

Punitive Violence against Children in Canada

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Submitted to the Public Health Agency of Canada

Contract No: HT091-02001/001/SS, Task #16

Technical Paper Series

March 31, 2006

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Objectives

1. To provide the first map of the landscape of caregivers' punitive violence against children in Canada.
2. To provide policy recommendations based on the findings yielded.
3. To identify avenues for other researchers to follow in order to further illuminate this form of child maltreatment.

Characteristics of Punitive Maltreatment Examined

1. Its distribution across maltreatment categories (physical, emotional, sexual, neglect, exposure to domestic violence).
2. Its variation across forms (e.g., hitting with the hand, hitting with objects, emotional abuse, etc.).
3. Its distribution across victim age.
4. The extent to which it results in documented physical or emotional harm to the child.
5. Its victims' psychosocial functioning.
6. Its perpetrators – their relationship to the victim and their psychosocial functioning.

Sample

A sample of 102,866 substantiated child maltreatment investigations (weighted) was selected from the database of the *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect – 2003* (CIS-2003; Trocmé et al., 2005).

Investigations were included if: 1) they were substantiated, 2) the context (punitive/non-punitive) of the maltreatment was known, and 3) the substantiated incident was the primary form of maltreatment investigated.

Major Findings

1. 75% of physical maltreatment is physical punishment. Punitive intent was documented in 13% of emotional maltreatment, 2% of sexual maltreatment, 2% of neglect, and 1% of exposure to domestic violence.
2. In most cases of punitive violence, no physical or emotional harm is documented.
3. Across victim ages, the most likely form of physically punitive violence is hitting with the hand. Among children under 1 year of age, all physical punishment was of this form. However, the likelihood of hitting with objects, shaking/grabbing/shoving/throwing, and punching increase with age. Adolescents made up 54% of punching victims.
4. Substantial proportions of victims of punitive violence exhibit internalizing or externalizing problems most often in the form of depression/anxiety, negative peer involvement, violence toward others, and other behavioural or emotional problems.
5. Most perpetrators of punitive violence are biological parents, who accounted for 79% of physical punishment, 83% of emotional punishment, and 65% of “other” punitive violence.
6. Inadequate social support and domestic violence characterize the context of punitive violence for both male and female caregivers.
7. In the majority of families for whom physically punitive violence was substantiated, spanking was typically used as a form of discipline.

Policy Recommendations

1. Physical maltreatment prevention strategies should target the prevention of physical punishment.
2. Physical punishment prevention must begin with parents of young infants.
3. Violence prevention initiatives must include building caregivers' competence in resolving conflicts with adolescents.
4. Prevention strategies should address the links between child maltreatment and partner violence, as well as building support systems for caregivers.
5. Prevention of physical violence against children must emphasize the delegitimation of spanking.

BACKGROUND

More than 30 years ago, David Gil (1970) revealed the role played by punishment in the dynamics of child maltreatment. From his two-year nationwide study of child abuse reports in the United States, he concluded that 63% of physical abuse incidents developed “out of disciplinary action taken by caretakers” (p. 126). Gil’s conclusions have been repeatedly supported by findings of studies examining the motives underlying caregivers’ violence against children. For example, from their study of 830 substantiated non-sexual abuse cases, Kadushin and Martin (1981) concluded that almost all of the parents defined their actions as disciplinary procedures that were required in response to the child’s behavior. Similarly, Margolin (1990) found that 70% of cases of child physical abuse by babysitters occurred within a disciplinary context. Data from the *Ontario Incidence Study on Child Abuse and Neglect* (Trocmé et al., 1994) and the first cycle of the *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect* (CIS-1998; Trocmé et al., 2001) reveal similar findings: most incidents of child physical maltreatment arise when caregivers attempt not to harm, but to punish.

It is surprising, then, that relatively little is known about the characteristics of punitive violence against children. While considerable data exist on child physical maltreatment generally, few studies have focused specifically on those incidents that emerge in a punitive context. Considering that these incidents constitute the majority of children’s physically violent experiences, it is critical that we begin to accumulate a greater body of knowledge about their characteristics.

The second cycle of the *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect* (CIS-2003; Trocmé et al., 2005) provides the first opportunity to examine a large, representative sample of substantiated incidents of punitive violence in Canada. This study was the first to provide a behavioural description of the violent act and an objective assessment of whether it was carried out as punishment. Notably, this study is the first to document whether incidents of emotional and sexual violence and neglect, in addition to incidents of physical violence, were perpetrated with intent to punish the child. Therefore, the data permit analyses of the characteristics of punitive violence, the children and perpetrators involved in these incidents, and the physical and emotional outcomes of violent punishment.

FOCUS OF THE PRESENT INVESTIGATION

In this report, we identify and address 7 key research issues related to punitive violence.

- 1. *Describing Punitive Violence.*** In which context(s) does punitive violence tend to occur? Is punitive motive most likely to characterize physical maltreatment or is punishment also a frequent motive for emotional and other forms of maltreatment? And when children are punished violently, what forms does this punishment take?
- 2. *Charting Age Trends in Punitive Violence.*** Does the nature of this form of maltreatment vary with children's physical and cognitive growth?
- 3. *Identifying Outcomes of Punitive Violence.*** How often does punitive violence result in physical or emotional harm to the child?
- 4. *Assessing the Well-Being of Children Experiencing Punitive Violence.*** What are the characteristics of the children who experience punitive physical violence? Do they indicate impaired psychosocial functioning?
- 5. *Identifying the Perpetrators of Punitive Violence.*** Who are the punitive caregivers? Are they more likely to be male than female or step-parents than biological parents?
- 6. *Assessing the Functioning of Perpetrators of Punitive Violence.*** Can we identify the functioning difficulties of caregivers who punish their children violently? For example, do they tend to have other problems indicative of disinhibition (e.g., alcohol or drug use, criminal activity)? Are they living under stressful conditions (e.g., poverty, unemployment, single parenthood)?
- 7. *Examining the Childrearing Context of Punitive Violence.*** To what extent does the substantiated incident of punitive violence reflect an aggressive/punitive orientation in the family more generally? Specifically, is spanking a typical response to parent-child conflict in these families?

Objectives

In addressing these questions, we will meet three primary objectives. First, we will provide the first map of the landscape of caregivers' punitive violence against children in Canada. Second, we will provide policy recommendations based on the findings yielded. Third, we will identify avenues for other researchers to follow in order to further illuminate this form of child maltreatment.

METHOD

The 2003 *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect* (CIS-2003; Trocmé et al., 2005) is the third child abuse and neglect incidence study to be conducted in Canada. The first cycle was completed in Ontario in 1993 (OIS-1993; Trocmé et al., 1994), the second and third cycles were Canada-wide studies completed in 1998 and 2003 for the Public Health Agency of Canada. The CIS-2003 tracked a sample of 14,200 child maltreatment investigations, conducted during the fall of 2003 in 63 out of 400 child welfare sites across Canada. Because of the large amount of missing data in the Québec portion of the study, the core CIS-2003 dataset contains 11,562 investigations involving children ranging from under 1 year to 15 years of age.

Information was obtained directly from investigating workers using a three-page data collection form describing the alleged maltreatment, the children, their families and the results of the investigations. Participating workers received a half-day training session covering key definitions and study procedures. In addition, all data collection forms were reviewed for completeness and consistency by the study research assistants.

Maltreatment Definitions

Each investigation was broadly classified into one of the following categories based on the form of maltreatment that best characterized the investigation (“primary category”)¹: 1) physical maltreatment, 2) emotional maltreatment, 3) sexual maltreatment, 4) neglect, or 5) exposure to domestic violence. (For detailed definitions of these categories and their subcategories, see Trocmé et al., 2005). A significant challenge for the study was to overcome the variations in definitions of maltreatment used by different jurisdictions. The CIS uses a common classification system across all jurisdictions that includes 25 specific forms of maltreatment. This classification reflects a fairly broad

¹ To ensure that cases involving multiple forms of maltreatment were tracked, every investigation could be classified into up to three forms of maltreatment (primary, secondary and tertiary categories).

definition of child maltreatment, and includes several forms of maltreatment that are not specifically included in some provincial and territorial child welfare statutes (e.g., educational neglect and exposure to domestic violence). All CIS maltreatment definitions also use a harm or substantial risk of harm standard that includes situations where children have been harmed, as well as situations where children have not yet been harmed but are considered to have been at substantial risk of harm. The inclusion of substantial risk of harm reflects the clinical and legislative definitions used in most Canadian jurisdictions.

A case was considered substantiated if the balance of evidence indicated that abuse or neglect had occurred. If there was not enough evidence to substantiate maltreatment but there remained a suspicion that maltreatment had occurred, a case was classified as suspected. A case was classified as unsubstantiated if there was sufficient evidence to conclude that the child had not been maltreated.

Weighting Procedure

Annual national estimates were derived by weighting cases up to the annual volume of cases investigated in each study site and applying a further regionalization weight reflecting the relative sizes of the child population in the selected jurisdiction to the population size in its strata. Estimates were calculated by applying annualization and regionalization weights that reflect the sampling strategy used (see Trocmé, et al. 2001 for details of weighting procedures).

Limitations of the Study Design

In interpreting the results of the study, several design limitations should be noted. The data collected are limited to information that workers gathered during their standard investigation; no additional instruments were used to collect information from children or families. The study only examined cases that were open for investigation by a child welfare authority and did not track screened out reports nor could it track internal reports on already open cases. To avoid double counting children, subsequent reports were removed if children were reported more than once during the sampling

period; therefore, the unit of analysis of the study for unweighted cases is the child. However, the weighted estimates reflect an unknown proportion of duplicate reports that were included in the sites' annual case volume statistics; the unit of analysis of the study for the weighted estimates is the child maltreatment investigation. Finally, the study only tracked case activity that occurred during the one to two month investigation period; thus, the data must be viewed through this lens.

Selection of Cases for the Present Analysis

The present analysis focused on cases of maltreatment that occurred within a punitive context. All findings presented here are based on weighted data. The cases were selected according to the following inclusion criteria:

- *Substantiated.* Only cases that were substantiated following investigation were included in the sample. Suspected and unsubstantiated cases were excluded.
- *Punishment context known.* For each case, the investigating worker was asked whether the investigated maltreatment took place within the context of punishment (yes, no, unknown). Only cases for which workers clearly indicated whether the investigated incident took place within a punitive context were included in the present analysis. Cases for which this information was missing or unknown were excluded.
- *Classified by primary maltreatment form.* Only cases for which the substantiated incident was the primary form of maltreatment investigated were included. Thus, for all cases analyzed, their classification is based on the form of maltreatment that best characterized the investigated incident.

This strategy yielded a final sample size of 5,648 substantiated child maltreatment investigations. The final weighted estimate is 102,866 substantiated child maltreatment investigations.

Variables Examined in the Present Analysis

The following characteristics of punitive maltreatment were examined:

- its distribution across maltreatment categories (physical, emotional, sexual, neglect, exposure to domestic violence),
- its variation across forms (e.g., hitting with the hand, hitting with objects, emotional abuse, etc.),
- its distribution across victim age,
- the extent to which it results in documented physical or emotional harm to the child,
- its victims' psychosocial functioning, and
- its perpetrators – their relationship to the victim and their psychosocial functioning.

FINDINGS

Describing Punitive Violence: Context

Punishment accounted for 75% of substantiated incidents in which physical maltreatment was the primary category for investigation (Table 1). In contrast, only 13% of emotional maltreatment, 2% of sexual maltreatment, 2% of neglect, and 1% of exposure to domestic violence occurred in a punitive context (Tables 2 to 5).

Physical punishment was the motive for 75% of incidents in which physical violence was the primary form of substantiated maltreatment.

Table 1: Substantiated Physically Punitive Maltreatment in Canada, Excluding Québec, in 2003

Form of Physically Punitive Maltreatment	n	% of All Physically Punitive Maltreatment (n = 18,726)	% of All Physical Maltreatment (n = 25,141)
Shake, grab, shove, throw	3,629	19	14
Hit with hand	8,855	47	35
Punch	906	5	4
Hit with object	3,891	21	16
Other	1,445	8	6
Total physical punishment	18,726	100	75

Table 2: Substantiated Emotionally Punitive Maltreatment in Canada, Excluding Québec, in 2003

Form of Emotionally Punitive Maltreatment	n	% of All Emotionally Punitive Maltreatment (n = 2,010)	% of All Emotional Maltreatment (n = 15,128)
Emotional abuse	1,748	87	12
Non-organic failure to thrive	0	0	0
Emotional neglect	262	13	2
Exposure to non-intimate violence	0	0	0
Total emotional punishment	2,010	100	13

Table 3: Substantiated Sexually Punitive Maltreatment in Canada, Excluding Québec, in 2003

Form of Sexually Punitive Maltreatment	n	% of All Sexually Punitive Maltreatment (n = 48)	% of All Sexual Maltreatment (n = 2,936)
Penetration	0	0	0
Attempted penetration	16	33	1
Oral sex	0	0	0
Fondling	32	67	1
Sex talk	0	0	0
Voyeurism	0	0	0
Exhibitionism	0	0	0
Exploitation	0	0	0
Total sexual punishment	48	100	2

Table 4: Substantiated Punitive Neglect (Primary Maltreatment Form) in Canada, Excluding Québec, in 2003

Form of Punitive Neglect	n	% of All Punitive Neglect (n = 737)	% of All Neglect (n = 30,366)
Failure to supervise: physical	205	28	1
Failure to supervise: sexual	0	0	0
Permitting criminal behaviour	0	0	0
Physical neglect	67	9	0
Medical neglect	0	0	0
Failure to provide psychological treatment	0	0	0
Abandonment	465	63	2
Educational neglect	0	0	0
Total punitive neglect	737	100	2

Table 5: Substantiated Punitive Exposure to Domestic Violence in Canada, Excluding Québec, in 2003

	n	% of All Exposure to Domestic Violence (n = 29,295)
Punitive exposure to domestic violence	139	1

Describing Punitive Violence: Form

Physically punitive maltreatment. Physically punitive violence was most likely to take the form of hitting with the hand (Table 1). Almost half of all physical punishment was of this type. The next most common forms of physical punishment were hitting with an object and shaking/grabbing/shoving/throwing; each of these forms accounted for approximately one-fifth of physical punishment incidents. Punching accounted for a small minority of these incidents, as did other unspecified acts.

Emotionally punitive maltreatment. Emotional abuse was the form of emotional maltreatment most likely to be inflicted as punishment (Table 2). This category was defined as, “overtly hostile, punitive treatment, or habitual or extreme verbal abuse (threatening, belittling, etc.).” The remaining forms of emotional maltreatment were unlikely to occur in a punitive context.

Sexually punitive violence. Very few sexually abusive incidents were intended as punishment (Table 3). The few cases of sexually punitive violence that took place were either of fondling or attempted penetration. Each of these forms of punishment constituted 1% of all sexual maltreatment cases. None of the remaining forms of sexual abuse was ever carried out as punishment.

Punitive neglect. Neglect intended as punishment was an infrequent occurrence (Table 4). When neglect did occur in a punitive context, it took the form of failure to supervise (physical), physical neglect, or abandonment. In no cases were any of the remaining forms of neglect motivated by an intent to punish.

Punitive exposure to domestic violence. Only rarely were children exposed to domestic violence as punishment (Table 5). A punitive context was noted in only 1% of all cases.

In 47% of physically punitive violence incidents, the perpetrator struck the child with a hand.

The frequencies obtained in this preliminary analysis revealed that all but one (emotional abuse) of the non-physical punitive maltreatment frequencies were too low to permit meaningful analyses. As a result, these categories were collapsed into two: emotional abuse and “other.” Therefore, the remaining analyses were based on the following re-categorization of punitive maltreatment:

- Physically punitive violence (equivalent to physical maltreatment in a punitive context, including all subcategories)
- Emotionally punitive violence (equivalent to the emotional abuse subcategory of emotional maltreatment in a punitive context)
- “Other” punitive violence (equivalent to all remaining emotional maltreatment subcategories, all sexual maltreatment subcategories, and exposure to domestic violence – in a punitive context).

Table 6 provides the frequencies for these three categories upon which all remaining analyses were based.

Table 6: Frequencies for Forms of Punitive Maltreatment in Canada, Excluding Québec, in 2003

Form of Punitive Maltreatment	n
Physically punitive violence	
Shake, grab, shove, throw	3,629
Hit with hand	8,855
Punch	906
Hit with object	3,891
Other	1,445
Total physically punitive violence	18,726
Emotionally punitive violence	
Emotional abuse	1,748
Other punitive violence	
Emotional	
Non-organic failure to thrive	0
Emotional neglect	262
Exposure to non-intimate violence	0
Sexual	
Penetration	0
Attempted penetration	16
Oral sex	0
Fondling	32
Sex talk	0
Voyeurism	0
Exhibitionism	0
Exploitation	0
Neglect	
Failure to supervise: physical	205
Failure to supervise: sexual	0
Permitting criminal behaviour	0
Physical neglect	67
Medical neglect	0
Failure to provide psychological treatment	0
Abandonment	465
Educational neglect	0
Exposure to domestic violence	139
Total other punitive violence	1,186

Charting Age Trends in Punitive Violence

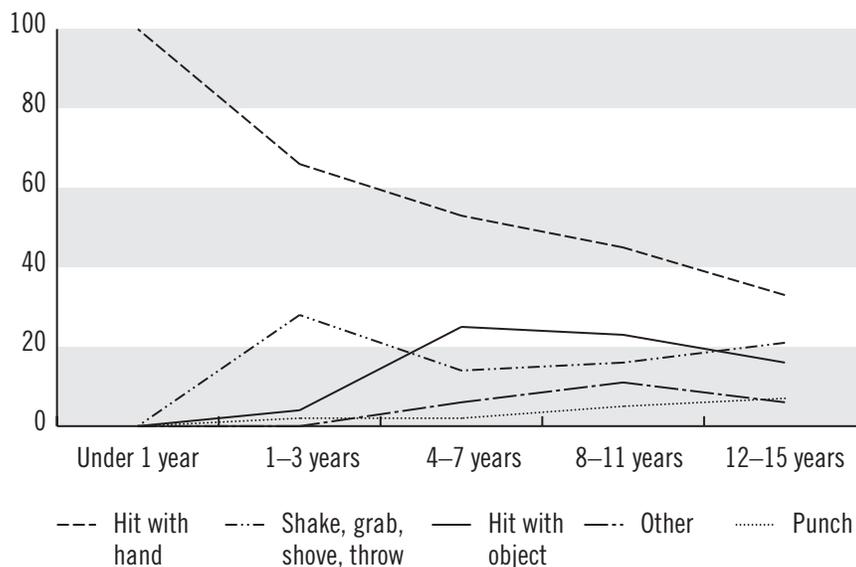
Figure 1 presents the overall age trends for each type of punitive violence. At all ages, physical maltreatment was by far the most predominant form of punitive violence. However, some age trends are evident within each form of violence.

Figure 1: Victim Age Trends in Punitive Violence in Canada, Excluding Quebec, in 2003
 Percentage of All Punishment in Each Age Group



Physically punitive violence. The nature of physical punishment appears to change as children develop (Figure 2). Of the youngest physically punished infants (under one year of age), all were hit with a hand. This form of violence accounted for 100% of *physical* punishment and 77% of *all* punishment in that age group. It is noteworthy that none of these young infants were shaken as punishment.

Figure 2: Victim Age Trends in Physically Punitive Violence in Canada, Excluding Quebec, in 2003
 Percentage of All Physical Punishment in Each Age Group



The prevalence of different forms of physical punishment begins to shift among older infants and toddlers. It is in this age group that shaking, grabbing, shoving and/or throwing emerge as forms of physical punishment, accounting for 28% of incidents. Hitting with a hand, however, continues to account for the majority of incidents in this age group (66%). Punching and hitting with objects, although they are experienced by some children of this age, are quite rare.

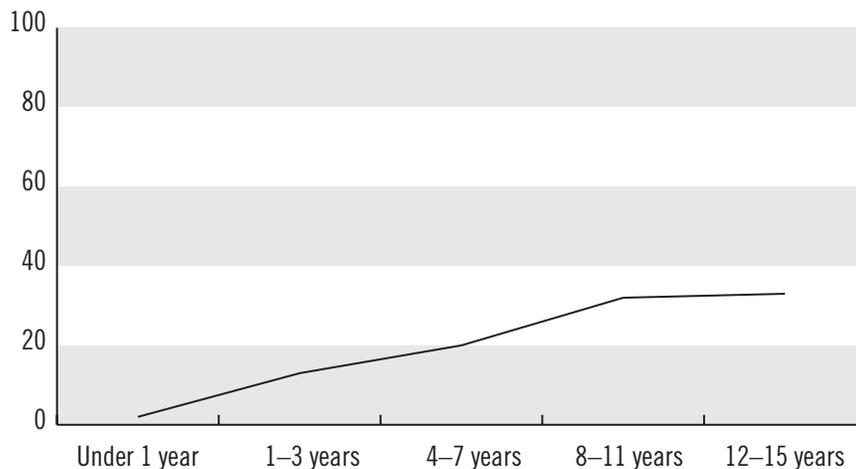
As children reach the preschool and early school period, hitting with objects becomes more common, accounting for 25% of physical punishment incidents. Hitting with the hand is still the predominant form of physical punishment in this age group, but it now accounts for a smaller majority (53%) of all physical punishment among children of this age. These proportions remain fairly consistent across the early and middle school years.

In adolescence, another shift is seen in the relative proportions of various forms of punitive violence. It is in this age group that the highest proportions of punching and shaking, grabbing, pushing and throwing are seen. While punching accounts for only 8% of all physically punitive violence against adolescents, adolescents make up 54% of punching victims. And while shaking, grabbing, shoving

and throwing account for 26% of all physically punitive violence against adolescents, adolescents make up 43% of the victims of these forms of violence. The most common form of physical punishment continues to be hitting with the hand, but it now constitutes less than one-half of physically punitive incidents (40%). Approximately one-fifth (26%) of physically punitive violence against adolescents involves hitting with an object.

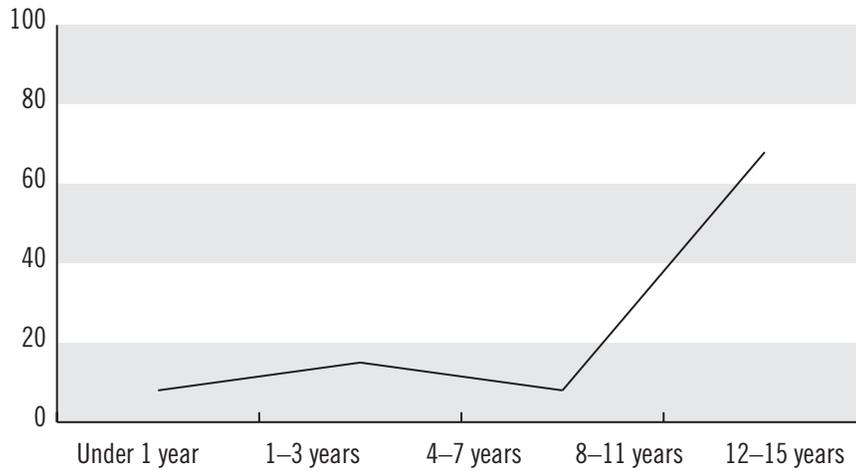
Emotionally punitive violence. It appears that children are increasingly likely to be punished through psychological means as they grow older (Figure 3). While young infants under 1 year of age experienced only 2% of all emotional punishment incidents, adolescents experienced one third of these incidents. However, there is a decreasing age trend in the proportion of all punishment that is accounted for by emotional punishment (Figure 1). This form of punishment accounts for at least twice as large a proportion of all punishment among children aged 3 and under than it accounts for in the older age groups.

Figure 3: Victim Age Trends in Emotionally Punitive Violence in Canada, Excluding Quebec, in 2003
Percentage of All Emotional Punishment Incidents Accounted for by Each Age Group



Other punitive violence. Adolescents are by far the most likely victims of “other” punitive violence, experiencing two thirds of these incidents (Figure 4). This form of violence accounted for 11% of all punishment inflicted on adolescents.

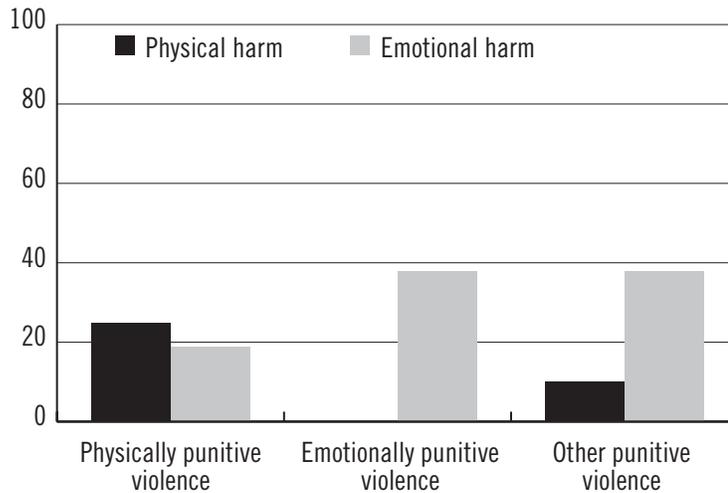
Figure 4: Victim Age Trends in Other Punitive Violence in Canada, excluding Quebec, in 2003
Percentage of All Other Punishment Incidents Accounted for by Each Age Group



Identifying Outcomes of Punitive Violence: Physical Harm

Physical harm is infrequently noted in cases of punitive violence (Figure 5). The majority (75%) of physically punitive violence incidents did not result in physical harm. Physical harm was never noted in cases of emotional punishment. Of cases of “other” punitive violence, 10% resulted in physical harm.

Figure 5: Physical and Emotional Harm Sustained in Cases of Punitive Violence in Canada, excluding Quebec, in 2003
Percentage of Each Type of Violence



When physical harm was sustained in cases of physically punitive violence, its form varied by the type of maltreatment inflicted. Physical harm resulting from physically punitive violence was most likely to take the form of bruises, cuts and/or scrapes; all other types of injury were rare (Figure 6). Only 2% of injuries required medical treatment. As Figure 7 shows, the form of physical punishment that was most likely to result in physical harm was punching; 58% of those children who were punched sustained bruises, cuts and/or scrapes. Less than one third of victims of each of the other forms of physical punishment sustained even minor injuries.

In 75% of physically punitive violence cases, no physical harm was noted.

Figure 6: Types of Injury Sustained in Cases of Punitive Violence in Canada, Excluding Quebec, in 2003
 Percentage of Each Type of Violence

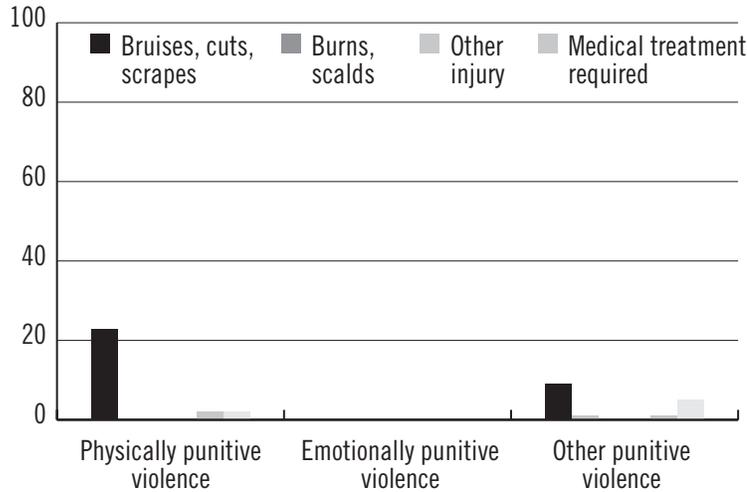
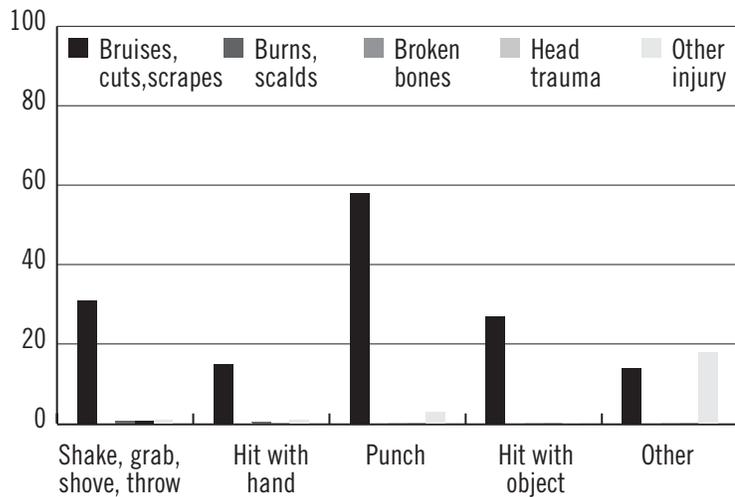


Figure 7: Types of Injury Sustained in Cases of Punitive Violence in Canada, Excluding Quebec, in 2003
 Percentage of Each Type of Violence



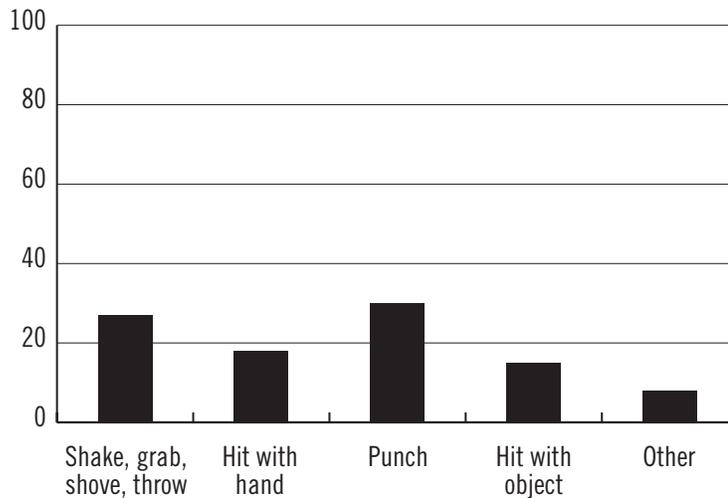
Identifying Outcomes of Punitive Violence: Emotional Harm

Emotional harm was less likely than physical harm to be noted in cases of physically punitive violence; it was noted in 19% of cases (Figure 5). As shown in Figure 8, emotional harm was most likely to be noted when the child had been punched (30%) or shaken/grabbed/shoved/thrown (27%).

Compared to physical punishment, emotional harm was twice as likely to be identified in cases of emotional and “other” punishment; it was noted in 38% of cases of each type (Figure 5).

Figure 8: Emotional Harm Sustained by Each Form of Physically Punitive Violence in Canada, Excluding Quebec, in 2003

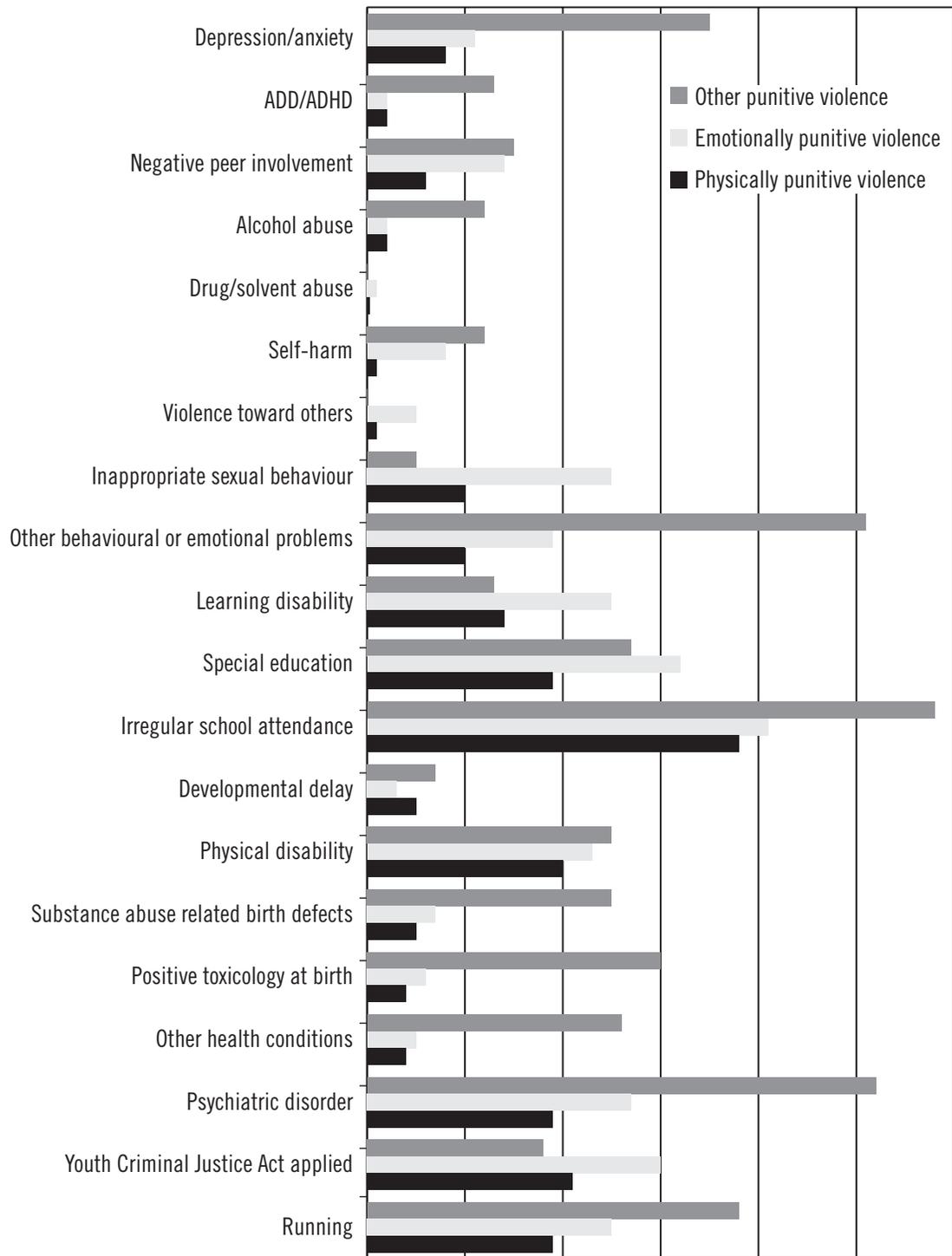
Percentage of Each Form of Physical Violence



Assessing the Well-Being of Children Experiencing Punitive Violence

Physically punitive violence. Certain child functioning concerns appear to be more strongly associated with physical punishment than others (Figure 9). The following functioning concerns were noted infrequently among these children: alcohol and drug abuse (4%), self-harming behaviour (5%), inappropriate sexual behaviour (5%), physical disability (1%), substance-abuse-related birth defects (1%), and positive toxicology at birth (0.3%). In contrast, each of the following functioning concerns was noted in substantial proportions of children experiencing physically punitive violence: depression/anxiety (19%), ADD/ADHD (21%), negative peer involvement (19%), violence toward others (20%), learning disability (19%), and other behavioural or emotional problems (38%). When the association was examined between child functioning concerns and the different forms of physical punishment, some interesting findings emerged. For example, among children who were punched by their caregivers, the most common form of maladjustment was depression or anxiety. This concern

Figure 9: Percentages of Victims of Punitive Violence for Whom Functioning Concerns were Noted in Canada, Excluding Quebec, in 2003



was noted for 38% of children who had been punched. But an equal proportion of children who had been punched were violent toward others (38%). Further, 30% of children who had been shaken, grabbed, shoved or thrown exhibited violence toward others, 29% had negative peer involvements, and 46% exhibited unspecified “other” behavioural or emotional problems. Among those who had been hit with a hand or an object, the most common concern was unspecified behavioural or emotional problems (34% and 33%, respectively).

Emotionally punitive violence. Emotionally punitive violence also was associated with particular types of child functioning concerns (Figure 9). Its strongest association was with unspecified behavioural or emotional problems; this concern was noted in 41% of cases of emotional punishment. Further, in substantial proportions of cases of emotional punishment, the following concerns were noted: depression/anxiety (25%), ADD/ADHD (30%), negative peer involvement (27%), violence toward others (23%), learning disability (32%), special education (25%), irregular school attendance (19%), and developmental delay (25%).

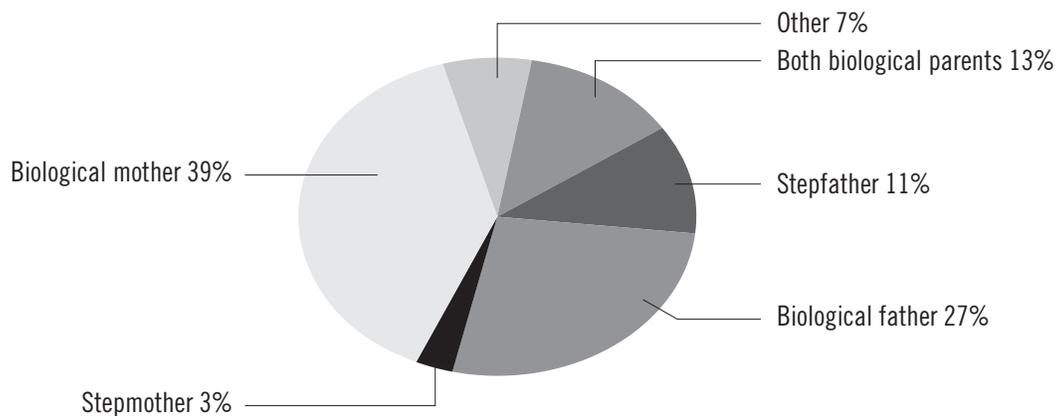
Other punitive violence. Of all forms of punitive violence, “other” punishment appears to be associated with the broadest range of concerns. The child functioning concern most frequently noted in cases of “other” punitive violence was unspecified behavioural or emotional problems, noted in 58% of cases (Figure 9). However, the following concerns were also noted in substantial proportions of cases: depression/anxiety (38%), negative peer involvement (52%), alcohol abuse (26%), drug/solvent abuse (30%), self-harming behaviour (25%), violence toward others (25%), learning disability (27%), and running (35%).

Identifying the Perpetrators of Punitive Violence

Physically punitive violence. The most likely perpetrators of physically punitive violence are biological parents who, singly or together, accounted for 79% of all incidents (Figure 10). Biological mothers (39%) accounted for a greater proportion of these incidents than biological fathers (27%). In contrast, stepfathers (11%) accounted for three times as many of these incidents as stepmothers

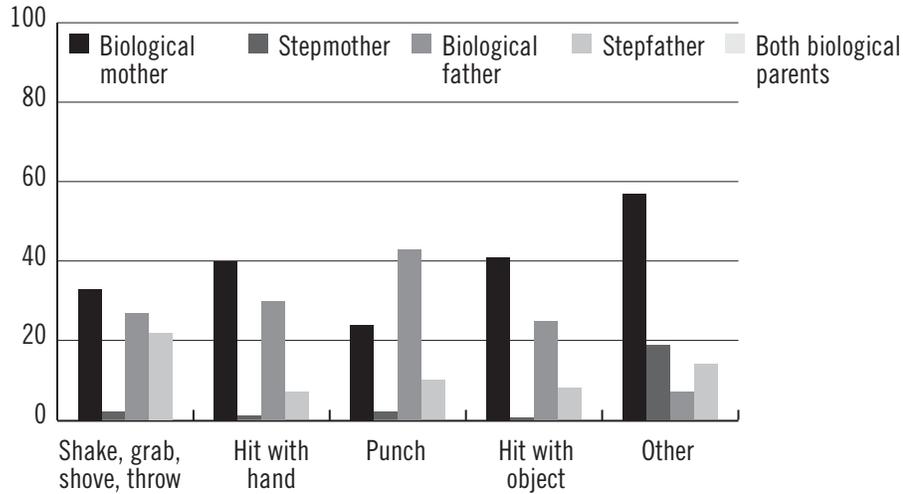
(3%), although each accounted for only a small proportion of these incidents. When we collapsed across gender in cases of single perpetrators, we found that female parents were perpetrators in 42% of incidents and male parents were perpetrators in 38% of incidents.

Figure 10: Percentage of Physically Punitive Violence Accounted for by Various Perpetrators in Canada, Excluding Quebec, in 2003



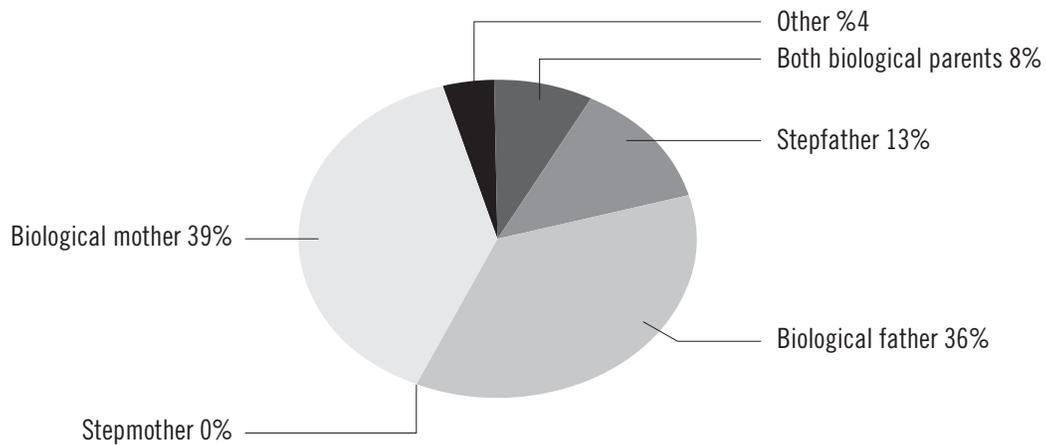
The relationship between perpetrators and the type of violence inflicted was also examined (Figure 11). Compared to biological fathers, biological mothers were somewhat more likely to be the perpetrators in incidents of shaking/grabbing/shoving/throwing and hitting with hands or objects, and 8 times as likely to be the perpetrators of “other” physically punitive acts. On the other hand, biological fathers (43%) were almost twice as likely as biological mothers (24%) to be the perpetrators in incidents of punching.

Figure 11: Percentage of Types of Physically Punitive Violence Accounted for by Various Perpetrators in Canada, Excluding Quebec, in 2003



Emotionally punitive violence. Biological parents accounted for 83% of all emotional punishment (Figure 12). Mothers and fathers were equally likely to be the perpetrators of these incidents.

Figure 12: Percentage of Emotionally Punitive Violence Accounted for by Various Perpetrators in Canada, Excluding Quebec, in 2003

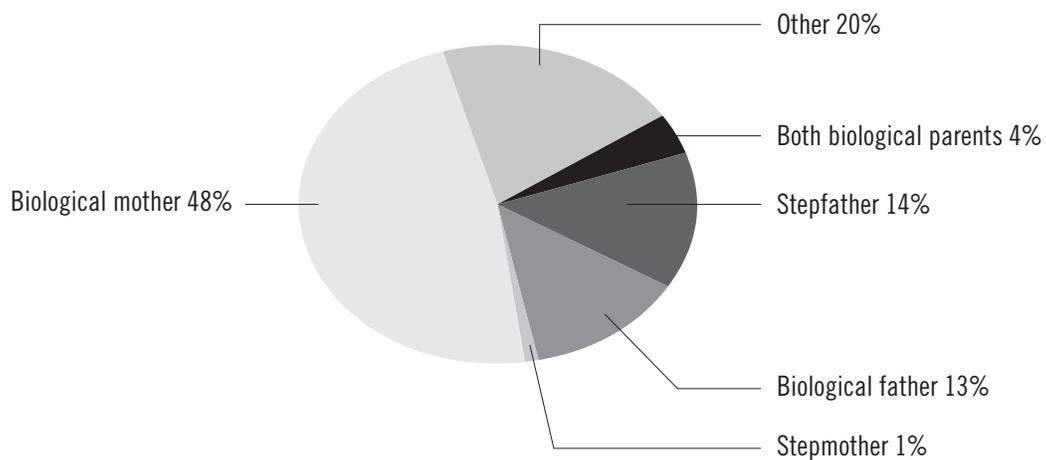


Other punitive violence. Biological parents accounted for 65% of “other” punitive violence (Figure 13). However, biological mothers were by far the most common perpetrators in these cases, accounting for

approximately one half of these incidents – almost 4 times the proportion accounted for by biological fathers or stepfathers. Stepmothers were almost never the perpetrators of these incidents.

Biological parents perpetrated 79% of physical punishment, 83% of emotional punishment, and 65% of “other” punitive violence.

Figure 13: Percentage of Other Punitive Violence Accounted for by Various Perpetrators



Assessing the Functioning of Perpetrators of Punitive Violence

Physically punitive violence: Male caregivers. In cases of physical punishment, the most likely concerns noted for male caregivers were inadequate social support (30%), a history of being maltreated as a child (17%), and a history of perpetrating domestic violence (24%) (Figure 14). When we examined the specific forms of physical punishment perpetrated (Figure 15), we found a marked pattern: inadequate social support was noted in 22 to 35% of all forms of physical punishment and a history of domestic violence was noted in 22 to 32% of all forms of physical punishment except for those classified as “other.” Thus, these two concerns appear to be implicated in these cases regardless of the form that the physical punishment takes.

Figure 14: Percentages of Categories of Punitive Violence for Which Male Caregiver Functioning Concerns were Noted in Canada, Excluding Quebec, in 2003

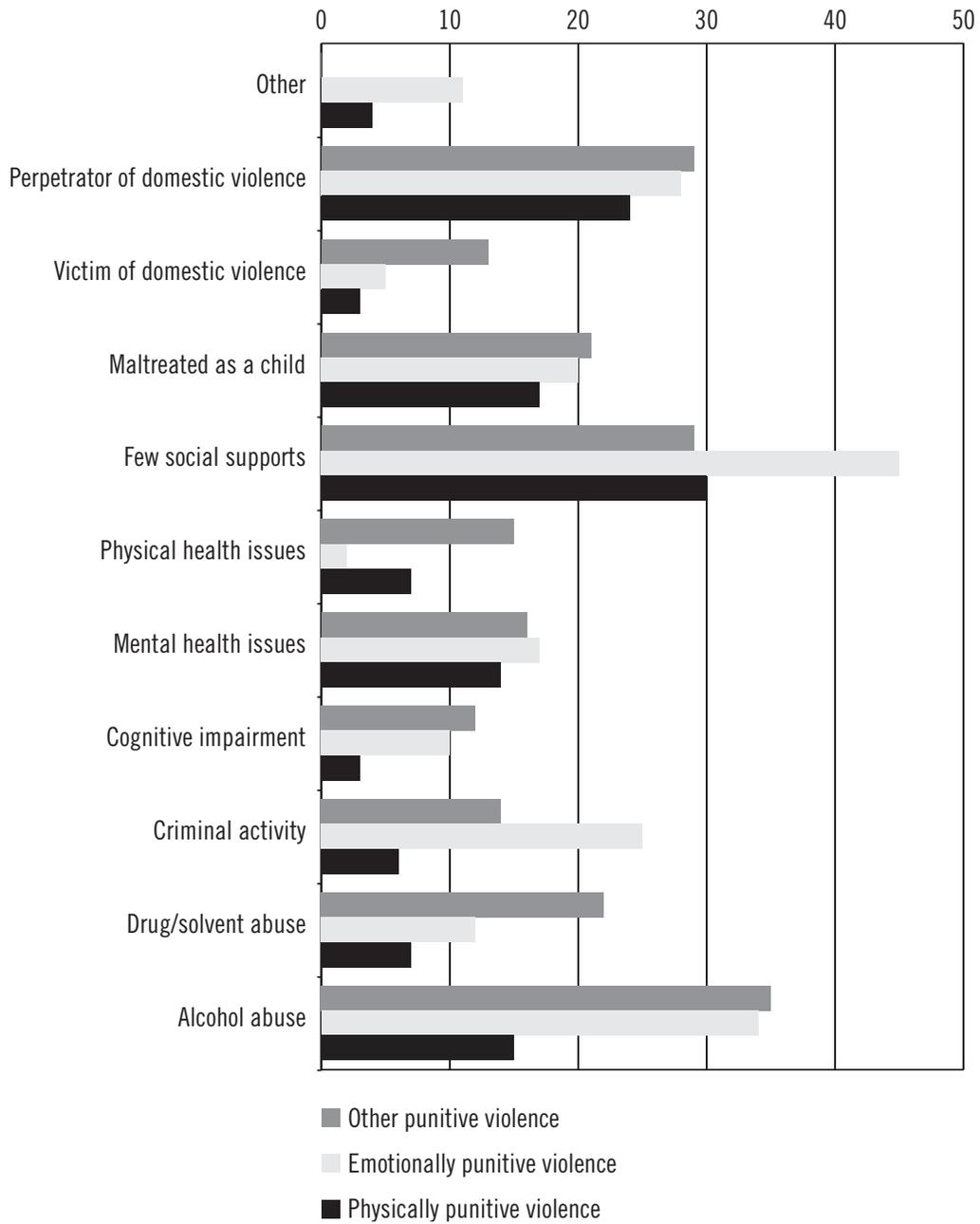
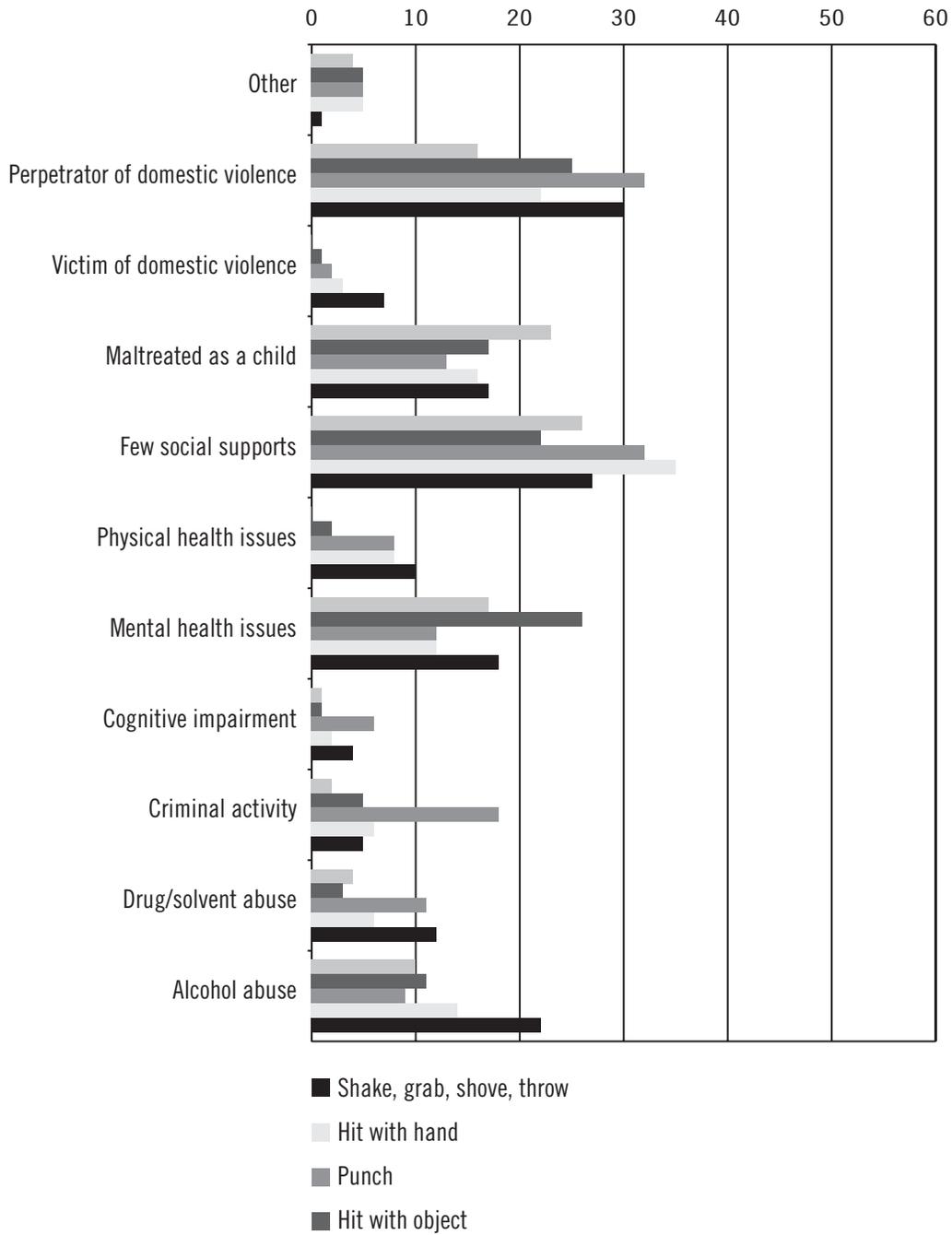


Figure 15: Percentages of Types of Physically Punitive Violence for Which Male Caregiver Functioning Concerns were Noted



Other concerns, in contrast, appear to be primarily implicated in specific forms of physical punishment (Figure 15). For example, alcohol abuse appears to be associated more strongly with shaking/grabbing/shoving/throwing than with any other form; criminal activity is associated most strongly with punching, mental health issues with hitting with objects, and a history of child maltreatment with “other” physical punishment.

Physically punitive violence: Female caregivers. Inadequate social support (32%) and a history of being a victim of domestic violence (31%) were the concerns most commonly noted for female caregivers involved in physically punitive incidents (Figure 16). Mental health issues were also evident in a substantial proportion (20%) of cases.

A pattern also was found in the distribution of female caregiver functioning concerns across types of physical punishment (Figure 17). For example, cases in which the child was shaken/grabbed/shoved/ thrown, hit with the hand or punched were marked by the caregiver’s history of being maltreated as a child, being a victim of domestic violence, inadequate social support, and mental health issues. Hitting with objects, in contrast, appears to be less strongly associated with mental health issues, but continues to be linked to inadequate social support and being a victim of child and spousal maltreatment.

Emotionally punitive violence: Male caregivers. Cases of emotional punishment are marked by the proportion accounted for by male caregivers who lack adequate social support (45%) (Figure 14). Other concerns that emerged in substantial proportions of these cases were alcohol abuse (34% of cases), a history of perpetrating domestic violence (28% of cases), involvement in criminal activity (25% of cases), and a history of child maltreatment (20% of cases).

Emotionally punitive violence: Female caregivers. Among female caregivers, the concerns most strongly implicated in cases of emotional punishment were a history of being maltreated as a child (45% of cases), mental health issues (45% of cases), and inadequate social support (41% of cases) (Figure 16). Partner violence and cognitive impairment were also noted in substantial proportions of these cases (34% and 24%, respectively).

Figure 16: Percentages of Categories of Punitive Violence for Which Female Caregiver Functioning Concerns were Noted

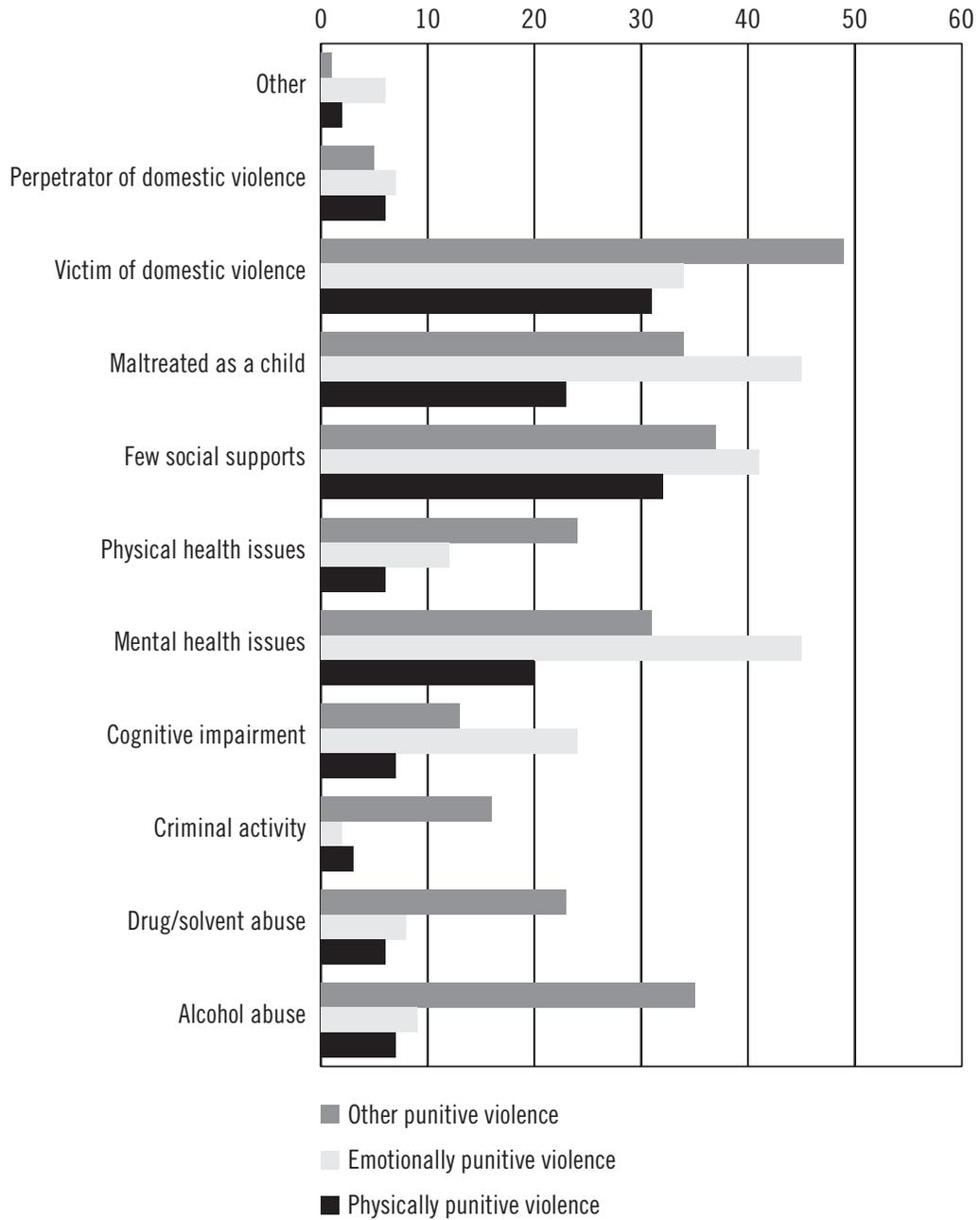
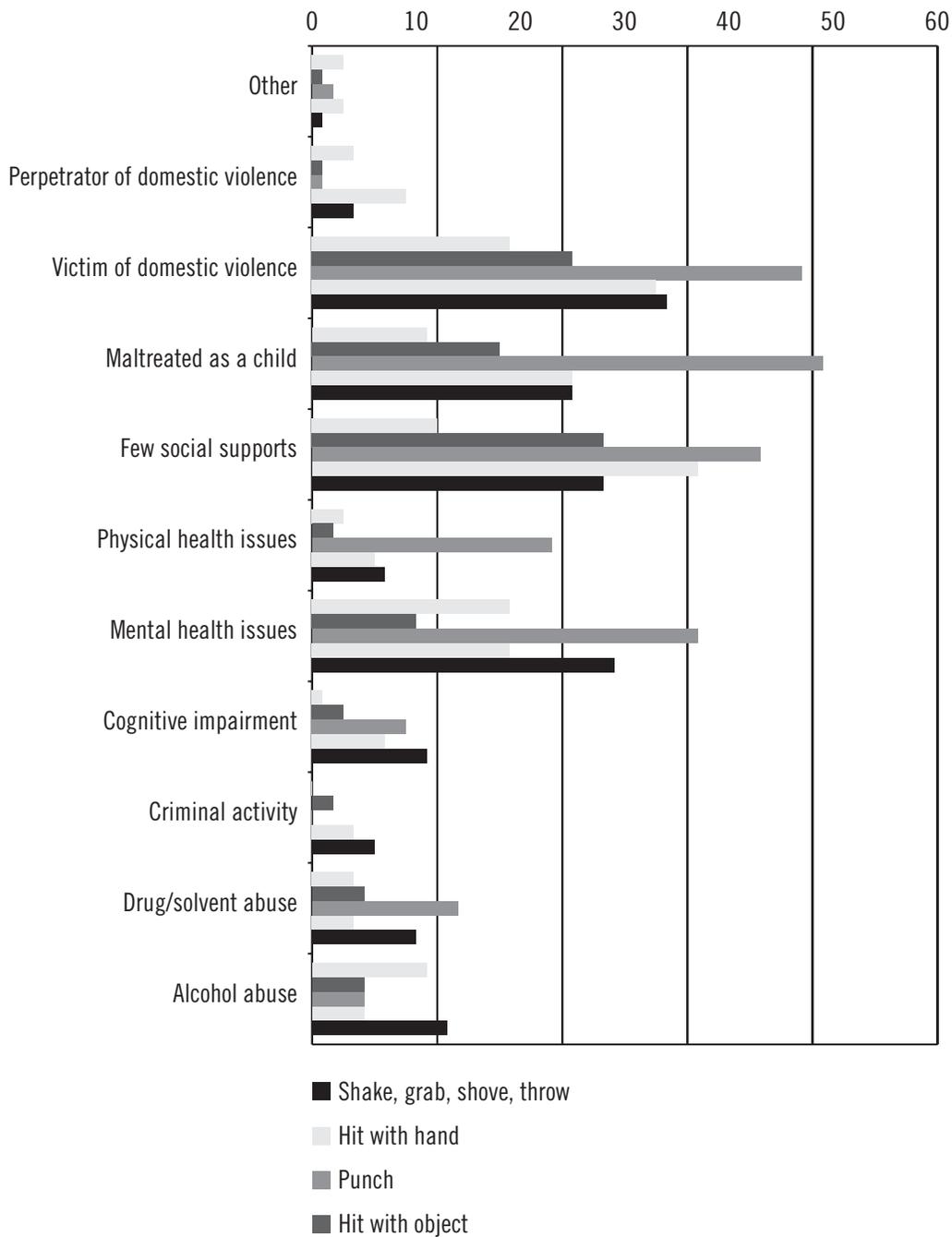


Figure 17: Percentages of Types of Physically Punitive Violence for Which Female Caregiver Functioning Concerns were Noted



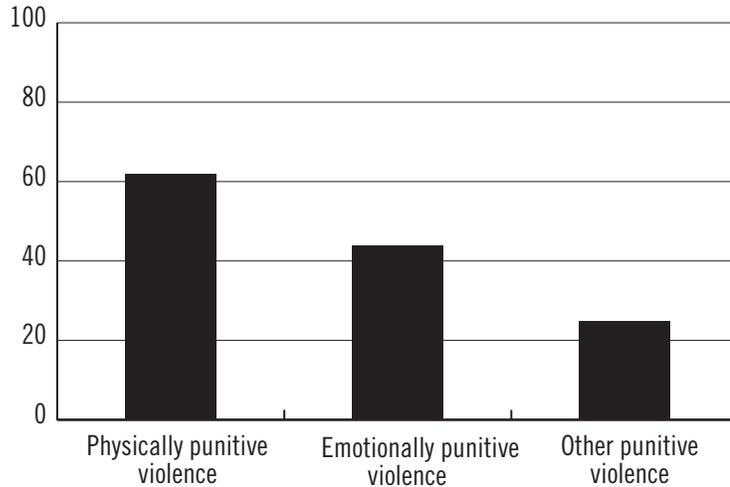
Other punitive violence: Male caregivers. The most commonly noted functioning concern among male caregivers in cases of “other” punitive violence was alcohol abuse (35% of cases) (Figure 14). A lack of social support (29%), a history of being maltreated as a child (21%), and perpetration of domestic violence (29%) were also noted for male caregivers in substantial proportions of these cases. Unique to these cases was the proportion accounted for by male caregivers who were involved in drug/solvent abuse (22%).

Other punitive violence: Female caregivers. In 49% of “other” punitive violence cases, the female caregiver also was a victim of domestic violence (Figure 16). Alcohol abuse, mental health issues, inadequate social support, and a history of maltreatment as a child each was noted in about one third of cases. Drug/solvent abuse was noted more than twice as often in these cases as in cases of physical or emotional punishment.

Examining the Childrearing Context of Punitive Violence

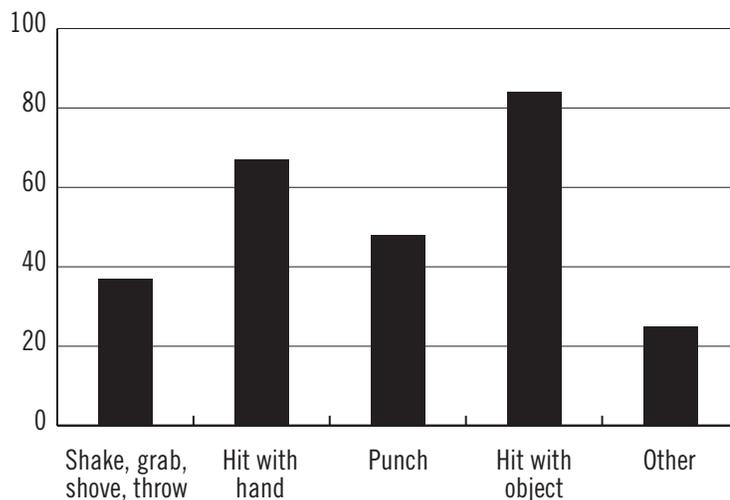
In 52% of families for which physically punitive violence was substantiated, spanking was typically used as a form of discipline (Figure 18). Spanking was used in 44% of families for which emotional punishment was substantiated. Spanking was related less strongly to “other” punitive violence. It was used in 25% of these families as a form of discipline.

Figure 18: Percentage of Punitive Violence Types for Which Caregivers Used Spanking as a Form of Discipline in Canada, Excluding Quebec, in 2003



As Figure 19 shows, the relationship between caregivers' use of spanking and substantiated incidents of physically punitive violence was most prominent in the case of hitting with the hand (67%) or with an object (84%). Spanking was used as a form of discipline in 48% of the families in which children were punched, 37% of families where children were shaken/grabbed/shoved/thrown, and 25% of families where other forms of punitive violence occurred.

Figure 19: Percentage of Types of Physically Punitive Violence for Which Caregivers Used Spanking as a Form of Discipline in Canada, Excluding Quebec, in 2003



DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

The primary aim of the present investigation was to provide a description of the characteristics of punitive violence against children in Canada upon which policy recommendations and direction for future research can be based. An analysis was conducted of all cases of punitive violence against children included in the CIS-2003. A number of important findings were revealed.

1. Most physical maltreatment is physical punishment. In the public mind, “child abuse” is often associated with pathological, even sadistic behaviour on the part of caregivers whose intent is to harm their children and who inflict grave injuries on them. While this image does capture the reality of some physical maltreatment cases, the findings of the present study indicate that these cases are relatively rare. In fact, most cases of physical maltreatment present quite a different scenario.

Consistent with findings of previous studies (Gil, 1970; Kadushin & Martin, 1981; Margolin, 1990; Trocmé et al., 1994), our findings demonstrated that in 75% of cases, the abusive caregiver’s intent is not to harm, but to teach the child. This figure is almost identical to that yielded by the CIS-1998 (76%) (Trocmé et al., 2001). Therefore, postulating a dichotomy between “punishment” on the one hand and “abuse” on the other does not reflect the reality of child physical maltreatment. In fact, most physical abuse *is* physical punishment. This finding, which replicates previous findings, provides strong support for emphasizing the prevention of physical punishment in any child maltreatment prevention initiatives. This recommendation is strengthened by the finding that, at all ages, the most common form of physically punitive violence was that generally considered to be socially acceptable – hitting with the hand.

In contrast, most emotional maltreatment (87%) is not intended as punishment, and punitive intent is rare in cases of sexual maltreatment, neglect and exposure to domestic violence. The present

findings suggest that punitive motive is unique to physical maltreatment. It must be noted, however, that the present analysis focused exclusively on the primary maltreatment category identified in each investigation. It might be the case that, in many incidents of physically punitive violence, emotional punishment accompanies it and is documented as a secondary maltreatment category. Investigation of the co-occurrence of various forms of punitive violence will be important to gaining a full understanding of its characteristics.

2. *In most cases of physically punitive violence, no physical or emotional harm is documented.* The notion of a punishment-abuse dichotomy is weakened further by our findings related to the outcomes of physically punitive violence. Whereas the image of “abuse” brings with it associations of injury, the reality of maltreatment is that the majority of substantiated cases do not result in injury. In 75% of substantiated cases of physically punitive violence, no injury was sustained; in 81% of cases no emotional harm was noted.

These findings suggest that child welfare workers are substantiating maltreatment on the basis of more than its immediate effects on the child. Perhaps they are considering the child’s overall safety, the well-being of the caregivers, or the very act of violence itself to decide whether maltreatment has taken place. In any case, it appears that workers have moved beyond injury as their criterion for determining whether a child is in need of protection.

The present findings related to harm sustained in other forms of punitive violence, however, raises some questions about how workers are identifying emotional harm. With regard to emotionally punitive violence, for example, emotional harm was documented in fewer than 40% of substantiated investigations. This proportion is surprisingly small and raises questions about the way in which workers make the determination of harm.

3. *The nature of punitive violence changes with the victim’s age.* At every age, hitting with the hand was the most common form of physically punitive violence. But the relative proportions of various

forms of physical punishment shifted with the age of victim. In infancy, 100% of physically punitive acts involved hitting with the hand. Surprisingly, no incidents of shaking were investigated for this age group. This finding might reflect a detection bias; it might be difficult to detect shaking in a non-verbal infant, whereas striking might result in a detectable injury. This question warrants further investigation. It is important to know whether it is injury that brings a maltreated infant to the attention of child welfare, or what else might account for the detection of striking in light of the absence of detection of shaking in this age group. It might be the case that shaking is not deemed by child welfare workers to be punitive, in many cases. If so, shaking of infants under one year of age might be recorded as not occurring in the context of punishment. In any case, a better understanding of the detection systems in place for shaking of young infants is needed.

Hitting with objects becomes increasingly likely as children grow older. This form of physically punitive violence accounted for one quarter of all physical punishment of 4- to 7-year-olds and 8- to 11-year-olds. Although the present data are not longitudinal, they do suggest that the intensity of physical punishment might escalate as children grow older. Among adolescents, there is an increase in the proportion of physical punishment consisting of shaking/grabbing/shoving/throwing, which might indicate that by this stage, physical punishment precipitates physical fights between children and their caregivers. An examination of the association between physical injury and victim age might shed some light on this question.

The proportion of emotional maltreatment incidents made up of emotional punishment also increases with age. By ages 8 to 11, it constitutes one third of all emotional maltreatment. And “other” punishment accounts for 68% of all “other maltreatment by adolescence.” These findings suggest that, as children get older, the nature of emotional and “other” maltreatment becomes increasingly punitive.

4. Substantial proportions of victims of punitive violence exhibit internalizing or externalizing problems. Very few victims of physically punitive violence had difficulties with alcohol or drugs, engaged in self-harm, or had physical disabilities or substance-abuse-related disorders. However,

19% of them exhibited depression or anxiety, 20% displayed violence toward others, and 19% were involved in negative peer relationships. These proportions were even more pronounced among children who had been punched or shaken/grabbed/shoved/thrown. And unspecified behavioural or emotional problems were noted in substantial proportions (33% to 46%) of children who had been punched, shaken/grabbed/shoved/thrown, or hit with hands or objects.

Similar difficulties were noted to similar degrees among children who had experienced emotional punishment. And “other” punishment was associated with the broadest range of concerns, which included depression/anxiety, negative peer involvement and violence toward others, as well as alcohol and drug abuse, self-harming behaviour, and running. A more detailed analysis of this punishment category might yield insight into the links between these infrequent forms of punishment and some psychosocial difficulties that appear to be unique to those forms. However, it must also be noted that the small frequencies in these categories might not capture valid relationships.

The present dataset cannot address the issue of causal direction between victims’ functioning concerns and their punishment experiences. But these findings do support those of numerous previous studies that have revealed an association between punishment and internalizing difficulties on the one hand, and externalizing difficulties on the other (Gershoff, 2002). It may be the case that children with behavioural or emotional problems are at greater risk for punitive violence, but it is at least equally likely that children who experience violence are more likely to become psychosocially maladjusted as a result of their experiences.

It also is not possible to determine from the present analysis the actual proportion of physically punished children for whom functioning concerns were noted. In other words, do the children exhibiting depressive symptoms constitute a group separate from those engaging in violence? Or are these groups overlapping? What proportion of physically punished children exhibit at least one internalizing or externalizing difficulty? It will be important to know the likelihood of psychosocial difficulties developing among victims of physically punitive violence. And it will be important to

understand the relationship between victims' ages and the probabilities and types of psychosocial difficulties they exhibit.

5. *Most perpetrators of punitive violence are biological parents.* It is commonly believed that step-parents, particularly step-fathers, are the most likely perpetrators of family violence against children. The present findings do not support this belief. Biological parents accounted for 79% of physical punishment, 83% of emotional punishment, and 65% of "other" punishment. In the case of physical and emotional punishment, mothers and fathers were equally likely to be perpetrators. But in the case of "other" punishment, biological mothers accounted for 4 times the proportion accounted for by biological fathers. This finding raises more questions about the nature of "other" punishment. Not only does it appear to have a unique relationship to particular child functioning concerns, but it also appears to be perpetrated primarily by mothers. Again, a more detailed analysis of these "other" punishment cases is called for if we are to obtain a clearer understanding of their nature.

6. *Inadequate social support and domestic violence characterize the context of punitive violence for both male and female caregivers.* With regard to physically punitive violence, male caregivers had inadequate social support in 30% of cases and a history of perpetrating partner violence in 24% of cases; female caregivers had inadequate social support in 32% of cases and were victims of partner violence in 31% of cases. These two factors were more prevalent among cases of physically punitive violence than mental health issues, alcohol abuse, drug abuse, or cognitive impairment. The link between physically punitive violence against children and the quality of the caregivers' social relationships is one that warrants further investigation. Is physically punitive violence reflective of some caregivers' approach to conflict resolution more generally? Or do physical punishment and partner violence both signal a lack of social supports for the family?

7. *In the majority of families for whom physically punitive violence was substantiated, spanking was typically used as a form of discipline.* Spanking was more strongly related to physically punitive violence than to emotionally punitive violence or "other" punitive violence. It was used as discipline

by the caregivers involved in more than 80% of incidents involving hitting with an object and more than 60% of incidents involving hitting with the hand. This finding lends further support to the conclusion that most physical violence against children emerges within a context of aggressive punishment and that spanking may signal a violent approach to managing parent-child conflict.

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