

## Chapter 2

# Prevalence of and Attitudes About School Corporal Punishment in the U.S.

Although there is very little information on the prevalence of school corporal punishment in the published research literature, the federal government has been collecting information about school corporal punishment for several decades. The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) in the U.S. Department of Education has gathered data on school corporal punishment since 1976 as part of its Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC; previously called the Elementary and Secondary School Survey). The CRDC collects data every few years from a sampling of school districts in all states on a variety of educational and civil rights issues in the public schools. The CRDC is conducted in compliance with Sect. 203(c)(1) of the Department of Education Organization Act of 1979 and as a means of enforcing civil rights afforded through three federal laws, namely protection from discrimination by race, color, or national origin under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, protection from discrimination based on sex under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, and protection from discrimination as a result of a disability under Sect. 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Office for Civil Rights 2011). All schools and districts that receive funding from the Department of Education are required to comply with requests for OCR survey data under several federal regulations (34 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] 100.6(b), 106.71, and 104.61 2000: Office for Civil Rights 2011).

### 2.1 Prevalence of School Corporal Punishment in Public Schools

We first examined national estimates for the number of students subject to school corporal punishment in the most recently available OCR data. Although OCR has made district- and school-level data from the 2011–2012 CRDC available on its website, it has not yet calculated national estimates and thus the most recent national data are from the 2009–2010 school year (Office for Civil Rights 2014b). In that year, 184,527 non-disabled students and 33,939 disabled students received school corporal punishment, for a total of 218,466 students. OCR estimates that

there were 48,273,920 public school students in the 2009–2010 school year, which means that the rate of corporal punishment was 0.5 % of students or 5 students out of every 1,000.

We then wanted to look at prevalence of school corporal punishment within each of the states that legally permits it. We first attempted to do so using the 2009–2010 data but found that OCR suppressed the data for some subgroups in some states for data reliability issues, meaning that we did not have a count of corporal punishment within subgroup categories. We decided that for any state-level analyses we needed to use the next most recent year of data, namely the 2005–2006 school year (Office for Civil Rights 2014a).

Table 2.1 presents the number of public school students subject to corporal punishment in 2006 within the 21 states that allowed it in that year. The reported numbers represent the sum of both non-disabled and disabled students from the OCR data tables available on its website. (In Chap. 3, we will examine disparities in corporal punishment by student disability status). Some states that allowed school corporal punishment reported no (Wyoming) or very few (Arizona, Colorado)

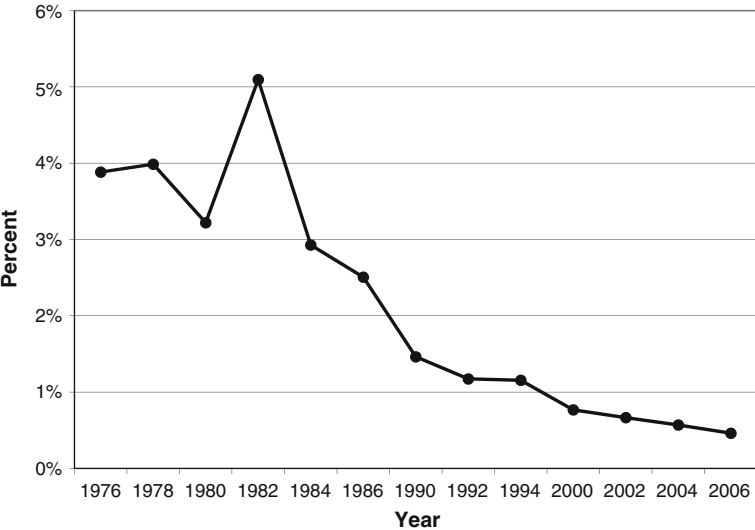
**Table 2.1** Prevalence of school corporal punishment in the 2005–2006 school year by state

State	Total number of students subject to corporal punishment	Prevalence (%)
Alabama	38,827	4.6
Arizona	28	<0.1
Arkansas	26,396	4.7
Colorado	9	<0.1
Florida	8,516	0.3
Georgia	22,152	1.1
Idaho	117	<0.1
Indiana	814	<0.1
Kansas	61	<0.1
Kentucky	2,716	0.3
Louisiana	13,543	1.7
Mississippi	43,962	7.5
Missouri	6,350	0.6
New Mexico	858	0.2
North Carolina	3,226	0.2
Ohio	1,002	<0.1
Oklahoma	17,077	2.4
South Carolina	1,601	0.2
Tennessee	18,486	1.5
Texas	59,419	1.1
Wyoming	0	0.0
US total:	265,160	0.4

Source Office for Civil Rights (2014a)

instances of corporal punishment in public schools. Most states with school corporal punishment reported that 2 % or less of their students experienced it; however, two states report that nearly 5 % of all students experienced school corporal punishment (Alabama and Arkansas), while Mississippi reported that fully 7.5 % of its students experienced corporal punishment during that school year.

We were then interested in how rates of school corporal punishment have changed over time. Although CRDC data on the OCR website only goes back to 2000, the first author applied to the OCR and received access to the restricted Elementary and Secondary School Civil Rights Survey Non-Public Data that included records from 1968 through 1998. Counts of corporal punishment were collected beginning in 1976 and thus we were able to plot the rates by dividing these counts by the total number of students in public schools for each year from this same dataset. Figure 2.1 plots these rates for all public school children for the 30 year period from 1976 to 2006. It is clear that the percentage of U.S. public school children experiencing corporal punishment has decreased dramatically. The number of students experiencing corporal punishment in the 2005–2006 school year (265,260; rate of 0.5 %) represented a reduction of 74 % compared with the number of students corporally punished in the 1975–1976 school year (1,024,063; rate of 4.0 %). The percentage of the public school population subject to corporal punishment dropped even more, from 4.0 % in 1976 to 0.4 % in 2006, a reduction of 90.0 %. The rate in 1982 appears to be an outlier; no explanation for this aberration is provided in the documentation OCR provided to the first author along with the historical data file. If the 1982 data point is removed, there is a clear downward trend in the rate of school corporal punishment over the 30 year period.



**Fig. 2.1** National prevalence of school corporal punishment among public school students (K to 12) by year of the OCR’s Civil Rights Data Collection from 1976 to 2006

## 2.2 A Note About the CRDC Data

While the CRDC data have been made publicly available on the OCR website for years, OCR has not included any data on corporal punishment in its annual reports to Congress (e.g., U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights 2009) or in reports summarizing the surveys for the public (e.g., Office for Civil Rights 2012). Outside of a few academic publications that have used annual OCR data (Gregory 1995; Owen 2005) and two joint reports from a collaboration between Human Rights Watch and the ACLU (Human Rights Watch and ACLU 2008, 2009), data on rates of school corporal punishment and the disparities in its use have not been widely disseminated. In addition, there have been no publications until now that have shown trends over time; this is the first paper to present these historical trends.

Some observers have argued that the data schools report to OCR are likely underestimates (Human Rights Watch and the ACLU, 2008, 2009) and thus more children may have been corporally punished than are in the OCR records. It is also important to note that the OCR data reports the number of children, not the number of times corporal punishment was administered. It is likely that some children were paddled multiple times in the year and thus these numbers are an underestimate of the instances of corporal punishment (Human Rights Watch and ACLU 2008, 2009). Indeed, a recent review of corporal punishment cases in North Carolina reported that 22 % of students had been paddled more than once (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction 2013). It is also the case that school corporal punishment may still occur in states where it is banned but not be reported to authorities. Finally, the OCR data only include public schools and thus children who attend private schools are not included in official statistics; given that corporal punishment in private schools is legal in 48 states, this means there may be substantial numbers of children who receive corporal punishment each year who are not represented in these statistics.

## 2.3 Misbehaviors that Elicit Corporal Punishment in Schools

The CRDC data do not include information on what misbehaviors elicited the corporal punishment. Much of what is known about how corporal punishment is administered and for what misbehaviors comes from three main sources: (1) two reports co-authored by Human Rights Watch and the ACLU (2008, 2009); (2) an in-depth study from the 1990s (Czumbil and Hyman 1997); and (3) a recent report from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2013).

It is first important to establish that corporal punishment is used to correct misbehavior in all grades of public school, namely from preschool through senior year of high school, although it tends to be used in the younger grades of elementary school (Human Rights Watch and ACLU 2008). A recent review of

corporal punishment cases in North Carolina found that two-thirds of the instances of corporal punishment involved elementary school students (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction 2013).

Proponents of school corporal punishment argue that it is used as a last resort or for only serious infractions. Interviews with paddled students make clear that some of the precipitating incidents are indeed quite serious, including fighting, setting off fireworks in school, or getting drunk on a field trip (Human Rights Watch and ACLU 2008). Principals from schools that do use corporal punishment report they are most likely to use it for student infractions involving fighting and least likely to use it for stealing (Medway and Smircic 1992). In the report from North Carolina, 48 % of cases were for disruptive behavior and 25 % were for fighting or aggression, with the remaining 26 % for inappropriate language, bus misbehavior, or disrespect of staff (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction 2013).

Yet it is not the case that all misbehaviors that elicit corporal punishment are serious. A review of over 6,000 disciplinary files in a central Florida school district for the 1987–1988 school year found that whether corporal punishment was used was not related to the severity of the student’s misbehavior or with how frequently they had been referred for a rule violation (Shaw and Braden 1990). School corporal punishment thus is not used as a ‘last resort’ for frequently misbehaving students or only for serious infractions. Indeed, in this Florida district, fully 25 % of all discipline referrals involved corporal punishment (Shaw and Braden 1990).

There is ample evidence that students are being paddled for a range of minor infractions. Examples of such infractions include but are not limited to: being late to class, failing to turn in homework, violating dress codes, running in the hallway, laughing in the hallway, sleeping in class, talking back to teachers, going to the bathroom without permission, mispronouncing words, and receiving bad grades (Human Rights Watch and ACLU 2008; Mitchell 2010). It is also not true that the severity of the corporal punishment fits the misbehavior. Czumbil and Hyman (1997) reviewed 507 media stories about school corporal punishment from daily, weekly, and Sunday newspapers from 1975 through 1992 and coded both the reason for the punishment (i.e., violent or non-violent misbehavior) and whether the incident of corporal punishment was severe (i.e., medical attention was sought, there was physical evidence of corporal punishment, or the parents thought the corporal punishment was too severe). They found that severe corporal punishment was not more common for violent than non-violent student misbehaviors (Czumbil and Hyman 1997).

## 2.4 State Characteristics Are Associated with School Corporal Punishment

In addition to individual-level factors such as the type of misbehavior that influence whether corporal punishment is used on a particular student, there are state-level factors that determine whether and how often corporal punishment is used across districts. It is clear from Fig. 1 that school corporal punishment is clustered in the

South. Even among paddling states, states in the South report more frequent school corporal punishment (Owen 2005). Support for school corporal punishment fits within a Southern culture that endorses violence as a means of social control, self-protection, and the socialization of children (Cohen and Nisbett 1994). There are also within-state differences in the rate at which corporal punishment is used in schools. Not surprisingly, rates of school corporal punishment are highest in regions of the country where residents report the strongest support for it (Owen 2005). They are highest in areas that are rural, small, and have high proportions of low income students (Grossman et al. 1995; Han 2011; McClure and May 2008; Nickerson and Spears 2007). It is also highest in schools with the most minority students (Han 2011), with the most Evangelical Christians (Owen and Wagner 2006), and with low social capital (Owen 2005).

While these research studies are informative, they did not examine a comprehensive set of state characteristics. We wanted to expand our understanding of the state characteristics that are associated with school corporal punishment rates by considering a larger set of such characteristics as predictors of whether states allow school corporal punishment at all and, among those allowing it, of how many children are subject to corporal punishment. We examined a range of state-level demographic and social variables, the majority of which were taken from the Kids Count Data Center (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2014): (1) percent of the population that was under 18 years of age; (2) percent of children living in poverty; (3) percent of the population that is White; (4) percent of the population that is Black; (5) percent of the population that is Latino; (6) percent of the population aged 25–34 that did not graduate from high school; (7) percent of the population aged 25–34 that has an Associates, Bachelors, or graduate degree; (8) per pupil expenditures in the public schools (adjusted for regional cost differences); (9) percent of children who are immigrants or have an immigrant parent; (10) percent of children in single parent families; (11) percent of 2 year olds who received the recommended 4:3:1:3:3:1 vaccine series (4 diphtheria/tetanus/pertusis, 3 polio, 1 measles/mumps/rubella, 3 Haemophilus influenza type B, 3 hepatitis B, 1 varicella); (12) rate of all forms of maltreatment per 1,000 children; (13) rate of child deaths per 100,000 children; and (14) rate of juvenile offenders per 100,000 children. Each of these indicators is derived from federal and state data; details are available at [datacenter.kidscount.org](http://datacenter.kidscount.org). (15) We also coded each state as being in the South or not per designations provided by the U.S. Census Bureau (2014); the following 17 states are considered to be Southern: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

We first looked at which of these state characteristics predicted whether a state legally allowed corporal punishment in public schools in 2014. We used the most recent data available from Kids Count, which was usually 2012 but in some cases 2010 or 2011, and included Washington, D.C., in our analyses. Because several of the predictors were highly collinear and because our sample size was only 51, a model with all characteristics at once would not run. Thus, we report unadjusted odds ratios from logistic regressions for each characteristic predicting whether school corporal

punishment is legal in Table 2.2. Nine of the fifteen predictors successfully predicted whether a state legally permitted corporal punishment in public schools. States with high proportions of their population that are children and with high proportions of children living in poverty were more likely to have school corporal punishment. Having more adults without a high school diploma is associated with a significantly higher likelihood that school corporal punishment would be legal, while having a higher proportion of the population with a college education and having a higher per-pupil expenditure in public schools were both associated with a lower likelihood that

**Table 2.2** State-level characteristics predicting whether school corporal punishment is legal in a state as of 2014 ( $N = 51$ )

	Unadjusted odds ratio	SE	Z	95 % confidence interval
Percent of population under 18 years	<b>1.44</b>	<b>0.26</b>	<b>2.03*</b>	<b>1.01–2.04</b>
Percent of children living in poverty	<b>1.68</b>	<b>0.25</b>	<b>3.44***</b>	<b>1.25–2.26</b>
Percent of population that is White	0.99	0.02	-0.46	0.86–1.02
Percent of population that is Black	1.05	0.03	1.84	1.00–1.10
Percent of population that is Latino	1.00	0.02	0.09	0.96–1.05
Percent of population aged 25–34 that are not high school graduates	<b>1.46</b>	<b>0.18</b>	<b>3.07**</b>	<b>1.15–1.87</b>
Percent of population aged 25–34 that has AA, BA, or higher degree	<b>0.76</b>	<b>0.06</b>	<b>-3.27***</b>	<b>0.65–0.90</b>
Per pupil expenditures in public schools (2010) <sup>a</sup>	<b>0.99</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>-2.64**</b>	<b>0.99–0.99</b>
Percent of children who are immigrants or have an immigrant parent	0.96	0.03	-0.15	0.90–1.02
Percent of children in single parent families	1.11	0.06	1.83	0.99–1.23
Percent of 2 year olds immunized (2008)	1.02	0.06	0.32	0.92–1.14
Rate of maltreatment per 1,000 children	0.94	0.07	-0.82	0.81–1.09
Rate of child deaths per 100,000 (2010) <sup>b</sup>	<b>1.27</b>	<b>0.11</b>	<b>2.82**</b>	<b>1.08–1.50</b>
Rate of juvenile offenders per 100,000 (2011)	0.99	0.00	-0.45	0.99–1.00
Southern <sup>c</sup>	<b>9.26</b>	<b>6.30</b>	<b>3.27***</b>	<b>2.43–35.14</b>

Note District of Columbia is included as a state. All state characteristics are from 2012 unless otherwise noted. All characteristics but the last one come from Kids Count Data Center (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2014)

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

<sup>a</sup> Adjusted for regional cost difference

<sup>b</sup> For children aged 1–14 years

<sup>c</sup> Source Southern region defined by the U.S. Census Bureau: [http://www.census.gov/geo/maps-data/maps/pdfs/reference/us\\_regdiv.pdf](http://www.census.gov/geo/maps-data/maps/pdfs/reference/us_regdiv.pdf)

school corporal punishment would be legal. States with higher child death rates were also more likely to allow corporal punishment in schools. States in the South were significantly more likely to allow school corporal punishment.

Taken together, these analyses indicate that there is a clear relationship between the demographic environment of a state and whether it permits corporal punishment in schools. School corporal punishment is more likely in states where children are more numerous and living in at-risk conditions (higher poverty, higher death rates), and where education is under-accessed (low college graduation rates) and under-valued (low expenditures). These findings suggest that the barriers to corporal punishment bans in these states may have sources in social and economic factors and any efforts to ban corporal punishment in these states will need to address these factors.

We next were interested in predicting the number of children receiving corporal punishment within the states that allowed it. For this analyses involving inter-state comparisons, we used the 2005–2006 OCR data with complete state-level data. We looked within the 21 states that allowed school corporal punishment in the 2005–2006 school year and linked their 2005 characteristics with the number of school corporal punishment cases they reported that year. As seen in Table 2.3, five

**Table 2.3** State-level characteristics predicting number of children who received school corporal punishment in the 2005–2006 school year among states where it was legal ( $N = 21$ )

	B	SE	$\beta$	$t$ test
Percent of population under 18 years	3,394.43	2,693.83	0.28	1.26
Percent of children living in poverty	<b>2,197.57</b>	<b>636.52</b>	<b>0.62</b>	<b>3.45**</b>
Percent of population that is White	−456.79	238.57	−0.40	−1.92
Percent of population that is Black	<b>615.59</b>	<b>259.78</b>	<b>0.48</b>	<b>2.37*</b>
Percent of population that is Latino	40.40	260.40	0.04	0.16
Percent of population aged 25 to 34 that are not high school graduates	<b>3,356.40</b>	<b>1,121.86</b>	<b>0.57</b>	<b>2.99**</b>
Percent of population aged 25 to 34 that has AA, BA, or higher degree	−1135.22	942.45	−0.27	−1.21
Per pupil expenditures in public schools <sup>a</sup>	−3.30	3.65	−0.20	−0.91
Percent of children who are immigrants or have an immigrant parent	166.21	446.66	0.09	0.37
Percent of children in single parent families	<b>1,430.96</b>	<b>642.13</b>	<b>0.46</b>	<b>2.23*</b>
Percent of two year olds immunized	1,000.62	738.70	0.30	1.36
Rate of maltreatment per 1000 children	−10.16	678.92	−0.01	−0.02
Rate of child deaths per 100,000 <sup>b</sup>	1,069.79	902.58	0.26	1.19
Rate of juvenile offenders per 100,000	−38.21	36.04	−0.24	−1.06
Southern <sup>c</sup>	<b>20,300.19</b>	<b>6,106.08</b>	<b>0.61</b>	<b>3.33**</b>

*Note* All state characteristics are from 2005 except rate of juvenile offenders which comes from 2003. All characteristics but the last one come from Kids Count Data Center (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2014)

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

<sup>a</sup> Adjusted for regional cost difference

<sup>b</sup> For children aged 1–14 years

<sup>c</sup> *Source* Southern region defined by the U.S. Census Bureau (2014)

state-level indicators predicted the number of children who received school corporal punishment in separate *t*-tests. School corporal punishment rates were higher when states were characterized by higher proportions of children living in poverty, of children living in single parent families, of the general population that was Black, and of adults aged 25–34 who did not graduate from high school. In addition, states in the South reported higher numbers of school children being subject to corporal punishment than did states not in the South.

While the analyses presented in Table 2.2 illustrated the differences between states that do and do not permit school corporal punishment, the analyses in Table 2.3 make clear that there are differences among states that allow corporal punishment as well. Several states have corporal punishment on the books but rarely use it (see Arizona, Colorado, Kansas, and Wyoming in Table 2.1) and this analysis identified the demographic and cultural factors that predict how often corporal punishment is administered in a state. There is likely additional variation with each state at the district or county level but we are unable to examine that possibility with these data.

The state-level factors that predict whether school corporal punishment is legal were generally the same as those that predict how often corporal punishment will be administered, a finding which suggests these factors may need to be addressed if corporal punishment is to be banned in these states. States that report more corporal punishment face several social and economic challenges which may underlie their support for harsh punishments for children's misbehaviors, just as families who experience the stress of living in poverty use more corporal punishment with their children (Berlin et al. 2009). These findings suggest that more work is needed to understand what it is about being in the South that promotes corporal punishment in schools. They are likely also a reflection of more favorable attitudes toward corporal punishment both in homes and in schools. In the next section, we review what is known about Americans' attitudes about school corporal punishment.

## **2.5 Attitudes About School Corporal Punishment in the U.S.**

Both state and federal laws are thought to reflect the will of the people. The only way to ascertain the will of the people is to ask, which typically means surveying a representative sample of them. A variety of surveys has asked Americans generally and educators specifically about their views on school corporal punishment. As will be seen below, school corporal punishment is falling out of favor with both of these constituencies, a fact that suggests the remaining laws permitting school corporal punishment are out of step with both public and educator opinion.

### 2.5.1 Public Opinion

Americans are by no means opposed to the corporal punishment of children overall. In a 2012 nationally representative survey, 65 % of women and 77 % of men surveyed agreed with the statement that sometimes a child needs a “good hard spanking” (ChildTrends 2013). These largely favorable attitudes have decreased only slightly since 1986, when 82 % of women and 84 % of men agreed with the same statement (ChildTrends 2013). Parents’ support for their own use of corporal punishment has been thought to underlie the public’s support for school corporal punishment historically (Society for Adolescent Medicine 2003). However, that connection is beginning to erode, as support for school corporal punishment is falling at a much faster rate than that for parental corporal punishment.

The first available opinion data about school corporal punishment specifically is from a national poll in 1938, in which 76 % of Southerners and 50 % of non-Southerners approved of school corporal punishment (Reed 1971). But rather than decreasing over time, support for school corporal punishment rose over the ensuing decades, such that by 1958, both groups had increased their support for school corporal punishment, with Southerners at 81 % approval and non-Southerners at 58 % (Reed 1971). By 1968, support dropped again, such that 49 % of all Americans were found to approve of corporal punishment (Poole et al. 1991). In other words, 46 years ago, and 9 years before the Supreme Court’s *Ingraham v. Wright* ruling that school corporal punishment was constitutional, fewer than half of Americans supported school corporal punishment (see sect. 6.2).

The next reported polls on school corporal punishment were not conducted until the 1980s. In a 1989 poll, 46 % of Americans were in favor of it (Hyman 1990). In this same poll, nearly twice as many Americans (86 %) were in favor of corporal punishment by parents as were those in favor of corporal punishment by school personnel. This poll also found regional differences in favorable attitudes, with 66 % of Southerners approving of school corporal punishment compared with 33 % of non-Southerners (Hyman 1990).

Another survey from the 1980s, although not nationally representative, sheds light on Americans’ attitudes beyond just favorable or not to beliefs about effectiveness. This survey of military personnel who were also parents found that 51 % agreed or strongly agreed that corporal punishment should be allowed in schools. However, their beliefs about its effectiveness were much lower. Only 1 in 5 military parents (20 %) thought school corporal punishment improved academic performance, and only 1 in 3 of these parents (34 %) thought it improved student behavior (Kelly et al. 1985). These results suggest that, at least in the 1980s, Americans’ beliefs about whether corporal punishment is an effective disciplinary practice lagged behind their support for the idea of corporal punishment in schools.

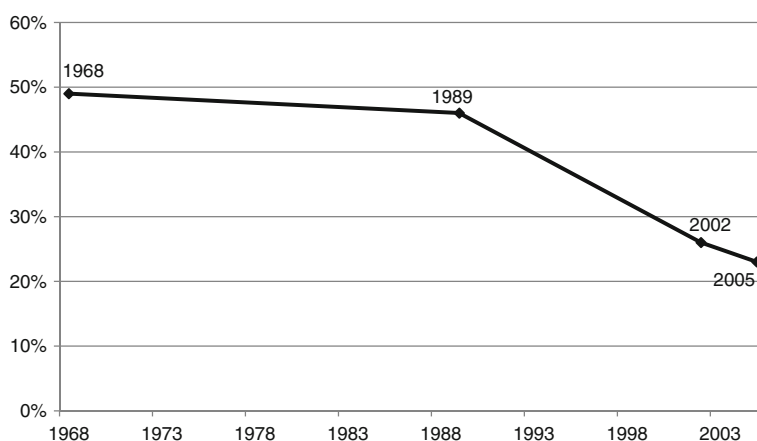
Available data on Americans’ attitudes about school corporal punishment takes another jump from the 1980s to the 2000s, and the data from the 2000s indicates a large drop in favorable attitudes over that time. In a 2002 national poll of over 1,000 adults, 74 % of Americans did not think teachers should be allowed to spank their

students, meaning only 26 % believed that they should (Crandall 2002). This same poll found that disapproval of school corporal punishment was even true for parents who spank their own children, 67 % of whom believed that school personnel should not be allowed to spank children at school, and for Southerners, 65 % of whom thought spanking should not be allowed in schools (Crandall 2002). This latter statistic represents a complete reversal from the 1989 data cited above, in which 66 % of Southerners had favorable attitudes (Hyman 1990).

Another survey conducted in the 2000s indicated minimal support for school corporal punishment in general but the presence of some regional variations. At the national level, only 23 % of the American adults in a 2005 national survey agreed that it was “OK for a school teacher to spank a student” (SurveyUSA 2005). As would be expected, support for school corporal punishment was much stronger in the Southern U.S. The four states in which more than half of adults approved of school corporal punishment were in the South and permitted school corporal punishment, namely Arkansas (53 %), Mississippi (53 %), Alabama (52 %), and Tennessee (51 %). Approval for school corporal punishment was lowest in the Northeast, where several states had fewer than 10 % of its residents in favor of school corporal punishment (9 %: Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Vermont; 8 %: New Hampshire).

A trend line compiling these surveys is presented in Fig. 2.2. It is clear that Americans’ attitudes about school corporal punishment have dropped precipitously over a nearly 40 year period. Again, this is in contrast to Americans’ attitudes about corporal punishment by parents, which has decreased only slightly over the last three decades (ChildTrends 2013).

Finally, if newspaper editorial pages can be seen as another reflection of the voice of the people, then there is evidence of increasing discomfort with the notion



**Fig. 2.2** Americans’ approval of school corporal punishment in national polls, 1968–2005. Sources 1968: Poole et al. (1991); 1989: Hyman (1990); 2002: Crandall (2002); 2005: SurveyUSA (2005)

of children been paddled in schools. The Center for Effective discipline, a non-profit organization that compiles data on corporal punishment and alternatives, lists on its website the newspaper editorials from 1985 to 2010 in major daily newspapers in both paddling and non-paddling states that have called for an end to school corporal punishment. *USA Today* has been at the forefront, publishing editorials calling for an end to corporal punishment in 1989, 1990, and 1994 (Center for Effective Discipline 2010); *USA Today* also published an editorial entitled “End Spanking in Public Schools” in 2012 (USA Today Editorial Board 2012). Editorials calling for a ban on school corporal punishment have appeared in newspapers in most paddling states: Alabama: *Huntsville Times* (2000); Arizona: *Arizona Republic* (2009); Georgia: *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (1989); Kentucky: *Louisville Courier-Journal* (2009). Louisiana: *Shreveport Times* (2008); North Carolina: *News and Observer* (2007); Oklahoma: *The Oklahoman* (2009); Tennessee: *Nashville Tennessean* (2004) and *Memphis Commercial Appeal* (2004); and Texas: *Dallas Morning News* (2000) and *Houston Post* (1989) (Center for Effective Discipline 2010).

### 2.5.2 Educator Opinion

Surveys of educators over the last several decades have tended to find stronger support for school corporal punishment than was found for the American public. A 1975 study commissioned by the Pennsylvania State Board of Education found that parents had the lowest percentage of being in favor of school corporal punishment (71 %) compared with 74 % of teachers, 78 % of principals, and 81 % of school board presidents (Reardon and Reynolds 1979). Tellingly, only 25 % of students surveyed in that same study were in favor of school corporal punishment. Similar levels of support were found in a survey of rural elementary school principals in South Dakota, among whom half were in favor of school corporal punishment; half also perceived that their communities supported the practice (Webster et al. 1988). A more recent study with teachers in Miami-Dade County, Florida, found that 70 % of teachers of kindergarten through senior year in high school reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that corporal punishment should be allowed in schools (Kenny 2004).

Teachers in districts that allow corporal punishment do not typically view it as problematic. In a study of over 500 elementary and middle school teachers across the country in the early 1990s, 62 % of teachers said abolishing corporal punishment in the classroom was of “above average importance” as a means of child abuse prevention; this percentage was substantially lower among teachers in the South at 38 % (Abrahams et al. 1992). Only 41 % of teachers in this same survey agreed that talking with their fellow teachers about corporal punishment was an “above average” priority. One teacher in this study stated that, “corporal punishment is not synonymous with child abuse or even with violence,” while another argued, “You want to take away our best effective deterrent to teacher abuse and class abuse” (Abrahams et al. 1992, p. 236).

But not all educators are convinced that school corporal punishment is effective. In a survey of 142 school administrators in Hillsborough County, Florida, elementary school and high school administrators rated corporal punishment as the least effective method of discipline in terms of behavior improvement, while middle school administrators rated it as the 5th most effective disciplinary strategy (after peer mediation, referral to guidance counselors, parent conference, and in-school suspension; Raffaele 1999). Reflecting this assessment, few schools in this district used corporal punishment (10 % of elementary schools; 17 % of middle schools; 7 % of high schools), although it is interesting that corporal punishment was used more often in middle schools than elementary or high schools.

The notion that corporal punishment is not effective has been found in other surveys as well. Only 28 % of 159 school principals from across Missouri professed to using corporal punishment, and none rated it as the most effective disciplinary technique (Billings and Enger 1995). A similar study in the Midwest, South, and Southwest found that when teachers were asked to rank the effectiveness of their classroom management techniques, corporal punishment was ranked as having the lowest effectiveness of the eight techniques considered (Little and Akin-Little 2008).

Educators who administer corporal punishment to students are, not surprisingly, more likely to be in favor of the practice and to believe it to be effective (Bogacki et al. 2005). An anecdotal account from a junior high principal in Everman, Texas, illustrates this firm belief that corporal punishment is necessary and effective:

We, as Americans, have let our school system get a little bit out of control. I love children, but when I see how many are going astray, it's heartbreaking... Corporal punishment adds just one small fear back into the system. (Breen and Goolsby 2006, para. 19)

This principal reported that he and his staff administered 535 paddlings or “pops” to students in a single year (Breen and Goolsby 2006).

A few contextual factors have been found to predict whether an educator favors corporal punishment. Educators are more likely to favor the use of corporal punishment if they are high in authoritarian beliefs (Bogacki et al. 2005) or neuroticism (Rust and Kinnard 1983), if they had been corporally punished by their own parents (Kaplan 1992), and if they had been corporally punished while they were in school (Rust and Kinnard 1983). These same factors have been found to predict whether parents favor and use corporal punishment with their own children (Gershoff 2002; Holden et al. 1999; Rodriguez and Sutherland 1999). In addition, educators who live in a state where school corporal punishment is legal have stronger support for it than educators who live in states where it is illegal (Bogacki et al. 2005).

## 2.6 Summary

This chapter presented the first published account of school corporal punishment rates over time. While the overall rate has dropped dramatically over the three decades from 1976 to 2006 such that only 0.4 % of students nationally are subject

to corporal punishment, within states that allow school corporal punishment, the rates are much higher, with Mississippi administering corporal punishment to 8 in every 100 of its students each year. Data from a school district in Florida indicate that corporal punishment is used in 2.4 times as many middle schools as high schools and 1.7 times as many elementary schools, suggesting that school personnel find misbehaviors in middle school more deserving of corporal punishment. Corporal punishment is not reserved for serious misbehaviors and rather has been documented as punishment for very minor child misbehaviors and thus is not being used just as a “last resort”. It is also the case that school corporal punishment has fallen out of favor in the majority of states but support for and use of it remains strong in the Southern U.S.

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