



The prevalence of corporal punishment in Australia: Findings from a nationally representative survey

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Funding information

National Health and Medical Research Council, Grant/Award Number: APP1158750; Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet; the Department of Social Services; and the Australian Institute of Criminology; European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, Grant/Award Number: ES/S008101/1 and 852787; UK Research and Innovation Global Challenges Research Fund; NHMRC Early Career Fellowship, Grant/Award Number: APP1137969; Queensland Department of Health

Abstract

Corporal punishment is associated with adverse outcomes; however, little empirical data exists about the state of corporal punishment in Australia. This paper presents the first national prevalence estimates of experiences of corporal punishment during childhood among Australians and its use as adults by Australian parents and caregivers. We also report community beliefs about the necessity of corporal punishment. Results show corporal punishment remains common in Australia. A high proportion of Australians (62.5%) experienced corporal punishment in childhood, including almost 6 in 10 (58.4%) young people aged 16–24. Approximately half of all parents surveyed (53.7%) had used corporal punishment. A quarter of Australians (26.4%) believe corporal punishment is necessary to raise children, 73.6% do not view it as necessary. The use of corporal punishment and belief in its necessity are lower among younger people. Findings indicate the experience of corporal punishment remains unacceptably high in Australia but that the use of corporal punishment and beliefs about its necessity may be changing. These findings have significant implications for policy and practice in Australia. Changes in legislation could reduce this form of violence toward children. Relatively low rates of endorsement of the necessity of corporal punishment suggest the Australian

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community may be receptive to attempts for law reform in this area.

KEYWORDS

beliefs, corporal punishment, parenting, prevalence, violence

Corporal punishment is the use of physical force to cause pain, but not injury, for the purposes of behavioural discipline or correction (Donnelly & Straus, 2005). It can involve hitting, slapping, pushing, pinching or otherwise temporarily hurting the child. Historically, physical discipline was a common and widely endorsed practice; however, its use is now in decline among many countries internationally (Finkelhor et al., 2019; Lansford et al., 2017). It is now viewed as a form of violence against children that contravenes Article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006; Convention on the Rights of The Child, 1989). Until now, Australia has had no nationally representative data about the prevalence of childhood experiences of corporal punishment or about parental use of corporal punishment. Furthermore, little is known at a national level about Australian community beliefs about the necessity of corporal punishment for raising children.

The limited data available appear to show corporal punishment is no longer a primary form of discipline for Australian parents. For example, a survey of 2000 parents by the Royal Children's Hospital (2018) found only 17% had used physical discipline, defined as physical punishment including smacking, hitting, spanking, pinching or pulling, within the prior month. There is also emerging evidence that the use of corporal punishment by Australian parents is declining. In the 2022 Parenting In Victoria Today survey, only 17% of parents reported ever “smacking” their children down from 27% in 2016 (Kienhuis et al., 2022). These declines are consistent with international patterns (e.g., Finkelhor et al., 2019). The lack of population data in this area is a major gap in Australian evidence (Poulsen, 2019). Accurate prevalence data are needed given current calls for legislative change to prohibit corporal punishment (e.g., Havighurst et al., 2023) and to inform policy and practice. In this paper, we report the first national Australian prevalence estimates of childhood experiences of corporal punishment, parental use of corporal punishment, and population-level beliefs about the necessity of corporal punishment. We examine these by age cohorts to determine whether the use of corporal punishment and beliefs about it are changing. We focus primarily on corporal punishment in the home and use by parents and employ a robust measure of corporal punishment that includes both smacking and any physical punishment.

Decades of research including systematic reviews and meta-analyses have shown corporal punishment is associated with a range of adverse outcomes (Gershoff, 2022; Zolotor, 2014; Zolotor & Puzia, 2010). These include increased aggression, externalising problems, internalising problems, mood disorders, lower moral internalisation and decreases in cognitive ability, and even neurological changes (Afifi et al., 2012; Burani et al., 2023; Ferguson, 2013; Gershoff, 2002; Paolucci & Violato, 2004; Ward et al., 2021). For example, a recent meta-analysis combining data from 160,927 children found that corporal punishment was associated with significant negative effects on 13 of 17 outcomes assessed (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016).

Corporal punishment is also thought to contribute to patterns of family violence and is strongly associated with child maltreatment (Grogan-Kaylor et al., 2018; Ma et al., 2022). For example, corporal punishment at age one is associated with a 33% increased risk that the family will become involved in child protective services before the child is aged five (Lee, Grogan-Kaylor & Bergnen, 2014). Similarly, mothers who use corporal punishment are between three and nine times more likely to self-report physical abuse than those who do not (Zolotor et al., 2008). Data also show that young adults who were spanked in childhood are more likely to perpetrate dating violence than those who were not even after adjusting for

family and maltreatment-related confounders (Temple et al., 2018). The primary benefit of corporal punishment is immediate compliance, an outcome that not only is short-term, but which research demonstrates can also be achieved with alternative non-violent parenting strategies that are sustainable (Larzelere & Kuhn, 2005; Leijten et al., 2018). The lack of benefits of corporal punishment, together with its negative effects, has led to calls to reduce corporal punishment as a child well-being strategy, and as a part of broader violence reduction initiatives (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2013; Havighurst et al., 2023).

Ethical guidelines preclude the types of randomised trials required to demonstrate causal pathways between corporal punishment and adverse outcomes (i.e., where two treatment groups are randomly assigned—those with and without corporal punishment—to determine outcomes on children). However, the strength and consistency of empirically validated associations between exposure to all forms of corporal punishment and developmental outcomes have led leading researchers to conclude that causal relationships exist and to urge policymakers and health professionals to raise awareness about its harms and recommend against its use (Gershoff et al., 2018; Ma et al., 2022). In the last 20 years, an increasing number of countries have made policy or legislative decisions to reduce or eliminate corporal punishment.

In 1979, Sweden became the first country to legislatively prohibit the use of corporal punishment. What followed was dramatic decreases in violence toward children (Durrant & Janson, 2005). Since this time, a developing consensus has been reached among researchers, legal scholars and peak bodies that corporal punishment should be avoided. The well-documented adverse outcomes with which physical punishment is associated have led many researchers and peak bodies to actively advocate for the total cessation of the use of corporal punishment against all children, in all contexts, arguing that based on social science research and human rights law, it should be prohibited (Gershoff, 2013; Gershoff & Bitensky, 2007; Zolotar et al., 2008). Some researchers have called for the reclassification of corporal punishment to be considered an adverse childhood experience (Afifi et al., 2017), and others argue it should be considered a form of toxic stress, given its influence on brain development (Gershoff, 2016).

It is not only researchers that are calling for change. Policy statements by esteemed bodies, such as the American Academy of Pediatrics (Sege et al., 2018) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Fortson et al., 2016), now actively advise parents to avoid corporal punishment and use non-physical alternatives. Key government bodies, such as the European Union, have also called for physical discipline to be prohibited, arguing all children have a right to a childhood free of all forms of violence (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2013). Most significantly, at the time of writing, 65 nations have enacted legislative prohibitions against corporal punishment in all settings (Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, 2021).

In Australia, corporal punishment by parents is lawful. Legislation and common law in all states and territories permits parents to use “reasonable” physical force for the purposes of discipline, punishment or correction (Havighurst et al., 2023). In five of the eight states and territories, this parental power is established in criminal legislation, and elsewhere, it is contained in long-standing common law principles (Havighurst et al., 2023). All have their genesis in centuries-old Roman law principles embodying anachronistic approaches to parental power. Australian researchers have called for these laws to be repealed on the strength of evidence of adverse impact and children's rights to bodily integrity and freedom from violence (Havighurst et al., 2023). Similar calls have been made by leading Australian bodies including the Australian Human Rights Commission (2019) and The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (2013). Calls have also been made by legal scholars who argue physical punishment is a violation of rights (e.g., Greeff, 2022, 2023). These increasing calls indicate a desire for

reform among professionals; however, little is known about community beliefs or how such reform would be received by the general public.

Calls for reform are intended to reduce violence toward children. It is argued that prohibition will both decrease the use of corporal punishment and change beliefs about the need for corporal punishment, thus leading to further change over time. However, prior research has shown that although reductions in the use of corporal punishment typically occur following legislative reform, these do not necessarily stem causally from legislative change. For example, one study of eight countries that instituted legal bans against the use of corporal punishment found decreased rates of the use of corporal punishment occurred in only three of the eight countries following legislative change, and that harsh corporal punishment decreased in only four of the eight (Lansford et al., 2017). Greater change occurred in countries that implemented public health campaigns to raise awareness about the negative impacts of corporal punishment and in countries where access to parenting education was provided to equip parents with alternative behaviour management strategies. This provides important guidance for the Australian context.

Sweden is often held as an example of the effectiveness of law reform in reducing violence toward children. Following the prohibition of corporal punishment, violence toward children dropped dramatically in Sweden as did levels of supportive attitudes toward corporal punishment (Durrant, 1996). However, a closer analysis of the time-series data negates this simplistic view. Instead, data show that support for corporal punishment was already declining prior to legislative change, indicating that public attitudes likely contributed to the successful implementation of statutory reform and associated behaviour change, not vice versa (Durrant & Janson, 2005; Roberts, 2000). Contrary to this, recent work comparing samples across seven countries found steeper declines in positive endorsement of physical discipline following prohibition (Alampay et al., 2022). Systematic reviews have also found that prohibition is associated with marked reductions in the use and support of corporal punishment; however, it is unclear whether these are causally related or whether the bans are themselves a result of changing societal beliefs and practices (Zolotor & Puzia, 2010). This highlights the importance of assessing the use and support of corporal punishment at a national level prior to any potential legislative change.

It is well-known that attitudes and beliefs predict behavioural change. This has been demonstrated in multiple settings including in health and parenting settings (e.g., Gonzalez et al., 2023). Moreover, beliefs about the necessity of corporal punishment stem from inaccurate assumptions that it is harmless or required to stop children running wild (e.g., Kish & Newcombe, 2015; Straus & Donnelly, 2017). Beliefs about corporal punishment are also influenced by individual childhood experiences (Chiocca, 2017). In particular, childhood experiences of corporal punishment—but not physical abuse—are related to more positive attitudes to physical discipline in adults (Deater-Deckard et al., 2003). This may contribute to beliefs like “It didn't harm me” being common in those in favour of physical discipline. Similarly, recent research has shown that adolescent beliefs about corporal punishment are highly related to the beliefs of their parents, suggesting intergenerational transmission of beliefs (Afifi et al., 2022). Several large-scale surveys of attitudes toward corporal punishment and the use of corporal punishment conducted across several high-income (e.g., Lansford et al., 2017; Morawska et al., 2019) and low- and middle-income countries have shown that corporal punishment is still highly prevalent and that beliefs differ across regions (Cuartas, 2021; Lansford et al., 2017).

Australia, however, lacks national data on the prevalence of children's experiences of corporal punishment, the use of corporal punishment by Australian parents and caregivers, and about population-level community beliefs regarding its necessity to raise children. These data are essential to inform policy and practice and the potential benefits of legislative reform.

1 | THE CURRENT STUDY

In this study, we present a comprehensive, empirically driven analysis of corporal punishment in Australia using a nationally representative dataset. First, we generate the first national Australian prevalence estimates of experiences of corporal punishment in childhood before 18 years across the full Australian population and by age strata. This allows us to examine age group effects, which serve as a proxy for time.

Second, we are interested in the use of corporal punishment by parents and primary caregivers and if this differs by age group or gender. If the use of corporal punishment is in decline, the impacts of any Australian law reforms are likely to be enhanced. Previous research has linked maternal experiences of childhood adversity with the use of negative parenting practices in raising their own children (Lotto et al., 2023). Similarly, socioeconomic status is associated with harsh parenting (Vittrup & Holden, 2010) and beliefs about corporal punishment (Pinderhughes et al., 2000). We therefore examine the influence of childhood economic hardship, current financial pressure, and childhood experiences of corporal punishment.

Finally, we examine beliefs about the necessity of corporal punishment both at a community level and within a parent and caregiver subset. We argue that the beliefs of parents, particularly those of childbearing or childrearing ages, are particularly important since they are the ones who are most likely to engage in corporal punishment. These data are important for those in policy and health services and in parenting support roles as well as for legal scholars considering the feasibility and potential impact of law reform.

To examine these research questions, we use the Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS) dataset. The ACMS is the first nationally representative study to assess the prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia (Mathews et al., 2021). In addition to child maltreatment, the study assessed other childhood experiences including corporal punishment. The sample consists of 8503 randomly selected Australians aged 16–65 years and older across five age decile strata. This dataset has the advantage of being a large, nationally representative and randomly selected sample (Haslam et al., 2023). The inclusion of Australians across all age groups also allows age group effects to be identified to examine potential differences by age group as proxy for change over time.

The three aims of our study are as follows:

1. to generate the first Australian prevalence estimates of the experience of corporal punishment in childhood and whether this differs by age cohort, gender, socioeconomic disadvantage and childhood financial pressure;
2. to estimate the prevalence of the use of corporal punishment by Australian parents and caregivers and whether this differs by age cohort, gender, socioeconomic disadvantage or childhood experience of corporal punishment; and
3. to report population-level community beliefs about whether the use of corporal punishment is necessary to raise a child and whether beliefs differ by age cohort, gender, socioeconomic status and childhood financial pressure, or by parental status.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Design and participants

We used data from the ACMS. The protocol (Mathews et al., 2021) and methodology including sample characteristics and psychometrics have been published elsewhere (Haslam et al., 2023). In brief, the ACMS used a random cross-sectional, retrospective interview design. There were 8503 participants aged 16–65+ years, comprising an oversample of young people aged

16–24 years ($n=3500$) plus 1000 people in five age groups: 25–34, 35–44, 45–54, 55–64 and 65 years and older. For this study, we use the term “Youth Cohort” to refer to participants aged 16–24 years. Prior to weighting, 49.3% of the sample identified as men ($n=4195$), 49.2% as women ($n=4182$) and 1.5% ($n=126$) were classified as having diverse genders. A large proportion of participants were parents (43.28%, $n=3680$); however, participants in the youth cohort were least likely to be parents.

The sample was broadly representative of the Australian population based on census and national health data (Haslam et al., 2023). The sample was weighted to adjust for minor differences and by Socio-Economic Indexes for Area (SEIFA) Index of relative socioeconomic disadvantage (IRSD; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022), a postcode-based measure of advantage and disadvantage.

2.2 | Procedure

Ethics approval was obtained from the Queensland University of Technology Human Research Ethics Committee (#1900000477). Participants were randomly selected using random-digit-dial methodology with a fully mobile sample frame. Selected phone numbers received an advance text message about the study, and then, a follow-up invitation was undertaken via phone. Informed verbal consent was obtained. Data were collected via fully trained interviewers using computer-assisted telephone interview technology.

2.3 | Measures

2.3.1 | Demographics

Parental or caregiver status was assessed by asking a single yes/no screener: Are you, or have you ever been a parent or primary carer of a dependent child? All participants who answered yes to this item are henceforth referred to as parents.

Gender was assessed by asking as follows: How would you describe your gender? Interviewers coded responses against a 14-response code including man/woman, non-binary, a gender, gender fluid and “I prefer not to have a label.” Participants could also refuse to answer or say, “I don't know.” Since relatively few participants identified with diverse gender identities, we combined any responses that were not men or women into a single “diverse genders” category to maximise statistical power.

Current financial pressure was assessed using a single dichotomous yes/no screener: In the last 12 months, has there been a time when your household could not meet its essential expenses? By essential expenses, we mean things such as food, the mortgage or rent payments, utility bills, childcare and medical care.

Childhood family economic hardship was assessed using an item from the US National Survey of Children's Health (Ghandour et al., 2018). This asked as follows: “How often did your family experience economic hardship, such as finding it difficult to provide food, medical care or other necessities?” There were four response options: never, not very often, somewhat often or very often.

Socioeconomic disadvantage was assessed using the SEIFA IRSD (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). This index is calculated using area-based demographics, including households with low income, and qualifications and occupations of residents in these areas. The Australian Bureau of Statistics provides these data in deciles. To aid interpretation and reduce the number of items in each model, we generated quintiles by adding each decile with the one above it. Higher quintiles represent a relative lack of disadvantage. Lower quintiles represent

greater relative disadvantage. We included the IRSD in our primary analyses given neighbourhood disadvantage has been linked with use of corporal punishment (Grogan-Kaylor et al., 2020).

Experiences of corporal punishment as children. This was assessed by a single screener administered to all participants: “Did an adult ever smack you or physically punish you for your misbehaviour?” In Australia, the term “smack” is used colloquially instead of the term “spank.” Response options were yes, no or refused to answer. Participants who endorsed the item received follow-up items about frequency, who administered the punishment and how old they were at cessation. The frequency item was “How many times did this happen to you?” Participants responded with an estimate of number of times. We adopted a conservative approach similar to that used in analyses in comparable jurisdictions to avoid overcounting by considering a participant to have experienced corporal punishment if they experienced it ≥ 4 times (Afifi et al., 2017). This recognises that isolated instances across the entire span of childhood may constitute an inappropriate measure, which could artificially inflate prevalence estimates. To identify who used the corporal punishment, we asked as follows: “Who were all the people who did this to you?” Participants’ responses were coded from a list comprising: parents and other parent-like adult caregivers such as teachers. Multiple options were permitted. Cessation was assessed by asking “How old were you the last time this happened?” Participants answered with their age at cessation. No item was included about onset, as corporal punishment typically commences early in childhood, prior to the formation of stable memories that could be coded in terms of age. The corporal punishment items were administered separate to but following items on physical abuse and were preceded by an explanatory preamble, in order to avoid contamination with potential instances of physical abuse.

Use of corporal punishment by parents. Participants who reported they were or had ever been parents or primary carers for a dependent child were asked a dichotomous yes/no screener: “Did you ever use physical punishment to discipline your child, such as smacking, hitting, shaking or anything else?” There was a single frequency follow-up item: “During the year this happened the most, how often did it occur?” Response options were as follows: daily, weekly, monthly and less than monthly.

Beliefs about the need for corporal punishment. Beliefs were assessed by a single dichotomous yes/no item: “Do you believe that to properly raise a child it is necessary to use physical punishment?”

For all items, participants were able to indicate they did not know, and they could refuse to answer.

2.3.2 | Analytic procedure

We calculated survey-weighted prevalence of experiences of corporal punishment in childhood and the use of corporal punishment (for participants who were parents). For the use of corporal punishment, we also examined whether the use differed by personal experiences of corporal punishment in their own childhood. We assessed beliefs about the need for corporal punishment both across the full Australian population and among participants with personal experiences of corporal punishment. Confidence intervals were calculated at 95% using the Taylor series expansion method (Wolter & Wolter, 2007). Differences between groups are considered statistically significant when confidence intervals do not overlap. We used survey-weighted logistic regression models to evaluate the association between the use of corporal punishment and the community beliefs about the need for corporal punishment with different age groups, gender, current financial strain, historical family economic hardship and current disadvantage using the SEIFA ISRD based on postcode of residence (quintiles; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). For each outcome, we fitted both unadjusted

and adjusted models that mutually adjusted for all variables. Odds ratios are considered statistically significant when the confidence interval does not include 1. Statistically significant odds ratios higher than one indicate higher odds or likelihood. Due to a small number of participants with diverse genders ($n = 126$), findings for this subgroup are only reported for analyses based on the full sample. Low power precluded further subgroup analysis.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Prevalence of childhood experiences of corporal punishment across the Australian population

The Australian prevalence of childhood experiences of corporal punishment across all ages was 62.5% ($n = 5350$, CI = 61.2–63.9). Age group prevalence rates are shown in [Table 1](#). Young people aged 16–24 experienced the lowest prevalence of experiences of corporal punishment than each of the older age strata (except for participants aged 65 and older). However, prevalence estimates were still relatively high even for this youngest age group (58.4%). The median age for cessation of corporal punishment was 11.6 years of age (interquartile range 9.2–14.2). This was similar across all age groups (median range 11.1–12.0).

3.1.1 | Gender effects in childhood experiences of corporal punishment

Across the population, men were significantly more likely to experience corporal punishment ($n = 2756$, 66.3%, CI = 64.5–68.1) than women ($n = 2520$, 59.1%, CI = 57.2–61.0). The proportion of people with diverse genders experiencing corporal punishment was similar to that of women ($n = 74$, 57.9%, 45.4–70.3), but the wide confidence intervals implied that any observed difference with men was nonetheless non-significant. No gender differences were found in the youth cohort, which is the age group with the highest number of persons with diverse gender.

3.1.2 | Frequency of childhood experiences of corporal punishment

The mean frequency of childhood experiences of corporal punishment across childhood was 32.8 occurrences (SD = 34.4, range 4–100). The median was 15 (interquartile range 4–60). This was similar for all age groups except for the 65 and older age group, which was the lowest (median = 10, interquartile range 5–25; see [Table S1](#)). Parents were by far the most common group who inflicted the corporal punishment, as reported by 92% ($n = 4980$) of those who experienced corporal punishment. The second most commonly endorsed group was teachers ($n = 9.4\%$).¹ Based on participants' responses about who inflicted corporal punishment, there were no differences in the frequency of experiences of corporal punishment by mothers compared with fathers.

3.1.3 | Impact of childhood financial hardship on childhood experiences of corporal punishment

Corporal punishment was positively associated with childhood family economic hardship. Participants who experienced childhood family economic hardship very often or somewhat often were significantly more likely to experience corporal punishment than those who did not.

TABLE 1 Prevalence of experiences of corporal punishment (at least four times), by age group, gender and family economic hardship ($N = 8503$).

| | Experiences of corporal punishment ≥ 4 times (% , CI)* | |
|---|---|----------|
| | % (CI) | <i>N</i> |
| Whole sample | 62.5% (61.2–63.9) | 5350 |
| Female | 59.1% (57.2–61.0) | 2520 |
| Male | 66.3% (64.5–68.1) | 2756 |
| Diverse genders | 57.9% (45.4–70.3) | 74 |
| 16–24 total | 58.4% (56.6–60.2) | 2095 |
| Female | 56.9% (54.2–59.6) | 969 |
| Male | 59.9% (57.3–62.5) | 1072 |
| Diverse | 58.8% (47.4–70.2) | 54 |
| 25–34 total | 65.8% (62.6–69.1) | 665 |
| Female | 63.0% (58.2–67.7) | 296 |
| Male | 69.1% (64.6–73.6) | 62 |
| 35–44 total | 67.9% (64.7–71.1) | 685 |
| Female | 64.6% (60.0–69.2) | 340 |
| Male | 71.0% (66.5–75.6) | 339 |
| 45–54 total | 68.1% (64.9–71.4) | 701 |
| Female | 64.8% (60.2–69.4) | 345 |
| Male | 71.9% (67.3–76.4) | 355 |
| 55–64 total | 62.1% (64.9–71.4) | 651 |
| Female | 57.6% (52.8–62.4) | 306 |
| Male | 67.8% (63.1–72.5) | 342 |
| 65+ total | 53.8% (50.3–57.2) | 553 |
| Female | 50.3% (45.5–55.1) | 264 |
| Male | 58.0% (53.2–62.9) | 286 |
| Family economic hardship (whole sample) | | |
| Never | 57.7% (55.8–59.5) | 2553 |
| Not very often | 64.8% (62.3–67.4) | 1535 |
| Somewhat often | 69.6 (66.0–73.2) | 762 |
| Very often | 74.6% (70.3–79.0) | 457 |
| Not stated | 60.3% (46.4–74.1) | 43 |

Abbreviation: CI, 95% confidence interval.

*Frequency of those who were exposed to corporal punishment, where frequencies over 100+ were coded as 100. 0 were set to missing.

Participants who never experienced family economic hardship were least likely to experience corporal punishment (Table 1).

3.2 | Prevalence of the use of corporal punishment by Australian parents

Among Australian parents in our sample ($n = 3680$), just over half (53.7%) had used corporal punishment ($n = 1911$, 53.7%, CI = 51.8–55.5). There were no differences in the use between fathers ($n = 866$, 53.2%, CI = 50.5–55.9) and mothers ($n = 1040$, 54.3%, CI = 51.8–56.8) across the

whole sample or by age group (Table 2). Parents who identified as gender diverse used corporal punishment least frequently, but this should be interpreted with extreme caution due to a very low sample size ($n=5$, 25.4%, CI=2.1–48.7). The majority (75%) of parents ($n=268$, CI=12.7–16.3) used corporal punishment less than monthly, with 1.1% reporting daily use ($n=9$, CI=0.6–1.7).

3.2.1 | Age group effects in the use of corporal punishment

As shown in Figure 1, there was a clear trend in the use of corporal punishment by parents across the age groups. Younger age groups were less likely to use corporal punishment than older age groups. The youth cohort had the lowest prevalence, and the oldest age group had the highest one. This is observed for the whole population and by both mothers and fathers. This is consistent with the findings reported above about experiences of corporal punishment. Among young parents aged 16–24 years, only 14.4% ($n=21$, CI=7.6–21.3) had used corporal punishment compared with 64.2% of parents aged 65 and older ($n=536$, CI=60.6–67.8).

3.2.2 | Use of corporal punishment by parents who experienced corporal punishment as children

We also examined parents' use of corporal punishment as a function of their own childhood experiences of corporal punishment. As shown in Table 2, parents who experienced corporal punishment in their own childhood were more likely to use corporal punishment than the full Australian population rates (60.4% vs. 53.7%). This was found for the full sample and for some of the older groups but not in the younger groups. In the youth cohort, parents who were physically punished as children were more likely to use corporal punishment than those without personal experience of corporal punishment, although there were no differences in the frequency of use. Current socioeconomic disadvantage was only related to the use of corporal punishment for those with personal experiences of corporal punishment. In this group, parents with high relative disadvantage were more likely to use corporal punishment than those with low relative disadvantage.

Logistic regression models for the use of corporal punishment by parents are shown in Table 3. Odds ratios where the confidence intervals do not include zero are considered statistically significant. Where confidence intervals include one the odds ratios are not considered statistically significant. We found significant age group effects. Except for the 55–64 age cohort, all younger age cohorts had a significantly lower odds of using corporal punishment than the 65 years and older group. Parents in the youth cohort were one-tenth as likely to use corporal punishment as those 65 years and older. Current financial pressure was significantly inversely related to the use of corporal punishment; however, this was no longer significant once adjustments had been applied. There were no significant associations found for parent gender, family economic hardship or current socioeconomic disadvantage.

3.3 | Beliefs about the necessity of corporal punishment

Just over a quarter of Australians (26.4%) believe corporal punishment is necessary to raise a child ($n=1791$, CI=25.2–27.6). Men were more likely to endorse its necessity ($n=1119$, 32.3% (30.5–34.2)) than women ($n=660$, 21.0%, CI=19.3–22.6) or those with diverse genders ($n=12$, 15.4%, CI=5.7–25.0). As shown in Figure 2, the prevalence of Australians who believe in the necessity of corporal punishment was highest in the oldest age group (65+ years)

TABLE 2 Prevalence of the use of corporal punishment by parents and caregivers with and without personal experiences of corporal punishment ($n=3680$), by gender, age group, economic disadvantage and frequency of use.

| | Full parent sample | | Parents with personal history of corporal punishment | |
|---|--------------------|----------|--|----------|
| | % (CI) | <i>n</i> | % (CI) | <i>n</i> |
| Parents and caregivers subset | 53.7% (51.8–55.5) | 1911 | 60.4% (58.2–62.6) | 1398 |
| Mother | 54.3% (51.8–56.8) | 1040 | 61.3% (58.2–64.4) | 732 |
| Father | 53.2% (50.5–55.9) | 866 | 60.0% (56.8–63.1) | 664 |
| Diverse genders | 25.4% (2.1–48.7) | 5 | | np |
| 16–24 total | 14.4% (7.6–21.3) | 21 | 17.1% (9.8–24.4) | 20 |
| Mother | 13.9% (6.7–21.0) | 14 | 19.5% (9.7–29.2) | 14 |
| Father | 15.2% (0.4–30.0) | 6 | 11.3% (1.7–21.0) | 5 |
| Diverse | np | np | np | np |
| 25–34 total | 32.8% (26.9–38.6) | 91 | 38.7% (31.3–46.1) | 73 |
| Mother | 31.8% (24.3–39.2) | 54 | 36.6% (27.0–46.2) | 40 |
| Father | 35.7% (26.0–45.4) | 37 | 42.9% (31.2–54.5) | 33 |
| 35–44 total | 43.2% (39.2–47.2) | 308 | 50.7% (45.8–55.5) | 242 |
| Mother | 42.3% (37.0–47.6) | 171 | 52.4% (45.8–59.0) | 136 |
| Father | 44.3% (38.2–50.3) | 135 | 48.8% (41.6–56.1) | 105 |
| 45–54 total | 52.9% (49.2–56.7) | 438 | 61.0% (56.5–65.4) | 348 |
| Mother | 54.3% (49.1–59.6) | 237 | 62.6% (56.3–68.9) | 179 |
| Father | 51.4% (45.9–56.9) | 200 | 59.5% (53.2–65.7) | 169 |
| 55–64 total | 62.7% (59.1–66.4) | 517 | 69.7% (65.5–74.0) | 367 |
| Mother | 65.1% (60.1–70.1) | 277 | 74.5% (68.6–80.3) | 189 |
| Father | 60.6% (55.4–65.8) | 240 | 65.8% (59.8–71.8) | 178 |
| 65+ total | 64.2% (60.6–67.8) | 536 | 72.5% (68.0–77.1) | 348 |
| Mother | 66.1% (61.2–71.1) | 287 | 72.8% (66.4–79.2) | 174 |
| Father | 62.0% (56.7–67.3) | 248 | 73.3% (67.0–79.6) | 174 |
| SEIFA Index of relative socioeconomic disadvantage ^a | | | | |
| Lowest quintile (highest disadvantage) | 55.8% (51.1–60.5) | 282 | 65.4% (59.7–71.2) | 208 |
| 2nd quintile | 55.9% (51.6–60.1) | 355 | 63.5% (58.5–68.6) | 259 |
| 3rd quintile | 53.5% (49.6–57.4) | 404 | 62.7% (58.0–67.4) | 304 |
| 4th quintile | 52.9% (48.9–56.9) | 408 | 58.1% (53.3–63.0) | 300 |
| Highest quintile (lowest disadvantage) | 50.9% (47.2–54.5) | 462 | 54.0% (49.4–58.5) | 327 |
| Frequency if use of corporal punishment | | | | |
| Daily | 1.1% (0.6–1.7) | 19 | 1.1% (0.5–1.7) | 14 |
| Weekly | 5.8% (4.7–7.0) | 115 | 6.2% (4.8–7.6) | 86 |
| Monthly | 14.5% (12.7–16.3) | 268 | 15.0% (13.0–17.1) | 206 |
| Less than monthly | 75.0% (72.8–77.2) | 1453 | 75.2% (72.6–77.7) | 1061 |
| Not stated | 3.5% (2.5–4.5) | 56 | 2.5% (1.5–3.5) | 31 |

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

| | Full parent sample | | Parents with personal history of corporal punishment | |
|----------------------------|--------------------|----------|--|----------|
| | % (CI) | <i>n</i> | % (CI) | <i>n</i> |
| Current financial pressure | | | | |
| Yes | 45.6% (40.1–51.0) | 178 | 53.6% (47.0–60.3) | 135 |
| No | 54.8% (52.8–56.7) | 1724 | 61.4% (59.1–63.7) | 1258 |
| Not stated | 61.5% (10.7–66.3) | 9 | 64.9% (26.2–100.0) | 5 |
| Family economic hardship | | | | |
| Never | 52.9% (50.4–55.5) | 968 | 61.6% (58.4–64.7) | 678 |
| Not very often | 52.9% (49.3–56.5) | 487 | 58.2% (53.9–62.6) | 360 |
| Somewhat often | 54.6% (49.4–59.8) | 244 | 59.8% (53.7–65.8) | 190 |
| Very often | 56.4% (50.5–62.3) | 185 | 58.4% (51.8–65.0) | 148 |
| Not stated | 65.9% (49.7–82.1) | 27 | 90.9% (81.6–100.0) | 22 |

Abbreviations: CI, 95% confidence intervals; Np, not available for publication because of small cell size, but included in totals where applicable.

^aSEIFA, Socio-Economic Indexes for Area of relative socioeconomic disadvantage. Lowest quintile represents highest socioeconomic disadvantage.

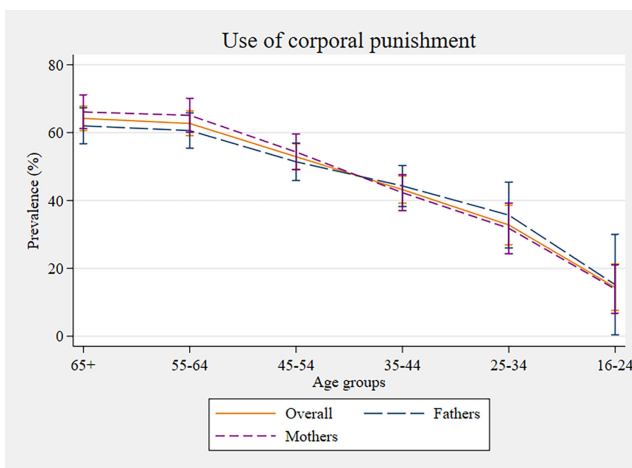


FIGURE 1 Use of corporal punishment by Australian parents across age groups. This is retrospectively reported use of corporal punishment while caregiving.

and was lower in each of the younger age groups. Overall people under 45 years had significantly lower prevalence of believing corporal punishment is necessary than those over 45 years of age (Table S2). For example only 14.8% of young people aged 16–24 years believed corporal punishment is necessary to raise children compared with 37.9% of Australians over 65 years of age.

3.3.1 | Differences in beliefs about corporal punishment by parental status

Across the population, parents endorsed the necessity of corporal punishment more frequently than non-parents (30.9% vs. 19%). Within age groups, this difference was observed in the older groups but not in the younger age groups (Table 4). In younger age groups, both parents and non-parents

TABLE 3 Unadjusted and adjusted logistic regression for the use of corporal punishment by parents and caregivers ($n=3680$), by gender, age group and socioeconomic disadvantage.

| | Use of corporal punishment OR, 95% CI | Use of corporal punishment AOR, 95% CI |
|--|---------------------------------------|--|
| Parents and caregivers | | |
| Mothers | 1.05 (0.90–1.21) | 1.08 (0.93–1.26) |
| Fathers | Reference | Reference |
| Diverse genders | 0.30 (0.09–1.03) | 0.35 (0.10–1.23) |
| Age groups | | |
| 16–24 total | 0.09 (0.05–0.17) | 0.10 (0.05–0.17) |
| 25–34 total | 0.27 (0.20–0.37) | 0.27 (0.20–0.37) |
| 35–44 total | 0.42 (0.34–0.53) | 0.43 (0.34–0.54) |
| 45–54 total | 0.63 (0.50–0.78) | 0.65 (0.52–0.82) |
| 55–64 total | 0.94 (0.75–1.17) | 0.96 (0.77–1.20) |
| 65+ total | Reference | Reference |
| SEIFA Index of relative socioeconomic disadvantage | | |
| Lowest quintile (highest disadvantage) | 1.22 (0.98–1.53) | 1.22 (0.95–1.57) |
| 2nd quintile | 1.11 (0.90–1.38) | 1.22 (0.97–1.54) |
| 3rd quintile | 1.08 (0.87–1.35) | 1.12 (0.90–1.40) |
| 4th quintile | 1.22 (0.96–1.55) | 1.13 (0.90–1.41) |
| Highest quintile (lowest disadvantage) | Reference | Reference |
| Current financial pressure | | |
| Yes | 0.69 (0.55–0.87) | 0.81 (0.63–1.05) |
| No | Reference | Reference |
| Family economic hardship | | |
| Never | Reference | Reference |
| Not very often | 1.00 (0.84–1.19) | 1.05 (0.87–1.26) |
| Somewhat often | 1.07 (0.85–1.35) | 1.24 (0.96–1.59) |
| Very often | 1.15 (0.89–1.49) | 1.35 (1.02–1.78) |
| Not stated | 1.72 (0.83–3.56) | 1.59 (0.87–1.26) |

Note: Fully adjusted model adjusted for age group, gender, financial pressure, childhood economic hardship and SEIFA Index for relative socioeconomic disadvantage.

Abbreviations: aOR, adjusted odds ratios when mutually adjusting for all variables; CI, 95% confidence intervals; SEIFA, Socio-Economic Indexes for Area.

Bold values indicate odds ratios that are significantly different from the reference category at .05. Bold values below 1 indicate a decrease in odds compared to the identified reference category and indicate an increase in odds compared to the reference category.

were less likely to believe in the necessity of corporal punishment than those in the older age groups. Fewer than one in five (19%) of young parents believed corporal punishment is necessary.

Table 5 shows the unadjusted and adjusted odds ratios of beliefs about corporal punishment. Adjustments made little difference in the pattern of results. After adjustment, women were half as likely as men to endorse the need for corporal punishment. Those with diverse genders were even less likely to endorse its necessity. Those experiencing the highest level of socioeconomic disadvantage had 2.3 times the odds of believing corporal punishment is necessary compared with those experiencing the lowest levels of disadvantage. Consistent with prevalence estimates reported above, parents had double the odds of believing corporal punishment is necessary than non-parents.

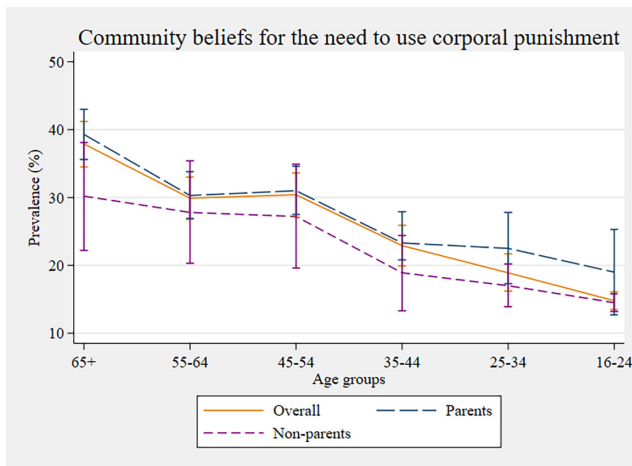


FIGURE 2 Prevalence of community beliefs about the necessity of corporal punishment by age groups across the community and by parental status. Data for this graph can be found in [Table S2](#).

We also investigated beliefs about corporal punishment separately by parental status. Unadjusted and adjusted analyses showed similar patterns, so only adjusted models were reported. After adjusting for age group, gender and relative socioeconomic disadvantage, similar patterns were found for parents and non-parents. Irrespective of parental status, women and gender-diverse participants had lower odds of believing corporal punishment is necessary than men ([Table S3](#)). Similar results were also found for socioeconomic disadvantage. After adjustment, highly disadvantaged parents were more than twice as likely to believe in the necessity of corporal punishment (aOR = 2.17, CI = 1.66–2.84) compared with those with the lowest disadvantage (highest quintile). Highly disadvantaged non-parents, as based on SEIFA IRSD, were 2.42 times as likely to report in the necessity of corporal punishment than their counterparts in the least disadvantaged areas (aOR 2.42, CI = 1.68–3.49).

4 | DISCUSSION

This study generated the first national prevalence estimates of corporal punishment experiences (in childhood) and use of corporal punishment by parents (as adults) in Australia. Additionally, we identified community beliefs about the necessity of corporal punishment in raising children among Australians and how these differed by age groups, which may indicate changing community attitudes. Comprehensive data about the state of corporal punishment in Australia are required to develop and drive policy and practice initiatives to reduce violence toward children in Australia. This empirical data can also be used to inform and shape legislative reform on this issue.

A high proportion of the Australian population aged 16–65 years and older have experienced corporal punishment (62.5%), mostly enacted by parents. This is similar to Canadian data that found 66.4% of adults retrospectively reporting experiencing corporal punishment as children (Gagné et al., 2007). This is however less than other Australian surveys of parents, which found 88% of parents had experienced corporal punishment (The Royal Children's Hospital National Child Health Poll, 2018). This may be due to the broad range of ages represented in the current study and changing patterns, since the earlier study included parents with a mean age of 45, whereas this study included people as young as 16 years. Furthermore, to be conservative, we only counted someone as having experienced corporal punishment if they

TABLE 4 Prevalence of community beliefs for the need to use corporal punishment, by gender, age group and SEIFA.

| | Parent or caregiver <i>n</i> = 3680 | | Non-parent <i>n</i> = 4816 | |
|---|-------------------------------------|----------|----------------------------|----------|
| | % (CI) | <i>n</i> | % (CI) | <i>n</i> |
| Whole sample | 30.9% (29.2–32.6) | 1034 | 19.0% (17.3–20.6) | 754 |
| Female | 25.5% (23.3–27.7) | 459 | 11.7% (9.6–13.7) | 200 |
| Male | 37.7% (35.1–40.3) | 572 | 25.2% (22.7–27.6) | 546 |
| Diverse genders | np | | 10.9% (2.8–19.1) | 8 |
| 16–24 total | 19.0% (12.7–25.3) | 33 | 14.5% (13.2–15.8) | 474 |
| Female | 13.3% (6.2–20.2) | 13 | 8.1% (6.6–9.5) | 125 |
| Male | 29.6% (16.9–42.3) | 19 | 20.9% (18.7–23.1) | 345 |
| Diverse | np | | np | |
| 25–34 total | 22.5% (17.3–27.8) | 61 | 17.0% (13.9–20.2) | 106 |
| Female | 15.9% (10.0–21.9) | 26 | 10.9% (6.9–14.9) | 27 |
| Male | 33.9% (24.2–43.6) | 34 | 21.7% (17.1–26.2) | 78 |
| 35–44 total | 23.3% (20.8–27.9) | 165 | 18.9% (13.3–24.4) | 44 |
| Female | 21.3% (16.8–25.8) | 81 | 14.6% (6.9–22.4) | 14 |
| Male | 28.3% (22.7–33.9) | 84 | 21.5% (14.0–29.0) | 30 |
| 45–54 total | 31.0% (27.5–34.6) | 235 | 27.2% (19.6–34.9) | 40 |
| Female | 26.8% (22.0–31.5) | 105 | 22.8% (11.8–33.8) | 14 |
| Male | 35.2% (29.9–40.5) | 129 | 32.0% (21.1–42.8) | 26 |
| 55–64 total | 30.3% (26.9–33.8) | 236 | 27.8% (20.3–35.4) | 45 |
| Female | 25.0% (20.6–29.4) | 106 | 17.0% (7.7–26.4) | 12 |
| Male | 36.5% (31.2–41.7) | 130 | 37.4% (25.9–48.8) | 31 |
| 65+ total | 39.3% (35.6–43.0) | 304 | 30.2% (22.2–38.1) | 45 |
| Female | 32.1% (27.3–37.0) | 128 | 13.0% (3.7–22.3) | 8 |
| Male | 49.2% (42.2–53.1) | 176 | 45.2% (39.4–61.8) | 36 |
| SEIFA Index of relative socioeconomic disadvantage ^a | | | | |
| Lowest quintile (highest disadvantage) | 39.7% (35.1–44.4) | 196 | 25.3% (20.3–30.4) | 131 |
| 2nd quintile | 33.6% (29.6–37.6) | 207 | 21.9% (17.8–26.0) | 154 |
| 3rd quintile | 31.2% (27.5–34.9) | 231 | 20.5% (16.8–24.3) | 171 |
| 4th quintile | 27.4% (23.8–31.1) | 197 | 18.5% (15.0–22.0) | 148 |
| Highest quintile (lowest disadvantage) | 24.4% (21.1–27.6) | 203 | 12.4% (9.7–15.1) | 150 |

Abbreviation: Np, not possible to calculate due to a small sample size.

^aLowest quintile represents highest socioeconomic disadvantage.

experienced it on four or more occasions. This means the true number of Australians who have experienced physical discipline is higher. Consistent with other research (e.g., Mehlhausen-Hassoen, 2021), men were more likely to report experiencing corporal punishment in childhood than women. There were no observed differences between those with diverse genders and either men or women in experiences of corporal punishment in childhood; however, we note a very small part of the sample reported diverse genders, which limits findings. For many children, these experiences continued far beyond toddler and preschool years, with the mean age of last occurrence being 11.6 years. This is important as children's reasoning skills, cognitive

TABLE 5 Unadjusted and adjusted logistic regression models for community beliefs for the need to use corporal punishment, by gender, age group, SEIFA and parental status.

| | Whole sample OR, 95% CI | Whole sample AOR, 95% CI N = 8496 |
|--|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Gender | | |
| Female | 0.56 (0.49–0.63) | 0.50 (0.44–0.57) |
| Male | Ref | Ref |
| Diverse genders | 0.38 (0.18–0.80) | 0.37 (0.18–0.81) |
| SEIFA Index of relative socioeconomic disadvantage | | |
| Lowest quintile (highest disadvantage) | 2.23 (1.81–2.75) | 2.26 (1.82–2.81) |
| 2nd quintile | 1.74 (1.42–2.13) | 1.71 (1.39–2.10) |
| 3rd quintile | 1.57 (1.29–1.91) | 1.57 (1.28–1.92) |
| 4th quintile | 1.32 (1.08–1.61) | 1.32 (1.08–1.63) |
| Highest quintile (lowest disadvantage) | Ref | Ref |
| Parental status ^a | | |
| Parent or caregiver | 1.91 (1.67–2.18) | 2.03 (1.77–2.33) |
| Non-parent | Ref | Ref |

Abbreviation: AOR, adjusted odds ratios.

^aIn adjusted analysis, seven participants who either refused or did not know were set to “missing”.

capacity and self-regulation develop as they age (Veraksa, 2011), making them more receptive to logic-based consequences and eliminating any perceived need for physical punishment. To our knowledge, no research has examined the impact of corporal punishment or its use at different developmental stages. It is possible that the use of corporal punishment on children in later developmental stages is more likely to overlap with physical abuse. This is worthy of further investigation particularly since rates of physical abuse and multi-type maltreatment are high in Australia (Higgins, et al., 2023; Mathews et al., 2023).

Our sample included participants across a wide range of ages, which had the benefit of allowing differences across age groups to be examined, although the population prevalence estimates are also influenced by this breadth of ages. To assess recent prevalence, we examined experiences of corporal punishment in young people aged 16–24 years (i.e., those who were most recently children). Prevalence estimates for young people were high with almost six in 10 young people (58.4%) reporting experiences of corporal punishment in childhood. This indicates this form of violence remains a pressing issue and common form of violence in Australian society. In general, younger participants were slightly less likely to experience corporal punishment than older participants; however, prevalence is still concerningly high given the negative outcomes with which physical discipline is associated. This paper does not report associations between experiences of corporal punishment and negative outcomes as this is the subject of forthcoming work. However, given the well-documented evidence related to the adverse impacts of corporal punishment, it is reasonable to assume Australians exposed to corporal punishment are likely to suffer similar harm as documented in the global literature (Afifi et al., 2017; Gershoff et al., 2018).

A little over half (53.7%) of Australian parents and caregivers reported ever using corporal punishment as parents. Our prevalence rates are substantially higher than other Australian data using nonrandom parent samples, including one of Victorian parents of children <19 years, that found only 17% of parents had *ever* used corporal punishment (Kienhuis et al., 2022). Other Australian data have found 17% of parents have used physical discipline in the last month (The Royal Children's Hospital National Child Health Poll, 2018). We found

75% of parents who have used corporal punishment use it less than once a month; however, this is collapsed across all age groups, which may explain these differences. Since behaviour problems are common in childhood, this suggests that many parents may not routinely use physical punishment as a primary form of discipline. We can speculate that parents may use corporal punishment as a last resort or for serious behaviours only, but this requires further examination. Alternatively, it is possible parents are more likely to use it when facing other periodic stressors. By contrast, and of serious concern, 1.1% reported daily use of physical discipline. Given the association between corporal punishment and harm (e.g., Gershoff et al., 2018; Zolotor, 2014; Zolotor & Puzia, 2010), these prevalence estimates highlight a major issue for our nation.

Parents who themselves experienced corporal punishment as children were more likely to use corporal punishment on their own children, compared with the general parent population. This was particularly the case for socioeconomically disadvantaged parents. This is consistent with other studies that have found intergenerational transmission of harsh parenting and corporal punishment (Niu et al., 2018). Some data suggests intergenerational transmission of this form of violence is linked with favourable attitudes towards corporal punishment (Wang, Wang & Xing, 2018). Our effects are consistent with potential intergenerational patterns of violence however the fact that younger Australians were less likely to believe corporal punishment is necessary is positive. Further work is needed to examine potential intergenerational effects and attitudes and is the subject of forthcoming work. Interrupting patterns by reducing corporal punishment in one generation via efforts to change attitudes and social norms, enhance parental support, reduce disadvantage and legislative reform may have flow-on benefits in subsequent generations.

The use of corporal punishment was significantly lower in younger age groups. Almost 65% of parents aged 65 years and older used corporal punishment compared with only 14.4% of parents in the youngest cohort, although this group had a small sample size. Models adjusting for other factors also found younger parents were significantly less likely to use corporal punishment. This is counter to previous research that has found younger parents and more disadvantaged parents were more likely to use corporal punishment (e.g., Combs-Orme & Cain, 2008). However, these studies have typically compared parental use of corporal punishment during active parenting phases (i.e., comparing younger and older parents of children within a limited age span such as under 12 years). In comparison, the current methodology study uses retrospective reporting of corporal punishment use. Although it is not possible to rule out alternative explanations such as recall differences, we posit that these age differences may reflect societal changes over time. These data are consistent with population-level declines in use, which have been observed internationally (Finkelhor et al., 2019; Lansford et al., 2017; Gershoff, 2010) and with other non-representative Australian data (Kienhuis et al., 2022). Future research should examine whether age is related to the use of corporal punishment among parents raising children in the same age range.

There were interesting effects regarding financial hardship and use of corporal punishment. Current financial pressure was inversely related to the use of corporal punishment, which was counter to expectations and inconsistent with other studies linking the two (e.g., Vittrup & Holden, 2010). This is explained by the fact that younger age groups, which are less likely to believe corporal punishment is necessary or use it, are more likely to experience financial hardship. This suggests even when facing financial pressure and associated stressors, younger parents are less likely to resort to corporal punishment. We found that after controlling for age group, gender and levels of disadvantage, there were no significant differences in the use of corporal punishment related to financial pressure, thus providing further support for this explanation.

Across the community, just over a quarter (26.4%) of participants endorsed the necessity of corporal punishment for raising children. In contrast, 73.6% of Australians do not

view physical punishment as necessary. Across the population, parents were more likely to endorse the necessity of corporal punishment; however, this was not seen in individual age groups. This is explained by the high proportion of non-parents in younger group and low proportion of non-parents in older group who were more likely to rate corporal punishment as necessary. People under 45 years of age were less likely than those over 45 years to believe corporal punishment is necessary. Given the cross-sectional nature of this study, we cannot argue these differences represent declines over time, but the pattern is consistent with potential declines. This hypothesis is strengthened by similar patterns in lower rates of use in young parents and other Australian studies that have reported recent declines in use (Kienhuis et al., 2022). Previous research with a nonrandom sample of Australian parents (mean age 45 years) found that roughly half of all Australian parents surveyed think it is never ok to use physical punishment, while the other half think it is unrealistic to expect parents to never use physical punishment (The Royal Children's Hospital National Child Health Poll, 2018). The current data add to the literature by providing nationally representative data from the Australian community across a range of ages and highlighting that the majority do not endorse its necessity in raising children. The distinct age group differences suggest community sentiment may be changing.

After adjusting for related variables, parents were twice as likely to endorse the necessity of corporal punishment. Moreover, those in the highest relative disadvantage area were 2.3 times as likely to endorse its necessity. This disadvantage effect was observed for both parents and non-parents. Comparatively higher rates of endorsement in the necessity of corporal punishment by parents than non-parents (30.9% vs. 19%) may reflect parents' personal challenges with managing child behaviour that they believe justify physical discipline in exceptional circumstances such as inherently dangerous situations. These beliefs may also be a way to resolve cognitive dissonance associated with a personal use of corporal punishment, particularly given the use of corporal punishment by parents is higher than perceived necessity. Despite higher beliefs about the need for corporal punishment among parents compared with non-parents, we note most parents (69.1%) did not endorse its necessity.

4.1 | Implications for policy, practice and law

The high prevalence of childhood experiences of corporal punishment even among young people indicates physical discipline remains a pressing issue for Australian society. We argue more research into how to best reduce this form of violence is needed. Findings related to lower use of corporal punishment and lower beliefs about its necessity among young people bode well for law reform efforts and violence reduction; however, there remains a subsection of parents who continue to use physical discipline in some cases daily against children. There may be vocal minorities who actively oppose legislative reform, but our data show the majority of those of childbearing age do not believe corporal punishment is necessary. Based on our findings, and the accumulated body of evidence worldwide, including research on the associated outcomes of corporal punishment (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016), we conclude corporal punishment should be banned in all settings in Australia, including by parents and in all education settings.

Irrespective of law reform, if Australia aims to reduce violence toward children including in the form of corporal punishment, it is essential that parents are provided with the opportunity to acquire non-violent alternative discipline techniques via universal access to parenting programs (Haslam et al., 2016), and through well-implemented programmes aimed to reduce maltreatment (Hardcastle et al., 2015; Mehta et al., 2021). Within Australia, a range of evidence-based parenting support programmes are available, such as the Triple P—Positive Parenting Program (Sanders, 2012) and Tuning into Kids (Havighurst et al., 2010). Some of

these are freely and widely available and do not require any threshold of parenting difficulty to access however increasing accessibility and reducing barriers to access is important. Parental engagement in programmes is low, suggesting parents may benefit from more targeted messages to enhance engagement (Gonzalez et al., 2023). Fathers should also be particularly targeted, given they are most likely to endorse the need for corporal punishment and because father involvement is associated with positive outcomes for children (Liu et al., 2021). Harsh parenting is known to be transmitted across generations (Niu et al., 2018). Recent research in Canada has indicated that the belief that corporal punishment is necessary is likely transmitted across generations from parent to child, meaning that if we can reduce the prevalence of these beliefs, there may be reductions in intergenerational cycles of violence (Afifi et al., 2022).

We argue that we must reduce population prevalence of the experiences of corporal punishment in children and the use of corporal punishment by parents, and also shift community beliefs about its necessity. To do this, public health and education campaigns are needed. These have been effective in other domains such as reducing skin cancer (Montague et al., 2001). There is evidence these are also successful in prompting parenting change (Tully et al., 2018) and are consistent with broad population approaches to improve parenting and reduce child maltreatment (Sanders & Prinz, 2008). Public health messaging should focus on the well-documented negative consequences of corporal punishment, since experimental data suggest negative consequence-related messages are associated with higher parenting engagement than benefit-only messages (Gonzalez et al., 2022).

All parents should receive clear and frequent messages that corporal punishment is harmful and that effective alternative parenting techniques are available and preferable with referral options available. These messages should start early in the perinatal period, for example, through home visiting services and programmes and via postpartum wellness checks. Equally important, these messages should be reinforced at every opportunity. For example, parents could be provided tip sheets with alternative forms of discipline at routine vaccination points. Corporal punishment remains lawful in some Australian school settings, typically in independent schools (Havighurst et al., 2023). However, irrespective of law, schools could reinforce the harm of corporal punishment when outlining discipline policies and by banning corporal punishment even if legally permitted. The introduction of “No Hit Zones” through hospitals, schools and paediatric facilities may also be beneficial and will contribute to changing norms about the acceptability of corporal punishment (Gershoff, 2020). Public messaging by influential individuals such as athletes, actors and entertainers, politicians, and social media personalities could support education about effective alternatives to corporal punishment. The embedding of messages via popular children's television shows such as Australia's “Bluey,” which already includes specific positive parenting and child development messages, also has the potential to shift community beliefs (Isaacs & Elliot, 2022). Finally, faith-based communities can communicate messages about appropriate discipline to counter inaccurate beliefs that specific religious texts recommend physical punishment (Vieth, 2017). Although we found levels of disadvantage were related to increased odds of believing corporal punishment is necessary, we argue that population-level messages and parenting support aimed at all parents are required to shift overall prevalence rates of corporal punishment and messaging should not be limited to at-risk groups.

Our study had several strengths including being a large, nationally representative and randomly selected sample and the inclusion of participants across a range of ages. The cross-sectional retrospective methodology was appropriate to our research questions, but it limits our ability to identify specific trends over time. We observed clear differences across age groups that are consistent with declines, but we cannot argue these represent actual decline in use or changes in beliefs, as they may be influenced by other factors such as recall.

Future studies using the same items could be conducted to track change over time. Another limitation is we only assessed the use of corporal punishment by parents. Our data on experiences of corporal punishment show some experiences were inflicted by teachers. Future work examining the use and impact of corporal punishment by teachers and in schools is warranted, particularly since there have been legislative and societal changes about the acceptability of corporal punishment in education settings, including the prohibition of corporal punishment in early childhood education and care settings through a national legislative scheme (Havighurst et al., 2023).

This paper has provided a comprehensive overview of the state of corporal punishment in Australia. Overall, we found that a high proportion of Australians have experienced corporal punishment in childhood. This includes young Australians aged 16–24 years reporting on recent childhood experiences. It is clear that corporal punishment remains a common form of violence in Australia. For Australia to reach its goal of reducing all forms of violence against children, the elimination of corporal punishment must form part of violence reduction initiatives. We found the use of corporal punishment and rates of belief in its necessity are significantly lower among younger Australians than among older Australians. Moreover, the majority of Australians no longer believe corporal punishment is necessary. Although corporal punishment remains an issue for Australian society, our data indicate there is currently an opportunity for policy and practice to capitalise on naturally occurring social change to reduce this form of violence against children.

FUNDING INFORMATION

The Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS) is supported by a National Health and Medical Research Council Project Grant (APP1158750). The ACMS receives additional funding and contributions from the Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet; the Department of Social Services; and the Australian Institute of Criminology. FM was supported by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme [Grant Agreement Number 852787] and the UK Research and Innovation Global Challenges Research Fund [ES/S008101/1]. HE is supported by a NHMRC Early Career Fellowship (APP1137969). HT is funded by the Queensland Centre for Mental Health Research, which receives its funding from the Queensland Department of Health.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Divna M. Haslam: Conceptualization; investigation; methodology; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; project administration; formal analysis. **James G. Scott:** Writing – review and editing. **Holly Erskine:** Writing – review and editing. **Rosana Pacella:** Writing – review and editing. **David Lawrence:** Formal analysis; conceptualization; writing – review and editing; data curation; investigation. **Sophie Havighurst:** Writing – review and editing. **Franziska Meinck:** Writing – review and editing. **Daryl Higgins:** Writing – review and editing; conceptualization; investigation. **Eva Malacova:** Investigation; formal analysis; conceptualization; data curation; methodology. **David Finkelhor:** Writing – review and editing. **Hannah Thomas:** Writing – review and editing. **Ben Mathews:** Writing – review and editing; conceptualization; funding acquisition.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Open access publishing facilitated by Queensland University of Technology, as part of the Wiley - Queensland University of Technology agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The Parenting and Family Support Centre is partly funded by royalties stemming from published resources of the Triple P—Positive Parenting Program, which is developed and owned by the University of Queensland (UQ). Royalties are also distributed to the faculty of health and behavioural sciences at UQ and contributory authors of published Triple P resources. Triple P International (TPI) Pty Ltd is a private company licensed by Uniquist Pty Ltd on behalf of UQ, to publish and disseminate Triple P worldwide. The authors of this report have no share or ownership of TPI. Dr Haslam has or may in future receive royalties and/or consultancy fees from TPI. Triple P International had no involvement in the study design, collection, analysis or interpretation of data, or writing of this report. Dr Haslam holds an honorary research position at the parenting and family research centre. No other authors declare any conflict.

AGENCY ROLES

The NHMRC funded the ACMS. The Australian Government and the AIC provided supplementary funding for several specific questions. The researchers were independent from the funders.

DATA ACCESS

The authors had full access to all data (including statistical reports and tables).

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Under a registered data management plan, final datasets will be stored on the Australian Data Archive, with details for access from 2024 made available on the ACMS Website. Under a multi-institutional agreement, the survey instrument is the intellectual property of the research team. It will be made available through a Creative Commons licence after an embargo period. For the purpose of open access, the author has applied a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence to any author-accepted manuscript version arising from this submission.

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ENDNOTE

¹ Participants were able to endorse multiple options so numbers do not add up to 100%.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

How to cite this article: Haslam, D.M., Malacova, E., Higgins, D., Meinck, F., Mathews, B., Thomas, H. et al. (2023) The prevalence of corporal punishment in Australia: Findings from a nationally representative survey. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 00, 1–25. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajs4.301>