

Teen Dating Violence and Girls

In the United States, as many as 1 in 5 teens reported experiencing physical or sexual abuse in a dating relationship¹ and the prevalence of emotional or verbal abuse may be even higher. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, young women aged 16-24 are more vulnerable to intimate partner violence than any other age group.²

On March 5, 2007, a Cleveland teen, Johanna Orozco, then 18, was shot in the face at close range by her ex-boyfriend. Her attacker, 17 year-old Juan Ruiz, shot Johanna after she had accused him of raping and stalking her. Juan Ruiz was sentenced to 27 years in prison. Johanna survived the attack and is now a university student and a recognized advocate for teen dating violence advocacy and prevention, lobbying in the Ohio legislature for improved laws to protect victims of teen dating violence.

While particularly tragic cases are often highlighted in the media, such as the Johanna Orozco case in Cleveland, these are merely examples of a more widespread problem of violence and abuse in adolescent relationships. This abuse has serious immediate consequences for teens and has also been linked to a pattern of violence which may lead to intimate partner violence in adulthood. Less attention has been given to the amount and nature of all forms of violence both experienced and committed by teen girls compared to adult domestic violence; however, research and practice have begun to focus more on this important social problem.

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The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found that up to 30% of adolescents reported being verbally or psychologically abused by an intimate partner in the previous year.³ Nationally, the 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) found that 9.9% of girls reported having been “Hit, Slapped, Or Physically Hurt On Purpose By Their Boyfriend Or Girlfriend” (physical violence) in the year prior to the YRBS.

In Ohio, 9.7% of girls surveyed reported having experienced physical violence, while 9.8% of boys also reported it. By grade level, 6.3% of those in 9th grade, 10.2% of those in 10th, 11.7% of those in 11th grade, and 11.7% of those in 12th grade reported experiencing physical violence. In Cuyahoga County, 6.8% of students reported being the victim of dating violence in the past year, with similar rates of victimization for male and female students, according to the 2006-2007 YRBS report.⁴ Research shows that adolescent girls engage in aggressive behaviors toward dating partners at rates comparable to boys; however, gender differences in the types of behaviors, their motivation and the consequences of their acts warrant further exploration.⁹

The YRBS does not capture sexual violence in dating relationships specifically, but national statistics demonstrate that adolescent and young adult women are more than four times more likely to be the victim of attempted rape or rape than women in any other age group and, in the majority of cases, the perpetrator has some sort of relationship with the victim, whether as an acquaintance or an intimate partner.⁵

Unfortunately, the prevalence of dating violence and the harms associated with it are often overlooked or underestimated. The fact that dating violence occurs within the context of an intimate relationship may be one reason why such violence sometimes goes unrecognized. Another possible

reason for the lack of attention to dating violence is that most research and reporting of intimate partner violence focuses on married or cohabitating couples.⁶ This is problematic because violence may occur most frequently in early adulthood, when partners are often not married or living together. Additionally, there are concerns that teens may underreport dating violence, suggesting that the scope of the problem may be larger than it appears. A developmentally sensitive conceptualization of adolescent dating violence is necessary in order to appreciate the qualitative differences between teenage and adult intimate partner violence. An increasing focus on violence in dating relationships, especially among adolescents and young adults, aims to address this imbalance in research, reporting and policy.

Defining the Issue: Teen Dating Violence & the Significance of Gender

Dating violence is defined by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) as a type of intimate partner violence that occurs between two people in a dating relationship. Dating violence can be in the form of physical, emotional or sexual abuse and need not take place in a date situation. The term typically refers to wide range of behaviors that are used to control, dominate or denigrate another person, causing harm.⁷ As a form of intimate partner violence, dating violence can occur among current or past partners.

Both males and females can be victims and aggressors of dating violence, with some studies finding that adolescent girls commit violence against their partners slightly more frequently, although the reasons for this difference are not yet known.⁸ In early adolescence, this violence can often be reciprocal, with both partners acting as aggressors and victims within a single relationship.⁹ However, girls are more likely to perpetrate forms

of violence such as slapping, kicking, punching and verbal abuse such as yelling or threatening to harm themselves,¹⁰ while boys are more likely to perpetrate types of dating violence that may cause more physical harm, such as beating up, choking or strangling, and committing sexual abuse.¹⁰ Consequently, in heterosexual relationships, adolescent girls are more likely than boys to be seriously injured, suffer sexual abuse or to be emotionally affected as a result of dating violence.⁶ While most research has focused on dating violence in heterosexual teen couples, some data suggests that similar incidence levels of violence may exist among gay, lesbian bisexual and transgender (GLBT) youth.¹¹ In addition to gender differences in type of violence, researchers note that differences exist in girls' and boys' motivations for committing relationship violence, with girls more likely to report that they commit violence as a means of self-defense, as a response to emotional pain, or to show anger, while boys report engaging in violence as a means to control their partner or in response to being hit first.¹⁰ Both boys and girls report jealousy as a common motivator for relationship aggression.¹²

A Developmental Perspective on Teen Dating Violence

The continuum of teen dating violence generally progresses from teasing and harassment behaviors in early and mid-adolescence, to verbal, physical, and sexual assault in mid to late adolescence. Although the function of "teasing" plays an important role in the development of cross-sex relationships, its ambiguous nature makes it more complex and it can escalate to intimidation and hostile treatment. Combined with adolescents' tendency to minimize certain forms of harassment, discerning harmfulness can be difficult. Regardless of the teens' attitudes about intent or potential harmlessness, harassment has particularly deleterious effects on girls who report lower self-esteem, self-blame, a sense of needing to change, and shame.⁹

Violence in teen dating relationships may be examined in a broader context to better understand some of the developmental pathways. Such a perspective would include teens' perception of their family's emotional climate, their prior experience with conflict and abuse, their interpretations of violence they have experienced, and their coping mechanisms and abilities to counteract personal stress. For example, social learning theory views abusive behavior, with poor communication and problem-solving skills evidenced in violent teen dating relationships, as being both learned and reinforced through prior exposure to violent conflict resolution.⁹

Teen Dating Violence Risk Factors & Characteristics

A variety of demographic and contextual factors have been associated with increased risk of experiencing adolescent dating violence, including place of residence, sex, socioeconomic status, academic achievement, maltreatment in childhood and peer group influences.⁶ Unfortunately, the broad range of possible risk factors and the potential for mediating factors make it difficult to predict teens who are at-risk of dating violence, causing some scholars to call for broad, generalized interventions to address dating violence.¹³

In the United States, teen girls who live in rural or urban communities have been shown to suffer higher rates of dating violence than girls in suburban environments.¹⁴ In both rural and urban settings, researchers point to higher rates of poverty as compared to suburban communities that may be contributing factors in the higher prevalence of dating violence. In urban communities specifically, higher overall violence may be associated with higher rates of dating violence, while in rural communities, higher social isolation and a comparative lack of resources for addressing dating violence may contribute to its higher prevalence.

Despite similar levels of victimization for males and females, risk factors are somewhat different across the genders. For example, teen girls who are struggling in school or who have multiple partners may be at higher risk of victimization. Poor grades are associated with a higher likelihood of being a victim of psychological violence from a dating partner. In one study, female students with mostly A grades had one third the risk of experiencing psychological violence as a student with mostly Ds or Fs.⁶ For girls, the total number of relationships was also linked to the likelihood of experiencing any kind of dating violence, with teens involved in the most relationships having the highest rates of dating violence.⁶ Higher levels of commitment and longer relationships have also been associated with higher rates of dating violence victimization. Risk factors for adolescent boys include having a much older partner, a same-gender partner, and previous violent victimization.¹⁵

Teens who have had personal experiences with relationship violence are at higher risk for dating violence in the future and later in adulthood. Victims of dating violence have a greater likelihood of experiencing future dating violence than are those who have never been victimized and importantly, research has shown that physical, verbal and sexual violence often occur in tandem, with victims of one type of violence at higher risk for other forms of violence as well.⁵ Childhood maltreatment, poor attachment and exposure to other forms of trauma has been strongly linked to adult relationship abuse and may also be associated with teen dating violence, although the importance of the peer group during adolescence may be a more important factor than child-parent relationships.⁹ Maltreatment or witnessing violence may lead to children developing behaviors such as increased vigilance that, while necessary for survival in a hostile environment, later influence a teen's ability to form healthy relationships. These effects may be felt in a number of ways, including hostility, fear, mistrust, aggression, poor self-efficacy,

poor problem-solving and a greater propensity to engage in risky behaviors.⁹ These factors, combined with a distorted view of relationships, may be associated with dating violence.

In addition to personal experience with relationship violence, peer group influence is a major risk factor for dating violence. In a longitudinal study of adolescent dating violence, researchers found that having friends who were in violent relationships consistently predicted a teen's likelihood of experiencing dating violence first-hand, as a victim or an aggressor.¹⁶ While parental violence or risky behavior impacts the well-being of adolescents, research shows that peer engagement in risk behavior is more likely to be influential during adolescence, perhaps because of its crucial role in teen identity development.¹⁷ Negative peer attitudes about male-female relationships can be a powerful force in adolescence, both reinforcing beliefs supporting aggression as a viable and acceptable tactic with dating partners and convincing girls to be more tolerant and accepting of such hostile behavior.⁹ These findings illustrate the crucial role of the peer group for teens and further support prevention interventions targeting all adolescents, not just perpetrators or victims of violence.

Consequences of Dating Violence

Dating violence can have both long and short-term effects on the health and well-being of teens, beyond the more immediate physical and emotional injury caused to the victim. In an analysis of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, researchers found that adolescent girls who were victims of dating violence showed longitudinal increases in health risk behaviors including depressed mood, antisocial behavior, suicidal behavior and illicit drug use.³ Adolescent boys who had been victims of dating violence, on the other hand, showed an increase in depressed mood only.

Dating violence has also been associated with higher rates of sexual health risk, particularly among adolescent girls, but also among adolescent boy perpetrators of dating abuse.¹⁸ Adolescent girls who have experienced dating violence have higher risk of a broad range of sexual health issues, including pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and higher rates of sexual risk behaviors.¹⁴ In one study, adolescent girls who had been victims of dating violence were found to be less likely to practice consistent use of condoms and more likely to fear talking to their partner about pregnancy or STD prevention.¹⁹ It is important to note that these studies do not demonstrate a directional link between dating violence and pregnancy or sexual health risk. It remains unclear whether girls in abusive dating relationships go on to develop more sexual health risk behaviors or if participation in a violent relationship is part of a broader set of circumstances of health risk.

Teen dating violence has been associated with violent relationships in adulthood.²⁰ In a longitudinal study of intimate partner violence among college-aged women, researchers found that women who had been physically abused in dating relationships as teens were more likely to be physically abused in relationships in college.²¹ In fact, teen dating violence victimization was better able to predict whether a young woman would be a victim of intimate partner violence than was childhood abuse.

The direct and lasting effects of teen dating violence and its potential to act as a precursor to intimate partner violence demonstrate the compelling need for effective policies and interventions to address this important issue.

Resources on Teen Dating Violence

There are a number of resources that address teen dating violence by providing access to a range of information, such as: data and statistics, educational programs, learning tools and activities, treatment and support services, and advocacy and policy materials. The following is a list of some of these local and national resources, with a brief description and website information.

LOCAL RESOURCES

Domestic Violence Center of Greater Cleveland
<http://www.domesticviolencecenter.org/teen-information/teens-and-dating-violence.htm>

The website includes a quiz on the warning signs of abuse, facts and figures, a Teen Dating Bill of Rights, and a personalized safety plan that teens can print out and use. The Center also operates a 24 hour hotline at 216-391-HELP.

Cleveland Rape Crisis Center
<http://www.clevelandrapecrisis.org>

The Center provides services for victims of sexual abuse as well as educational and empowerment programs for women and girls. A 24 hour hotline is available at 216-619-6192.

The Tina Project
<http://www.thetinaproject.org>

The Tina Project is a comprehensive curriculum and community effort to address teen dating violence and promote healthy relationships in response to Ohio House Bill 19. The Tina Project works with schools and the community to facilitate school-based educational program about dating violence, as mandated by OH Bill 19.

Expect Respect
<http://www.jfsa-cleveland.org/fvs/Family%20Violence%20Prevention/ExpectRespect/index.html>

Expect Respect is an initiative of the Jewish Family Services Association that uses interactive dramatic presentations to educate teens about healthy relationships and dating abuse. In addition to educational services for teens, the program offers educational services to parents and school personnel, as well as support groups and more targeted services for teens dealing with violence.

Addressing Teen Dating Violence: Implications for Policy and Practice

Dating violence among adolescents has clear policy and public health implications, both on a local and national scale. The high prevalence of dating violence combined with the negative implications of such abuse for health and well-being suggests that intervention is both vitally necessary and has the potential to improve the lives of both teens and adults. Both legislation and violence prevention programs have attempted to address the issue of teen dating violence and its associated harms.

Locally, two pieces of legislation have recently been enacted to combat dating violence among adolescents. In 2010, Ohio enacted "Tina's Law", which requires Ohio public schools to have policies and programs to address dating violence in grades 7-12. The law is named for a teen in Middleton, Ohio, who was shot and killed by her boyfriend in 1992. "Tina's Law" provides a clear definition of dating violence as "a pattern of behavior where a person uses or threatens physical, sexual, verbal or emotional abuse to control the person's dating partner" and dating partner as "any person, regardless of gender, involved in an intimate relationship with another person primarily characterized by the expectation of affectionate involvement, whether casual, serious or long-term."²² A second Ohio bill, HB 10, was also passed in March 2010. It allows a person under the age of 18 to file for civil protective orders on their own behalf against former dating partners. This law is important because it recognizes that adolescents experience dating violence and must have the right to seek protection. In the past, juveniles were unable to file for protection on their behalf or against other juveniles. This law represents a major step in combating dating violence and sets Ohio apart from other states, because although national legislation exists for some specific behaviors such as sexual abuse, stalking and physical violence, most states have age requirements that

prohibit minors from filing protective articles. In addition, some laws are limited to marriage or common-law partnerships, which do not apply in the vast majority of teen dating violence cases.

In addition to legislation and services designed to protect teens from dating violence once it occurs, some researchers and practitioners are developing prevention and early intervention programming based on a public health model of risk and protective factors, to help prevent dating violence in adolescence. Because adolescent girls and boys report both victimization and perpetration of dating violence, researchers have called for universal approaches to raising awareness and preventing teen dating violence that target both genders.²³ School-based approaches that teach teens about developing healthy relationships and avoiding dating violence have been shown to be effective.⁷ In addition, community-based programs that prevent teen dating violence, even by a small amount, have the potential to significantly reduce health care costs. Programs should use developmentally appropriate assessments and services should be cognizant of gender, in addition to race and cultural differences, whether employing a universal or targeted service strategy.

An innovative school-based prevention program that involves teens, parents, teachers and the broader community, seeks to address the underlying factors that predispose some teens to dating violence. This targeted program is known as the Fourth R approach, where "relationships" are considered to be such a central part of education that they are added to the old adage of "reading, writing and arithmetic."²⁴ It draws on the research that demonstrates different risk factors for adolescent boys and girls to provide specific programming to both genders. In addition, the classroom setting avoids the tendency to stigmatize some students by involving whole classes in the intervention. This program addresses the topics of dating violence and also violence/bullying, unsafe sexual behavior,

and substance use, as these behaviors often occur within the context of relationships. Programs such as the Fourth R seek to empower teens to build healthy relationships and to avoid dating violence with its associated health risks and potential to develop into a cycle of unhealthy relationships into adulthood.

Further research is needed to better understand how teen dating violence is qualitatively different from childhood peer group aggression and adult intimate partner violence in order to better address the problem. Areas for potential research include: dating violence comorbidity with other risk factors (i.e. substance abuse, eating disorders, early maturation, trauma); dating violence experiences of gay, lesbian and bisexual youth; developmental trajectories; developing more reliable measurement and assessment techniques; and evaluating effectiveness of interventions and violence prevention strategies. Ultimately, this research should inform more effective prevention and treatment practices and policies.

Teen dating violence is increasingly becoming an issue of local, national and international concern. Alarming cases in the media help to draw attention to the issue of teen dating violence but far more cases go under the public radar. Advocacy campaigns, such as National Teen Dating Violence Prevention and Awareness Week (the first week in February), seek to educate and inform teens, parents and educators about the issue of adolescent dating violence. These advocacy efforts, in combination with legislation and effective interventions, may help to reduce violence in adolescent relationships. However, with rates of teen dating violence remaining high and evidence mounting for associated detrimental effects to health and well-being, teen dating violence remains a crucial issue for child and adolescent research, policy and practice.

LOCAL RESOURCES, continued

Citizens Against Domestic Violence Ohio

<http://www.cadv-ohio.com>

This nonprofit organization aims to promote awareness about domestic violence and provides a helpline for teen dating violence at 1-800-331-9474. In addition, the organization has speakers who present educational programs in school settings. The organization also administers a competitive scholarship for teens and young adults wishing to pursue higher education in a field where they can work to address issues of domestic violence.

NATIONAL RESOURCES

National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline

<http://www.loveisrespect.org>

The National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline can be reached at 1-866-331-9474 or 1-866-331-8453. Loveisrespect.org, the Helpline's website, contains information on dating abuse and also allows teens to chat live with a peer advocate.

Break the Cycle

<http://www.breakthecycle.org>

Break the Cycle is an organization that seeks to empower teens to end domestic and dating violence. The organization provides a wide range of services, including crisis services, teen empowerment initiatives, adult education programs and policy advocacy.

Love is Not Abuse

<http://www.loveisnotabuse.com>

Love is not Abuse provides information and tools to address the teen dating violence epidemic. At loveisnotabuse.com, teens can access resources, quizzes and other information about teen dating violence.

That's Not Cool

<http://www.thatnotcool.com>

Thatnotcool.com is a website that focuses on teen relationship abuse in the digital world. It includes music videos, cartoons and other youth-focused resources experiencing or concerned about exploitation, harassment, or abuse online.

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