



# DATING VIOLENCE AMONG ADOLESCENTS: RISK FACTORS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TREATMENT AND RESEARCH

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Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), or violence in dating relationships, is a serious problem in the United States, involving significant numbers of men and women as victims and as perpetrators.

The consequences can be grave. Victims risk physical harm, with women being more likely to suffer injuries. Injuries from IPV result in an estimated 250,000 emergency room visits each year.<sup>1</sup>

IPV is particularly troubling during adolescence. Among early and middle adolescents, who range in age from 10-17 years old, estimated rates of IPV have been reported as high as 42%. In addition to the risk of injury, dating violence among adolescents may also influence relationship patterns that carry over into adulthood.

Much work remains to be done to improve the methodology and scope of research into this important issue. Available studies, however, shed some light on the characteristics of IPV and the adolescents involved, as well as suggest targets for intervention and directions for future research.

## THE PROBLEM

Studies report that 11% to 42% of adolescents aged 10-17 years old experience IPV at some point in their young lives. Among later adolescents, who range in age from 18 years to their mid-20s, rates of IPV range from 21% to 55%.

Although determining the true rate of IPV among adolescents is difficult given the wide differences reported in available studies, several general characteristics of violence within dating relationships seem clear:

- A large share of the adolescent population experience violence within the context of a dating relationship.
- Both boys and girls are involved in inflicting and receiving physical violence within dating relationships.

- Girls and women report being recipients of more sexual violence than men.
- Women also report inflicting and receiving more physical violence than men.

## Injuries

The reported injury rates among adolescents who experience IPV are high. And when IPV occurs, girls and women are more likely to be the ones injured.

Among early and middle adolescents, for example, one study found that 70% of the girls and 52% of the boys who had experienced IPV sustained injury. Of those injured, 9% of females and 8% of males went to a hospital emergency room for treatment.<sup>2</sup>

In one study of IPV among late adolescents, women were significantly more likely to report mild injuries, such as small cuts and bruises; moderate injuries, such as cuts that required stitches; and severe injuries that included fractured limbs and permanent disability.<sup>3</sup>

## Mutual Violence

Although many people believe that males are the perpetrators of violence and females are the victims, those roles, in fact, are not so clearly defined in cases of IPV. In adolescent dating relationships that involve violence, for example, research suggests that in many cases both partners inflict violence as well as receive it.

Mutually violent relationships heighten the risk of injury. The mean amounts of violence received and injuries sustained in these types of relationships are reported to be greater than in relationships involving one-sided violence.<sup>4</sup>

Several studies have found that between 42% and 72% of early and middle adolescents who have experienced IPV say they have been both the perpetrator and the victim. Very few studies report on mutual violence in dating relationships among late adolescents. However, in one study of undergraduates, about 60% of men and women reported they had been involved in a mutually violent relationship at some point in their lives.<sup>5</sup>

## Gender Differences

The perception that girls are typically the victim of

physical violence in a dating relationship rather than the one who inflicts it is called into question in several studies of high school students who had experienced IPV.

One such study found that 29% of females and 4% of males reported being perpetrators of IPV and that 26% of the males and 8% of the females reported being victims.<sup>6</sup> Narrower gender differences were reported in one of the most methodologically sound studies of adolescent IPV. It found that 21% of male 12<sup>th</sup> grade students and 26% of females reported being the perpetrators.<sup>7</sup>

Although many studies find that more girls report inflicting physical violence than boys, firm conclusions are difficult to draw. Reported rates vary and some studies have failed to find significant differences in gender. Reported rates may support findings among adults that suggest women, in general, remember and report more violent incidents than men. It may also be that because men are socialized to be more aggressive, interactions with intimate partners that involve violence may not be as meaningful or memorable. Also, the impact and perceived meaning of violence experienced by males and females may be quite different.

In terms of *sexual* IPV, however, significantly more adolescent girls report being the victim. For example, one study found that among high school students, 16% of girls and 4% of boys reported having experienced sexual dating violence.<sup>8</sup>

## RISK FACTORS

Several factors that may increase the likelihood of adolescent dating violence have been identified in a number of studies. Areas explored include the reasons adolescents give for IPV, their relationships, family experiences, and characteristics of their personalities.

The developmental context in which this type of violence occurs is another factor to consider. Adolescence is a unique time of development marked by physical and psychosocial growth and maturity, all of which may influence behavior in relationships.

### Adolescence

Traditionally, adolescence was described as a period of “storm and stress” characterized by turbulence and transition. While adolescence is clearly a time of transition, current researchers and theorists no longer consider emotional instability and conflict to be inevitable parts of adolescence.

Researchers identify the transition into adolescence beginning as early as 10, when pubescence begins, and ending when the individual completes formal education, is autonomous from parents, and is fulfilling adult role

expectations. For many Americans, the period of adolescence stretches into their 20’s.

Studies identify several general characteristics of adolescence, including the following:

- Boys’ physical development, although beginning later than girls’, usually surpasses that of girls’ by mid-adolescence, when they are 15 to 17 years old. By mid-to late-adolescence, most boys have surpassed girls in both stature and strength.
- Gender roles become more salient and rigid during adolescence. In general, boys are socialized to be independent, aggressive, and confident; girls, to be passive, dependent, affectionate, and sensitive.
- Interactions with peers change during adolescence. After approximately age 12, friendships among girls continue to be characterized by close-knit and intimate relationships, while boys’ relationships tend to be highly competitive and focused on dominance.
- Reasons for dating and partner selection vary by stage of adolescence. Early and middle adolescents are more likely to list recreation and status as reasons for dating; late adolescents were more likely to list companionship, sexual activity, and mate selection.<sup>9</sup>

### Reasons for Conflict

For adolescents, regardless of age, violence in dating relationships is interpreted as anger, confusion, or love. Perceived reasons for conflict include jealousy, self-defense, intimidation, communication difficulties, and the use of alcohol and drugs.

For example, a study of adolescents ranging in age from 10 to 17 years old, found that the “aggressor” most frequently interpreted his or her behavior as arising from confusion (60%), anger (54%), and love (31%).<sup>10</sup> Recipients of abuse interpreted their partner’s behavior as a sign of anger (71%), confusion (40%), or love (27%).

Intimidation and self-defense are also frequently perceived reasons for IPV. Adolescent men are perceived as more likely to inflict violence to intimidate and adolescent women are viewed as more likely to inflict violence in self-defense.

### Relationship Characteristics

Relationship factors that have been examined include the number of dating partners, frequency of dating, length of relationship, and seriousness or meaningfulness of relationship.

Little is known about relationship characteristics

and IPV during early and middle adolescence. And what is known is contradictory, perhaps because it is unlikely that many relationships during this stage of adolescence last longer than six months and even fewer last as long as two years.

However, studies suggest that longer relationships, more frequent dating, greater numbers of partners, and more serious relationships are factors that increase the risk of experiencing IPV among late adolescent couples who range in age from 18 years to mid-20s.

### Family Factors

Studies of adult IPV generally support the social learning theory that views violent behavior as a learned response based on experiencing and witnessing physical violence within the family of origin. For example, a recent study reports that 60% to 80% of abusive adult males and 20% to 30% of wives of abusive husbands come from violent homes.<sup>11</sup>

Evidence that exposure to violence as a child increases the likelihood of being involved in a violent relationship as an adolescent has been reported in several studies. Studies of late adolescents suggest that males are much more likely than females to inflict or receive violence in a dating relationship if they had been exposed to child abuse. However, the evidence is far less clear among early and middle adolescents.

Although the association between violence within the home and dating violence appears strong, it does not explain all the variance associated with experiencing IPV. Some children raised in violent homes do not experience IPV, and some children who were not raised in violent homes nevertheless become involved in IPV.

### Personality Factors

The role of personality factors and psychopathology are important but understudied topics for understanding IPV in adolescence. Although the studies are few and, in some cases, contradictory, they identify poor self-esteem, depression, and drug and alcohol use as factors related to dating violence.

One of the more comprehensive studies to examine personality factors suggests that when poor self-esteem and symptoms of depression are found among girls, they are more likely to inflict violence in an intimate relationship. For boys, a history of antisocial behavior, such as delinquency, makes it more likely they will inflict IPV.<sup>12</sup> Such findings are consistent with adolescent development research showing that boys tend to have externalizing problems and girls tend to have internalizing problems.

Drug and alcohol use is one of the more consistent

factors found to be related to adolescent IPV. In one study, 33% of the adolescents reported that both partners were drinking during their most violent incident, and 25% reported using other drugs.<sup>13</sup>

### Harm To Relationship

Significant numbers of adolescents appear to believe that dating violence does not harm – and may even improve – a relationship, despite the price that can be paid in injuries and feelings of anger, hurt, and regret.

The perception that IPV is a benign or a positive factor in a relationship is reflected in studies across all stages of adolescence. A study of early and middle adolescents who experienced IPV reported that 23% felt their relationship improved, 35% felt it was unchanged, 12% said it worsened, and 23% ended the relationship.<sup>14</sup> Among late adolescents, 37% reported that relationships improved, and 41% said relationships did not change as a result of violence.<sup>15</sup>

## TREATMENT IMPLICATIONS

Many factors appear to be related to IPV during adolescence, and different factors may be predominant in different situations and with different couples. For this reason, it seems important that interventions be tailored to the needs of different individuals.

Available research suggests that factors important to implementing a treatment plan include experiences with violence in the family of origin, personal history of violence and delinquency, and mental health status.

Also important is the finding that adolescents often do not perceive violence in a relationship as destructive or unhealthy and, in fact, may believe it improves a relationship. Such findings underscore the importance of identifying limits and personal safety within a relationship. If relationships are not likely to end due to violence, it may be helpful to teach youth how to recognize when a relationship is becoming unsafe and how to leave it safely.

Research also suggests that adolescents should be taught ways to communicate differently and be provided with skills to assist in navigating this new arena of relationships. Interaction patterns from same-gender relationships in childhood may need to be adapted for intimate relationships in adolescence and adulthood.

## RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Findings from research on IPV during adolescence suggest a number of important issues, including a high rate of IPV, a tendency among girls to report inflicting

violence at rates equal to or higher than boys, evidence that violence within the family is related to violence within an intimate relationship, and that girls sustain more injuries and experience more negative emotions as a result than boys.

However, the research to date consists primarily of retrospective reports by individuals. Thus, while attempting to deal with some interesting and important issues, the current research on IPV during adolescence leaves many questions unanswered.

The shortcomings of available research identify directions that future research might follow. For example:

- Conceptually, one important question to be addressed is *involvement with IPV over time and across relationships*. While the information gathered to date helps to raise awareness of the problem of violence in dating relationships, it does not provide valuable data on adolescents who are most likely to continue to be involved with IPV into adulthood.
- The *roles* played by partners in violence need to be more clearly delineated. It is one thing to identify who inflicted and who received violence, but it is quite another to clearly identify who *initiated* the violence in specific situations. This distinction could lead to a better understanding of characteristics associated with the initiation of violence among intimate partners.
- The reported *motivation* of the inflictor of violence and the perceived motivation of the inflictor by the recipient is a frequently overlooked factor.
- In general, data on the *impact* of dating violence is scant to nonexistent. Some studies reported on physical injury rates, but none adequately assessed the psychological impact of experience with dating violence.
- Also, the rates of reported experience with violence in a dating relationship call into question the *acceptability* of the use of violence. Prevalence rates are high and the impact on the relationship is not always negative. Such findings suggest it is important to explore what matters to the adolescents with regard to dating violence.

The importance of developing a fuller understanding of IPV among adolescents is clear. IPV can, and often

does, result in physical and emotional damage. Moreover, evidence suggests that dating is a training ground for relationships later in life – that patterns developed in adolescence may carry over into adulthood.<sup>16</sup>

## REFERENCES

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *This report is a summary, written with the assistance of Jeffery Fraser, of a more comprehensive paper by the author that was submitted to the Clinical Psychology Program, Department of Psychology, University of Pittsburgh. References noted in the text of the report follow.*

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