

FOCUS

Views from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency

Interpersonal and Physical Dating Violence among Teens

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Introduction

The death of a 16 year-old girl, shot and killed by her 17 year-old boyfriend in Oakland, California, epitomizes the potential of interpersonal violence to escalate to a tragic extreme (Contra Costa Times, 2008). Exposure to interpersonal violence often begins in early adolescence and continues into adulthood (CDC, 2006). In the US alone, approximately 1 in 3 adolescent girls (estimates up to 35%) is a victim of interpersonal violence (Bonomi & Kelleher, 2007; CDC 2006 & 2007; Marcus, 2005). This Focus attempts to bring to light various aspects of a little-studied issue of critical importance, especially to youth.

What is Interpersonal Violence?

Interpersonal violence is physical, emotional, or verbal abuse by one partner towards another in a dating relationship. It is referred to by a variety of names—relationship violence, date fighting, and intimate partner violence—terms used interchangeably in this report. This definition also includes any abusive behavior aimed at controlling or hurting a dating partner and thus includes threats and acts of intimidation (WomensLaw.org, 2007; CDC, 2007). The physical aspect of interpersonal violence—intentional hitting, slapping, or physically hurting by a boyfriend or girlfriend—is referred to as physical dating violence (PDV) and is emphasized in the following report.

An estimated 5.3 million interpersonal violence incidents occur each year in the US, resulting in approximately 2 million injuries and 1,300 deaths among women.

(CDC, 2006).

Method

To examine the prevalence and patterns of interpersonal violence among adolescents, the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) analyzed data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). The YRBS is a self-reported, written instrument that is administered every two years across the US to 9th through 12th grade students in public and private schools. It serves as a core instrument used in tracking the leading causes of morbidity and mortality among high school students by examining social problems, including occurrences and patterns of PDV among adolescents and teens. National YRBS data is regularly consulted by researchers; however, this NCCD analysis also uses YRBS data from two California cities, San Francisco and Los Angeles. Although the YRBS does provide important insight into many aspects of adolescent behavior, it does not cover everything. Accordingly, NCCD consulted other data sources, where noted, on youth and adult interpersonal violence.

Scope of the Problem

Interpersonal violence is linked to a range of social, mental health, and physical health problems among adolescent victims. National and local studies show that PDV-exposed teens are at increased risk for injuries and have greater tendencies to engage in activities that are unhealthy and often dangerous, which include unsafe sexual activities, suicide ideation, and drug, alcohol, and tobacco abuse (Eaton et al., 2006; Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001). Studies also indicate that most of these victims are typically subject to multiple acts of violence and aggression that tend to increase in frequency and intensity over time (Marcus, 2005; Smith, White, & Holland, 2003). For example, a nationally representative sample of youth revealed that, of those reporting having been slapped, hit, or kicked by their partner, 63.7% reported that the abuse occurred

on two or more occasions. Other reports highlight that relationship violence contributes to a significant number of injuries and deaths among young women; adolescent girls are more likely than adult women to be victims of interpersonal violence and to suffer both minor and severe injuries as a result (California Attorney General, 2004; Black, Noonan, Legg, Eaton, and Breiding, 2006; Rennison, 2001 & 2003). However, research focused on this issue in the youth population has been limited. Perhaps, as some observers in the public health community contend, sensational high profile events such as school shootings, although devastating, have skewed attention away from the more chronic and widespread problem of interpersonal violence.

Estimates of youth violence

33%	<i>Adolescent girls victimized by a dating partner</i>
14%	<i>Youth that have had a fight at school</i>
7%	<i>Youth that have been bullied at school</i>
< .01%	<i>Youth that die from homicide or suicide</i>

Prevalence among Adolescents

The prevalence of interpersonal violence among adolescents generally varies from 9% to 35%, depending upon the population surveyed and how interpersonal violence is defined (Bonomi & Kelleher, 2007; CDC, 2007; Marcus, 2005). For example, a large study that surveyed over 4,000 youths in grades 9 through 12 found that approximately 20% of female youth had been physically or sexually abused by a dating partner (Silverman, et al., 2001). Another study evaluated experiences of middle school students in New Jersey and found that as many as 57% reported having engaged in at least one aggressive act against a dating partner during the previous year (Avery-Leaf, Cascardi, O'Leary, & Cano, 1997). Because each study addressed different arenas of abuse (i.e., some included questions about emotional abuse, while others addressed sexual mistreatment and violence), and assessed different populations, these estimates are not easily comparable.

Prevalence by Gender

In the US, the rate of violence against females by intimate partners is 3 to 6 times that of males; 1 in every 5 women has been physically assaulted by an intimate partner compared to 1 in every 14 men. For both adolescent and adult populations, injuries that result from interpersonal violence are also significantly more common among females (Tajaden & Thoennes, 2000). Although women and girls show the greatest exposure, interpersonal violence affects individuals of both genders as well as those of different sexual orientations.

One study found that young males are more likely to use physical violence as a means to control their girlfriends, whereas young girls are more likely to use violence in self-defense (e.g., against an abusive partner) (Okeefe & Treister, 1997). Similar studies have also found that females are more likely to report being terrified as a result of experiencing physical violence in dating relationships and are more likely to sustain serious injuries, despite who initiates the violence. In contrast, males seldom fear violence from their female dating partner (Foshee, 1998). It is important to identify the factors that contribute to a youth's fighting behavior. A shortcoming of the YRBS is that it fails to question the factors, such as self defense, that may underlie reported behaviors.

Females are more likely than males to sustain serious injuries, despite who initiates the violence.

Prevalence in Communities of Color

African Americans: A variety of studies maintain that African American females are at greater risk for victimization from intimate partner violence and other forms of physical abuse. It is estimated that African American females experience intimate partner violence at a rate 35% higher than White females and 22% higher than other races (Rennison, 2001).

Latinos: Latina girls ages 16 to 19 also have high rates of intimate partner violence (Rennison, 2001). In a poll conducted by the Texas Council on Family Violence (2002), 64% disclosed that either they or a member of their family had experienced at least one form of domestic violence in their lifetime. In addition, approximately 39% of Latina respondents had experienced intimate partner violence in their lifetime.

Asians: Studies commonly indicate that the prevalence of interpersonal violence among Asian women and girls is significantly lower than that for Whites and other minority groups (Tajaden & Thoennes, 2000). However, advocates within the Asian community challenge these assertions and contend that Asian Americans are excluded from most North American studies that focus on violence and abuse, which has led to their exclusion from prevention and intervention programs. A study by the National Asian Women's Health Organization (2002) found that a significant proportion of young Asian women were in fact exposed to many forms of interpersonal violence. A similar study that examined experiences of abuse, service needs, and barriers among Asian women found that 81% of respondents experienced at least one form of intimate partner violence (McDonnell & Abdulla, 2001).

YRBS Results

The graphs that follow are derived from YRBS data.* Specifically, survey respondents were asked if they had been deliberately hit, slapped, or physically hurt by a boyfriend or girlfriend during the twelve months prior to the survey.

Both male and female respondents were victims of physical dating violence. The analysis also shows very small variations among racial and ethnic groups. These differences were much smaller than what has been seen in other research and were not statistically significant. This again points to a general pervasiveness of relationship violence.

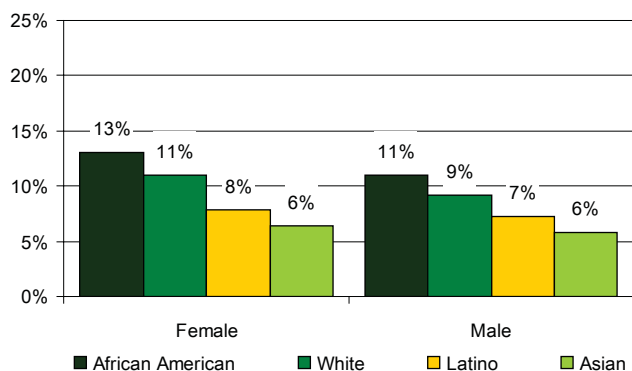
Girls that are exposed to PDV also report greater exposure to other kinds of violence.

Exposure to Violence

Girls that are exposed to PDV also report greater exposure to other kinds of violence. A policy report by the California Attorney General's Office (2001) estimates that among California youth, 1 in every 4 is exposed as a witness to or victim of violence. The YRBS data support this estimate.

The YRBS examined six indicators of violence. In the combined datasets from Los Angeles and San Francisco, more than 3 in 4 PDV-exposed girls (78%) experienced at least one episode of some kind of violence during the twelve months prior to the survey. In comparison, 44% of non-exposed females had the same experience.

Figure 1
PDV Exposure by Race



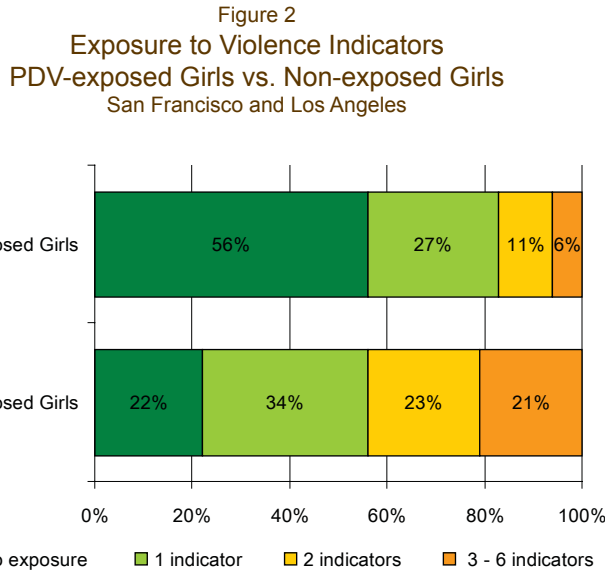
Statistical Significance indicates that there is measurable statistical evidence to attest that differences seen among groups is reliable and not due to chance.

Table 1
Teen Girls' Exposure to Six YRBS Violence Indicators
San Francisco and Los Angeles

Rates of exposure to violence indicators among Girls	Non-exposed	PDV-exposed
Experienced some form of threat, violence, or violence-related behavior	44%	78%
Was in a fight or injured in a fight and had to be treated by a doctor/nurse one or more times in the past 12 months.	23%	54%
Had property stolen or deliberately damaged on school property one or more times in the past 12 months.	22%	39%
Did not attend school due to feeling unsafe at school or on the way to or from school on one or more occasions during the past 30 days.	8%	20%
Carried a weapon, including a gun, knife, or club during the past 12 months.	6%	19%
Was threatened or injured with a weapon, such as a gun, knife, or club on school property one or more times during the past 12 months.	5%	18%

* A total of 13,917 youth submitted useable questionnaires for the 2005 national data collection; this sample included 1,228 youth from Los Angeles and 2,419 from San Francisco.

PDV-exposed females were also exposed to multiple forms of violence: 41% were exposed to two or more of the six violence indicators, with an average of three. The majority of non-exposed girls reported no exposure to any of the violence indicators above (56%).



Over one-half of PDV-exposed teen girls (54%) were involved in or injured in a fight during the twelve months prior to the survey. This proportion is higher than that for non-exposed girls (23%) and all boys (PDV-exposed, 51%; non-exposed, 35%).

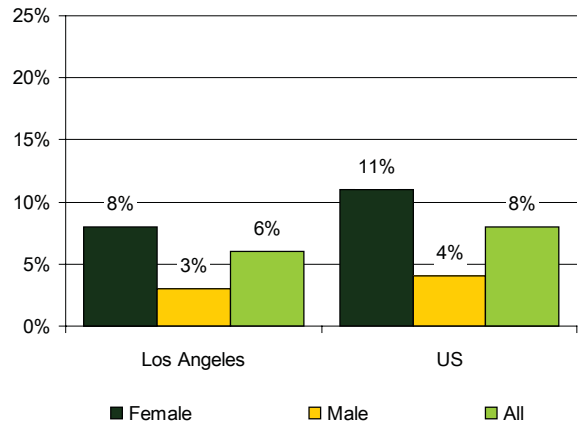
A large proportion of PDV-exposed girls report fighting or being injured in a fight.

Sexual Victimization – Forced Sexual Intercourse

Forced sexual intercourse, which is analyzed separately from PDV, is another form of violence addressed through the YRBS. Respondents were asked if they had ever been physically forced to have sexual intercourse

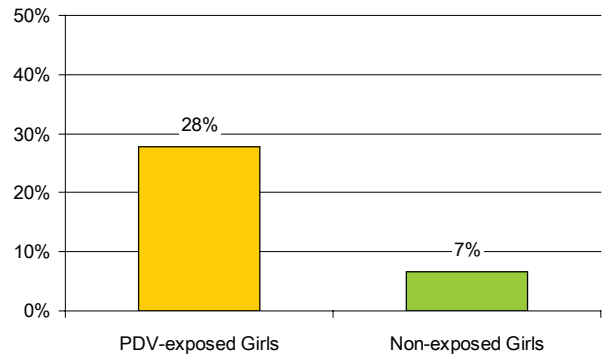
when they did not want to. The responses here are from the Los Angeles and national samples only. Los Angeles follows a similar pattern to that of the nation.

Figure 3
Forced Sexual Intercourse
 Los Angeles and US



A considerable proportion of PDV-exposed girls has experienced both physical and sexual assault. The sexual victimization prevalence of PDV-exposed girls in the Los Angeles sample is approximately four times greater than that for non-exposed girls (28% vs. 7%).

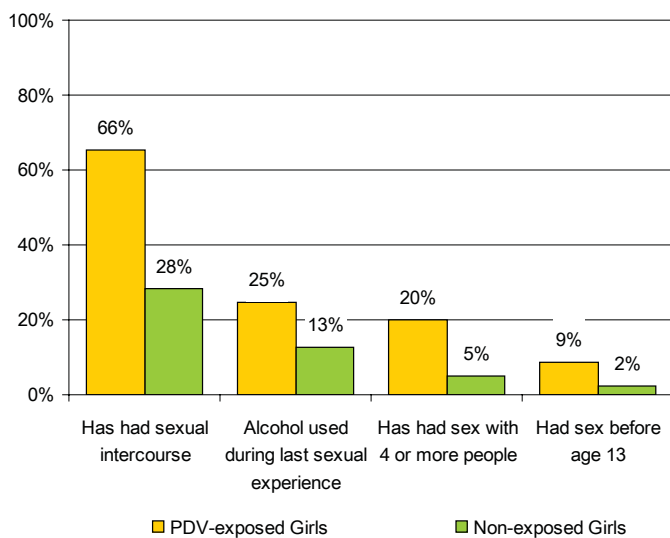
Figure 4
Forced Sexual Intercourse among Girls
 Los Angeles



High-Risk Sexual Behavior

Teenage girls who experience dating violence are more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors, which include sexual activity at a young age or with multiple partners (Corporate Alliance to End Partner Violence, 2007). Among female youth in the combined YRBS data from San Francisco and Los Angeles, the proportion who participated in high-risk sexual behavior was up to four times greater with the presence of PDV.

Figure 5
High-Risk Sexual Behavior among Girls
San Francisco and Los Angeles



Patterns of substance use also reveal that PDV-exposed girls are at greater risk than non-exposed girls. Figure 6 illustrates the proportion of females in the combined data samples who in their lifetime drank alcohol or smoked cigarettes or marijuana on one or more occasions; Figure 7 highlights the most current consumption of these substances.

Figure 6
Marijuana, Tobacco, and Alcohol Use among Girls
San Francisco and Los Angeles

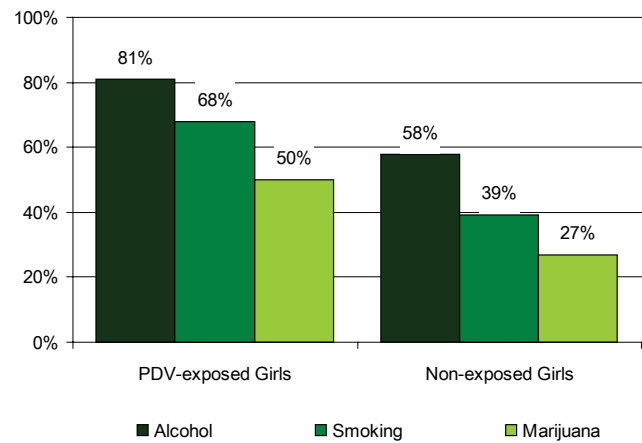
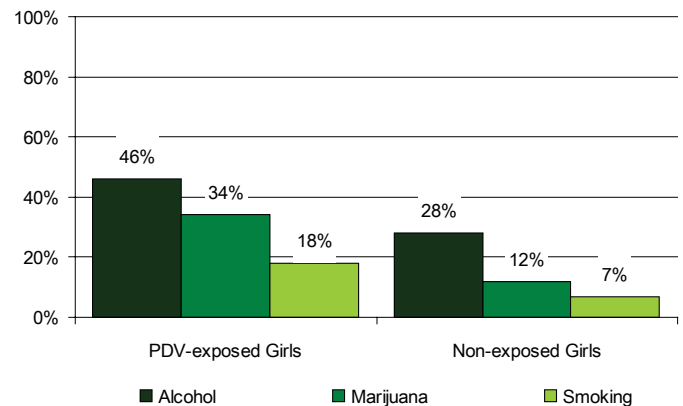


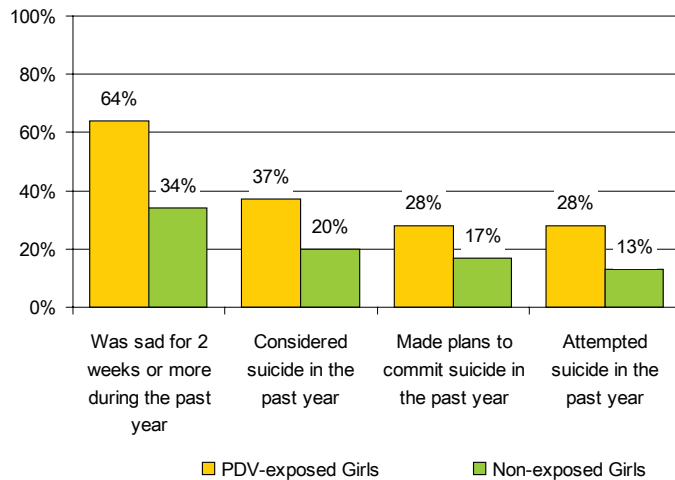
Figure 7
Marijuana, Tobacco, and Alcohol Use among Girls During Prior Month
San Francisco and Los Angeles



Depression & Suicide Ideation

Survey results show that a greater proportion of PDV victims suffer from depression, suicide ideation, and attempted suicide than non-victims. Almost twice as many PDV-exposed girls (64% vs. 34%) were sad for two weeks or more in the twelve months prior to the survey. In addition, a greater proportion engaged in suicide ideation. Other research indicates that adolescents who experience dating violence were up to 60% more likely than their non-exposed counterparts to report one or more suicide attempts (Corporate Alliance to End Partner Violence, 2007).

Figure 8
Depression and Suicide Ideation among Girls
San Francisco and Los Angeles



Summary

Interpersonal violence is a serious public health threat that must be taken seriously. It is a pervasive problem that can have very damaging and sometimes deadly outcomes for victims. National and local studies document that this behavior is shockingly common among adolescents today. As noted in this report, approximately 1 of 3 adolescent girls falls victim to interpersonal violence. This figure far exceeds the rate of many other forms of adolescent violence. These studies also indicate that girls exposed to interpersonal violence show greater exposure to other forms of violence, greater propensity for unsafe sexual activity, and a higher incidence of substance abuse and suicide ideation than their male counterparts or non-exposed females. Some public agencies, including the California Attorney General's Office and California Department of Education (2004) acknowledge the toxicity of interpersonal violence among school-age youth and have called for the mobilization of schools and other youth-serving organizations to address this critical issue.

Recommendations

Primary Prevention Programs

A significant number of adolescents experience an episode of violence by age 15. Although PDV is prevalent among teens in all communities, the evidence also suggests that they have difficulty identifying it as such. Clearly, a youth that does not understand that he or she is suffering abuse or perpetrating it is much less likely to reach out for help. Educating teens about the issue is essential. Primary prevention programs must be a key element in a movement to curtail PDV. One such program is Youth Alive's Teens on Target, in Oakland, California, which presents dramatizations of dating violence to groups of middle school youth.

Cultural Competency

Despite the general prevalence of PDV, the specifics and precipitating factors vary among communities. There is a need for studies of violence among youth of color that specifically address contextual and cultural factors (i.e., family and social background, norms within families, communities, and neighborhood structure) and exposure to other forms of violence, abuse, and maltreatment—all factors that are relevant to teens' experience of dating violence. Effectiveness in prevention is driven by the cultural appropriateness of programs. Focused research can achieve a better understanding of the complex of issues around violence in communities of color. This in turn will help ensure a positive impact of prevention and response efforts.

Skilled Assessment and Intervention

Even if youth do understand that they are victims or abusers, they may still have tremendous difficulty seeking help with a relationship. Adults that work with youth, especially at school, need training in assessing the signs of interpersonal violence. Once identified, youth need to have access to effective intervention strategies. Having such help for identified youth is the next step in any meaningful remedy to this widespread threat to vulnerable youth.

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