



## Teen Dating Violence: A Closer Look at Adolescent Romantic Relationships

by Carrie Mulford, Ph.D., and Peggy C. Giordano, Ph.D.

Most teenagers do not experience physical aggression when they date. However, for one in 10 teens, abuse is a very real part of dating relationships.

According to the 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, approximately 10 percent of adolescents nationwide reported being the victim of physical violence at the hands of a romantic partner during the previous year.<sup>1</sup> The rate of psychological victimization is even higher: Between two and three in 10 reported being verbally or psychologically abused in the previous year, according to the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health.<sup>2</sup>

As for perpetration rates, there are currently no nationwide estimates for who does the abusing, and state estimates vary significantly. In South Carolina, for example, nearly 8 percent of adolescents reported being

physically violent to a romantic partner. Interestingly, the rates of reported victimization versus perpetration in the state were similar for boys and girls.<sup>3</sup> However, when it comes to severe teen dating violence — including sexual and physical assault — girls were disproportionately the victims.<sup>4</sup>

At a recent workshop on teen dating violence, co-sponsored by the U.S. Departments of Justice (DOJ) and Health and Human Services (HHS), researchers presented findings from several studies that found that girls and boys perpetrate the same frequency of physical aggression in romantic relationships. This finding was at odds with what practitioners attending the workshop said they encounter in their professional experience. Most of the practitioners in attendance — representing national organizations, schools and victim service community-based agencies — said that they primarily see female victims,

and when they discuss teen dating violence with students, they hear that boys are the primary perpetrators.

So what *is* the reality?

Because teen dating violence has only recently been recognized as a significant public health problem, the complex nature of this phenomenon is not fully understood. Although research on rates of perpetration and victimization exists, research that examines the problem from a longitudinal perspective and considers the dynamics of teen romantic relationships is lacking. Consequently, those in the field have to rely on an *adult* framework to examine the problem of teen dating violence.

However, we find that this adult framework does not take into account key differences between adolescent and adult romantic relationships. And so, to help further the discussion, we offer in this article a gender-based analysis of teen dating violence with a developmental perspective.<sup>5</sup> We look at what we know — and what we don't know — about who is the perpetrator and who is the victim in teen dating violence. We also discuss how adult and adolescent romantic relationships differ in the hope that an examination of existing research will help us better understand the problem and move the field toward the creation of developmentally appropriate prevention programs and effective interventions for teenagers.

### **Victims and Perpetrators: What the Research Says**

In 2001-2005, Peggy Giordano and her colleagues at Bowling Green State University interviewed more than 1,300 seventh, ninth and 11th graders in Toledo, Ohio. [*Editor's Note:* Giordano is one of the authors of this article.] More than half of the girls in physically aggressive relationships said both they and their dating partner committed aggressive acts during the relationship. About a third of the girls said they were the sole perpetrators, and 13 percent reported that they were the sole victims. Almost half of the boys in physically aggressive relationships reported mutual aggression, nearly

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half reported they were the sole victim, and 6 percent reported that they were the sole perpetrator.<sup>6</sup>

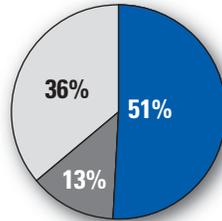
These findings are generally consistent with another study that looked at more than 1,200 Long Island, N.Y., high school students who were currently dating. In that 2007 survey, 66 percent of boys and 65 percent of girls who were involved in physically aggressive relationships reported mutual aggression.<sup>7</sup> Twenty-eight percent of the girls said that they were the sole perpetrator; 5 percent said they were the sole victim. These numbers were reversed for the boys: 5 percent said they were the sole perpetrator; 27 percent the sole victim.

In a third study, teen couples were videotaped while performing a problem-solving task. Researchers later reviewed the tapes and identified acts of physical aggression that occurred between the boys and girls during the exercise. They found that 30 percent of all the participating couples demonstrated physical aggression by both partners. In 17 percent of the participating couples, only the girls perpetrated physical aggression, and in 4 percent, only the boys were perpetrators.<sup>8</sup> The findings suggest that boys are less likely to be physically aggressive with a girl when someone else can observe their behavior.

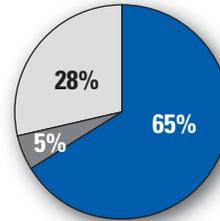
Considered together, the findings from these three studies reveal that frequently there is mutual physical aggression by girls and boys in romantic relationships. However, when it comes to *motivations* for using violence and the consequences of being a victim of teen dating violence, the differences between the sexes are pronounced. Although both boys and girls report that anger is the primary motivating factor for using violence, girls also commonly report self-defense as

## Who Perpetrates Teen Dating Violence?

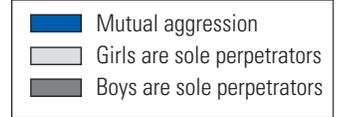
### How girls in physically aggressive relationships see it



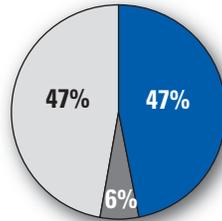
Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study



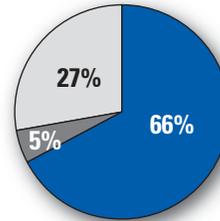
Source: Suffolk County Study of Dating Aggression in High Schools



### How boys in physically aggressive relationships see it

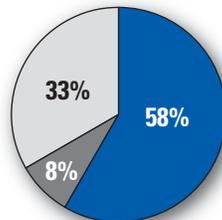


Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study



Source: Suffolk County Study of Dating Aggression in High Schools

### What is observed in physically aggressive couples



Source: Oregon Youth (Couples) Study

a motivating factor, and boys also commonly cite the need to exert control.<sup>9</sup> Boys are also more likely to react with laughter when their partner is physically aggressive.<sup>10</sup> Girls experiencing teen dating violence are more likely than boys to suffer long-term negative behavioral and health consequences, including suicide attempts, depression, cigarette smoking and marijuana use.<sup>11</sup>

## Applying Adult Perspectives to Teen Dating Violence

Why do teenagers commit violence against each other in romantic relationships? We

have already touched on the existing body of research on perpetration and victimization rates. Yet there is not a great deal of research that uses a longitudinal perspective or that considers the dynamics of teen romantic relationships. As a result, practitioners and researchers in the field tend to apply an adult intimate partner violence framework when examining the problem of teen dating violence.

A split currently exists, however, among experts in the adult intimate partner violence arena, and attendees at the DOJ-HHS teen dating workshop mirrored this divide.

Some experts hold that men and women are mutually combative and that this behavior should be seen as part of a larger pattern of family conflict. Supporters of this view generally cite studies that use “act” scales, which measure the number of times a person perpetrates or experiences certain acts, such as pushing, slapping or hitting. These studies tend to show that women report perpetrating slightly more physical violence than men.<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that most studies on teen dating violence that have been conducted to date have relied primarily on “act” scales.

Another group of experts holds that men generally perpetrate serious intimate partner violence against women. They contend that men in patriarchal societies use violence to exert and maintain power and control over women.<sup>13</sup> These experts also maintain that “act” scales do not accurately reflect the nature of violence in intimate relationships because they do not consider the degree of injury inflicted, coercive and controlling behaviors, the fear induced, or the context in which the acts occurred.<sup>14</sup> Studies using “act” scales, they contend, lack information on power and control and emphasize the more common and relatively minor forms of aggression rather than more severe, relatively rare forms of violence in dating and intimate partner relationships.<sup>15</sup> Instead, supporters of this perspective use data on injuries and in-depth interviews with victims and perpetrators.<sup>16</sup>

We believe, however, that applying either of these adult perspectives to adolescents is problematic. Although both views of adult intimate partner violence can help inform our understanding of teen dating violence, it is important to consider how adolescent romantic relationships differ from adult romantic relationships in several key areas.

### **How Teen Dating Violence Differs: Equal Power**

One difference between adolescent and adult relationships is the absence of elements traditionally associated with greater male power in adult relationships.<sup>17</sup>

*Because most abusive teen dating relationships are characterized by mutual aggression, prevention efforts must be directed toward both males and females, and interventions for victims should include services and programming for boys and girls.*

Adolescent girls are not typically dependent on romantic partners for financial stability, and they are less likely to have children to provide for and protect.

The study of seventh, ninth and 11th graders in Toledo, for example, found that a majority of the boys and girls who were interviewed said they had a relatively “equal say” in their romantic relationships. In cases in which there was a power imbalance, they were more likely to say that the female had more power in the relationship. Overall, the study found that the boys perceived that they had less power in the relationship than the girls did. Interestingly, males involved in relationships in which one or both partners reported physical aggression had a perception of less power than males in relationships without physical aggression. Meanwhile, the girls reported no perceived difference in power regardless of whether their relationships included physical aggression.<sup>18</sup>

It is interesting to note that adults who perpetrate violence against family members often see themselves as powerless in their relationships. This dynamic has yet to be adequately explored among teen dating partners.<sup>19</sup>

### **Lack of Relationship Experience**

A second key factor that distinguishes violence in adult relationships from violence in adolescent relationships is the lack of experience teens have in negotiating romantic relationships. Inexperience in communicating and relating to a romantic partner may lead to the use of poor coping strategies, including verbal and physical aggression.<sup>20</sup> A teen who has difficulty

expressing himself or herself may turn to aggressive behaviors (sometimes in play) to show affection, frustration or jealousy. A recent study in which boys and girls participated in focus groups on dating found that physical aggression sometimes stemmed from an inability to communicate feelings and a lack of constructive ways to deal with frustration.<sup>21</sup>

As adolescents develop into young adults, they become more realistic and less idealistic about romantic relationships. They have a greater capacity for closeness and intimacy.<sup>22</sup> Holding idealistic beliefs about romantic relationships can lead to disillusionment and ineffective coping mechanisms when conflict emerges.<sup>23</sup> It also seems reasonable to expect that physical aggression may be more common when adolescents have not fully developed their capacity for intimacy, including their ability to communicate.

## The Influence of Peers

We would be remiss to try to understand teen behavior and not consider the profound influence of friends. Peers exert more influence on each other during their adolescent years than at any other time.<sup>24</sup> Research has confirmed that peer attitudes and behaviors are critical influences on teens' attitudes and behaviors related to dating violence.<sup>25</sup>

Not only are friends more influential in adolescence than in adulthood, but they

are also more likely to be "on the scene" and a key element in a couple's social life. In fact, roughly half of adolescent dating violence occurs when a third party is present.<sup>26</sup> Relationship dynamics often play out in a very public way because teens spend a large portion of their time in school and in groups. For various reasons, a boyfriend or girlfriend may act very differently when in the presence of peers, a behavior viewed by adolescents as characteristic of an unhealthy relationship. For example, boys in one focus group study said that if a girl hit them in front of their friends, they would need to hit her back to "save face."<sup>27</sup>

Conflict over how much time is spent with each other versus with friends, jealousies stemming from too much time spent with a friend of the opposite sex, and new romantic possibilities are all part of the social fabric of adolescence.<sup>28</sup> Although "normal" from a developmental perspective, navigating such issues can cause conflict and, for some adolescents, lead to aggressive responses and problematic coping strategies, such as stalking, psychological or verbal abuse, and efforts to gain control.

## Where Do We Go From Here?

Adult relationships differ substantially from adolescent dating in their power dynamics, social skill development and peer influence. These factors are critical to understanding physical violence and psychological abuse in early romantic relationships and may help explain the similar perpetration rates among boys and girls suggested by current statistics.

All of this points to important implications for teen dating violence prevention and intervention strategies. Because girls engage in high levels of physical aggression and psychological abuse and most abusive relationships are characterized by mutual aggression, prevention efforts must be directed toward both males and females, and interventions for victims should include services and programming for boys and girls. Interventions must also distinguish between severe forms of violence that produce injury and fear and other more common abuse,

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## About the Authors

**Carrie Mulford is a social science analyst at the National Institute of Justice. She has worked extensively with research on juvenile justice, teen dating violence, child abuse, elder mistreatment, enforcement of victims' rights laws, hate crime and situational crime prevention. Since 2006, she has been the coordinator of the Federal Interagency Workgroup on Teen Dating Violence, whose members contributed to this article.**

**Peggy Giordano is the Distinguished Research Professor of Sociology at Bowling Green State University. Her research centers on social relationship experiences during the adolescent period, focusing particularly on studies of the nature, meaning and impact of friendships and romantic relationships.**

and they must respond with appropriate safety planning, mental health services, and criminal or juvenile justice involvement.

More research on traditionally gendered relationship dynamics — and the links to relationship violence — is also needed. For instance, some male behavior may stem from an attempt to emulate other males who they believe (not always accurately, as data show) are confident and “in charge.” Further, nearly one in five adolescent girls reports having sex with a partner three or more years older. These girls are at increased risk of acquiring a sexually transmitted disease because they are less likely to use a condom — possibly a result of unequal power dynamics in these relationships.<sup>29</sup> This power imbalance might also increase their risk for violent victimization by older partners.

And finally, research on the extent to which teens involved in abusive relationships become involved in adult abusive relationships — whether as victims or perpetrators — is sorely needed. Many delinquent youth, for example, have a well-documented path of illegal behavior; this behavior peaks in adolescence and dramatically declines in early adulthood. A similar look at aggressive adolescent romantic relationships may help us better understand the possible progression from teen dating violence to adult intimate partner violence.

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## Notes

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## ADDITIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Michele Lynberg Black, an epidemiologist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), also contributed to this article. During her more than 20 years at CDC, Black has worked across a broad range of disciplines, including reproductive health, environmental health and violence prevention. She has also worked with the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control’s Division of Violence Prevention since 2002, focusing on the areas of intimate partner violence, dating violence, sexual violence and family violence.

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