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Trends in Physical Dating Violence Victimization Among U.S. High School Students, 1999–2011

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Abstract

Dating violence is a serious form of violence that places students at risk for injury, death, and negative mental health sequelae. The current analysis presents data on the prevalence of dating violence over a 12-year period among a nationally representative sample of high school-attending youth in the United States, stratified by race and gender. Data from the national Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) 1999–2011 revealed that physical dating violence victimization rates are similar for males and females; the 12-year prevalence rate of physical dating violence victimization was 9.4% for males and 9.2% for females. Black and Multiracial students were at increased risk for dating violence victimization in comparison to their White, Asian, and Hispanic counterparts. There were no changes in the reported rate of dating violence victimization over the 12-year period.

Keywords

dating abuse; partner abuse; dating violence; partner violence; youth violence; Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System

Introduction

School violence can take multiple forms, including bullying, sexual harassment, and student-teacher aggression. One form of peer violence that is prevalent among U.S. school-attending youth is dating violence; that is, physical or sexual assault against a person with whom a student has a romantic or sexual relationship. Dating violence occurs can occur in school, community, or home settings. Dating violence is both prevalent and consequential; nationally-representative data finds that 10% of U.S. high school-attending youth report having been physically hurt by a dating partner per year (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). Consequences may include death, injury, mental health problems, sexually transmitted infections, and poor school performance (Banyard & Cross, 2008; Coker, Derrick, Lumpkin, Aldrich, & Oldendick, 2000; Jacoby, Gorenflo, Black, Wunderlich, & Eyler, 1999; Kahn, Huang, Rosenthal, Tissot, & Burk, 2005; Teten, Ball,

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Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Valle, Noonan, & Rosenbluth, 2009; Whitaker, Haileyesus, Swahn, & Saltzman, 2007; Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2008). Moreover, given evidence that bullying and teasing predicts school dropout rates (Cornell, Gregory, Huang, & Fan, 2013), it is plausible that dating violence might have a similar effect.

Several studies have noted that there is substantial overlap in the perpetration of dating violence and bullying (Miller et al., 2013). However, even schools that provide bullying prevention programming and have implemented bullying-related policies often have yet to institute dating violence prevention programming and policies (L. Rios, personal communication, May 16, 2013). A recent nationally-representative study of U.S. high school nurses revealed that 86.4% of schools do not have protocols for how to respond to dating violence incidents, and that 88.1% had not received training on how to respond to dating violence in the prior two years (Khubchandani, Telljohann, Price, Dake, & Hendershot, 2013). These data are supported by survey results that demonstrated 81% of U.S. high school guidance counselors have no protocol for responding to dating violence, and 90% had received no training on responding to dating violence in the past two years (Khubchandani et al., 2012).

One piece of information about dating violence that has not been investigated previously, but is critically important, is whether dating violence is increasing or decreasing in prevalence among U.S. adolescents. Trend data are important for understanding and preventing public health and social problems, because they permit inferences about whether existing strategies might be having an effect, inform members of the public about the extent of the problem, and permit forecasting that can help policy-makers prioritize the issue appropriately. Until the incidence and epidemiology of dating violence is better understood, effective prevention and intervention solutions may remain elusive. Stratifying trend data by race and gender may be particularly instructive, because even if the annual prevalence of dating violence were stable for students on the whole, important differences based on race/ethnicity or gender may be masked.

To address the gap in the existing evidence base, the present analysis was designed to answer the following three research questions:

1. What was the prevalence of dating violence victimization among U.S. high school students for each biennial year 1999–2011, and was there a trend over time?
2. Were there differences in the prevalence rates by gender, and were the trends over time by gender different than the trend for the population as a whole?
3. Were there differences in the prevalence rates by racial and ethnic group, and were the trends over time different for racial and ethnic subgroups as compared to the whole?

Method

Survey Design

Since 1991, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has biennially administered the national Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System survey (YRBSS). The

purpose of the YRBSS is to track the incidence and prevalence of priority health-risk behaviors among high school-attending youth. Survey data are representative of U.S. public and private school students in Grades 9–12. Participation is anonymous and voluntary, and parental permission is sought prior to implementation. It should be noted that the parental permission is passive, which has been controversial in some locales because the survey contains questions about sexual activity and rape. Typically, students complete a self-administered paper-and-pencil YRBSS questionnaire during a class period. Every U.S. state and territory survey a sample of their youth using at least a portion of the CDC-recommended YRBSS questions. In 1999, 18 states opted to include the question about dating violence, and the first national estimate of dating violence was derived from the resulting data (8.8%). Since 1999, an ever-increasing number of states have selected to include the dating violence victimization question on their YRBSS, and in 2011, a record number of 42 states did so (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012).

For the biennial years from 1999 to 2011, a three-stage cluster-sample design was used to obtain the representative sample. Details of YRBSS sample design have been described elsewhere (Brener et al., 2004; Eaton et al., 2010). YRBSS school and student response rates have also been published previously; from 1999–2011, the overall response rates ranged from 63–71% (Olsen, Hertz, Shults, Hamburger, & Lowry, 2011). The IRB at the CDC approved the YRBSS implementation.

Participants

For the years 1999–2011, there were a total of 103,957 respondents from a total of 43 different U.S. states. Only Massachusetts and Ohio did not participate in any year. Approximately 51% of the respondents were female, 43% White, 22% Black, 27% Hispanic, 4% multiracial, 3% Asian and 1% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. The ages of respondents ranged from 12–18 years old, with 90% in the 15 to 18-year-old age range.

Measures

Physical dating violence victimization was assessed via the question “During the past 12 months, did your boyfriend or girlfriend ever hit, slap or physically hurt you on purpose?” Response options were *yes* or *no*. The reliability kappa for this item was calculated previously using the 1999 data, and was 53.6 (Brener et al., 2002).

Analytic Procedures

Our goal was to understand the pattern of dating violence victimization over time. Across all years of YRBSS data (1999, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2011), there were a total of 103,957 respondents. Of these, we excluded $N = 1,829$ because there were missing data on the age, sex or race/ethnicity variables. After excluding missing data on the outcome variables, the final analytic sample was $N = 100,901$. In all trend analyses, time was treated as a continuous variable (i.e., 1999 was recoded as 1, 2001 was recoded as 3, and so on). In addition, a weighting factor was applied to each student record to adjust for nonresponse and the varying probability of selection, including those resulting from the oversampling of Black and Hispanic students. The weights were scaled so that the weighted count of students

was equal to the total sample size, and so that the weighted proportions of students in each grade matched national population proportions.

First, we calculated pooled prevalence estimates for each outcome, for each survey year, for the entire sample and then stratified by gender and race. Because a goal of survey research is to infer from a survey sample to what might be true for the general population, there is always a need to account for the variability (sampling error) that might exist between the sample and general population (Sarndal, Swenson, & Wretman, 1992). In order to address this, we calculated the standard error for each prevalence estimate and calculated 95% confidence intervals for each estimate. Next, we conducted tests for trends over time. The first test was a polynomial regression analysis that included both a linear and quadratic term. Multiplying the recoded time variable with itself created the quadratic time variable. The second test was a regression analysis that included only the linear term. These regression analyses were adjusted for age (i.e., < 16 or 16 years old) and race/ethnicity (i.e., non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black, non-Hispanic other race, and Hispanic), and for gender in the nonstratified analyses. Finally, in order to determine whether there were substantial differences in the past year prevalence rates of victimization by gender or by race, we employed Pearson Chi-square tests. All analyses were performed using the complex survey procedures in SUDAAN software package (version 10.0.1). Significance was set at $p < .05$. In cases where the 95% confidence intervals overlapped, but the Chi-square test was nevertheless statistically significant, we selected to report the finding as statistically significant based on the recommendation from Mulla and Cole (2004), who explain that it is not unusual for Chi-square results to be statistically significant even when 95% confidence intervals overlap, and in these cases the Chi-square result is preferred.

Results

The Prevalence of Physical Dating Violence Victimization

The prevalence of dating violence victimization ranged from a low of 8.8% in 1999 to a high of 9.9% in 2007 (see Table 1). Across all seven years of the survey, the pooled prevalence rate was 9.3%. The physical dating violence victimization rates were similar for males and females each year with the exception of 2007, when males were 1.2 times more likely than females to report victimization (11.0% vs. 8.8%, $\chi^2(1) = 6.98, p < .01$). Overall, the 12-year prevalence rate of physical dating violence victimization was 9.4% for males and 9.2% for females. The results of both linear and quadratic tests for trends over time were not significant for females, but the linear trend test for males was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.02, p < .05$). In other words, the rate of physical dating violence victimization remained stable between 1999–2011 for U.S. high school-attending females, and there was a very slight increase in the prevalence rate for males (see Table 1).

There were significant differences in the prevalence of dating violence victimization by race, $\chi^2(4, N = 100,901) = 41.19, p < .0001$. The prevalence among Black (12.9%) and Multiracial (12.2%) youth was significantly greater than among White (8.0%), Asian (8.0%), or Hispanic youth (10.5%; see Table 1). The prevalence among Hispanic youth was also significantly greater than among Whites, $\chi^2(2, N = 70,142) = 24.7, p < .0001$. The prevalence of dating violence victimization over time appeared stable for youth in all racial

groups over the 12-year period, but when rates were stratified by both race and gender it became apparent that there was one significant trend: Hispanic males experienced a small but statistically significant increase in the annual prevalence of dating violence victimization during the 1999–2011 period ($\beta = 0.04$, $p < .01$; Table 1). Within racial groups, there were no statistically significant differences between males' and females' reported victimization rates for any given year with the exception of Asians in 2003 and Hispanics in 1999, when the only 4.8% of Asian females reported victimization as compared to 14.1% of Asian males, $\chi^2(1, N = 475) = 5.57$, $p < .05$, and 11.0% of Hispanic females reported victimization as compared to 7.3% of Hispanic males, $\chi^2(1, N = 3297) = 4.75$, $p < .05$.

Discussion

This analysis of 12 years of YRBSS data revealed that the past year prevalence of physical dating violence victimization among U.S. high school-attending students did not change between 1999 and 2011 for females, and that there was a very small increase for males. Nevertheless, the rate (9%) is substantial, and underscores the importance that school systems be prepared to address issues of dating violence when they occur, and to engage actively in prevention efforts.

Our findings are important for at least three reasons. First, parents, teachers and other members of the public are under the impression that dating violence is “getting worse” or “on the rise” (CBSNews, 2010; Perry, 2010; Whitehouse Chairs Hearing on Preventing Teen Violence, 2011). Our analysis has not only provided the first dating violence victimization trend data by race and gender for a nationally representative sample in the U.S., but our findings refute the claims that dating violence is a worsening problem.

Second, there has been debate about whether adult domestic violence victimization varies by race. Some have reported significant differences by race, controlling for potentially confounding factors such as education, financial security, and employment (Cho, 2012). Others, have argued that apparent racial differences might be exaggerated because of a tendency for researchers to group all non-White people together in one racial category, and that racial differences might be attributable to confounds such as immigration status, differences in the way incidents are reported to law enforcement, or ethnic values (Grossman & Lundy, 2007). Our analysis, which stratified by race and by gender, found statistically significant differences in self-reported youth dating violence victimization by racial groups. Importantly, the elevated partner violence victimization rates for Black and Multiracial youth are consistent with racial disparities in victimization observed in adults (Cho, 2012; Rennison & Welchans, 2000; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Whether the racial differences in the youth who participated in the YRBSS are attributable to disparities in socioeconomic contexts or other factors nearly collinear with race, what is important for readers to note is that these data suggest that Black and Multiracial group appear to be more likely to experience dating violence victimization. Therefore, school-based prevention strategies to benefit Black and Multiracial youth are warranted.

Third, our results suggest that dating violence remains a substantial problem in U.S. schools, and merits attention and consideration in the development of school policies, teacher

trainings, and health class curricula. There are at least four dating violence prevention programs for schools that have been tested through randomized controlled trials and found to be effective; *Safe Dates* (Foshee et al., 2005), the *Fourth R* (Wolfe et al., 2009), *Shifting Boundaries* (Taylor, Stein, & Burden, 2010), and *Coaching Boys Into Men* (Miller et al., 2011). Each of these programs includes education about what constitutes dating violence, gender roles in relationships, and nonviolent ways to resolve conflicts. In this context, effective means that on average, students who participate in these programs report less dating violence victimization and perpetration experiences than students at demographically-matched schools that do not offer the curricula. For example, a one-month follow-up study of 1,700 high school students who were randomized to either receive the Safe Dates program or no programming found that at follow-up, there was 25% less psychological abuse perpetration, 60% less sexual violence perpetration, and 60% less violence perpetrated against the current dating partner in schools where Safe Dates was delivered (Foshee et al., 1996). Similarly, the Fourth R was evaluated and results indicated that 2.5 years after receiving the program, students who had participated had 2.4 times lower odds of reporting that they had perpetrated dating abuse in the past year as compared to controls (Wolfe et al., 2009). When Shifting Boundaries was evaluated, they found that students exposed to the program were 50% less likely to report having experienced sexual violence by a dating partner in the prior six months as compared to students who did not participate (Taylor et al., 2010).

While school-based primary prevention programs should be employed in U.S. schools to reduce dating violence, other strategies in other settings are also needed. For example, school-based health center care providers currently lack effective, low-cost brief interventions to reduce dating violence that can be carried out in that setting. Parents, and professionals who work closely with youth (e.g., afterschool program staff) often lack basic information about dating violence and how to talk with youth about healthier relationships (Rothman, Miller, Terpeluk, Glauber, & Randel, 2011). In order to move the field forward, there is a need to evaluate the impact of comprehensive and sustained schoolwide strategies to reduce dating violence.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this analysis that must be considered. First, YRBSS data are self-reported. Therefore, respondents may have underreported or overreported violence victimization experiences. Moreover, as others have previously detected, extreme response bias may overinflate violence-related estimates derived from the YRBSS (Furlong et al., 2004). Second, although we identified trends over time using regression models, the differences were not large. Because the YRBSS is completed by thousands of students each year, even small changes can produce statistically significant results. Third, the YRBSS questions about dating violence have not been tested for validity. One problem is that the dating violence question does not inquire about sexual coercion or sexual assault in the dating relationship. This may have produced substantial underestimates, or influenced the gender parity we observed. Also, the YRBSS question about dating violence does not assess the frequency of the event but uses a yes/no response format, and uses the words “boyfriend” and “girlfriend,” which may limit some students from reporting violence

perpetrated by more casual dating or sexual partners (Rothman & Xuan, 2012). Finally, these data may not be generalizable to all U.S. high school-aged youth. YRBSS participants are those students who attend school on the day of the survey and are able to complete it; youth who have dropped out of school, are frequently truant or absent, or lack the behavioral, mental health or cognitive ability to complete the survey are not represented, and these may be youth at the most acute risk for violence. As a result, the prevalence rates obtained through the YRBSS are likely underestimates.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that physical dating violence victimization among U.S. high school-attending students did not decrease in the period 1999–2011. Dating violence remains a prevalent problem for youth. Schools are encouraged to address dating violence by utilizing tested prevention programs, crafting policies to address both perpetration and victimization, and training staff.

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Table 1

Percentage (and 95% Confidence Interval) of U.S. High School Students Who Reported Being Hit, Slapped, or Physically Hurt on Purpose by a Boyfriend or Girlfriend During the 12 Months Preceding the Survey, by Year, According to Gender and Race

All races	All respondents (N = 100,901)	Females (n = 51,327)	Males (n = 49,574)	% (95% CI)	% (95% CI)	χ^2 comparing females to males
All years	9.34 (8.93, 9.75)	9.21 (8.74, 9.68)	9.44 (8.93, 9.95)			0.69
1999	8.78 (7.41, 10.15)	9.26 (7.73, 10.79)	8.30 (6.67, 9.93)			1.50
2001	9.49(8.82, 10.16)	9.81 (8.81, 10.81)	9.15 (8.35, 9.95)			1.08
2003	8.85 (7.85, 9.85)	8.80 (7.78, 9.82)	8.89 (7.67, 10.11)			0.03
2005	9.15 (8.39, 9.91)	9.26 (8.28, 10.24)	9.01 (8.13, 9.89)			0.20
2007	9.94 (8.92, 10.96)	8.84 (7.57, 10.11)	10.96 (9.67, 12.25)			6.98*
2009	9.83 (8.95, 10.71)	9.31 (8.33, 10.29)	10.30 (9.12, 11.48)			2.35
2011	9.44 (8.52, 10.36)	9.31 (8.13, 10.49)	9.49 (8.37, 10.61)			0.07
Linear trend	ns	ns	$p < .05$			—
Quadratic trend	ns	ns	ns			—

Black	All Black respondents (n = 22,002)	Black females (n = 11,520)	Black males (n = 10,482)	χ^2 comparing females to males
All years	12.92 (12.18, 13.66)	13.17 (12.15, 14.19)	12.68 (11.72, 13.64)	0.51
1999	12.40 (9.64, 15.16)	14.14 (9.87, 18.41)	10.63 (8.22, 13.04)	2.02
2001	11.18 (9.32, 13.04)	11.7 (9.74, 13.66)	10.65 (7.81, 13.49)	0.42
2003	13.86 (12.31, 15.41)	13.98 (11.73, 16.23)	13.75 (11.77, 15.73)	0.03
2005	11.92 (10.04, 13.80)	12.03 (9.64, 14.42)	11.83 (9.52, 14.14)	0.02
2007	14.18 (12.59, 15.77)	13.24 (11.42, 15.06)	15.16 (12.57, 17.75)	1.45
2009	14.29 (12.51, 16.07)	14.77 (12.52, 17.02)	13.84 (10.94, 16.74)	0.23
2011	12.16 (10.59, 13.73)	11.81 (9.75, 13.87)	12.38 (10.40, 14.36)	0.19
Linear trend	ns	ns	ns	—
Quadratic trend	ns	ns	ns	—

Hispanic	All Hispanic respondents (n = 27,503)	Hispanic females (n = 13,990)	Hispanic males (n = 13,513)	χ^2 comparing females to males
All years	10.48 (9.85, 11.11)	10.31 (9.45, 11.17)	10.64 (9.74, 11.54)	0.27
1999	9.14 (6.89, 11.39)	10.95 (7.66, 14.24)	7.33 (5.57, 9.09)	4.75*
2001	9.87 (8.50, 11.24)	10.71 (7.89, 13.53)	9.06 (7.20, 10.92)	0.55

Hispanic	All Hispanic respondents (<i>n</i> = 27,503)	Hispanic females (<i>n</i> = 13,990)	Hispanic males (<i>n</i> = 13,513)	χ^2 comparing females to males
2003	9.31 (7.49, 11.13)	9.24 (7.53, 10.95)	9.20 (6.42, 11.98)	0.01
2005	9.94 (8.20, 11.68)	8.97 (6.89, 11.05)	10.95 (8.62, 13.28)	1.89
2007	11.09 (9.50, 12.68)	10.14 (8.00, 12.28)	11.98 (9.77, 14.19)	1.34
2009	11.51 (10.41, 9.55)	11.39 (9.55, 13.23)	11.66 (10.01, 13.31)	0.04
2011	11.39 (9.82, 12.96)	10.6 (8.97, 12.23)	12.06 (9.45, 14.67)	0.95
Linear trend	<i>p</i> < .05	ns	<i>p</i> < .01	—
Quadratic trend	ns	ns	ns	—
White	All White respondents (<i>n</i> = 42,639)	White females (<i>n</i> = 21,407)	White males (<i>n</i> = 21,232)	χ^2 comparing females to males
All years	7.96 (7.57, 8.35)	7.89 (7.38, 8.40)	8.03 (7.52, 8.54)	0.18
1999	7.38 (6.07, 8.69)	7.43 (5.96, 8.90)	7.31 (5.62, 9.00)	0.02
2001	9.14 (8.26, 10.02)	9.41 (8.14, 10.68)	8.88 (7.84, 9.92)	0.50
2003	7.00 (6.08, 7.92)	7.47 (6.06, 8.88)	6.57 (5.71, 7.43)	1.43
2005	8.22 (7.42, 9.02)	8.50 (7.36, 9.64)	7.96 (6.90, 9.02)	0.51
2007	8.43 (7.21, 9.65)	7.44 (6.09, 8.79)	9.34 (7.58, 11.10)	3.31
2009	8.04 (7.12, 8.96)	7.17 (5.95, 8.39)	8.81 (7.48, 10.14)	3.43
2011	7.55 (6.53, 8.57)	7.67 (6.16, 9.18)	7.43 (6.29, 8.57)	0.08
Linear trend	ns	ns	ns	—
Quadratic trend	ns	ns	ns	—
Asian	All Asian respondents (<i>n</i> = 4,247)	Asian females (<i>n</i> = 2,060)	Asian males (<i>n</i> = 2,187)	χ^2 comparing females to males
All years	7.98 (6.73, 9.23)	7.05 (5.54, 8.56)	8.82 (7.15, 10.49)	3.19
1999	6.28 (4.14, 8.42)	7.11 (3.39, 10.83)	5.56 (3.15, 7.97)	0.61
2001	8.40 (4.07, 12.73)	9.49 (3.39, 15.59)	7.35 (3.51, 11.19)	0.69
2003	9.62 (5.68, 13.56)	4.76 (1.66, 7.86)	14.19 (7.41, 20.97)	5.57*
2005	7.17 (4.21, 10.13)	6.90 (2.43, 11.37)	7.27 (4.43, 10.11)	0.02
2007	7.73 (4.93, 10.53)	5.40 (2.56, 8.24)	9.77 (5.14, 14.40)	2.20
2009	6.99 (4.40, 9.58)	6.16 (2.55, 9.77)	7.59 (4.63, 10.55)	0.62
2011	9.45 (5.77, 13.13)	9.79 (5.24, 14.34)	9.16 (5.16, 13.16)	0.08
Linear trend	ns	ns	ns	—
Quadratic trend	ns	ns	ns	—

Multiracial	All Multiracial respondents (<i>n</i> = 4,510)	Multiracial females (<i>n</i> = 2,350)	Multiracial males (<i>n</i> = 2,160)	χ^2 comparing females to males
All years	12.20 (10.42, 13.98)	11.47 (8.94, 14.00)	12.90 (10.35, 15.45)	0.61
1999	10.84 (6.88, 14.80)	10.94 (4.96, 16.92)	10.56 (5.29, 15.83)	0.01
2001	9.73 (7.57, 11.89)	8.08 (4.96, 11.20)	11.64 (7.54, 15.74)	1.45
2003	16.71 (10.61, 22.81)	12.56 (5.92, 19.20)	20.44 (9.80, 31.08)	1.20
2005	12.33 (8.39, 16.27)	14.95 (7.50, 22.40)	9.47 (6.08, 12.86)	1.64
2007	11.72 (8.04, 15.40)	9.59 (4.40, 14.78)	14.05 (9.70, 18.40)	1.76
2009	12.38 (9.17, 15.59)	11.27 (7.27, 15.27)	13.33 (8.82, 17.84)	0.48
2011	13.41 (10.33, 16.49)	13.02 (9.71, 16.33)	13.84 (8.80, 18.88)	0.08
Linear trend	ns	ns	ns	—
Quadratic trend	ns	ns	ns	—

Note. CI = confidence interval.

* *p* .05.