

# *Gender and Contextual Factors in Adolescent Dating Violence*

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*This study explored the occurrence of violence in adolescent dating relationships, the contexts in which violence occurred, and the reactions of adolescents involved in the violence. Six hundred and thirty-five high school students were surveyed using a dating violence questionnaire that included items modified from the Conflict Tactics Scales. Analyses focused on comparing male and female reports of victimization in current and past dating relationships. Consistent with some previous studies, male and female adolescents did not differ in overall frequency of violence in dating relationships. However, adolescent girls experienced significantly higher levels of severe violence and reported more severe physical and emotional reactions to the violence.*

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*In stark contrast to the image of dating as a time of intimate sharing and romantic experimentation, recent research indicates that dating is often a time of conflict and abuse, where partners become physical targets during emotional outbursts of anger, jealousy, and confusion (Henton, Cae, Koval, Lloyd, & Christopher, 1983). Makepeace (1981), in his groundbreaking study of dating violence, began the documentation of significant violence in the college-age dating population. However, until very recently, little has been done to examine the existence and meaning of dating violence in the high school population. Levy (1990) asserted that as many as one third of high school youths were currently experiencing physical or sexual violence in their dating relationships. Several recent studies of high school dating violence yield estimates of the frequency of dating violence. Bergman (1992) found 15.7% of girls and 7.8% of boys in three high schools (one rural, one suburban, and one urban) had experienced physical dating*

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violence. Rates that combined physical and sexual abuse were 24.4% for girls, and 9.9% for boys. Suderman and Jaffe (1993) reported that 14.7% of all girls and 3.3% of boys in two high schools reported being physically abused in a dating relationship. DeKeseredy and Schwartz (1994) reported that in a Canadian sample of college students who retrospectively reported on their high school experiences, 9% of female students reported that their partners physically hurt them during high school. In addition, 14.5% of females reported that their dates physically forced them to engage in sex acts. Finally, Jezl, Molidor, and Wright (1995) found that 59% of male and female high school students reported experiencing at least one dating violence incident within the past year.

One consistent and perplexing finding in the college-age dating violence literature is that the prevalence of acts of dating violence is equal or comparable by gender (e.g., Arias, Samios, & O'Leary, 1987; Laner & Thompson, 1982; Makepeace, 1989; Pirog-Good & Stets, 1989; Riggs & O'Leary, 1989; Sugarman & Hotaling, 1989). However, it is important to note that these results indicate only similarity of frequency of reported abuse. Examination of simple frequencies alone can be deceptive. Unless there is an examination of the contextual circumstances surrounding the violent incident, we may embrace an illusive and misleading impression of the violence occurring in dating relationships. Yet, to date, there is only a limited amount of research on contextual factors associated with dating violence (Carlson, 1987; Molidor, 1995; Pirog-Good & Stets, 1989). Applying a feminist perspective to dating violence would suggest that the aversive effects of dating violence would disproportionately fall upon high school females rather than high school males.

This study explores the issue of high school dating violence. We examined not only the rates of victimization for adolescent boys and girls, but also critical aspects of the context and consequences of victimization. We looked beyond the reports of how frequently various types of violent acts occurred to what physical and emotional effects those acts had upon the victims, how the victims responded, and the effects of the violence on the dating relationship. We also explored when and where the violence occurred and who else was present. By examining these contextual issues, we hoped to better understand how violence differentially affects

girls and boys. Examining the frequency of abusive acts against boys and girls, and the context and consequences of those acts, allowed us to test the prediction from feminist theory that girls would more likely be the victims of dating violence and that they would be more negatively affected by the abusive actions taken against them.

## METHOD

### SAMPLE

Respondents were 635 students between the ages of 13 and 18 from a large Midwestern high school. The school works with over 4,000 students who come from two communities. The majority of one of the communities is composed of middle- to upper-class professional and white-collar workers. The other community is largely middle- and lower-middle-class professionals, laborers, and blue-collar workers. The majority of the people in the two communities are of European American background, but there are substantial numbers of African Americans, Asians, and Hispanics in the community. The sample of students obtained reflects this diversity, as Table 1 indicates.

The data were obtained through a convenience sample. Questionnaires were distributed in 23 gym classes, segregated by gender during each period. This sampling frame was chosen so that for heterosexual couples, perpetrators would not be sitting in the same room, at the same time, as the victims while filling out the questionnaire. We believed this would reduce the risk of verbal and nonverbal threats by perpetrators toward victims who might be in the same class. The gym classes were the only segregated classes the school could make available for the research. In addition, we believed that the accuracy of reporting of physical and sexual abuse incidents would be enhanced by the privacy of smaller, gender-specific classes. Unfortunately, we could not sample classes at random, although we have no reason to believe that the classes obtained differ in any systematic way from the rest of the school population.

Of the 305 girls who received the questionnaire, 4 did not complete it. Of the boys, 330 fully completed the questionnaire. Another 101 male questionnaires were not used because they were

**TABLE 1**  
**Demographic Characteristics of Students by Sex**

	<i>Boys</i>		<i>Girls</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	
<b>Age</b>					
14	68		69		137 (21.7)
15	82		78		160 (25.2)
16	91		95		186 (29.5)
17	63		49		112 (17.7)
18	27		10		37 (5.9)
<b>Parents' marital status</b>					
Married	216		180		396 (62.7)
Divorced	86		78		164 (26.0)
Divorced/remarried	29		42		71 (11.3)
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>					
Asian	31	7.3	13	4.8	44
Black/African American	109	29.8	84	27.1	193
Hispanic/Latino	38	9.4	21	3.9	59
Native American	13	3.9	9	1.4	22
White	139	49.6	174	49.5	313

NOTE: Numbers in parentheses are percentage of total.

left incomplete. If the boys who refused to fill out the questionnaire were more likely to be victimized in their dating relationships, then male self-reports of violence might be underreported in this study. However, given reluctance of males in other age groups to self-disclose their own abusive behavior, the sample of boys obtained might overestimate victimization and underestimate perpetration.

## MEASURES

The measure of physical dating violence was a modified Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS). The CTS is the most commonly used instrument for measuring intimate violence (Carlson, 1987; Straus & Gelles, 1985). In its initial form, the CTS was used to measure how family members acted during conflicts (Billingham & Sack, 1986). In the present study, we modified the wording to examine abusive acts by a dating partner. Three items were added (had hair pulled, intentionally scratched, and painfully pinched) to examine other physically abusive behaviors that might be common in adolescent dating relationships (Nelson, Saunders, & Landsman, 1990). Also, the verbal subscale of the CTS was not used, as verbal and psy-

chological maltreatment were measured by another scale, not reported here. An additional item measured sexual abuse in dating relationships (forced to engage in sexual activity against your will).

The questionnaire asked students to report lifetime frequencies of any past dating violence and violence in their most recent or current dating relationship. We divided the modified CTS into three subscales: overall violence, severe violence, and moderate violence. The severe violence subscale has been frequently used in research (Billingham & Sack, 1986; Marshall, 1987; Straus, 1989; Sugarman & Hotaling, 1989). In accordance with past practices, the following items were categorized as severe violence: having an object thrown, and being punched, choked, or threatened with a weapon. The second subscale included the other items not classified as severe: having one's hair pulled, and being kicked, scratched, slapped, or pinched. We recognize, however, that this distinction is somewhat arbitrary, as any of these acts might result in severe physical or emotional consequences. The internal consistency coefficients for the overall scale was acceptable ( $\alpha = .79$ ). The two subscales also were sufficiently reliable (moderate,  $\alpha = .76$ ; severe,  $\alpha = .70$ ).

In addition to frequency of dating violence in past and current or most recent relationships, we examined the context of the occurrence of abusive acts in the current or most recent dating relationship. We asked about (a) who initiated the abusive incident; (b) why, in the respondent's view, the abuse had occurred; (c) who was present; (d) the physical consequences of the abuse; (e) the emotional reactions after the abuse; (f) the effect of the abuse on the relationship; (g) who was told about the abuse; and (h) where the abuse occurred.

## RESULTS

Males and females did not differ significantly according to overall frequency of violence in any past dating relationship. For students who had ever dated, 36.4% of the girls and 37.1% of the boys reported they had experienced physical violence in the dating relationship. When examining the rate of violence among all students who responded, rather than just those who dated,

**TABLE 2**  
**Experience of Violence in Any Dating Relationship**

<i>Violence Index</i>	<i>Boys</i>			<i>Girls</i>		
	<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage of</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage of</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
		<i>Those Who</i>	<i>of Total</i>		<i>Those Who</i>	<i>of Total</i>
		<i>Ever Dated</i>	<i>Sample</i>		<i>Ever Dated</i>	<i>Sample</i>
Overall violence	108	37.1	32.6	94	36.4	31.3
Moderate physical violence	101	34.7	30.5	60	23.3	20.0
Severe violence	48	16.5	14.5	70	27.1	23.3

31.3% of girls and 32.6% of boys experienced some physical violence in a dating relationship. These results, if viewed in isolation, paint a picture of boys and girls being equally violent.

As Table 2 indicates, the severe and moderate violence subscales highlight a different understanding of the role of gender than the overall levels of violence. For violence in any dating relationship, girls, significantly more often than boys, reported that they experienced severe violence. Boys, on the other hand, were significantly more likely than girls to experience the less severe forms of physical dating violence.

Analysis of occurrence of any type of violence indicated no significant gender difference in rates of current dating violence. However, analysis of violent acts in current or most recent dating relationships showed significant differences by gender in the types of violence reported by boys and girls (see Table 3). Girls were much more likely to be punched and to be forced to engage in sexual activity against their will. Boys, on the other hand, were significantly more likely to be pinched, slapped, scratched, and kicked. Girls experienced significantly more severe physical violence, whereas boys reported significantly more moderate physical violence.

A crucial component of understanding the context of the commission of these acts is the examination of the consequences experienced by those who are victims of the physical and sexual violence. Table 4 reveals a significant gender difference in regard to the physical consequences of dating violence. When examining the worst incident of dating violence experienced in their dating relationship, boys reported no effect (did not hurt at all) or a little

**TABLE 3**  
**Experience of Violence in Current or Most Recent Dating Relationship**

<i>Item</i>	<i>Boys</i>		<i>Girls</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Hair pulled	20	6.8	22	8.7
Kicked	46	15.8	13	5.2**
Scratched	33	11.3	20	4.0**
Slapped	77	26.4	30	11.9**
Pinched	58	19.9	30	11.9*
Object thrown at you	27	9.2	31	12.3
Punched	16	5.5	44	17.4**
Forced sexual activity	1	.3	45	17.8**
Choked	10	3.4	16	6.3
Threatened with a weapon	9	3.1	7	2.8
Overall violence	111	38.1	90	34.9
Severe physical violence	38	13.1	58	22.5**
Moderate violence	109	32.9	63	21.0**

Results of  $\chi^2$ : \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

effect (hurt me a little) in over 90% of the incidents. The reports by girls differed markedly. When questioned about their worst experiences of dating violence, 47.8% of the girls reported serious harm (hurt me a lot) and physical injury (caused bruises, needed medical attention) in 33.6% of the incidents. They reported not being hurt at all in only 8.7% of incidents. Boys were significantly more likely to report little or no physical consequences of the violence they experienced.

The next step in the analysis was to examine the victims' reactions to the violence. Because an abused adolescent might have more than one reaction to a violent incident, the questionnaire asked them to note all their reactions to their worst incident of violence in their current or most recent dating relationship. Separate  $2 \times 2$  cross-tabulations were conducted on each of the possible responses by gender. Significant differences were found on several reactions to the violent incident. Table 5 lists the various reactions and notes the significant gender differences.

Over half of the boys reported "laughing" at the experience of a physical altercation, whereas one third reported "ignoring it." Girls significantly more often reported having "fought back," having "tried to talk to their partner," or having "obeyed their partner" after experiencing violence. A critical distinction here is that 36% of the girls indicated they defended themselves when

**TABLE 4**  
**Physical Effects of Worst Incident of Violence**

<i>Physical Effect</i>	<i>Boys</i>		<i>Girls</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Did not hurt at all	59	56.2	8	8.7**
Hurt a little	36	34.3	18	19.6*
Hurt somewhat	7	6.7	9	9.8
Hurt a lot	4	3.8	44	47.8**
Caused bruises	3	2.9	27	29.3**
Needed medical attention	2	1.9	4	4.3

Results of  $\chi^2$ : \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

**TABLE 5**  
**Reaction to Worst Incident of Violence in a Dating Relationship**

<i>Reaction</i>	<i>Boys</i>		<i>Girls</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
I laughed	63	53.8	12	10.3**
I cried	3	2.6	47	40.2**
I ran away	1	.9	13	11.1**
I talked to my partner	24	20.5	30	25.6
I fought back	15	12.8	42	35.9**
I obeyed	2	1.7	14	12.0**
I left the scene	19	16.2	29	24.8
I ignored it	36	30.8	17	14.5**

Results of  $\chi^2$ : \*\* $p < .01$ .

they experienced a violent act by their partner. This is one way of accounting for some of the incidents of violence that boys report occurring toward them. The boys' reports of violence toward them may, in fact, be their partners' acts of self-defense.

An important contextual factor that also sheds light on the issue of self-defense relates to who initiated the violent incident. Table 6 presents data that summarize perceptions by gender of who began the abuse. There was a significant gender difference on reports of who initiated the abusive incident,  $\chi^2(2) = 43.5, p < .001$ . Girls reported their dating partners were the ones who started the abuse 70% of the time, whereas boys reported their dating partners to be the initiators of abuse only 27% of the time. The boys were much more likely to state that incidents were initiated by them.



TABLE 6  
Who Initiated the Abusive Incident

<i>Who Initiated Incident</i>	<i>Boys</i>		<i>Girls</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Me	19	16.2	9	7.6
My partner	32	27.4	83	70.3
Both	66	56.4	26	22.0

Respondents also reported their perceptions of why the abuse occurred. For boys reporting they had been subject to a partner's use of physical violence, 17.1% reported that the reason for this violence was because they had been making sexual advances toward their dating partner. Not surprisingly, only 3% of the girls reported that they were subject to violence as a result of their own sexual advances toward their partner. This gender difference was statistically significant. Furthermore, the girls in the study reported they were victims of physical violence significantly more often while their male partners were making sexual advances. Thirty-seven percent of the girls reported the reason they were subjected to physical violence was because their partner had been making sexual advances toward them, whereas only one male reported the same. This suggests that a large percentage of girls are being abused because they are refusing unwanted sexual advances.

Analysis of  $2 \times 2$  cross-tabulations showed a significant difference between boys and girls who reported their partner's jealousy was the reason they had been subjected to physical violence,  $\chi^2(1) = 13.4, p < .001$  (males, 49%; females, 25%). In addition, more boys (21%) than girls (10%) reported that their own jealousy was the reason for the violence expressed toward them.

Log-linear analysis indicated a significant interaction when examining adolescents who were subject to violence by a dating partner while they were drunk. The boys reported that when they were drunk, their dating partners were also drunk 55% of the time. Subsequent  $3 \times 2$  cross-tabulations indicated boys were subject to violence significantly more often while they (the boys) were drunk than the girls. Of the 117 boys who reported physical abuse, 36.8% reported they were drunk at the time of the violence. Only 9.4% of the girls reported they were drunk when they were hit.

Fifty-five percent of the girls reported that their partners were drunk at the time of the incident.

Previous studies have reported that dating couples often report their relationships improve after the violence. Boys significantly more often stated that there was no change or that their dating relationships actually improved after they had been physically abused,  $\chi^2(2) = 23.0, p < .001$ . However, girls reported their relationships worsened or ended 64% of the time when severe violence occurred in the dating relationship, and they reported their relationships worsened or ended 55.9% of the time when they were victims of moderate violence. The girls reported their relationships improved only 4.0% of the time after severe violence and 6.8% of the time after moderate violence had occurred.

To further understand responses of victims to the abusive incident, we asked students who had experienced dating violence whom they told after their most abusive incident. Log-linear analysis found no significant gender differences in who was told following victimization. Less than 3% of students overall reported a violent incident to an authority figure (e.g., police, social worker, counselor, or teacher), whereas only 6% of physically or sexually abused adolescents recounted the incident to a family member. Sixty-one percent of the adolescents reporting abuse stated they told only a friend, whereas over 30% told no one at all about being victimized by their dating partner.

Girls who reported experiencing severe abuse reported this to a family member, teacher, social worker, or other authority figure only 6% of the time. Boys also stated they told an authority or family member only 11% of the time after experiencing severe abuse. These findings suggest that when severe abuse is occurring in dating relationships, parents, teachers, counselors, and other authorities are not informed and therefore cannot intervene to change it.

Finally, students reported where the worst incident of abuse occurred and who was present during the incident. No significant gender differences were found in relation to where the abusive incident occurred or who was present. However, the data suggest that a substantial number of abusive incidents occurred in a school building or on school grounds. Forty-two percent of the males and 43.2% of the females who reported abuse stated that this abuse occurred in a school building or on school grounds. In addition,

most violence occurred while the couple was alone; 60% of the girls and 51% of the boys stated that they were alone at the time. That indicates that either another boy or girl or a group of people were present 40% of the time when the female experienced abuse and 49% of the time when a male experienced abuse.

## DISCUSSION

This study examined the context of dating violence in high school. Analyses indicated significant differences between adolescent girls and boys in the severity of violence experienced and in the seriousness of the consequences experienced from the abuse. Rather than interpreting dating violence as mutual and reciprocal, the conclusions of this study point to gender differences that are distinct, substantial, and severe.

Overall, the girls' reactions to the incidents of dating violence indicate that they are perceived as serious assaults having damaging physical and psychological effects. On the other hand, boys were much more likely to respond in ways that indicated the incidents were not perceived as threatening or damaging. For girls, the abuse was more likely to worsen or end the relationship. Boys perceived less negative impact of the abuse on their relationship and were more likely to report that the relationship stayed the same or improved as a result of their partners' use of physical force toward them. It should be noted that although significant gender differences appeared, there was a small group of boys who reported that the violence they experienced did have significant negative consequences for them.

The data suggest that much of girls' violence toward boys may be the result of self-defense, either to fend off physical attacks or coercive sexual behavior. In addition to the results presented here, analysis of data from this sample on boys and girls concerning their perpetration of abuse also supports self-defense as an important factor in girls' use of physical violence. In describing their worst incident of expressed violence, 37% of the girls reported self-defense as the reason they used violence toward their partner. However, only 6% of the boys reported self-defense as being the reason for their expressed violent behavior. These results parallel those of Saunders (1988) with adult domestic violence victims and

add support for the contention that violent behavior reported in measures like the CTS must be considered in their fuller context.

The frequent use of alcohol by those perpetrating dating violence is consistent with the literature on college dating violence (Tontodonato & Crew, 1992). Being drunk at the time of an abusive incident was also a frequent occurrence for victims, both male and female. As in other forms of domestic violence, the relationship between alcohol and drug use and incidents of violence is undoubtedly complex (Tolman & Bennett, 1990) and warrants further exploration in the adolescent context.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERVENTION

These findings suggest numerous directions for intervention in and prevention of dating violence. The literature on prevention of school violence generally has not addressed the issue of dating violence. Our study supports the contention that dating violence is a form of school violence. Not only are a large number of high school students likely to be victims of abuse by dating partners, but a high percentage of acts of abuse are occurring on the school grounds. Although popular depictions might give the impression that school violence is largely a problem of violence between boys, these results demonstrate that the school is also a dangerous place for young women.

To address the issue, the school system can create an ecology of dating violence prevention by setting policies, developing intervention plans, and encouraging student input through classroom participation and workshops. This environment will send a message to the students that authority figures are willing to listen and intervene if needed. This environment of listening to the students is crucial if the adolescents are expected to talk to school personnel about abuse or to use adults in the school setting to get other help, something this study indicates they are very unlikely to do on their own. Our study revealed that only a few students contacted school personnel, or any adult at all, about the abuse they experienced.

Adolescents who experienced abuse were most likely to tell their peers, if they told anyone, suggesting that interventions be directed toward preparing peers to respond effectively to abuse reported by their friends. Such preparation could include information about resources available to victims, so that peers might

act as gateways to further help. However, peer responses that make it clear that abuse is unacceptable might deter perpetrators from further action, as well as supporting victim help-seeking. Given our results indicating that a substantial percentage of abusive incidents occur in the presence of peers, peer response that supports victims and confronts perpetrators is even more critical. Thorne-Finch (1992) outlines a range of strategies directed toward changing male peer culture, strategies that could be applied to bring about needed changes.

In addition to their reluctance to inform adults about abuse, help seeking for adolescents abused in dating relationships is further complicated because adolescent victims of dating violence often do not have access to remedies available to adults. Most states do not permit dating partners to receive orders for protection (Hart, 1992). The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges recently introduced a model state domestic violence code that also covers dating partners, including adolescents. Although this action would create legal remedies for adolescent victims, adolescents' ability to seek such remedies still remains blocked by significant barriers. To seek those remedies, they will need to seek adult help, something our survey suggests they are very reluctant to do. Support for services to adolescent victims can be obtained from domestic violence programs, but many states do not permit adolescents to seek counseling for more than a few sessions before parental notification. Reaching out to adolescents by linking these programs with school-based programs is one strategy that could provide more effective gateways for service, including legal advocacy (Jaffe, Suderman, Reitzel, & Killip, 1992; Levy, 1991).

Returning to the issue of school response, even when the violence occurs in settings outside of the school, victims of abuse will frequently encounter their abusers in the school building. Generally, schools are unprepared to deal with these issues and do not have policies to protect victims from contact with their abusers. For example, in a recent Illinois case, a girl who was sexually assaulted by a classmate sought unsuccessfully to have him transferred to another school (Hanna, 1994). Development of school policies that make the environment for victims safer by excluding known abusers from contact with their victims will send clear

messages to all students that any type of violence within a school building or school grounds will not be tolerated.

This study demonstrates that males may begin their abusive behavior toward female partners early in the life cycle. Attempts to change batterers' behavior generally have focused on men later in the life cycle, typically when they become involved as adults in the criminal justice system. When male batterers come to the attention of the courts and intervention programs in their early twenties, they may already have a substantial history of gendered violence. Attempts to identify and intervene with violent boys as early as possible seem warranted. As adolescent girls increasingly seek help through the court system, the juvenile justice system must be prepared to effectively sanction adolescent batterers and to provide them with needed services. Programs designed for teen perpetrators must be available, either through programs currently serving adult batterers or through collaborations with teen service agencies. Of course, prevention programs, which challenge male attitudes of entitlement to control and abuse women and which decrease social support for abusive male behavior, also are a critical element of a coordinated approach to ending dating violence.

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