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## The impact of state policy on teen dating violence prevalence

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## ABSTRACT

Teen dating violence (TDV) is a serious public health concern that is associated with many negative effects. Studies on TDV prevention most often focus on the evaluation of prevention programs in school and community settings. Much less is known about the effects of policy on TDV prevalence. This study tests a model to explain whether stronger laws regarding TDV, specifically civil protection orders, have an impact on TDV rates in states. Results show that stronger policy, Democratic party control of the governor's office, and higher state median income are associated with lower rates of TDV. This study provides solid information regarding the role of civil protection orders as a means of TDV prevention and adds to our knowledge of the efficacy of state-level TDV policy. The information can lead to increased vigor on the part of advocates to strive for specific provisions in the law and to work for gubernatorial candidates who will support such laws.

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## Introduction

Teen dating violence (TDV) is a very real problem and its negative consequences are well documented in the literature. Strong correlations exist between youth being victimized by physical TDV and higher levels of depression, suicide ideation and attempts, and poorer educational outcomes (Banyard & Cross, 2008; Filson, Ulloa, Runfola, & Hokoda, 2010). Youth experiencing TDV are more likely to engage in risky behaviors including episodic heavy drinking, binge-eating, sexual intercourse, pregnancy, smoking and physical fighting than non-victimized youth (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006; Silverman, Raj, & Clements, 2004). Experiencing TDV is even linked to increased risk of re-victimization through intimate partner violence (IPV) later in life (Smith, White, & Holland, 2003).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) define TDV as intimate partner violence that occurs between two people in a close relationship and can be physical, sexual or psychological/emotional (CDC, 2014a) but researchers often choose different approaches to operationalize. Because there is no standard way to measure TDV, reported prevalence rates vary considerably between studies. Some studies include all forms of violence; some only focus on physical, and many studies do not include sexual violence. In addition, reported TDV prevalence may be inaccurate because most dating violence research relies on self-report (CDC, 2014b; Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001; Straus, 2004) and thus subject to the issue of socially desirable responses.

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The CDC use The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance (YRBS) instrument, though this measures only physical dating violence. It reports that in the United States, 9.4% of high school students experienced physical abuse such as being slapped, hit, or physically hurt on purpose by their boyfriend or girlfriend (CDC, 2012, p. 10). Higher prevalence on the YRBS exists for Black (12.2%) and Hispanic teens (11.4%) than for white teens (7.6%) (CDC, 2012, p. 10) across the nation. Findings from the YRSB show considerable variation in states' rates of TDV, from a low of 6.5% in Vermont to a high of 16.1% in Georgia (median of 11.0%) (CDC, 2012, p. 67). In large urban school districts, rates ranged from 7.6% to a staggering 24.2% (CDC, 2012, p. 10).

Studies on TDV similarly often concentrate on the impact of victimization, help-seeking, risk and protective factors at the individual, family, and community level. Studies on TDV prevention most often focus on the evaluation of prevention programs in school and community settings and do not look at the larger context of those programs or societal level factors (Tharp et al., 2012). Little is known about prevention of TDV using community and social-level variables (Hoefler, Black, & Salehin, 2012), as is true of the prevention research (DeGue et al., 2014; Lippy & DeGue, 2014; Tharp et al., 2012). Because the perpetration of TDV, similar to domestic violence and sexual violence, has many causes, preventing it will take multi-prong approaches (DeGue et al., 2014; Lippy & DeGue, 2014; Tharp et al., 2012).

Especially few studies have focused on policy issues related to TDV (Campbell, 2005; Hoefler et al., 2012; Largio, 2007). For example, scant literature exists concerning the impact of TDV policies on dating violence prevalence and we do not know if policy can be an effective mechanism to prevent TDV. Understanding the interplay of various aspects of current state-level laws and policies on levels of TDV may help us better understand how to craft effective policies to address the high number of cases and, ultimately, lower the number of teens experiencing dating violence. In this study, we examine whether laws in the area of TDV can be considered a form of prevention, as Weisberg (2013) indicates in her legislative analysis of Lindsay's Law to prevent teen dating violence. In short, we ask whether state level differences in TDV prevalence are related to state-level differences in state laws relating to the availability of civil protection orders (CPOs). We choose to examine the effectiveness of CPOs in the prevention of TDV because they are a commonly used and effective violence prevention policy for adults experiencing domestic violence (Logan, Shannon, Walker, & Faragher, 2006) but have not been examined in the prevention of TDV. Efforts to prevent TDV through the use of school programming has received greater attention in the literature (Bouffard, Jackson, & Fox, 2013; Foshee et al., 2004; Zwicker, 2002).

## Literature review

### *TDV and prevention policy*

Shelters for battered women (e.g., National Coalition Against Domestic Violence), advocacy groups (e.g., Break the Cycle), and governmental agencies have taken the primary role in the prevention of TDV at the policy level. Numerous advocacy groups (e.g., Break the Cycle, Liz Claiborne's Moms and Dads for Education To Stop Teen Dating Abuse; National Coalition Against Domestic Violence,) are involved in trying to prevent TDV through changing policies. In 2000, the victims of dating violence were included for the first time in the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) (first passed in 1994) which provides support for domestic violence shelters and rape crisis centers, creates community-coordinated responses to violence against women, allows for the federal prosecution of interstate domestic violence and sexual assault crimes and guaranteed interstate enforcement of protection orders (POs).

Legal policies to address teen dating violence are often embedded in domestic violence policies (Sousa, 1999). (For example, in some states a minor can seek a protective order similar to an adult). Although all fifty states have some form of domestic violence civil protection order legislation, dating violence policies vary dramatically from state to state (Break the Cycle, 2010). Policy in this area frequently changes but no national model is followed in all the states at the time of this writing. For example, some states preclude people who are in a dating relationship and not a legal, family, cohabiting, or co-parenting relationship from accessing provisions within the domestic violence law (Zosky, 2010). Some states have statutes requiring schools to provide TDV prevention programming. Some states have statutes that require schools to have policies addressing TDV and some states have statutes permitting those in dating relationships to obtain a Civil Protection Order (CPO). In this study, we focus on the policy issue of CPOs.

### *Civil protection orders (CPOs)*

CPOs prohibit an offender from contact (or least violence contact) with a victim of partner violence (Finn, 1989). Generally, CPOs are enforced through criminal divisions of the courts, and thus, violating a CPO can become a criminal charge. The label and eligibility criteria of CPOs varies across states (i.e., restraining order, peace bonds) but all states have enacted some form of CPOs to protect victims of partner violence (Logan et al., 2006).

Although there is controversy about their effectiveness, research generally supports the conclusion that CPOs are associated with reduced risk of violence toward the victim (Benitez, McNeil, & Binder, 2010; Kothari et al., 2012; Logan & Walker 2010). For example, Holt, Kernice, Wolf, and Rivara (2003) found that those women with full CPOs had less repeat abuse than women without full CPOs during a 9-to-12 month period. Strand (2012) found that offenders assessed as low or medium risk for IPV were less likely to recidivate if they had a restraining order issued upon them than those assessed as high risk. Studies also generally find that women report that they feel safer and that their lives improved after obtaining a protective order (Keilitz, Hannaford, & Efke, 1997; Logan et al., 2006). Hawkins (2010) reported that prior to receiving a protective order,

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