



Pergamon

Child Abuse & Neglect 29 (2005) 1249–1263

Child Abuse
& Neglect

Dating violence and sexual risk behaviors in a sample of at-risk Israeli youth[☆]

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Received 14 January 2003; received in revised form 16 March 2005; accepted 9 April 2005

Abstract

Objective: This exploratory study examines the reported dating violence and its association with sexual risk behavior among Israeli adolescents, who are at risk for dropping out of school.

Methodology: A convenience sample of 105 at-risk youth (51 boys and 54 girls) completed self-administered anonymous, questionnaires in small same-gender groups. The questionnaire included a Hebrew version of the Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory, a valid scale developed in the US especially for adolescents, the Hebrew version of the Conflict Tactics Scale and the Self-Efficacy to Refuse Sexual Behavior Scale.

Results: We found high rates of perpetration of verbal-emotional abuse for both girls and boys. Rates of reported victimization by physical abuse were higher among boys but that by sexual abuse were higher among girls. We found a moderate inverse association between victimization by dating violence and practicing safe sex among girls. There was a similar but much stronger association for boys who were victims of dating violence.

Conclusions: The high rates of various types of dating violence in Israel, at least among at-risk adolescents, should raise concern and motivate designing and implementing specific prevention interventions. The high reported rates of victimization from dating violence among boys are somewhat surprising and call for special attention and more in-depth studies.

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Keywords: Dating violence; Sexual risk behaviors; At-risk adolescents; Courtship violence

[☆] The study was funded by a JDC-Warburg grant.

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Introduction

Violence occurring in dating relationships is rapidly becoming recognized as a problem among adolescents (Ely, Dulmus, & Wodarski, 2002; Molidor & Tolman, 1998; O'Keefe, 1997; Wolfe, Scott, Reitzel-Jaffe, & Wekerle, 2001). Such dating or courtship violence includes physical and psychological abuse and can take place in private or public (Ely et al., 2002). During courtship violence, victims are frequently forced into unwanted sexual behavior—partial or full sexual activity which may expose them to sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) as well as exposing girls to the risk of unwanted pregnancies (Howard & Wang, 2003; Wingood, DiClemente, Hubbard-McCree, Harrington, & Davies, 2001).

These behaviors are of great concern to public health (Miller, Forehand, & Kotchick, 2000). If not treated at an early stage, exposure to both sexual risk behaviors and dating violence may harm adolescents and affect their future mental and physical development (Valois, Oeltmann, Waller, & Hussey, 1999; Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). For example, exposure to dating violence is thought to decrease adolescents' school performance and harm their ability to establish healthy intimate relationships in the future (Chase, Treboux, & O'Leary, 2002). The exploratory study presented here investigates the relationship between dating violence and sexual risk behaviors among the at-risk Israeli adolescents.

Most of the early research on dating violence investigated college populations (Makepeace, 1981; O'Keefe, 1997). In the following years, a few studies addressed the problem among high school students in the United States, with estimated rates of dating violence ranging from 7 to 39% (Bergman, 1992). Later studies found that dating violence ranges from 15% (Bennett & Fineran, 1998) to as high as 36% (Molidor & Tolman, 1998). However, a recent Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance report indicates that in a period of 12 months prior to the survey, 8.9% of students in a United States nationwide sample were exposed to dating violence (Grunbaum et al., 2004). At the same time, the Youth Behavior Survey data indicate that over half the high school students in the United States have engaged in sexual intercourse prior to graduation, but only a small proportion of sexually active adolescents (10–20%) report consistent use of condoms (Kann et al., 1995). These numbers are alarming and call for an immediate effort to develop and implement effective intervention and prevention.

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage, especially when it comes to relationships between genders. Because during these years adolescents are faced with new tasks, such as integration into peer groups and learning acceptable social performances (Howard & Wang, 2003; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997), they often are motivated to try on an array of potentially risk activities, such as smoking, drinking, as well as aggressive behaviors with peers (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). These risk-taking activities are often perceived as normative for adolescents and thus not necessarily a cause for concern (Wekerle, Wall, & Knoke, 2004). However, some of these behaviors may later develop into unhealthy relationship between men and women (Bennett & Fineran, 1998).

Previous studies on sexual violence among adults found a significant association between violence in a woman's partner and her exposure to sexual risk behavior (Eby, Campbell, Sullivan, & Davidson, 1995; Morill & Ickovics, 1996; Wingood & DiClemente, 2000; Wingood, Hunter-Gamble, & DiClemente, 1993). Given the prevalence of unsafe sexual relationships and dating violence among high school students, it is possible that an important correlation between dating violence and sexual risk behaviors exists in adolescence as well.

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