



Original article

## Relationship Context and Intimate Partner Violence From Adolescence to Young Adulthood



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### A B S T R A C T

**Purpose:** To assess changes in self-reported intimate partner violence (IPV) experience from adolescence through young adulthood. To examine whether individual change in indicators of relationship context—qualities and dynamics of the relationship, changes in partners, and relationship type (dating, cohabiting, and married)—were associated with change in self-reports of IPV.

**Methods:** Drawing on longitudinal population-based data, the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study, we used fixed-effects models to estimate within-person change in associations between features of respondents' intimate relationships and the proportion of relationships with IPV from adolescence through young adulthood. Analyses focused on 1,146 young men and women ages 13–29 years (51% female). Items measuring IPV were from the Conflict Tactics Scale.

**Results:** More than half of respondents (53%) experienced discontinuity in IPV across relationships. Among those reporting violence, the vast majority (87%) did not experience violence in all of their relationships. Age-related patterns were similar for men and women with IPV peaking in young adulthood. Infidelity, frequency of disagreements, and partner continuity were associated with a higher proportion of relationships with IPV. Improvements in the nature and character of romantic relationships were associated with a lower accumulation of IPV experiences.

**Conclusions:** IPV, although prevalent, does not represent a consistent experience. As young adults develop higher quality relationships they move toward desistance from IPV. Yet, variability in these experiences is observed, supporting previous calls for programs that promote the development of healthy relationships among adolescents and young adults.

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### IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

Intimate partner violence (IPV) experiences varied substantially across adolescence and young adulthood, with the majority reporting discontinuity in IPV across relationships. Improvements in relationship quality were associated with a lower accumulation of IPV experiences further reinforcing calls for programs that emphasize building healthy relationships during adolescence and young adulthood.

Recent evidence shows that rates of IPV peak during young adulthood, with one-third (32%) of young adults reporting victimization and one-quarter (24%) perpetration [1,2]. Prior

studies focusing on IPV during adolescence and young adulthood have been limited to victimization [1] or examined shorter time periods [3] and have not focused sufficient attention on proximal relationship-specific factors as influences on IPV experiences. Drawing on a life course perspective, we examine the degree of continuity in IPV (perpetration and victimization) and assess whether individual changes in relationship context, including relationship quality (infidelity, relationship churning, frequency of disagreements, trust, validation, self-disclosure, and commitment), relationship type (dating, cohabitation, and marriage), and partner continuity (retaining a partner between data points),

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are associated with changes in IPV across adolescence and young adulthood.

Entry into the world of romantic relationships begins during adolescence. As youth transition to adulthood, romantic relationships increase in duration, take on greater meaning [4], and often follow a pattern characterized by increasing levels of trust, intimacy, and commitment [5,6]. Although these changes largely reflect positive development for most young people [7], considerable variation exists, and factors such as poverty and the accumulation of relationship experiences may complicate the idea of a smooth transition and set of relationship progressions [8]. Consequently, for some individuals romantic relationships may be associated with additional discord, and outcomes such as IPV [9].

A key insight of the perspective is that although early experiences have a formative influence, all phases of development present new opportunities and challenges. Thus, research has shown that peer relationships are linked to a variety of developmental outcomes, even after controlling for family factors [10]. Although it is well recognized that over time romantic involvement becomes an increasingly important preoccupation and context for development [7], the impact of romantic relationships in general and in relation to specific outcomes such as IPV has received considerably less attention relative to family and peer factors [6]. Thus, it is important to explore how romantic involvement influences adolescents and young adults, particularly in connection with IPV, as this is a behavior that by definition takes place within the context of intimate relationships.

As relationships increase in salience, they also increase in duration [6], and this combination may result in the perception of a “higher stakes” relationship and a longer window for the development of conflicts—some of which may escalate to the point of violence. Furthermore, continued IPV within a relationship is consistent with the idea that some couples develop interaction styles that once developed, may be intractable or difficult to extinguish [3].

During the period of the adolescent to adult transition, relationships also vary in form or type, as some individuals move in together or get married and others continue a pattern of dating. Some researchers have also documented an association between the form of relationships and IPV with cohabiting unions demonstrating higher odds of IPV [11]. The current investigation takes into account basic differences in partner continuity, as well as relationship type and their association with IPV as observed across the study period. Most important, however, is the need to capture variations in relationship qualities, as specific dynamics within the relationship are likely to represent concrete, proximal sources of variations that are directly implicated in IPV experience.

Previous cross-sectional assessments have documented that infidelity, relationship churning (breaking up and reconciling), and verbal conflict/disagreement are all associated with higher odds of reporting IPV [12,13]. Lower levels of positive relationship dimensions such as trust or partner validation have also been associated with higher risk [12]. However, it is important to determine whether this reflects a kinds-of-people association or intrapersonal change. A longitudinal lens is important because cross-sectional portrayals can lead to unwarranted conclusions such as once an abuser or victim, always an abuser or victim [14]. This contrasts with basic tenets of the life course perspective, which accommodates the idea that experience within romantic relationships themselves can be the basis for further learning and

adjustment [15]. Previous longitudinal studies have enhanced understanding of between-individual differences [1,13,16,17] but continue to shed little light on within-person change. A more nuanced analysis of how individuals navigate relationships from adolescence to adulthood is warranted to capture discontinuities in IPV experiences.

Although many IPV experiences reported in population-based samples are mild (pushing, shoving, and grabbing), they often involve both partners' use of violence and can produce injuries [18]. Yet, many studies limit analysis (because of data constraints) to only victimization or only perpetration. Acknowledging that bidirectional violence often occurs [15,19] and that patterns of victimization and perpetration may shift over time, the present study examines patterns of any IPV (victimization and/or perpetration), recognizing the need to build on this initial portrait with more nuanced investigations of various types and levels of IPV experience.

Drawing on longitudinal population-based data, the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS), we provide a descriptive portrait of individuals' proportion of relationships with IPV from adolescence into adulthood and fixed-effects analyses examining how changes in relationship context relates to the accumulation of IPV over time. We hypothesize that such intrapersonal changes will reflect a complex risk profile that may increase or decrease IPV risk. Specifically, increases in infidelity, relationship churning, frequency of disagreements, and partner continuity will be associated with increases in the proportion of relationships with IPV, whereas trust, validation, self-disclosure, and commitment will be associated with decreases in the proportion of relationships with IPV.

## Methods

### Data

The TARS sample ( $n = 1,321$ ) was drawn from the year 2000 enrollment records of all seventh, ninth, and 11th graders in Lucas County, Ohio. The sampling frame, devised by the National Opinion Research Center, consists of a stratified, random sample of students enrolled in school (but not necessarily attending) based on grade, race-ethnicity, and gender. The TARS sample of 1,321 is 81.3 percent of the original 1,625 students who were contacted. We conducted interviews in respondents' homes using preloaded laptops to maintain privacy and respondents received gift cards in the amount of \$25 (interviews 1 and 2), \$50 (interviews 3 and 4), and \$75 (interviews 5) as compensation. This study was reviewed and approved by Bowling Green State University's institutional review board.

We drew on data across all five interviews or “waves.” Wave 1 was conducted in 2001, wave 2 in 2002–2003, wave 3 in 2004–2005, wave 4 in 2006–2007, and wave 5 in 2011–2012. Retention rates from the first to second interview were 89.1%, 84.4% for the third interview, 82.8% for the fourth interview, and 77.8% for the fifth interview. Participation rates were lower for black youth, males, and those who changed partners between waves. Reports of any IPV were not contingent on participation rate. To assess variation in the proportion of IPV reports across relationships, we restricted the fixed-effects analysis to those with two or more partners, ( $n = 1,146$  subjects, 3,534 observations). The vast majority, 87%, reported two or more relationships from adolescence to young adulthood. An advantage of the analytic strategy (described in the following section) is that it is not

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