

Original article

Older boyfriends of adolescent girls: the cause or a sign of the problem?

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Abstract

Purpose: There were two aims of this study: (a) to determine the causal relationship between adolescent girls' early sexual activity and the presence of an older boyfriend, and (b) theoretically and empirically contextualize the relationship between these two variables within a model of adolescent problem behavior.

Methods: Secondary analysis was conducted with the 670 adolescent girls of Waves I and II of the public use version of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. Girls included in the analyses had not already had an older romantic partner in Wave I but did have a romantic partner in the 18 months before Wave II. Four alternative causal models are proposed and tested using structural equation modeling and a nested model comparison analysis strategy.

Results: The model with the best fit to the data depicted the presence of an older partner as a mediator of psychosocial risk factors and adolescent problem behaviors (including early sexual activity). Psychosocial characteristics of adolescent girls in Wave I predicted whether they would enter romantic relationships with older boyfriends by Wave II. In turn, though, the presence of an older boyfriend increased problem behavior in Wave II above and beyond the effects of the psychosocial risk factors.

Conclusions: These findings are discussed in terms of the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the unions between adolescent girls and older boyfriends before statutory rape policies are modified. © 2005 Society for Adolescent Medicine. All rights reserved.

Keywords:

Older partners; Sexual behaviors; Gender; Adolescent problem behaviors

The study of adolescent girls' relationships with older boyfriends has primarily been shaped by concern over the current statutory rape laws and the legislative interest to decrease welfare costs through a reduction of teen pregnancies. Because adolescent girls coupled with older boyfriends have a higher rate of sexual activity and subsequent pregnancies than their peers with same-aged boyfriends [1,2], policymakers have been increasingly attracted to the notion that stricter laws and stricter enforcement of existing laws against older boyfriends who "prey" upon adolescent girls could decrease the number of births to underage girls and

therefore decrease welfare costs [3]. However, these interpretations and proposed solutions are based upon correlational data, often at a bivariate level. A more sophisticated analysis of the relationship between adolescent girls' sexual behaviors and the presence of older male partners is necessary before we can develop effective policy strategies to prevent high rates of sexual activity among adolescent girls coupled with older male partners.

The purpose of this study was to address the limitations in previous research by providing a more complete understanding of the nature of the relationships between adolescent girls and older boyfriends and any negative health implications for girls because of these unions. Specifically, in this article we (a) determine the causal relationship between early sexual activity among adolescent girls and the presence of an older boyfriend and (b) frame the relation-

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ship between these variables by theoretically and empirically locating them within a larger framework of adolescent problem behaviors.

The role of older boyfriends in the sexual activity of adolescent girls has received heightened attention since the mid-1990s with the press coverage of Landry and Forrest's study documenting the involvement of adult men in pregnancies and subsequent births by females under the age of 18 [4]. Although Landry and Forrest's initial estimate of half of teen births being associated with adult men was followed by subsequent estimates of roughly one-fourth [5], the public concern over adolescent girls coupling with older males was established and, to some extent, has framed the research agenda in terms of confirming or disconfirming the predator role of older male partners.

The association between older partner and high-risk sex behaviors among adolescent girls is well documented. Adolescents who have an older partner are more likely to engage in sexual intercourse at a younger age [5,6]. Moreover, having an older partner among adolescent girls has been associated with decreased condom use and increased rates of pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases [2,5,7]. Exploring possible reasons for the association between having an older partner and increased sexual activity, Marin and colleagues found that adolescents with older partners had more sexually experienced friends and were more likely to have been alone with a person who was a romantic interest [8].

Additional research on sexual activity among females with older partners suggests that the association between older partners and high-risk sex behaviors is a result of older male partners "preying" upon adolescent girls. For example, women whose first sexual partner was significantly older, in contrast to women whose first sexual partner was the same age, are more likely to report that they did not want this sexual experience to occur [9]. Other studies, though, suggest that the notion that older males take advantage or prey upon passive, innocent adolescent girls is too simplistic. Adolescent girls who have an older partner are more likely than their peers with same-age partners to have a higher rate of previous suicide attempts, drug and alcohol use, and previous pregnancies [10,11]. These high rates of risk behaviors among adolescent girls with older partners, coupled with the known intra- and interpersonal risk factors for such behaviors (e.g., [12]), suggest that adolescent girls with older partners may have psychosocial deficiencies that predispose them to relationships with older male partners. It is important to note, though, that all of the above mentioned research is based on correlated data, in which causality is difficult to determine. Given these limitations, the first aim of this study was to determine the causal direction between the presence of an older boyfriend and adolescent girls' sexual activity using panel data and structural equation modeling.

The second aim of the study was to locate, both theoret-

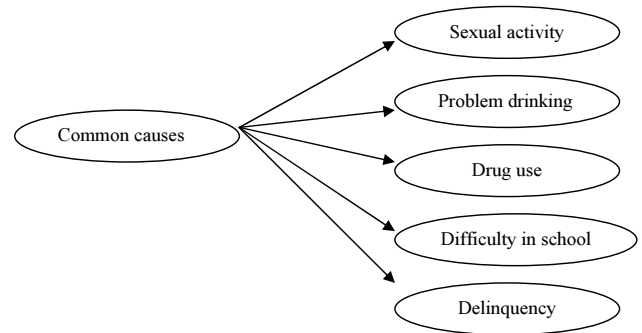


Fig. 1. Relationships between adolescent risk behavior proposed by Problem Behavior Theory.

ically and empirically, the relationship between having an older partner and early sexual behavior within a larger framework of adolescent risk behaviors. In the present study, we used Problem Behavior Theory [13] as a theoretical framework to guide our statistical modeling. The association between various adolescent risk behaviors (e.g., alcohol and illicit drug use, early sexual activity, conduct problems, and poor academic performance) has been well documented (e.g., [14–17]). Problem Behavior Theory provides a useful framework for understanding why these behaviors co-occur. According to the theory, these risk behaviors are associated with each other because they are manifestations of a common underlying syndrome. Individual, biological, behavioral, and personality factors interact with perceived and actual social environments to shape the underlying syndrome and subsequent problematic behaviors. Common causes to adolescent problem or risk behaviors include poor attachment to parents, school, or wider community; association with peers who exhibit high-risk behaviors; lower levels of self esteem, self-efficacy, or psychological well-being; or previous experiences of physical or sexual abuse [18,19]. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship among these variables as proposed by Problem Behavior Theory.

In Fig. 1, the variables to the right side (early sexual activity, problem drinking, drug use, delinquency, and problems with school) correlate because they each are caused by one or more common causes (in this diagram, the term "common causes" is used to refer to the above list of causes).

We propose four different models for how having an older partner can be incorporated into this framework (Fig. 2). In the first conceptual model (see Diagram A, Fig. 2), having an older partner could act as predictor of early sexual behavior. In this model, having an older partner is viewed as an additional common cause to problem behavior, which acts above and beyond these factors in predicting early sexual activity among adolescent girls. This model depicts the "older partner as predator" explanation for why the presence of an older boyfriend corresponds to adolescent girls' sexual activity, because this

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