



Original article

In Search of Teen Dating Violence Typologies



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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: The goal of the present research was to identify distinct latent classes of adolescents that commit teen dating violence (TDV) and assess differences on demographic, behavioral, and attitudinal correlates.

Methods: Boys and girls ($N = 1,149$; $M_{age} = 14.3$; Grades 6–12) with a history of violence exposure completed surveys assessing six indices of TDV in the preceding 3 months. Indices of TDV included controlling behaviors, psychological TDV, physical TDV, sexual TDV, fear/intimidation, and injury. In addition, adolescents provided demographic and dating history information and completed surveys assessing attitudes condoning violence, relationship skills and knowledge, and reactive/proactive aggression.

Results: Latent class analysis indicated a three-class solution wherein the largest class of students was nonviolent on all indices (“nonaggressors”) and the smallest class of students demonstrated high probability of nearly all indices of TDV (“multiform aggressors”). In addition, a third class of “emotional aggressors” existed for which there was a high probability of controlling and psychological TDV but low likelihood of any other form of TDV. Multiform aggressors were differentiated from emotional and nonaggressors on the use of self-defense in dating relationships, attitudes condoning violence, and proactive aggression. Emotional aggressors were distinguished from nonaggressors on nearly all measured covariates.

Conclusions: Evidence indicates that different subgroups of adolescents engaging in TDV exist. In particular, a small group of youth engaging in multiple forms of TDV can be distinguished from a larger group of youth that commit acts of TDV restricted to emotional aggression (i.e., controlling and psychological) and most youth that do not engage in TDV.

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IMPLICATIONS AND
CONTRIBUTION

This information provides valuable understanding of teen dating violence in high-risk populations of youth and may be useful in tailoring prevention efforts to different groups of teens.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors report no conflict of interest.

Disclaimer: The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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Intimate partner violence (IPV) and its suspected precursor, teen dating violence (TDV), are a substantial public health problem in the United States. Recent estimates from the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey suggest that 27% of women and 12% of men in the United States have experienced IPV with one or more associated negative impacts (e.g., fear, injury, post-traumatic stress symptoms, depression, substance use) in their lifetime [1]. On the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 21% of female

and 10% of male adolescents reported having experienced some form of physical and/or sexual TDV in the past 12 months [2].

Despite an accumulation of research, results from studies across the various domains of IPV/TDV research (e.g., etiology, risk and protective factors, primary prevention, secondary prevention) are often mixed and difficult to reconcile. However, one evident pattern is that we currently have few effective strategies to prevent or reduce violence in intimate relationships among adults [3,4], suggesting a need to start prevention efforts earlier in the life course [5]. The primary prevention of TDV has emerged as a public health focus because of the potential for persistent and severe sequelae and because adolescence is a critical developmental period relevant to onset, escalation, and persistence of relationship violence into adulthood [6–8]. However, the few extant programs shown to be efficacious for TDV prevention have generally proffered modest effects [9,10] or reduced opportunity rather than propensity for TDV [11]. If we can more explicitly identify and measure disparate types of relationship violence, we can be more precise about the types of relationship violence our interventions are able to prevent. Thus, we will be able to develop, test, disseminate, and implement successful prevention strategies for IPV/TDV with greater proficiency and efficiency.

A number of researchers have suggested that IPV/TDV comprises a series of vastly disparate violent events perpetrated by diverse subtypes of people under varying contextual factors [12–17]. It is therefore important to parse out these differences to more effectively frame prevention efforts. Although there have been various attempts to explicate different forms of IPV or identify typologies or classes of perpetrators in adult relationships [12–17], there have been relatively few attempts to parse TDV. Messinger et al. [18] used cluster analytic methods to identify subgroups of TDV offender/victims in a sample of adolescent girls. A particularly pertinent finding was that adolescent relationships characterized by a high degree of controlling behavior involved more frequent acts of physical violence and fear of the controlling partner [18]. Diaz-Aguado and Martinez [19] conducted a latent class analysis (LCA) on a probability sample of adolescent boys in Spain. In addition to a class of nonviolent boys, these authors found three classes comprising a group of boys who isolate and control their partners, a group that exerts only medium-level emotional abuse, and a group of boys who frequently engage in all types of violence.

The present research expands on the previous investigations by seeking to identify the existence of unique classes who report engaging in acts of TDV among both male and female adolescents. In addition, we seek to identify covariates that may elucidate the factors that contribute to membership in differing latent classes. Importantly, TDV in high-risk populations has been under-researched [20]. In the present research, we examine offending in a sample of adolescents who are at high risk based on prior exposure to violence in the home and/or community. Thus, these youth may have greater need for, and be more likely to benefit from, intervention.

Methods

Participants and procedures

The current data are derived from the baseline assessments of adolescents participating in an evaluation of the Expect

Respect TDV prevention program (see Ball et al. [21] for details). Participants were 1,149 sixth to 12th grade students ($M_{age} = 14.3$; standard deviation = 1.6, Range = 11–17) from 35 schools in Texas referred by school counselors or social workers. The sample was 62.1% female ($n = 713$) and 37.9% male ($n = 436$). Participants were racially and ethnically diverse with 53.5% identifying as Hispanic/Latino ($n = 615$), 16.3% African-American ($n = 187$), 12.7% non-Hispanic/white ($n = 146$), 12.9% multiracial ($n = 148$), 3.7% “other” ($n = 43$), and 10 (.8%) did not respond.

During an initial intake, students’ history of exposure to violence (i.e., being the witness, victim, or perpetrator of dating violence, peer violence, domestic violence, child abuse, or some other form of violence in the home or community) was assessed via semistructured interview. Students that verbally endorsed at least one type of violence exposure at any point during their life were eligible to participate in the study. Most students (73%) reported exposure to multiple forms of violence. Students were informed that all information would be confidential except for disclosures of child abuse, homicidal, and/or suicidal threat, which were reported to the appropriate agencies specified by law.

Data were collected between 2011 and 2013 via paper-and-pencil surveys. Passive consent forms were mailed to the home at the time of referral, and parents/guardians were able to opt out either by mail or by phone. During an initial intake interview, facilitators explained the confidentiality policy and mandatory reporting requirements to students who then provided written assent before participating. All procedures for the study were approved by the institutional review board at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and by the participating school districts.

Measures

Copies of all measures can be obtained from the lead author.

Demographics. Students responded to items indicating gender, age, ethnicity, and history of dating partners.

Teen dating violence perpetration. Questions from the Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory [22] and the Safe Dates TDV scales [9] were adapted and combined with supplementary items to assess the presence or absence of six dimensions of TDV perpetration. The six indices of TDV were (1) five controlling behavior items (e.g., “I did not let my partner do things with other people”), $\alpha = .70$; (2) eight psychological TDV items (e.g., “I yelled and screamed at my partner”), $\alpha = .72$; (3) five physical TDV items (e.g., “I hit my partner with a fist or a hard object”), $\alpha = .76$; (4) six sexual TDV items (e.g., “I grabbed or touched my partner’s private parts without their consent”), $\alpha = .69$; (5) two fear/intimidation items (e.g., “My partner was afraid of me”), $\alpha = .56$; and (6) three injury items (e.g., “My partner went to a doctor or nurse because of an injury”), $\alpha = .75$. Students rated the presence of each item from 0 (Never) to 3 (Often) for each of the indices for all dating relationships that occurred in the preceding 3 months. A dating relationship was defined as occurring with a “boyfriend or girlfriend, someone you go out with or hang out with in a romantic way, or someone you hook up with.” Responses were summed and dichotomized for each TDV index, with a value of 2 or more indicating the presence of TDV and 0 or 1 indicating no TDV for that index.

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