



## Brief report

# The associations of adolescents' dating violence victimization, well-being and engagement in risk behaviors



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## ABSTRACT

This brief report describes dating violence victimization among adolescents in Flanders, Belgium, and focuses on how dating violence is related to adolescents' well-being and engagement in risk behaviors, such as substance use, sexual behaviors, and engagement in vandalism or fighting. A survey was conducted in Flanders, Belgium among 1187 adolescents (61.3% female,  $n = 728$ ). A total of 466 respondents between 16 and 22 years old ( $M = 17.82$  years,  $SD = 0.92$ ) were in a relationship (71.0% female,  $n = 331$ ), and, therefore, formed the subsample of the present study. The results show that adolescents, who consume alcohol at a younger age, have ever used marijuana, or were involved in vandalism have a higher probability to become victim of dating violence than adolescents who are not involved in these behaviors. Dating violence victimization was also linked with symptoms of depression and a lower self-esteem.

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## 1. Introduction

Some adolescents might find themselves within dating and relationships that involve abuse or violence (Lewis & Fremouw, 2001). Dating violence can be physical (e.g., hitting, pushing or slapping a partner), emotional (e.g., yelling or insulting a partner or threatening to use violence) or sexual in nature (e.g., pressuring a partner to engage in sexual activities by insisting or threatening a romantic partner) (Bonomi et al., 2012; CDC, 2016).

Teenage dating violence is a public health problem (CDC, 2016; Teten, Ball, Valle, Noonan, & Rosenbluth, 2009). This is substantiated by longitudinal studies conducted in North-America focusing on the associations between dating violence victimization, risk behaviors and well-being. Dating violence victimization among adolescents has been associated with substance use, such as smoking, alcohol use and marijuana use (Ackard, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007; Exner-Cortens, Eckenrode, & Rothman, 2013; Foshee, Benefield, Ennett, Bauman, & Suchindran, 2004; Foshee, Reyes, Gottfredson, Chang, & Ennett, 2013; Roberts, Klein, & Fisher, 2003). Dating violence victimization has also been found to predict risky sexual behaviors, such as contraceptive non-use (Shorey et al., 2015). Dating violence victimization has also been linked with conduct

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problems (such as fighting with peers) (Foshee et al., 2004) and antisocial behaviors, such as destruction of property or runaway behavior (Exner-Cortens et al., 2013; Roberts et al., 2003). With regard to well-being, dating violence victimization has also been linked to experiencing symptoms of depression (Ellis, Crooks, & Wolfe, 2009; Exner-Cortens et al., 2013; Foshee et al., 2004, 2013; Roberts et al., 2003), suicidal ideation and suicidal behaviors (Ackard et al., 2007; Exner-Cortens et al., 2013; Roberts et al., 2003).

While previous research in Europe has focused on adolescents' attitudes and experiences with dating violence, few studies outside of North America have focused on replicating the associations between dating violence victimization and health outcomes, such as engagement in risk behavior and well-being (Bowen et al., 2013; Hamby, Nix, De Puy, & Monnier, 2012; Puy, Hamby, & Lindemuth, 2014). International research in this subject area is warranted as the legal and cultural context between the US and other countries might differ. For instance, the legal framework for alcohol and cigarette consumption differs between the US and Belgium, the country in which this study was conducted. In the domain of sexual behaviors, previous research has found that Dutch youth engage in sexual contact at a later time than their American peers, and that they engage more often in discussions about sexual health with their parents than adolescents in the US (van de Bongardt, de Graaf, Reitz, & Deković, 2014). In some US schools, sexual education is taught using sexual education initiatives which exclusively focus on abstaining from sexual intercourse. These lessons appear to be less effective in preventing sexual risk behaviors than interventions which use a more encompassing type of relational and sexual education (Kohler, Manhart, & Lafferty, 2008). In the Flemish educational system, the region in which the present study was conducted, a comprehensive relational and sexual education program is included in the standards that have to be met by secondary schools (Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, s.d.). The amount of teenage pregnancies among 15–19 year olds (57 per 1000 women) is also higher in the US as compared to Belgium (21 per 1000 women) (Sedgh, Finer, Bankole, Eilers, & Singh, 2015), as is the percentage of youth with STDs in the among the same age group (Panchaud, Singh, Feivelson, & Darroch, 2000).

From a routine-lifestyle theory perspective, youth who engage in deviant or risky behaviors might be more vulnerable for dating violence victimization, as they are more likely to be in situations in which guardians who could protect them, such as parents, are absent (cf. Cohen & Felson, 1979; Gover, 2004). Cultural and legal differences might however have an impact on what is perceived as a deviant or risky behavior. For instance, it could be hypothesized that when potential legal consequences are absent, as is the case with the consumption of substances such as cigarettes in Belgium, that teenagers might regard it less as a deviant behavior and might find it more acceptable to engage in substance use in the presence of guardians, such as their parents. Consequently, the fact that engagement in these risky behaviors is done less outside of situations with social control might lower the chances for victimization of aggressive behaviors such as dating violence. Moreover, cultural differences in the educational efforts about sexual and relational education might potentially affect the associations between dating violence victimization and engagement in other types of risk and risky behaviors.

The aim of this brief report is to add to the literature by describing how dating violence victimization is linked to well-being and risk behaviors among adolescents in Flanders, Belgium. The results can contribute to the understanding of why some adolescents are more likely to become victim of dating violence than others and can guide the development of international prevention and intervention efforts. In the discussion section we will contrast our findings with previous research.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

The data are part from the larger *Teen Digital Dating Survey* (Van Ouytsel, Ponnet, & Walrave, 2016), which was conducted among 1187 adolescents (61.3% female,  $n = 728$ ) between March and May 2015 in 7 Flemish secondary schools. The participants were between 16 and 22 years old ( $M = 17.82$  years;  $SD = 0.92$ ). In all schools, students from the two final grades of secondary education took part in the survey. In one school, students from an additional so-called “seventh year” of secondary education also participated. Students following this program, enroll for an additional year of vocational or technical training which enables them to master a trade or a profession. The students are typically subject to the same class schedules, rules and classes than other high school students. Some students in our sample had also repeated a grade. The inclusion of these students is the reason why some students in our sample are up to 22 years old. All results reported in this manuscript are based on the 466 respondents (71.0% female,  $n = 331$ ) who indicated that they were currently in a romantic relationship. The procedures of this study were approved by the ethical committee of the University of Antwerp.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Substance use and sexual behaviors

The items measuring alcohol use, marijuana use, sexual behaviors, fighting, and vandalism were adapted from the *Youth Risk Behavior Survey* (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). The questions were translated into Dutch and some additional examples were added to make sure that the questions were relatable to the respondents. The items and response options are included in [Appendix 1](#).

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