



# Relationship violence victimization and binge drinking trajectories among a nationally representative sample of adolescents



Kate Walsh PhD<sup>a,\*</sup>, Angela M. Moreland<sup>b</sup>, Rochelle F. Hanson<sup>b</sup>,  
Heidi S. Resnick<sup>b</sup>, Benjamin E. Saunders<sup>b</sup>, Dean G. Kilpatrick<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Ferkauf Graduate School of Psychology, Yeshiva University, United States

<sup>b</sup> Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Medical University of South Carolina, United States

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## ABSTRACT

The present study evaluated the impact of relationship violence (RV) victimization on the longitudinal trajectory of binge drinking (BD) among 3614 US adolescents (51.2% male) who participated in an initial telephone interview regarding physical and sexual RV victimization and binge drinking. Two follow-up phone interviews were completed over approximately three years. Multilevel modeling revealed small, but significant, increases in BD over time; older adolescents and those who had ever experienced RV victimization were more likely to report BD at Wave 1 compared to younger adolescents and non-victims. Although new RV victimization reported during the study predicted an increase in the likelihood of BD at that occasion, those who had ever experienced RV victimization were less likely to report BD over time compared to non-victims. Contrary to expectations, no sex differences emerged. Findings indicate that BD may precede RV. Interventions to reduce alcohol-related RV may be especially useful in this population.

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Relationship violence (RV), defined here as physical or sexual assault that occurs within the context of dating or other peer relationships, is associated with significant societal costs and heightened risk for acute and long-term psychosocial difficulties. RV constitutes a substantial problem among adolescents, with 35% of adolescents reporting verbal or physical RV victimization in national samples (Haynie et al., 2013). Importantly, exposure to RV has been linked to a range of detrimental outcomes including long-term mental health problems, increased drug and alcohol use, educational difficulties, depression, suicidal thoughts, and risk for sexual or physical revictimization (e.g., Banyard & Cross, 2008; Exner-Cortens, Eckenrode, & Rothman, 2013; Exner-Cortens, Eckenrode, Bunge, & Rothman, 2017; Temple & Freeman, 2011; Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2008). Although numerous cross-sectional investigations have documented correlates of RV among adolescents, fewer longitudinal studies have examined correlates of RV change over time.

Alcohol use, particularly binge drinking (BD), has emerged as a particularly concerning correlate of RV victimization (e.g., Yan, Howard, Beck, Shattuck, & Hallmark-Kerr, 2010). Approximately 18% of adolescents involved in an abusive

\* Corresponding author. 1165 Morris Park Avenue, Room 143, Bronx, NY, 10461, United States.

E-mail address: [kate.walsh@einstein.yu.edu](mailto:kate.walsh@einstein.yu.edu) (K. Walsh).

relationship reported drinking alcohol at least six days per week (Swahn, Bossarte, & Sullivent, 2008). Researchers have postulated a bidirectional relationship, in that alcohol use may both contribute to risk for interpersonal victimization and also serve as a coping mechanism for negative affect resulting from victimization (e.g., Testa, Livingston, & Hoffman, 2007). Alcohol use may be a critical pathway to RV victimization, particularly among girls (Maas, Fleming, Herrenkohl, & Catalano, 2010). Adolescents who begin drinking at a younger age are at increased risk for RV (Van Ouytsel, Ponnet, & Walrave, 2017), possibly because engagement in risky behaviors like BD may increase vulnerability to victimization due to exposure to potentially delinquent peers and dangerous situations (Begle et al., 2011; Rothman et al., 2011). Additionally, daily diary studies suggest increased risk for RV perpetration and victimization on heavy drinking days (Rothman et al., 2012). However, alcohol use also has been suggested as a means of coping with or “self-medicating” distress emanating from an abusive experience (Miranda, Meyerson, Long, Marx, & Simpson, 2002). At least one study found that girls who experienced physical or psychological RV as teens were significantly more likely to report BD when assessed five years later than those who did not report BD; this same pattern was not evident with boys (Exner-Cortens et al., 2013). In that study, RV did not include sexual victimization and it was assessed five years before various negative outcomes, including BD. Although these data suggest there may be a long-term impact of physical and psychological RV on BD use among girls, they tell us little about reciprocal relationships between BD and a broader measure of RV. Additional research is needed to gain a better understanding of the associations between BD and RV to develop more effective prevention and risk reduction programs.

Independent of victimization experiences, BD tends to increase over the course of adolescence, peaking in early adulthood (Chen & Jacobson, 2012). Past research has revealed mixed findings for gender differences in the relations between RV and BD, with some studies suggesting that girls are more likely to engage in relationship disputes after consuming alcohol (Wells, Speechley, Koval, & Graham, 2007) and subsequently experience RV victimization (Marquart, Nannini, Edwards, Stanley, & Wayman, 2007). Additionally, RV victimization is prospectively associated with more frequent binge drinking among adolescent girls but not boys (Exner-Cortens et al., 2013). However, other studies suggest equally problematic associations between RV and BD for both sexes (Rothman et al., 2012; Yan et al., 2010). Thus, greater clarification of age and sex effects on RV and BD is warranted.

## 1. The present study

The purpose of this study was to examine how RV impacts the longitudinal course of BD among adolescents. Using data from a three-wave longitudinal study, the first goal was to explore the trajectory of BD among adolescents, ages 12 to 17, over this three year time period. The second goal was to explore the time-invariant and time-varying role that RV victimization plays in BD. Hypotheses were that:

1. BD would increase over the course of the study with older adolescents and boys reporting more frequent binge drinking at the initial interview (Wave 1).
2. Adolescents who reported ever experiencing RV victimization would report more binge drinking at the initial interview and over the course of the study.
3. At each occasion when a new instance of RV victimization was reported, it was expected that binge drinking also would increase significantly at that occasion.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The National Survey of Adolescents-Replication (NSA-R) is a longitudinal, nationally representative study of adolescents aged 12–17<sup>1</sup> years ( $N = 3614$  at wave 1) designed to assess the prevalence, risk factors, and mental health outcomes of exposure to potentially traumatic events. The NSA-R sample consists of a national household probability sample and an oversample of urban-dwelling youth. To correct for oversampling, data were weighted to bring the sample in line with the adolescent U.S. population based on 2005 Census data. Mean age at Wave 1 was 14.60 ( $SD = 1.71$ ). Regarding racial/ethnic makeup, 69% were Caucasian, 13% were African-American, 10% were Hispanic, 3% were Native American, and 3% were Asian/Pacific Islander. At Wave 2, 49.7% of the sample was male, mean age was 15.9 ( $SD = 2.03$ ), and 70.8% of the sample was Caucasian, 13.5% African American, 10.6% Hispanic, 2.6% Native American, and 2.6% Asian/Pacific Islander. At Wave 3, 50.5% of the sample was male, mean age was 17.3 ( $SD = 2.6$ ), and 74.1% of the sample was Caucasian, 11.9% African American, 9.1% Hispanic, 2.5% Native American, and 2.4% Asian/Pacific Islander. For more detailed descriptions of sampling and methodological procedures, refer to McCauley et al. (2010) or Wolitzky-Taylor et al. (2008).

<sup>1</sup> Ten participants were outside of this age range (6 were 11 years old; 4 were 18 years old).

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