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Dating violence compared to other types of violence: similar offenders but different victims



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to characterize young dating violent offenders (DVO), and to compare them to the general population and to young offenders with violent crimes directed against other victims. We have used data from the Development of Aggressive Antisocial Behaviour Study, in all 262 young men, 18 to 25 years, convicted of violent crimes and imprisoned in the Western Region of the Swedish Prison and Probation Services. We found that young DVO offenders differed from the general population in all investigated areas; however, the group did not differ in comparisons to other young violent offenders. Our results highlight the antisocial aspects of dating violent crime being rooted in aggressive antisocial behaviour, lacking signs of any specific offender type characteristics, thus questioning the validity of crime specific treatment programs in prison for young offenders of dating violence.

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La violencia en las relaciones sentimentales en comparación con otros tipos de violencia: los mismos delincuentes con diferentes víctimas

RESUMEN

El presente estudio ha tenido por objetivo la caracterización de los jóvenes delincuentes violentos en sus relaciones sentimentales ("DVO" en su acrónimo inglés) y su comparación tanto con el conjunto de la población como con otros delincuentes violentos jóvenes que han cometido delitos con otro tipo de víctimas. Hemos empleado datos del estudio sobre desarrollo de conducta antisocial violenta con 262 jóvenes varones de entre 18 y 25 años de edad condenados por delitos violentos y encarcelados en la Región Oeste del Servicio de Prisiones y Libertad Vigilada de Suecia y hallado que los jóvenes delincuentes de tipo DVO se diferenciaban del resto de la población en todas las áreas objeto de estudio. Sin embargo, no mostraban discrepancias con respecto a otros delincuentes violentos jóvenes. Nuestros resultados destacan que los aspectos antisociales de los delitos violentos en las relaciones sentimentales tienen su base en una conducta antisocial violenta, sin indicios de vinculación con un tipo específico de delincuentes, lo cual cuestiona la validez de los programas penitenciarios para el tratamiento de delitos específicos orientados a delincuentes jóvenes condenados por violencia en las relaciones sentimentales.

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Violence, regrettably, is a matter also concerning the young. World Health Organisation (WHO) states that youth homicide victims (people aged 10–20) make up 43% of the total number of homicide victims globally (WHO, 2015). Being young is also a risk factor for becoming a violent crime offender, while young women between the ages of 16 to 24 are most likely victims of partner violence (Rennison & Welchans, 2000). Partner violence in

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adolescence and early adulthood, commonly referred to as dating violence, courtship violence, or adolescent relationship abuse, is generally defined as physical, sexual, and/or psychological violence between dating partners in the ages of 15 (or younger) up until 24. It is regularly discussed as a prevalent and serious social and health problem (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). Thus, identifying offender characteristics in dating violence is considered an urgent quest.

However, definitions of the concept vary: some include sexual violence (Dardis, Dixon, Edwards, & Turchik, 2015; Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001) and some do not (Lewis & Fremouw, 2001). Investigated age groups vary as well, as some include, or study exclusively, teenagers (Fernández-González, Wekerle, & Goldstein, 2012), adolescents (Giordano, Copp, Longmore, & Manning, 2016) and/or young adults (Gómez, 2010). Overall, the span of investigated ages in studies of dating violence varies from 12 years to 25 years. Dating violence victimization rates found in the United States, where incidences are reported for the last 12 months, have been found ranging from 1.6%, including physical and sexual violence among 12–17 years old, (Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2008) to 20.9% among girls and 10.4% among boys, in a nationally representative survey in grades 9–12 (Vagi, Olsen, Basile, & Vivolo-Kantor, 2015). Despite any exact estimates of the prevalence of dating violence, contributing also to the severity of the problem is the fact that it afflicts young people. As was suggested in the earliest work in the field (Makepeace, 1981), this fact entails certain consequences: young age means that the process of socialization is ongoing and, in cases where the pattern of abuse is established already in adolescence, the severity of adult intimate partner violence is often greater. This is found to be true for both perpetration and victimization. In a conditional probability analysis by O'Leary et al. (1989) it was found in couples where violence had occurred during the dating period and after 18 months of marriage that the likelihood of new violent acts at 30 months was .72 for women and .59 for men. Smith, White, and Holland (2003) have presented results from a longitudinal study of women in university, showing an increased risk of revictimization. Among the young women who had experienced prior physical abuse in a romantic relationship in adolescence, the relative risk for revictimization was 2.96 during their first year of university studies. The negative health consequences of victimization of partner violent abuse have been investigated in a number of studies (Campbell, 2002; Plichta, 2004; Roberts, Klein, & Fisher, 2003) and associated with numerous conditions, such as substance abuse, diet related behaviours, and overuse of health and social services.

Regarding the question of aetiology of dating violence, the cycle of violence theory (Widom, 1989) has been in the centre of attention of several studies (Gómez, 2010; Whitfield, Anda, Dube, & Felitti, 2003; Wood & Sommers, 2011). The cycle of violence, or intergenerational violence, is rooted in the social learning theory and proposes that growing up being witness or subjected to violent behaviour teaches the child acceptance for violent behaviour (Bandura, 1977).

In the vicinity of the question of aetiology, you find the search of potential risk factors or correlates. However, although risk factors do not carry any one-directed argument of causality, they bring important knowledge of occurrence of dating violence. In a review of longitudinal studies, Vagi et al. (2013) presented that risk factors for dating violence clustered together in the key dimensions: mental health problems, attitudes, behaviours such as the use of aggressive media, aggressive behaviours towards peers or others, substance abuse, precocious sexual behaviour, and having antisocial peers. The review concluded that effective prevention programs ought to focus on youths who had experienced maltreatment and other adverse childhood events, had particular mental health problems, behaved aggressively and

had aggressive attitudes, used substances, and were in hostile or unhealthy relationships. Capaldi and Owen (2001) investigated associations between physical aggression, injury, and fear in an at-risk community sample, and showed that physical aggression among partners was associated to antisocial behaviour. The only study examining a total birth cohort (Magdol, Moffit, Caspi, & Silva, 1998) reported that the most consistent predictor of intimate partner abuse at age 21 was the presence of early problem behaviours, such as aggressive delinquency and substance abuse at the age of 15. Also, concerning the victimization of dating violence, several studies have reported that the victims of dating violence are found among groups of youth exhibiting social and health risk behaviours (Nilsen, Blom, Heimer, & Danielsson, 2011; Roberts & Klein, 2003; Silverman et al., 2001), such as non-violent and violent delinquency, increased levels of substance abuse, and sexual risk behaviours. It has been suggested, in accordance with the theory of gender symmetry (Straus, 2006), that the roles of victim and offender oscillate in violent relationships (Muftić, Finn, & Marsh, 2012).

These facts indicate that both offenders and victims of dating violence display social vulnerability, potentially in need of extra societal support, and attention. For example, experience of maltreatment and other adverse childhood events, early onset disruptive behaviours, mental health problems, aggressive behaviour, and substances abuse disorders are all factors presenting an elevated risk of being convicted of crimes when entered into adulthood (Af Klinteberg, Almquist, Beijer, & Rydelius, 2011; Shukla & Wiesner, 2016; Reavis, Looman, Franco, & Rojas, 2013).

However, studies aiming at exploring risk and protective factors of dating violence have almost exclusively used samples derived from high school, college, or community populations. The large amount of general risk behaviours neighbouring dating violence point to the need of inquiry into samples of delinquent adolescents and socially marginalized and/or criminal young adults. The age group of 18–25 years is of particular interest since it is the range where, in most Western cultures, the transition into adulthood is made. We consider an examination of imprisoned dating violent offenders of this age group to be a relevant task partly because it has not been done before, partly because an assumption that the offenders of the most severe violence towards dating partners are the ones convicted to prison. Knowledge regarding imprisoned dating violent offenders could thus add to the knowledge of what characterizes individuals who are at the high end of the spectrum of dating violence.

Based on previous research and theory of aetiology, potentially important areas of investigation could be: occurrence of adverse childhood experiences (e.g., experiences of neglect and abuse in childhood, household social dysfunction, and levels of adaptation to school and work), clinical variables (such as major mental disorders (MMD), personality disorders, substance use disorders, and neurodevelopmental disorders), and overall aggressive antisocial behaviours. A likewise important area to investigate would be the importance of type of offender victim relationship. Offender victim relationship is the denominator for the entire discourse of both dating violence and intimate partner violence (IPV). Research has shown that offender victim relationship, not necessarily being an intimate or dating one, can be a precipitating and aggravating factor of violent crime: the closer the relationship, the more severe the victim injury (Heller, Ehrlich, & Lester, 1983). It has also been found that lethal violence (i.e., homicides) where the offender knew the victim more often is associated with expressive violence, while homicides committed of unknown victims more often are associated with instrumental motives, as such homicides occur in conjunction with other crimes (e.g., robbery, breaking an entry) (Drawdy & Myers, 2004). In spite of several findings of similarities

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