



# School climate and physical adolescent relationship abuse: Differences by sex, socioeconomic status, and bullying

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## ABSTRACT

Little is known about the association between school climate and adolescent relationship abuse (ARA). We used 2011–2012 data from surveys of California public school students (in the United States of America) who were in a dating relationship in the last year ( $n = 112\,378$ ) to quantify the association between different school climate constructs and physical ARA. Fifty-two percent of students were female, and all students were in 9th or 11th grade (approximately ages 14–17). Over 11% of students reported experiencing physical ARA in the last year. Increased school connectedness, meaningful opportunities for participation, perceived safety, and caring relationships with adults at school were each significantly associated with lower odds of physical ARA. Increased violence victimization and school-level bullying victimization were associated with higher odds of physical ARA. These school climate-ARA associations were significantly moderated by student sex, school socioeconomic status, and school-level bullying victimization. School climate interventions may have spillover benefits for ARA prevention.

## 1. School climate and adolescent relationship abuse<sup>1</sup>

Adolescent relationship behaviors are rapidly evolving (Draucker & Martsof, 2010; Zweig, Dank, Yahner, & Lachman, 2013), and given how much time students spend at schools (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011), the school setting can provide an important opportunity for intervention. Research on the relationship between school climate and adolescent violent behaviors is growing (Berkowitz, Moore, Astor, & Benbenishty, 2017), and school-based dating violence prevention programs are on the rise (De La Rue, Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2017), yet few have explored the link between school climate and adolescent relationship abuse (ARA). This study examined the cross-sectional association between school climate and physical ARA among a California-wide sample of diverse high school students who had been in a dating relationship in the last year, and assessed whether this association varied by student- and school-level characteristics.

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations: ARA: adolescent relationship abuse; CBEDS: California Basic Educational Data System; CHKS: California Healthy Kids Survey; Cal-SCHLS: California School Climate Health and Learning Survey; SES: socioeconomic status; U.S.: United States.

### 1.1. Physical adolescent relationship abuse

Adolescent relationship abuse occurs, by definition, within relationships. Romantic relationships have become more common and are starting earlier: over half of U.S. adolescents reported being in a romantic relationship in the past 18 months, and three-quarters of 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders reported dating by the time they are in high school (Niolon et al., 2015). Given that intimate partner violence is highest among girls ages 11 to 24, and that violence victimization often starts in adolescence (Black et al., 2011; Catalano, 2006), researchers must identify ways to mitigate ARA and support healthy relationships into adulthood (Exner-Cortens, Eckenrode, Bunge, & Rothman, 2017). What works for promoting healthy intimate relationships has implications for informing school-level prevention programs, policies and system-level changes.

Youth may experience multiple types of ARA. ARA is defined as behaviors that threaten, control, or harm at least one member of a romantic or sexual relationship either in person or with technology, in which the victim is an adolescent (Miller et al., 2015; Stonard, Bowen, Lawrence, & Price, 2014). ARA is common and has serious health, social-emotional, and development implications for youth. While youth can experience multiple different types of ARA, including psychological and sexual, this study focuses on physical ARA. Physical ARA specifically is defined as physical violence such as hitting, kicking, pushing experienced by an adolescent in a romantic or sexual relationship. Though national physical ARA victimization estimates vary depending on the definition, an estimated 18–21% of dating females and 10–18% of dating males report being physically abused by their dating partner (Mulford & Blachman-Demner, 2013; Taylor & Mumford, 2016; Vagi, Olsen, Basile, & Vivolo-Kantor, 2015). Physical ARA victimization in combination with other types of ARA have been linked to a range of adverse health disparities (Exner-Cortens, Eckenrode, & Rothman, 2013).

### 1.2. The role of school climate

Fifteen to fifty percent of ARA incidents occurred at school (Fineran & Bolen, 2006), and school is an important developmental context during adolescence (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Thus, we consider how school-level characteristics may be associated with physical ARA victimization. We focus on school climate, which we define as the school social environment, including norms, values, and interactions (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009).

A growing number of studies have focused on the social-ecological influences from parents and peers on ARA, via social learning theory (Foshee et al., 2011); few have considered the role of schools (including school staff and teachers), which increasingly shape adolescent values, attitudes, and behaviors into adulthood (Giordano, Kaufman, Manning, & Longmore, 2015). In particular, our theoretical framework is grounded in the notion that social settings can influence human behavior and human development, as informed by theories like the socioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and person- and stage-environment fit (Eccles et al., 1993). We use social learning theory to build upon this by emphasizing that individuals learn from their peers and prior events about what behaviors are appropriate and emulate those behaviors accordingly (Rosenstock, Strecher, & Becker, 1988). This could drive links between school climate and ARA if adolescents see peers behave antisocially in ways that make the school climate more negative and determine that those are appropriate ways to act in dating relationships, thereby leading to ARA.

There is substantial empirical support for school climate potentially being associated with adolescent relationship abuse. Positive school climate is associated with reduced violence and aggression in schools (Astor, Meyer, & Behre, 1999; Birnbaum et al., 2003; Johnson, Burke, & Gielen, 2011; Steffgen, Recchia, & Viechtbauer, 2013), verbal victimization (Attar-Schwartz & Khoury-Kassabri, 2008), bullying (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009) and sexual harassment (Attar-Schwartz, 2009). Given that bullying and sexual violence perpetration share many risk factors (Basile, Espelage, Rivers, McMahon, & Simon, 2009), positive school climate could plausibly be associated with reduced physical ARA victimization, an aspect of sexual violence. Positive school climate is also associated with improved mental health (Wang & Dishion, 2011), social emotional learning, and other developmental outcomes, which may influence romantic relationship patterns. School climate is fundamentally relational (Eccles & Roeser, 2011), and students' relations with their peers, parents, teachers, and staff can extend into their romantic relationships (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009).

For the purposes of this study, we examined five salient dimensions of school climate: school connectedness, caring relationships with school-based adults, meaningful opportunities for participation, students' perceived safety, and student's experience of violence victimization. Each of these dimensions represents one of the National School Climate Center's four major areas of school climate assessment: institutional environment (school connectedness), interpersonal relationships (caring relationships with school-based adults), teaching and learning (meaningful opportunities for participation), and safety (student's perceived safety and violence victimization) (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). We consider bullying as a separate exposure of interest, even though it can also be considered an aspect of the safety dimension of school climate.

### 1.3. The potential moderating effects of student and school characteristics

School climate in California high schools varies by student- (e.g., race and ethnicity, parental education and income levels) and school-level characteristics (e.g., urbanicity, school size) (Jain, Cohen, Huang, Hanson, & Austin, 2015). Thus, it is possible that specific student- or school-level characteristics may moderate the association between school climate and student outcomes. Sex and socioeconomic status (SES) could plausibly moderate the association between school climate and physical ARA. Physical ARA severity (both in isolation and in combination with other ARA types) and related risk factors were more common among women (Foshee, Reyes, & Ennett, 2010; Niolon et al., 2015). Additionally, school climate dimensions influenced student outcomes differently for females versus males (Thapa et al., 2013). Thus, it is important to examine whether the school climate-ARA association differ by sex.

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