

WHAT IS DATING VIOLENCE AND HOW COMMON IS IT AMONG CANADIAN YOUTH?

Dating and romantic relationships figure prominently in the lives of Canadian adolescents and young adults. Media often portray these relationships in the light of emotional and sexual intimacy built on trust, understanding and mutual respect. Some young people do have dating and relationship experiences that fit some of these characteristics but others may find themselves in relationships with various types of emotional, physical or sexual abuse. These kinds of negative experiences are often referred to broadly as “dating violence” although as we will see below researchers include a variety of experiences in this category. So what does the recent research tell us about dating and dating violence among Canadian youth?

OCCURRENCE OF DATING AMONG CANADIAN YOUTH

According to Canada’s National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth, 71% of respondents reported that they had dated by the age of 15. In a study of 910 female and male high school students in grades 9 to 12 in Ontario, Connolly and McIsaac (2009) found that 75% had either a current or past experience of a romantic relationship; 44% reported 3-5 such relationships and 37% reported more than five. The most commonly reported length of the most recent relationship was less than one year but more than one month. Overall, the research indicates that dating is very common. It should be noted that studies that ask about dating experiences must address misunderstandings associated with terms such as “dating,” “boyfriend,” and “girlfriend.” These terms are not always understood and defined in the same way from study to study. Participants may also have different definitions. Comparisons between studies should thus be done with caution.

OCCURRENCE OF VIOLENCE IN DATING RELATIONSHIPS

As is the case with the terms used to describe dating and romantic relationships, the definition of what is meant by dating violence also varies between studies. Researchers may ask respondents if they have experienced or engaged in a range of aggressive actions such as pushing, shoving, slapping, pulling hair, and punching. Aggression can be defined not only as physical acts but also as emotional and psychological abuse which may involve verbal threats, controlling behaviour, insults and belittling comments that attack a person’s self-esteem and personal sense of worth. Some studies also ask about having experienced or engaged in any form of sexual abuse ranging from unwanted touching to forced sexual intercourse.

In their review of the literature for their comparative study of dating aggression in Canada and Italy, Connolly et al. (2010) estimated that between 30 and 50% of adolescents had experienced some form of physical aggression in at least one romantic dating relationship and that both males and females engaged in such activity. The Canadian data for the Connolly et al. study came from high school students in southern Ontario schools (average age 15.4 years, 66.7% living with both biological parents, 73.7% of European background, with 12.1% Asian, 9.2% Caribbean/African and 5% other). Overall 33% of students had at least one experience of aggression with a current or past partner. The terms the authors used to define aggressive behaviour were taken from the Conflict Tactic Scale, and included such actions as: pushing, spitting, pulling hair, scratching, slapping, kicking, biting, twisting an arm, throwing, smashing, choking, punching, and slamming against a wall. The researchers also looked at the level of conflict within the relationship as well as the power dynamics between partners. Perhaps not surprisingly, research shows that relationships with a high degree of verbal abuse are more likely to lead to physical aggression. As well, when there is a power imbalance in a relationship, there is a higher likelihood of physical aggression occurring. Such relationships are characterized by one partner who is perceived to be more in control and who typically makes decisions for the other partner.



Sears and Byers (2010) surveyed 627 youth, aged 12 to 18, from 4 schools in an Atlantic province, to determine their experiences with and attitudes towards dating violence, both physical and psychological. The results showed that 62% of girls and 60% of boys had experienced some form of psychological violence, defined as insults, threats and controlling behaviour. More boys (41%) than girls (29%) reported that they had been victims of physical aggression. Both boys (40%) and girls (44%) had experienced some form of sexual coercion. The study also showed that many youth experienced a combination of both physical and psychological abuse in dating relationships.

The authors were interested in whether those who reported violence in relationships were emotionally upset by the experience. Their results indicate that girls tended to be more upset than boys. However, both boys and girls who feared family violence and reported having friends who had experienced dating violence, were more emotionally upset by their own experiences with dating violence. Low self-esteem was also common among those who were upset by dating violence.

It is interesting to note that those youth who did not seem emotionally upset by their experiences with dating violence, also tended to have friends who had experienced dating violence. In these cases, the authors speculate that dating violence is seen as a social norm, and is not considered to be abnormal or particularly upsetting.

YOUTH RESPONSES TO AN ONLINE OPINION POLL ON DATING VIOLENCE

What do you know about dating violence?

- That it is very common unfortunately. (Female, age 16)
- I know about that. I've had violent girlfriends and the scars to prove it! (Male, age 20)
- I think that dating violence is wrong. Even though someone is being hurt in a relationship, they stay in it because they may not want to be lonely. (Female, age 17)
- I know a lot of people are abused physically and emotionally by their partners. (Female, age 16)

Source: Wekerle, C., and Tanaka, M. (2010). Adolescent dating violence research and violence prevention: An opportunity to support health outcomes. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 19(6), 681-685.

POLICE-REPORTED STATISTICS

While much of the research on youth dating violence indicates that males and females are equally represented as victims and perpetrators, statistics from police-reported incidents of violence tell a different story. Recently published Canadian statistics indicate that overall, 8 in 10 victims of dating violence were women (Mahoney, 2010). For youth in the 15 to 19 age group, 10 times as many females as males reported incidents of dating violence. Almost half (47%) of these incidents involved sexual assault and unwanted touching, and others involved common assault (27%) and uttering threats (12%). In most (88%) reported cases, the perpetrator was older than the victim. It is important to keep in mind that the reported incidents likely represent only a portion of those that actually occur. Canadian statistics on domestic violence have shown that only 72% of victims reported abuse to the police (Mahoney). This tendency to under-report violent experiences is no doubt true in cases of dating violence as well.

Why do police statistics reveal a much higher rate of victimization among young women as compared to young men? It may be that the other studies of youth dating violence examined a broader range of aggression, including emotional, psychological and physical, whereas the police-reported, statistics represented, incidents that involved acts of more extreme physical and sexual violence. These acts are more often committed by males against females. Statistics for spousal violence also reveal that more women than men are victims of physical and sexual aggression.



YOUTH RESPONSES TO AN ONLINE OPINION POLL ON DATING VIOLENCE

What is important for teens to know about in dating or when dating?

- That abuse is not okay, no matter what the other person says, and to always use protection. (Female, age 16)
- You should know the person you are dating. Don't rush into dating someone. Be careful. (Male, age 18)
- Know your partner and your surroundings. (Male, age 18)
- When teens are dating, they should know that you should choose your partner(s) wisely; if they are being hurt, then they can talk it out or get help. (Female, age 17)

Source: Wekerle, C., and Tanaka, M. (2010) Adolescent dating violence research and violence prevention: An opportunity to support health outcomes. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 19(6), 681-685

WHAT IS THE TAKE HOME MESSAGE?

Studies of youth dating relationships reveal disturbingly high rates of emotional, psychological, physical and sexual aggression. Dating violence in adolescence may set the stage for continued abuse in adult relationships. The first step in countering dating violence is acknowledging its existence, and openly challenging the acceptance of violence in intimate relationships. Once this is done, then the underlying factors that contribute to violence and aggression in relationships can be discussed, and ways of resolving conflict before it escalates into violence can be explored.

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