

Partner exploitation and violence in teenage intimate relationships

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Executive summary

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Background

This landmark report from the University of Bristol and the NSPCC looks at the issue of partner violence in teenage intimate relationships. It is the first UK research on teenage partner violence – spanning England, Scotland and Wales – providing a detailed picture of the incidence and impact of this form of violence on the lives of young people. Although a body of evidence exists on adult experiences of domestic violence, very little is known about partner exploitation and violence in teenagers' own intimate relationships and encounters in the UK. Research from the US has highlighted the high level of violence in young people's intimate relationships. However, how these findings apply to the UK context has been unknown. This research, funded by the Big Lottery Fund and the NSPCC, sought to bridge this gap in understanding.

The research project

The research explored with young people their experiences of physical, emotional and sexual forms of violence in their partner relationships, including their coping strategies and views on intervention. A "partner" was defined in the research as any young person with whom they had been intimate; ranging from a serious long-term boyfriend or girlfriend, to a more casual partner or a one-off encounter. The more specific aims included exploring:

- the nature, frequency and dynamics of different forms of partner violence
- if any groups were particularly vulnerable to becoming victims and/or assailants
- wider social processes and structures which underpin such violence.

Methodology

The study used a multi-method approach. A confidential survey was completed by 1,353 young people, between 13 and 17 years old, from eight schools in England, Scotland and Wales. In total, 91 in-depth interviews were undertaken with 62 girls and 29 boys. Careful consideration was paid to ethics and consent throughout the project. A young people's and an adult advisory group provided advice and consultation throughout the two-year project.

Main findings

The survey findings clearly show that violence in young people's intimate relationships should be viewed as a significant child-welfare problem. The findings highlight a range of factors for prevention and intervention programmes. A central issue concerns gender. Girls, compared to boys, reported greater incidence rates for all forms of violence. Girls also experienced violence more frequently and described a greater level of negative impacts on their welfare. The research also found that younger participants (aged 13 to 15 years old) were as likely as older adolescents (aged 16 and over) to experience particular forms of violence. The majority of young people either told a friend about the violence or told no one. Only a minority informed an adult.

Associated factors, both for experiencing and instigating teenage partner violence, included previous experiences of child maltreatment, domestic violence in the family and aggressive peer networks. For girls, having an older partner, and especially a "much older" partner, was associated with the highest levels of victimisation. The bulleted points below are the key findings from the research.

Survey findings

Relationship experiences

- Overall, 88 per cent of young people reported some form of intimate relationship. A lower percentage of south Asian participants reported a relationship.
- Girls' partners were generally slightly older (47 per cent) and a minority (11 per cent) had a "much older" partner. Boys' partners were either the same age or younger than them (79 per cent). Fourteen per cent had a slightly older partner. Fewer than 1 per cent of boys reported a much older partner.
- The majority of young people had a partner of the opposite sex; 4 per cent reported a same-sex partner.
- Young people with experience of family violence were more likely to have experienced a relationship, and more likely to have experienced one at an earlier age than young people with no history of family violence.
- Girls with a history of family violence had an increased likelihood of having an older partner.

Physical partner violence

- Disconcertingly, a quarter of girls and 18 per cent of boys reported some form of physical partner violence.
- One in nine girls and 4 per cent of boys reported severe physical violence.
- Three-quarters of girls and 14 per cent of boys stated that the physical violence had negatively impacted on their welfare.

Emotional partner violence

- Nearly three-quarters of girls and half of boys reported some form of emotional partner violence.
- A third of girls and 6 per cent of boys stated that the emotional violence had negatively affected their wellbeing.
- Most commonly reported forms of emotional violence, irrespective of gender, were “being made fun of” and “constantly being checked up on by partner”.
- More direct or overt forms of abuse were reported more frequently by girls than boys.

Sexual partner violence

- One in three girls and 16 per cent of boys reported some form of sexual partner violence.
- Seventy per cent of girls and 13 per cent of boys stated that the sexual violence had negatively impacted on their welfare.
- The majority were single incidents. However, for a minority of young people, sexual violence was a more regular feature of their relationships.
- Some anomalies existed with regard to boys’ responses, which may call into question the validity of some of the findings on male sexual victimisation.

Wider associated factors

- Girls were more likely than boys to say that the partner violence was experienced repeatedly and also that it either remained at the same level of severity or worsened.
- Family and peer violence were associated with increased susceptibility to all forms of partner violence.
- Having an older partner, and especially a “much older” partner, was a significant risk factor for girls. Overall, three-quarters of girls with a “much older” partner experienced physical violence, 80 per cent emotional violence and 75 per cent sexual violence.
- Having a same-sex partner was also associated with increased incidence rates for all forms of partner violence.

In-depth interview findings

Impact of violence

Girls experienced all three forms of partner violence more frequently than boys and reported more severe forms. Many girls stated that the violence had a highly detrimental impact on their welfare; boys nearly always said it had little, if any, negative consequence, apart from making them annoyed.

Sian: I only went out with him for a week. And then... 'cos I didn't want to do what he wanted to (have sexual intercourse) he just started...picking on me and hitting me.

Boys' experiences of violence

Little evidence existed to support the possibility that boys, although they were negatively affected by their partner's violence, felt unable either to voice or to recognise their vulnerability. Boys minimised their own use of violence as "messaging around". Boys also reported the violence as mutual, although they often used disproportionate force compared to their female partners.

Callum: She tried to batter me but I'm too strong...it's nothing.

Self-blame

For girls issues of self-blame were very prominent, especially in relation to sexual coercion, where girls felt they had "given in" to sexual pressure from their partners. Often it was this aspect of the sexual violence, rather than the act itself, which girls said affected them in the long term.

Coercive control

The level of coercive control in some young people's relationships was highly worrying. Again, girls were most often affected, experiencing high levels of control over where they could go, whom they could see or what they could do. Often girls were under constant surveillance through the use of online technologies, mobile telephones and text messaging. Control often resulted in isolation from peer networks.

Amy: Like when I'd be out with my friends and he'd drag me off and say he didn't want me out any longer and I'd got to go in and it could be like half past six.

In some cases girls were unsure if their partner's behaviour was caring concern or coercive control. However, many girls often stated they were too scared of their partner's reaction to challenge their behaviour; boys did not experience this fear and ignored their partner's attempts at control or ended the relationship.

Interviewer: How did you deal with it [constant checking up by phone]?

Josh: I turned my phone off.

Post-relationship violence

Many girls who experienced violence remained in the relationship, often for some considerable time. However, when girls left violent relationships, this sometimes resulted in an escalation of the violence from their ex-partner.

Older male partners

All the girls interviewed who had a "much older" partner, defined by girls as being at least two years older, experienced some form of violence. All acts of severe physical and sexual violence were instigated by older partners. In a few cases, girls under the age of 16 reported that their partner was an adult man, making the relationship illegal.

Support

The majority of young people interviewed told a friend about their experience. Although in many cases peers provided a valuable source of support, in some instances they held inappropriate views about the acceptability of violence.

Moira: Everybody does it [control], I thought he was weird and then I talked to my friends and all their boyfriends are the same.

School learning mentors were the main professionals whom participants approached for help regarding their experiences; all responses were viewed positively. Learning mentors, or an equivalent service, were present in four of the eight schools in the sample.

Tanisha: She's [school mentor] really supportive, she understands and knows what our lives are like at home.

Recommendations

Recognition of teenage partner violence as a significant child welfare problem

Findings from the study have important child welfare implications for all professionals working with children and young people. The research findings clearly highlight partner violence as a significant concern for young people's wellbeing, providing unequivocal evidence for the need to develop more effective safeguards in this area of child welfare. The interviews also indicate that younger children, aged 12 years and under, require protection in this area too. Clearly, adult domestic violence often starts at a much younger age than previously recognised.

Impact of teenage partner violence – the gender divide

The impact of partner violence is indisputably differentiated by gender; girl victims report much higher levels of negative impact than do boys. This is not to imply that boys' experiences of victimisation should be ignored. It may be that boys minimise the impact of the violence due to the need to portray a certain form of masculinity. However, although intervention programmes should ensure that the needs of both girls and boys are recognised, it is important that the wider experiences of girls remain a focus. In addition, boys' minimisation of their own use of violence – by dismissing it as “messing around” and justifications based on mutual aggression – needs to be challenged.

Different forms of partner violence

The importance of recognising all three forms of partner violence is clearly shown in the research findings. Teenage partner violence requires a coherent approach to prevention, which recognises specific forms of violence, both in isolation, and also in relation to each other in young people's relationships. The presence and recognition of coercive control in young people's relationships, and the isolation from support networks this can cause, require particular attention.

New technologies

A central mechanism for partners to extend their exploitation and control was through the use of new technologies. This research provides new and important insights into this under-recognised area of partner violence. New communication technologies are a central aspect of young people's social lives, including their intimate relationships. However, new technologies

also provide a mechanism by which exploitation and control can be extended to all aspects of young people's lives, including their families and peer networks. This use of new technologies to control partners requires challenging through safeguarding initiatives for young people.

Family and peer violence

A history of family or peer violence was significantly associated with greater susceptibility to partner violence. Consequently, child welfare professionals working with adolescents, especially those who have experienced family or peer violence, need to ensure their experiences of partner violence are also addressed. As teenage partner abuse is rarely reported to adults, it is important that professionals routinely include this area in their overall assessments of young people's needs.

Older boyfriends

Perhaps one of the most disconcerting findings concerned violence from older partners, and especially "much older" partners. The level of exploitation and violence in these relationships is so pronounced that it may be appropriate to consider any girl with "a much older" partner as a child in need. Guidance on this issue, such as that contained in *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (HM Government, 2006), needs to emphasise that, in professional assessments of harm, older partners – and especially "much older" partners – routinely represent a significant risk factor.

Enhancing help-seeking

Young people's help-seeking strategies, which favour peers, need to be acknowledged in school-based intervention programmes aimed at reducing teenage partner violence. Peer support and counselling schemes have been established in a number of UK schools, although their remit is often limited to bullying. This service should be expanded to include this important area of peer violence.

Adult learning mentors were identified by young people as a source of appropriate support and advice. The central role of learning mentors is to develop and maintain effective and supportive mentoring relationships with young people and those engaged with them. Young people's acceptance of the accessibility of learning mentor schemes provides a valuable message for professionals working with adolescents in this area of child welfare. There is an important potential role here for organisations such as the NSPCC and domestic violence agencies seeking to develop services for young people.

It is also important that personal, social and health education (PSHE) classes focus on physical, sexual and emotional forms of partner violence. The role of coercive control in underpinning other forms of violence, as well as isolating victims from support networks, requires particular attention. Parents need better advice on supporting their children in their intimate relationships, including guidance on how to protect them from associated harm.

References

HM Government (2006) *Working Together to Safeguard Children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children*. London: TSO.
www.ecm.gov.uk/safeguardingandsocialcare

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