



CALIFORNIA
WOMEN'S
LAW CENTER

Policy Brief

TEEN DATING VIOLENCE: AN IGNORED EPIDEMIC

“He picked me up and threw me into the wall. I got my stuff and ran out of the house. Then he paged me and put in the code: I love you.”—

17 year-old high school student¹

Debate across the nation concerning what should be done to combat teen violence has narrowly focused on the highly visible, yet infrequent, school shootings. What has been lost in the debate, and thus not considered in the solutions, is the serious and sometimes fatal violence that occurs within teen dating relationships.

“Teen violence” is defined by the behaviors and warning signs directly associated with school shootings, according to governmental organizations, lawmakers, and school officials. This narrow interpretation ignores the violence perpetrated within dating relationships and guarantees that the solutions created will fail to impact the lives of young women in abusive relationships.

The seriousness of violence against young women cannot be overstated.

- Women between the ages of 16 and 24 experience the highest per capita rates of domestic violence.²
- Nearly 80 percent of teenage girls who are abused remain in the abusive relationship.³
- 40 percent of teenage girls know of someone who has been beaten by her boyfriend.⁴
- 30 percent of all teenage girls who are killed are killed by a boyfriend or former boyfriend.⁵

Teens tend to accept and conform to traditional sexual stereotypes in greater numbers than adults. This basic need to belong and be validated by one’s peers creates a situation ripe for control, intimidation, and violence.

Dating violence is a serious problem both within heterosexual and homosexual relationships. While this policy brief does not directly address the addi-

tional complexities involved in dating violence between homosexual couples, the solutions suggested apply to all teens in violent relationships.⁶

Is Dating Violence Really That Serious?

The patterns and signs of teen dating violence tend to mirror those exhibited in adult abusive relationships. Dating violence is violence perpetrated by one partner against another and includes physical abuse ranging from pushing, to throwing objects, to attacking with weapons, as well as sexual and emotional abuse.⁷ Abusive boys, like abusive men, intimidate, physically threaten, force sexual intimacy, isolate young women from friends and family, equate possessiveness and jealousy with love, and use their social status to establish control over the women in their lives.

Teen dating violence is disturbingly common. Approximately 33 percent of teenagers will experience some degree of dating violence.⁸ A recent study found that 15 percent of teens have been punched with a closed fist by their dates, 27 percent have punched their dates, and 4.5 percent have been threatened or attacked with a weapon by their dates.⁹ Despite these glaring statistics, parents continue to deny the existence of dating violence. According to a national poll, of 456 parents surveyed, 80 percent were unaware or did not believe that there was a problem with dating violence in their children’s schools.¹⁰

The erroneous perception parents have of the prevalence of dating violence is partly the result of victims not feeling comfortable reporting the violence to adults. Teen dating violence usually occurs in private, silently hidden from the world. A recent study found that 23 percent of teens involved in violent relationships never reported the abuse.¹¹ Of those who did tell someone, the majority told a friend and the incident never reached an adult who could help.

In general, teen victims simply have not been taught what to do when confronted with violent dating situations. In fact, Massachusetts is the only state that has

allocated resources to fund domestic violence prevention programs in secondary schools.¹² When schools fail to educate young women and men about dating violence, teens are left without guidance on how to recognize or react to abusive situations, whether they are directly involved or witness it among their friends.

Dating Violence Cannot be Treated as Only an Adult Problem

California law distinguishes between teen dating violence and adult domestic violence by requiring that all violence toward minors under the age of 18 be reported as child abuse.¹³ This distinction irrationally labels the same type of violent behavior differently based solely on the age of the victim. Doing this creates inaccurate statistics regarding both the prevalence of child abuse and of teen dating violence. Additionally, because child abuse is under the jurisdiction of Child Protective Services, mislabeling dating violence as child abuse often delays the involvement of law enforcement allowing the batterer to elude serious punishment.

When dating violence is reported as child abuse, the statistics become skewed and the pervasiveness of the violence is hidden. These inaccurate statistics reinforce the myth that dating violence is not a problem that schools, parents, and lawmakers need to address.

Failing to exempt dating violence from the child abuse reporting statutes inappropriately isolates teen dating violence from adult dating violence. When a young woman is abused by her boyfriend, the abuse should not be treated differently simply because she is a minor.

Teen Dating Violence Requires Special Attention

While teen dating violence is in many ways identical to adult domestic violence, research suggests that teens may be at a higher risk of being in abusive relationships due to their tendency to conform to traditional sexual stereotypes.¹⁴ Peer pressure plays an enormous role in dating vio-

lence. Abusive boys, like men who are violent toward their partners, are often outwardly charming and well-liked. Such behavior often makes it difficult for women to leave abusive relationships; the situation can be especially problematic for teenage girls.

The failure to address teen dating violence is especially damaging to adolescent girls due to the cyclical nature of domestic violence. Many children who grow up in violent homes recreate the violence in their peer relationships. Girls who are abused at young ages tend to involve themselves with abusive men as they grow older. Likewise, without intervention, a teenage boy who is battering his girlfriend will continue to use controlling behavior as he enters adulthood.

By ignoring the prevalence of dating violence, parents and schools give teens little to no assistance understanding and addressing the aspects of themselves and their lives that lead them to violence. Without adequate support systems, problem solving abilities, and coping skills, teens—both batterers and victims—are likely to continue the cycle of violence into their adult lives.

Availability and Enforcement of Restraining Orders

California law allows a minor 12 years old or older to petition the court for a restraining order against a family member or a non-family member.¹⁵ Restraining orders give the court power to prevent contact between a victim and her abuser. Typically this includes ordering the abuser not to go within a certain number of feet of the victim and to have no contact with her. Teenage girls, however, are often not aware that restraining orders are available to them.

Teens who are involved in relationships usually attend the same school as their abuser, further complicating the situation. The pressure to conform and be liked can be sufficiently strong to deter a young woman from seeking a restraining order unless she is outwardly supported by the school staff and her peers. Schools often respond to restraining orders by transferring the batterer to another school. While frequently this is an appropriate response, without adequate support by faculty and friends, it can end up hurting the victim. Classmates may blame the victim

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for seeking the order and forcing the batterer to leave the school. This problem is enhanced when the batterer is popular with both his peers and faculty. Clearly, without a support system in place, a victim may fear being alienated from the school community so much that she will choose not to seek a restraining order at all.

Teen Dating Violence and Its Relationship to Pregnancy

There is a direct correlation between teen dating violence and pregnancy. Abused teens are four to six times more likely to become pregnant than non-abused teens.¹⁶ Similarly, teens are more likely to be abused during pregnancy. Studies have shown that dating violence either “begins or intensifies when boyfriends learn of pregnancy.”¹⁷ Additionally, while over 70 percent of pregnant teens are abused by their boyfriends, 6 percent of adult pregnant women are abused.¹⁸

The fact that pregnant and parenting teens tend to have few resources and are often subject to blame and judgment by adults makes it unlikely that they will seek assistance. The lack of support, whether perceived or actual, coupled with the stress of pregnancy, greatly increases feelings of isolation and helplessness, thus making young women more likely to remain in abusive relationships.

What Can Be Done

While the legal and educational systems have begun to address school sexual harassment, they have been slow to address teen dating violence. Lawmakers and school officials must consider the pervasiveness and complexity of teen dating violence when drafting laws and school regulations.

The California legislature should require all secondary public schools to implement permanent educational curricula addressing teen dating violence and the availability of restraining orders.

School officials must recognize and address the fact that young women often are not aware that they are in abusive relationships. Likewise, young men often

believe that abuse toward their girlfriends is not a crime. Schools are the most appropriate places to educate young women and men about dating violence as well as effective prevention strategies.

Furthermore, the right to obtain a restraining order can be a very powerful tool for young women in abusive relationships. Without proper education, however, the laws often fail to reach the young women whom they are designed to protect.

School officials should ensure that adequate counseling is available to all students.

Schools should hire counselors who are specifically trained in domestic violence in order to address the complexities inherent in dating violence. Furthermore, funding should be allocated to train current counselors, school-based health care providers, and teachers in how to recognize signs and how to address dating violence effectively.

Schools should implement policies requiring that school officials report incidents of dating violence separately from other violent incidents.

Dating violence generally does not occur as an isolated incident. Thus, patterns of abuse are recognizable if accurately reported, and identifying these patterns of abuse will help officials develop effective policies to address dating violence. Complaints or reports of dating violence should be kept separate from other reports of student on student assaults in order to facilitate the awareness of patterns of violence that may emerge.

Schools should utilize record keeping systems that track the existence of restraining orders against students to help school officials effectively enforce the orders.

A restraining order is ineffective if violations of the order are not reported. It is crucial that teachers and other school officials know when a student has a restraining order against another student. A system that tracks all restraining orders obtained by students will serve to notify school employees that an order exists, thus enabling them to recognize subsequent violations.¹⁹

Current domestic violence and child abuse laws should be amended to respond more effectively

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to the needs of young women who are in violent relationships.

Teen dating violence must be recognized and reported by the legal system as domestic violence. Child abuse reporting laws must be modified to recognize and fully account for young women under the age of 18 who are victims of dating violence. Failing to label teen dating violence appropriately denies its connection to domestic violence thus minimizing its seriousness.

Research into the causes and prevention of dating violence should be increased and inclusive of same-sex relationships.

Comprehensive research should be done into all issues surrounding teen dating violence, including violence between same-sex couples. Full and detailed

research and data collection will enable policy makers to create more effective laws to combat dating violence.

Conclusion

Ignoring the pervasiveness and danger of teen dating violence marginalizes the terrifying experiences confronting young women daily. Young women and men cannot be called upon to recognize and stop the violence within their relationships without assistance from both the legal and educational systems. A student who participated in the domestic violence class at SELF High School in Irvine, California clearly illustrated this point when she said, "If I hadn't taken the class, I wouldn't have known I was in an abusive relationship. I thought it was normal."²⁰

¹ Liz Brody, *Bad Love*, JUMP MAGAZINE, Nov./Dec. 1997, at 81-82.

² CALLIE MARIE RENNISON AND SARAH WELCHANS, U.S. DEP'T. OF JUSTICE, SPECIAL REPORT: INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE (2000).

³ Liz Claiborne, Inc., Women's Work, *Love is Not Abuse, Fact Sheet, Fast Facts*, available at http://www.loveisnotabuse.com/fast_facts.asp (last visited July 18, 2001).

⁴ National Domestic Violence Hotline, *National Domestic Violence Fact Sheet and Statistics, Incidence of Partner Abuse*, available at <http://www.ndvh.org/ndvh2.html> (last visited July 17, 2001).

⁵ Memorandum from Sally Borden, Executive Director and Karen Shue, Interim Director of Community Education, *Teen Dating Violence* (on file with the California Women's Law Center).

⁶ For more extensive research on teen dating violence involving gay and lesbian couples, see Naomi Freedner et al., *Dating Violence Among Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Heterosexual Adolescents: Results From a Community Survey* (unpublished results of a community survey, Violence Prevention Consulting Group, a Division of Adolescent Medicine, Children's Hospital, Boston) (on file with the California Women's Law Center).

⁷ See Alwyn Cohall MD et al., *Love Shouldn't Hurt: Strategies for Health Care Providers to Address Adolescent Dating Violence*, [3] 54 J. Am. Med. Women's Ass'n. 144, 144-145 (1999).

⁸ See Barrie Levy & Patricia Occhiuzo Giggans, *What Parents Need to Know About Dating Violence*, Nat'l Council of Jewish Women J., Summer 20 (1997).

⁹ See Cohall, *supra* note 7, at 145.

¹⁰ See Press Release, The Empower Program, *Violence as a Rite of Passage*, available at http://www.empowered.org/Press/press_releases.htm (2000).

¹¹ See Cohall, *supra* note 7, at 146.

¹² See Marcella Bombardieri, *An Early Start to Try to Stop Domestic Abuse*, Boston Globe, Apr. 11, 2001, available at 2001 WL 3928482.

¹³ California Penal Code §11165 et seq. requires that teachers and health officials, among others, report to Child Protective Services (CPS) any suspected abuse of a minor under the age of 18, including those minors who are married or emancipated. See CAL. PENAL CODE §§ 11165-11165.6 (Deering 2001).

¹⁴ See Roger J.R. Levesque, *Dating Violence, Adolescents, and the Law*, 4 VA. J. Soc. Pol'y & L., 339, 347 (1997).

¹⁵ See CAL. FAM. CODE § 6301a (Deering 2001); CAL. CIV. PROC. CODE § 372(b) (Deering 2001).

¹⁶ See Lindsey Tanner, *Many Teenage Girls Victimized by Dates*, THE ADVOCATE (Baton Rouge, LA), Aug. 1, 2001, at Metro.

¹⁷ Levesque, *supra* note 14, at 352.

¹⁸ See The Children's Program, *Fact Sheet: Children and Domestic Violence*, available at <http://ivpf.org/programs/display.php?DocID=77> (last visited July 18, 2001); Connecticut Clearinghouse, *Helping Victims of Teen Dating Violence*, (on file with Connecticut Clearinghouse; reprint requests to: Connecticut Clearinghouse, 334 Farmington Ave., Plainville, CT 06062).

¹⁹ Massachusetts has employed a restraining order tracking system that requires school officials to track restraining orders issued to students. See Bombardieri, *supra* note 12.

²⁰ Michael Datcher, *Beat it*, available at

<http://www.salon.com/news/1998/01/28news.html> (Jan. 28, 1998) (last visited Aug. 22, 2001).

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