

# Teen Dating Violence, Sexual Harassment, and Bullying Among Middle School Students: Examining Mediation and Moderated Mediation by Gender

## WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

The purpose of the current study was to assess the relationship between teen dating violence (TDV) and other forms of aggression over time. Specifically, the researchers used a longitudinal design (a design that gathers data from participants at multiple time points) to examine the relationship between sexual harassment perpetration, bullying perpetration, and dating violence among adolescents in middle school. Middle school is a transition period where children move into adolescence and are faced with new challenges such as new social groups and more responsibilities. During this developmental period, social groups often shift toward mixed-gender friendships and aggressive behaviours also shift as adolescents are faced with new age-specific challenges. Aggression may be viewed as positive by the adolescent as it often serves their needs to assert power and control within social circles.

This aggression may first appear in the form of bullying, shifting to sexual harassment as sexuality becomes more relevant and important in adolescents' lives, and eventually may lead to TDV as adolescents begin dating and sexual relationships. Research has shown that bullying perpetration precedes sexual harassment perpetration, suggesting that sexual harassment may be predicted by bullying (i.e., bullying at a young age may lead to sexual harassment when the child gets older). There is some research that also suggests sexual violence is associated with both bullying and sexual harassment, meaning youth who engage in one of these forms of aggression may also engage in the others. What is unknown is whether sexual harassment mediates (i.e., explains) the relationship between bullying and TDV and whether gender has an impact on any of the relationships between different forms of aggression.

## WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

Participants were recruited from four schools across the United States that ranged in school size, percentage of free/reduced price lunch (a measure designed to assess household income), race/ethnicity, and socio-historical and cultural city contexts. Assent was received from students and parental permission was also obtained. From 2010-2012, students filled out questionnaires every 6 months (beginning in the fall of 7th grade and continuing until the spring of 8th grade). Participants filled out surveys in English or Spanish about five types of aggression perpetration over the last 6 month period: physical dating violence (e.g., pushed, grabbed), psychological dating violence (e.g., insulting in front of others), electronic dating violence (e.g., spreading rumours about their partner electronically), sexual harassment (e.g., uninvited touching), and bullying (e.g., threatening to hurt or hit someone). Participants could respond "never" or "any" for each question. 612 students were included in the final sample for this paper. Students were excluded from the total study sample of 1516 students if they did not complete surveys for all time points and if they were not consistently dating throughout the length of the study.

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW:

- Understanding the relationship between sexual harassment, bullying, and teen dating violence perpetration is important to help create and guide targeted intervention programs to help reduce aggressive behaviour that may later lead to TDV
- Overall, results of this study indicated that sexual harassment did not explain the relationship between bullying and TDV perpetration.
- Instead, both bullying and sexual harassment perpetration predicted TDV perpetration at later time points.



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## **WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?**

The current study found that bullying perpetration at the first time point (fall of seventh grade) significantly predicted TDV perpetration at the third time point (fall of eighth grade). This means that individuals who engaged in bullying perpetration initially were more likely to engage in TDV perpetration 12 months later. However, this finding was only for girls (i.e., for boys, there was not a relationship between bullying and TDV perpetration). One possible explanation the authors suggest is that boys may choose to use forms of aggression that assert their masculinity (i.e., sexual harassment, TDV) more than forms that are not as gender-based (i.e., bullying). For boys, the only significant relationship was found between sexual harassment at the second time point (spring of seventh grade) and TDV at the third time point (fall of eighth grade). This finding further supports the idea that bullying perpetration may function separately from TDV and sexual harassment perpetration for boys. As mentioned previously, this may be due to males using aggression as a form of asserting their masculinity, and general bullying perpetration may not necessarily meet this purpose. It's important to note that the measures in this study did not include data about same-sex sexual harassment, and findings may differ for sexual harassment and TDV in same-sex relationships.

## **HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?**

The research findings of the current study can be helpful when creating and implementing prevention and intervention programs for youth violence. For example, the results highlight the importance of early targeted bullying prevention programs for both girls and boys that target bullying perpetration and sexual harassment, as these may be helpful to reduce later perpetration of TDV. Such integrated programs that target multiple forms of aggression would provide a more holistic understanding of relationships between types of violence, as current programs tend to focus on only one form of aggression. Future research should also continue to examine the temporal relationships of different forms of interpersonal aggression, considering both gender and sexual identity to better understand potential differences in aggression pathways.

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## **KEYWORDS**

Bullying, Sexual harassment, Teen dating violence, Gender, Adolescents, Longitudinal, United States

## **FULL REFERENCE**

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