



The National Prevalence of Adolescent Dating Violence in Canada

WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

Violence experienced in the context of dating and/or sexual relationships is a serious problem in Canada. While intimate partner violence can happen at any age, violence that occurs during adolescence (adolescent dating violence, or ADV) is particularly concerning. ADV is commonly defined as physical, sexual and/or psychological violence, including stalking, experienced in dating and/or sexual relationships from ages 11-18. When ADV is experienced online, it is called cyber dating aggression/abuse, and includes methods of control and harassment through the use of technology and/or forms of media. Adolescents who experience ADV are subsequently at increased risk for many negative outcomes, such as re-victimization in adulthood, mental health problems and substance use.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW:

- The consequences of adolescent dating violence (ADV) on the lives of youth are serious, and thus national prevalence data is needed in order to establish effective prevention initiatives in Canada.
- The results of this study suggest that ADV is a serious health problem that impacts a substantial minority of Canadian youth. 1 in 3 youth reported experiencing any physical, psychological and/or cyber ADV, and 1 in 7 reported perpetrating any physical, psychological and/or cyber ADV.
- ADV prevention programs that focus on root causes of violence (e.g. poverty, racism) are needed.

The national prevalence of ADV in Canada is currently unknown. Without national prevalence data, it is hard to offer effective prevention supports and understand the potential health impact of ADV for Canadian youth. In the current study, researchers aimed to 1) report national prevalence estimates of ADV among Canadian adolescents in the past year, and 2) explore differences between those who have a) experienced and b) used ADV, as compared to people who neither experienced nor used ADV in the past year.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

The researchers analyzed data from 3,711 adolescents in grades 9 and 10 who had consistently reported dating experience in the past year. The data used were from the 2017/2018 Health Behavior in School-Aged Children (HBSC) study, a nationally representative survey of Canadian youth, which explored experiences of physical, psychological and cyber ADV among adolescents. There were three questions for victimization (experiencing ADV), and three questions for perpetration (using ADV against someone else). For victimization, youth were asked if someone they were dating or going out with 1) physically hurt you on purpose, 2) tried to control you or emotionally hurt you, and/or 3) used social media to hurt, embarrass or monitor you. For perpetration, youth were asked if they had 1) physically hurt someone you were dating on purpose, 2) tried to control or emotionally hurt someone you were dating, and/or 3) used social media to hurt, embarrass or monitor someone you were dating.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?

For ADV victimization, 11.8% of youth reported having experienced physical aggression; 28.7% reported having experienced psychological aggression; and 17.5% reported having experienced cyber aggression. For ADV perpetration, 7.3% reported using physical aggression; 9.3% reported using psychological aggression; and 7.8% reported using cyber aggression. Both victimization and perpetration were highest among non-binary youth (compared to cis-gender males and females).

For both boys and girls who reported any ADV, victimization alone was the most common experience (59.1% and 64.4%, respectively). In comparison, mutual aggression (i.e., the experience of both victimization and perpetration) was reported by 34.1% of boys and 28.9% of girls. 82.6% of youth who reported any perpetration said that this perpetration was part of mutual aggression in the relationship, whereas only 33.4% of youth who reported any victimization reported that this victimization was part of mutual aggression in the relationship. These findings suggest two common ADV patterns: those who both use and experience ADV (i.e. mutual aggression), and those who only experience ADV (victimization).

Older students, students reported a female or non-binary gender identity, those living in a single parents/other household, and those who reported food insecurity and lower family affluence reported more ADV victimization. For ADV perpetration, youth who were older, reported a non-binary gender identity, came from a racialized group (i.e., non-White), were a first or second generation Canadian, and experienced food insecurity and lower family affluence reported more use of ADV. Overall, use and experience of ADV was most common in youth experiencing social marginalization (e.g., poverty, racism).

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

The findings of this study can be helpful when creating and implementing prevention and intervention programs for ADV. This research shows ADV is a concerningly common experience for Canadian youth. Thus, prevention of this experience is very important. Policy makers and youth program developers can use this research to create programs and initiatives that target youth who are most at risk for ADV: namely, socially marginalized youth. Future research should explore questions related to sexual victimization and perpetration, as well as the context in which specific ADV behaviours occur.

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