

# Study looks at the lives of boys who commit dating violence

October 14 2008

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A new study sheds light on the lives of teenage boys who abuse their girlfriends. In their own words, the young men often describe facing challenges such as growing up with troubled family lives, having little or no support when they began to fail at school, and witnessing violence in their own homes and communities. The study advocates broadening the view of abusive behaviors within dating relationships to explore the myriad environments — school, home and community — that affect boys' lives and actions.

"Until now, we did not have much information on young men who hurt their partners," said Elizabeth Miller, the study's senior author and an assistant professor of pediatrics at UC Davis Children's Hospital. "This is a critically important piece of the puzzle in terms of designing meaningful prevention and intervention programs to prevent adolescent relationship violence."

The study, "The Social and Emotional Contexts of Adolescent and Young Adult Male Perpetrators of Intimate Partner Violence: A Qualitative Study," appeared online in the September issue of the *American Journal of Men's Health*. It is the first qualitative study to document the social and environmental factors experienced by adolescent males who have abused dating partners.

Despite multiple studies on the consequences of dating violence for girls, Miller said researchers still lack an understanding of the fundamental social and environmental factors that promote male violence within

dating relationships — information that is crucial to guiding its prevention.

"While less is known about what leads to male violence within dating relationships, existing studies have often pointed to individual characteristics of males, such as substance abuse or having traditional attitudes towards women," said Elizabeth Reed, the study's lead author and a graduate student at Harvard University at the time the research was conducted. "However, we need to also conduct research that considers aspects of environments — such as family life, school, peer environment and communities — that might promote such characteristics among boys. Violence in dating affects certain groups of boys more than others. We need to look beyond individuals to see how environments play a role in this important public health problem, and address the issue in a way that considers factors much larger than individual choices and behaviors."

For the study, Miller and Reed conducted in-depth interviews with 19 boys, ages 14 to 20, with known histories of perpetrating intimate partner violence and who lived in mostly urban neighborhoods in metropolitan Boston, where Miller worked before moving to Sacramento, Calif., two years ago. The researchers identified common themes — from listening to boys who had been referred by their schools or families to an intervention program for abusive behavior with girlfriends. They also gathered information from their previous work. In 2007, Miller and her colleagues completed a survey of 825 Boston-area youth that was designed to assess the prevalence of and factors related to teen dating violence among those who utilize confidential adolescent health clinics. The current study was part of this larger research project on adolescent relationship violence and health.

For the interview-based study, researchers identified common themes — from listening to boys who had been referred by their schools or families

to an intervention program for abusive behavior with girlfriends.

"The themes that often came up in interviews included problematic home environments, inadequate support at school, community contexts characterized by violence and peer interactions that encourage the sexual maltreatment of girls," said Reed, who is now a postdoctoral fellow at Duke University in Durham, N.C. "The findings of our study suggest that it will not be effective to focus on the influence of one of these contexts alone. We need to understand the complex interplay of how they influence boys' behavior within intimate relationships. Intervention programs that aim to address boys' abusive behaviors toward their girlfriends may be more effective if they also address a broad array of difficulties faced within boys' lives. However, we need more research on this topic to know for sure."

Miller and Reed said that the study is from an urban sample of boys in programs for dating violence perpetration and, therefore, does not represent all boys who perpetrate abusive behaviors toward girlfriends. However, it offers some important, initial insights into the life contexts of boys that may contribute to dating violence.

"Many intervention studies have assumed that talking to students in schools about dating violence will do the trick," Miller explained. "It's not that simple. We really need to do meaningful prevention that addresses the failures of the structures and systems in place that are supposed to support these boys. For example, the lack of positive mentorship and support at home and in school are key factors. Given staggering high school drop-out rates, school-based programs cannot reach those males who have already dropped out of school."

Miller is conducting a research study on a dating violence prevention program called Coaching Boys into Men, sponsored by the Family Violence Prevention Fund. The program trains coaches to work with

high school-aged athletes to stop violence against women and girls. In addition to the research study, Miller is establishing a Sacramento-based Coaching Boys into Men program.

Miller also continues to support young women through a dating violence intervention program based in Planned Parenthood clinics and funded by the National Institutes of Health. Through the program, family planning counselors in Northern California will be trained to talk to patients about how intimate partner violence may be affecting their reproductive and sexual health.

"We need to design dating violence prevention programs that meet these young men and women where they are and that speak directly to their needs — emotionally, socially, academically — and literally at the places where they hang out. That might be on a sports field or in a Planned Parenthood clinic," Miller said.

Source: University of California - Davis

Citation: Study looks at the lives of boys who commit dating violence (2008, October 14)  
retrieved 28 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-10-boys-commit-dating-violence.html>

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