

Intimate partner violence among youth linked to suicide, weapons and drug use

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Pamela Orpinas is a professor in the College of Public Health's Department of Health Promotion and Behavior. Credit: Paul Efland/UGA

Adolescents who are violent toward their romantic partners are also more likely to think about or attempt suicide, carry a weapon, threaten

others with a weapon and use drugs or alcohol than peers in non-violent relationships, according to new research from the University of Georgia.

The study, published recently in the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, followed a randomly selected cohort of 588 Georgia students for seven consecutive years as they progressed through middle and high school. During that period, students self-reported instances of slapping, kicking, punching, scratching or shoving a romantic partner; slamming a partner against a wall; throwing something at a partner that could cause injury; or using an object to injure a partner.

"Intimate partner [violence](#) is a serious public health problem," said Pamela Orpinas, lead author of the study and professor of health promotion and behavior in UGA's College of Public Health. "It affects people in the moment because of the aggression, but it also has long-term consequences."

In a previous study, the researchers identified two groups from their cohort: students who were not involved in dating violence during the seven years of the study and students with an increasing probability of violence. Two-thirds of the students indicated low to nonexistent levels of [physical violence](#), and one-third had an increasing probability of committing acts of physical aggression toward a romantic partner.

Students in this latter group were two to three times as likely to think about killing themselves and to attempt suicide than peers who reported low levels of physical violence in their romantic relationships.

More than half of the students in violent relationships reported carrying a [weapon](#) at least once during the study while less than a third of the low-to no-violence group reported the same. Almost one out of every two students in abusive relationships reported threatening someone with a weapon; fewer than one in five of the students in the nonabusive group

said they used a weapon to intimidate someone.

Both groups increased their levels of alcohol and marijuana use over the course of the study at the same rate. However, students in violent relationships reported higher substance use levels. This group continued to use more marijuana and alcohol and report more instances of getting drunk throughout the seven-year study.

"It's clear that this problem is not an isolated event," Orpinas said. "This study shows how dating violence relates to suicidal thoughts, to weapon carrying, and to alcohol and drug use. If you mix all that together, you have a very deadly combination."

This "cluster of problem behaviors" was evident by the sixth grade, meaning that there were already different levels of violence, drug use, [suicidal thoughts](#) and carrying a weapon between [students](#) in violent relationships and their peers in nonabusive relationships in the first year of the survey.

"This study shows that we need to start very early, earlier than sixth grade, with prevention programs that target this complex group of behaviors," Orpinas said. "Programs targeting one behavior are less likely to be successful. This is a complicated syndrome of behaviors."

More information: Pamela Orpinas et al. Low and Increasing Trajectories of Perpetration of Physical Dating Violence: 7-Year Associations with Suicidal Ideation, Weapons, and Substance Use, *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* (2017). [DOI: 10.1007/s10964-017-0630-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-017-0630-7)

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