



ADVANCING HEALTH EDUCATION & RESEARCH

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AVA Research Review

ADVANCING HEALTH EDUCATION & RESEARCH

Review Title: Emerging evidence on dating violence among gender and sexual minority youth

Reviewer: Heather L. McCauley, ScD and Sarah Zelazny, BA

Article: Dank, M., Lachman, P., Zweig, J.M., Yahner, J. (2014). Dating violence experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth. *J Youth Adolescence*, 43, 846-857. doi: 10.1007/s10964-013-9975-8

Article Summary:

Brief Overview:

Studies on dating violence, including physical, sexual and emotional abuse, have generally not distinguished youth based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. The few studies among self-identified lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) youth indicate that dating violence is common, with evidence for

even greater risk for abuse among bisexual youth. Unique forms of coercion are experienced by LGB youth, including threats of "outing" a partner, indicating that further research is necessary to tailor interventions for this marginalized population.

The authors sought to compare dating violence prevalence and dating violence risk factors and help seeking by sexual and gender identity. Data were collected among 5,647 youth in grades 7-12 from 10 schools in New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. Cross-sectional analyses were restricted to youth who were currently or recently (past year) in a dating relationship (n=3,745). Six percent of the analytic sample identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual questioning, queer or other (LGB). One half of one percent identified as transgender. LGB youth were significantly more likely than heterosexual youth to identify

as transgender. Fourteen percent of LGB youth reported being in a same-sex relationship, 47% reported being in an opposite sex relationship and 38% did not report the gender of their current or most recent dating partner.

The survey, which was delivered in paper-pencil format, assessed physical dating violence, psychological dating abuse, cyber dating abuse, and sexual coercion. Respondents were asked about both victimization and perpetration. Physical violence was measured with 16 items developed and validated by Foshee (1996) that spanned mild, moderate and severe physical violence (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.72-0.86$). Psychological dating abuse was measured with 21 items that assessed threatening behaviors, monitoring, personal insults, and emotional manipulation and fear (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.63-0.88$; Foshee, 1996). Cyber dating abuse was measured with 16 adapted items assessing behaviors such as pressuring partners to send sexual or naked photo of themselves, sending threatening text messages to partners, and using partner's social networking account without permission (Picard 2007). Sexual coercion was measured with three items adapted from Foshee (1996)

and Zweig (1997, 2002), which assessed forced sex, being forced to do sexual things that the person did not want to do, and unwanted sexual intercourse (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.72-0.74$). Other items included school performance, parental involvement, risk behaviors (related to youths' substance use, delinquency, and sexual activity), psychosocial adjustment and social interactions. Notably, the authors are unclear about how help seeking behaviors related to dating violence were assessed.

Relevant Findings:

Dating violence was common among this sample of adolescents. Physical dating violence, psychological abuse, cyber dating abuse and sexual coercion was reported by 30%, 47%, 26% and 13% of all youth, respectively. Perpetration was also common with 21% reporting perpetrating physical dating violence, 26% reporting perpetrating psychological dating abuse, 12% reporting perpetrating cyber dating abuse and 3% reporting perpetrating sexual coercion. Self-identified LGB youth were significantly more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to report dating violence victimization and perpetration. Similarly, transgender youth were more likely than biological male and biological

female youth to report dating violence victimization and perpetration, though it is important to remember that transgender youth only represented 0.5% of the sample ($n=19$). Help seeking behaviors (including seeking any help, seeking help within one day, and seeking help after the first incident) were also more prevalent among LGB survivors.

The authors then ran a series of multivariate logistic regression models restricted to the sub-sample of youth who reported dating violence victimization to assess the association between sexual identity and risk factors for violence victimization. Salient correlates of LGB identity among survivors of dating violence include the number of delinquent acts reported by youth, prior sexual activity, frequent depressive symptoms, and more hours spent on a computer.

Authors' Conclusions:

LGB youth in this sample were at significant risk for dating violence victimization and reported more perpetration than their heterosexual counterparts. This advances the field of dating violence research that has, to date, focused primarily on violence in heterosexual relationships or not distinguished youth by sexual identity. Moreover,

research on dating violence perpetration among LGB youth is scarce, at best. The elevated prevalence of dating violence among transgender youth was another important finding, warranting further research to understand the unique experiences of this vulnerable group. Authors highlight the importance of understanding how race/ethnicity may intersect with LGB identity, though the current study was not able to disentangle the independent effects of race/ethnicity and socio-economic status. Collectively, findings suggest that the school environment might be ideal for violence prevention efforts. The paper highlights potential strategies including improving school climate with respect to homophobic bullying and implementing peer-led dating violence awareness groups to normalize help seeking behaviors.

Potential Limitations:

The authors note several limitations to this study. First, this was a school-based sample of youth so findings cannot be generalized to out-of-school youth who are likely the most vulnerable to violence victimization. Moreover, participants attended schools at which administrators were amenable to this type of research, thus findings cannot be generalized to all school-based youth. Another

limitation is the cross-sectional nature of the survey so it is not possible to determine whether the risk factors assessed in this paper are, in fact, risk factors or consequences of dating violence victimization. Lastly, participants self-reported victimization and perpetration so under or over reporting is possible.

Reviewer's Comments:

This article is important to the field as it is among the first studies to document disparities in dating violence victimization among self-identified LGB youth compared to heterosexual youth. Due to the low population prevalence of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, the sample size of LGB youth and transgender youth was small. Findings among transgender youth, in particular, should be interpreted with caution, as less than 20 youth in the sample identified as such. Another strength of this study was the extensive measurement of dating violence, including physical dating violence, psychological abuse, cyber dating abuse and sexual coercion. The inclusion of cyber dating abuse, in particular, in the context of a conversation about dating violence among LGB youth is important as research on this emerging form of abuse is limited but growing. One measurement limitation was the lack of clarity on how dating violence help seeking behaviors were defined and operationalized. Given author recommendations focus on improving school climate and building capacity of

school professionals to address dating violence and homophobic bullying, information on who LGB youth sought care from after they experienced abuse would be helpful.

We must point out that this study assesses only one facet of youths' sexual orientation – sexual identity – to the exclusion of sexual attraction and sexual behavior (i.e. the sex of their sexual partners). Emerging research on adolescent sexuality highlights the importance of distinguishing between these constructs as they do not perfectly overlap (McCauley, 2014; Saewyc, 2004). Notably, almost half of LGB youth in this study indicated that their dating partners were opposite sex partners, while 14% indicated they were in same-sex relationships and a sizable 38% did not report their partner's sex at all. This finding hints that sexual identity and sexual behavior do not always coincide for this sample either, though the extent of missing data on the sex of their dating partners is also intriguing. Because these data are cross-sectional and measures are limited to recent relationships, authors are not able to assess sexual identity, sexual behavior and the types of romantic relationships youth had prior to the study, which are likely not stable over time. Further research is needed to understand the context of the dating relationships in which youth are experiencing abuse, including whether victimization and perpetration occurred in relationships with their male or female partners. Moreover, further research is

needed to understand whether risk factors for abuse identified in this study are similarly predictive for youth who are same-sex attracted or engage in sexual behavior with same-sex partners throughout adolescence.

Reviewer Summary:

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth may be disproportionately affected by dating violence. Further research is needed to understand the contexts in which LGBT youth experience abuse and the unique strategies used by perpetrators, such as “outing” partners, that stem of LGBT youths’ experience of isolation, violence and discrimination related to their sexual minority status.

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