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Original article

Adolescent help-seeking for dating violence: prevalence, sociodemographic correlates, and sources of help

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Abstract

Purpose: To examine the prevalence and sociodemographic correlates of help-seeking and helping sources used by adolescent victims and perpetrators of dating violence.

Methods: Data are from the victims (n = 225) and perpetrators (n = 140) of dating violence identified from a longitudinal study of adolescent dating violence conducted in the public school system of a primarily rural North Carolina county. Logistic regression was used to examine bivariate and multivariate relationships between study variables and help-seeking or sources of help.

Results: Sixty percent of victims and 79% of perpetrators did not seek help for dating violence. Male perpetrators were more likely to seek help than female perpetrators. The odds of seeking help increased with perpetrators' age (OR = 1.79 per year; 95% CI = 1.05, 5.76). Most victims and perpetrators who sought help chose friends and family members rather than professionals. Male victims and perpetrators who sought help were more likely than female victims and perpetrators to choose professional sources of help.

Conclusions: Most adolescent dating violence victims and perpetrators do not seek help. Male perpetrators and older perpetrators were more likely to seek help than female perpetrators or younger perpetrators. Friends and family members are more common sources for help-seeking than professionals, but males were more likely to seek help from professionals than females. © 2005 Society for Adolescent Medicine. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Help-seeking; Adolescence; Gender differences; Dating violence

Adolescent dating violence is a serious public health problem. Recent surveys have reported prevalence rates of adolescent physical and/or sexual dating violence ranging up to 25% [1–3]. Adolescent males and females both report victimization and perpetration of dating violence [1–5]. Consequences of adolescent dating violence include injuries [5], death, and psychological and emotional problems for both victims and perpetrators, and violence toward pregnant females adversely affects the health and viability of unborn children [6].

Prior research on the help-seeking patterns for intimate violence has typically focused on female victims at domestic violence shelters [7,8] and/or victims in adult relationships [9,10], with findings showing that (a) many victims do not seek help and (b) those who seek help frequently choose family and friends instead of formal services [10–14]. The help-seeking patterns of adolescents from the general population in violent dating relationships are largely unexplored. A recent study examined African-American middle school youths' help-seeking intentions related to dating violence [15].

Seeking assistance of others has obvious instrumental benefits for the person in need; for example, it is likely to expedite the solution of one's problem. Help-seeking may lead to three categories of social support or help: (a) emotional support (concern, acceptance, understanding, or encouragement), (b) information support (advice to aid prob-

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lem-solving), and (c) instrumental assistance (aid with tasks and contribution of material resources) [16]. Information received from help-givers may improve conflict negotiation and anger management skills; information from adults knowledgeable about healthy dating relationship behavior may improve the adolescent's understanding of a dating partner as a person and of the adolescent's role as a dating partner. Instrumental assistance may be vital for adolescents to ensure self-protection, reduce the severity or frequency of violence and injuries, or obtain medical care. Therefore, understanding and promoting help-seeking behaviors of adolescents involved in dating violence is important for improving psychosocial and health outcomes. Moreover, identifying correlates of adolescent help-seeking for dating violence is important for developing interventions to reduce dating violence among adolescents.

Studies suggest that adolescents typically do not seek help for problems [17,18]. Barriers include stigma attached to problems requiring help and to the associated help-seeking process, concerns about privacy, value placed on self-sufficiency, poor knowledge of resources, low self-awareness related to the need for help, and an external locus of control.

Gender, race, and age have been found to influence the help-seeking behaviors of adolescents for problems such as family, interpersonal relationships, health, education, emotional, and mental health [17–19]. Male adolescents tend to ask for help for problems less often than female adolescents [17,19]. This gender difference in help-seeking behavior may be explained by cultural gender-role norms. The condition of needing help is congruent with the stereotypically feminine role and incompatible with the stereotypically masculine role. Cultural pressures may create costs of asking for help that are higher for males, especially for male victims of dating violence, than females in otherwise identical circumstances. Cultural norms may also stigmatize perpetration of dating violence by males more so than by females, inhibiting help-seeking by male perpetrators. People of color may experience more logistic and cultural barriers to help-seeking than Caucasians. Possibly for these reasons, adolescents of color have been found to be less likely to seek healthcare [20] and mental health services [18] than Caucasian adolescents. As adolescents mature, they develop the ability to generate hypotheses and predict outcomes to possible solutions.

The present investigation also explores adolescents' sources of help for dating violence. Previous studies have shown that adolescents in general prefer informal help-seeking [17,21,22]. Adolescent peer norms and values may encourage help-seeking within the informal network of friends and family instead of formal help-seeking. Adolescent dating violence victims and perpetrators may not seek help from formal service providers because they fear being blamed and are concerned that information will not be held in confidence. Studies have not evaluated the helpfulness of formal helping sources to adolescents about dating violence. But, research indicates that service providers are often not helpful to adult victims of partner violence [23].

Gender, family structure, and parental education have been found to be associated with adolescents' choice of helping source for emotional problems [18,22]. Schonert-Reichl and associates [22] found that males were less likely than females to seek help from formal sources. Youths living in stepparent or single-parent homes have been found to be more likely to seek help from formal sources, such as mental health professionals and school counselors, for emotional and mental health problems than were youths living with two biological parents [18,22]. Saunders et al [18] found that parental education is positively associated with adolescents' help-seeking from formal sources for mental health problems [18].

In this study, we examined (a) the prevalence of help-seeking by adolescent dating violence victims and perpetrators, (b) sociodemographic correlates of adolescent help-seeking for dating violence, (c) the sources from whom adolescents seek help for dating violence, and (d) correlates (gender, family structure, and parent educational level) of helping sources adolescents choose. Based on research about adolescent help-seeking for other types of problems, we developed the following hypotheses: (a) Most victims and perpetrators would not seek help for dating violence; (b) Male victims and perpetrators would be less likely to seek help than female victims and perpetrators; (c) Caucasian victims and perpetrators would be more likely to seek help than victims and perpetrators of other races; (d) Older victims and perpetrators would be more likely to seek help than younger victims and perpetrators; (e) More victims and perpetrators would seek help from informal sources than from formal sources; (f) Male victims and perpetrators would be less likely than female victims and perpetrators to seek help from formal sources; (g) Victims and perpetrators who live in single-parent or stepparent households would be more likely to seek help from formal sources than victims and perpetrators in households with two biological parents; and (h) Parental level of education would be positively associated with victims' and perpetrators' help-seeking from formal sources.

Methods

Data for this study were from self-administered questionnaires completed by adolescents in school as part of a study testing the effects of an adolescent dating violence prevention program [2]. A secondary purpose of data collection was to further explore characteristics associated with violence victimization or perpetration. The original study procedures were approved by the University of North Carolina School of Public Health Internal Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects. Active parental consent and adolescent assent were obtained for adolescent participation

in the study. During the fall of 1994, baseline data were collected from 81% (n = 1965) of all eighth and ninth graders from 14 schools in a primarily rural school district in North Carolina. Intervention activities occurred in seven randomly allocated schools from November 1994 to March 1995. Follow-up questionnaires were administered in May 1995 to 1905 adolescents and in May 1996 to 1814 adolescents. Data were collected by mail from adolescents who dropped out of school or moved to another school system. On all questionnaires, adolescents were asked to indicate whether they had ever been on a date. A date was defined as any informal activity, such as meeting at the mall, a park, or a sporting event, as well as a more formal activity. Adolescents who responded positively were asked to indicate whether they had ever experienced victimization or perpetration of physical dating violence that was not in self-defense (such as hitting, pushing, shoving, kicking, or assaulting with a weapon), and adolescents who responded positively were then asked about help-seeking. Pre-intervention survey results yielded a significant amount of missing data in response to questions about help-seeking. Upon reviewing all waves of data collection, we determined that the May 1996 questionnaire had the least missing data on help-seeking questions, and therefore we used it to create the samples needed to test study hypotheses.

Study samples

We tested hypotheses examining prevalence and sociodemographic correlates of help-seeking using data from adolescents who experienced dating violence; hypotheses examining helping sources adolescents choose required samples comprised solely of adolescents who sought help for dating violence. We created four samples for these purposes: a victims sample, a perpetrators sample, a victim help-seekers sample, and a perpetrator help-seekers sample.

Of the 1814 adolescents responding to the May 1996 questionnaire, 1368 reported that they had been on a date. The students who reported dating were asked, "How many times has anyone that you have been on a date with EVER used physical force (such as hitting, pushing, shoving, kicking, or assaulting with a weapon) against you that was NOT in self-defense?" About 17% (n = 228) of adolescents (22% of females and 10% of males) who reported that they had been on a date responded that they had been a victim of dating violence at least once. These adolescents were then asked whether they had ever sought help for dating violence victimization. Three did not answer the question and were eliminated from the analyses. The resulting *victims* sample included 225 adolescents.

About 11% (n = 147) of adolescents (14% of females and 7% of males) who reported that they had been on a date reported that they had been a perpetrator of dating violence at least once. Students who indicated that they had been a perpetrator of dating violence were then asked whether they had ever sought help for dating violence perpetration. Seven did not answer the question and were eliminated from the analyses. The *perpetrators* sample included 140 adolescents. Almost 45% of victims were also perpetrators, and 72% of perpetrators were also victims.

Hypotheses examining helping sources required samples comprised solely of adolescents who sought help for dating violence. Of the 225 victims who answered the question about help-seeking, 91 reported that they had sought help for dating violence. One victim did not answer the question about help-seeking source and was eliminated from the analyses. The *victim help-seekers* sample included 90 adolescents.

Of the 147 perpetrators asked about help-seeking, 30 reported seeking help for dating violence perpetration. One perpetrator did not answer the question about help-seeking source and was eliminated from the analyses. The *perpetrator help-seekers* sample included 29 adolescents.

Table 1 provides the sociodemographic characteristics of each sample. Compared with the larger sample of eighth and ninth graders completing baseline data, study subjects were more likely to be female (59% to 79% vs. 50% of the larger sample), and the proportion of Caucasian students was lower among the perpetrator sample (66%) than among the larger sample (76%).

Measures

Help-seeking for dating violence victimization was indicated by response to the question, "Have you ever asked anyone what you should do about the violence in your dating relationship?" Help-seeking for dating violence perpetration was indicated by response to the question, "Have you ever asked anyone for help on how to stop using violence towards dates?" We grouped the responses into "yes" and "no" categories.

Adolescents who indicated that they had sought help for dating violence were asked to identify the sources of help from a list that included both informal and formal sources. The informal sources included a friend at their school, a friend at another school, their mother, their father, or a nonprofessional not listed above (adolescents were asked to specify type of person). The formal sources included a teacher, a school counselor, a school nurse, a social worker, a lawyer, a police officer, someone on a telephone hot-line, a therapist or counselor outside of school, someone at the health department, someone at the hospital, a minister or preacher, or a professional not listed above (adolescents were asked to specify type of person). In addition to analyzing individual sources of help, we examined factors associated with choosing formal sources of help. To measure formal help-seeking, we coded responses to reflect a dichotomous variable, with "yes" (coded 2), indicating that the adolescent had sought help from at least one formal source, and "no" (coded 1), indicating no formal sources.

Table 1
Characteristics of victims and perpetrators in each sample

	n	Gender (%)	Race (%)	Age (May 1996) % (years)
Victims	225	72.0 Female	75.6 Caucasian	15.6 (14)
		28.0 Male	19.6 Black	49.3 (15)
			4.9 Other	29.3 (16)
				5.8 (17+)
Perpetrators	140	72.1 Female	66.4 Caucasian	12.9 (14)
		27.9 Male	27.9 Black	52.9 (15)
			5.7 Other	28.6 (16)
				5.7 (17+)
Victim help-seekers	90	78.9 Female	74.4 Caucasian	21.1 (14)
		21.1 Male	21.1 Black	44.4 (15)
			1.1 Hispanic	30.0 (16)
			1.1 Asian	4.4 (17+)
			1.1 Am. Indian	
			1.1 Other	
Perpetrator help-seekers	29	58.6 Female	75.9 Caucasian	6.9 (14)
		41.4 Male	13.8 Black	48.3 (15)
			3.5 Asian	31.0 (16)
			3.5 Am. Ind.	13.8 (17+)
			3.5 Other	

Note: Because of rounding, percentages may not all total 100.

We grouped race into two categories: (a) Caucasian (coded 2) and (b) African-American, Hispanic, Asian, American Indian, and other races (coded 1). Age was coded 4 for 14 years old, 5 for 15 years old, 6 for 16 years old, and 7 for 17 years old or older. We coded family structure as 1 for households with single or stepparents and 2 for households with two biological parents. We used mother's educational level rather than father's educational level because adolescents who lived with both parents were more knowledgeable about their mother's education than their father's. In addition, adolescents who lived with one parent were asked about only that parent's educational level, and more adolescents lived in mother-only households than in father-only households. We grouped mother's educational level into six categories: (a) less than high school graduate, (b) high school only, (c) vocational or business school, (d) some college, (e) college graduate, and (f) more than 4 years of college.

Analysis strategy

We used odds ratios (ORs) and 95% confidence intervals (CIs) to examine bivariate relationships between each of the sociodemographic variables and the dichotomous variable indexing help-seeking (Hypotheses 2–4). ORs and 95% CIs were also used to examine bivariate relationships among gender, family structure, maternal education, and the dichotomous variable indexing adolescents' choice of formal helping sources (Hypotheses 6–8). Because 52% of the victims (n =16) and 55% of the perpetrators (n = 77) received a dating violence prevention program, the effects of the program on help-seeking and choice of helping source were assessed using May 1996 data. (Analyses of the May 1995 data also found that exposure to the intervention was not a significant predictor of help-seeking [24]. However, less psychological abuse, sexual violence, and violence perpetrated against current dating partners were reported at schools exposed to the intervention than at control schools.) Exposure to the program was not a significant predictor of help-seeking or source choice among any of the study samples. Accordingly, we ignored exposure to the program in subsequent analyses.

Results

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, most victims and perpetrators did not seek help for dating violence. Sixty percent of the 225 victims and 79% of the 140 perpetrators reported they had not asked for help.

None of the sociodemographic characteristics were significantly associated with victims' help-seeking (Table 2). Gender and age were associated with perpetrators' help-seeking. However, contrary to expectations, male perpetrators were significantly more likely to seek help than female perpetrators (33% of 39 males vs. 17% of 101 females; OR = 2.47; 95% CI = 1.05, 5.76). As hypothesized, the odds of seeking help increased with perpetrators' age (OR = 1.79 per year; 95% CI = 1.05, 3.13).

Among the victim help-seekers sample, 93% reported seeking help from informal sources (n = 84), and 40% reported seeking help from formal sources (n = 36). Among perpetrator help-seekers, 90% reported seeking help from informal sources (n = 26), and 62% reported seeking help from formal sources (n = 18). Table 3 shows that the most

Table 2
Percentages of victims and perpetrators seeking help

	Victims			Perpetrators		
	n	%	OR (95% CI)	n	%	OR (95% CI)
Gender			0.60 (0.32, 1.09)			2.47* (1.05, 5.76)
Males	63	32		39	33	
Females	162	44		101	17	
Race			0.92 (0.50, 1.73)			1.88 (0.77, 5.08)
Caucasian	171	42		92	25	
Minority	54	40		48	15	
Age (years)			0.83 (0.59, 1.17)			1.79* (1.05, 3.13)
14	36	54		18	11	
15	110	36		74	19	
16	65	42		41	25	
17 or older	14	31		8	50	

* $p < .05$.

commonly sought source of help for both victims and perpetrators was friends.

In bivariate analyses, gender was associated with victims' choosing formal sources, but contrary to expectations, male victims were significantly more likely than female victims to seek help from formal sources (63% of 19 males vs. 34% of 71 females; OR = 3.36; 95% CI = 1.20, 10.09). Family structure and maternal education were not associated with victims' seeking help from formal sources.

Gender was associated with perpetrators' choosing formal sources, but again findings were contrary to expectations. Male perpetrators were significantly more likely than female perpetrators to seek help from formal sources (83% of 17 males vs. 47% of 12 females; OR = 5.63; CI = 1.07, 44.35). Family structure and maternal education were not associated with perpetrators' seeking help from formal sources.

Discussion

Consistent with findings from studies of help-seeking for other problems [17,18], the results of this study suggest that adolescents typically do not seek help for dating violence. However, contrary to findings from studies of help-seeking for other problems [17,19], male perpetrators in this study were significantly more likely than female perpetrators to seek help. Although we reasoned that cultural norms would discourage help-seeking among males, society generally views males hitting females as less acceptable than females hitting males, and therefore males may feel more compelled than females to seek help for violent behavior toward dates. Gender differences in the consequences of dating violence may also explain this finding. Females have been found to receive more injuries than males from dating violence [5]. Males may have sought help for dating violence perpetra-

Table 3
Sources of help sought by victims and perpetrators

Victims (n = 90)		Perpetrators (n = 29)	
Source	%	Source	%
Friend	89	Friend	83
Sibling or extended family	40	Teacher	31
Mother	30	Mother	28
Father	13	Lawyer	28
School counselor or therapist	13	Telephone hot-line	28
Law enforcement officer	13	Father	24
Teacher	12	Police officer	24
Telephone hot-line	12	Nonschool therapist/counselor	21
Minister or preacher	12	Minister or preacher	21
Lawyer	8	School counselor	18
Nonschool therapist/counselor	8	Social worker	17
Health department	7	Health department	14
School nurse	6	Sibling or extended family	10
Hospital	6	School nurse	10
Social worker	4	Hospital	10

tion because injuries that resulted from their behavior signaled seriousness and danger.

Other explanations for this finding may be methodological. Males may underreport their violent behaviors more than females. If this is true, then males who did not report perpetration also may not have sought help for it, and the actual rate of help-seeking by male perpetrators may be lower than reported in this study. Studies have not been conducted to independently validate self-reports of dating violence, and therefore it is not known whether males are more likely than females to underreport perpetration.

Perpetrators' age was positively associated with help-seeking. One middle-adolescent developmental task is growth in cognitive functioning, especially in the development of abstract thinking [25]. As adolescent perpetrators mature, this developmental task may influence help-seeking behavior by orienting them toward evaluating the potential consequences of their violent behavior, assessing the helping resources available to them, and recognizing the potential benefit of seeking help.

Consistent with findings from studies of adolescent help-seeking for other problems [17,21,22], most adolescents who sought help for dating violence chose informal sources of help. However, contrary to findings from a study of adolescent help-seeking for emotional problems [22], males were more likely than females to seek help from formal sources for dating violence victimization and perpetration. Research in this area has been scarce and has sometimes investigated help-seeking from specific sources (such as mental health professionals vs. school counselors) rather than formal sources as a group vs. informal sources. One study found that males sought help less often than females from mental health professionals [22], but this study failed to examine whether gender differences in help-seeking reflected gender differences in emotional problems. Another found that gender difference for formal help-seeking about a personal problem was small and generally nonsignificant [26]. Adolescent males involved in dating violence may perceive that peer norms would prevent their friends from empathizing and/or providing helpful advice about reducing violence.

Limitations

The present study had several limitations. First, approximately 25% of eligible students did not participate. How these students differ from participating students and the impact of these differences on help-seeking estimates could not be determined. Second, measurement error could have resulted from social desirability bias and self-reporting. Dating violence is a sensitive topic, and adolescent victims and perpetrators may have underreported their violent experiences, influencing the reported prevalence of help-seeking for dating violence. We attempted to reduce social desirability bias by using self-administered questionnaires. Project staff assured all youths that their responses would be confidential. To improve adolescents' assurance in the confidentiality of the survey, participants put the completed questionnaires in an envelope and then gave the sealed envelope to the researchers. Teachers were not present while the participants completed the questionnaires. Furthermore, previous research suggests the validity of self-reported measures. Many adolescents reporting dating violence victimization also reported receiving injuries, suggesting that the self-reports of victimization reflected actual violence [5]. As would be expected, mild dating violence perpetration was reported most commonly, and severe dating violence perpetration was reported least commonly [5]. Third, small sample sizes may have prevented detection of some significant differences. Large samples representative of the general population, perhaps over-sampled for dating violence victims and perpetrators, are necessary to determine whether victims and perpetrators differ in terms of help-seeking behavior. Finally, this study was conducted in a southern, rural community, and many characteristics of this environment may have affected help-seeking for dating violence [27–32]. Future studies should investigate the relationships among gender, age, and help-seeking for adolescent dating violence in other areas of the country.

The present study has many strengths. One is the age of the subjects. Very few studies of dating violence have included adolescents [1,3–5], and none has assessed actual help-seeking by adolescents for dating violence. Adolescents are given special attention because adolescence is developmentally a period of value and identity formation, as well as the period when the first dating relationships occur. Second, this study focused on help-seeking for dating violence, not marital violence. Third, unlike many adult studies of help-seeking for marital violence, it examined the help-seeking behaviors of both males and females, and of both victims and perpetrators. Furthermore, the sample came from a general population as opposed to selected groups, such as women at shelters, emergency room patients, or people contacting the police. No prior studies have examined correlates of adolescent help-seeking and sources of help for dating violence.

Conclusions

Most adolescents in our study did not seek help for dating violence; thus, prevention, early identification, and outreach targeting youths may be very important. Particularly, female and younger perpetrators were least likely to seek help, so helping resources should be prepared to address these populations. Most important, adolescents who sought help turned to friends and family, and the utilization of peers as confidantes and educators is implicit in these data. Victims and perpetrators identified friends as the source they would seek help from most often, suggesting a

desire to receive help from within the peer group. Interventions designed to improve help-giving among friends and peers are warranted. Finally, male victims and perpetrators were more likely than female victims and perpetrators to use formal helping sources. This finding has implications for the training of school counselors, teachers, and other potential helpers who interact with adolescents.

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