

Domestic violence: not just an adult problem

Christine Barter reports on research into young people's experiences of partner violence.



A substantial body of evidence exists on adult experiences of domestic violence, including the impact on the welfare of children and young people. Over the past two decades the significance of domestic violence as a social problem has been recognised in both policy and practice. However, this recognition has, until relatively recently, failed to include young people's experiences of violence in their own intimate relationships. The research undertaken by the University of Bristol, with the NSPCC, sought to bridge this gap in our understanding (Barter et al., 2009).

The research was the first ever UK-wide study to explore the problem of partner violence in teenage relationships (defined as dating violence in the US literature). The research findings are shocking and challenge our previous understanding of intimate violence as a primarily adult problem. The research has received extensive media, policy and professional attention. In response to the findings, the Home Office commissioned a major public awareness campaign in 2010 aimed at raising awareness of this form of intimate violence. Earlier this year a speech on domestic violence by Keir Starmer, Director of Public Prosecutions (Starmer, 2011), quoting the research findings, concluded that we are clearly at risk of a whole new generation of domestic violence.

Research aims and methodology

The research explored with young people their experiences of physical, emotional and sexual forms of violence in their partner

relationships. The study used a multi-method approach. A confidential survey was completed by 1353 young people, aged between 13 and 17 years old, from eight schools across England, Scotland and Wales. In addition 91 in-depth interviews were undertaken. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

Findings

The research findings provide clear, and disconcerting, evidence of the seriousness and the negative impact that this form of violence has on the lives of teenagers, and especially girls.

Physical partner violence

A quarter of girls and 18 per cent of boys reported physical partner violence, such as being hit, slapped or punched. One in nine girls and 4 per cent of boys had experienced severe physical violence, including being beaten up or hit with an object.

Interviewer: *Did you think that Joel loved you?*

Amy: *At one point.*

Interviewer: *At one point, did it stop feeling like love at some point?*

Amy: *When he started hitting me and beating me up.*

Interviewer: *Did he hurt you?*

Amy: *Yeah.*

Although these findings indicate comparatively similar incidence rates by gender, when impact

is introduced a different picture emerges. Three-quarters of girls, compared with only 14 per cent of boys, stated that the violence had a negative impact on their welfare.

Emotional partner violence

Three-quarters of girls and half of boys reported some form of emotional violence, such as being shouted at, called names, constantly checked-up on or controlled. However, compared with other forms of partner violence, fewer participants reported adverse effects. Again girls were more likely to assert this, with a third of girls and only 6 per cent of boys reporting a detrimental impact. Participants who reported a negative impact often experienced multiple, and repeated, forms of emotional violence. This was reflected in interviews with girls who spoke about their partner's intimidation, surveillance and control over who they could see and where they could go.

Emma: *Like when I'd be out with my friends and he'd drag me off and say he didn't want me out any longer and I'd got to go in and it could be like half past six (pm).*

Some girls stated that they were under constant surveillance through the use of new technologies, mobile telephones and text messaging. Often this was underpinned by very high levels of fear.

Keira: *... most of the time it would be fine, then one thing would happen he would just go mad about it. Like even on the computer if I took too long to reply he would be like 'why, what are you doing, what are*

you doing, do you not want to talk to me, do you not have time for me or anything?' I would be like 'no that's not why, it's just because I am doing something else', stuff like that all the time.

Interviewer: *What, how would you describe his behaviour towards you now?*

Keira: *He's just so controlling.*

Interviewer: *Controlling?*

Keira: *Manipulative like that.*

Control often resulted in isolation from peer networks. In contrast, boys told us they routinely ignored their female partner's attempts at control.

Josh: *It depends like because sometimes, like I was going to a party and I was going out with someone and they've like been ringing me all the time.*

Interviewer: *How did you deal with it?*

Josh: *Turned my phone off.*

Sexual violence

One in three girls and 16 per cent of boys reported some level of sexual violence, this included being 'pressured' or physically forced into an unwanted sexual act or intercourse. Seventy percent of girls and 13 per cent of boys reported an adverse affect.

Interviewer: *... did he hurt you?*

Louise: *Um ... well yeah, he was pressuring me a lot. But there'd be a few times where he was like really trying to force me ... yeah it was a few times he did yeah.*

Interviews revealed the long-term impact of violence, especially on self-esteem. However, girls often found it difficult in interviews to define their experiences as sexual violence even though they revealed considerable levels of sexual pressure and, in some instances, physical force from their partners.

Wider associated factors

The research revealed a number of factors associated with teenage partner violence, including:

- Girls were more likely than boys to report recurring violence that either stayed the same or got worse.
- Younger girls (aged 13 and 14) were as likely as older adolescents (aged 15–17) to experience some form of partner violence. In interviews some girls spoke about being 11 and 12 years old when they first experienced violence, including sexual violence, from a partner. However, older young people were more likely to report severe forms of violence.
- Having experiences of family or peer violence was associated with a significantly increased susceptibility to violence from a partner.
- Having an older partner, and especially a 'much older partner', was a significant risk factor for girls – over three-quarters of girls with a much older partner experienced partner violence
- Post-relationship violence was a significant issue for some female participants.
- The majority of young people either told no one about the violence or told a friend. Very few told an adult and only a very small minority had reported the violence to the police.

Recommendations

The findings from the research have important implications for professionals working to safeguard young people's welfare. The research clearly shows that this form of intimate violence needs to be recognised as a significant child welfare problem that can have a profound impact on young people's, and especially girls', welfare. This is not to imply that boys' experiences of victimisation should be ignored. The needs of both girls and boys must be recognised, although the wider impact on girls requires acknowledgment in policy and practice.

The importance of recognising all three forms of partner violence is clearly identified. An emphasis on only physical or sexual forms of violence will fail to address the underlying issues of control that underpinned many of these abusive relationships. Similarly, the role of new technologies in this area of young people's lives requires attention.

Perhaps one of the most disconcerting findings was the high level of abuse from 'much older' partners. Guidance on this area of risk needs to be more strongly emphasised. In addition, professionals working with young people who have experienced family violence, and who are therefore more susceptible to partner violence, need to ensure this is addressed. As teenage partner violence is rarely reported to adults, it is important that all professionals routinely include this in their work with young people. Our research demonstrates that partner violence is a major problem for many young people, and for girls it might be the most common form of childhood violence they experience. Our study shows that current child welfare policy requires revision so that the significance and impact of this form of violence on the lives and well-being of young people is directly acknowledged. Similarly, domestic violence policy, currently focused almost exclusively on adults, also needs to respond to the experiences of teenagers. Clearly our research shows that domestic violence starts at a much earlier age than previously recognised. ■

Christine Barter is NSPCC Senior Research Fellow, University of Bristol.

References

- Barter, C., McCarry, M., Berridge D. and Evans, K. (2009), *Partner Exploitation and Violence in Teenage Intimate Relationships*, available at www.nspcc.org.uk/inform
- Starmer, K. (2011), *Domestic Violence: the Facts, the Issues, the Future*. Crown Prosecution Service, www.cps.gov.uk/news/articles/domestic_violence_-_the_facts_the_issues_the_future/ (accessed 12 April 2011).