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31% of Sexually Active Teen Girls Report Dating Violence; Injured by Boyfriend, Forced to Have Sex, or Both, Survey Finds

By Jim Ritter

Nearly one in three sexually active high school girls say they have been physically hurt by boys or forced to have sex, a study has found.

A survey of 1,641 girls who have had sexual intercourse found that 31.5 percent had experienced dating violence.

The finding is “really staggering,” said lead researcher Michele Decker of the Harvard School of Public Health. “It shows what a prevalent problem this is.”

The study is published in the journal *Pediatrics*.

Girls were asked: “Have you ever been hurt physically or sexually by a date or someone you were going out with? This would include being hurt by being shoved, slapped, hit or forced into any sexual activity.”

Results: 15.3 percent had been physically hurt, 6.7 percent had been forced into sex, and 9.5 percent had experienced both physical violence and forced sex.

Cross section of races

“Adolescents are at extreme risk for dating violence,” Decker said.

The findings are similar to what other studies have found in adults, said Decker, a researcher who specializes in violence against women.

Decker and colleagues surveyed 9th- to 12th-grade girls in Massachusetts high schools. Forty-two percent reported they had had sexual intercourse, with rates ranging from 4.9 percent among girls 14 and younger to 53.2 percent among girls 17 and older.

The Massachusetts sample included a cross section of races, including 75 percent white, 10.6 percent Latino and 8.4 percent black. All racial groups reported high rates of dating violence. However, it's unknown how these results would compare with a nationwide sample.

Controlling personalities

Other studies have found that abusive boyfriends tend to be extremely controlling. They might, for example, monitor their girlfriends' phone calls or prohibit them from seeing friends. Girls thus isolated have no one to turn to and find it difficult to escape abusive relationships. In addition, some abusive boyfriends warn girls not to tell anyone about the abuse, Decker said.

“The vulnerability of these girls cannot be overstated.”

Girls who had experienced both physical violence and forced sex were 2.6 times more likely to have been diagnosed with a sexually transmitted disease such as herpes, chlamydia, syphilis or genital warts.

There are two possible reasons for this finding, Decker said. Abusive boyfriends are more likely to have multiple sex partners and less likely to agree to requests to wear a condom.

Decker recommends that doctors screen girls for dating violence and that schools offer programs to prevent such abuses.

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