

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Examining the Association Between Bullying and Adolescent Concerns About Teen Dating Violence

KATRINA J. DEBNAM, PhD<sup>a</sup> SARAH L. JOHNSON, PhD<sup>b</sup> CATHERINE P. BRADSHAW, PhD<sup>c</sup>

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**ABSTRACT**

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**BACKGROUND:** The school environment is an important context for understanding risk factors for teen dating violence. This study seeks to add to the growing literature base linking adolescent experiences with bullying and involvement with teen dating violence.

**METHODS:** Data were collected from 27,074 adolescents at 58 high schools via a Web-based survey.

**RESULTS:** Three-level hierarchical linear models indicated that adolescents who had been bullied were more concerned about both physical and emotional dating violence among students at their school. Schools that were perceived by students as safer were rated as having lower levels of teen dating violence. Older students and male students consistently reported greater concerns about dating violence.

**CONCLUSIONS:** These results suggest that adolescents who experience bullying may also have concerns about violence in teen dating relationships. Findings also indicate that schools perceived as being unsafe may be an important context for targeting dating violence prevention efforts.

**Keywords:** dating violence; bullying; school safety.

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The school environment is an important context for understanding and preventing dating violence. Adolescents spend much of their time in school, and as a result, the majority of their dating relationships are formed and experienced in this context.<sup>1</sup> Research suggests that normative beliefs developed in school about the acceptability of aggressive dating relationship behaviors such as hitting when a partner makes them mad or jealous can have an important influence on their dating relationships in adulthood.<sup>2</sup> Efforts to prevent dating violence stress the importance of changing peer norms regarding violence in relationships.<sup>3,4</sup> In addition, exposure to aggression

among peers may not only influence normative beliefs related to violence but also may increase youths' use of violence in relationships.<sup>5,6</sup> For example, preliminary evidence suggests that bullying and dating violence perpetration and victimization often co-occur among adolescents.<sup>7</sup> However, few studies have examined how violence at school and individual experiences with bullying influence adolescents' concerns about teen dating violence.<sup>8</sup> This study seeks to extend this line of research by investigating the association between adolescents' individual experiences with bullying, their concerns about teen dating violence, and school safety.

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<sup>a</sup>Assistant Scientist, (kdebnam@jhsph.edu), Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Johns Hopkins Center for the Prevention of Youth Violence, 624 North Broadway, Baltimore, MD 21205.

<sup>b</sup>Assistant Professor, (slj@jhmi.edu), Department of Pediatrics, Division of General Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, 200 North Wolfe Street, Room 2073, Baltimore, MD 21287.

<sup>c</sup>Associate Professor, (cbradsha@jhsph.edu), Johns Hopkins Center for the Prevention of Youth Violence, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, 624 North Broadway, Baltimore, MD 21205.

Address correspondence to: Katrina J. Debnam, Research Associate, (kdebnam@jhsph.edu), Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Johns Hopkins Center for the Prevention of Youth Violence, 624 North Broadway, Baltimore, MD 21205.

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## Dating Violence

Defined as the physical, sexual, or psychological/emotional violence within a dating relationship, the prevalence of teen dating violence has increased since 2005.<sup>9</sup> Research suggests that over 400,000 US adolescents are victims of dating violence at some point in their lives.<sup>9,10</sup> The 2 most common forms of teen dating violence are emotional and physical abuse. Emotional abuse is characterized as threatening a partner and/or harming his or her self-worth.<sup>11</sup> This type of abuse can come in the form of name calling, making a partner feel guilty, purposeful embarrassment, or controlling behaviors such as keeping him/her away from friends and family. Physical abuse is the most easily identified form of dating violence and the most widely studied. Physical abuse is defined as the intentional or purposeful pushing, hitting, shoving, or kicking by a dating partner.<sup>11</sup>

Teen dating violence victimization and perpetration have been linked with various individual and family risk factors.<sup>12</sup> For example, depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation and behaviors, engagement in physical fighting, and believing that violence is tolerable and justifiable have been shown to increase the risk for teen dating violence victimization.<sup>13-16</sup> Other behaviors that have a strong link to dating violence perpetration and victimization include school conduct problems; for example, expulsion or suspension from school and engaging in substance use and risky sexual behaviors.<sup>12,14,15</sup> Furthermore, childhood maltreatment and exposure to violence in the family of origin are commonly cited as a risk factor for future intimate partner violence perpetration and victimization.<sup>17</sup> Data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health reported that approximately 30% of youth were verbally or psychologically abused by their dating partner in the previous year.<sup>18-20</sup> Given the potential link between adolescent dating violence and violence in future relationships,<sup>10,18,21</sup> more efforts are required to identify risk factors for teen dating violence and strategies that can be used to prevent it.

## Dating Violence and Bullying Behaviors

A related behavioral concern in adolescence is bullying, which is defined as a form of peer victimization that is repeated, intentional, and involves a real or perceived power imbalance.<sup>22-24</sup> Some researchers have argued that dating violence is a form of bullying that can occur within the context of a dating relationship.<sup>25</sup> For example, a dating partner may use physical violence or emotional threats of violence to maintain power and control over the other. It can be repeated and intentional, thus exemplifying similar characteristics as bullying perpetration. From a developmental perspective, early childhood teasing

may become bullying among adolescent peers, and bullying may transform into harassment and violence where abuse becomes a normal part of dating dynamics.<sup>26</sup> Experiences with bullying may also create a belief that harassment and violence in relationships is normative and can be tolerated.<sup>8</sup> Related research on Ehrensaft's model of adult intimate partner violence suggests that adolescent antisocial behavior may be a significant risk factor for adult perpetration and victimization.<sup>13</sup>

Bullying is relatively common among adolescents. Approximately 30% of teens report involvement in bullying in the last month.<sup>24,27</sup> However, limited empirical research has examined the association between bullying and dating violence. Some researchers suggest that childhood bullying perpetration may predict the occurrence of certain types of dating violence perpetration.<sup>28</sup> For example, a study by Espelage and Holt<sup>28</sup> provided preliminary evidence that adolescents' who bully others and are bullied in school report higher levels of physical dating violence victimization. More research is required to understand how being victimized by peers at school is related to victimization within dating relationships.

## School Safety

Schools are the most commonly targeted context for implementing both bullying<sup>29</sup> and dating violence<sup>30</sup> prevention interventions. School-based interventions like the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program<sup>31</sup> and the Safe Dates Program<sup>32-34</sup> have produced significant positive impacts on students' attitudes and behaviors toward bullying and dating violence, respectively. Research has also shown that characteristics of schools, like positive school climate and safety, are associated with less bullying and improved social outcomes for students.<sup>35</sup> In addition, research indicates that school factors, such as school size, student demographics, discipline and attendance rates, may also be associated with student beliefs and behaviors regarding bullying.<sup>36,37</sup> Similar associations have been observed for dating violence and school safety.<sup>2,4,5</sup> For example, Schurr and Lohman<sup>2</sup> found that African-American males who perceived their school environment as unsafe were at greater risk of dating violence perpetration when compared to males from other racial/ethnic groups. Although evidence suggests that perceptions of school safety may influence student bullying and dating violence individual behaviors, few studies have examined how perceptions of the school environment may influence peer norms related to dating violence occurring in school. A school environment that is perceived as unsafe by students will likely be characterized by students as having a problem with both physical and emotional forms of teen dating violence.

## Current Study

This study examined adolescents' concerns about school dating violence and bullying experiences. Our first aim was to examine the association between adolescents' concerns about physical and emotional dating violence in relation to their individual experiences with bullying. Given the conceptual and empirical evidence for the association between bullying and dating violence, we hypothesized that adolescents who experience bullying would be more likely to perceive dating violence as a problem at their school. Our second aim was to investigate the association between school contextual factors and dating violence perceptions. Specifically, we anticipated student perceptions of their school's safety and other school contextual factors would be negatively associated with student concerns about dating violence. For example, it was expected that students in schools with greater perceived school safety would report lower levels of concerns about dating violence. Similarly, we expected that these school-level effects would be most pronounced for students who experienced bullying.

## METHODS

### Participants

Data come from 58 high schools in 12 Maryland school districts participating in a state-wide project focused on measuring and improving the school climate, called the Maryland Safe and Supportive Schools Initiative (MDS<sup>3</sup>). Data were collected from adolescents in grades 9-12 using a Web-based survey in spring 2012. An average of 25.4 classrooms per school participated in the data collection. A total of 27,074 adolescents in grades 9-12, with a mean age of 15.9 (SD = 1.3) were surveyed. Youth and school demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1. Participating schools included a diverse population with a minority rate of 45.93% (SD = 25.11) and mean student enrollment of 1268.48 (SD = 466.82).

### Procedure

Schools' participation in the MDS<sup>3</sup> Initiative was voluntary. Districts were approached by the Maryland State Department of Education to determine their interest in participating in the project. Upon expressing interest in the MDS<sup>3</sup> Initiative, district-specific principal meetings were conducted to obtain school level commitment to the project. The anonymous, online survey was administered using a passive consent process and youth assent process, and all participation was voluntary. Letters were sent home to parents providing information about the survey and the larger initiative. The survey was administered online in language arts classrooms at participating high schools. School staff administered the survey following a written protocol.

Table 1. Student and School Demographic Characteristics

Student Characteristics (N = 27,074 Students)	N (%)
Sex	
Boys	13,622 (48.9)
Girls	13,447 (48.2)
Race/Ethnicity	
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	149 (0.5)
American Indian/Native American	432 (1.5)
Asian/Pacific Islander	1191 (4.3)
Black/African American	6156 (47.9)
White/Caucasian	13,353 (51.2)
Hispanic	1314 (4.7)
Other	1912 (6.9)
Age*	15.94 (1.3)
Grade	
9th	7623 (27.3)
10th	6834 (24.5)
11th	6594 (23.7)
12th	6011 (21.6)
Bullied in the past year	6211 (23.4)
EDV problem at their school	6222 (23.2)
PDV problem at their school	5890 (22.0)
School Characteristics (N = 58 schools)	M (SD)
% Attendance	93.1 (1.6)
% Minority	45.9 (25.1)
% Suspension	22.3 (11.1)
School Enrollment	1325.3 (449.8)
% FARMS	35.9 (17.1)

\*Age represents mean with standard deviation in parenthesis.

The nonidentifiable data were obtained for analysis for this article.

### Instruments

The MDS<sup>3</sup> Student Survey was developed by the Johns Hopkins Center for the Prevention of Youth Violence in collaboration with project partners. Researchers from the Center undertook a comprehensive review of the literature focusing on several domains of school climate emphasized by the US Department of Education.<sup>38</sup> In addition, focus groups were held with students, district personnel, and school administrators to understand the operationalization of school contextual factors for each of the different stakeholders (for additional details see Bradshaw).<sup>39</sup> For this article, we focused on the association between personal experiences with bullying, concerns about different types of teen dating violence at their school, including physical and emotional forms of abuse, and school contextual factors.

**Student demographic characteristics.** Participating adolescents responded to a series of questions regarding their basic demographic characteristics, including age and sex. Participants were also asked to report on their race/ethnicity, and indicate whether they were identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, Native American/

American Indian, Native Hawaiian, White/ Caucasian, or Other. Student race/ethnic identity was recoded since Black students often report higher prevalence of bullying<sup>40</sup> and dating violence behaviors.<sup>15</sup> The variable was coded this way: *Black* (1 = Black students, 0 = all other ethnicities).

**Bullying victimization.** Consistent with the definition by Olweus<sup>23</sup> and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,<sup>22</sup> the survey included a definition of bullying, which read: "A person is bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons. Bullying often occurs in situations where there is a power or status difference. Bullying includes actions like threatening, teasing, name-calling, ignoring, rumor spreading, sending hurtful emails and text messages, and leaving someone out on purpose." Then students were asked: "During the current school year have you been bullied?" Response options were yes and no.<sup>41</sup>

**Perceived dating violence to be a problem.** Students were asked about their perceptions of the physical and emotional dating violence occurring in their school. Specifically, one question assessed physical dating violence, which read: "How much of a problem at this school is students being hit, slapped, or kicked by their boyfriend or girlfriend?" and the other which assessed emotional dating violence read: "How much of a problem at this school is students being threatened, degraded, or intimidated by their boyfriend or girlfriend?" The response options ranged from a *large problem* to *not a problem* on a 4-point Likert scale. These items were adapted from adolescent dating violence items on the Youth Risk Behavior Survey.<sup>42</sup>

**School safety.** A school-level safety subscale score (*safety*) was created based on student responses to the following 6 items: (1) "I feel safe at this school; (2) At this school students try to stop bullying; (3) Students at this school try to stop bullying; (4) How much of a problem at this school is physical fighting between students; (5) How much of a problem at this school is students carrying guns or knives; (6) How much of a problem at this school is harassment or bullying of students." For items 1-3, students were asked to rate whether they *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree* while on items 4-6, response options ranged from a *large problem* to *not a problem*; all 6 items were on a 4-point Likert scale. All items were rescaled where higher scores indicated increased perceptions of safety ( $\alpha = .74$ ). Similar scales have been used to assess perceptions of school safety in previous research.<sup>43</sup>

**School contextual factors.** A series of school-level demographic variables were obtained from the Maryland State Department of Education for inclusion in the models as school-level covariates. Those variables were the percent of students receiving free and reduced priced meals (*FARMS*), the percentage

of students who received an out of school *suspension*, school *attendance* rate, and the total number of students enrolled in the school (*enrollment*), as an indicator of school size.

## Data Analysis

Three-level hierarchical linear models were conducted using the HLM 7.0 software<sup>44</sup> to examine the association between the school contextual factors, bullying, and concerns about teen dating violence, while accounting for the nested nature of the data, that is, students within classrooms, within schools. Student variables at level 1 included student *age*, *sex*, *race*, and experience with bullying in the last year (*bullied*). At level 2, we accounted for classroom-level clustering of students, by including an error term for the intercept, but no variables were modeled. At level 3, we included the school-level perception of *safety*, *enrollment*, *FARMS*, *suspension*, and *attendance* rate. Because the data were collected as a part of a larger randomized controlled trial, school *intervention* condition was also included as a level-3 predictor as a control variable. However, given this was the first year of data collected post randomization, intervention effects were not expected. All level-3 variables were grand-mean centered.<sup>45</sup> We also tested cross-level effects between student bullying status at level 1 and the school contextual factors.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Analyses

Twenty-three percent of students reported being bullied in the past year. In addition, 22.0% and 23.2% of students felt that physical and emotional dating violence were a somewhat and large problem at their school, respectively. Table 1 contains additional descriptive analyses.

### Multilevel Analyses

**Perceptions of physical dating violence (PDV).** As reported in Table 2, the results of the 3-level HLM analyses indicated that all individual (student)-level predictors, age, sex, race, and bullying experience, were significantly associated with greater concern about PDV. For example, males and older students were more likely to perceive PDV as a problem in their school. Students who reported being bullied in the last year perceived PDV to be a greater problem at the school (Coeff = .4535,  $p < .001$ ). At the school level, the school's enrollment and FARMS rate were positively associated with PDV. There were higher perceptions of PDV as a problem in schools with a higher enrollment and FARMS rate (Coeff = .0096,  $p < .05$ ; Coeff = .0033,  $p < .01$ ). The school-level (average) safety score was also associated

**Table 2. HLM Results for 3-Level Model Examining the Association Between Bullying and Concerns About Dating Violence**

	Physical Dating Violence			Emotional Dating Violence		
	Coefficient	SE	t Ratio	Coefficient	SE	t Ratio
Individual-level variables						
Age	0.0428***	0.0072	5.943	0.0535***	0.0061	8.807
Male	0.1665***	0.0154	10.840	0.0661***	0.0155	4.264
Black	-0.0377	0.0195	-1.936	-0.0456*	0.0179	-2.541
Bullied	0.4535***	0.0152	29.793	0.4977***	0.0153	32.556
School-level variables						
Intervention status	-0.0055	0.0218	-0.254	-0.0030	0.0209	-0.144
Enrollment	0.0096*	0.0039	2.433	0.0105**	0.0033	3.154
Suspension	0.0013	0.0015	0.882	0.0004	0.0014	0.319
Attendance	-0.0006	0.0141	-0.041	-0.0025	0.0130	-0.190
FARMS	0.0033**	0.0011	3.079	0.0025*	0.0011	2.419
Safety	-0.6252***	0.0914	-6.843	-0.6581***	0.0917	-7.176
Proportion of variance explained			88.96%	90.62%		
AIC			71,778.73			72,001.71
BIC			71,893.29			72,116.27

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001.

FARMS, Free and reduced meals rate; Male: 0 = Female and 1 = Male; Black: 0 = not Black and 1 = Black;

with PDV, such that less favorable perceptions of school safety were associated with greater concerns about PDV (Coeff =  $-.6252$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Finally, cross-level interactions were examined to determine if experiencing bullying in the last year within a school environment characterized by a low safety score would be associated with student perceptions of PDV as a problem. No significant associations were found.

**Emotional dating violence (EDV).** The HLM results indicated that EDV was significantly associated with students' age, race, and sex. Males, older, and non-Black students were more likely to perceive EDV as a problem in their schools. Students who reported being in bullied in the last year, perceived EDV to be a greater problem in the school than students who did not report experiencing bullying (Coeff =  $.4977$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Similar to PDV, at the school-level, school size and FARMS rate were significantly associated with EDV, such that students in schools with a larger student enrollment and high FARMS rate had higher reports of EDV (Coeff =  $.0105$ ,  $p < .01$ ; Coeff =  $.0025$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Furthermore, the school-level safety score was also associated with students' reports of EDV (Coeff =  $-.6581$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Cross-level interactions did not show that experiencing bullying in the last year within a school environment characterized as unsafe was significantly associated with student perceptions of EDV.

## DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine the association between perceptions of teen dating violence, and individual experiences with bullying and perceptions of school safety. Study findings shed light on the importance of the school environment in understanding

teen perceptions of dating violence. Results showed that students' perceptions of physical and emotional dating violence as a problem at their school were linked to their experiences with bullying and school safety. The effects of school safety and bullying experiences remained even after controlling for student age, sex, and race.

Consistent with our hypothesis, students who had experienced bullying in the last year reported higher perceived problems with dating violence at their school than nonvictimized students. These findings lend support to the theorized relationship between bullying and dating violence.<sup>46,47</sup> In this study, adolescents who experience bullying victimization may transfer their own negative experiences with peer relationships to their perceptions of the dating relationships in the school. Another hypothesis is that these victimized students may be more perceptive of negative treatment in dating relationships than their peers. Finally, students who are victims of bullying may be more likely to be victims of dating violence, which might influence their perception of the quality of dating relationships in the school. While we are unable to determine if those who had been bullied also had personal experience with dating violence, previous research has shown that bullying and dating violence often co-occur among adolescents.<sup>7,28</sup>

Our second hypothesis was also supported. Perceptions of school safety were also associated with dating violence perceptions. In schools characterized by low perceptions of safety, students reported higher perceived problems with physical and emotional dating violence. School safety was independently associated with perceptions of dating violence as a problem, regardless of individual student-level factors. Although school safety is often studied in school-based violence

prevention research, rarely if ever, is dating violence a part of these measures. These findings lend support to the inclusion of dating violence as a potential component of school safety measurement. Similar to other indicators of school safety like bullying, fighting, weapon use; perceptions of dating violence provide a unique perspective into the dynamics of student relationships in the school.

Furthermore, other school contextual factors, such as (high) school enrollment and (high) FARMS rate, were also significantly associated with greater concerns about both physical and emotional dating violence. It is unclear how these factors may influence student perceptions of the dating violence climate at their schools, but research does indicate that these factors are often associated with perceptions of school safety and disorder.<sup>48</sup> Thus, as FARMS and enrollment increase, student perceptions of safety may decrease. Indeed, the correlations showed that these variables were moderately associated ( $r = -.251$ ,  $p = .06$ ;  $r = -.567$ ,  $p < .05$ , respectively). As a result, any efforts to decrease school disorder and promote a positive school environment could decrease dating violence and improve school safety.

In considering the effects of individual student demographics on perceptions of dating violence, older, male, and non-Black students reported higher perceived problems of physical and emotional dating violence. These findings are generally consistent with previous research on dating violence victimization.<sup>15,49,50</sup> Older students, as a result of having been in more relationships, often report higher rates of dating violence. Nationally, boys also consistently report a greater prevalence of dating violence victimization when compared to girls.<sup>51</sup> Research and funding announcements have emphasized the need to understand why boys report higher victimization rates and the dynamics of aggression and fighting within dating relationships.<sup>52</sup> Boys may be experiencing more emotional forms of dating violence, in contrast to the physical forms that are often studied among girls. Furthermore, whereas black adolescents have reported higher dating violence prevalence, these findings are somewhat inconsistent across samples.<sup>51,53</sup> Black adolescents who witness violence occurring within their community may be attuned more to dating violence at school. More research is required to understand how these and other individual factors may influence perceptions of dating violence. For example, adolescents who are currently involved in a romantic relationship may be more sensitive to dating violence occurring in their school environment.

### Limitations

Some study limitations should be taken into consideration. This study measured perceptions of

dating violence as a problem in the school rather than the personal experience with dating violence. However, few studies have examined bullying as it relates to general perceptions of dating violence. In addition, there are inherent limitations of self-report data, which would be improved through multimethod assessment (parent, peer, or teacher ratings); however, this was not feasible given the nature of these behaviors and the design of this study. Although the study sample was rather large with multiple classrooms and students across 58 high schools, the participating schools all volunteered to enroll in the project. Therefore, they are not necessarily a representative sample of high schools in the state. This study focused on public high schools; additional research is required in elementary and middle schools in order to determine the generalizability of these findings to younger age groups. Finally, the cross-sectional nature of this study design does not allow for any causal inferences to be made based on the findings.

### Conclusions

Findings from this study suggest a link between bullying experiences and perceptions of dating violence. Prevention programs aimed at preventing dating violence should include efforts to address student perceptions of violence occurring within the school and their prior experiences with bullying and other violent acts. Although more research is needed to elucidate the intricate relationship between bullying and dating violence, it is also clear that school safety plays a substantial role in student perceptions of interpersonal violence.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL HEALTH

Schools are an important context for understanding and preventing violence among adolescents. Many interventions developed to prevent youth violence are designed to be implemented within this environment where students learn, grow, develop, and engage socially and romantically with their peers. Given the growing body of research elucidating the link between dating violence and bullying behaviors, school-based interventions like Safe Dates and the Olweus Bullying Program may find it useful to measure their effects on perceptions of school safety and student violent behaviors. In addition, schools often implement multiple interventions that target sometimes overlapping behaviors, such as bullying and school violence. It is likely that implementing an integrated youth violence prevention program could have effects not only on bullying but also dating violence within the school. For example, the Olweus Bullying Program includes

lessons on dating violence prevention and pro-social peer relationships.

### Human Subjects Approval Statement

This study was approved by the Internal Review Board of the authors' university.

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