

Dating violence in Denmark

English Summary

A nationwide survey of prevalence, character and
consequences
of exposure to violence among 16-24 year-olds

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Executive summary

The Danish 2005-2008 national action plan to stop violence against women has prompted this study on young people's experiences of sexual relationships and dating violence, which has been conducted among a representative national sample of 16-24 year-olds.

Objective

The primary objectives were to examine the prevalence, character and consequences of dating violence, defined as physical, sexual and/or psychological violence perpetrated by a present or former dating partner and to illuminate the attitudes of young people towards violent behaviour in dating relationships.

Method

The studies comprised of quantitative and qualitative data collections. In the fall of 2007, an internet-based survey was conducted among a random sample of 2,123 Danish residents, aged 16-24. A sample of 8000 youths was initially drawn from the Danish personal identification number register; a register containing information about all registered residents in Denmark. The response rate ended on 28 %, once respondents with invalid contact information had been removed. This is a low response rate, wherefore the representativity of the participating sample was controlled in regards to the corresponding background population. This control found that our sample was representative in regards to age, ethnic and geographic distribution but not to gender.

In January 2008, focus group discussions were conducted to gain insight into young people's perception and discourse concerning dating, abusive behaviour and violence. These included one gender-mixed group, three groups of young women and one group of young men. The survey and the interviews supplemented one another and allowed this study to gain a deeper understanding of the survey results by giving a voice to the generation that they seek to understand.

Among the 2123 young people participating in the survey, 82% reported to have dating experience. It is this group of young people (36 % men and 64 % women) that forms the basis for the presentation of the prevalence and character of dating violence.

While focusing on young people with dating experience, this summary also presents data on young people's exposure to violence in general. Dating violence is extensively analysed and described in respect to a number of themes such as risk factors, risk behaviour, implications and prevention, and it is compared to violence occurring outside of dating relationships.

Violence comprises psychological, sexual and physical violence. Psychological violence covers threats via digital media as well as threats made face-to-face. Sexual violence covers harassment, sexual offences and serious sexual abuse, such as rape or attempted rape. Physical violence includes pushing, slaps, punches, kicks, strangulation attempts and assaults with weapons.

Dating violence

Women report dating violence more frequently than men do. Around 10 % of the young women and 4 % of the young men have been victims of physical and/or sexual dating violence within the previous year.

Women report sexual violence (7%) slightly more often than physical violence (6%) and psychological dating violence (5 %), whereas men report physical violence as frequently as sexual violence and psychological dating violence (2%).

The forms of violence that the young people most frequently report are milder types of dating violence, such as threats and harassment, whereas more serious forms of dating violence are reported relatively seldom. 0.7 % of the young women report that a present or former partner has attempted strangulation, and 0.7 % report to be forced into having sex with a present or former dating partner through the use of physical force.

Overall, 12% of the young women and 5% of the young men report having been victims of psychological, sexual and/or physical dating violence. It is estimated that in the Danish population around 28,000 women and 12,000 men aged between 16-24 years on an annual basis are victims of some form of dating violence. This estimate is based on the young people in general, and not just on those with dating experience.

Specifically in regards to physical dating violence, it is estimated that in the Danish population around 13,000 young women and 4,500 young men annually are exposed to this form of dating violence.

The qualitative focus group discussions with young people revealed that dating violence is surrounded by extensive taboos, which influences the readiness of young people to report and to reach out for counselling and support.

Both the survey and the focus group interviews show that men are more tolerant towards violence when compared to women. The focus group interviews additionally elucidated that dating violence perpetrated by women towards men is dismissed and not taken as seriously as dating violence perpetrated by men. The ridicule of the male victims may lead to men being less likely to recognise and acknowledge this form of violence, therefore resulting in an under-reporting of dating violence amongst males.

Women under the age of 20 are more likely to be victims of dating violence compared to women aged between 20 and 24. Dating violence occurs more often between partners that have been going out for less than 6 months than in relationships of longer duration and more frequently in relationships where the victim and perpetrator are not co-habiting. This indicates that it is the youngest women with limited relationship experience who are at greatest risk of being exposed to dating violence. Additionally, the study found a correlation between early sexual debut and exposure to dating violence.

The reporting of dating violence incidents to the police was very uncommon amongst both male and female victims and only relatively few have sought professional help after being victimised. Instead young people predominantly turn to friends and family for help and support. The focus group interviews illuminated that young people refrain from reporting a violent partner and seeking help in order to conceal the violence as a means of protecting their partner and themselves from being criticised by the people around them.

A correlation between exposure to physical dating violence and alcohol and drug consumption was found. There was no correlation between sexual dating violence and alcohol consumption but a correlation to drug abuse.

Having witnessed family violence as a child and perpetration of physical violence are significant risk factors for exposure to dating violence. This is especially the case among young women. The attitudes and behaviour of peers are also of great importance for the young people's own use and acceptance of violence.

Dating violence and mental distress

Female dating violence victims more frequently report mental problems, such as sadness, depression, anxiety attacks, nervousness, use of sedatives and suicide attempts compared to both female victims of other violence and non-victims.

Male dating violence victims more frequently report sleeping disorders and suicide attempts compared to male victims of other type of violence and non-victims. Hence, violence from a partner appears to have a more serious impact on the victims compared to violence perpetrated by someone outside a dating relationship.

General victimisation amongst youths with dating experience

A relatively high proportion of the young people with dating experiences reported exposure to violence from a non-dating partner and they reported psychological violence most frequently. As many as 20 % of the young women and 41 % of the young men report, that they have been exposed to either digital or face-to-face threats within the last year.

Young women report sexual victimisation more frequently than men. 21 % of the young women with dating experience report exposure to some form of sexual violence within the last year, compared to 8 % of the men.

Contrarily to this, men experience physical violence more frequently than women. Respectively 38 % of the men and 16 % of the women report exposure to some form of physical violence within the last year.

It is estimated that annually in Denmark around 100,000 women and a little more than 140,000 men aged between 16-24 are exposed to psychological, physical and/or sexual violence by any perpetrator. This includes dating and non-dating relations. Around 40,000 young women and around 100,000 young men annually are physically victimised and considerable more that 50,000 women and around 20,000 men annually are victims of sexual violence.

Physical violence against women is most often reported to have taken place in a restaurant, bar or a discotheque, whereas sexual violence is generally reported to have

taken place in the home of either the victim or of the perpetrator. Men are most frequently assaulted on a street or in other public places.

Both young women and men regard street violence to be the single most frequent type of violence perpetrated against young people. Women highlight psychological and sexual forms of violence as the most frequent forms of violence, whilst men tend to regard physical violence as the most frequent form of violence.

Young people consider violence between adults to be more severe than violence taking place between youths. This is the standpoint of both victims and non-victims. An explanation might be that violence between young people is closely associated to childhood play fights and therefore are more acceptable, whereas violence among adults indicates serious problems and breaches social norms for adult behaviour.

It is notable that young people who themselves have been exposed to physical and/or sexual violence more readily define various incidences as acts of violence compared to non-victims. Additionally, these youths consider more frequently than other youths that some situations may justify violence as a means of self-defence.

Prevention of dating violence

It is very plausible that there exists a correlation between exposure to dating violence during adolescence and an increased risk of being exposed to partner violence as an adult. It is therefore likely that prevention of dating violence may contribute to the prevention of adult partner violence and therefore of children of the adults becoming witnesses of family violence.

At present in Denmark there exist only a limited number of prevention initiatives that specifically target dating violence, whereas several initiatives have been implemented to prevent violence against women and children more generally¹.

One national initiative addresses family and dating violence through school information events, and there exist several local initiatives, such as support groups for youths. However they do not specifically address dating violence, even though they may present a valuable service to the victims. There is a clear need for better general awareness about the risks of dating violence and for qualified counselling both regarding primary prevention and secondary prevention of the possible consequences of exposure to physical, psychological and sexual dating violence.

Since the early 2000's, a limited number of counselling services have targeted male offenders. These initiatives include counselling and treatment of young sexual aggressors, whereas services for perpetrators of physical and psychological violence mainly address adult perpetrators.

¹The Ministry of Equality has for example drafted a report and a debate magazine "Kønsforskelle i unges udøvelse af vold og udsathed for vold", which has been distributed to all Danish schools. The Ministry has also financed various projects providing support to children who have witnessed family violence and are living in domestic violence shelters, as well as a internet based chatrooms where children and young people can meet and talk to peers about their experiences with violence at home.

Youth's point of views on dating violence prevention

Preventative measures were a central theme both in the focus group interviews and the survey that allowed for the respondents to outline their personal views on how they felt dating violence might be prevented.

The participants particularly highlighted the responsibility of family and friends, and the importance of them being aware and being able to offer support and help if a young person encounters difficulties in a dating relationship. The young people stressed a great need for more and better information about the problem. Such information would additionally contribute to minimizing the taboo that surrounds dating violence today.

The respondents also stressed the importance of youths becoming better at acknowledging what they want and do not want to accept from a dating partner and to be able to take action if anyone crosses their personal boundaries.

They also requested more visible services and easier access to them. These services should provide the necessary help and support to someone who is a victim of dating violence.

The focus group interviews highlighted the need for improving general awareness about dating violence. A greater general awareness may break the taboos that at present often are blurring the scope of the problem and which hinder victims in seeking help. For example, awareness may be promoted by national publicity campaigns designed with well-known role models as figureheads. In particular, participants found it important that such campaigns did not assume the characteristics of scare campaigns. Furthermore, they recommended that the campaigns should address both male and female dating violence, presenting the message that it is just as wrong for women as it is for men to be violent against a partner.

They highlighted that friends and family should have more empathy towards the troubles of young people in order to react in case a young person has problems with a boyfriend or girlfriend. In this regard it is important that friends and family offer their support without prejudice and without blaming the youth for 'choosing a bad partner'. There is also a clear need for more information about how to manage conflicts in dating relationships and how to react when personal boundaries are violated.

The following recommendations were drawn up in relation to three target groups: the young people, their parents and the authorities.

Young people:

- Inform them about the prevalence and character of dating violence and thereby break the taboo surrounding the issue.
- Carry out public campaigns with the clear message that it is unacceptable both for boys and girls to be violent towards a partner.
- Use role models who disassociate themselves from dating violence.
- Develop and incorporate mandatory training in schools about children and young people's rights and respect to personal boundaries.

Parents:

- Inform parents and other adults about the risks of dating violence and the responsibility of adults to guide, help and support young people during their first dating experiences.

Authorities:

- That authorities implement a wide and active prevention effort in the form of nationwide public campaigns aimed at breaking the circle of violence.