RESEARCH & ADVOCACY REVIEW

The Rate of Cyber Dating Abuse Among Teens and How It Relates to Other Forms of Teen Dating Violence

"…Technology has developed new ways for youth to be in contact with one another, creating both opportunity and risk. Based on this study's results, cyber dating abuse experiences are common…[and] youth who are victims of such abuse are vulnerable to it anytime of the day or night. People no longer have to be actually physically together to fall victim to or perpetrate various forms of dating abuse.…Females are especially vulnerable to cyber dating abuse, and sexual cyber dating abuse in particular" (Zweig, et. al., page 13).

This study looked at the extent of cyber dating abuse and how it relates to dating abuse in general. Here are some key aspects of the study:

- Various forms of abuse were considered including sexual, psychological, and physical.
- Youth voluntarily took part in the study while at schools that agreed to participate, in three Northeastern states. Most youth were in high school, lived with both parents, and identified as White and as heterosexual/straight.
- Abuse was categorized as follows: cyber abuse (sexual and non-sexual), and other forms of dating violence (psychological, physical, and sexual coercion).
- The study looked for overlaps between cyber abuse and other forms of dating violence.
- The study asked about both victimization and perpetration.

Examples of "sexual cyber abuse" included the perpetrator sending unwanted sexual pictures, demanding sexual pictures from the victim (including threats if the victim refused), and sending unwanted messages about having sex.

The study found that:

- About 1 in 4 youth reported experiencing cyber dating abuse in the past year, with females reporting victimization at a higher rate than boys, particularly in the case of sexual cyber abuse.
- Youth who experienced sexual cyber abuse were 7 times more likely to have also experienced sexual coercion in the same dating relationship,

and also were more likely to experience other (non-cyber) forms of abuse in that relationship. Girls were twice as likely to report victimization than boys.

- Youth who *perpetrated* sexual cyber abuse were 17 times more likely to have also perpetrated sexual coercion. Boys were more likely to report perpetration.

The gender differences in victimization and perpetration were far more pronounced with sexual cyber abuse and sexual coercion than the other forms of dating violence. In fact, some forms of dating violence were more often reported as perpetrated by females (as in non-sexual cyber dating abuse) and/or males reported more frequently being the victims (as with mild physical violence).

The study emphasized that while newer technologies provide a new venue for already existing dating violence behaviors, the nature of the technologies make it possible for that abuse to occur anytime of the day or night, whether or not dating partners are physically together. "...The ability to be in constant contact with a dating partner via these relatively new technologies may contribute to someone's ability to stalk, control, harass, and abuse their partners" (Zweig, et. al., page 2).

Advocates should not lose heart about technology in general. We should encourage parents, educators, and others who work with youth to not see technology only as a negative force. The authors remind us that, "While technology may open up avenues for dating abuse and harassment, it can also provide the most effective solutions to prevent it. These same digital platforms can be tools to educate teens, spread the word about where to go for help, and give victims and witnesses a safe way to report abuse." (Zweig & Dank, page 2).

Some Next Steps for Advocates

- Work with schools to raise awareness and develop prevention approaches addressing cyber dating violence. In these efforts, be clear that while both genders perpetrate cyber dating abuse in general, sexual cyber abuse (and the related likelihood of sexual coercion) are more frequently perpetrated by boys against girls.

- Update curricula, programs, and materials to reflect the risks and benefits of newer technologies.

- Use newer technologies including social media as an integrated part of prevention efforts and outreach.

- Read the short-version report, "Teen Dating Abuse and Harassment in the Digital World: Implications for Prevention and Intervention," available on the Urban Institute's website at http://www.urban.org/publications/412750.html).

References

Zweig, J. M., Dank, M., Yahner, J. & Lachman, P. (2013) The Rate of Cyber Dating Abuse Among Teens and How It Relates to Other Forms of Teen Dating Violence. *Journal of Youth & Adolescence.* Published Online February 2013.

Zweig, J. M. & Dank, M. (2013) *Teen Dating Abuse and Harassment in the Digital World: Implications for Prevention and Intervention.* Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.