

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Dating Violence Among Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Adolescents: Results From a Community Survey

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**Purpose:** To characterize the prevalence of dating violence experienced by gay, lesbian, bisexual (GLB), and heterosexual adolescents.

**Methods:** Self-report surveys were collected and analyzed from 521 adolescents at a GLB youth rally. Respondents were asked about dating violence, including types of abuse, threats of “outing,” and gender of abuser. Multivariate logistic regression analyses were used to test group differences.

**Results:** Reports of dating violence were prevalent in all sexual orientation groups, and there were few statistically significant differences. Compared with heterosexuals and controlling for age, bisexual males had greater odds of reporting any type of abuse, and bisexual females had greater odds of experiencing sexual abuse. Controlling for age, lesbians had greater odds of being scared about their safety, compared with heterosexual females, and bisexuals were more likely to be threatened with outing, compared with gay males/lesbians.

**Conclusions:** Overall, the prevalence of dating violence among GLB adolescents is similar to that of heterosexuals. Dating violence outreach and prevention efforts should be targeted to reach GLB adolescents. © Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2002

## KEY WORDS:

Adolescents  
Bisexual  
Dating violence  
Gay  
Lesbian

Intimate partner violence has been increasingly recognized as a significant public health problem [1]. The impact of intimate partner violence has been well-documented in the last decade, with long-term effects including increased use of medical services, chronic pain, and psychological sequelae such as anxiety and depression [2–4]. The prevalence of dating violence among high school and college students nationwide ranges from 9% to 41%, [5–10], with variations in estimates depending in part on definitions of abuse and sampling procedures. Adolescents reporting dating violence are two to five times more likely than their peers to have increased risk of other negative health outcomes, including substance use, forced sexual contact, sexual risk behaviors, teen pregnancy, eating disorders, and suicidality [7].

Previous research about dating violence has not focused on sexual minority youth or adolescents in same-sex relationships, yet nearly 6% of youth responding to the Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey described themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (GLB) and/or reported same-sex sexual contact [7]. Because of the stigma associated with being GLB, many teens may experience social isolation, verbal and physical harassment, and violence in their schools and communities [11]. The stressors that GLB youth face have been shown to be associated with

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high rates of psychosocial and health risk behaviors [11,12].

This is one of the first studies to examine the prevalence of dating violence among GLB and heterosexual adolescents. In addition, this analysis reports the gender of the abusive partner and examines the threat of being "outed" (having one's sexual orientation disclosed), a form of abuse not previously studied in dating violence research.

## Methods

### Setting and Study Sample

A community-based gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) youth organization in the Northeast administered an anonymous, self-report survey to a convenience sample of adolescents attending a rally focused on GLBT youth rights held in an urban area in Spring, 2000. Volunteers for the community organization asked adolescent and young adult rally participants whether they would be willing to fill out a short, anonymous survey on dating violence. Those who agreed completed the questionnaire while they waited for the rally to begin. The survey took less than 5 minutes to complete.

Questionnaires were collected from 632 adolescents between the ages of 13 and 22 years. Thirty-five respondents self-identified their sexual orientation as "questioning" and were excluded from the analysis because of their small numbers. Similarly, the nine respondents self-identifying as female-to-male or male-to-female transgender were excluded from the analysis. Sixty-seven respondents were excluded because of missing data. Data from 521 female and male adolescents were included in this analysis, representing 82% of the original sample.

### Survey Instrument

The 18-item questionnaire collected demographic data, including gender (male, female, female-to-male, or male-to-female transgender), sexual orientation (gay, lesbian, bisexual, straight, or questioning), age, ethnicity, primary language, and living situation. Lifetime experiences of dating violence were adapted from the Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey [13], Victimization and Dating Relationships Survey [14], and Conflict Tactics Scale [15] and were assessed by the following five items: (a) "Has a date or partner ever tried to control most or all of your daily activities: for example, controlling

who you can talk to and where you can go?"; (b) "Has a date or partner repeatedly put you down, embarrassed you in front of other people, or made you feel bad about yourself?"; (c) "Have you ever been scared for your physical safety because of the anger or threats of a date or partner?"; (d) "Has a date or partner ever hurt you physically? This would include being shoved, slapped, hit, kicked, bit, choked, burned, stabbed, or shot"; and (e) "Has a date or partner ever hurt you sexually or made you do something sexual that you did not want to do?" Response options for each item were as follows: (a) "No"; (b) "Yes, a date/partner of the same sex"; (c) "Yes, a date/partner of the opposite sex"; or (d) "Yes, both a date/partner of the same sex and the opposite sex." An original sixth item asked respondents whether a date or partner had ever threatened to "out" them to others. Participants who had been abused were asked whether they had disclosed the abuse to anyone and, if so, to whom. All participants were also asked whether they knew of resources for GLBT youth experiencing dating violence.

### Variables

Sexual orientation served as the primary independent variable in analyses and was modeled using indicator terms representing three sexual orientation groups (gay/lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual). The abuse items served as dependent variables and were coded as binary ("Yes"/"No") terms representing the five specific types of abuse (control, emotional, scared for safety, physical, sexual). A composite term was created to represent experience of at least one of these five types of abuse. In addition, a binary term represented ever having been threatened with "outing" by a date or partner, and another represented ever having disclosed the abuse to another. Age was coded two ways, as a continuous variable and as three binary indicator terms representing ages 13 to 15 years, 16 to 18 years, and 19 to 22 years.

### Statistical Analysis

Demographic statistics, including gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and mean age were calculated. Lifetime prevalence of experiencing each of the five individual types of abuse, at least one of the five types of abuse, and threats of being outed by a date or partner were estimated. Chi-square and, for small cell counts, Fisher's exact test statistics were calculated to test for differences in prevalence of abuse

**Table 1.** Demographics of Respondents in a Sample of Gay Lesbian, Bisexual, and Heterosexual Adolescents (n = 521)

| Variable               | Number            |
|------------------------|-------------------|
| Number of respondents  | 521               |
| Age (mean yr $\pm$ SD) | 17.1 ( $\pm$ 1.8) |
| Gender                 | n (%)             |
| Male                   | 171 (32.8)        |
| Female                 | 350 (67.2)        |
| Race/ethnicity         |                   |
| White/non-Hispanic     | 410 (79.6)        |
| Hispanic               | 38 (7.4)          |
| Other                  | 37 (7.2)          |
| Black/non-Hispanic     | 14 (2.7)          |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 13 (2.5)          |
| Native American        | 3 (0.6)           |
| Sexual Orientation     |                   |
| Males                  |                   |
| Gay                    | 101 (59.1)        |
| Bisexual               | 21 (12.3)         |
| Heterosexual           | 49 (28.7)         |
| Females                |                   |
| Lesbian                | 83 (23.7)         |
| Bisexual               | 128 (36.6)        |
| Heterosexual           | 139 (39.7)        |

experienced across the sexual orientation groups and differences in the prevalence of each of the five types of abuse. Fisher's exact test statistics were also calculated to test for differences in prevalence of threats of outing comparing gay/lesbian and bisexual respondents. Chi-square statistics were calculated to test differences across sexual orientation groups in having disclosed experiences of abuse to someone. In addition, genders of abusive dates or partners were compared across sexual orientation groups.

Multivariate logistic regression methods were used to determine whether age might confound the relationship between sexual orientation and lifetime experience of dating violence. Separate logistic regression models were tested to estimate the odds of experiencing at least one type of abuse or experiencing each of the specific types of abuse associated with sexual orientation, controlling for age as a categorical variable. All analyses were gender-stratified and conducted with the SPSS statistical package [16]. This project was approved for data analysis by the Children's Hospital Clinical Investigation Committee.

## Results

### Study Population

As shown in Table 1, of the 521 participants, 171 (32.8%) were male and 350 (67.2%) were female. The

mean age of respondents was 17.1 years ( $\pm$ 1.8). Of the respondents, 410 (78.7%) were white/non-Hispanic, 38 (7.3%) were Hispanic, and 67 (13%) were of other ethnicities. Overall, gay and lesbian participants had the highest mean age in years (gay/lesbian: 17.9 years; bisexual: 16.7 years; heterosexual: 16.6 years;  $p < .01$ ). The mean age in years of those reporting at least one of the five types of abuse was greater than those not reporting abuse (17.3 vs. 16.9 years;  $p < .05$ ).

### Prevalence and Type of Abuse

*Males.* Table 2 depicts the prevalence and type of abuse reported by respondents. As seen in this table, 41.5% of males reported experiencing at least one of the five types of abuse. Results of Pearson's Chi-square and Fisher's exact tests suggest that there were some differences in abuse across sexual orientation groups. After controlling for age in logistic regression models, bisexual males had 3.6 times (95% confidence interval [CI]: 1.2, 10.5) the odds of experiencing at least one of the five types of abuse, compared with heterosexual males, and 5.4 times the odds (95% CI: 1.5, 19.4) of being threatened with outing by a date or partner, compared with gay males.

Of the bisexual males reporting at least one of the five types of abuse, three (25%) reported experiencing abuse perpetrated only by males, three (25%) only by females, and six (50%) by both. Among gay males who experienced at least one of the five types of abuse, seven (6.9%) were abused by female dates or female partners. Among bisexual males who experienced the threat of being outed, one (16.7%) reported this abuse was committed only by a female, one (16.7%) only by a male, and four (66.7%) reported threats of being outed by both male and female partners.

*Females.* Among females, 37.1% experienced one or more of the five types of abuse (Table 2). The percentage experiencing at least one type of abuse did not vary significantly by sexual orientation. Although 27.3% of bisexual females experienced at least one of the five types of abuse from males, 19.3% of lesbians also experienced abuse committed by male dates or male partners.

The results of Pearson's Chi-square and Fisher's exact tests are reported in Table 2. After controlling for age in logistic regression models, there were three significant associations: Compared with heterosexual females, lesbians had 2.4 times (95% CI: 1.1, 5.5)

**Table 2.** Prevalence and Type of Abuse by a Date or Partner Reported in a Sample of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Heterosexual Adolescents (n = 521)

|  | Overall<br>n (%) | Gay/Lesbian<br>n (%) | Bisexual<br>n (%)      | Heterosexual<br>n (%) |
|--|------------------|----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| Male                                   | n = 171          | n = 101              | n = 21                 | n = 49                |
| Experienced abuse <sup>a</sup>         | 71 (41.5)        | 45 (44.6)            | 12 (57.1)*             | 14 (28.6)             |
| Gender of abuser <sup>b</sup>          |                  |                      |                        |                       |
| Abuse by male partner                  | 54 (31.6)        | 44 (43.6)            | 9 (42.9)               | 1 (2.0)               |
| Abuse by female partner                | 29 (17.0)        | 7 (6.9)              | 9 (42.9)               | 13 (26.5)             |
| Type of abuse                          |                  |                      |                        |                       |
| Control                                | 42 (24.6)        | 26 (25.7)            | 7 (33.3)               | 9 (18.4)              |
| Emotional                              | 33 (19.3)        | 21 (20.8)            | 6 (28.6)               | 6 (12.2)              |
| Scared for safety                      | 16 (9.4)         | 12 (11.9)            | 4 (19.0)               | 0 (0.0)               |
| Physical                               | 21 (12.3)        | 14 (13.9)            | 2 (9.5)                | 5 (10.2)              |
| Sexual                                 | 19 (11.1)        | 14 (13.9)            | 3 (14.3)               | 2 (4.1)               |
| Threatened to be outed                 | 13 (7.6)         | 7 (6.9)              | 6 (28.6) <sup>#</sup>  | #                     |
| Gender of abuser (outing) <sup>b</sup> |                  |                      |                        |                       |
| Abuse by male partner                  | 12 (7.0)         | 7 (6.9)              | 5 (23.8)               | #                     |
| Abuse by female partner                | 6 (3.5)          | 1 (1.0)              | 5 (23.8)               | #                     |
| Female                                 | n = 350          | n = 83               | n = 128                | n = 139               |
| Experienced abuse <sup>a</sup>         | 130 (37.1)       | 36 (43.4)            | 49 (38.3)              | 45 (32.4)             |
| Gender of abuser <sup>b</sup>          |                  |                      |                        |                       |
| Abuse by male partner                  | 94 (26.9)        | 16 (19.3)            | 35 (27.3)              | 43 (30.9)             |
| Abuse by female partner                | 72 (20.6)        | 33 (39.8)            | 33 (25.8)              | 6 (4.3)               |
| Type of abuse                          |                  |                      |                        |                       |
| Control                                | 78 (22.3)        | 26 (31.3)*           | 29 (22.7)              | 23 (16.5)             |
| Emotional                              | 69 (19.7)        | 22 (26.5)*           | 26 (20.3)              | 21 (15.1)             |
| Scared for safety                      | 42 (12.0)        | 16 (19.3)*           | 14 (10.9)              | 12 (8.6)              |
| Physical                               | 44 (12.6)        | 12 (14.5)            | 18 (14.1)              | 14 (10.1)             |
| Sexual                                 | 57 (16.3)        | 12 (14.5)            | 28 (21.9)*             | 17 (12.2)             |
| Threatened to be outed                 | 19 (5.4)         | 3 (3.6)              | 16 (12.5) <sup>#</sup> | #                     |
| Gender of abuser (outing) <sup>b</sup> |                  |                      |                        |                       |
| Abuse by male partner                  | 5 (1.4)          | 2 (2.4)              | 3 (2.3)                | #                     |
| Abuse by female partner                | 15 (4.3)         | 1 (1.2)              | 14 (10.9)              | #                     |

Tests of differences for any abuse experienced and the five types of abuse use heterosexual as the reference group.

\* Test of Pearson Chi-square or Fisher's exact test (for expected cells less than 5) significance at  $p < .05$ .

> Test of Pearson Chi-square or Fisher's exact test (for expected cells less than 5) significance at  $p < .01$ .

Tests of differences for threatened to be outed use gay/lesbian as the reference group.

# Test of Pearson Chi-square or Fisher's exact test (for expected cells less than 5) significance at  $p < .05$ .

<sup>a</sup> Experienced abuse represents reported experience of one or more of the five types of abuse (control, emotional, scared for safety, physical, and sexual).

<sup>b</sup> Gender of abuser categories are not mutually exclusive. Test of differences for gender of abuser were not performed.

the odds of reporting that a date or partner had made them scared about their safety, and bisexuals had 2.0 times (95% CI: 1.0, 3.9) the odds of reporting sexual abuse by a date or partner. When compared with lesbians, bisexuals had 4.3 times (95% CI: 1.2, 15.6) higher odds of having been threatened with outing by a date or a partner.

Among the lesbians reporting they were scared about their safety, 5 (31.3%) reported that males had committed this abuse. Among bisexual females experiencing sexual abuse, 9 (32.1%) of the respondents reported that the abusers were only female, 17 (60.7%) reported that the abusers were only male, and 2 (7.1%) reported abusers of both sexes. The majority [13 (81.3%)] of bisexual females experienc-

ing a threat of outing reported the abusers were only female; two (12.5%) reported male abusers only, and 1 (6.3%) reported being threatened with outing by both male and female partners. Among the lesbians who were threatened with outing, 2 (66.7%) were threatened by male partners and 1 (33.3%) by a female partner. Of note is that four heterosexual females reported having male dates or male partners who threatened them with outing.

### Disclosure

As seen in Table 3, more than one-quarter of males experiencing any partner abuse did not tell anyone about it. Among those experiencing abuse, 11 (27.5%)

**Table 3.** Reported Disclosure of Abuse Among Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Heterosexual Adolescents Who Have Been Abused by a Date or Partner (n = 175)<sup>a</sup>

| Among Those Who Have Experienced Abuse <sup>b</sup> | Overall n (%) | Gay/Lesbian n (%) | Bisexual n (%) | Heterosexual n (%) |
|---|---------------|-------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Male  | 62            | 40                | 9              | 13                 |
| Disclosed abuse <sup>c</sup>                        | 44 (71.0)     | 29 (72.5)         | 6 (66.7)       | 9 (69.2)           |
| Disclosed to friend                                 | 43 (97.7)     | 29 (100.0)        | 5 (83.3)       | 9 (100.0)          |
| Disclosed to adult                                  | 7 (15.9)      | 6 (20.7)          | 1 (16.7)       | 0 (0.0)            |
| Female  | 113           | 28                | 45             | 40                 |
| Disclosed abuse <sup>c</sup>                        | 78 (69.0)     | 21 (75.0)         | 29 (64.4)      | 28 (70.0)          |
| Disclosed to friend                                 | 75 (96.1)     | 19 (90.5)         | 29 (100.0)     | 27 (96.4)          |
| Disclosed to adult                                  | 11 (14.1)     | 4 (19.0)          | 3 (10.3)       | 4 (14.3)           |

<sup>a</sup> Nine males and 17 females who reported experiencing abuse did not respond to a survey question on disclosure.

<sup>b</sup> Experienced abuse represents reported experience of one or more of the five types of abuse (control, emotional, scared for safety, physical, and sexual).

<sup>c</sup> Friend and adult categories are not mutually exclusive.

of the gay males and 3 (33.3%) of the bisexual males told no one, compared with 4 (30.8%) of the heterosexual males, although the differences were not statistically significant. Similar to the males, 31.0% of the females told no one about their experiences of abuse, and there were no statistical differences across sexual orientation groups. Among both males and females who disclosed the abuse, almost everyone told a friend, whereas less than one-sixth told an adult.

## Resources

Among the 148 participants responding to a question asking whether they knew where to find resources for GLBT youth experiencing dating violence, 82.4% identified a high school- or community-based GLBT youth group as a place for GLBT teens to get help for same-sex dating violence, but just 10% identified traditional domestic violence/sexual assault resources.

## Discussion

This study is unique in that it reports the prevalence of dating violence among GLB adolescents and additionally identifies the gender of the abuser. These initial findings suggest a substantial proportion of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual adolescents have experienced abuse in a dating relationship. In addition, we found the prevalence of dating violence was similar among males and females in our sample.

Bisexual males were more than five times more likely and bisexual females more than four times more likely than either gay male or lesbian adoles-

cents to report being threatened with outing by a partner. This is the first study to specifically examine threats of outing, a type of abuse that is unique to GLBT populations. Although we do not have data to explain why rates are higher among bisexuals, it is possible that bisexual adolescents are less accepted by both the gay/lesbian and heterosexual communities, making them even more isolated than their gay or lesbian peers and therefore more vulnerable to threats of outing [17]. Bisexual females were also twice as likely as heterosexual females to report sexual abuse. Because most studies to date have collapsed gay/lesbian and bisexual into a single category, there is a paucity of research examining risks specific to bisexual adolescents. The results presented here indicate that further study is warranted.

Almost half the lesbians reporting abuse had been abused by a male partner, and bisexual males and females were equally likely to report abuse by male partners as they were female partners. This illustrates the importance of distinguishing between behavior and identity [18,19]. Self-identified lesbians and gay males may have opposite-sex partners, and bisexual adolescents may have both same- and opposite-sex partners. It is important that providers not make assumptions about the gender of adolescents' partners on the basis of their sexual orientation.

The majority of respondents identified school- or community-based GLBT youth groups as resources for GLBT teens experiencing dating violence, which has implications for prevention and intervention. First, to effectively reach this population, domestic violence and sexual assault agencies should be aware of same-sex dating violence and increase their out-

reach efforts to this population. Second, even when GLBT youth groups are successful in establishing connections with GLBT teens, most of them do not have experience in addressing issues of dating violence. Finally, because adolescents experiencing abuse are most likely to turn to a friend, prevention and intervention efforts should also focus on teaching young people how to help friends who are experiencing dating violence.

There are several limitations to this study. First, because the data were collected from participants at a rally for GLBT youth rights, results may not be generalizable to all GLB and heterosexual adolescents. GLB adolescents attending the rally may not be representative of the entire population of GLB adolescents, and the experiences of dating violence in the population may be different. Second, the sample was relatively small, and the analyses may not have had enough statistical power to detect some associations. Third, the survey instrument was self-report. To decrease the likelihood of respondents giving socially desirable answers, surveys were completed anonymously. The prevalence estimates of dating violence among heterosexual adolescent respondents are consistent with those reported elsewhere, supporting the validity of the data collected [20]. Finally, the survey was cross-sectional and did not provide information about when the abuse occurred, frequency of abuse, or number of abusive partners.

The findings are an important step in characterizing both prevalence and types of abuse experienced by GLB adolescents and underscore the need for dating violence prevention and intervention programs within school- and community-based GLBT youth groups. In many parts of the country in which GLBT youth programs are scarce, clinicians and prevention specialists need to make extra effort to reach and serve GLBT youth.

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