

# MASOC PRACTICE UPDATE: Prevention and Progress



## NOVEMBER 2020 MASOC NEWSLETTER

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### Prevalence of and Risk Markers for Dating Abuse-Related Stalking and Harassment Victimization and Perpetration

#### **BOTTOM LINE**

Nearly half (48%) of 12-18-year-old youth who are dating, experience stalking and harassment and the prevalence of perpetrating these behaviors was 43%. Given the relative normality of these behaviors in the current climate, Interventions targeting these less severe forms of dating abuse are warranted.

#### **RESEARCH**

This study analyzed data on dating related abuse collected from 320 youth aged 12-18 years old who had dating experience. Using a social-ecological approach, the authors explored the relationship between individual and neighborhood level risk markers. The authors suggested that this information was critical because 1) these behaviors can be risk markers for subsequent severe aggression; understanding their presence can inform efforts at preventing further abuse 2) the behaviors are harmful in and of themselves, and 3) they may also be “proxy variables” or indicators that assist self-reporting dating abuse perpetration in evaluations.

The study found that 48% of these youth experienced stalking and/or harassment while dating and 43% had perpetrated some form of stalking and/or harassment while dating. Not surprisingly, one in three participants experienced both perpetration and victimization. The authors noted that prior studies assessed stalking only, suggesting that these broader categories that included harassment may explain the higher prevalence rates observed in this study.

The prevalence did not vary substantially by genders. Just under half (44/6%) of boys reported victimization as compared with just over half (51.1%) of girls. And perpetration was also comparable for boys and girls. However, for boys, the prevalence of perpetration varied substantially by race/ethnicity and by neighborhood crime and prevalence varied substantially by race for victimization. For example, one third (36.5%) of white male participants perpetrated stalking and harassment and 39.1% had experienced it. Among Latinx male participants, 70.6% had perpetrated stalking and harassment while 70.7% had been victimized by it. Boys residing in neighborhoods with higher crime rates and boys with a low-quality relationship with their parents were also more likely to report perpetration. For girls, the risk markers included: those younger than 15 years old, living in higher crime rate neighborhoods

alcohol and marijuana use, and being black and were linked to higher rates of victimization and perpetration.

The results echo previous studies which indicate that there are multiple factors that may lead an individual to cause harm. The results also suggest that focusing on only one level (e.g., individual factors) without also considering family and neighborhood factors, may prevent any prevention or other intervention from being successful. In fact, the results suggest that creating additional supports and interventions for youth to explore what constitutes problematic dating relationships versus caring healthy relationship behavior might be helpful – especially Latinx boys and Black girls may benefit from such supports and intervention.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS**

Perhaps the most surprising finding is that a full third of the sample had both experienced and perpetrated the behaviors studied. Historically, professionals have viewed adolescents in these situations as either having been victimized or having perpetrated abuse. These data show that the lives and behavior of young people can be quite complicated, evolve over time, and therefore, require a holistic approach to preventing harm.

Among the most important implications of this study is that these behaviors, while harmful in their own right, may serve as indicators of a need to offer interventions and guidance. As such, rather than ignoring them as less severe or damaging, they present an important opportunity to prevent further more severe abuse.

Finally, these findings highlight how adolescents can be strongly influenced by their peers and therefore they need to be evaluated being mindful of the context in which they live. As this study shows, community disorganization can have a profound influence on young people and their subsequent behaviors and outlook on relationships.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD**

Most readers of this newsletter have a background of working with children or teens who have sexually abused. For many years, our focus was in areas such as risk assessment and the components of an effective treatment to prevent further abuse after it had been perpetrated. This study adds to our knowledge about the social context in which many of our clients live. It also adds to our knowledge of potential risk and protective factors that enable professionals to intervene before abuse occurs.

Importantly, these data give us pause to reflect on the complex interaction of neighborhood, culture, and other influences that youth experience. This study's finding that youth growing up in violent families or neighborhoods are reporting higher levels of their own problematic behavior (54.2% for high-crime areas as opposed to 36.6% in lower crime neighborhoods) is something worthy of further empirical study. What can be learned from teens who may be more open to reporting these behaviors. Equally important to consider: adolescents from certain cultural communities are more vulnerable to victimization and may have fewer barriers to perpetration. This study offers an important model for exploring and ultimately offering insights into disentangling these family, community and societal influences on youth and their behaviors.

**CITATION:**

Rothman, E.F., Bahrami, E., Okeke, N., & Mumford, E. (2020). Prevalence of and risk markers for dating abuse-related stalking and harassment victimization and perpetration in a nationally representative sample of U.S. adolescents. *Youth and Society*. DOI: 10.1177/0044118X20921631

**ABSTRACT:**

There are no nationally representative estimates of the prevalence of dating abuse–related stalking and harassment. We analyzed data collected from 320 twelve- to 18-year-old U.S. youth. Youth with dating experience were asked whether a dating partner had ever spied on or followed them, damaged something that belonged to them, or gone through their online accounts. The prevalence of lifetime stalking and harassment victimization was 48% and the prevalence of perpetration was 43%. Latinx boys were at elevated risk for dating abuse–related stalking and harassment perpetration and victimization. Among girls, younger age, being marijuana use and living in a neighborhood with an elevated crime rate were associated with perpetration, and younger age, being Black, and marijuana use were associated with victimization. Interventions that prevent less severe and indirect forms of dating abuse are warranted.