

Nonreciprocal and Reciprocal Dating Violence and Injury Occurrence Among Urban Youth

Swahn MH, Alemdar M, Whitaker DJ. Nonreciprocal and Reciprocal Dating Violence and Injury Occurrence Among Urban Youth. *WestJEM*. 2009; 11(3):264-268.

To the Editor:

Within public health research, “reciprocal” or “mutual” violence is defined as relationship violence perpetrated by both partners *in the same relationship*.^{1,2} Michael Johnson³ coined the phrase “common couple violence,” which he defined as the perpetration of violence by both partners in a romantic relationship *during a specific interaction* (e.g., disagreement). The study of reciprocity, however, has not been without controversy. The terms “reciprocity,” “mutual violence,” and “sex symmetry” are used interchangeably in the literature to suggest that males and females are both violent in dating or intimate relationships. This has often been reduced to “women are just as violent as men,” resulting in a very polarized field.^{4,5}

The Youth Violence Survey: Linkages among Different Forms of Violence (Linkages), described by Swahn, Alemdar, and Whitaker,⁶ asked participants who indicated they had been on a date in the last 12 months about their dating violence experiences, using ten behaviorally specific items assessing a large spectrum of increasingly violent behaviors (e.g. scratched, hit/slapped to punched or hit with something that could hurt to threatened with a weapon and hurt badly enough to need medical care). For victimization, the item was “Thinking about the last 12 months, how often has someone you have been on a date with done the following things to you?” For perpetration, it was “Thinking about the last 12 months, how often have you done any of the following things to someone that you have been on a date with?” These victimization and perpetration items, however, do **NOT** specify if the violence occurred in the same relationship. Given research indicating that one third of adolescent relationships last less than one month and another third last less than five months,⁷ the reported violence likely did not occur within the same relationship and is likely not reciprocal. Although Swahn et al.⁶ note this possibility in their limitations by saying “...findings may pertain across dating relationships and as well as to multiple partners” (sic)(p. 267), they fail to acknowledge that their data do not assess reciprocity.

The use of definitions consistent with the literature, particularly in the study of reciprocity, is critical to appropriately interpret and use research findings. Research in this area must strive to use valid methods of data collection (e.g., collecting victimization and perpetration data from one member of a relationship about the violence experiences of both members) in order to make any claims about reciprocity. Swahn et al.’s⁶ paper measures the associations between

physical dating victimization and perpetration, some of which *may* have been reciprocal, and demographic variables. However, the *meaningful* interpretation of sex differences in the experience of reciprocal physical dating violence, reported by Swahn et al.⁶, is severely limited based on their analyses.

In sum, Swahn et al.⁶ do not measure reciprocity as it has been defined in the literature on intimate partner and dating violence. A reader who is not intimately familiar with the Linkages data, however, may not understand this fact given the title of the paper and limited information presented. While they acknowledge that their findings may apply across dating relationships and to multiple partners, adequate information is not provided to allow readers to have a full understanding of how their operational definition of reciprocity affects their ability to measure this construct. We contend that the operational definition of dating violence reciprocity used by Swahn et al.⁶ is fundamentally flawed and the paper cannot reach its intended goal “...to determine the scope and prevalence of dating violence reciprocity among teens...” (p. 265).

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The opinions and conclusions in this Letter to the Editor are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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In reply:

In response to our manuscript,¹ Basile² and Hamburger raise the importance of using clear definitions in dating violence research. We concur that the field is comprised of multiple definitions that are in need of more clarity and consistent use,³⁻⁸ and we certainly could have been clearer in our language. However, we also find that there are emerging areas of research for which the best use of terms still have to be developed. Thus, whether or not "reciprocity" was the best term for the conceptual approach used for the analyses and findings presented in our manuscript¹ can be debated. Perhaps more significantly, the manuscript also raised other and equally important issues that we hope will help drive future research and guide violence prevention strategies, specifically for adolescents where most prevention efforts are targeted.⁹

The main objective of our brief research report¹ was to illustrate, primarily using descriptive and correlational statistics, that there was a significant association between victimization and perpetration of dating violence among adolescent boys and girls. This remains an understudied topic among adolescents, despite an emerging literature focused on adults that underscores that reciprocity is common and also more likely to lead to injuries, which has important implications for prevention.^{6,8,10-14} Our findings, corroborated by earlier research of adults, show that adolescent boys and girls who report both victimization and perpetration are also more likely to experience injuries.^{8,10}

We agree that ideally the findings we presented should pertain to specific relationships. However, given the scarcity of data available on this topic and the difficulty of studying adolescent relationships, as noted by Basile² and Hamburger, we thought it important to share these findings so that future dating violence research can be conducted with this important

aspect in mind. Even though the adolescents included in our study may have responded across multiple partners and relationships, it is informative that the data we presented replicated findings from the adult literature, which used a more specific definition of reciprocity.¹⁰ These findings raise important questions about reciprocity and the underlying processes by which reciprocity leads to greater injury, such as the escalation of violence among partners.^{8,10,11} Similarly, the findings may also suggest that the propensity for an adolescent to be a victim and perpetrator of violence is stable across the brief and unstable relationships experienced in this developmental phase. With these questions in mind, we hope that the analyses we presented will be replicated in future studies that examine issues of reciprocity within and across relationships. However, these remain important and unaddressed questions for future research.

Finally, the most important issue going forward for the field of dating violence prevention research will be to conduct large, empirical studies of representative populations that apply a true public health approach to this important topic. Our efforts should focus on how to best serve boys and girls at risk for violence and to identify those relationship contexts and circumstances that increase risk for injury. Meanwhile, we welcome suggestions for new terminology and definitions that more accurately capture the range of dating violence victimizations and perpetration that may occur across relationships, specifically for adolescents.

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