

## Summary of Preliminary Results for

### ***Project DATE: Demand Appreciation, Trust, & Equality***

#### *Risky Relationships and Teen Dating Violence among High Risk Adolescents*

### **PROBLEM AND PURPOSE**

Adolescence is when youth learn to initiate, maintain, and dissolve romantic relationships. While positive relationship experiences are linked to a number of positive outcomes (e.g., Karney, Beckett, Collins, & Shaw, 2007), negative relationship experiences—including *teen dating violence*—are linked to numerous short- and long-term negative outcomes. For example, teens involved in dating abuse are more likely to experience depression, delinquency, substance use, academic failure, and risky sexual behavior such as early sexual debut and unprotected sex (e.g., Manlove, Ryan, & Franzetta, 2004). In addition, research suggests that youth who experience dating abuse during adolescence may be set on a negative trajectory that includes intimate partner violence as adults (e.g., Gómez, 2011). Teen dating violence is a phenomenon that may be falling through the cracks between the adult and juvenile justice systems (Zosky, 2010). While there currently exist clear policies for dealing with adult intimate partner violence (e.g., mandatory arrest laws), teen relationship violence occurs largely hidden from the legal radar (Zosky, 2010).

Given the potential severe and longstanding consequences of teen dating violence, research exploring adolescents' trajectories into and out of violent relationships is important for developing effective prevention and intervention programs to promote healthy conflict resolution within teen relationships. Despite a burgeoning body of

literature on teen dating violence, research has generally been restricted to normative samples of high schoolers or college students (e.g., the Youth Risk Behavior Survey). This population-based research may not capture the unique experiences of youth who are already on an at-risk trajectory and therefore most likely to experience negative relationship outcomes *and* most likely to come in contact with service providers. Therefore, the purpose of Project D.A.T.E. (Demand Appreciation, Trust, and Equality) was to provide insight into gaps in current research on adolescent romantic relationships by focusing on outcomes among *at-risk adolescents*.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

***(1) What risk and protective factors are related to teen dating violence and positive relationship outcomes within a single target relationship?***

In the literature, myriad risk factors across a variety of domains of past and present functioning have been associated with teen dating violence (e.g., Foshee, Benefield, Ennett, Bauman, & Suchindran, 2004). However, there is a paucity of research designed to investigate the factors associated with dating abuse among at-risk youth who are already likely to experience negative outcomes. Moreover, the inter-relationships *between* many of these empirically-supported risk factors have yet to be examined. In addition, little prior research has examined protective factors that buffer against dating abuse or encourage formation of healthy teen relationships (e.g., Pepler, 2012). Therefore, this study examined the risk *and* protective factors related to dating abuse *and* positive relationship outcomes within an at-risk sample.

***(2) What factors are associated with abuse across multiple relationships, and do early abusive relationships increase the likelihood youth will continue to experience abuse in future relationships?***

Given that involvement in more than one abusive relationship exposes teens to greater cumulative risk (e.g., Gómez, 2011), it is valuable to know what differentiates those who go on to become involved in multiple abusive relationships from those who experience abuse in just a single relationship. However, little research has examined teens' trajectories from one violent relationship to another. We add to the literature by investigating the specific risk factors for involvement in *multiple* violent relationships, as well as how abuse in one relationship relates to abuse in subsequent relationships.

***(3) How are relationship-level characteristics associated with relationship abuse?***

Recent research focused on the dyadic interplay between partners, taking the individual relationship itself as the unit of analysis, has uncovered two themes on how relationship-level characteristics relate to dating abuse: Relationships with (1) greater intimacy and (2) where both partners are engaged in delinquent behavior are more prone to dating abuse (e.g., Giordano, Soto, Manning, & Longmore, 2009; Vézina & Hébert, 2007). We have built upon these prior results by investigating whether intimacy or deviance in teen relationships is more strongly associated with abuse within an at-risk sample.

***(4) Are adolescents at greater risk for victimization and negative reproductive health outcomes if they date older partners, and if so, why?***

Statutory rape laws aim to prevent intimate relationships between youth and older partners, and this goal appears warranted by research demonstrating a host of negative

victimization and reproductive health outcomes for teens who date older partners (e.g., Young & d'Arcy, 2005). However, uncertainty regarding *for whom?* and *why?* partner age gaps are associated with negative outcomes has made this prior research difficult to translate into meaningful practices, policies, and laws to protect adolescents from potentially harmful relationships with older partners. Therefore, we examined how younger partner age and gender impact the link between partner age gaps and negative outcomes, and explored some theoretical explanations for *why* this link exists.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

### *Participants:*

Participants included 223 adolescents (58% female). To be included, participants had to meet the following three eligibility criteria: (1) were between 13 and 18 years old, (2) answered yes to “Have you ever ‘dated someone’ or been in a romantic relationship that lasted at least 1 month?”, and (3) received community-based services (e.g., foster care, alternative schooling) and/or low-income services (e.g., free or reduced lunch, low-income housing). The sample was predominately low-income, with 86% reporting they received free or reduced lunch, and 86% of the sample was involved in community-based services earmarked for at-risk youth. The sample was ethnically diverse, with participants self-identifying as African American (61%), Caucasian (22%), biracial/multi-ethnic (14%), Latina/Latino (3%), and other (1%).

### *Procedures:*

A sample of low-income, service-receiving participants were selected in order to examine romantic relationship outcomes specifically for the youth most at-risk for

negative experiences and thus the primary targets of prevention and intervention programs. The Project D.A.T.E. research team collaborated with a number of local agencies that provide services to at-risk adolescents in and around Central Virginia, such as the Virginia Department of Social Services, the Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice, and alternative schooling programs. In addition, the Project D.A.T.E. team distributed flyers door-to-door in local low-income neighborhoods. As the study progressed, participants started to refer their service-receiving peers.

Youth eligible to participate in Project D.A.T.E. completed two waves of two-hour in-person interviews that took place about a year apart. Participants chose the location of their interviews, most of which took place in participants' homes. Of those who participated in wave 1, 95% also participated in wave 2. We obtained written consent from parents and written assent from teens prior to study enrollment. Teens also received a \$50 gift card at each interview.

As part of each self-report interview, participants were first asked about basic socio-demographics, including family and school experiences. The majority of each interview, however, was focused on participants' romantic relationships. Using a Life History Calendar, participants were asked to think back to up to three romantic relationships that lasted a month or longer (thus, up to six relationships across two waves of data collection). The majority of the interview was then spent answering questions specific to each romantic relationship. When possible, we measured constructs using assessment tools that have been shown to be valid and reliable for adolescents in past literature.

## KEY FINDINGS

### *Descriptive Findings:*

Across the two waves, the majority of youth described involvement in multiple romantic relationships, with over 90% of participants providing data for two or more relationships and over a third of participants providing data for four or more relationships. For three-quarters of participants, Project D.A.T.E. captured their *first ever* romantic relationship.

Rates of dating abuse were much higher in this at-risk sample than in previous surveys of population-based samples. For example, within teens' earliest reported relationship, 41% of participants reported perpetrating at least one act of physical abuse, 83% reported perpetrating at least one act of emotional abuse, and 16% reported perpetrating at least one act of sexual abuse. Rates were similar for victimization. Although teens were much more likely to endorse less serious than more serious forms of abuse, 16% of youth reported being injured by their first partner (e.g., breaking a bone, feeling pain the next day because of a fight) and 11% reported injuring their partner.

Moreover, data from Project D.A.T.E. provide further evidence for the idea that the romantic relationships of teens are not as shallow, fleeting, or inconsequential as once thought. The average length of a relationship was about 9 months, with most teens rating even their first ever relationship as "very serious" or "moderately serious." About 48% of boys and 43% of girls reported engaging in sexual intercourse with their first ever romantic partner, with 65% of youth reporting having had intercourse by age 14 or younger. Therefore, this at-risk sample was also more sexually precocious and experienced than population-based samples.

*(1) What risk and protective factors are related to teen dating violence and positive relationship outcomes within a single target relationship?*

- A. Violent victimization and perpetration were highly correlated, meaning participants were likely to either be both a perpetrator and a victim, or neither a perpetrator nor a victim. Boys and girls reported similar levels of victimization. In general, risk factors for dating violence put boys and girls equally at risk for partner abuse.
- B. The myriad risk factors related to dating abuse in this study could be statistically reduced to four broad factors: Sexual History, Family Background, Self-Regulation, and Social Environment. Dynamic risk factors currently at play in a teen's dating life, such as depression or peer delinquency, had much stronger associations to dating abuse than static risk factors, such as early sexual debut or childhood maltreatment. Results support a state-dependence model of risk where static risk factors set the stage for exposure to more powerful dynamic risk factors that promote dating violence.
- C. Teens' coping style was consistently related to both positive and negative relationship outcomes. An active coping style was associated with positive relationship outcomes like negotiation, while an avoidant coping style was associated with less negotiation and greater dating abuse.

***(2) What factors are associated with abuse across multiple relationships, and do early abusive relationships increase the likelihood youth will continue to experience abuse in future relationships?***

- A. A majority of participants reported involvement in more than one relationship that was either physically or emotionally abusive. Overall, the risk and protective factors associated with involvement in *multiple* violent relationships were similar to those associated with dating abuse in a single target relationship.
- B. Dating abuse *by* partners and *toward* partners were both relatively stable across teens' earliest three relationships. This stability is consistent with the hypothesis that teens carry patterns of aggression learned in earlier relationships into later relationships.
- C. Teens who *perpetrated* abuse in early relationships were more likely to be *victims* of abuse in later relationships, even after accounting for initial levels of victimization. The reverse was also partly true: Teens who were *victims* of emotional (but not physical) abuse in their second relationships were more likely to be *perpetrators* of abuse in their third relationships. For many teens, experiencing abuse in their *first ever* romantic relationship appeared to start them on a trajectory of future abuse.

***(3) How are relationship-level characteristics associated with relationship abuse?***

- A. Overall, participants' relationships were characterized by high levels of intimacy: The average relationship lasted about 9 months, involved sexual intercourse, and was rated as "serious." In addition to being highly intimate, participants'

- relationships were also highly deviant, with over half of dating dyads engaged in substance use and approximately three-quarters engaged in delinquency.
- B. Greater relationship-level *and* greater relationship-level deviancy were associated with dating abuse, including sexual victimization and perpetration. However, deviancy was much more consistently associated with dating abuse outcomes than intimacy across time and relationships. Results support a lifestyles and routine activity framework, whereby teens' antisocial behavior with delinquent partners is a key risk factor for experiencing abuse.

***(4) Are adolescents at greater risk for victimization and negative reproductive health outcomes if they date older partners, and if so, why?***

- A. A majority of participants (70%) dated a partner who was at least one year older, with 14% of participants dating a partner who was at least four years older. Although, on average, girls dated older partners than boys, boys still reported dating older partners.
- B. Our at-risk participants, in general, reported poor sexual health: Less than 60% reported that they used protection during sex "all the time," and about 20% of participants reported that they contracted a sexually transmitted infection or that they (or their partner) became pregnant during the target relationship.
- C. Larger partner age gaps were associated with poorer sexual health, including greater probability of engaging in sexual intercourse, decreased use of protection, and increased probability of contracting an STI or becoming pregnant. Larger

- D. These associations between partner age gap and negative health outcomes were just as strong for younger vs. older teens, and for girls vs. boys.
- E. Although common wisdom assumes that dating an older partner is problematic because the older partner wields greater power in the relationship, our results do not support this contention: Partner age gaps were *not* associated with lack of negation or dissatisfaction with decision-making within the relationship. Instead, participants' and their partners' *risky lifestyles* appeared to mediate the relationship between partner age gaps and negative health outcomes. The quality of lifestyle that older partners tended to live, namely their greater involvement in substance use and delinquency, appeared to render adolescent partners vulnerable to violent victimization.

### **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE**

- A. Our study demonstrates that teen dating violence is often reciprocal and rarely is there a clear dichotomy between perpetrator and victim. While these results align with the results of prior research (e.g., Moffitt & Caspi, 1999), the reciprocal nature of abuse in our teens' relationships flies in the face of traditional conceptions of relational abuse as *intimate terrorism* (Johnson, 1995), where the male attempts to achieve power and control over the female through abuse and intimidation. For the vast majority of teens in our sample, patterns of dating abuse appear to map more closely onto what Johnson (1995) terms *common couple violence*, abuse that springs up

*between* partners in the course of a disagreement and is *not* part of a pattern of coercion (Johnson, 1995). However, many teen dating violence prevention programs use language adopted from the intimate terrorism framework (e.g., Pence & Paymar, 1993). Therefore, teen dating violence prevention and intervention programs need to define abusive relationships in a way that maps onto teens' lived experience, or teens will be unlikely to recognize that their relationship is problematic and seek help.

Addressing teen dating violence as a pattern of behaviors that can *co-occur* between partners and *re-occur* across multiple relationships may be more important than focusing on how to avoid a single stereotypical perpetrator.

- B. In general, the lack of gender differences in patterns of risk and violence supports past calls for more research, programming, and policies aimed at preventing teen dating violence and other health risks among low-income, at-risk adolescent *boys*, not just girls (e.g., Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2011).
- C. *Static* risk factors for dating abuse, like young age at first sex or childhood maltreatment, may be used to flag high-risk teens for targeted interventions designed to make the most of scarce resources. However, such fixed, historical risk factors cannot themselves be a locus for intervention. Encouragingly, though, our research suggests that *dynamic* risk factors currently at play in a teens' life, like academic disengagement and delinquent peers, are more potent indicators of dating abuse. Such dynamic risk factors might represent a fertile domain for intervention to reduce teen dating violence (Douglas & Skeem, 2005). For example, our research suggests that interventions focused on improving coping and emotion regulation could potentially reduce dating abuse and increase positive outcomes in teens' relationships.

- D. Since study results suggest that dyadic delinquency is a consistent relationship-level risk factor for dating abuse, findings support the development of interventions focused on at-risk youth in juvenile detention centers (e.g., *Expect Respect*; Ball, Kerig, & Rosenbluth, 2009). The juvenile justice system may be a fruitful resource for screening teens in need of treatment for relationship abuse trauma, as well as prevention and intervention services for abusive relationships.
- E. Given that our results suggest that partner age gaps, *not* younger partner age, are associated with greater health risks, programming and laws designed to reduce negative sexual health outcomes and partner victimization among adolescents might be most effective if focused on age gaps between partners. Results call into question many statutory rape laws across the U.S. that still define sexual activity with youth as illegal based solely on the younger partner's age (e.g., "age of consent" laws). Instead, results support movements toward laws that take into consideration partner age gaps.
- F. Results provide evidence in favor of considering older partners' involvement in substance use and delinquency when determining whether to prosecute in cases of statutory rape, given that older partners' risky lifestyles helped to explain links from partner age gaps to emotional, physical, and sexual abuse.

### **LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

- A. A caveat on our finding of high concordance between victimization and perpetration is that our data is all self-report from teens reporting about their own *and* their partners' dating violence. Therefore, our data is prone to memory and reporting bias, and high concordance between victimization and perpetration may be an artifact of

the study design. Future research into patterns of victimization and perpetration may be aided by gathering data from *both* partners. Such information will aid more nuanced research into different typologies of teen dating violence (e.g., Johnson, 1995). For instance, some couples may engage in egalitarian (though still unhealthy) fighting, while for others there is really one perpetrator and the other partner's violence scores reflect self-defense. If this is the case, these different typologies may come with varying risk and protective factors as well as trajectories.

- B. Although this study provides strong evidence for stability of abuse across multiple relationships, we do not know how to we help youth break away from an abusive relationship trajectory or encourage them to seek help for these negative relationships. Although the Conflict Tactics Scale-2 (Straus et al., 1996) is a commonly used measure in intimate partner violence research, it is a quantitative measure that only records *how many times* a particular violent act was received or perpetrated within a relationship. However, the CTS-2 provides no information about what happened before or after the violent episodes, whether the teen was frightened or upset by the violence, whether an act of perpetration was viewed as self-defense, whether there was a mismatch in power, etc. In order to address why abuse tends to persist across relationships and how we can help youth end this cycle, future research needs to focus on context, definitions, and help seeking related to abuse, which means qualitative questions or novel quantitative measures designed to get at the context of a violent act and teens' interpretation of that violence.
- C. Because the CTS-2 asks how many times a particular act *ever* occurred within a particular relationship, another limitation of the study is that we have no data on the

trajectory of dating violence *within* relationships. In order to explore violence trajectories *within* relationships rather than merely across relationships, more longitudinal research with short gaps between waves—on the order of one wave a month—is needed to explore temporal patterns of violence within relationships.

- D. Although Project D.A.T.E. is a longitudinal study, a current limitation is that only two waves of data have been collected. Future research into teen dating violence should include multiple waves of data collection to allow for mediation analyses to explore potential explanatory mechanisms leading to dating violence, as well as to explore long-term outcomes of teen dating violence (such as job satisfaction, educational attainment, parenting, etc.). In addition, longer-term longitudinal research capturing teens' transition from adolescence to young adulthood can help us understand how developmental trends (such as an age-related desistance from delinquency; e.g., Farrington, Ttofi, & Coid, 2009) relate to changes or stability in partner violence.
- E. This study indicates the need to further explore how teens make and maintain *positive* romantic relationships. Particularly, the ties between intimacy (e.g., how long the relationship is, how serious teens view their relationships) and dating violence cast doubt on how emotional closeness can be considered a positive outcomes at all. Future research needs to explore emotional closeness in a more complex way to aid understanding of how at-risk youth form healthy relationships that protect against dating abuse.
- F. This study identified age gaps as a more important factor for poor health outcomes than the young age of the adolescent partner, but to better inform statutory rape policies and laws, future research is needed to determine the age gap cutoffs that are

most strongly related to negative health outcomes. Today, states vary largely in how they define illegal versus legal sexual relationships for teens, and very little methodologically rigorous research exists to help states approach consensus about the contexts under which youth are competent to consent to sexual activity.

### **FINAL REMARKS**

Overall, this study contributes in many theoretical and practical ways to the literature on adolescent romantic relationship outcomes, providing insight into the many individual, family, peer, and relationship-level factors that place adolescents at-risk for experiencing abuse within a single romantic relationship and across relationships. Although there are many more important questions that can be tested using the Project D.A.T.E. data, these initial results highlight a few clear overarching messages. First, studying romantic relationships among at-risk teens appears to have real practical value. Low-income, service receiving adolescents demonstrated high rates of abuse in their *earliest* relationships, and then continued to be significantly at risk for abuse in subsequent relationships. Thus, there is a clear need for prevention and intervention efforts targeting low-income, service receiving youth. The use of early screenings and prevention or remedial programming in service organizations targeting at-risk youth might help to identify and treat partner abuse at an early age. Second, despite high rates of abuse, at-risk youth also rated their romantic relationships as being positive in many ways, for example they were highly satisfied with the relationships, rated them as very serious, and remained in the relationship for long periods of time. Focusing on the quality of relationships as a whole rather than simply screening for the presence or absence of

abuse might be a more effective intervention approach, as youth do not seem to perceive their relationships dichotomously as “good” or “bad” based upon the presence of abuse alone.

As such, initial Project D.A.T.E. findings have provided insight into valuable future research pathways, specifically suggesting that further investigation into the *context* surrounding relationship abuse is imperative. Obtaining better information concerning the events preceding and following violent incidents, as well as the perspective of *both* partners within the dyad, would provide necessary depth to our understanding of how youth perceive teen dating violence. This has direct implications for teens’ help-seeking behavior, as teens’ perceptions of and experiences with teen dating violence may diverge from common language used to describe relationship abuse among service providers, police, and the legal system. Indeed, individuals will not seek help for a violent relationship if they do not perceive a problem (Foshee, 1996). The next steps for Project D.A.T.E. are to better understand to whom youth turn for help, when they seek help, and how they define and perceive teen dating violence so as to better know how to encourage help seeking behaviors in both victims and perpetrators of abuse.