



Statewide Dating Violence Survey Executive Summary

Introduction

This report presents the results of a research study conducted on behalf of the Texas Council on Family Violence (TCFV) by GCI Group and Equation Research in March 2006 to quantify the problem of dating violence among 16- to 24-year-old Texans.

TCFV's objectives were to measure dating violence incidence levels, to gauge attitudes and behaviors toward dating violence, and to survey overall dating habits and opinions about relationships.

Data was collected from a statewide online survey of 918 respondents. All respondents were unmarried and between the ages of 16 and 24. Respondents were randomly chosen to reflect a demographic sample representative of the Texas population.

Respondent Demographics

Fifty-one percent of respondents were male and 49 percent were female. The majority were Caucasian (76 percent), with the rest either being Hispanic, African-American or another race. Ninety-four percent of respondents identified themselves as heterosexual. The majority were current high school or college students, with the rest identifying as high school or college graduates. Weighting results to account for any slight over- or under-sampling of ethnic groups or geographic areas had no statistically significant affect on findings.

Dating Violence Defined

In findings, the term "dating violence" refers to a list of verbal, physical and sexual behaviors including but not limited to: telling a dating partner what to do or how to act; embarrassing a partner in public; kissing or touching a partner when it's not wanted; yelling and screaming; threatening to harm a dating partner; pushing, shoving or slapping; and forcing a partner to do something sexual.

For all questions measuring incidence of and attitudes and behaviors toward dating violence, respondents were presented with a complete list of dating violence behaviors. The list was randomized rather than presented in any perceived order of severity.

Respondents were asked if these dating violence behaviors had happened, period, rather than being specifically asked whether they had been the perpetrator or victim.

Incidence Levels

Dating violence is a pervasive problem among Texas teens and young adults. Approximately 75 percent of respondents have experienced dating violence or know someone who has. One in two report having personally experienced dating violence, with 41 percent admitting to an experience of verbal abuse, 27 percent to physical violence and 19 percent to sexual violence.

Females were more likely than males to have experienced dating violence (60 percent v. 40 percent, respectively). Among females, 49 percent have experienced verbal abuse, 33 have experienced physical violence and 33 percent have experienced sexual violence. Thirty-three percent of males have experienced verbal abuse, 22 percent have experienced physical violence and 6 percent have experienced sexual violence.

While there are some smaller differences in incidence levels or attitudes among various demographic and psychographic groups, dating violence cuts across all ages, races and other demographic lines. Dating violence was seen to be more prevalent among older respondents (18- to 24-year-olds), bisexuals and those who had reported witnessing a parent/guardian's dating violence behavior.

Hispanics were also more likely than non-Hispanics to have experienced physical or sexual violence (35 v. 26 percent for physical, 26 percent v. 18 percent for sexual). Those Texans living in the state's largest cities (Austin, Dallas-Fort Worth, Houston and San Antonio) were more likely to have experienced sexual violence than those living in other parts of the state (22 percent v. 14 percent), with Austin residents reporting the highest incidence levels (35 percent).

Reporting

The majority of Texans (74 percent) reported having told someone about their dating violence experience(s). Those who've kept quiet cite shame or embarrassment as the most common reason for not telling anyone, followed by fear of the relationship ending, fear of authorities becoming involved and fear that family would intervene and keep the couple apart.

When respondents were asked about who they thought they'd first tell about a dating violence experience, a parent/guardian was the most popular choice, followed by a friend. However, those who've actually experienced dating violence reported having told a friend first, with a parent/guardian being the second-most common confidante.

Peer Help

Respondents who said they knew of dating violence happening in a peer's relationship said they most commonly saw the behavior happening or were told about it by the victim (43 percent and 29 percent, respectively). When asked what they would do first if they learned a peer was experiencing dating violence, 43 percent said they'd tell the friend to break up with the abusive partner, and the second most common choice was to tell a family member (27 percent).

Forty-two percent of respondents reported having seen or heard a parent/guardian's domestic violence experience(s).

Behaviors & Healthy Relationships

The more tangible a behavior is, the more likely it is to scare young Texans rather than merely making them uncomfortable or nervous. When surveyed about their levels of concern toward each possible dating violence behavior, actions like causing physical harm were much more likely to worry or scare people than controlling someone's actions or acting extremely jealous. In general, respondents were more worried about dating violence happening to their peers than in their own relationships.

Respondents also identified the top three characteristics of a healthy relationship: honesty, trusting each other when you're apart and feeling safe to express feelings.

Online & Dating Habits

A large percentage of respondents reported making friends easily online (46 percent) with a significant percentage eventually meeting someone in person whom they'd become acquainted with online (29 percent). Respondents who had personally experienced dating violence were more likely to report making friends easily online, meet friends in person after becoming acquainted online and other behaviors such as dating someone after meeting online and exchanging personal information like phone numbers and home addresses.

Most respondents began dating in their teens, with the average age being 15. Respondents who began dating at age 13 or 14 were significantly more likely to have personally experienced dating violence than those who started dating at a later age.

Conclusion

Research results point to a need for education about what kinds of behaviors constitute dating violence, why early warning signs like control and jealousy should cause worry rather than mere discomfort, how the problem escalates and why "just break up" is not always the most constructive advice for a peer who's being abused. With such a high level of dating violence incidence and reporting, there is less of a need to educate young Texans about the general existence of the problem.

Educational messaging should be directed toward both males and females, counteracting the stereotype that dating violence is a "women's issue." Results indicate a need to speak to young Texans about their own relationships and those of their friends. While some messages should be reinforced more among various demographic groups according to research results, dating violence is such a pervasive problem that all young Texans will benefit equally from broad and comprehensive education efforts.

Any educational campaign should favor mediums that allow for more complex messages. Higher levels of online-driven social encounters among those who've personally experienced dating violence point to an opportunity to deliver messages through online mediums.