Victims and Victimizers: Breaking the Cycle of Violence Among Youth

In one form or another, violence is a pervasive part of society that youth experience on a daily basis. It may show up on a particular television show or movie, in music videos or in video games, or on the six o’clock news coverage of everything from local murders to terrorist attacks.

But beyond experiencing violence in the media, youth also witness it first hand in their relationships, families, schools, and communities and are often involved in it, either as victims or victimizers. How often are youth involved with violence and how does it affect their behavior? What kinds of programs are available to help youth who are victims or victimizers? RAND researchers have been seeking to answer such questions, looking across a range of experiences where youth confront violence in their daily lives. We describe several of these efforts here.

Helping Children Cope with Violence

When children are exposed to violence, either as witnesses or victims, the emotional impact can be profound. While in extreme cases children may develop post-traumatic stress symptoms, they are often more likely to have behavioral problems, poorer school performance, more days of school absence, and feelings of anxiety and depression. Children from all social categories are affected, but the burden falls mostly on poor and minority children. School officials are often willing to provide help, but the real question is, what works?

Until recently, there had been no randomized controlled trials of intervention effectiveness.

Researchers from RAND, UCLA, and the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) teamed up to address this gap. They developed an intervention designed to help children traumatized by violence, implemented it at participating LAUSD middle schools located in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, and evaluated the results.

Based on the randomly controlled evaluation, the intervention—known as Cognitive-Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools, or CBITS—works. Students who participated had significantly fewer post-traumatic stress symptoms, less depression, and less psychological dysfunction upon completing the program and maintained that improvement six months after treatment ended. The program, combining child, parent, and small-group counseling, was successfully implemented by school-based mental health clinicians and was welcomed by students, teachers, school officials, and parents.

Teasing Out the Problem of Bullying

Middle school is a notoriously difficult time for children, and bullying is one of the key reasons. Being a bully, being the victim of a bully, or being both a bully and a victim of bullying are all associated with poor mental health and violent behavior. To intervene effectively, we need to better understand whether these three groups have the same or different kinds of needs and issues. Unfortunately, the common approach to studying bullying relies on

Challenges in Studying and Helping Teens Involved in Dating Violence

As a clinical psychologist and a RAND behavioral scientist, Dr. Lisa Jaycox has combined clinical and research expertise in the area of mental health and behavioral reactions to traumatic life events and interventions used to alleviate them. She has examined the mental health consequences of violent injury via community violence and developed and evaluated programs for children exposed to community violence and youth involved in dating violence. She has a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania.

Why is it so hard for researchers to study intimate partner violence among teens? One reason is actually definitional. Defining who is a dating partner is particularly challenging among adolescents. Researchers often define partner violence as violence between married and cohabiting partners; clearly that does not apply to adolescents, whose relationships vary widely in their level of intimacy, role expectations, and duration.

What other challenges do researchers face? When working with teens, researchers must carefully balance the need to protect confidentiality and to obtain parent permission for participation with their desire to include the most vulnerable youth. Researchers

Interview

Dr. Lisa Jaycox presents Impact of a Teen Dating Violence Prevention Program.

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Congressional Briefings

Join us for a Congressional Luncheon Briefing on Monday, October 3, 2005, at 12:00 P.M. Location: TBD.
Challenges in Studying and Helping Teens  continued

can’t always ask the questions they want because they must be able to protect teenagers’ privacy.

For instance, California law mandates that certain professionals report knowledge or suspicions of child abuse to law enforcement. That means that if researchers collect identified data on dating violence, they may end up assuming the legal obligation to report such incidents. And many intervention programs have the same obligations, which makes it hard to provide services to teens who wish to keep their victimization confidential.

So, who can teens turn to for help with dating violence?
The laws on mandatory reporting are designed to make sure teens get help, but many teens don’t want their problems reported to the police. In our work, we found teens were most likely to turn to friends or family members rather than to police or attorneys, school counselors, doctors, or nurses. But peers might not always offer the best advice, since they often tend to blame the victim or support the violence in some way. Peer mentorship programs—where peers are trained to do a better job helping their friends who experience dating violence—might be a better way to go.

Isn’t the legal system any help to teens?
Some states do afford good protection to teens because their laws and available remedies for “domestic violence” apply to teens. But in some states, domestic violence legislation applies only to individuals 18 years and older in certain types of intimate, cohabiting relationships. Such variation can restrict eligibility for services and protections; as a result, victims of teen dating violence sometimes fall through the cracks.

Prevention programs like “Break the Cycle” that help teens learn about the law and how it can help them are promising. Because the program is offered by attorneys, who can provide confidentiality by virtue of attorney-client privilege, it can tailor its approach and include parents when appropriate. When we evaluated the program, we found that by the end of the program, teens were more likely to say they’d talk to an attorney about dating violence. So by educating teens about how the legal system can work for them, we are opening more doors for them to seek help.

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self-reports from those involved, which can yield misleading results.

RAND researchers took a different tack, including peer and teacher reports along with self-reports. In its study, 22 percent of the sample of middle school students were involved with bullying, 7 percent as bullies, 9 percent as victims, and 6 percent as bully-victims. More important, despite conduct problems, bullies were psychologically strongest and enjoyed high social standing, and victims were emotionally distressed and socially marginalized. Bully-victims were the most troubled group, displaying the highest level of conduct, school, and peer relationship problems. These differences suggest that interventions need to be targeted differently for the three groups.

Understanding Dating Violence Among Teens

In contrast to the literature on adult intimate partner violence, much less is known about the prevalence of intimate partner violence in teen dating relationships and the effectiveness of programs designed to prevent it—a fact confirmed by a broad literature review conducted by RAND researchers.

Despite the clear gap in our knowledge base, a few very general conclusions can be drawn. For example, we know that a range of violent and abusive behaviors take place within teen dating relationships and that boys and girls are both victims and victimizers, although they appear to use violence for different reasons. Also, prior maltreatment may increase the risk of dating violence, and justification of violence and witnessing parental violence may increase perpetuation of violence, at least among boys.

Although existing dating violence intervention programs may have some effect on attitudes and beliefs related to partner violence, we don’t know whether such changes are lasting or have an influence on behavior during adolescence and into adulthood. Because boys and girls may use violence for different reasons, more research is needed to understand whether different intervention programs are justified.

The Promising Practices Network (PPN) is a user-friendly website operated by RAND that provides evidence-based information on child, youth, and family policy. RAND is currently reviewing and summarizing programs that improve child and youth mental health outcomes. Please look for these programs to be added to the site in the coming months.

Visit the Promising Practices Network:  
http://www.promisingpractices.net/

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