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Latino Teens Talk About Help Seeking and Help Giving in Relation to Dating Violence

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The authors examine attitudes about help seeking and help giving related to dating violence among Latino ninth graders, including survey and focus group data. Latino teens are more likely to seek help for a dating violence situation from informal sources of support (e.g., friends) than from formal sources (e.g., health professionals). Students are most likely to turn to other teens for help and do not confide or trust the adults in their social network. Teens are reluctant to intervene in dating violence situations. The quality of help offered by teens related to dating violence is perceived as being limited.

Keywords: *dating violence; help giving; help seeking; Latino youth*

Intimate partner violence (IPV), or dating violence, is a serious problem among adolescents and a serious public health and social problem. Although there is a significant body of research on the prevalence, distribution, context, and consequences of IPV among adults and a smaller but still significant body of research on this problem among college students, far less is known about this problem among adolescents, especially Latino adolescents. Estimates of the prevalence and gender distribution of IPV among adolescents are widely divergent between the two most important sources of national data (see Hickman, Jaycox, & Aronoff, 2004, for a review). The National Crime Victimization Survey (Rennison & Welchans, 2000) estimates IPV among girls as 0.3% and 0.1% for boys, whereas the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (Grunbaum et al., 2002) estimates 9.8% for girls and 9.1% for boys. These estimates most likely differ because of differences in the range of violence covered on their surveys,

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age ranges of participants, context of the questions about victimization, and survey administration (e.g., household survey vs. classroom survey).

Smaller single studies provide much higher estimates of the prevalence of IPV among teens (Hickman et al., 2004). For example, baseline data from the Safe Dates Project (Foshee et al., 1996) found that among adolescents in eighth and ninth grades, 25.4% and 8.0% had been victims of nonsexual and sexual dating violence, respectively, and 14.0% and 2.0% had been perpetrators of nonsexual and sexual dating violence, respectively. Regardless of the exact prevalence, it is clear that IPV is a pressing problem for adolescents. Though the consequences of dating violence on teens are not yet well documented, there are numerous studies of IPV among adults that indicate that IPV has an enormous physical and emotional toll and is a major cause of injury (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2003; World Health Organization, 2002).

Thus, the need for teens to be able to reach out for help is clear. Few research studies have looked at how children and adolescents seek help when experiencing IPV or how they perceive available sources of help. However, there is some evidence that teens and college students exposed to IPV underutilize available resources. A study of community service programs for victims of IPV found that only 18% of their clients were between the ages of 15 and 25 and that although most of the programs provide services to college students, students accounted for only 7% of their clients (Bogal-Allbritten & Allbritten, 1987). Other studies found that teens are more likely to seek help for all sorts of problems, including IPV, from friends and family rather than to report the abuse to criminal justice authorities (Black & Weisz, 2003; Mahlstedt & Keeny, 1993; Stets & Pirog-Good, 1989; Watson, Cascardi, Avery-Leaf, & O'Leary, 2001). For example, a study of high school students' responses to dating aggression found that one of the most frequently reported forms of action was informal help seeking primarily from friends and talking to partners (Watson et al., 2001).

Some studies have found that teens are unlikely to seek help from adult figures in their social networks (e.g., family, clergy, and teachers). Jaffe, Suderman, Reitzel, and Killip (1992) found that high school students do not view teachers or school officials as viable options for help and that there was a low probability that teens would seek help from teachers or guidance counselors in dating violence situations. In contrast, Black and Weisz (2003) found that the African American youths in their study were willing to seek help from others when confronted with dating violence and were willing to seek help from adults, especially family members. In fact, the African American youth in the Black and Weisz study were more willing to seek assistance from adult family members than from their friends.

Finally, there are some indications of gender differences in help seeking. Girls appear to engage in more actions in response to victimization than do boys and may be more likely to fight back than boys (Watson et al., 2001). In addition, girls may be more likely than boys to talk to friends or family. Another study found that

African American girls were more likely to seek help than were African American boys (Black & Weisz, 2003).

Few research studies have moved beyond help seeking to examine perceptions of potential sources of help, or how effective these services are. Foshee and colleagues (1996) found that adolescents are less likely than adults to seek help from service providers because they fear that they will be blamed for the abuse and that information will not be held in confidence. Stets and Pirog-Good (1989) found that individuals in abusive relationships are more likely to confide in friends who may be less likely to react negatively than other people in their social network (e.g., parents).

More research is clearly needed to understand the help-seeking patterns of teens who experience IPV. In addition, more information to better understand help-seeking behavior among teens from a variety of racial or ethnic groups would also be useful for IPV-prevention efforts. Particular cultural beliefs about gender roles may influence IPV in racial or ethnic groups. Gender socialization in Hispanic families may influence a man to behave in controlling or aggressive ways and a woman to think she should be submissive and self-sacrificing for the sake of the family (Kasturirangan & Williams, 2003; Sugihara & Warner, 2002). If IPV is experienced by Hispanic women, they may feel they have little recourse. Krishnan, Hilbert, and VanLeeuwen (2001) found that more than half the Hispanic women in their study contemplated or attempted suicide, as compared to 35% of all other study participants. Although there is growing evidence that suggests that Latinos are at significant risk for IPV and accompanying psychological distress (Krishnan et al., 2001), few studies to date have included Latino youths. If Latino adults are at increased risk for psychological distress when experiencing IPV, Latino youths may be as well. Thus, Latino youths may have an increased need for IPV interventions. The purpose of this study was to examine attitudes about help seeking and help giving with regard to dating violence among Latino ninth graders, as part of a larger study that is evaluating an IPV prevention program offered in schools in the Los Angeles area. Information gathered from these Latino youth could be used to assist in the prevention of IPV in this population.

Method

This article includes survey data collected via self-administered surveys and data collected via focus groups. We will describe each data collection component in turn.

Survey Data

We conducted the survey in two waves across two academic years and targeted schools in the Los Angeles area, where more than 80% of the students were Latino.

Across the 2 years, we approached 15 high schools of this type in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Of the 15 schools that were approached, 11 agreed to participate in the study and 4 declined. Six schools participated in the first wave of the study, and 5 participated in the second wave.

The ethnic distribution of the students in the 11 schools that agreed to participate was 0% to 6% Asian, 0% to 2% Black, 0% to 4% non-Hispanic White, and 81% to 99% Hispanic. All but one school operated on a year-round academic calendar in which students are assigned to 1 of 3 school calendars (referred to as “tracks”), and student population ranged in size from 2,900 to 4,900 students. The remaining school operated on a traditional calendar and had approximately 2,800 students. After the initial phase of recruitment, three tracks withdrew from the study because of logistical problems, leaving 28 participating tracks in 11 schools. Two to four Health classes (taught in English) were randomly selected per track for a total of 78 classes. Letters of introduction and parental permission forms in both English and Spanish were given to all students to take home to their parents. Because the violence prevention program met the school district’s curriculum requirements for health instruction, the intervention component of this study did not require active parental consent (parents were notified of the program in the materials that were sent home with youths and could call to request that their child not participate in the program). However, active parental consent was required for participation in the research study component (the surveys). In addition, student assent for participation in the study was also required. Parents returned consent forms for 80% of teens, and among these, 90% of parents consented to the study. Of the teens with parent permission, 88% were present in the classroom on the day of the survey administration, and among these, 98% of teens assented to participate. Among 1,724 surveys collected, 14 were unusable (less than 1%), and 55 were incomplete and not included in this analysis (4%). The overall participation rate (after accounting for active and passive refusals, absenteeism, and unusable data) was therefore 59% of children enrolled in the class.

Of the total sample of 1,655 individuals, averaging 14.53 years of age ($SD = 1.1$ years) and split evenly between boys and girls, 91.0% were Latino, 3.4% were Asian American, 1.5% were African American or Black, and 2.0% were non-Latino Caucasian. Among Latinos, 65.6% were Mexican or Mexican American participants. Of the rest of the sample, 8.8% were Central American, 1.5% were South American, Puerto Rican or Cuban mixed-heritage Latino, and 14.9% were unspecified Latino participants.

To assess help seeking, we included four measures. First, we asked, “If you experienced violence with a date, how helpful do you think it would be to talk about it to . . .” and then listed nine sources of help, including a friend; a counselor or teacher at school; a minister or priest; a police officer; a parent or guardian; a brother, sister, or other family member; a lawyer who could give you confidential legal advice; a school nurse; and a doctor or other health professional (not counting the school nurse). For each source of help, participants rated how helpful the source would be

on a 5-point Likert-type scale (*not at all helpful to extremely helpful*). For analysis, we collapsed the 5-point scale into a 3-point scale: *not at all helpful*, *a little or moderately helpful*, and *quite or extremely helpful*. Second, we asked a parallel set of questions that began with the stem, "If you experienced violence with a date, how likely would you be to talk about it to . . ." and asked participants to rate the likelihood of talking to each source of help. Third, we asked participants, "Have you ever talked to the following people about violence in your relationships?" and asked them to indicate yes or no for each source of help. Participants who had never experienced violence in their relationships skipped these items.

To assess help giving, we included a hypothetical scenario: "If you were at a party and saw a guy who knew grab the arm of his girlfriend and pull her towards the door to get her to leave the party, would you. . . ." Participants were asked to rate six choices as to whether or not they would do them (yes, no, or maybe). Response choices included ignore it, talk to him about it at a later time, talk to him about it then and there, talk to the girl about it later on, try to stop him, and talk to someone else about it.

Analysis of survey data consisted of a comparison of the proportion of boys and girls who endorsed each item, controlling for clustering within tracks and schools. We fit logistic regression models with fixed effects for gender and used empirical sandwich standard error estimates (Zeger & Liang, 1986) to account for the clustering of students in tracks and classrooms within track. Wald *t* tests tested for differences between genders for the dependent variables. All statistical analyses were generated using SAS and SAS/STAT software, version 8.2 (SAS Institute Inc., 2001), and SAS Proc GenMod.

Focus Groups

In addition to the surveys, we conducted focus groups at the end of the first year of survey data collection (early summer 2002). The purpose of the focus groups was to collect information to help understand unexpected findings from the first year of data collection, to confirm findings, and to assess whether students were understanding the language used in the survey for key concepts such as "dating" and "date." We also wanted to collect information on how teens think and talk about dating and dating violence and to discuss help seeking and help giving, the focus of this article.

The focus group participants were students recruited from ninth-grade health classes in two large, urban, year-round schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District who also participated in the survey described above. Three focus groups were conducted with ninth-grade health students who had received the Break the Cycle Ending Violence curriculum, and three focus groups were conducted with ninth-grade health students who were not participating in the study and who had not received the Ending Violence curriculum. Parental consent and youth assent were obtained for participation in the focus groups.

The focus group topics for the students who took the Ending Violence classes included helpfulness of the Ending Violence classes, effectiveness of the classes in reducing exposure to dating violence, reactions to early findings about knowledge and attitudes with regard to dating violence, and reactions to early findings about help seeking and help giving related to dating violence. The focus group topics for students who did not take the Ending Violence classes included understanding of violence and abuse, reactions to recruitment materials, concerns about privacy that might limit participation, terms used for dating and intimate relationships, and rates of dating among teens their age.

The students who volunteered to participate in the focus groups were predominantly Latino. All of the students were between 13 and 14 years of age and all were in the ninth grade. A total of 43 students participated in the focus groups, and the participants were almost evenly split by gender, with a total of 22 boys and 21 girls participating in the focus groups.

The focus groups were audiotaped and transcribed. An observer's notes were used to check the transcripts and fill in wording which was unintelligible. Two coders (B.W. and G.S.) read the transcripts and coded them into major themes, agreed on completely by the coders. Statements that represented the opinions of the groups and represented these themes were selected for inclusion in the article. These statements are used as supporting material in developing an interpretation of the major findings from the focus groups.

Results

The results reported in this article are a combination of information gathered from the student surveys and information gathered from the student focus groups. We will report differences and similarities between the two sources of data where we collected similar data by each method.

Help-Seeking Behavior

Recall that in the student survey, we asked how helpful various types of people would be in giving advice for a dating violence situation, how likely the students would be to use those sources, and if they actually sought help from those sources. In terms of how helpful teens thought the various sources of help would be, they reported they saw informal sources of help as most helpful, especially parents (see Table 1). The percentage of teens who reported that police, lawyers, counselors, or teachers at school and siblings or other family members would be quite a bit or extremely helpful was somewhat lower, ranging from 57% to 67%, and teens rated friends as about this helpful as well. Fewer than half of participants thought that a minister or priest, doctor or other health professional, or school nurse could be quite

Table 1
Proportion of Boys and Girls Reporting How Helpful Each
Source Would Be If They Experienced Dating Violence

		Boys	Girls	Difference Statistic (z)
Friend	<i>N</i>	795	808	
	Not at all	6.29	2.60	
	A little bit or somewhat	38.87	31.31	
Parent or guardian	Quite a bit or extremely	54.84	66.09	4.76***
	<i>N</i>	795	804	
	Not at all	5.16	5.97	
Brother, sister, other family member	A little bit or somewhat	13.08	12.06	
	Quite a bit or extremely	81.76	81.97	0.03
	<i>N</i>	787	803	
Counselor or teacher at school	Not at all	7.24	6.23	
	A little bit or somewhat	28.46	26.40	
	Quite a bit or extremely	64.29	67.37	1.40
School nurse	<i>N</i>	793	805	
	Not at all	9.71	7.83	
	A little bit or somewhat	27.36	29.32	
Doctor or other health professional	Quite a bit or extremely	62.93	62.86	0.23
	<i>N</i>	786	802	
	Not at all	34.73	29.43	
Minister or priest	A little bit or somewhat	47.71	44.51	
	Quite a bit or extremely	17.56	26.06	4.08***
	<i>N</i>	784	799	
Police officer	Not at all	21.94	22.15	
	A little bit or somewhat	47.19	42.80	
	Quite a bit or extremely	30.87	35.04	1.09
Lawyer who could give confidential legal advice	<i>N</i>	787	800	
	Not at all	14.61	13.25	
	A little bit or somewhat	42.31	41.00	
Police officer	Quite a bit or extremely	43.07	45.75	1.13
	<i>N</i>	788	801	
	Not at all	14.09	11.36	
Lawyer who could give confidential legal advice	A little bit or somewhat	25.76	21.47	
	Quite a bit or extremely	60.15	67.17	3.30***
	<i>N</i>	784	804	
Lawyer who could give confidential legal advice	Not at all	11.35	7.96	
	A little bit or somewhat	31.12	29.85	
	Quite a bit or extremely	57.53	62.19	2.55*

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

a bit or extremely helpful to them. Some gender differences were apparent, with girls rating friends, school nurses, police officers, and lawyers as more helpful than boys rated them.

In terms of how likely teens said they would be to use these sources of help, the same general pattern of results emerged, except that the percentage of teens who chose the “quite a bit” or “extremely” categories was generally lower in this set of questions (see Table 2). That is, teens ranked sources of support as more helpful than they reported that they would be likely to seek help from them, indicating some possible reluctance to seek help for problems related to dating violence. Teens reported that they would be most likely to seek informal sources of support: parents, siblings or other relatives, or friends. Fewer than half of the teens reported they would be quite a bit or extremely likely to seek help from the other sources of support and reported being particularly unlikely to seek help from a doctor or other health professional or from a school nurse. Girls reported they would be more likely to seek help from friends, siblings, or other relatives and from lawyers. Boys reported they would be more likely to seek help from parents and other family members.

The focus group participants were also asked very generally to think about whom they would go to for help if they were in an abusive relationship and specifically about the sources of support included in the survey: school personnel, medical personnel, the police and other law enforcement officials, attorneys and the legal system (including Break the Cycle), and family and friends. The findings from the focus groups are consistent with the findings from the survey in that the focus group participants also reported that they would be more likely to seek help from informal sources of help (friends and family) than formal sources of support (school staff, health professionals, law enforcement).

Informal Sources of Support

Friends. As in the student survey, the majority of the focus group participants reported that they would be more likely to seek help from friends. Several of the students also reported that they would seek help from family members, but even these students reported that unless it was a serious situation, they would tend to seek help from friends first: “And your friends, they would most likely just help you just talk about it and then they would help you tell your parents about it.”

The students also reported that even with friends, they have to be careful about whom they confide in for fear that people might divulge sensitive information that could embarrass them or even make an abusive situation worse.

Family. Among family members, most students reported that they would talk to their mothers, although some students also reported that they would talk to siblings, aunts, and cousins. None of the students reported that they would seek help from their father, and, in fact, several students reported that they did not feel close enough to their father to talk to them about sensitive issues.

Table 2
Proportion of Boys and Girls Reporting How Likely They Would
Be To Use Each Source If They Experienced Dating Violence

		Boys	Girls	Difference Statistic (z)
Friend	<i>N</i>	777	797	
	Not at all	10.81	5.14	
	A little bit or somewhat	41.70	31.87	
Parent or guardian	Quite a bit or Extremely	47.49	62.99	6.70***
	<i>N</i>	768	793	
	Not at all	12.76	16.27	
Brother, sister, other family member	A little bit or somewhat	24.35	22.45	
	Quite a bit or Extremely	62.89	61.29	-1.02
	<i>N</i>	770	789	
Counselor or teacher at school	Not at all	11.82	10.52	
	A little bit or somewhat	32.73	28.26	
	Quite a bit or extremely	55.45	61.22	2.27*
School nurse	<i>N</i>	772	796	
	Not at all	29.27	26.38	
	A little bit or somewhat	39.51	42.09	
Doctor or other health professional	Quite a bit or extremely	31.22	31.53	0.90
	<i>N</i>	767	794	
	Not at all	58.02	55.29	
Minister or priest	A little bit or somewhat	34.68	33.63	
	Quite a bit or extremely	7.30	11.08	1.55
	<i>N</i>	769	793	
Police officer	Not at all	42.65	42.37	
	A little bit or somewhat	40.05	38.84	
	Quite a bit or extremely	17.30	18.79	0.40
Lawyer who could give confidential legal advice	<i>N</i>	770	793	
	Not at all	32.73	35.18	
	A little bit or somewhat	38.44	34.55	
Lawyer who could give confidential legal advice	Quite a bit or extremely	28.83	30.26	-0.28
	<i>N</i>	771	797	
	Not at all	32.81	29.49	
Lawyer who could give confidential legal advice	A little bit or somewhat	29.96	31.49	
	Quite a bit or extremely	37.22	39.02	1.04
	<i>N</i>	772	791	
Lawyer who could give confidential legal advice	Not at all	27.20	23.51	
	A little bit or somewhat	38.86	37.67	
	Quite a bit or extremely	33.94	38.81	2.86**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

One student reported that he would talk to his parents because he would be afraid his friends would laugh at him if they found out he was getting beaten up by a girl: "A guy? I think they'll probably tell their parents because, if I tell my friends, they'll probably just laugh at me and they'll be like, your ass is getting beat up by a girl."

At the other extreme, some students reported that they would never talk to their parents or other family members about their relationships or about anything as sensitive as dating abuse or violence because they do not feel close to them, "can't relate to them," and were not comfortable talking to them about sensitive issues. Still other students worried that their parents would get upset or mad at them or blow things out of proportion and that they would lose control over the situation by confiding in their parents. When the moderator asked how parents would react, a student replied, "They'd go crazy." "They would yell at you. If you try to talk to them person-to-person, they yell at you."

Indeed, students reported that they seek help from friends before help from family because of their sense that friends do not judge them but simply try to help them. In addition, students felt that their friends would respect their wishes and not do something without their knowledge or permission or escalate the situation beyond their control. By contrast, several students reported that if they sought help from their parents, their wishes in terms of how to handle the situation would not be respected and they would be pushed into notifying the authorities about the abuse: "Friends always come first. Because if you tell your parents, then it's going to make it worse. They'll be like, 'Oh, let's call the cops.'"

Still other youths worried about making their families worry or burdening their families, particularly younger siblings, by confiding in them about an abusive relationship.

Formal Sources of Support

The focus group participants reported that they generally do not trust and do not feel close to the adults in professional roles (doctors, counselors, teachers, and other school staff) in their lives and, with a few exceptions, would not go to them for help if they were experiencing dating abuse.

Participants reported that they needed to feel close to and trust the person they told and believe that the person understood them. It would have to be someone that "you're close to and you trust" and "you have a good relationship with them." "It all depends on who understands you the most."

Teachers and other school staff. With a few exceptions, most students in the focus groups stated that they would not seek help from a teacher in dealing with relationship problems or if they were experiencing dating abuse. Most of the students reported that they did not feel close to their high school teachers. In addition, students reported being concerned that teachers would report the abuse to counselors, their family, or other school staff and that the situation would escalate beyond

their control. During a discussion regarding dating abuse or violence in which girls are the perpetrators and boys are the victims, several boys stated that they would not seek help from a teacher because they would be too embarrassed to tell him or her that a girl was abusing them. Some students speculated that they might confide in a teacher, but clarified that it would have to be a teacher they felt close to and not just any teacher:

If I had a close, close relationship to the teacher I think I would. I think it's another option. I would go straight to my friends first, then I would go to the parents or a teacher, but they would have to be close. I couldn't just go to any other teacher and just tell them my problems—I wouldn't feel right.

Of the focus group participants who reported that they would consider seeking help from a teacher or other school staff, they reported they would seek help from a middle school or elementary school teacher, a football coach, a Youth Security Officer (staff who work with youths in a Police Academy magnet program), and a school counselor. With regard to the principal or assistant principal, students were vehement in stating that they would never seek help from them and stated that, in general, the principal and assistant principal “don't know who they are and don't care about them.” It should be noted that these focus groups were conducted with ninth graders attending high schools with approximately 3,000 students.

Medical and legal professionals. Although medical professionals, lawyers, and law enforcement personnel are in professions that are likely to be of help to adolescent victims of IPV, the focus group participants stated they would not be likely to seek help from these sources because of embarrassment or because the adolescents could not trust them to keep the information confidential. Some participants stated they felt they should be able to handle the situation on their own without professional involvement.

The focus group participants reported that they rarely go to the doctor, and almost all reported that when they do go, they rarely see the same doctor. The participants stated that they would not seek help from a doctor or nurse for a problem with dating abuse because they do not know them, do not trust them, and, again, “can't relate to them” or “it's too personal.” In addition, some students felt that they would be judged and that the discussion would not be confidential.

Although several students acknowledged that lawyers would be knowledgeable about dating violence and the law, almost all the students in the focus groups stated that they would not seek help from a lawyer because they would be too afraid or embarrassed or the lawyer would “flip out [report] the person who's abusing and who knows what will happen then.” The students were afraid of harassment or the abuser spreading rumors about the victim. Participants were asked whether they thought that teens would call Break the Cycle if they ever needed help. Although the students replied they did not think so because of embarrassment, Break the Cycle

receives most of its referrals directly or indirectly through their school prevention and outreach programs.

The majority of the students reported that they would not seek help from the police if they were experiencing dating violence. Many of the students in the focus groups had a very negative perception of law enforcement officials, reported that they do not trust them, and felt that the police and other law enforcement or emergency service personnel do not care about them. This is not surprising given that the image of the Los Angeles Police Department and law enforcement in general has been tarnished in recent years by a series of highly publicized scandals involving rogue police officers stationed in minority communities. All of the students in the focus groups came from high-minority, inner-city neighborhoods in Los Angeles that have historically had poor relations with law enforcement. Students felt that police and emergency personnel do not care about them: “They just leave you dying and then you call the ambulance and they’ll be there an hour later.” “If there were some guys fighting and they’ll come, like a half an hour later.”

The students also seemed to feel that the police would not take their complaint seriously because they are just teenagers and stated that unless they had physical evidence that indicated that they had been abused, the police were unlikely to do anything about it:

Not really. Because I know somebody that, like I think she was getting raped—she was I think 13 or 14, by an 18-year-old. And when he was 17, that’s when he first did it and he had told her that she can’t do anything about it because he was 17, and when he turned 18 and he kept on doing it and when she finally told I don’t know who, they took the case in and everything and he just denied it and denied it and denied it and they didn’t put him in jail or nothing. They just put him on probation for a year and he had to do community service and counseling. They also took DNA to see if he really did and it turned out that he did, so I don’t know why they didn’t take it seriously that she should have paid for that.

When examining the survey responses from the student survey in terms of actual help sought, we examined the percentages of teens who sought help related to violence out of the entire sample (including those without any violence exposure and those with exposure who did not seek help; see Table 3). This pattern of results was similar to their reports of the likelihood of seeking help, with informal sources sought most often (friends, parents, siblings, and other relatives), followed by formal sources of support. Help seeking from school nurses was particularly rare, but we note that not all schools surveyed had a school nurse on their staff. Boys were more likely than girls to report having talked to a doctor, a police officer, or a minister or priest.

Reasons for Not Getting Help

Some focus group participants reported that perhaps people put up with an abusive relationship because they think the abusive partner loves them:

Table 3
Proportion of Boys and Girls Who Reported Talking to
Each Source About Violence in Their Relationships

	Boys ^a	Girls ^b	Difference Statistic (z)
Friend	13.31	15.79	1.07
Parent or guardian	12.40	9.25	-1.51
Brother, sister, or other family member	13.19	11.70	-0.81
Counselor or teacher at school	4.62	3.47	-1.42
School nurse	2.51	1.67	-1.08
Doctor or other health professional	5.01	2.31	-2.78**
Minister or priest	3.83	2.18	-2.05*
Police officer	4.49	2.70	-1.99*
Lawyer who could give confidential legal advice	3.43	2.19	-1.45

a. $N = 758$

b. $N = 779$

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

I think that's the way it is during the beginning. Like let's say she did something and he like, gets abusive towards her. She's going to be like, well, it's because he cares about me and doesn't want me to do it again and he loves me and so he just wants me to be a good person or a good mate.

Some of the focus group participants stated that people may put up with an abusive relationship because that is what they have seen at home:

I think that you can't really change quickly. If they grew up violent and they've been violent for their whole life, I don't think anything that lasts just for 3 days [e.g., the Break the Cycle intervention] is going to change it overnight.

Help-Giving Behavior

The student survey presented a scenario about an abusive dating violence situation, and the participants were asked what action they would take if they observed this scenario. Survey results showed that most teens preferred to take some action in response to the dating violence situation presented (see Table 4), with only 12% of boys and 7% of girls saying they would ignore the situation. The response endorsed most frequently was to talk to the girl later on, followed by trying to stop the situation, talking to the boy later on, talking to the boy right then, and talking to someone else about it. Boys and girls were similar in their report of help giving, with the exception that more girls than boys said that they would talk to someone else about the situation. Only about half of participants said they would try to stop the situation.

The focus group participants were also asked to discuss the types of help that friends would provide to those who were experiencing violence in a dating relationship. The

Table 4
Boys' and Girls' Reported Responses to Hypothetical
Scenario of Dating Violence

		Boys	Girls	Difference Statistic (z)
Ignore it	<i>N</i>	330	380	
	No	45.76	45.26	
	Maybe	42.73	47.37	
	Yes	11.52	7.37	0.59
Talk to him at a later time	<i>N</i>	334	380	
	No	21.26	25.00	
	Maybe	29.94	31.84	
	Yes	48.80	43.16	1.74
Talk to him about it then and there	<i>N</i>	330	381	
	No	20.61	23.62	
	Maybe	40.00	38.06	
	Yes	39.39	38.32	0.88
Talk to the girl about it later on	<i>N</i>	333	380	
	No	15.92	13.42	
	Maybe	26.13	22.11	
	Yes	57.96	64.47	-1.48
Try to stop him	<i>N</i>	334	390	
	No	14.97	15.64	
	Maybe	35.93	35.38	
	Yes	49.10	48.97	0.14
Talk to someone else about it	<i>N</i>	332	383	
	No	40.66	27.42	
	Maybe	32.23	34.73	
	Yes	27.11	37.86	-3.30***

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

predominant opinion among the participants was that the types of help that teenagers would provide would primarily consist of emotional support, someone to talk to, and helping them feel better about themselves. In terms of specific advice that teenagers might provide, the predominant response was that they would tell the friend to leave the abuser. Some of the participants also stated that if the friend failed to follow this advice, then there would be nothing else that could be said or done. The participants were asked how friends could help each other. One participant responded, "I don't know—just help them in certain things to make them like feel better about themselves and then tell them to break up with him or with her."

Notably, none of the participants reported that they would encourage their friends to talk to an adult such as a parent, teacher, school administrator, or the police. Participants were specifically asked whether they thought teenagers who had participated in the dating violence prevention program would be inclined to refer their friends to the nonprofit organization providing the program. The predominant opinion was that

teenagers would not be inclined to do this, nor would they give the Break the Cycle number to their friends; however, as stated earlier, the tracking of referral sources indicates that students are referring their friends to Break the Cycle.

The focus group participants were also asked to speculate on what they would do if someone they knew was in an abusive relationship. The overwhelming opinion among the focus group participants was that most teenagers would be reluctant to intervene in an abusive relationship if the situation involved two youths with whom they were friends. The predominant opinion among the students was that relationships and dating violence are intimate and sensitive issues and they have to respect the right to privacy. In addition, some students stated that youths may be reluctant to believe that a situation merits intervention and that sometimes youths make things up or exaggerate to get attention or to get another student in trouble. Many students would not intervene “because it’s not their business and they don’t want to get in trouble.”

However, some of the focus group participants stated that they would try to talk to the abuser, whereas a few others stated that they would “beat the abuser up.” Some of the male participants stated that if a girl were abusing a male friend, they would send one of their female friends to attack the girl because it was unacceptable for a male to hit a female.

The focus group participants were also asked whether they would intervene if they were at a party and witnessed an incident in which a boy became both physically and verbally abusive with his girlfriend. The responses from the focus group participants are consistent with the results from the survey, although the focus group participants did report being somewhat less likely to intervene than the survey data indicated. Some of the participants stated that if they knew the abuser, they would try to talk to him or tell him to calm down or tell the girl to get away from him. Other participants stated that they would not do anything on the spot but would ask the girl what had happened when they saw her in school. Most of the participants reported that they would be unlikely to intervene physically to prevent the abuse. Although there was no group consensus, the predominant opinion was that people should mind their own business and that relationship problems are private and one should not get involved. In addition, some of the participants stated that they would be unlikely to intervene if the abuser was not someone they knew because they feared he would pull out a weapon or come back with his friends to seek retribution.

Quality of Help Giving Peers Can Provide

The findings from the focus groups clearly indicate that the type of help that teenagers are likely to provide is primarily limited to providing emotional support, someone to talk to, and advising the victim to leave the abuser. However, this help did not include any concrete steps or advice that would enable the victim to leave the abuser or put the victim in touch with someone who could help them stop the abuse. It would be useful if peers were knowledgeable about helpful resources for those

involved in IPV. When the focus group participants were asked whether they thought the help that teenagers can provide other teenagers would be useful, the responses were mixed. Although some of the participants said yes, others said that all a friend could do was be there for another friend but that ultimately they would have to help themselves.

Summary and Conclusions

The findings from the focus groups were generally consistent with the findings from the survey. The focus group participants reported that most Latino teens do not trust the adults in formal help-giving professions and generally do not go to them for help when they have problems. The findings from both the survey and the focus groups indicate that most teens turn to their friends for help when they have problems or when they need advice or emotional support and would be most likely to turn to their friends if they were involved in an abusive relationship. At the same time, however, the focus group participants reported that the type of help that friends provide is limited to listening to them and providing emotional support rather than offering concrete suggestions for action. However, at times when peers do offer suggestions, it may be bad advice. For instance, peers have been shown to see IPV as a private matter and not intervene (Bui, 2003), to blame the victim for the violence (Jackson, Cram, & Seymour, 2000; Mahlstedt & Keeny, 1993), or to offer unhelpful advice, including support of the perpetrator (Koval, 1989). Peers may also offer advice that leads the victim to stay in the relationship longer than they might have otherwise (Mahlstedt & Keeny, 1993). Only 25% of the boys and girls who talked with someone about abuse in their relationships reported a change in the relationship (Jackson et al., 2000).

The findings from both the surveys and the focus groups indicate that most teenagers would be reluctant to immediately intervene if they witnessed an incident of dating violence or abuse. The focus group participants reported that most teens would be unlikely to intervene physically if they witnessed an incident of dating violence or abuse, particularly among youths they know.

It should be noted that because of the age of the students in this study, many had not yet begun to date, and so their experience with dating and with IPV was limited (only about half the students reported dating in the past 6 months, and most students reported that they had not experienced or witnessed dating violence firsthand). The sample size for those who had experience in dating is presently unacceptable for analyses. However, after all project data are collected, we will be able to thoroughly investigate the differences between dating and nondating study participants.

Although the survey collected information about perceived helpfulness of various sources of help, likelihood of seeking help, and actual use of sources of help, few teens reported having sought help from these sources. For the focus groups, we were

limited to asking youth to speculate what teens their age would do in terms of help seeking and help giving for IPV. The participants' limited experience with dating and dating violence and the fact that we asked them to anticipate behaviors instead of reporting on actual behaviors are important limitations of the study. Indeed, Watson and colleagues (2001) found that youth were more likely to predict that they would use formal sources of help than they actually did.

Nevertheless, the study indicates that there is a strong need to teach skills to teens about what they can do to help themselves and others who are experiencing an abusive relationship. Given findings in the adult literature that Hispanic or Latino culture may influence both expression and tolerance of IPV, we might expect the same to be true for Latino teens. Dating violence–prevention curricula teach students about how to recognize abusive behaviors and how to intervene to get help for the victim. The development of culturally informed prevention programs may be particularly important. Intervention programs may serve teens well by educating them about the importance of intervening when they witness an incident of violence or abuse among their friends. It is clear that if they seek help at all, Latino adolescents are going to seek help from their peers. Given this, it is clear that a promising avenue for IPV intervention is for programs to use teens as peer educators to teach other teens about the dimensions and prevention of IPV. In addition, it would also be important to have these teens act as peer counselors who can serve as a link to formal sources of support, so that those in dating violence situations will have someone to talk to who they can feel comfortable with and trust.

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