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Prevalence of Violence Victimization and Perpetration During Middle and High School in Under-Resourced, Urban Communities

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Abstract

This study describes rates of violence victimization, perpetration, and witnessing in 6th–11th grade for a multisite sample (N = 3,466) of predominantly Black and Hispanic middle- and high-school students from urban areas with high rates of crime and economic disadvantage. Students completed surveys in middle and high school assessing teen dating violence, stalking, sexual violence and harassment, bullying, cyberbullying, and physical violence perpetration and victimization, as well as witnessing violence. The highest prevalence rates are observed most often in 8th or 9th grade. Youth reported high rates of witnessing serious assault and severe community violence throughout adolescence. These findings suggest that efforts to prevent violence among youth living in under-resourced communities need to start early and address community-level socioeconomic disparities.

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Keywords

dating violence; bullying; sexual violence; witnessing violence; adolescence; racial and economic diversity

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is defined by critical changes in physical, social, and emotional development that present both opportunities and risks for establishing healthy behavior into adulthood (DiClemente et al., 1996). Exposure to violence—as a victim, perpetrator, or witness—during adolescence is a well-established risk factor and potentially traumatic adverse childhood experience (ACE) associated with a range of negative health outcomes, including mental and physical health concerns, substance abuse, poorer educational and occupational outcomes, and later violence exposure in adulthood (Basile et al., 2020; Bellis et al., 2019; David-Ferdon et al., 2021). Many young people will experience some form of violence before adulthood and often for the first time in adolescence (Sacks et al., 2014). Efforts to reduce or prevent that exposure rely, in part, on an understanding of the development of those behaviors and risks during the life course (Bellis et al., 2019). While many studies have examined exposure to violence among young people, most examine a narrow subset of violence types, and few have looked at the prevalence of these experiences across adolescent development to identify patterns and critical windows for intervention (e.g., Camerini et al., 2020; Wincentak et al., 2017). In addition, fewer studies have looked at prevalence in racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse samples of youth. The purpose of the current study is to add to the understanding of the prevalence of violence exposure on a comprehensive set of experiences, including teen dating violence (TDV), sexual violence, sexual harassment, stalking, bullying, cyberbullying, and physical violence victimization and perpetration, as well as witnessing violence in the home and community in a diverse sample of youth followed from 6th through 11th grade.

Violence Exposure in Adolescence

Adolescents experience a substantial burden of violence exposure (David-Ferdon et al., 2021; Sacks et al., 2014). Data from the 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) found that 44.3% of high-school students had experienced at least one form of violence (e.g., physical fighting, being threatened with a weapon, physical dating violence, sexual violence, and bullying) in the past year, and 15.6% experienced two or more types (David-Ferdon et al., 2021). Changes in socioemotional development and exposure to a wider range of physical and relational contexts where violence can occur (e.g., dating relationships, online or electronic communication, unsupervised peer activities, or access to the community) introduce new opportunities for risk as youth age (Ybarra & Thompson, 2018). Yet these risks for violence exposure are not borne proportionately across the population, with differential risk for victimization and perpetration well-documented by gender, race/ethnicity, and sexual identity (Mennicke et al., 2021; Wincentak et al., 2017). Evidence also suggests that youth exposed to social and economic inequities, including racism, poverty, and neighborhood disadvantage, may be at greater risk for a range of victimization, perpetration, and witnessing violence exposures (Voisin et al., 2016; Wincentak et al.,

2017). Understanding the nature, prevalence, and patterns of violence in the population, particularly in groups experiencing disproportionate risk, is critically important to the strategic development and implementation of primary prevention approaches (Niolon et al., 2017).

Dating Violence, Sexual Violence and Harassment, and Stalking

The onset of sexual development and dating behavior, coinciding with decreasing parental supervision online and in person, creates new opportunities for the initiation of relationship and sexual violence in early adolescence (Ybarra & Thompson, 2018). Dating violence occurs within the context of dating and romantic relationships and includes a range of harmful behaviors such as psychological, physical, and sexual behaviors (Wincentak et al., 2017), while sexual violence, sexual harassment, and stalking can occur within or outside of the dating context (Basile et al., 2020). A recent meta-analysis estimated the prevalence of physical (20%) and sexual (9%) dating violence among U.S. teens (Wincentak et al., 2017). Furthermore, data from the 2019 YRBS indicated that 11% of teens had experienced sexual violence by anyone in the past year (Basile et al., 2020). A large, statewide study of Kentucky high-school students found substantial exposure to several forms of violence victimization and perpetration, respectively, including dating violence (33% and 20%; Coker et al., 2014), sexual violence (19% and 8%; Williams et al., 2014), sexual harassment (30% and 9%; Clear et al., 2014), and stalking (17% and 5%; Fisher et al., 2014).

Some youth may be at even greater risk of exposure. For example, a meta-analysis found higher rates of physical (but not sexual) dating violence perpetration and victimization in samples from under-resourced neighborhoods and those with higher proportions of cultural or racial/ethnic minority youth—but only for girls, highlighting the intersectional risks associated with gender and socioeconomic disadvantage on some forms of violence (Wincentak et al., 2017). The same meta-analysis found that, overall, girls perpetrated more physical dating violence than boys (25%–13%) with no differences in victimization rates but perpetrated less (3%–10%) and experienced more (14%–8%) sexual dating violence than boys; prevalence rates of sexual, but not physical, dating violence victimization were higher for older teens.

Trajectory analyses of dating violence suggest that dating violence tends to increase from early to later adolescence, peaking around 16 or 17 and declining as youth approach adulthood with generally consistent patterns (despite different rates) by gender and race (Foshee et al., 2009; Orpinas et al., 2013). Sexual harassment and sexual violence perpetration, however, may start earlier, with the average onset between 15 and 16 years in one longitudinal study (Ybarra & Thompson, 2018). Developmental patterns of adolescent stalking remain relatively unexamined.

Bullying and Peer Violence

A core developmental shift in adolescence involves the emerging significance of peers as important sources of influence, social support, and conflict, with related increases in bullying and peer violence as youth navigate these relationships. Bullying and peer violence are forms of youth violence that involve the use of power or physical force to threaten

or harm others; bullying can occur in person or online (David-Ferdon et al., 2016). A meta-analysis of 80 studies reported a mean prevalence rate of 35% for in-person bullying involvement (as perpetrator and/or victim) and 15% for cyberbullying involvement (Modecki et al., 2014). Bullying victimization during the last year was also reported by 25% of high-school youth on the 2019 YRBS, with 20% reporting being bullied on school property and 16% electronically (Basile et al., 2020). Victimization rates were highest among girls and among White compared with Black or Hispanic youth. A longitudinal prospective study of Swiss adolescents (ages 11–17) found that physical bullying tended to decrease over time for those exposed to only perpetration or victimization but was persistently high and increased from age 15 to 17 for bully/victims who both perpetrated and experienced bullying (Zych et al., 2020).

About one in five (22%) adolescents reported experiencing physical assault by a peer in the past year, with the highest rates of victimization among Black youth (32%), in a nationally representative survey (Turner et al., 2011). Other studies of middle- and high-school students found that roughly 40% had perpetrated peer physical violence in the past 1–3 months (Rothman et al., 2010), with the highest rates of perpetration and victimization consistently reported by males (Rothman et al., 2010; Turner et al., 2011). A national longitudinal survey found that rates of peer physical assault victimization increased substantially around age 10 and remained near 25% throughout adolescence; across all age groups, boys were victimized at rates almost twice as high as girls (Finkelhor et al., 2009).

Witnessing Violence in the Home and Community

Less data are available on the prevalence of witnessing violence in adolescence, though evidence suggests it can be traumatic with harmful impacts on health and behavior (Voisin et al., 2016), including an increased risk for bullying and peer victimization (Voisin & Hong, 2012). One study of high-school students who had dated found that 41% had witnessed parental violence in their lifetime, and this exposure predicted dating violence victimization (Karlsson et al., 2016). Another study by Duke et al. (2010) found that witnessing physical abuse within the home was significantly associated with the perpetration of delinquent behavior, bullying, physical fighting, dating violence, and weapon carrying among adolescents. A review by Stein et al. (2003) pointed to substantially higher rates of witnessing community violence among urban versus suburban youth. In a national longitudinal study (Finkelhor et al., 2009), witnessing violence and indirect violence exposure (e.g., being told about it) increased dramatically after age 10, with lifetime rates of witnessing violence in the home and/or community nearing 50% among older youth (14–17).

METHOD

Study Design and Analysis Sample

Data for this study were drawn from a multisite, longitudinal, cluster-randomized (school) controlled trial of a comprehensive TDV prevention model (see Niolon et al., 2019 for details regarding the larger study design). The current study only uses data from students in 26 middle schools that were randomly assigned to a standard-of-care comparison

condition to avoid concerns that behavior change associated with exposure to this comprehensive violence prevention model throughout middle school may have impacted violence prevalence rates in the sample at later ages. Students in the comparison condition received an evidence-based TDV prevention program in the 8th grade that is widely implemented in the United States (*Safe Dates*; Foshee et al., 1998). Schools were located in four urban sites (Alameda County, CA; Baltimore, MD; Broward County, FL; and Chicago, IL) and were located in neighborhoods with above-average crime and economic disadvantage, as determined by the local health department relative to the metropolitan area in which they were located (Niolon et al., 2016).

The current sample includes data from five cohorts of students surveyed over 6 years (2011–2016). Students in grades 6–8 were enrolled in Year 1 (Cohorts 1–3) with new cohorts of 6th graders added in Years 2 and 3 (Cohorts 4–5). Cohorts were surveyed in the following grades: Cohort 1 (8th–11th); Cohort 2 (7th–11th); Cohort 3 (6th–11th); Cohort 4 (6th–10th); Cohort 5 (6th–7th and 9th; grade 8 data were not collected due to a gap in contractual timing). Data from multiple waves were aligned into samples based on grade such that the 6th-grade sample, for example, consists of all surveys taken by 6th graders regardless of the year of survey administration, creating successive semi-independent samples by grade. A total sample of 3,466 student participants *(range* = 31–317 per school; M = 133.3) were used in the current analyses.[1] Fifty-three percent of the sample was female.[2] The sample was 48% non-Hispanic Black, 34% Hispanic, 8% Asian, 4% non-Hispanic white, 6% non-Hispanic multiracial, and 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.

All students in Cohorts 1 and 2 were followed into high school. For Cohorts 3–5, high school follow-up was conducted with a random sample of participants due to budget limitations. Random samples from each cohort at each middle school were selected for recruitment into the high-school surveys. To supplement this planned missing design, a convenience sample was also surveyed if a student was present on the day of an in-person high-school assessment and had previously participated during middle school. Of the total sample, 357 (10.30%) took the survey at 5 or more occasions; cumulatively 1,025 (29.57%) at 4 or more; 1,720 (49.62%) at 3 or more; and 2,518 (72.65%) at 2 or more occasions.

During middle school (Grades 6–8), we surveyed students in their classrooms twice each year (fall and spring); only data from spring surveys were included in the current study. As surveys during high school were only administered in spring, spring surveys were utilized in middle school to capture experiences during that grade level as well. In addition, time periods assessed in fall surveys (e.g., last 4 months) overlap substantially with the summer, whereas spring surveys captured only experiences during the school year. Active parental

[1]·Eight students who had died, been institutionalized, or did not matriculate with their respective cohort into Grade 9 were removed from the larger study from which this data was drawn.

[2]·Due to missing or irreconcilable gender and birthdate information across middle school data collection, demographic data was imputed for 16% of the total RCT sample (n = 1,282, including intervention and comparison conditions) using middle school data collected mid-way through the study, with gender and birthdate assigned based on model imputed values across 100 imputations. Imputed values from the larger study were utilized for the subsample in the current analysis. Because imputation was completed for the full sample and not tracked by condition, the percent of imputed data in the current sample is not available but assumed to be proportional to the total RCT sample.

consent was obtained for students to participate in the study across multiple years, with the exception of one site which was allowed to switch to passive parental consent procedures in Year 2 due to difficulty in getting forms returned from parents regardless of whether the parent gave or withheld consent. Student assent was obtained at each survey wave. In high school (Grades 9–11), we administered the survey once per year. These annual surveys were made available as either paper-and-pencil or online versions and could be completed either in the classroom context or individually; interviewer assistance was available. The research design, procedures, and materials for the trial were approved by the Office of Management and Budget (#0920–0921), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Institutional Review Board (IRB; #6161), the NORC IRB (#120104), and multiple local ethical review boards.

Measures

Supplementary Table 1 (available at https://connect.springerpub.com/journals in the PDF view) summarizes measures used to assess dating violence, stalking, sexual violence and harassment, bullying, cyberbullying, physical violence, and witnessing violence. Reliability estimates for each scale are included in Supplementary tables 2–6 (available at https://connect.springerpub.com/journals in the PDF view). Youth who endorsed any items within a measure were considered exposed at that measurement occasion.

Analytic Approach

Descriptive analyses consisted of simple summarization (proportions, means, and standard deviations) of raw endorsements by construct and gender for each grade-level sample. In addition, mean rates of violence exposure across grades (overall and by gender) were calculated to facilitate a comparison of overall rates of exposure with other studies and between violence measures within the current study. T-tests by gender of mean differences in item-response metric are provided in Supplemental Table 1 without correction for multiple comparisons. As not all youth responded on each occasion due to design, absence, or loss to follow-up, the results reflect developmental patterns across grades rather than individual, longitudinal trajectories. In the context of patterns versus trajectories, no statistical comparison of means across time is made; however, means by time and gender are provided for visual comparison. As such, analyses utilizing clustering (e.g., time within person within cohort within site/school) information to obtain standard errors adjusted for intraclass correlations were unnecessary. Some pattern variation may reflect missing data patterns and design factors.

RESULTS

Patterns of violence exposure by grade for the full sample are provided for dating violence (Figure 1), sexual violence and harassment, bullying, and physical violence (Figure 2), and witnessing violence (Figure 3). Patterns of violence exposure by grade and gender are presented in Supplementary figures 1–3 (available at https://connect.springerpub.com/journals in the PDF view). Mean endorsement rates (% any) averaged across grades for the full sample and by gender are provided in Table 1. In addition, overall, subscale, and data means in item-response metric by grade, sample sizes by occasion, reliability estimates,

and *t*-tests of gender differences are available in Supplementary tables 2–6 (available at https://connect.springerpub.com/journals in the PDF view).

The highest rates of violence exposure across middle and high school involved dating violence (*M* Perpetration [*p*], Victimization [v] = 66.9%, 68.5%), driven primarily by consistently high reports of emotional TDV perpetration and victimization that were higher in 6th–9th grade and leveled off in high school (see Figure 1; Table 1; Supplementary Figure 1 [available at https://connect.springerpub.com/journals in the PDF view]). Rates of physical TDV assessed by the primary measure were also substantial *(M p*,v = 25.6%, 24.7%) with the highest reports for 8th and 9th graders. Partner sexual violence victimization was reported by about one in five girls (20.7%) and one in six boys (15.6%) on the primary measure with fewer youth reporting perpetration overall; perpetration increased slightly over time, while victimization increased only for females. Greater perpetration of physical and threatening TDV was reported by females vs. males across grades, though victimization rates and patterns by gender were similar. Rates of threatening TDV and stalking were reported less often than other forms of TDV with relatively stable rates across grades. Relational TDV was also less prevalent overall and reports declined over time. Physical and sexual TDV in the past 12 months were also assessed in high school with secondary single-item measures drawn from the YRBS (with variants assessing perpetration and victimization) to permit comparison with national norms (see Figure 1; Table 1). Reports using these items were much lower, with means of 5.0% and 3.0% for physical and 3.3% and 3.6% for sexual TDV perpetration and victimization, respectively, across grades.

Sexual harassment rates (*M p*,v = 14.8%, 32.1%) were substantially higher than rates of sexual violence against anyone (*M p*,v = 1.5%, 2.6%) with rates for both forms of violence being highest in 8th grade and decreasing or leveling off in the high school grades. Males generally reported greater perpetration of sexual violence and harassment, while females reported slightly higher rates of victimization at most time points starting in 7th grade (see Figure 2; Supplementary Figure 2 [available at https://connect.springerpub.com/journals in the PDF view]).

Bullying, cyberbullying, and physical violence (against/by anyone) rates were consistently highest in middle school—generally peaking in 7th and 8th grade—and lower in high school. Bullying (*M p*,v = 33.3%, 34.6%) and cyberbullying (*M p*,v = 6.2%, 14.4%) were more prevalent than physical violence (*M p*,v = 4.4%, 4.9%). Patterns of bullying and physical violence exposure were similar for males and females over time; however, females reported more bullying (in middle school) and cyberbullying victimization; males reported more physical violence victimization and perpetration (see Figure 2; Supplementary Figure 2 [available at https://connect.springerpub.com/journals in the PDF view]).

Substantially more youth in this population reported witnessing assault with a weapon (*M* = 19.6%) or severe violence in the community (i.e., shootings, bombs, or riots; *M* = 24.4%) than violence between parents/caregivers in their home (i.e., intimate partner violence [IPV]; *M* = 7.6%). Rates of witnessing violence at home and in the community were highest among middle schoolers and rates declined for all groups during high school. Reports of witnessing severe violence in the community declined slightly in the older grades, while reports of

witnessing serious assaults declined more steadily from 9th to 11th grade. There were no differences in witnessing IPV by gender; males were slightly more likely than females to report witnessing assaults and severe violence in the community in high school grades (see Figure 3; Supplementary Figure 3 [available at https://connect.springerpub.com/journals in the PDF view]).

DISCUSSION

This study considered unadjusted endorsement rates and patterns of violence exposure from 6th through 11th grade for multiple forms of dating violence, sexual violence and harassment, bullying, and physical violence against anyone, as well as witnessing violence in successive, semi-independent, cross-sectional samples of primarily Black and Hispanic youth living in under-resourced urban neighborhoods. The study aimed to address three key gaps in understanding of violence exposure in adolescence: comparing rates and patterns of a comprehensive range of violence types—both perpetration and victimization—within one sample; examining violence exposure in a sample of predominantly racial/ethnic minority youth from under-resourced communities; and highlighting developmental periods (as measured by grade) in which rates of different forms of violence are highest from early to late adolescence.

The most common forms of violence victimization experienced across adolescence in this sample, with exposure rates averaged across grade, were emotional dating violence (65%), bullying (35%), and sexual harassment (32%)—three interrelated forms of aggression that employ similar verbal and relational tactics to harass, denigrate, manipulate, exclude, and intimidate victims. Although there are no comparable studies examining the wide range of violence types included in this study within one sample from early to later adolescence, prior research has also identified dating violence and sexual harassment (Clear et al., 2014; Coker et al., 2014) and bullying (Basile et al., 2020) as more prevalent forms of violence during high school than other forms of violence assessed. Prior research has identified bullying perpetration as a correlate and developmental precursor of sexual harassment during middle school (Espelage et al., 2015), and involvement in bullying has been associated with a greater risk for sexual harassment and emotional and physical dating violence victimization (Espelage et al., 2018). Cutbush et al. (2016) also found that bullying and sexual harassment perpetration in middle school predicted later TDV perpetration. In the current study, rates of bullying and sexual harassment declined substantially after middle school, while emotional dating violence exposure increased from middle to high school by a similar margin—around 20%. Although these analyses did not examine individual-level trajectories, it is possible that these patterns reflect a developmental shift in the way these forms of aggression are expressed in youth at higher risk of violence, from bullying and sexual harassment in middle school to emotional relationship abuse in high school as involvement in more serious dyadic relationships increases.

Physical dating violence victimization was also prevalent in this sample, with about one in four youth reporting these experiences on average in the last 4 months. Rates and demographic patterns of physical TDV in this study were strikingly consistent with a recent meta-analysis which found an overall prevalence of 20% for physical TDV exposure, higher

perpetration rates among girls but equivalent rates of victimization by gender, and higher rates in samples of cultural minority girls or youth from under-resourced neighborhoods (Wincentak et al., 2017). Likewise, the overall prevalence of physical TDV in this study with a diverse, disadvantaged sample was somewhat higher at 25% on average across gender and time with the highest rates reported for girls' perpetration (33%). Lower rates of physical and sexual dating violence (3%−5% on average) reported using single-item measures from the YRBS (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009) were expected, as these items assess only more severe behaviors involving physical injury and forced sex. Rates in this sample, however, were also lower than the most recent nationally representative YRBS sample which found victimization rates of 8.2% for both outcomes (Basile et al., 2020).

Another experience affecting about one in four youth in this sample—witnessing severe violence in the community—was assessed with an item from Finkelhor's Juvenile Violence Questionnaire, which asked youth whether they had seen or heard in real life people being shot, bombs going off, or street riots (Finkelhor et al., 2005). These experiences represent a diverse (and extreme) range of experiences that are vulnerable to discrepant interpretation by respondents and, as such, interpretation is difficult. Rates of exposure ranging from 18% to 29% in this sample were substantially higher than those found for a recent national sample of youth ages 10–13 (4.4%) and 14–17 (10.3%) using the same item (Finkelhor et al., 2015). These high rates of reporting could reflect the reality that youth living in urban neighborhoods selected for above-average rates of poverty and crime are much more likely to have heard or witnessed a shooting than youth overall (Mitchell et al., 2021). Furthermore, reports of exposure to "street riots" may reflect a range of experiences including experiences that are potentially traumatic or dangerous, those that represent a positive expression of community power and collective action, or both (DiClemente et al., 2018; First et al., 2020). During data collection for this study, Baltimore experienced protests and civil unrest—both violent and peaceful—in the Spring of 2015, sparked by the death of Freddie Gray in police custody. It is likely that many, if not most, of the Baltimore youth participating in this study—one of four study sites—at that time were exposed to these events in some form. A search of news media suggests that other sites experienced similar protests during this period, although none received as much national media attention as those in Baltimore. Research has shown that exposure to protests or civil unrest was associated with posttraumatic stress symptoms among adult Black protest engagers (First et al., 2020), while other work suggests that experiences, like protests, which foster critical consciousness and political participation among youth of color may promote positive developmental outcomes (Diemer & Li, 2011; Mathews et al., 2020). While the full implications of these findings are unclear, the data demonstrate substantial levels of exposure to violence and/or civil unrest in this sample of urban adolescents and suggest a need for greater investments in the prevention of community violence and accessibility of mental health supports for youth exposed to multiple social and environmental stressors.

Consistent with past research, females in this study reported more perpetration of physical, emotional, and threatening TDV than males but also higher rates of TDV victimization on average, suggesting that male victims may be underreporting their experiences of relationship violence (Basile et al., 2020; Wincentak et al., 2017). Dating relationships seem to represent an important and unique risk context for adolescent girls' violence perpetration,

potentially influenced by fewer perceived social mores against female-to-male than male-to-female violence (Karlsson et al., 2016). Females also reported higher rates of cyberbullying victimization—especially in middle school—but there were no notable gender differences in bullying otherwise. Prior research on gender differences in bullying is inconsistent with some work, suggesting males may be victimized more often offline (Smith et al., 2019) and other studies finding greater victimization for females across contexts (Basile et al., 2020). Finally, gender differences in this sample reinforced prior evidence that males are at greater risk for perpetrating physical and sexual violence but also experiencing physical violence victimization and exposure to community violence (Wincentak et al., 2017). These persistent risk patterns for boys have been linked to the influence of traditional masculine norms that encourage displays of dominance and strength and discourage emotional expression and connection among males, resulting in violence and a range of other negative health and social outcomes (Reidy et al., 2018). Given consistent evidence of gender differences in violence perpetration and victimization, it is important that research and prevention efforts continue to attend to the ways in which gender interacts with violence risk.

Decades of research suggest that youth exposed to intersectional inequities in social and economic determinants of health are at risk for poorer physical and mental health, educational, and social outcomes (Pickett & Wilkinson, 2015). Yet, few studies have examined rates or temporal patterns of a range of violence exposures in these populations to understand the potential for elevated risk of violence associated with these social and health inequities. Data from this sample of primarily Black and Hispanic youth from under-resourced neighborhoods suggest that those elevated risks may manifest in greater risk for some forms of violence exposure but not others. However, differences between this study and others in the literature in terms of the measures used and time periods assessed (e.g., 4 months vs. 12 months or lifetime) make some comparisons difficult. For example, rates of sexual violence by anyone (i.e., forced to do something sexual, last 4 months) were substantially lower in the current sample compared with victimization rates in a national sample using a similar item but over a longer time period (11%, last 12 months; Basile et al., 2020), and compared with past-year victimization (19%) and perpetration (8%) rates in a large, mostly white high-school sample using a broader measure of any unwanted sex (forced or coerced; Williams et al., 2014). Thus, these lower rates could be the product of a narrow, single-item measure over a shorter time period. Similarly, rates of physical violence involving anyone were substantially lower in this sample compared with prior studies of adolescent physical violence involving peers specifically, including those who reported elevated past-year rates of victimization among Black youth (Finkelhor et al., 2009; Turner et al., 2011). In contrast, rates of sexual harassment victimization and perpetration in this sample were substantially higher during middle school—but similar during high school—compared with large studies of predominantly White high-school students (last 12 months; Clear et al., 2014) and a national sample of adolescents (lifetime; Ybarra & Thompson, 2018) assessing longer time-periods. Yet, they were similar to those reported in a racially diverse sample of New York City middle school students assessing lifetime exposure, suggesting the elevated exposure reflects disproportionate risk in these populations (Rolfe & Schroeder, 2020). Furthermore, comparatively high rates of witnessing violence suggest the need for more targeted prevention in high-risk urban areas, especially for younger

adolescents. During middle school—but not high school—rates of witnessing IPV were higher than those reported for an older national sample using the same item to assess past-year exposure (i.e., 11.7% in 6th grade vs. 7.7% for 10–13 year olds; Finkelhor et al., 2009). Witnessing assault with a weapon or severe violence in the community was also reported at concerning rates. Reports of witnessing assault fell from a high of 25% in 6th grade to 11% by 11th grade bringing the rate more in line with other samples (e.g., 13.9%; Finkelhor et al., 2005). However, rates of witnessing severe violence in the community, including seeing shootings, bombings, or riots, remained quite high (24.4%, on average) throughout middle and high school compared with older estimates (2002–2003) using the same items in a national sample that also included younger children (5.5%; Finkelhor et al., 2005).

Finally, a key contribution of the current study is the ability to examine violence exposure patterns in early to late adolescence using grade-level data from a longitudinal multicohort study. Violence exposure in this study tended to peak in 8th or 9th grade and was lowest in high school, except for emotional and sexual TDV, which remained near peak levels in high school. These findings suggest that middle school may be a critical period of risk for these youth and, thus, a critical period for prevention. Stress associated with social-emotional and physical development in early adolescence may interact with increasing independence from caregivers and, potentially, more exposure to neighborhood-level risk factors associated with social and economic inequities. These findings strongly suggest that primary prevention programs need to reach young people early—even before middle school—and, as suggested by prior research, those interventions may work best when they occur as part of a broader prevention strategy that also addresses family-, school-, and neighborhood-level factors (David-Ferdon et al., 2016; Niolon et al., 2017; Niolon et al., 2019).

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, these findings may not generalize to youth living in different socioeconomic conditions or in rural/suburban areas unlike those included in the current sample. Second, some measures (e.g., sexual violence) are limited to one or two items, accentuating any measurement flaws inherent in those items (including lower chances of percent any scoring) and capturing a small range of experiences within that construct. Furthermore, there may be some overlap between the constructs as measured; for example, a physical assault by a dating partner could be reported as physical dating violence and physical violence by anyone. Third, it is possible that youth not assessed on one or more measurement occasions were at differential risk for violence exposure. Almost half of the sample provided data at three or more of the six occasions, and patterns may approximate trajectories. Finally, all participants received an evidence-based dating violence prevention program in 8th grade which has been shown to reduce rates of dating and sexual violence over time (Foshee et al., 2004). This exposure may have impacted their violence exposure into high school, potentially resulting in lower rates of violence perpetration and victimization in 9th–11th grade than would have been observed in a no-treatment sample. We might, however, expect to see more consistent declines in the primary outcomes addressed by the program—TDV—in that case, and instead, those were some of the rates that remained stable or were higher in later grades. In addition, as of 2014, 22 states

had legislation that required, encouraged, or allowed dating violence education in schools, making exposure to some form of violence prevention education a standard experience for many American youth (Black et al., 2020).

Future Research Directions

The current sample utilized a unique population of youth experiencing intersecting social, environmental, and risk factors; replication using other samples would be helpful to understand how these patterns may vary by demographics and other social determinants of health. We used pooled grade-level data from a longitudinal cohort study to highlight key developmental periods in which the risk of certain violence types was greatest in this at-risk population. Future research that is longitudinal—following the same individuals through middle and high school—and also assessing a wide range of violence exposures would add to our understanding of the development of violence in adolescence. Furthermore, the current paper identified high rates of witnessing violence in the home and, particularly, the community. Witnessing violence has been linked to risk for future violence perpetration and victimization as well as other negative health outcomes (Duke et al., 2010; Mitchell et al., 2021; Voisin & Hong, 2012). More research is needed to examine the nature, prevalence, and effects of witnessing violence across adolescence using robust measures, including better assessment of exposure to violence and civil unrest in the community. Finally, it is unclear how recent increases in violent crime in the United States (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2021), coinciding with both the COVID-19 pandemic and widespread social justice protests and civil unrest across the county (Buchanan et al., 2020), may be impacting violence exposure among adolescents. Emerging evidence suggests that violence against children increased in 2020, though reports to child welfare declined (Cappa & Jijon, 2021). Children may also have experienced increased exposure to parental violence during this time (Boserup et al., 2020). Efforts to understand and ameliorate the effects of these violence exposures among youth, particularly youth living in socially and economically disadvantaged communities, will be critically important for promoting health and preventing additional violence in the post-pandemic period.

Prevention, Clinical, and Policy Implications

Youth living in urban neighborhoods with above-average crime and economic disadvantage are experiencing substantial rates of violence—as perpetrators, victims, and witnesses —with the greatest burden of violence exposure occurring in middle school. These findings reinforce the critical importance of reaching adolescents with cross-cutting violence prevention initiatives early given strong evidence that adolescent violence exposure is associated with a range of health risk behaviors and conditions (David-Ferdon et al., 2021). Newer violence prevention strategies for middle school youth have shown efficacy at preventing multiple forms of violence. For example, *Dating Matters* —a comprehensive dating violence prevention model with healthy relationship-focused programs for middle school youth as well as prevention components addressing parent, school, and community factors—has been shown to prevent not only dating violence but also bullying, cyberbullying, physical violence, sexual violence and harassment, delinquency, weapon-carrying, and other risk behaviors in middle school (Niolon et al., 2019; Niolon, 2021). In addition, many effective violence prevention strategies for younger children have

been identified (David-Ferdon et al., 2016). For example, young children in *Early Head Start* programs demonstrate less aggressive behavior and have fewer referrals to child welfare and substantiated reports of physical and sexual abuse (David-Ferdon et al., 2016). The classroom-based *Good Behavior Game* has shown also shown effects on aggressive behavior during elementary school as well as long-term effects on violent crime perpetration and substance use (David-Ferdon et al., 2016). Implementing evidence-based violence prevention approaches early—before middle school—may protect young people against increased risk for violence exposure as they navigate the unique social and developmental challenges of adolescence.

Exposure to multiple forms of violence in this sample is likely compounded by chronic stress and trauma associated with living in communities with high rates of poverty and crime, and racial and ethnic minority youth are also exposed to racism and discrimination. Interventions and investments in these communities are needed to address their elevated risk for some forms of violence exposure in adolescence but also the underlying social and health inequities that contribute to early trauma and increase the risk for a range of ACEs, including violence. Community-level interventions and policies that address social determinants of health have the potential for increasing health equity in disadvantaged communities and reducing violence exposure at all ages (David-Ferdon et al., 2016).

CONCLUSION

Findings from this study suggest that youth from racial/ethnic minority groups living in under-resourced urban neighborhoods are exposed to relatively high rates of violence as perpetrators, victims, and witnesses throughout adolescence. Exposure to sexual harassment and witnessing violence in the home and community may pose uniquely elevated risks in this population and suggest a need for focused prevention approaches in addition to efforts that address the broader set of social determinants of health affecting these young people. This study also sheds light on the need for early intervention with findings suggesting that the highest rates of many forms of violence exposure were reported in middle school. Violence exposure affects youth across our society and places them at risk for a range of harmful physical and mental health outcomes (Basile et al., 2020). Implementing primary prevention strategies that address multiple forms of violence before it begins can protect young people from the short- and long-term effects of violence exposure and promote health and well-being throughout their lifespan.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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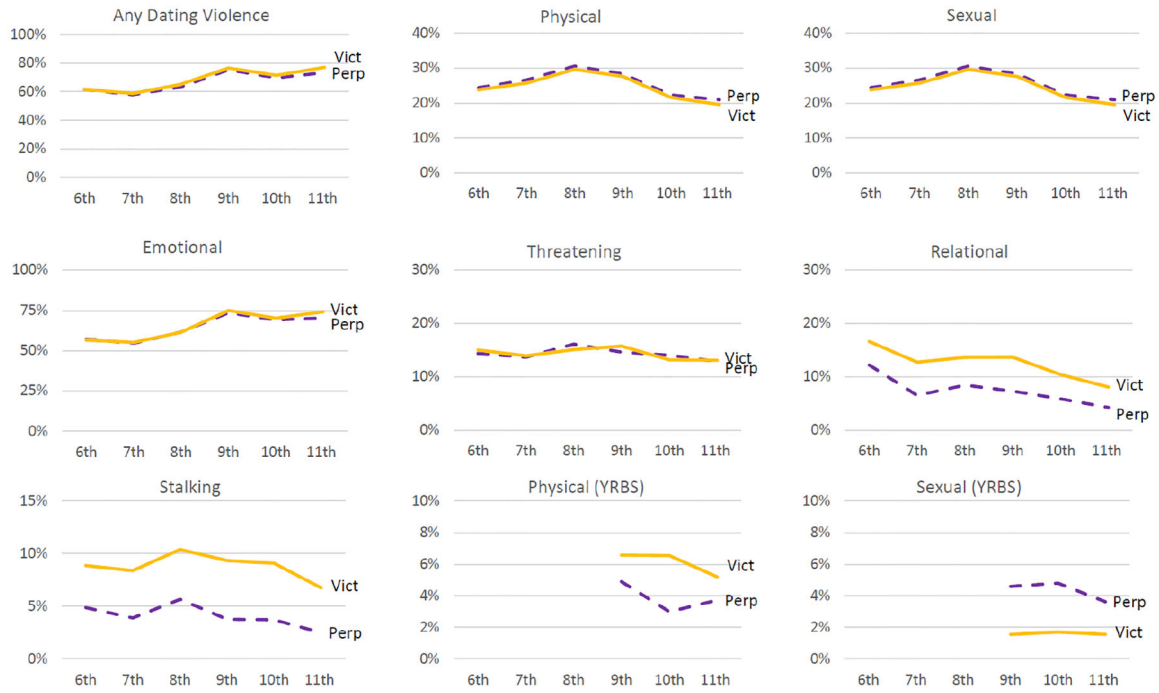

FIGURE 1.

Rates of teen dating violence exposure by grade and gender.

Note. YRBS = Youth Risk Behavior Survey.

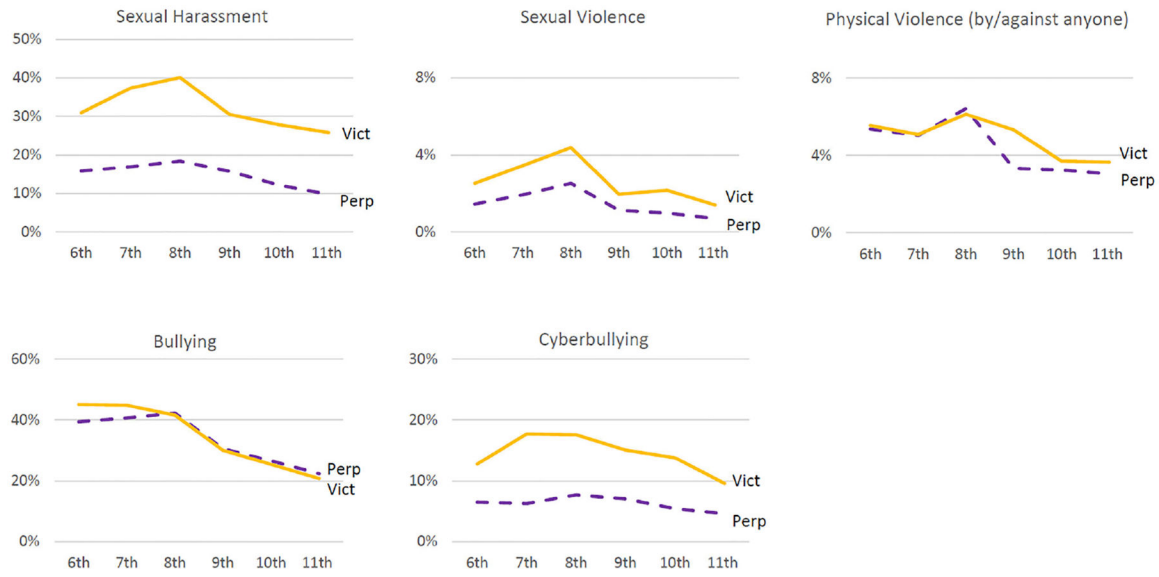

FIGURE 2.

Rates of physical and sexual teen dating violence (YRBS items), sexual violence, sexual harassment, bullying, cyberbullying, and physical violence exposure by grade and gender.

Note. YRBS = Youth Risk Behavior Survey.

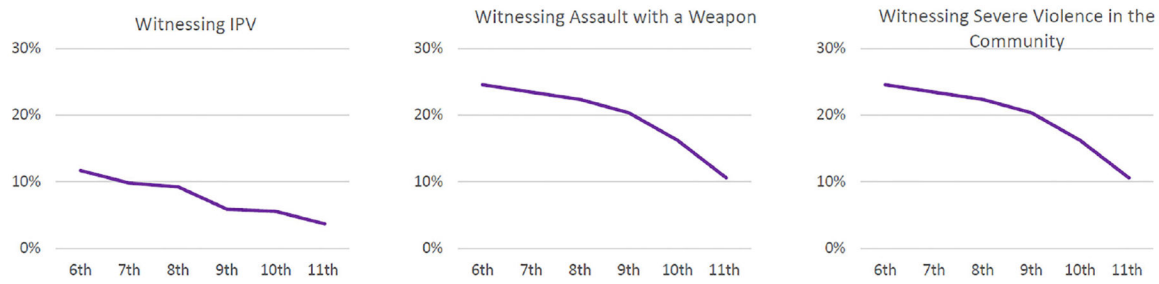

FIGURE 3.
Rates of witnessing violence in the home and community by grade and gender.

TABLE 1.

Mean Rates of Violence Reported Across Grades, Overall, and by Gender

Violence type and exposure		% Any endorsement Means across grades		
		Overall	**Male**	**Female**
Any TDV	Perp	66.9	61.0	71.7
	Vict	68.5	65.1	71.2
Emotional TDV	Perp	64.3	58.2	69.4
	Vict	65.4	61.2	68.8
Physical TDV	Perp	25.6	17.4	32.6
	Vict	24.7	24.2	25.0
Threatening TDV	Perp	14.3	11.0	17.1
	Vict	14.3	13.7	14.9
Sexual TDV	Perp	13.3	14.1	12.5
	Vict	18.4	15.6	20.7
Relational TDV	Perp	7.4	7.8	7.2
	Vict	12.5	12.6	12.5
Stalking TDV	Perp	4.1	4.5	3.7
	Vict	8.8	9.0	8.7
Physical TDV (YRBS)	Perp	5.0	4.6	5.3
	Vict	3.0	3.4	2.7
Sexual TDV (YRBS)	Perp	3.3	3.7	2.9
	Vict	3.6	3.9	3.4
Sexual harassment	Perp	14.8	17.6	12.6
	Vict	32.1	29.3	34.1
Sexual violence	Perp	1.5	2.0	1.0
	Vict	2.6	2.4	2.8
Bullying	Perp	33.6	34.8	32.8
	Vict	34.6	33.1	35.8
Cyberbullying	Perp	6.2	6.3	6.2
	Vict	14.4	11.3	16.8
Physical violence (by/against anyone)	Perp	4.4	5.5	3.6
	Vict	4.9	6.7	3.5
Witness assault with a weapon		19.6	20.5	18.8
Witness severe violence in community		24.4	24.9	24.1
Witness IPV in home		7.6	7.7	7.6

Notes. TDV = teen dating violence. IPV = intimate partner violence. YRBS = Youth Risk Behavior Survey. Perp = Perpetration. Vict = Victimization. Simple mean of total prevalence rates across grades. Variability in the number of items assessing each construct could affect “percent any” endorsement rates as participants have more opportunity to report exposure on higher-item measures.