

# Adolescent dating violence affects one in three, but murky policies mean most adults don't know how to help

October 20 2021, by Deinera Exner-Cortens, Wendy Craig

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Credit: cottonbro studio from Pexels

Adolescent dating violence is a serious public health problem in Canada. Dating violence is also a [children's rights](#) issue, because it violates

youths' right to safe and healthy development.

Adolescent dating [violence](#) is the experience of physical, sexual and/or psychological aggression in romantic and [sexual relationships](#) between the ages of 11 and 18. It is very important that caregivers, educators and other adults who work with youth understand dating violence.

As researchers who work on preventing dating violence, we wanted to specifically understand if there was policy in Canada specific to dating violence. Our findings demonstrate that we are currently failing to protect youths' right to be safe in their relationships.

## **Prevalence and outcomes**

In Canada, [one in three](#) youth experience dating violence. However, parents and caregivers are [unlikely to discuss dating violence](#) with their children. In fact, we find that most people are surprised by how common dating violence is.

Families are more likely to discuss issues that are actually less common than dating violence. For example, family communication about substance use is a [popular topic](#), but alcohol and tobacco use affects fewer young people than dating violence. About [one in four](#) youth in Canada report that they drank heavily in the past year. [One in five](#) report e-cigarette use in the past 30 days.

To break down dating violence statistics, [we conducted a study](#) with a national sample of over 3,000 Canadian youth. We found that, in the past year, 12 percent were physically hurt on purpose by someone they were dating or going out with. Another 18 percent had a dating partner use social media to hurt, embarrass or monitor them. And, 28 percent reported that a dating partner had tried to control them or emotionally hurt them.

Other research from Québec also found that sexual dating violence is a common experience for Canadian youth. [In this study](#), 20 percent of [female participants](#) and seven percent of male participants reported unwanted sexual activity in their current or most recent dating relationship. Stalking by an intimate partner also impacts a [substantial minority](#) of young people. In Canada, approximately two out of every three stalking victims are women, and about half are between the ages of 15–34.

Like many public health problems, dating violence disproportionately affects [youth who are marginalized](#), including trans and non-binary youth, youth living in poverty and racialized youth.

In terms of outcomes, [research conducted by our team](#) found that youth who experience dating violence are significantly more likely to report mental health problems in the future. Dating violence is also a [strong risk factor](#) for domestic violence in adulthood. In the [worst-case scenario](#), dating violence [can lead to homicide](#).

## **The role of policy in prevention**

Early intervention is critical to preventing the negative impacts of dating violence. Yet, [adolescents report](#) significant barriers to receiving support following dating violence.

One key barrier [is that educators](#) and [other significant adults](#) do not generally know their role in responding to dating violence. We believe this is related to limited knowledge about dating violence policy, which is very important in defining and guiding adults' roles when responding.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic continues to show us the critical role policy plays when we are trying to solve public health problems. But, the role of policy in preventing dating violence has been very undervalued.

The policies that might apply to dating violence in each province and territory are not easily navigated. In fact, in our roles as the scientific co-directors of Canada's [healthy relationships hub PREVNet](#), one of the most common questions we are asked by educators is about how they should respond to dating violence. Caregivers and youth themselves also want to know what to do if someone in their life experiences dating violence.

## Dating violence policy map

Our team at PREVNet created an interactive policy map (available in both [French](#) and [English](#)) that gives user-friendly guidance for educators and caregivers as well as young people on dating violence policy in each province and territory. For example, for educators, our map provides a helpful summary of the policies related to supporting youth in their area who experience dating violence.

Our map is an important first step in listing available policy protections for youth who experience dating violence in Canada. But, our work also highlights that while there are a lot of policies for children who experience abuse, and some for adults who experience domestic violence, there is almost no policy that is specific to youth experiencing dating violence.

For example, adolescents are generally not able to access [protection orders](#). There also are no publicly funded supports (such as hotlines) dedicated to adolescents experiencing dating violence in Canada. Existing policy also does not make clear adults' roles in supporting these youth.

This map highlights where we need to go to support youth experiencing dating violence. There is a clear need for the development of youth-centered policy at the federal and provincial levels that specifically

addresses dating violence. This policy must clarify the roles and responsibilities of adults in responding to dating violence. It must also provide developmentally appropriate supports for youth.

Through the development and implementation of such [policy](#), we can support [youth](#)'s rights and well-being.

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