

'Partner abuse is normal' say disadvantaged youth

14 September 2011

The levels of violence girls and boys from disadvantaged backgrounds experience in their partner relationships is revealed in new University of Bristol research published today.

It is the first time there has been an in-depth look at violence in the intimate relationships of disadvantaged teenagers who are not in mainstream education. Some of those who took part had been permanently excluded from school, were young offenders or [teenage mothers](#).

The researchers interviewed 82 boys and girls aged 13-18 for the NSPCC-funded research entitled 'Standing on my own two feet'. The research underlines the need to address the problem being highlighted by the Home Office's teen violence campaign, launched this month.

Although the study does not claim to be representative of the UK population, it suggests levels of violence in teenage relationships may be much higher than previously assumed. More than half of the girls who supplied information in the study said they had been in a sexually violent relationship before they were 18 and over half of the girls reported that they had been a victim of [physical violence](#) in at least one of their [intimate relationships](#). A quarter of boys who responded said they had dated physically aggressive partners.

Today's research found that children from [disadvantaged backgrounds](#) were much more likely to experience abusive partner relationships than their better-off counterparts. The research ran parallel to a landmark study (2009)² on violence in relationships among those in [mainstream education](#).

Many of the young people who participated in the study appeared to accept violence as normal, although unwanted, aspect of being in a relationship. Some suffered black eyes, lost teeth or were head-butted.

Christine Barter, lead author and Senior Research Fellow from the University's School for Policy Studies, said: "Tragically, control and violence seem to be so prevalent in these relationships that girls are unable to recognise its impact - it is an everyday happening. Many girls found it very difficult to see that their partner's behaviour is abusive. The government and those working with young people need to recognise that teenage partner violence is an even more profound child welfare issue for disadvantaged young people. This will help professionals assess the possibility of partner violence and challenge young people's beliefs that this abuse is a normal part of teenage relationships."

Emma, who was interviewed for the study, told researchers how she had been forced into having sex 'quite a few times' when she was 13, "I've never shouted rape or anything. I've never been able to say that I've been raped but it's not like I've given consent. In certain situations it has been pushed on me and it has been really horrible."

Fourteen-year-old Jo said her boyfriend had, "only hit me in the face once. He used to push me down the stairs and stuff though."

Even though half of all those taking part in the research had been assigned a social worker most did not reveal their partner's violence. Many said that welfare professionals were not interested in this aspect of their lives.

Andrew Flanagan, Chief Executive of the NSPCC, said: "It's appalling that [violence](#) in these relationships seems to be just part of daily life.

These findings underline how important it is for children to be educated about abusive behaviour and for them to feel able to seek help to prevent it happening. The NSPCC is making strides to educate children and young people on recognising abuse through our newly launched Schools

Service. This knowledge empowers our youth to take action and get help.

"Only through awareness can we start to reduce abuse which damages so many young lives."

Home Office Minister, Lynne Featherstone, said:
"Although teenage romances can often be short lived, we know that sometimes, they can be just as intense and important as adult relationships. In extreme cases they can also fall foul of the same pitfalls and dangers. That's why it is so important to ensure [young people](#) develop healthy relationships and know where to go for support when things go wrong.

"We need to challenge the attitudes and behaviours that foster an acceptance of abusive relationships by intervening as early as possible. Bringing the issue out in the open will help teenagers feel confident to challenge abusive behaviour when they experience it or see it."

Provided by University of Bristol

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