

TEEN DATING VIOLENCE: NEXT STEPS IN OUR NATIONAL RESPONSE

A Report of the Subcommittee on Teen Dating Violence of the U.S. Department of Justice,
Office on Violence Against Women
National Advisory Committee on Violence Against Women

Executive Summary

The Attorney General's charge to the National Advisory Committee included the issue of teen dating violence:

Federal statistics tell us that young women suffer a disproportionate amount of sexual assault and intimate partner violence. Moreover, young victims face different obstacles when seeking help than do adult victims. How can we best expand our work to address dating violence against teens? In particular, the Committee will consider how to build partnerships among parents, victim advocates and middle and high schools that will enable schools, communities and families to work together in the effort to combat dating violence. The Committee will address what school policies could enhance victim safety and improve school responses; what support services are needed for teen victims and their families; and how to provide appropriate educational programming and mentoring for students to prevent teen dating violence. The Committee will also explore how adolescent development and jargon affect the way dating violence is addressed and understood among teens, in communities, including faith communities, and in schools and how the adolescent perspective on dating violence can be used to better communicate the problem. Consideration will be given to the unique challenges faced by rural communities.

A six-member, cross-disciplinary Subcommittee on Teen Dating Violence was appointed to help the Committee fulfill its charge. Over a two-year period, we conducted a review of national research and literature to examine the scope of teen dating violence; existing research and evidence-based practices that prevent teen dating violence and promote greater victim and public awareness; and promising practices that are collaborative, culturally competent, and relevant to diverse populations of teens and their parents and communities across the United States.

We have concluded that teen dating violence is a major public health and safety concern in the United States. The detrimental social and psychological effects reach far beyond young victims and perpetrators, to their families, their schools and their communities. While many significant efforts today seek to generate greater awareness and prevention of teen dating violence and provide services to victims, more is needed.

Our report included seven important recommendations for further action that will strengthen our Nation's response to teen dating violence. We wish to highlight two of these.

1. It is the opinion of the subcommittee that we need greater involvement of schools and the educational system in our drive to address teen dating violence.

Schools are a key stakeholder in this issue. State Departments of Education, local Boards of Education and school administrators can promote awareness and prevention of teen dating violence through the development of strong policies that address the issue within the context of schools, and the integration of the topic into standardized curricula. Teachers are on the front line of both identifying incidents of such violence, and incorporating the topic into curricula such as civics, health, history, physical education and the arts. Other school staff, including nurses and other health professionals, counselors, coaches, law enforcement, and staff and volunteers who facilitate after-school programs and mediation programs – can educate themselves about teen dating violence and incorporate aspects of awareness and prevention into their ongoing programs. And Parent/Teacher/Student associations can partner on strategies to educate parents and families about teen dating violence, and engage parents in prevention and responses.

Excellent models exist in a few states and some local jurisdictions, but this information is not widely available. Schools should be encouraged to standardize their approach to teen dating violence using evidence-based practice. The Department of Education must embrace this issue as part of its complete response to safe schools.

2. It is the opinion of the subcommittee, that as the needs of teen victims become clear, lack of confidentiality is recognized as a barrier to services. One complex issue that can keep teens from seeking help is the issue of mandatory reporting.

All states have laws that mandate certain reporting of crimes against children. Some of these laws require any person with knowledge of the victimization of a minor to report to child protective services or law enforcement. The issue of mandated reporting, however, becomes problematic in cases of teen dating violence. While mandatory reporting laws are intended to increase victims' safety, in this context they may operate as a barrier to services. The teen years are a time of growing independence and autonomy. Teen victims may hesitate to disclose abuse if they believe the abuse may be reported to the police or child protective services against their will—not only due to loss of independence and control, but often due to fear of reprisal from the offender or even the victim's parent or guardian. Furthermore, the system intended to respond to such reports and child protective services is often ill equipped to act in cases of non-family offenses against teens. A national dialogue is needed on the issue of mandated reporting in the context of teen dating violence to ensure that such laws do not restrict a victim's ability to seek help. Such dialogue should consider the need to support teen victims' autonomy wherever possible and to consider safety planning whenever a report is made. A national summit must be held to discuss the workability of adjusting mandatory reporting schemes to meet the safety AND confidentiality needs of adolescent victims.

The issue of teen dating violence is widely recognized as a serious problem by potential community partners. Many of those partners, however, are unclear about their next steps. Because of the existing level of interest and awareness, any effort to increase access to resources and identify best practices will have a significant effect in our national effort to end teen dating violence.

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