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Reports

Before It's Too Late: Adolescent Relationship Abuse In New York City

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Violence and Youth

Although public awareness of domestic violence as a serious social problem has increased dramatically in the last twenty-five years, there is still a common misperception that domestic violence occurs only in the adult population. Yet recent studies have revealed that an alarming number of young people are victimized by violence in dating relationships.

Scope of the Problem

The full scope of the problem of intimate partner violence in youth relationships is just beginning to receive adequate attention. In 2001, the Harvard School of Public Health completed the most comprehensive study to date on dating violence among adolescents. The study, published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, reports that one in five teenage girls are physically or sexually assaulted by a dating partner. That number jumps to one in three when verbal and emotional abuse is included. Another critical report by the U.S. Department of Justice found that women between the ages of 16 and 24 are nearly three times more vulnerable to intimate partner violence than women in other age groups.

A 2001 special report prepared by the Bureau of Justice provides statistics on the relationship between domestic violence and the age of victims. The Bureau's report reveals that young women are abused at a higher rate than middle-aged and older women. Women ages 16 to 24 are victims of intimate partner violence at a rate of nearly 16 per 1,000. Comparatively, the rate of domestic violence among 25 to 34 year old women is 9.4 per 1,000, and 6 per 1,000 for women ages 34 to 49. The report also indicates that younger women are less likely to report their abuse to the police. Only 30 percent of 12- to-15-year-old victims, 46 percent of 16-to-19-year-old victims, and 53 percent of 20-to-24-year-old victims reported their abuse to police.

Distinctive Effects of Dating Violence on Adolescents

The negative impact of relationship abuse is compounded by the circumstances of adolescent development. Adolescence is the time in life when individuals develop a sense of self-identity and independence from parents and caregivers. Teenagers must also cope with physical changes in their bodies and substantial peer group and other social pressures. Teen

gender roles are often defined in extreme and stereotypical ways, the male overly dominant and the woman overly passive.

In addition, many teens lack experience with intimate relationships, making it difficult to handle conflicts that arise and realize the seriousness of abuse.

In addition to the direct emotional and physical consequences of abuse, studies have uncovered a broad array of associated health risks specific to adolescents. Destructive influences during this time can shape the way a person functions later in life. According to the study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, female adolescents who experience physical dating violence experience a higher incidence of substance abuse, eating disorders, high-risk sexual behavior, pregnancy, and suicide.

Moreover, it is likely that a teenager involved in an abusive relationship will repeat that pattern of violence in relationships throughout their lives. The struggle to develop a sense of identity can also cause teen victims to rely on abusive partners to help define themselves.

Adolescent Relationship Abuse Education

A 1993 report by the Family Violence Task Force (established by the offices of then-Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger and then-City Council Member Ronnie Eldridge) found that while schools were required to report signs of child abuse, they did not provide teachers with enough training on adolescent relationship abuse. The report recommended that schools provide additional training for teachers as well as students on teen dating violence. Currently, high school health curricula do not offer chapters specifically on dating violence, although teachers and other staff do have protocols on how to spot and report abuse.

In 1999, the Mayor's Office to Combat Domestic Violence and the City's Human Resources Administration partnered with domestic violence organizations to create a model teen relationship abuse education program in New York City public high schools. New York City Adopt-A-School/Relationship Abuse Prevention Program (RAPP) is a comprehensive, school-based teen relationship abuse program that promotes healthy relationships, intervenes in the cycle of teen intimate partner violence, and prevents destructive patterns of relationship abuse from extending into adult relationships.

RAPP pairs 20 high schools in the five boroughs with local domestic violence organizations. Implemented jointly by the schools and the domestic violence service providers, the program provides students with effective teen relationship abuse prevention and intervention services with an additional focus on professional development, community outreach, and parent development, all while responding to the needs of the individual schools. During the 2002-2003 school year, over 22,000 students attended more than 1,000 RAPP classes. An average of 580 students participated in individual or group counseling each month. The program fully integrates its services with the school community while ensuring a "zero-tolerance" approach to abuse in all of its forms.

Findings

The City does not adequately refer adolescent victims of domestic violence to legal and support services.

There is no specific DOE curriculum on relationship abuse. Only 20 out of over 440 high schools participate in the Adopt-A-School program, which is a school-based teen relationship abuse program that promotes healthy relationships.

Although no comprehensive studies of dating violence among adolescents in New York City have been undertaken, indicators specific to this City verify that nation-wide statistics regarding the incidence of teen relationship abuse parallel that of New York City. Unfortunately no comprehensive studies of dating violence among adolescents in New York City have been undertaken, indicating a critical deficiency in the focus of the City's domestic violence services; however, the New York City Department of Health reports that 10% of identified domestic violence victims treated at New York City public hospitals are under the age of 20, and that 7% of the known abusers of domestic violence victims treated at New York City public hospitals are under the age of 20. Teenagers comprise approximately 8% of the total number of females killed in intimate partner homicides in New York City. In addition, calls to the City's Domestic Violence Hotline from teenagers have increased over 70% since 1998, currently totaling more than 10,500 calls a year.

There are few legal and social services organizations in New York City that serve the distinctive needs of teenage victims of intimate partner abuse. Teen relationship abuse is often characterized by the same patterns of power and control that occur in adult abusive relationships. Teen abuse is significantly different, however, because there are fewer options available for teens seeking help and because of the particular developmental consequences of abuse for adolescents. Even if a teenager is able to realize that she is suffering from abuse and needs help, there are few places for her to turn. There are many legal service organizations assisting domestic violence victims in New York City, but few of these organizations specifically focus on serving adolescents or have expertise in dealing with adolescent issues.

Recommendations

The Department of Education must ensure that all New York City public high schools institute an education program on relationship abuse. DOE must expand education on relationship abuse, specifically the Adopt-A-School Program, to all New York City high schools and intermediate schools and connect students to community-based organizations that can provide legal and support services.

Integrate education on dating violence into the health education curriculum for boys and girls in both intermediate and high school. The Adopt-A-School program is an important proactive approach to end the cycle of violence in many children's lives. A similar program needs to be implemented even earlier than the high school level.

The Department of Education and all New York City hospitals should post highly visible signs listing the DV hotline number in high schools and hospital emergency rooms. Because this population is underserved and largely alienated from domestic violence service providers, this is an extremely important outreach method. The Teen Relationship Abuse Education Public Education Campaign in 1997 resulted in a 50 percent

increase in calls to the DV hotline by teens, demonstrating the likely success of this similar initiative in achieving that goal.

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