

# Dating violence in Denmark

A survey of the prevalence, nature and impact of violence  
among adolescents and the developments 2007-2011



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## Preface

In 2007 the National Institute of Public Health carried out a survey on dating violence against adolescents in Denmark for the Minister for Gender Equality. The results were reported in 2008 and have brought about specific initiatives aiming to prevent violence in dating relationships.

As part of the national actions to combat violence in dating relationships, the institute has on behalf of the Minister for Gender Equality and Ecclesiastical Affairs monitored the developments in partner violence in Denmark, including dating violence among adolescents. The present report is based on a questionnaire survey among 16-24-year-olds, conducted in 2011 and on focus group interviews with adolescents in 2012.

The survey was designed to assess the development in various forms of dating violence and to describe adolescents' attitudes to dating relationships and violence within these in comparison to the 2007 study.

The study was prepared by senior researcher, MD, MPH Karin Helweg-Larsen in collaboration with sociologist Rikke Plauborg. Communication consultant Hanne Møller contributed to the study design and completion of the web-based questionnaire survey. Anthropologist Katrine Bindsbøl Holm Johansen and Rikke Plauborg carried out the focus group interviews. The report was written and edited in collaboration between Rikke Plauborg, Katrine Bindsbøl Holm Johansen and Karin Helweg-Larsen.

We would like to thank the Minister for Gender Equality and Ecclesiastical Affairs for financing the study.

The English summary presents the main results. The full report is available in Danish on

[www.si-folkesundhed.dk](http://www.si-folkesundhed.dk)

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# 1. Background and purpose

In recent years, there has been an increasing attention on adolescents' risk of being exposed to physical violence and sexual assault in their early dating relationships. In Denmark, until 4-5 years ago no concrete knowledge of the extent and impact of dating violence were available. This was the reason for conducting a questionnaire survey among 16-24-year-olds in 2007 that focused on the adolescents' own experiences of dating violence and their attitudes towards acceptable and not acceptable behaviour in a dating relationship. The survey revealed that even in early dating relationships physical violence frequently occurs and adolescents are fairly often exposed to sexual abuse and physical assault in form of harassment by a present or former dating partner and that it influences the adolescents' well-being.

International studies have previously described a significant prevalence of violence in adolescents' early dating relationships. In the US, a questionnaire survey, Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), is conducted every two years among a representative sample of students in grades 9-12 and it is reported that approximately 10% of the adolescents have experienced physical dating violence, with considerable gender differences and differences between the federal states.

In Norway, a survey on partner violence among 20-year-olds was conducted in 1999, which demonstrated that more young men (6%) than women (4%) had been exposed to physical violence from a dating partner and that more young women (6%) than men (2%) self-reported having committed partner violence.

The Danish dating violence survey in 2007 found, however, that young women are more often than young men exposed to physical, psychological and/or sexual assault in a dating relationship, totally 12% of women and 5% of men. There were also considerable gender differences in the associations between violence exposure and mental problems in the everyday lives of the adolescents, meaning that there was especially poor well-being among young women exposed to dating violence.

The Dating Violence Survey in 2007 has contributed to efforts targeted at children and adolescents in Denmark to prevent and stop dating violence. The website [www.ditforhold.dk](http://www.ditforhold.dk) was established in 2009 by the Ministry's Department of Gender Equality in collaboration with the Danish Crime Prevention Council and the National Organisation of Shelters for Battered Women and their Children. On the basis of examples, the website aims to inform adolescents of the possibilities of counselling and support to end a violent relationship. Experiences from a panel of adolescents based on the results of the Dating Violence Survey in 2007 were included here.

At the beginning of 2011, the Department of Gender Equality asked the National Institute of Public Health to carry out a follow-up study on the previous Dating Violence Survey among adolescents. The purpose of the present has been to examine the current prevalence, nature and development in violence among adolescents with special focus on dating violence, as well as a description of family-related factors, including so-called family control in relation to adolescent dating

relationships, that is, whether the adolescents are allowed to have a dating relationship by their parents and whether they are expected to postpone sexual activity until they are married.

The purpose of the focus group interviews has been to clarify what forms the adolescents' attitudes towards and perceptions of dating violence, their reactions to dating violence and ideas for preventing violence between dating partners.

The overall purpose of the study has, thus, been to create knowledge as a basis for continued preventive initiatives against violence in dating relationships. In a more long-term perspective, interventions towards dating violence in adolescence can help reduce the risk of violence in close relationships in adulthood.

## 2. Summary

The study consist of a questionnaire survey among a nationally representative sample of 16-24-year-olds in Denmark and focus group interviews with 24 young people aged 16-30 years and it is thus based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative data.

### 2.1 The quantitative survey

In spring 2011, a total of 2.780 adolescents aged 16-24 years participated in a web-based questionnaire survey, 'Ungdom in 2011' (Youth in 2011), which included questions on their well-being, dating relationships, everyday conflicts and family situation, and their attitudes towards violence perpetration. It thereby examined the extent and nature of exposure to and perpetration of dating violence and other kind of violence. The survey is a follow -up on a similar questionnaire survey in 2007, which makes it possible to describe development in dating violence and other kinds of violence among adolescents in the past five years in Denmark.

The main results of the questionnaire survey are:

#### General exposure to violence

- There are generally significant gender differences in adolescents' exposure to violence.
- Within the past year 23% of the young women and 38% of the young men have been exposed to physical, psychological and/or sexual violence from one or more perpetrators, such as a dating partner, friend, family member, colleague, stranger or other person.
- Young men are more often than women exposed to threats of violence and different kinds of physical violence.
- Young women are more often than men exposed to sexual violence/assault.
- Young men are more frequently exposed to violence by a stranger, the women more frequently from a friend/family member/colleague.

#### Dating violence

- Young women are more often than men exposed to dating violence.
- Within the past year 6.5% of the women against 3.7% of the men have been exposed to physical, psychological and/or sexual violence from a present or former dating partner.
- Young women have nearly twice as often as young men been exposed to physical dating violence in the last year, 3.2% and 1.7%, respectively.
- It is estimated that approx. 10.000 women and approx. 5.500 men between 16-24 years are annually exposed to physical dating violence in Denmark.
- 2.5% of the young women against 1.5% of the young men reported exposure to threats of violence, harassment or other psychological violence in the last year.
- Young women twice as often as men report sexual assault, 2.7% against 1.2%.
- When the proportion exposed to physical, psychological and/or sexual dating violence is described on the basis of the adolescents who have or have had a dating partner, 7.4% of young women and 4.8% of young men have been exposed to one or more kinds of dating violence in the last year.

- Among young women, there is a tendency towards a greater prevalence of dating violence in short-term dating relationships.
- Physical dating violence has in less than half of the cases resulted in physical injury.
- There is an association between a number of psychological problems related to well-being, such as sadness and sleeping problems and exposure to dating violence and other kinds of violence, especially among young women.
- There is a tendency towards a correlation between suicide attempt, other types of self-inflicted harm and exposure to dating violence.
- There is no correlation between the adolescents' age, their ethnicity and exposure to dating violence.
- Risk factors for exposure to physical dating violence are:
  - Early sexual debut, that is, young age at first intercourse.
  - Sexual orientation, a tendency towards greater frequency among homosexual women.
  - Witnessing violence against mother in childhood home.
  - Threats of violence or exposure to physical violence by parents in childhood and adolescence.
  - Adolescent's own alcohol abuse.
  - Substance abuse among the adolescents.

### **Developments in violence 2007-2011**

- The proportion of young women and men who have been exposed to psychological, physical and/or sexual violence within a year has decreased from 2007 to 2011. This is the case for both dating violence and violence committed by another person than a present or former dating partner.
- Overall exposure to physical violence, regardless of the relationship to the perpetrator, has decreased from nearly 15% in 2007 to 11% in 2011 among young women and from 35% in 2007 to 25% among young men.
- In 2007, 10.2% of young women and 4.3% of young men reported one or more kinds of dating violence, against 6.5% of women and 3.7% of men in 2011.
- The proportion exposed to physical dating violence has decreased among young women from 4.7% in 2007 to 3.2% in 2011, but has increased slightly among young men from 1.6% to 1.7%.

### **Adolescents' own attitudes to violence**

- The great majority, nearly 100 % of young women do not find it acceptable to use physical violence against children, men or women – and not in a dating relationship either.
- Up to 20% of the young men find it acceptable or are undecided as to whether it is acceptable to use violence to defend one-self when one is being provoked or to defend the family's honour.
- There are significant differences between young men with a Danish ethnic origin and other than Danish ethnic origin with regards to attitudes to using violence, for instance if a dating partner is being unfaithful, or to protect the family's honour. Larger proportions of men with a minority ethnic origin find it acceptable or are undecided about using physical violence in certain situations.
- Young women most often report having used physical violence against a dating partner, young men most often against a stranger.
- 1.4% of young women and 0.4% of men have been perpetrators of physical dating violence.
- Just as experiencing violence in the childhood home is significantly associated with a later risk of violence exposure it is also a risk factor for adolescents being perpetrators of violence themselves.

### **Family attitude to adolescents' dating relationships**

- Nearly 2/3 of young women with an ethnic origin other than Danish experience that their parents want them to remain sexually abstinent before marriage – whereas that is only the case for 3% of ethnic Danish women.
- Young women and men with a Danish ethnic origin experience no restrictions from parents towards dating relationships, whereas that is the case for nearly one in four adolescents of another ethnic origin than Danish.

## 2.2 The qualitative survey

The qualitative part of the study is based on four gender-segregated focus group interviews with 14 girls and 10 boys in an upper-secondary school and a vocational school, respectively, in the capital area. The majority of the adolescents were aged between 17-19 years, but with an age span from 16 to 30 years. In the focus group interviews, the adolescents were asked about their perception of a good and a bad dating relationship, their attitudes towards and perception of the concept of dating violence, their own experiences of excessive and violent behaviour by a dating partner and their reactions if they witness violence between dating partners. Furthermore, they were asked about their ideas to prevent dating violence and best support adolescents exposed to violence by a dating partner.

### Adolescents' delimitation of a dating relationship

Adolescents delimit a dating relationship as a particular intimate relationship, which fundamentally differs from other social relationships the adolescents are part of, by being based on a sexual attraction. This makes the relationship both fragile and particular compared to for instance a friendship. For the adolescents, a good dating partner is characterised by someone who accepts and respects you for who you are and, at the same time, leaves room for you to be with other people other than your dating partner. A bad dating relationship is characterised by jealousy, unfaithfulness and controlling behaviour.

### Adolescents' perception and attitude towards dating violence

During adolescence the youth still have limited dating experience and a dating relationship therefore poses new demands on the adolescents' ability to relate to the needs of another person. Generally, the adolescents' attitudes towards dating violence and their articulations hereof are characterised by stereotypical gender perceptions, associated with for instance the difference in physical strength between women and men. Thus, often the young women are being described as the primary victims and boys as primary perpetrators. However, this account is shaded in the focus groups discussions among the youth, which demonstrates their ambivalence towards the problem area. .

There are four recurrent factors that influence the adolescents' perception of when an act can be defined as dating violence. The factors are *the action's effect, the intention behind the action, the frequency of the action and the situational context*. Furthermore, the adolescents have a tendency to distinguish between *unacceptable* violence and *acceptable* violence, where the latter is described by some as "an understandable slap".

The acceptable violence differs from the unacceptable violence by positing a certain conflict situation - as for instance unfaithfulness to be acceptable. Furthermore, the acceptance is generally tied to the gender of the perpetrator, as it was primary the young women for whom the youth found this behaviour acceptable. Thus, the adolescents express culturally determined perceptions of dating violence, which do not by definition perceive all actions of violence in a dating relationship as improper or unacceptable.

Sexual violence differs from the adolescents' perception of both physical and psychological violence, as it takes place in the intimate sphere that makes the dating relationship particular.

In the youths' opinion, sexual violence primarily includes forcing a dating partner to have sex. The youths' inexperience with sexual relations may create an uncertainty about boundaries and sexual expectations; this in turn may lead to negotiations about sex in intimate situations and makes it difficult for the youth to distinguish when negotiation leads to abuse.

### **The adolescents' own experiences of exposure to dating violence**

Totally, 6 of the 14 young women in the focus group say that they have experienced excessive behaviour from a dating partner, most frequently in the form of a slap in the face and/or controlling behaviour. Four of the young men say that they have once or several times been slapped in the face by a dating partner and two have experiences with a controlling dating partner.

In contrast with the young women, none of the young men describe their experiences as excessive behaviour and they therefore do not see themselves as exposed to dating violence. Moreover, only the young women think that the violence has had negative consequences for them, such as greater distrust in future dating partners.

One of the main reasons that dating violence frequently remains secret is that the violence is normalised and that adolescents with little dating experience may find it difficult to know if the behaviour is part of a normal dating relationship. The adolescents point out that especially violence against young men is tabooed.

### **Reactions to witnessing dating violence**

The adolescents' attitudes towards witnessing and reacting to violence between dating partners are marked by ambivalence. Generally their interference if witnessing dating violence would depend on their relationship with the parties involved. The vast majority of the adolescents would intervene if they witnessed a young woman being exposed to dating violence and the majority if they knew the girl.

### **Prevention of dating violence**

The adolescents recommend instructions in school on how to tell a good dating relationship from a bad one. This they youth find would help young people in bad relationships to seek counselling and help earlier.

## **2.3 Summary of the quantitative and qualitative results**

The results gained the quantitative and qualitative part of the study support each other. The following section compares selected results from the two partial studies, where the focus group interviews can underpin the results of the questionnaire survey. The quantitative data, based on nearly 3,000 adolescents' answers, describe how dating violence often occurs in a cross-section of Danish 16-24-year-olds, its average nature and possible impacts, factors of general significance for the prevalence of dating violence and the general attitudes towards violence prevailing among youths.

In contrast, the qualitative study based on focus interviews with adolescents illustrates how dating violence is articulated among young women and men and how gender affects their attitudes and perceptions of violent actions in dating relationships.

Selected results from the two partial surveys have been compared. Among 16-24-year-olds, nearly twice as many women as men reported having been exposed to one or more kinds of dating violence. The most frequent kind of violence was physical violence. Correspondingly, the qualitative study shows that the young women had more experiences with dating violence than the young men. Moreover, it also shows that the youth in general tend to perceive the same actions as violence when committed against a woman but not when committed against a man. A tendency that reflects the gendered nature of the youths' perceptions and the influence the unequal physical power balance between men and women has on their positions.

None of the young men in the focus groups indicated that a slap in the face was an act of violence when committed by a female dating partner. Nor did the young men experience controlling behaviour and conduct from their dating partner as offending, rather they found it as an incitement to end the relationship.

When young women to a far greater extent than young men in the questionnaire survey report exposure to violence by a partner, one of the reasons may be that young men generally do not perceive actions (as for instance slapping) as violence in the same way as young women do. Importantly, as mentioned in the focus group interviews, the violent actions rarely have the same fear creating effect on young men as on young women due to the unequal physical power balance between men and women.. The young men interpret women's physical acts of violence as a kind of conflict management and a sort of punishment for having behaved 'improperly', but not as an expression of control.

### **Adolescents' own use of physical dating violence**

The focus group interviews support a general idea that men's violence against women to a greater extent than women's violence against men is perceived as unacceptable. That may imply that men have more barriers towards reporting having been violent against a woman, that is, it is more tabooed for men to report having committed violence against a woman than the other way round.

Among those more than 1,500 women and 1,200 men who participated in the questionnaire survey, only relatively few, 22 women (1%) and five men (<1%), stated that they themselves had been physically violent against a dating partner in the last year.

The majority of the adolescents, that is, more than 90%, stated in the questionnaire survey that they were against the use of violence against a dating partner. But 9% of the men and 8% of the women found that in the event of unfaithfulness it was acceptable for a man to slap his dating partner or they were in doubt if it was acceptable and a larger proportion, 12% of the young women and 15% of the men, had this attitude in relation to a women slapping a dating partner in the event of unfaithfulness.

In the focus group interviews, the young women indicated that slapping a dating partner in the face could be justified in a conflict situation where the dating partner had behaved unacceptably by for instance being unfaithful, that is, as a well-deserved punishment. Among the young men there was a similar attitude towards violent reactions from a young woman towards a male dating partner, but not the other way around.

### **Sexual assault, forcing a dating partner to have sex**

A larger proportion of 16-24-year-old young men than the young women indicated in the questionnaire survey that it may be acceptable to force one's dating partner to have sex if one wants to, but the vast majority did not find it acceptable.

In the focus group interviews, most of the adolescents also indicated that it is wrong to force a dating partner to have sex, but that pressure could, however, be acceptable between equal dating partners, that is, when they have the same sexual experience and/or age.

The adolescents expressed the opinion that young men have a stronger sexual drive than young women. They are assumed to always want to have sex and therefore cannot be perceived as victims of sexual assault. In the opinion of the adolescents, that justifies that a man forces his dating partner to have sex.

### **3. Recommendations to prevent violence among adolescents**

There is still a need for an intervention towards violence in adolescent dating relationships. On the basis of the study general results, it is, firstly, suggested to increase the awareness of the problem among adolescents and, secondly, to make support and counselling available to adolescents exposed to dating violence.

The following initiatives are recommended by the adolescents:

- The problem of dating violence as part of the compulsory sex education at primary, lower and upper secondary school levels.
- Recurrent and national school campaigns, for instance in connection with a campaign such as The Danish Family Planning Association's "Week 6".
- The dating violence theme should be included in the curriculum for both teachers and pre-school teachers.
- Information should be given to teachers in primary, lower and upper secondary schools as well as in day care settings on existing possibilities of support for adolescents exposed to dating violence.
- Information material to parents should be distributed through the adolescent's educational institution.

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## **Dating violence in Denmark**

The report examines, on the basis of a questionnaire survey in 2011, the prevalence and nature of physical, psychological and sexual violence in adolescent dating relationships and the general exposure to violence. The survey is a follow-up on a similar survey conducted by the Institute in 2007.

Young women are more often than young men exposed to dating violence, but men are more often exposed to physical violence outside of dating relationships.

The frequency of physical dating violence has decreased among young women, but increased slightly among young men.

The results of the questionnaire survey are elaborated through focus group interviews among adolescents in the educational system and indicate which possibilities there are of preventing violence in adolescent relationships.