

Relationship Violence Among Young Adult Couples

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Overview. *The prevalence of violence in romantic relationships is difficult to measure. In part, this reflects the fact that men and women who experience violence in their relationships may be reluctant to report these acts because they want to protect a partner; they may assume that nothing can be done to prevent future violent acts; and they may fear retaliation.⁶ Moreover, most surveys of relationship violence provide a limited picture of the scope of the problem because they only gather information on the most severe types of violence or they rely solely on the report of one partner—typically the woman.⁵*

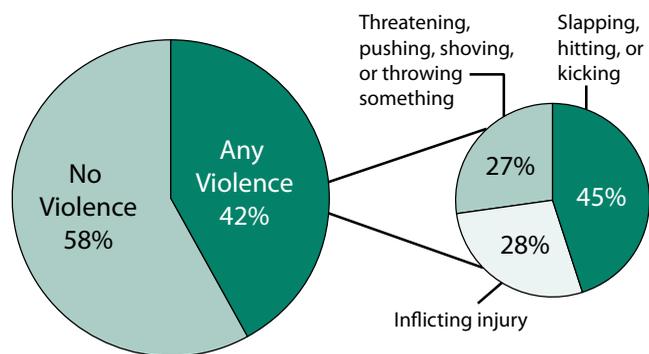
This brief extends previous work by using national data to examine relationship violence among young adults, as reported by both partners in a relationship. Child Trends drew on data collected from young adult couples (ages 18-28) in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) to examine past-year relationship violence as reported by both partners in each relationship. Specifically, we estimated the frequency and severity of relationship violence across all couples, as well as levels of relationship violence among married, cohabiting, and dating couples.

We found that four in 10 young adult couples in our sample reported some type of relationship violence and that certain relationship characteristics were linked to higher or lower levels of violence. For example, cohabiting couples reported the highest levels of relationship violence (in contrast to married and dating couples), and relationship violence tended to be higher among couples with lower levels of education, couples with children in the household, and couples in which partners differ by race or ethnicity. These findings may help to identify couples at particular risk for relationship violence and its subsequent negative outcomes, including sexual risk behaviors, sexually transmitted diseases, and unintended pregnancies.⁷

INTRODUCTION

Recent estimates from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that nearly five million women and more than five million men in the United States experience some type of violence at the hands of their partners each year.¹ Relationship violence is associated with a host of negative physical and mental health outcomes for men and women, ranging from gastrointestinal problems, migraines, anxiety, and depression, to posttraumatic stress disorder and suicidal thoughts and behavior.^{18,21} Further, relationship violence is linked with sexual risk-taking, unintended pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs),⁷ as well as with poor maternal and child health outcomes.² Thus, learning more about relationship violence and identifying those most at risk can be important steps in trying to better understand the problem and to develop policies and programs to address it.

Figure 1
Percent of couples who report relationship violence in the previous year, and the most severe type of violence reported



ABOUT THE DATA SOURCE FOR THIS BRIEF

The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) is a nationally representative survey of U.S. students who were in the seventh through 12th grades in 1994-1995. The third round of the survey (Wave III) interviewed participants again in 2001-2002, when they were between the ages of 18 and 28. This *Research Brief* used data from the Romantic Pairs subsample (“couples sample”) of the Wave III survey, which provides individual and relationship information on 1,507 randomly selected respondents and their partners, who were interviewed separately.

To be included in this subsample, both the respondent and the partner had to be at least 18 years old and in a current, heterosexual relationship that was at least three months in length. The sample was designed to consist of approximately 500 married, 500 cohabiting, and 500 dating couples, resulting in a weighted sample of 24 percent married couples, 24 percent cohabiting couples, and 52 percent dating couples. The analytic sample was restricted to the 1,317 couples with valid weights, and all analyses were weighted to represent the 8,206 couples eligible to be included in the subsample. The main limitations of this study are that the couples data: 1) were collected 11 years ago and thus may not accurately reflect current levels of violence in young adult relationships; 2) only include heterosexual couples; 3) only include couples who were still in relationships at the time of the interview and thus may underestimate the prevalence of relationship violence for those who broke up as a result of violence; and 4) exclude dating couples who were in shorter dating relationships (less than three months) and thus are biased towards couples in longer-term relationships. However, these limitations are offset by the rich and varied measures of relationship violence collected from both partners.

In this brief, “relationship violence” is defined as any of the following behaviors perpetrated or experienced by either partner in the previous year: threats of violence, pushing, shoving, or throwing something that could inflict harm; slapping, hitting, or kicking; or inflicting an injury, such as a sprain, bruise, or cut. Respondents were asked how often they or their partners had done any of the latter in the previous year; those who reported that these behaviors occurred one or more times were considered to have perpetrated or experienced that behavior. Differences presented in this brief are statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level.

PATTERNS OF PHYSICAL VIOLENCE AMONG YOUNG ADULT COUPLES

Four in 10 couples report some type of relationship violence. In 42 percent of young adult couples in our study sample, one or both partners reported either perpetrating or experiencing some type of relationship violence – such as threatening, hitting, or inflicting injury – in the previous year (see Figure 1). This finding is higher than other national estimates,^{9, 15} which is likely attributable in part to the fact that reports from both partners were used, including reports of both experiencing and perpetrating violence, and that our sample included longer-term and on-going relationships.

- Slightly more than one-quarter (27 percent) reported that the most severe type of violence they had experienced involved pushing, shoving, throwing something that could inflict harm, or threatening to carry out a violent act.

- Nearly one-half (45 percent) reported that the most severe type of violence they experienced was slapping, hitting, or kicking.

- More than one-quarter (28 percent) reported that the most severe type of violence they had experienced resulted in an injury, such as a sprain, bruise, or cut to themselves and/or their partner.

Couples often report multiple types and episodes of relationship violence.

- Most of the couples who reported more severe types of physical violence (such as violence that resulted in injury) reported less severe types of violence as well. For example, nearly all (87 percent) reported pushing, shoving, throwing something that could inflict harm, or threatening to carry out a violent act (analyses not shown).

- Regardless of violence type, two-thirds of couples who reported relationship violence noted *multiple occurrences* of violence in the previous year; only one-third reported a single act of violence (analyses not shown).

In many cases, only one partner (often the female) reports violence in the relationship.

In 39 percent of couples, one or both partners reported that the man experienced violence; in 27 percent of couples, one or both partners reported that the woman experienced violence. In both cases, relationship violence was most often reported by only one partner—typically the female (see Figure 2). These findings match other national statistics¹ and may reflect gender biases in ways relationship violence data are reported, collected, and measured in national surveys.^{5,18}

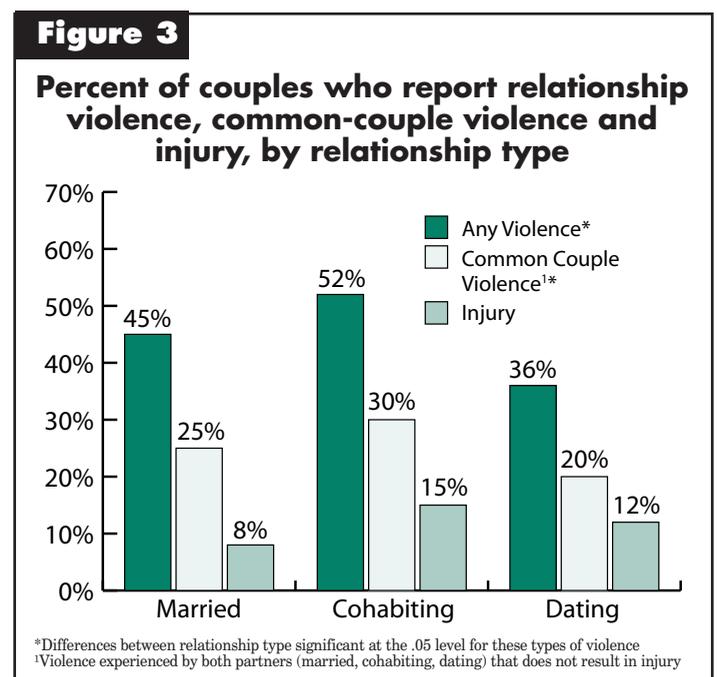
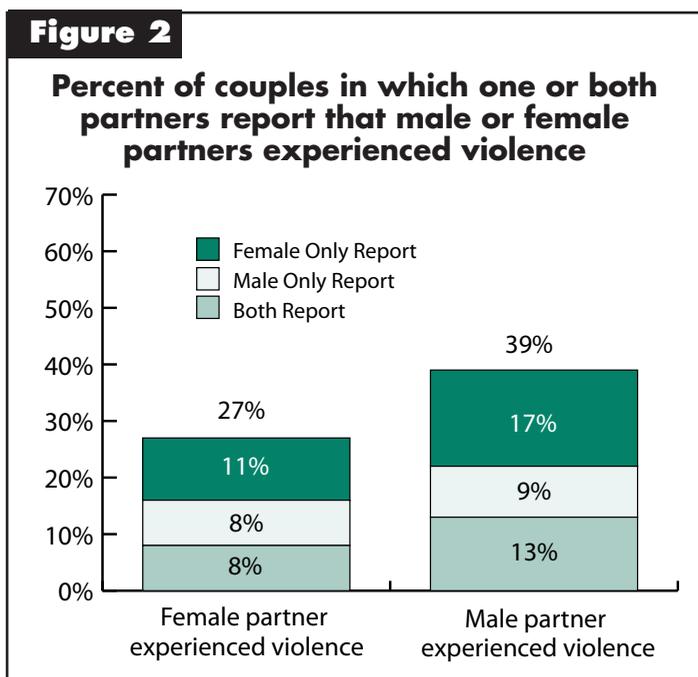
- Among couples in which one or both partners reported that the man experienced violence, only one-third (13 percent of the 39 percent) of reports came from both partners.
- Similarly, among couples in which one or both partners reported that the woman experienced violence, just under one-third (eight percent of the 27 percent) of reports came from both partners.
- In general, women were *more* likely to report that they had been violent toward their male partner (17 and 13 percent, for a total of 30 percent), than they were to report that their partner had been violent toward them (11 and eight percent, for a total of 19 percent). In

contrast, men were less likely to report that they had been violent toward their female partner (eight and eight percent, for a total of 16 percent) than they were to report that their partner had been violent toward them (nine and 13 percent, for a total of more than 22 percent).

RISK OF VIOLENCE BY RELATIONSHIP TYPE AND CHARACTERISTICS

Not all couples in the sample were the same: some were married, some were cohabiting, and some were dating. Relationship characteristics linked to relationship violence—including the length of the relationship, partners’ educational attainment, the presence of children in the household, and partners’ racial and ethnic background—often vary by relationship type. Additionally, the associations between relationship characteristics and relationship violence are likely to differ for married, cohabiting, and dating couples. Therefore, we examined how these differences played out in the lives of the three types of couples.

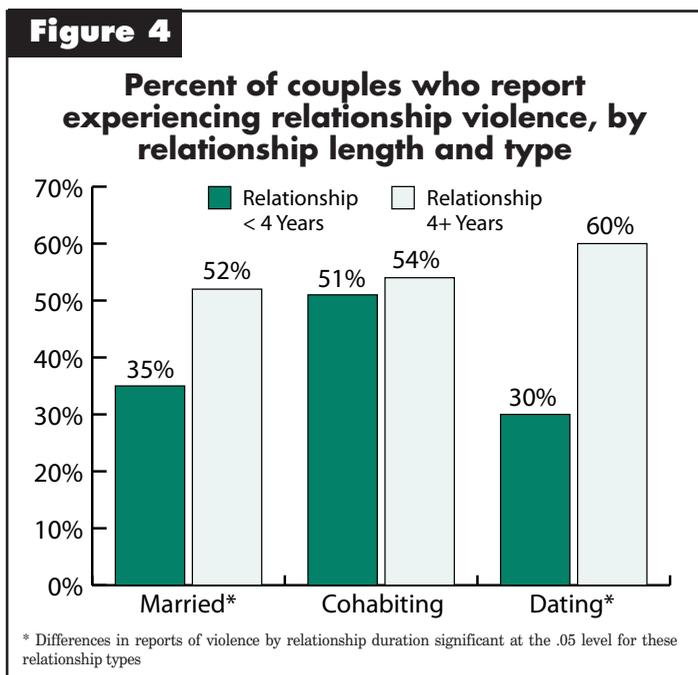
Cohabiting couples report the highest levels of relationship violence, and dating couples report the lowest. Although 42 percent of all couples in our study sample reported some type of relationship violence in the previous year, variations existed by relationship type. Among these young couples, married and cohabiting couples were both more likely to report violence than were dating couples: 45 percent of married couples and 52 percent of cohabiting couples reported violence, compared



with 36 percent of dating couples (see Figure 3). Overall, 24 percent of the couples reported “common couple violence”—that is, violence experienced by both partners that does not result in injury.¹³ Cohabiting couples were also more likely than were dating couples to report common couple violence (30 percent of cohabiting couples, compared with 20 percent of dating couples and 25 percent of married couples). Reports of injury from relationship violence were similar across relationship type (ranging from eight to 15 percent).

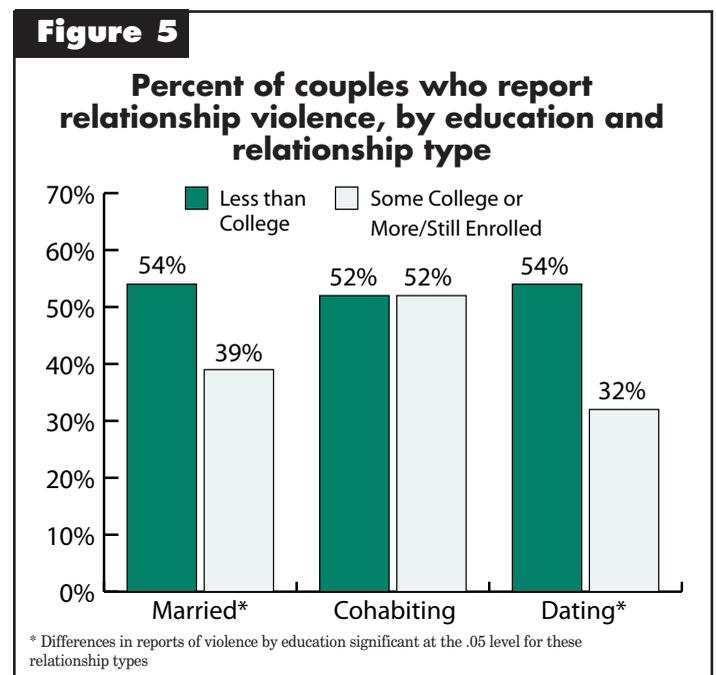
For married and dating couples, the longer a relationship lasts, the more likely it is that relationship violence in the previous year will be reported. Nearly six in 10 (57 percent) married couples in our study sample had been together for more than four years, compared with only one in four (24 percent, each) cohabiting and dating couples (analyses not shown). Figure 4 shows that:

- Five in 10 (52 percent) married couples and six in 10 (60 percent) dating couples who had been together for four or more years reported past-year relationship violence, compared with about three in 10 married and dating couples (35 percent and 30 percent, respectively) who had been together less than four years.
- Relationship length was not associated with relationship violence among cohabiting couples: more than one-half of cohabiting couples reported violence in their relationship regardless of their relationship length.

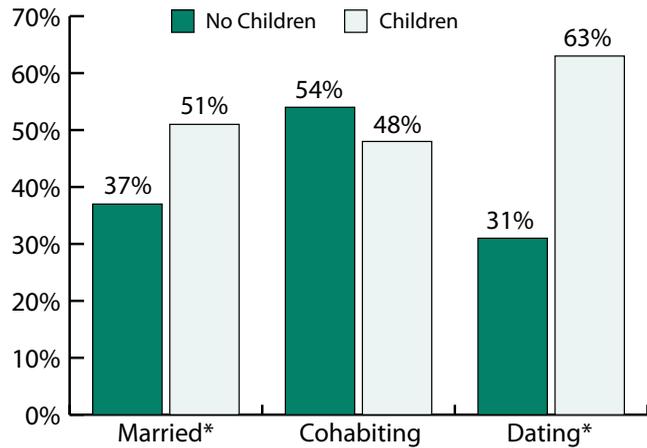


Increased educational attainment is associated with fewer reports of violence for both married and dating couples. Eight in 10 (79 percent) dating couples in our study sample reported that at least one partner had obtained some college education (or were still enrolled in school), compared with roughly six in 10 married and cohabiting couples; analyses not shown). Figure 5 shows that:

- Couples in married and dating relationships who reported that one or both partners had some college education or were enrolled in school at the time of the interview were less likely to report relationship violence than were those in which neither partner had reached these academic milestones. Specifically, 39 percent of married couples and 32 percent of dating couples who had some college education reported violence in their relationship, compared with 54 percent of both married and dating couples who lacked any college experience.
- Among cohabiting couples, educational attainment was not associated with relationship violence: more than one-half of cohabiting couples reported violence in their relationship regardless of educational level.



Having children in the household is associated with increased reports of violence for married and dating couples. Fifty-nine percent of married couples and 38 percent of cohabiting couples had a child living with them in the household; 14 percent of dating couples had a child in one or

Figure 6**Percent of couples who report relationship violence, by presence of children in the household and relationship type**

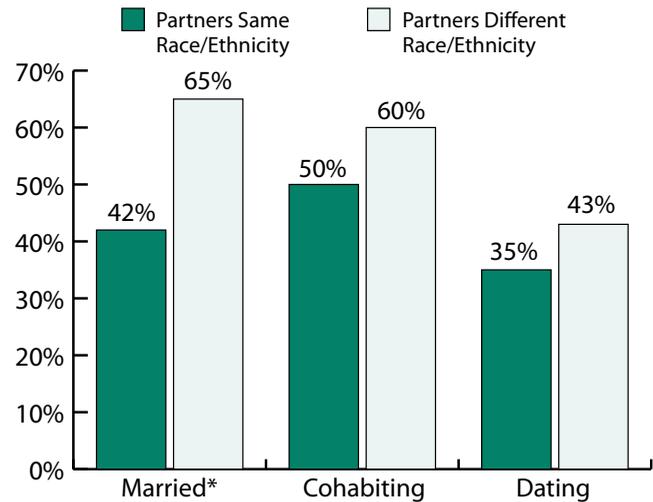
* Differences in reports of violence by the presence of children significant at the .05 level for these relationship types

both of their households (analyses not shown). As shown in Figure 6:

- Slightly more than one-half (51 percent) of married couples and nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of dating couples with children living in one or both of their households reported past-year relationship violence, compared with 37 percent of married couples and 31 percent of dating couples with no children living in the household.
- The presence of children was not linked to violence among cohabiting couples: about one-half of cohabiting couples reported violence regardless of the presence of children in the household (48 percent with children and 54 percent without).

Married couples in which the partners were of different racial or ethnic backgrounds were more likely to report relationship violence. One in five (19 percent) cohabiting and dating couples reported that partners came from different racial and/or ethnic backgrounds, compared with one in 10 (12 percent) married couples. However, this characteristic was only linked to violence for married couples. As seen in Figure 7:

- Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of married couples with partners of different racial/ethnic backgrounds reported relationship violence,

Figure 7**Percent of couples who report relationship violence, by couple's race/ethnicity and relationship type**

* Differences in reports of violence by partner race/ethnicity significant at the .05 level for these relationship types

compared with 42 percent of married couples with partners of the same racial/ethnic background.

- Cohabiting and dating couples with partners of different racial/ethnic backgrounds reported similar levels of violence as those with partners of the same racial/ethnic background.

DISCUSSION

The actual prevalence of relationship violence in the United States is difficult to assess, not only because it is often underreported, but also because estimates often rely on survey responses from only one partner (most often the female partner)¹⁸ or are drawn from sources such as shelter or criminal justice records that tend to underestimate less severe forms of violence or common couple violence.¹³ In our research for this brief, we used the Romantic Pairs subsample of the Add Health survey to measure reports of past-year violence from both partners in a relationship. Several notable findings emerged from this work. Some of these findings may help to identify couples at particular risk for relationship violence and its subsequent negative outcomes, including sexual risk behaviors, STDs, unintended pregnancies, and even death.

Young adult couples report high levels of relationship violence. We found that four in 10 young adult couples reported some type of physical

relationship violence or threatening behavior *in the previous year*. In this brief, relationship violence is measured among couples, incorporating information from both partners about experiencing violence as well as perpetrating it. Therefore, our results are not directly comparable to estimates based on individual reports of experiencing violence. However, other recent research based on a nationally-representative sample of adults aged 18 and over estimates that 33 percent of women and 28 percent of men will experience physical violence (not including threatening behavior) from an intimate partner at some point in their lives.¹ No doubt estimates would be even higher if threats were included in this estimate and if information on perpetration of violence from the partners was included. It is increasingly clear that relationship violence is distressingly common among men and women, particularly young adults. Although not all relationship violence begins in young adulthood, recent national data reveal that, of all U.S. adults who report experiencing relationship violence, more than one-half were younger than 24 when they first experienced this violence.¹

Both men and women experience relationship violence. Although people often assume that women are more likely than are men to experience relationship violence,⁵ the findings reported in this brief, in line with evidence from other research, confirm that violence against men is common as well.^{1,18} In fact, data from Add Health and other national data sources indicate that experiencing relationship violence may be more common among men than among women.¹ The misperception that men are never the “victims” of relationship violence may be attributed, in part, to biases in how violence is assessed (such as the belief that women are more credible in their reports of relationship violence) and to men’s chronic underreporting of violence—even when they are the recipients of it—stemming from the stigma attached to male reports of relationship violence.^{5,18}

Couple-level agreement on reports of violence seems to be limited. Violence was reported by both partners in less than one-third of the couples reporting that either the man or woman experienced violence. This finding, which has been mirrored in other nationally representative samples,¹⁹ may reflect differences in how men and women assessed violence or how willing they were to report it.^{5,18} Moreover, the divergence in partners’ responses points to the need to find better ways to assess violence using survey data and to

explore the reasons behind men and women’s lack of agreement about the experience of relationship violence.

Not all relationship violence results in injury. Consistent with results from prior research,⁶ we found that relationship violence among young adults most commonly involves less severe types of aggression, specifically, violence that does not result in injury. However, these threatening and hitting behaviors were also the most likely types of violence to have occurred more than once in the previous year. Prior research has found that two-thirds of adults who experience relationship violence report multiple violent acts by the same partner and that these adults report about three-and-a-half violent acts a year.²³

Many couples exhibit reciprocal violence that does not result in injury. Overall, we found that 20 percent of dating couples, 30 percent of cohabiting couples, and 25 percent of married couples experienced non-injurious, bi-directional violence. These couples may be exhibiting what is known as common couple violence (which, as defined in Figure 3, is violence that occurs occasionally in the context of interpersonal conflict, that is perpetrated equally by both partners, and that generally does not escalate or result in injury¹³). For these couples, it may be that violence is less about premeditation or control and more about reacting to volatility in the relationship.¹³ However, it may also be the case that the survey data used for this brief provide more information on less serious violence and show more gender equity in relationship violence than do data from other sources—such as clinics, shelters, hospitals, criminal justice systems, or divorce courts.¹³

Couples in cohabiting relationships are the most likely to report relationship violence. Consistent with prior studies,³ we found that couples in cohabiting relationships report higher levels of relationship violence than do couples in dating or married relationships. In fact, throughout the analyses, cohabiters were different from married and dating couples, in that they had the highest reports of relationship violence, regardless of other relationship characteristics (such as relationship duration, education, and the presence of children in the household). One possible explanation for this finding is that couples in cohabiting relationships face more financial hardships and report lower levels of relationship quality,^{10,14} both of which may lead to a greater risk of relationship

violence. Because cohabitation is increasingly common in the United States,²⁰ the high level of violence among these couples is of particular concern and more studies of cohabiting couples are needed.

The education and racial/ethnic makeup of couples appears to have a bearing on relationship violence. We found that married and dating couples in which neither partner has received any college education report higher levels of relationship violence. The reason for this finding may be that individuals with lower levels of education have lower incomes, weaker social networks, and less power, resulting in higher levels of stress, vulnerability, relationship conflict, and, subsequently, violence.¹² Additionally, among married couples, we found that differing racial/ethnic backgrounds between partners is also linked to increased levels of violence. Couples with different racial/ethnic backgrounds – particularly married couples with different racial/ethnic backgrounds – are often confronted with numerous stressors, including racism, discrimination, and conflicting beliefs about family structure and power;⁴ in some cases, these stressors may result in higher levels of relationship conflict and violence.

Levels of violence appear to be higher in households with children. In our analyses, we found that the presence of a child or children in the household—biological, step-, or adopted—puts some couples at additional risk for violence. This confirms prior research that has found that relationship violence is more common among couples with children than among those without children.¹⁶ Parenting, in general, can be stressful, and the stress involved in raising children often spills over into couples' relationships.⁸ Parenting may be particularly stressful when a stepchild is involved.²² When violence enters a household, it threatens not only the well-being of the adults, but also that of the children – and prior research has shown that some parents delay leaving a violent relationship out of concern for their children.¹⁷ It is estimated that 15.5 million children in the United States live in households with relationship violence between their parents or caregivers,¹⁶ and evidence shows that countless negative childhood outcomes are associated with living in a violent household, including an elevated risk of children being involved in relationship violence themselves.¹¹ Further, the evidence confirms that relationship violence can be intergenerational: children whose parents

engaged in relationship violence are more likely to be involved in relationship violence as adults.¹¹ As such, couples who live with children and who experience relationship violence represent a critical population for targeted violence prevention.

CONCLUSION

Although nationally-representative data indicate that, as a whole, relationship violence has been declining since the early 1990s, the same data indicate that young adults are at the greatest risk for getting caught up in this destructive vortex.⁶ The findings in this brief reveal that physical relationship violence is reported in a substantial percentage of young adult relationships. Though not included in these analyses, many young adult couples may also experience psychological or sexual violence. Our findings also point to the need to identify better survey methods to assess relationship violence prevalence and to focus future research and prevention on high-risk couples, such as cohabiting couples and couples with children. Although chronic underreporting—especially among men – may limit our ability to identify couples who experience relationship violence, the findings presented in this *Research Brief* highlight the need for ongoing awareness and prevention strategies to address the problem.

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