

The prevalence and severity of teen dating violence victimization in community and at-risk adolescents in Spain

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Abstract

The aim of the present study was to determine the prevalence and severity of teen dating violence victimization in Spanish adolescents from both community and at-risk samples. The sample comprised 1,105 community adolescents from secondary schools, 149 adolescents from child, and adolescent mental health centers, 129 from residential care centers associated with the child welfare system, and 101 from centers in the juvenile justice system. The participants, aged between 14 and 17 years, were interviewed using the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire. The lifetime prevalence of victimization in dating relationships ranged from 2.5% to 33.7%. The prevalence of physical victimization was slightly higher in boys, while sexual and electronic victimization and injuries were more prevalent in girls. In conclusion, teen dating violence is a prevalent problem in Spain that needs to be addressed to prevent adolescents from developing risk behaviors and to avoid adverse consequences on mental health, especially in at-risk adolescents.

KEYWORDS

adolescence, at-risk samples, dating violence, electronic victimization, physical victimization, sexual victimization, Spain

1 | INTRODUCTION

Teen dating violence is defined as the threat or actual use of physical, sexual, or emotional violence on an intimate partner in early- and mid-adolescent romantic relationships

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(Exner-Cortens, 2014). It is a frequent problem for adolescents and a costly one for societies around the world (Jennings et al., 2017). Teen dating violence can severely affect the mental and physical health of adolescents (Exner-Cortens et al., 2013), as well as their personal development and social integration (Banyard & Cross, 2008). This has consequential costs for the whole society.

Teen dating violence has certain unique features that distinguish it from other forms of intimate partner violence (González et al., 2003). First, adolescent relationships, unlike those of adults, do not seem to be characterized by stereotypes of patriarchy that confer greater power on males and impose more dependent behaviors on females. Thus, feminist theories of violence embedded in a patriarchal value system do not seem to be able to fully explain teen dating violence (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999).

Another factor that distinguishes violence in adult relationships from violence in adolescent relationships is the lack of experience teens have in romantic relationships which may lead to the use of poor coping strategies, including verbal and physical aggression (see the review by Mulford & Giordano, 2008). In this context, the theory of social learning (Bandura, 1977) states that boys and girls learn and imitate observed patterns of behavior; therefore, family models and parental dynamics play a transcendental role in the use of violence by adolescents. Being a victim or witness of violence in the family becomes a primary risk factor for using violence in dating relationships (Gover et al., 2011; Izaguirre & Calvete, 2016), contributing to the normalization and legitimization of dynamics of violence as a form of relationship and conflict resolution (Calvete et al., 2016) and, by extension, to the intergenerational transmission of violence (Ehrensaft et al., 2003). Adolescents may experience violence as early as in their first partner relationship (Lewis & Fremouw, 2001) and research has suggested that both dating violence victimization and perpetration tend to increase slightly with age (Izaguirre & Calvete, 2016). Thus, the need to determine the scale of this social problem from an early age is empirically supported.

The most significant differential feature of dating violence is that it tends to be symmetrical and/or mutual between genders, and therefore occurs in both males and females (Straus, 2011). Indeed, systematic reviews point to a high bidirectionality of violent behavior in teen dating couples (Wincentak et al., 2017). According to Archer (2000), the younger the age of the subjects, the more marked is the bidirectionality of violence: it is in middle-late adolescence (between 16 and 17 years old) where more violent interactions are recorded in both boys and girls. However, significantly less attention has been paid to teen dating violence than to other forms of intimate partner violence (Rodríguez-Franco et al., 2009).

Previous research based on theories of social psychology (i.e., social learning theory, Bandura, 1977), the perspective of the intergenerational transmission of violence (Ehrensaft et al., 2003), and theoretical victimology (i.e., lifestyle, Hindelang et al., 1978; and routine activities theories, Cohen & Felson, 1979) have tried to explain why certain adolescents are at a higher risk for dating violence. Factors related to the adolescent's family, such as previous family violence, and lack of parental support or an adult caregiver, but also individual factors such as psychological distress that raise the likelihood of engaging in risk-taking behaviors (substance use, early sex initiation), increase the risk of dating violence victimization (Foshee et al., 2008; Vézina et al., 2011).

1.1 | Epidemiology of teen dating violence in community samples

Although the reported prevalence rates of teen dating violence vary widely, partly due to sample characteristics, the measure of the violence used, the time frame evaluated,

and the study location, systematic reviews have shown that physical violence (e.g., slapping, hitting, punching, kicking, beating, or throwing objects) seems to occur in approximately 20% of teen dating relationships (for a review and meta-analysis, see Desmarais et al., 2012; Wincentak et al., 2017). The prevalence rates of psychological violence (e.g., humiliation, belittling, insulting, degrading, criticizing, intimidating, threatening to break up, and threats of harm) are more difficult to estimate because of the wider variation in the results (Jackson, 1999). However, general trends show that it is the most frequently experienced form of dating violence, ranging from 17% to 88% (Leen et al., 2013). The prevalence rates of sexual violence within teen dating relationships (e.g., forced sexual intercourse or other non-consensual sexual acts) are generally lower than those of physical and psychological violence, with an established rate of 9% (Wincentak et al., 2017). In addition, it has been estimated that between 12% and 56% of adolescents have experienced electronic dating violence (e.g., control, harassment, threats, stalking, and abuse of current or former dating partners via technology and social media) (Stonard et al., 2014).

The vast majority of the data on the prevalence of dating violence in adolescents come from Western, high-income countries, mainly from the United States and Canada (see the review of Jackson, 1999, regarding this and other issues in dating violence research). In Spain, research on dating violence is still limited, but several studies have analyzed the prevalence of dating violence victimization in adolescents from community samples, mainly from secondary schools, finding a high prevalence of violence. Victimization through psychological violence was reported by 33.9% (Dosil et al., 2020), 74.6% (Izaguirre & Calvete, 2016), and 95.4% (Fernández-Fuertes & Fuertes, 2010) of surveyed adolescents. The prevalence rates of physical victimization were much lower and reported by 3.7% (Dosil et al., 2020), 12.2% (Izaguirre and Calvete (2016), and 21.7% (Fernández-Fuertes & Fuertes, 2010) of adolescents. Victimization through sexual violence was reported by 34.7% of adolescents in the study by Izaguirre and Calvete (2016). Furthermore, Machimbarrena et al. (2018) reported that 17.4% of their sample of adolescents had experienced cyber dating abuse victimization, while Cava et al. (2020) found that 44% of adolescents had experienced cyber control victimization in the last year, and 11.6% had experienced cyber aggression victimization.

Even though prevalence rates vary widely from one study to another, verbal and emotional aggression are consistently the most frequent forms of teen dating violence (including electronic dating), followed by physical victimization, and finally by sexual victimization. Thus, one of the objectives of the present study is to see whether these results are replicated in a sample of adolescents from northeastern Spain.

1.2 | Epidemiology of teen dating violence in at-risk samples

As mentioned, certain groups of young people are more likely to experience interpersonal victimization such as dating violence (Joly & Connolly, 2016). Thus, it is surprising that very few epidemiological studies on dating violence have assessed adolescents from at-risk populations (such as adolescents with mental health problems, those involved in the juvenile justice system, or those who are cared for by the welfare system) (Jackson, 1999), with none of these studies conducted in Spain.

A study conducted with adolescents hospitalized in a psychiatric facility in the United States showed that 77% reported any form of victimization by a dating partner in the last year. Among them, 51% had experienced psychological abuse, 5.8% reported physical abuse, and 10.9% reported sexual victimization (Rizzo et al., 2010). Others studies in

the United States involving youth from mental health services found a 12-month prevalence of 13% for physical dating violence (Brown et al., 2009), and 19.1% for physical or sexual dating violence in the past 3 months (Rizzo et al., 2012). Studies with female participants within the juvenile justice system in the United States found prevalence rates of physical and/or sexual dating violence during their lifetime ranging between 23% and 28% (Kelly et al., 2009) to 40.6% (Buttar et al., 2013). In the case of adolescents in the child welfare system, Jonson-Reid and Bivens (1999), presenting data from the United States, showed that 37% of girls and 11% of boys had been victims of physical, sexual, and/or verbal violence while in a relationship. Two studies show similar results for adolescents in the Canadian welfare system, with rates for verbal, physical, or sexual dating violence in the past 12 months ranging between 28.3% and 49% among male participants and between 32.6% and 63% among female participants (Tanaka & Wekerle, 2014; Wekerle et al., 2009). Focusing only on adolescent girls living in residential care centers, prevalence rates for lifetime dating violence victimization ranged from 58.8% to 87.9% for psychological aggression, from 46.0% to 67.2% for physical violence, and from 32.9% to 70.2% for sexual violence. Moreover, between 24.4% and 44.0% of the victims reported being physically injured as a result of the dating violence (Collin-Vézina et al., 2006; Manseau et al., 2008).

Once again, in at-risk samples, the prevalence rates of teen dating violence vary widely. However, higher rates than those obtained with community samples seem to be the norm. Thus, another objective of the present study is to analyze whether this higher prevalence can also be found in Spanish at-risk teen samples.

1.3 | Gender differences in dating violence

There has been much debate about whether the rates of teen dating violence differ between genders. The findings on the role of gender in teen dating violence victimization and perpetration are mixed (Paradis et al., 2017). Some studies have indicated higher rates of violence victimization among girls compared to boys, while others have indicated similar rates of dating violence victimization between genders or higher rates among boys (see the reviews by Desmarais et al., 2012; Leen et al., 2013; Wincentak et al., 2017).

The percentages of dating violence victimization in adolescent couples are quite similar in both genders in Spain. The rates of physical victimization range from 9.1% to 42.1% in girls and from 15.1% to 39.4% in boys, while those for psychological victimization range from 82.8% to 95.5% in girls and from 68% to 94.5% in boys. Finally, sexual victimization in dating couples range from 10.0% to 32.2% in girls and from 7.8% to 33.5% in boys (Fernández-Fuertes & Fuertes, 2010; Fernández González et al., 2013, 2014; Izaguirre & Calvete, 2016; Rodríguez, 2015). Electronic teen dating violence victimization rates vary between studies. Machimbarrena et al. (2018) found that the prevalence of cyber dating violence victimization was 49.5% in boys and 50.5% in girls. Cava et al. (2020) found that 77.3% of boys and 66.7% of girls reported cyber control victimization, while 63.7% of boys and 47.8% of girls reported cyber aggression victimization. However, Ortega-Barón et al. (2020) found that 7.6%–19.9% of boys and 15.7%–33.5% of girls reported control victimization, while 9.2%–10.8% of boys and 12.4%–23.3% of girls reported direct aggression victimization.

Regarding the severity of physical aggression, various studies suggest that severe forms of physical aggression are rare in adolescent couples (Muñoz-Rivas et al., 2007; Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2008). However, the results according to gender are contradictory. Some studies report gender differences depending on the severity of the violence, with girls reporting

more injuries following either physical or sexual assault (Hamby & Turner, 2013; Muñoz-Rivas et al., 2007). However, other studies have not found these differences between boys and girls since the reciprocal pattern of partner violence also occurs in severe physical aggressions (Straus, 2011; Viejo et al., 2015). Therefore, another objective of the present study is to establish whether the prevalence of teen dating violence in boys and girls is similar, but also whether there are differences in the severity of injuries between the genders, as previously found in Spanish studies (Fernández-González et al., 2014)

1.4 | The current study

Studying teen dating violence victimization in Spain is important for several reasons. First, the empirical evidence in adolescents is insufficient in southern European countries (Jackson, 1999), with only a few studies in Spain analyzing teen dating violence. Furthermore, these studies have also considered young adults or have focused on young adult couples (e.g., Muñoz-Rivas et al., 2007, 2009). Considering that adolescence is a specific stage of development with neurobiological particularities that affect behavior (Steinberg, 2009), the results of studies based on young adults cannot be generalized to adolescents. In addition, since dating violence episodes that begin at an early age are strongly related to their severity and chronicity (Rubio-Garay et al., 2015), it is important to focus on teen dating relationships. Furthermore, we need to establish the real extent of the problem not just in community samples, but also in at-risk samples such as adolescents receiving treatment for mental health problems, those serving sentences in a juvenile justice center, or those living outside their family environment (Jackson, 1999). These situations all increase the vulnerability of the adolescents, making them more likely to be victims of violence (Foshee et al., 2008; Kelly et al., 2009; Manseau et al., 2008; Rubio-Garay et al., 2015). Either because of their lifestyle, their routine activities (Meier & Miethe, 1993), or the role model of violence learned from their caregivers and peers (Hébert et al., 2019), certain adolescents are more exposed to victimization. However, in Spain, there are no data available from previous studies on the prevalence of teen dating violence victimization in at-risk samples. Thus, important gaps still exist in our understanding about the prevalence and characteristics of teen dating violence.

The present study aimed to determine the prevalence of physical, sexual, and electronic dating violence victimization in different samples of Spanish adolescents from secondary schools, mental health centers, residential childcare centers, and juvenile justice centers. First, we hope to establish which types of dating violence are more frequent in the samples studied. Considering that in the present study, we did not directly measure verbal or emotional aggression (recognized in previous epidemiological studies as the most frequent type of violence, followed by physical violence), we hypothesized that physical violence would be the most frequent in both the community and at-risk samples. Second, since the difference in the rates of violence between the genders continues to be a controversial issue (Straus, 2010), we analyzed the types of victimization in males and females, hypothesizing that there would be no statistically significant gender differences in the prevalence of dating violence (overall, physical, sexual, and electronic victimization) in both the community and at-risk samples. Moreover, since previous studies regarding the severity of the victimization according to gender are contradictory (Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2008), another aim of this study was to examine whether injuries resulting from acts of physical or sexual aggression differed between the sexes in the four samples analyzed. Meta-analytic studies suggest that the wide variability in rates is due, among other factors, to the sample characteristics (Wincentak et al., 2017). In this regard, the present study aimed to analyze the

socio-demographic characteristics of adolescent victims of dating violence (i.e., gender of participants, age, country of birth, and at-risk nature of the sample). Finally, we hypothesized that adolescents from at-risk samples (i.e., mental health centers, residential care, and juvenile justice centers) would have higher rates of all types of dating violence than those from the community sample, as has been found in previous international studies (e.g., Collin-Vézina et al., 2006; Kelly et al., 2009).

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Ethical approval

The design of this observational, cross-sectional, multicenter study guaranteed the ethical standards for research with human beings, complying with the basic principles included in the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2008) and the Code of Ethics of the Psychologists' Association of Catalonia (COPC, 2015). The study was approved by the Bioethics Committee of the University of Barcelona (IRB00003099). The instruments were applied by two members of the research team who were trained in collecting data on violence against children, as recommended by UNICEF (2012).

2.2 | Participants

2.2.1 | Community sample

The sample was composed of 1,105 adolescents aged 12 to 17 years (46.5% females, $M = 14.52$; $SD = 1.76$) who were from seven secondary schools in the northeast region of Spain. The majority of the adolescents (94.8%) were born in Spain and only 5.1% were of a foreign origin.

2.2.2 | Mental health centers

One hundred and forty-nine outpatients with ages ranging from 12 to 17 years (64.4% females, $M = 14.28$; $SD = 1.45$) were recruited from 14 child and adolescent public mental health centers in the northeast region of Spain. Participants were primarily of Spanish nationality (79.9%) and 18.8% were born in other countries. The most common diagnoses were adjustment disorders (21.5%), anxiety disorders (19.5%), attention-deficit and disruptive behavior disorders (17.4%), mood disorders (7.4%), and eating disorders (6.0%).

2.2.3 | Residential care centers

The residential care sample comprised 129 adolescents aged 12–17 years (50.4% females, $M = 14.59$; $SD = 1.62$). Participants were recruited from 18 residential facilities run by the child welfare system in northeastern Spain. The most common reason for entry into the child welfare system was compromised security and development due to a lack of adequate parenting, primarily neglect (71.5%), physical violence (11.8%), and sexual violence (3.9%). The majority of the adolescents (67.4%) were born in Spain, with the rest being born in a foreign country (32.7%).

2.2.4 | Juvenile justice centers

One hundred and one adolescents aged between 14 and 17 years (18.8% females, $M = 16.08$; $SD = 0.99$) were recruited from three detention centers and five open centers in northeastern Spain. In this sample, 54.5% were of a foreign origin, while 45.5% were born in Spain.

2.3 | Procedure

The data from this study were collected as part of a larger study on interpersonal victimization in adolescents aged 12–17 years. The head teachers of the different schools in the north-east of Spain were contacted and informed about the scope, nature, and purposes of the study. Similarly, we contacted the managers of each residential facility, with the legal guardians from each center inviting the adolescents to participate. To select the participants from the juvenile justice system, five open centers and five juvenile justice detention centers were selected. Only two detention centers declined to participate. We then requested the consent of the parents and guardians for the adolescents to participate in the study (only 1% did not give consent). We explained the objectives of the study to the adolescents and informed them that participation was voluntary and anonymous. Data were collected in their respective school, mental health center, residential care center, and juvenile justice center. The confidentiality of the data collected was guaranteed. Between 3% (community sample) and 26.8% (juvenile justice sample) refused to participate or were unable to do so because of problems in understanding the questions (e.g., due to not being fluent in Spanish), cognitive problems, or acute symptomatology. After the data collection and analysis, the centers were informed of the main results of the study in a written report.

2.4 | Measures

2.4.1 | Sociodemographic variables

The sociodemographic characteristics of the adolescents and their families (i.e., age, gender, country of birth, marital status of parents, parents' education, and parents' occupation) were obtained through a questionnaire created ad hoc for this study. The socioeconomic status was calculated based on an adaptation of the Hollingshead Four-Factor Index (Hollingshead, 1975).

2.4.2 | Teen dating violence

To assess the lifetime prevalence of physical, sexual, and electronic victimization in teen dating relationships, five items (item P6, physical victimization; items S3 and S4, sexual victimization; and items INT1 and INT2, electronic victimization) were selected from the validated Spanish version of the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ; Finkelhor et al., 2005), which has been shown to have adequate psychometric properties (Pereda et al., 2018). The reliability of the Spanish version of the JVQ for the total scale has been established at 0.82 for the last year and at 0.84 for lifetime victimization experiences (Forns et al., 2013). The JVQ is a self-report instrument that requires direct responses from the adolescents. It has been previously applied to the assessment of teen dating

violence (see the study by Hamby & Turner, 2013). Perpetrators identified as “boyfriend” or “girlfriend” to questions regarding physical (i.e., P6. At any time in your life, did a boyfriend or girlfriend or anyone you went on a date slap or hit you?), sexual (S4. Did anyone try to force you to have sex; that is, sexual intercourse of any kind, even if it didn't happen?), or electronic victimization were coded as positive in dating violence for the purposes of this study (INT2. Did anyone on the internet ever ask you sexual questions about yourself or try to get you to talk online about sex when you did not want to talk about those things?). Severity was assessed by a follow-up item that asked whether the youth was “physically hurt when this happened.” The responses were “yes” or “no,” with all the “yes” answers recorded as injurious violence. The participants were asked about physical injury if they reported physical and/or sexual victimization. Since sexual and electronic victimization were measured by two items each (i.e., S3 and S4 and INT1 and INT2, respectively), we calculated the prevalence of each type of victimization based on whether the participant answered “yes” to either one of the two items. The correlation between the two items measuring sexual victimization was $\varphi = 0.23$ ($p < 0.01$), while that for the items measuring electronic victimization was $\varphi = 0.18$ ($p < 0.01$).

2.5 | Data analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS version 21. First, the lifetime prevalence of victimization (physical, sexual, and electronic) was calculated in each sample, both overall and by gender, in terms of percentages. When comparing prevalence between the males and females in each sample, the odds ratios (*OR*) were adjusted for “age” and “country of birth” using logistic regression analysis when differences between the genders were detected in these variables. Due to the large amount of missing data on the socioeconomic level and marital status of the parents, they were not included in the analysis. The *OR* is presented alongside its corresponding 95% confidence interval (CI). Among the victims of physical and sexual dating violence (i.e., excluding victims of electronic victimization), chi-square independence test (or Fisher's exact test when appropriate) was used to explore the association between gender and the severity of the dating violence (i.e., the presence of injuries resulting from physical and/or sexual victimization). In the cases in which the association was statistically significant, Cramer's *V* was calculated to quantify the effect size (0.1 was interpreted as small, 0.3 was interpreted as medium, and 0.5 was interpreted as large according to Cohen, 1988).

The sociodemographic characteristics (i.e., gender, age, and country of origin) of the victims of dating violence were compared among the four samples (community, mental health, residential care, and juvenile justice centers) through the chi-square test (χ^2), Fisher's exact test, or the Kruskal-Wallis test (*H*), as appropriate. Cramer's *V* was calculated when statistically significant differences were found in the chi-square and Fisher's exact tests.

To analyze whether each at-risk sample presented a higher prevalence of victimization compared to the community sample, adjusted *OR* values were calculated using logistic regression analysis. For the overall prevalence of dating violence victimization and for each victimization type (i.e., physical, sexual, and electronic), the contribution of the at-risk sample to the prediction of victimization was tested with separate logistic regression models after controlling for sociodemographic variables (gender, age, or country of birth) when appropriate, with the community sample acting as the reference category (0 = community sample, 1 = at-risk sample).

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Prevalence of dating violence

Regarding our first and second hypothesis, the lifetime prevalence of physical, sexual, and electronic victimization and gender differences in each sample studied are shown in Table 1.

In the community sample, physical victimization was found to be the most frequent form of dating violence (1.8%). The percentage of physical victimization was slightly higher in boys (2.0%) than in girls (1.6%). By contrast, the prevalence of electronic victimization was slightly higher in girls (0.8%) than in boys (0.3%). Only girls reported being victims of sexual violence. The adjusted *OR* indicated that there were no statistically significant differences between the genders in the prevalence of any of the types of victimization evaluated.

In the sample from the mental health centers, the most frequent victimization form was electronic victimization (10.1%). No statistically significant differences between the genders were found for any of the types of victimization. Again, only girls were victims of sexual violence.

In the residential care sample, the overall prevalence of dating violence victimization indicated clear gender symmetry. Physical victimization was the most frequent (10.9%), with its prevalence being similar between the boys and girls. No statistically significant differences were found between the genders. Girls from the residential childcare sample had the highest prevalence of sexual victimization (1.6%).

Adolescents recruited from the juvenile justice centers had the highest overall prevalence of dating violence (33.7%) and the highest prevalence of physical victimization (30.7%). Only girls were victims of sexual violence (5.3%) and only boys reported electronic victimization (6.1%).

3.2 | Severity of victimization

Regarding our third hypothesis, adolescents who reported injuries as a result of physical and/or sexual victimization (i.e., excluding victims of electronic victimization) comprised 42.9% of the sample from the residential childcare centers ($n = 14$), 28.6% of the sample from the mental health centers ($n = 7$), 25% of the community sample ($n = 24$), and 16.1% of the sample from the juvenile justice system ($n = 31$).

Although girls reported suffering more injuries than boys in all the samples, there was no statistically significant association between severity and gender, with the only exception being among adolescents from the juvenile justice centers. In this sample, there was a significant association between gender and physical injuries, with a higher proportion of girls reporting physical injuries (21.1%) than boys (1.2%) ($\chi^2(1) = 11.24$, $p = 0.005$, with a medium effect size as Cramer's $V = 0.60$, $p < 0.01$).

3.3 | Sociodemographic characteristics of the victims of dating violence

Regarding our fourth hypothesis, the main sociodemographic characteristics of the victims of dating violence in the four samples are shown in Table 2. Significant differences were found between the samples in terms of gender ($\chi^2(3) = 19.41$, $p < 0.05$; Cramer's $V = 0.44$) and country of birth ($\chi^2(3) = 19.10$, $p < 0.05$; Cramer's $V = 0.44$), with both

TABLE 1 Lifetime victimization in dating relationships in community, mental health, residential care, and juvenile justice system samples

	Community <i>n</i> = 1,105			Mental health centers <i>n</i> = 149			Residential care centers <i>n</i> = 129			Juvenile justice centers <i>n</i> = 101						
	Total <i>N</i> (%)	Males <i>n</i> (%)	Females <i>n</i> (%)	Total <i>n</i> (%)	Males <i>n</i> (%)	Females <i>N</i> (%)	Total <i>n</i> (%)	Males <i>n</i> (%)	Females <i>n</i> (%)	Total <i>n</i> (%)	Males <i>n</i> (%)	Females <i>n</i> (%)				
Dating violence																
Physical victimization ^d	20 (1.8)	12 (2.0)	8 (1.6)	0.76(0.31-1.88)	5 (3.4)	2 (3.8)	3 (3.1)	0.82(0.13-5.08)	14 (10.9)	7 (10.9)	7 (10.8)	0.66(0.21-2.13)	31 (30.7)	24 (29.3)	7 (36.8)	1.36(0.44-4.23)
Sexual victimization ^e	6 (0.5)	0 (0.0)	6 (1.2)	-	2 (1.3)	0 (0.0)	2 (2.1)	-	2 (1.6)	0 (0.0)	2 (3.1)	-	1 (1.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (5.3)	-
Electronic victimization ^f	6 (0.5)	2 (0.3)	4 (0.8)	2.37(0.43-13.04)	15 (10.1)	3 (5.7)	12 (12.5)	2.38(0.64-8.84)	5 (3.9)	1 (1.6)	4 (6.2)	2.92(0.31-28.04)	5 (5.0)	5 (6.1)	0 (0.0)	-
Total	28 (2.5)	14 (2.4)	14 (2.7)	1.16(0.55-2.47)	21 (14.1)	4 (7.5)	17 (17.7)	2.63(0.83-8.29)	14 (10.9)	7 (10.9)	7 (10.8)	0.66(0.21-2.13)	34 (33.7)	27 (32.9)	7 (36.8)	1.16(0.38-3.57)

The 95% confidence interval does not include the null value (*OR* = 1).

^a*OR* adjusted for "Country of birth."

^b*OR* adjusted for "Age."

^c*OR* adjusted for "Country of birth."

^dComputed taking into account only the item on physical dating violence (P6).

^eComputed taking into account only the items on sexual victimization involving physical contact (S3 and S4) in cases in which the offender was the intimate partner.

^fComputed taking into account only the items on electronic victimization (INT1 and INT2) in cases in which the offender was the intimate partner.

TABLE 2 Comparison of sociodemographic characteristics of victims of dating violence among samples

	Community, <i>n</i> = 28	Mental health centers, <i>n</i> = 21	Residential care centers, <i>n</i> = 14	Juvenile justice centers, <i>n</i> = 34	Statistic
Gender <i>n</i> (%)					$\chi^2(3) = 19.408^*$
Male	14 (50)	4 (19)	7 (50)	27 (79.4)	
Female	14 (50)	17 (81)	7 (50)	7 (20.6)	
Age <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	15.46 (1.26)	15.29 (1.41)	15.71 (1.54)	16.12 (0.88)	<i>H</i> (3) = 6.678
Country of birth <i>n</i> (%)					Fisher's exact test = 19.102 [*]
Spain	27 (96.4)	15 (71.4)	7 (50)	16 (47.1)	
Other countries	1 (3.6)	6 (28.6)	7 (50)	18 (52.9)	

H = Kruskal-Wallis test.

**p* < 0.05.

showing a medium strength of association. There were no significant differences between the samples in terms of age.

Both the community sample and the sample from residential care showed gender symmetry among the victims of dating violence (50% girls and 50% boys). The victims of dating violence from mental health centers were mainly girls (81%), whereas those from the juvenile justice centers were mainly boys (79.4%). Victims from the community sample and those from mental health centers were mainly Spanish. There were similar numbers of Spanish individuals and foreigners among the victims from residential care centers and the juvenile justice system.

3.4 | Comparison of dating violence between the community and at-risk samples

Finally, adjusted *ORs* are reported in Table 3 as an indicator of the contribution of each at-risk sample to the prediction of the overall victimization prevalence and the prevalence of each victimization type (i.e., physical, sexual, and electronic).

Compared to the community sample, all the at-risk samples significantly contributed to the explanation of the overall prevalence of dating violence, with the adolescents from the residential care centers being more than four times more likely to be victims of dating violence (*OR* = 4.20, 95% CI [2.04–8.69]). Adolescents from mental health centers were almost six times more likely to experience victimization (*OR* = 5.73, 95% CI [3.09–10.63]), while adolescents from the juvenile justice system were almost 16 times more likely to be victims of dating violence (*OR* = 15.67, 95% CI [7.75–31.70]). Thus, adolescents from the juvenile justice system are the most vulnerable group for dating violence victimization.

Regarding the lifetime prevalence of physical victimization in teen dating relationships, the type of sample was also a significant predictor, except in the sample of adolescents from mental health centers. Adolescents from residential care centers were almost six times more likely to be victims of physical dating violence (*OR* = 5.67, 95% CI [2.62–12.26]) than those from the community sample. Furthermore, adolescents from the juvenile justice system were 20 times more likely to be victims of physical dating violence (*OR* = 20.27, 95% CI [9.40–43.72]). For sexual victimization, the at-risk samples were not statistically significant predictors.

TABLE 3 Comparison of lifetime prevalence of teen dating violence in community, mental health, residential care, and juvenile justice system samples

Comparison ^a	Physical victimization	Sexual victimization	Electronic victimization	Overall
	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)
Community (<i>n</i> = 1,105) vs. Mental health centers (<i>n</i> = 149) ^b	1.70 (0.60-4.81) <i>p</i> = 0.321	2.19 (0.44-11.01) <i>p</i> = 0.341	18.71 (6.98-50.22)* <i>p</i> < 0.001	5.73 (3.09-10.63)* <i>p</i> < 0.001
Community (<i>n</i> = 1,105) vs. Residential care centers (<i>n</i> = 129) ^c	5.67 (2.62-12.26)* <i>p</i> < 0.001	2.90 (0.52-16.20) <i>p</i> = 0.226	6.04 (1.62-22.59)* <i>p</i> = 0.007	4.20 (2.04-8.69)* <i>p</i> < 0.001
Community (<i>n</i> = 1,105) vs. Juvenile justice centers (<i>n</i> = 101) ^d	20.27 (9.40-43.72)* <i>p</i> < 0.001	3.42 (0.38-31.02) <i>p</i> = 0.274	5.41 (1.20-24.42)* <i>p</i> = 0.028	15.67 (7.75-31.70)* <i>p</i> < 0.001

^aCommunity sample as the reference category (0 = community sample, 1 = at-risk sample).

^bOR adjusted for "Gender" and "Country of birth."

^cOR adjusted for "Country of birth."

^dOR adjusted for "Gender," "Age," and "Country of birth."

**p* < 0.05; the 95% confidence interval does not include the null value (*OR* = 1).

The type of at-risk sample was a significant predictor of electronic victimization. Adolescents from mental health centers were almost 19 times more likely to experience electronic victimization (*OR* = 18.71, 95% CI [6.98–50.22]) than adolescents from the community sample. Moreover, adolescents from residential care centers were six times more likely to report electronic victimization (*OR* = 6.04, 95% CI [1.62–22.59]). Adolescents from the juvenile justice system were five times more likely to be victims of electronic victimization (*OR* = 5.41, 95% CI [1.20–24.42]) than those from the community sample.

4 | DISCUSSION

This study shows that dating violence is still a common and significant problem in Spanish adolescents. The lifetime prevalence of dating violence in the four samples of adolescents varied between 2.5% and 33.7%, which is similar to that reported for other groups of Spanish adolescents (Fernández-Fuertes & Fuertes, 2010) and young adults (Muñoz-Rivas et al., 2007, 2009; Rodríguez, 2015). Moreover, the prevalence range is similar to those obtained in systematic reviews and meta-analyses (Wincentak et al., 2017). Previous international studies with at-risk samples have shown higher prevalence rates than those obtained in our study (e.g., Kelly et al., 2009; Manseau et al., 2008; Rizzo et al., 2010, 2012). Methodological differences can be an explanation for these divergent results (Jackson, 1999). In addition, cultural differences influence what is understood as a dating relationship, and how behaviors (including aggressive behaviors) are interpreted in these relationships; culture and beliefs about romantic love influence their normalization and legitimization (Calvete et al., 2016; Leen et al., 2013).

In accordance with our first hypothesis, physical victimization was the most frequent type of violence experienced by practically all the adolescents evaluated, corroborating previous studies using other measures in Spain (Fernández-González et al., 2013) and those using the same measure elsewhere (Hamby & Turner, 2013). The only exception was the mental health center outpatients, in whom electronic victimization was the most common form of victimization. Electronic technology (e.g., cellular telephones, the internet, and social networking sites) has created a new environment for social interactions, becoming a prime vehicle for dating violence through text messages, calls, or via social networks

(Draucker & Martsof, 2010). Although only a few studies have analyzed electronic victimization in the context of intimate partner relationships in Spain, the results suggest that it affects a significant group of adolescents, thereby indicating that it should be a focus of professional interest. The study of dating violence must be adapted to the new digital environments where violence takes place, such as the internet, since cyber dating violence is a growing problem among Spanish adolescents (Cava & Buelga, 2018).

With regard to our second hypothesis, the rates of victimization found in this study were similar for males and females, in both the community and at-risk samples. In line with previous studies, the bidirectionality of violence is one of the most distinctive characteristics of dating relationships in comparison to intimate partner violence in adulthood: the lower the age of the members of the relationship, the more marked is the bidirectionality (Foshee et al., 2009; Mulford & Giordano, 2008). Our findings demonstrate that violence in dating relationships tends to show gender symmetry (Straus, 2010). This pattern, especially in less severe forms of physical and electronic victimization, reflects the fact that both male and female adolescents may be victimized by their dating partners, supporting the idea that males and females can be victims and perpetrators, thus reciprocally perpetuating violence and alternating the victim-offender roles (Sebastián et al., 2014). These results are further supported by other Spanish studies reporting that boys and girls do not appear to differ in the use of violent tactics when dealing with conflict in their dating relationships (Calvete et al., 2016). However, not all Spanish studies have found this pattern (see, e.g., the studies by Dosil et al., 2020 and Rodríguez, 2015, who found that girls experienced all types of victimization more than boys). This discrepancy in the results about sex could be explained by the use of different instruments with diverse psychometric properties (Caselman et al., 2014).

Despite this gender symmetry, the proportion of boys who reported being victims of physical violence in their dating relationships was higher than that of girls, a result that has also been found in previous studies performed in Spain with adolescents (Calvete et al., 2016; Fernández-Fuertes & Fuertes, 2010). However, the percentages of girls who were victims of sexual, electronic, and severe physical violence were higher (Rodríguez, 2015).

And according to our third hypothesis and to previous results in Spain (Fernández-González et al., 2014), girls reported injuries more frequently than did boys. However, the association between severity and gender was only statistically significant in the sample of adolescents from the juvenile justice system. As clinicians, we must be aware of the significance of these results. Both males and females can be victims. Thus, both gender groups should be included in prevention and treatment programs. However, females tend to suffer more severe victimization and are therefore in greater need of support and resources. This is particularly the case in the field of primary prevention, since adolescents involved in dating violence may be drawn into a situation characterized by an increasing number of violent episodes that could be a predictor of more severe aggression in the future if there is cohabitation with the violent partner (O'Leary & Slep, 2003).

In addition to gender, the country of origin of participants also had a conflicting role in its relationship with dating violence. Significant differences in dating violence victimization were found in the four samples depending on the country of origin. Victims from the community sample and mental health centers were mainly of Spanish origin, however victims from the juvenile justice system and residential care centers were Spanish or of foreign origin in similar percentages. These results are in line with previous studies indicating that ethnic origin has an inconsistent relationship with both dating violence victimization and perpetration (Rubio-Garay et al., 2015). The relationship between ethnic minority status and dating violence may be mediated by other sociocultural factors such as socioeconomic status, place of residence, or family structure (Foshee et al., 2008; Vézina et al., 2011), variables that were not assessed in the present study.

According to our fourth hypothesis, belonging to an at-risk sample was a significant predictor of dating violence victimization, in other words, adolescents from mental health centers, residential care centers, and the juvenile justice system reported more experiences of dating violence victimization than adolescents from the community sample.

Adolescents in the juvenile justice system were the most victimized group, followed by mental health center outpatients and those in residential childcare centers. A relationship between a history of victimization and the development of externalizing symptomatology, above all criminal behavior, has been reported, with victims and juvenile delinquents forming overlapping populations (Cuevas et al., 2007). Criminological theories related to routine activities or lifestyle (Meier & Miethe, 1993) explain this relationship between the two groups. These theories highlight that adolescence is a vulnerable developmental stage, due to the lower degree of supervision by adult caregivers and the greater exposure and proximity to peer influences (Finkelhor et al., 2009).

The finding that adolescent mental health center outpatients were the second most victimized group supports previous research indicating that mental health problems in children and adolescents are a precipitating factor of victimization (Cuevas et al., 2010). Other studies have also shown that adolescents with mental health problems tend to select aggressive dating partners (Joly & Connolly, 2016). However, it could also be true that being a victim of dating violence can produce psychological distress and mental health problems, such as antisocial behaviors, episodic drinking, depressive symptomatology, and suicidal ideation (Exner-Cortens et al., 2013).

4.1 | Practice implications

The findings from this study have important implications for clinical practice, policy, and research. Due to the high prevalence of teen dating violence and its adverse health outcomes (Exner-Cortens et al., 2013), there has been an increased focus on developing more effective intervention and prevention programs. However, the fact that the prevention programs for adolescent dating violence offer a single universal content to everyone indicates that they do not take into consideration the complexity of the problem (Shorey et al., 2012), especially if we take into account that being part of a risk sample in adolescence is a significant predictor of dating violence. Perhaps, one of the most important implications taken from our findings is the need to carefully tailor prevention activities and messages to at-risk adolescents. Educational programs should be implemented in the interventions with these particular groups, especially in juvenile justice centers where one in three adolescents report dating violence victimization.

It is important that dating violence interventions should consider gender differences to respond to the needs of both boys and girls, since a preventive perspective might be more effective if it raises an awareness of both genders as victims and perpetrators of dating violence (Fernández-Fuertes & Fuertes, 2010). Treatment providers and other professionals in contact with adolescents need to be educated on the overlap between adolescent victimization and offending in order to offer adequate services (Lauritsen et al., 1991). Policy makers cannot ignore the results that show the high prevalence of victimization in both boys and girls. However, we should keep in mind that girls are particularly at a higher risk of suffering a negative impact (Taquette & Monteiro, 2019). The higher reported rates of injuries in girls show that they are victims of more severe aggression in their dating relationships than boys. Therefore, it is necessary to try to detect these situations early and to provide special support to female victims (Straus, 2011).

4.2 | Limitations

This study presented certain limitations. Although the evaluation of adolescents from different contexts enriched the results, the fact that the sample was from a specific geographical area of the country and recruited through convenience sampling makes it difficult to generalize the conclusions to adolescents from other Spanish regions. Furthermore, a high percentage of adolescents from the juvenile justice system refused to participate in the study, which is consistent with their tendency to overstep authority and present disruptive behavior (Teplin et al., 2002). Third, the questionnaire used is not specific to the assessment of dating violence, since it was designed to gather information about a wide range of victimizations. However, we should bear in mind that violence in the relationships of adolescents and young people is usually evaluated using adapted versions of instruments created for adults and that there are only a few instruments specifically developed for assessing dating violence in Spain (Rodríguez Franco et al., 2012). The questionnaire used has been previously applied in studies on dating violence (Hamby & Turner, 2013). Furthermore, it has been validated in Spain, presenting good psychometric properties (Pereda et al., 2018). However, the item evaluating physical victimization in the questionnaire refers directly to having received a slap or being hit, excluding milder forms of physical violence such as being pushed or shoved. The wording of this item, along with other factors such as the idea that expressions of violence are increasingly becoming naturalized and established in adolescent couples (Silverman et al., 2001), may have reduced the rates of physical victimization recorded. Thus, the real extent of this type of violence may be higher than the results suggest. Regarding the statistical limitations, confidence intervals around the *OR* point estimates were very wide, indicating that when the study is repeated using the same sampling strategy the uncertainty in the estimate is high (i.e., the estimate will fall between widely separated lower and upper bounds). In addition, no information regarding dating experiences was gathered from the adolescents and the prevalence rates presented include participants who have dating experience, and those without dating experience. Another limitation of the present study was that dating violence reports are made by only one member of the couple; the rates are likely to be higher when obtained from dyadic reports (Vicario-Molina et al., 2015). Studies with both members of adolescent couples together with in-depth interviews about the context in which violence is practiced could improve our knowledge of this serious problem in Spain. Finally, although previous studies have demonstrated the strong relationship between dating violence victimization and perpetration (Straus, 2010), we were unable to evaluate perpetration and, therefore, we cannot corroborate the bidirectionality of the violent acts. This should be considered in future research.

5 | CONCLUSION

Teen dating violence is still a developing line of research in Spain, particularly when referring to at-risk samples. Results show that victimization in dating relationships affects a significant segment of the Spanish youth population. The use of physical, sexual, and electronic violence in dating relationships can start from an early age. As previously found in northern countries, both boys and girls are victims to a similar degree in Spain. The differences lie in the severity of the violence and the extent of sexual violence, with girls being the main victims. Practitioners are faced with the challenge of providing adequate treatment to victims, both females and males. Early adolescence is the best time to intervene in primary prevention in order to prevent adolescents from developing risk behaviors and to avoid

adverse consequences on mental health (e.g., depression and suicidality, substance abuse, disordered eating, and school problems) (Exner-Cortens et al., 2013; Silverman et al., 2001). In this regard, it is important that public prevention policies are based on the results of empirical studies and not only on official reports. Therefore, awareness campaigns on this issue should not only be oriented toward girls, as is the case so far. Regarding the methodological implications of our results, surveys of teen dating violence should contemplate the possibility that both boys and girls can be victims and perpetrators. Likewise, more research including at-risk youth is needed to know the real extent of the problem and its specific characteristics and risk factors in different groups of adolescents. It is at this stage of life that the first episodes of dating violence are reported. If left unchecked and without treatment, these cases could lead to more severe intimate partner violence later (Jouriles et al., 2017).

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This study was supported by the Catalan Institution for Research and Advanced Studies, under the ICREA Academia programme 2016.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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How to cite this article: Oyarzún, J., Pereda, N., & Guilera, G. (2021). The prevalence and severity of teen dating violence victimization in community and at-risk adolescents in Spain. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development, 2021*, 39–58. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cad.20433>