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Dating Violence in Young Men and Women in Chile:  
Evidence from a Survey of College Students

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## ABSTRACT

The socioeconomic environment in Chile provides fertile ground for intimate partner violence to flourish. Yet to date, research and prevention/ response programs have focused almost exclusively on cohabiting and married couples. This study represents a first effort to measure the prevalence of psychological and physical dating violence with a sample of college students in Chile. Based on a survey of students enrolled in general education courses at a public university in Santiago during the Winter 2005 term (N= 484 women, 466 men), we find a high prevalence of both types of violence, with patterns that closely resemble those that have been documented for the United States. Our findings present a compelling case for not continuing to neglect dating violence in Chile and other Latin-American countries: prevention programs beginning in high school could go far in minimizing the opportunity for aggression to become an established style of conflict resolution.

Keywords: dating violence; courtship violence; intimate partner violence

## INTRODUCTION

As is true in other Latin American countries, a high level of intimate partner violence (IPV) exists in Chile.<sup>1-5</sup> The most recent national study found that 50.3% of women in informal or formal unions had ever experienced some form of intimate partner violence,<sup>6</sup> and homicide statistics show that approximately one woman per week is killed by an intimate partner.<sup>7</sup> IPV has come to be widely recognized in Chile as a serious public health concern, responsible for far-reaching problems in the areas of physical, mental, sexual, and reproductive health;<sup>8</sup> its adverse repercussions in the economic sphere have also been noted.<sup>9</sup>

The focus of the research on IPV in Chile, and also in other Latin American countries, has been on couples in consensual or marital unions.<sup>10</sup> Yet studies based on samples of youth in the U.S. - mostly high school and college students - show that patterns of physical partner violence often begin during courtship, in adolescence and early adulthood. Such violence has been viewed with concern not only per se, because of its adverse effects for victims' health,<sup>11-12</sup> but also because of its role as a precursor to more severe violence after transition to cohabitation or formal marriage.<sup>13-15</sup>

Contrary to public perceptions, reviews of the U.S. dating violence literature suggest that women initiate as much or more violence as men.<sup>16-17</sup> However, this assertion must be interpreted with caution: there is some evidence that men are more likely to use violence to intimidate or inspire fear, whereas women are more likely to engage in aggression for reasons of self-defense or to get the partner's attention.<sup>18-19</sup> Since men's initiation of violence is generally regarded with less acceptance than women's initiation, the results are likely to be further confounded by selection bias and social desirability bias in reporting; moreover, men's acts of physical violence have a higher probability of resulting in physical injuries and to have serious psychological consequences.<sup>16</sup> Most research identifies prevalence of dating violence victimization for men and women in the 21%- 45%

range; the estimates vary widely across studies in part because different definitions, methodologies, and time frames are employed.<sup>16</sup>

Beyond the U.S., in a study of university students attending 31 institutions in 16 countries, 17% to 45% of respondents reported that they had physically assaulted their partner in the previous 12 months. At 68% of the universities, a higher percentage of women than men reported having assaulted their partner. Most of the assaults by men and women involved relatively minor attacks, such as slapping and throwing things at the partner, but more serious assaults were also reported. The percentage of students who reported having inflicted an injury on a dating partner ranged from 1.5% to 20%; the rates for males were higher than those for females in 58% of the sites. While the study did not specify whether violence was self-initiated or in self-defense, the findings suggest that the high levels of dating violence documented in the U.S. also prevail in other countries, with similar patterns.<sup>20</sup>

Psychological abuse can also have serious repercussions for victims, but this form of relationship violence has received less attention in research on youth. The U.S. literature suggests a high prevalence, e.g., in a national study of university students, over 80% of men and women reported acts of verbal aggression towards their partner during the past year.<sup>14</sup>

A report commissioned by SERNAM, the Chilean women's bureau, reviewed the sparse available evidence on dating violence in Chile, based on unpublished studies, and concluded that high levels of dating violence likely exist among Chilean youth, with patterns similar to those described above for other countries.<sup>21</sup> To date, there have been no published quantitative studies on physical and psychological violence in college students in Chile. Utilizing the literature for other countries reviewed above as a point of departure, the present study is part of a larger project on gender-based violence with a sample of Chilean college students,<sup>22,23</sup> aimed at beginning to close this gap in the literature. The focus of this study is on the prevalence of psychological and physical

victimization in both female and male students, and description of the contexts in which physical violence occurs.

## **METHODS**

### ***Study Design and Survey***

The 2005 Survey of Student Well-Being was compiled by the first author of this study with the purpose of collecting quantitative data on gender-based violence with a sample of Chilean college students. The survey was administered at a large, public university located in Santiago, with approval from the university's Ethics Committee on Human Subjects Research.

All general education courses offered in the Winter 2005 term were surveyed, with the exception of one which was affected by class cancellation. The survey administrator made a brief presentation to the students regarding the content and significance of the study, and explained that participation was voluntary and that responses would be anonymous. Students signed a consent form.

The sample includes students enrolled in all the educational programs offered by the university. There were 2,451 students enrolled in the 24 general education courses, with some students enrolled in more than one course. At the time of survey administration, 1,193 students were present in class, and 970 students responded, an 81% participation rate; some of the non-response corresponds to students who had already completed the survey in another class. The final sample consisted of 484 women and 466 men. Additional information on the methodology is available elsewhere.<sup>22, 23</sup>

## ***Measures***

The survey included 11 items on psychological dating violence in the past 12 months adapted from a scale used by Foshee,<sup>24</sup> and two sets of questions on physical violence adapted from scales used by Straus et al.<sup>25</sup> and Foshee<sup>24</sup>: 10 items on various forms of assault and 4 items on physical injuries, in the past 12 months and since age 14. These items were addressed to students who had gone out on a date or had had a romantic relationship in the corresponding period. The questions on physical assaults and injuries were accompanied by instructions to omit any incidents in which the partner was acting in self-defense.

## ***Statistical Analysis***

SAS, Version 9.1 (SAS Institute, Cary, NC) was utilized for data analysis. We generated frequencies for incidents of psychological and physical violence, and injuries, and conducted *t*-tests to assess differences in prevalence between women and men. We also generated frequencies to describe the contexts of the most severe incident of physical dating violence.

In the scales of 11, 10, and 4 items regarding psychological violence, physical violence, and injuries, respectively, we made imputations when one item had missing data; a few cases with more missing responses were eliminated. If a subject answered all questions on psychological violence except one, it was assumed that the type of violence left blank did not occur. These imputations using the modal category- i.e., that there was no incident of violence - generate conservative measures of prevalence. A similar procedure was employed for the scales on physical violence and injuries. In order to minimize loss of data, we proceeded with each set of variables one at a time; each table indicates the number of cases in the subgroup considered, and the sample that was left after cases with missing data were dropped.

## RESULTS

Tables 1A and 1B show that 67.3% of women and 79.9% of men reported at least one incident of psychological victimization in the past 12 months; the difference is statistically significant ( $t=-4.03$ ,  $P<0.01$ ). For both women and men, the majority of the incidents reported were in the milder categories: monitoring behaviors, and emotional manipulation and personal insults.

Tables 2A and 2B report the frequencies of various forms of physical victimization, for the past 12 months and since age 14. The summary variable indicates that 15.1% of women reported some form of physical victimization in the past 12 months and 25.4% since age 14; the corresponding percentages for men are 26.6% and 37.9%. For both time periods, the percentage of women who reported physical victimization was significantly lower than the percentage of men; the differences are statistically significant ( $t=-4.00$ ,  $P<0.01$  and  $t=-3.97$ ,  $P<0.01$ , respectively). For both women and men, the majority of the reported incidents were in the mild and moderate violence categories.

Table 3 shows frequencies for physical injuries associated with dating violence, in the past 12 months and since age 14, based on the subgroup of subjects who reported having ever experienced physical violence in the corresponding time period. The summary measure indicates that 15.9% of women in the subgroup reported an injury in the past 12 months and 19.5% since age 14; the corresponding percentages for men are 6.9% and 13.3%. The female-male difference in the percentages corresponding to the period since age 14 is insignificant ( $t=1.34$ ,  $P=0.18$ ); for the past 12-month period, the difference attains marginal significance ( $t=1.71$ ,  $P=0.09$ ).

Tables 4 and 5 describe the contexts of the incident of physical dating violence since age 14 deemed by the subject as "most severe." Although the survey generally had a low percentage of items with no responses, these questions were answered by only 50-53% of women and 34-43% of men who reported some form of physical victimization. The questionnaire did not specify criteria

for defining "most severe," and this ambiguity may account for some of the non-response. The aggressors in the most severe incident of physical dating violence since age 14 were mostly identified as a steady dating partner or spouse: 80.8% in the sample of women and 72.3 % in the sample of men (Table 4). A third of women and 42.7% of men who were victimized did not tell anyone about the incident; 85.0% of women and 87.2% of men who did tell someone confided in a friend; no one informed the police (Table 5).

## DISCUSSION

In this study of 484 women and 466 men enrolled in a Chilean public university, we found that 67.3% of women and 79.9% of men who had had a date or romantic relationship in the past 12 months reported some form of psychological victimization in that period; the corresponding rates for physical victimization were 15.1% and 26.6%; both of these differences were statistically significant. Approximately 16% of women and 6.9% of men reported a physical injury in the past 12 months. This last difference was marginally significant, suggesting the tentative conclusion that while men were more likely to experience some incident of physical victimization in the past 12 months, women were more likely to experience an injury. Overall, these patterns are consistent with study findings for other countries.

Regarding the contexts of the most severe incident of physical violence since age 14, the finding that none of these incidents were reported to the police supports the notion that official statistics seriously underestimate the magnitude of the problem, and also suggests the importance of educating youth about basic human rights, definitions of dating violence, and the protections provided by the law. Friends were identified as the most common confidants when respondents did tell someone about the incident, suggesting that prevention and response programs should include

education of peers on how to identify signs of risk in their friends, and on how to support survivors and help them find additional resources when needed.

Most subjects identified a steady dating partner or spouse as the perpetrator of the most severe incident of physical violence since age 14. This result is consistent with U.S. findings that dating violence is more prevalent in more committed relationships,<sup>26-27</sup> and that there is a positive association between length of relationship and severity of abuse.<sup>28</sup>

The present study has some limitations. Although the sample encompassed students enrolled in all educational programs offered by the university, it was not random and the results cannot be generalized to the whole student body. Our results on dating violence prevalence should be viewed as conservative estimates, as survivors often underreport their experiences.<sup>16, 29</sup> In addition, a considerable number of students were absent from class when the survey was administered; school absenteeism has been linked to risk behaviors,<sup>30-32</sup> which in turn are associated with a higher incidence of dating violence victimization.<sup>33-34</sup>

### ***Next Steps***

Our findings suggest that dating violence in Chilean youth is a public health issue that deserves further attention, beginning with the collection of additional quantitative and qualitative data. If the high levels of dating violence suggested by our results are corroborated by additional studies, the next step will be to begin to establish and evaluate theory-based programs for prevention and response in educational institutions across the country. Programs implemented in the U.S. have sought to address gender role stereotypes, improve conflict-management and communication skills, and change attitudes regarding the acceptability of violence in interpersonal relations.<sup>35-37</sup> A recent review of international research on gender-based violence notes that the

knowledge base regarding the effectiveness of programs to prevent and respond to physical IPV and sexual violence against women is limited, because few initiatives have been rigorously evaluated.<sup>38</sup>

A key element in IPV is a desire to exert power and control. The social climate in Chile provides fertile ground for such behaviors, as perceptions that men can demonstrate love through violent acts are widespread, levels of alcoholism are high, and power relations between men and women are shaped by machismo as a cultural norm.<sup>1,2,4</sup> Economic inequality between men and women, and the corresponding unequal distribution of power within households, yield an economic environment that is also conducive to violence against women.<sup>39</sup> The legal landscape has both reflected and contributed to these socioeconomic conditions. For example, divorce was illegal until 2004, even in cases of spousal abuse, and the first law regarding workplace sexual harassment was passed in 2005.

The high levels of spousal abuse in Chile, with women predominantly as the victims, take place against the backdrop of this social, economic, and legal climate. It seems likely that women lose ground in the power balance in intimate relationships as they become mothers, assuming primary responsibility for the care of their children, and seeing their earnings capacity adversely affected.<sup>21</sup> Given that assaults against women in consensual or marital unions are generally more severe than those that take place in the context of dating, it is understandable that research and interventions to date in Chile have focused on the former. Yet the case for not continuing to neglect dating violence is compelling: prevention programs beginning in the high school years could go far in minimizing the opportunity for aggression to become an established style of conflict resolution.

While the present study was based on data collected in Chile, our results suggest that increased attention to dating violence is also warranted in other Latin American countries where there is currently a similar lack of dating violence data and prevention/ response initiatives, in the midst of similar socioeconomic and legal contexts.

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**Table 1A. Psychological Violence in the Past 12 Months: Women<sup>a, b</sup> (%)**  
n=407

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently
<b>Threatening Behaviors</b>				
Damaged something that belonged to me on purpose	90.9	6.6	2.0	0.5
Acted as if he was going to hit me but stopped	95.6	3.0	1.2	0.3
Threatened to hurt me	96.3	2.7	0.7	0.3
<b>Monitoring</b>				
Would not let me do things with other people	68.8	18.4	9.8	3.0
Told me I could not talk to someone of the opposite sex	91.2	4.7	3.0	1.2
Made me describe where I had been every minute of the day	79.9	13.0	4.4	2.7
Monitored my e-mail or telephone calls	85.5	9.3	3.4	1.7
<b>Emotional Manipulation/ Personal Insults</b>				
Said things to hurt my feelings on purpose	52.6	31.0	13.5	3.0
Insulted me in front of others	85.5	11.1	3.0	0.5
Threatened to start dating someone else	87.5	7.9	3.4	1.2
Blamed me for bad things that he did	69.5	18.2	9.3	3.0
<b>Any Psychological Victimization</b>			67.3	

<sup>a</sup> Categories are not mutually exclusive.

<sup>b</sup> Sub-group: 418 women who indicated having ever gone on a date or having had a romantic relationship in the past 12 months.

**Table 1B. Psychological Violence in the Past 12 Months: Men<sup>a, b</sup>(%)**  
n=373

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently
<b>Threatening Behaviors</b>				
Damaged something that belonged to me on purpose	81.8	13.9	3.5	0.8
Acted as if he was going to hit me but stopped	89.3	7.0	2.1	1.6
Threatened to hurt me	91.2	7.5	1.1	0.3
<b>Monitoring</b>				
Would not let me do things with other people	50.9	26.5	16.9	5.6
Told me I could not talk to someone of the opposite sex	82.6	10.7	5.1	1.6
Made me describe where I had been every minute of the day	66.2	20.9	9.1	3.8
Monitored my e-mail or telephone calls	76.1	13.9	6.4	3.5
<b>Emotional Manipulation/ Personal Insults</b>				
Said things to hurt my feelings on purpose	44.8	32.4	18.8	4.0
Insulted me in front of others	77.8	15.0	5.4	1.9
Threatened to start dating someone else	87.7	8.3	3.5	0.5
Blamed me for bad things that he did	63.0	24.1	8.9	4.0
<b>Any Psychological Victimization</b>			79.9	

<sup>a</sup>Categories are not mutually exclusive.

<sup>b</sup>Subgroup: 388 men who indicated having ever gone on a date or having had a romantic relationship in the past 12 months.

**Table 2A: Physical Violence: Women<sup>a,b</sup>(%)**

	Panel A: Past 12 months n=416				Panel B: Since Age 14 n=445			
	Never	1-2 times	3-5 times	6+ times	Never	1-2 times	3-5 times	6+ times
Subject indicates that somebody with whom she has gone out with on a date or has had a romantic relationship did any of the following things to her:								
<i>Mild Violence</i>								
Scratched or slapped me	98.1	1.7	0.2	0.0	95.3	3.9	0.7	0.2
Pushed, grabbed, or shoved me	88.7	11.1	0.2	0.0	80.7	18.0	0.9	0.5
<i>Any form of mild violence</i>				11.8				20.9
<i>Moderate Violence</i>								
Slammed me or held me against a wall	96.4	2.9	0.5	0.2	90.8	7.4	1.4	0.5
Kicked or bit me	96.4	3.4	0.2	0.0	95.1	3.6	0.9	0.5
<i>Any form of moderate violence</i>				6.3				11.9
<i>Severe Violence</i>								
Hit me with a fist	99.8	0.2	0.0	0.0	98.4	1.1	0.5	0.0
Hit me with something hard	99.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	98.0	1.6	0.0	0.5
Beat me repeatedly	99.5	0.5	0.0	0.0	98.7	1.1	0.0	0.2
Tried to choke me	98.6	1.5	0.0	0.0	97.1	2.5	0.0	0.5
Burned me	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	99.6	0.2	0.2	0.0
Assaulted me with a knife or gun	99.8	0.2	0.0	0.0	98.9	0.7	0.2	0.2
<i>Any form of severe violence</i>				2.4				5.6
<b>Any physical victimization</b>				15.1				25.4

<sup>a</sup>Categories are not mutually exclusive.

<sup>b</sup>Subgroups for Panels A and B: 418 and 447 women who indicated having gone out on a date or having had a romantic relationship in the past 12 months and since age 14, respectively.

**Table 2B: Physical Violence; Men<sup>a, b</sup>(%)**

	Panel A: Past 12 months n=388				Panel B: Since Age 14 n=417			
	Never	1-2 times	3-5 times	6+ times	Never	1-2 times	3-5 times	6+ times
Subject indicates that somebody with whom she has gone out with on a date or has had a romantic relationship did any of the following things to him:								
<i>Mild Violence</i>								
Scratched or slapped me	84.2	12.4	2.1	1.3	73.0	19.0	5.1	2.9
Pushed, grabbed, or shoved me	86.1	10.9	2.3	0.8	79.9	14.2	5.0	1.0
<i>Any form of mild violence</i>				21.6				33.3
<i>Moderate Violence</i>								
Slammed me or held me against a wall	95.4	4.1	0.0	0.5	90.7	8.2	0.7	0.5
Kicked or bit me	88.9	7.5	2.6	1.0	86.5	8.4	4.1	1.0
<i>Any form of moderate violence</i>				13.1				18.7
<i>Severe Violence</i>								
Hit me with a fist	95.6	3.7	0.8	0.0	93.7	4.8	1.2	0.2
Hit me with something hard	96.7	3.1	0.3	0.0	94.2	4.8	0.5	0.5
Beat me repeatedly	95.4	3.4	0.8	0.5	94.7	3.4	1.4	0.5
Tried to choke me	99.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	98.3	1.7	0.0	0.0
Burned me	99.2	0.3	0.5	0.0	98.3	1.0	0.2	0.5
Assaulted me with a knife or gun	99.7	0.0	0.0	0.3	99.3	0.5	0.0	0.2
<i>Any form of severe violence</i>				11.1				15.1
<b>Any physical victimization</b>				26.6				37.9

<sup>a</sup>Categories are not mutually exclusive.

<sup>b</sup>Subgroups for Panel A and B: 388 and 417 men who indicated having gone out on a date or having had a romantic relationship in the past 12 months and since age 14, respectively.

**Table 3: Injuries<sup>a, b</sup> (%)**

	Women		Men	
	Panel A: past 12 months	Panel B: since age 14	Panel A: past 12 months	Panel B: since age 14
	n=63	n=113	n=102	n=158
<i>Mild Injury.</i> Student reports the following happened due to a fight with the partner: “I had a sprain, bruise or small cut because of a fight with a dating partner.”				
	15.9	19.5	6.9	13.3
<i>Severe Injury.</i> Student reports that at least one of one of the following things happened due to a fight with the partner: “I passed out from being hit on the head by my dating partner in a fight;” “I went to a doctor for an injury from a fight with my partner;” “I needed to see a doctor for an injury from a fight with my partner, but didn’t go.”				
	1.6	3.5	0.0	0.6
<b>Any Injury</b>	15.9	19.5	6.9	13.3

<sup>a</sup>Categories are not mutually exclusive.

<sup>b</sup> Subgroup, Panel A: 63 women and 103 men who indicated having ever experienced physical dating violence victimization in the past12 months.

Subgroup, Panel B: 113 women and 158 men who indicated having ever experienced physical dating violence victimization in the past12 months.

**Table 4. Aggressor in Most Severe Incident of Physical Dating Violence<sup>a</sup> (%)**

	<b>Women</b> n=57	<b>Men</b> n=54
someone whom student was dating casually	15.8	24.1
boyfriend/ ex-boyfriend, or girlfriend/ ex-girlfriend, or fiancée/ ex-fiancée	79.0	66.7
spouse/ ex-spouse	1.8	5.6
other	3.5	3.7

<sup>a</sup> Subgroup: 113 women and 158 men who indicated having ever experienced physical dating violence since age 14.

**Table 5. Did Victim Tell Someone About the Most Severe Incident of Physical Dating Violence? <sup>a, b</sup> (%)**

	<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>
<b>PANEL A</b>		
Did not tell anyone	33.3	42.7
<b>PANEL B</b>		
<b>Told</b>		
mother/ step-mother	30.0	15.4
father/ step-father	12.5	2.6
brother/sister	17.5	7.7
other family members	15.0	0.0
friend	85.0	87.2
psychologist/ social worker	5.0	12.8
doctor	2.5	0.0
a priest, rabbi, or other religious leader	2.5	0.0
teacher/ professor	7.5	2.6
police	0.0	0.0
other/ no specific individual mentioned	17.5	7.7

<sup>a</sup> Categories in Panel B are not mutually exclusive.

<sup>b</sup> Subgroup, Panel A: 113 women and 158 men who indicated having ever been victims of physical dating violence since age 14. Within this subgroup, 60 women and 68 men responded to the questions on whether they told someone about the incident and if so, to whom.

Subgroup, Panel B: 40 women and 39 men who indicated having told someone about the incident.