

From the Editor

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Teen Sexual Violence: 'You Don't Want to Go There'

Judy A. Rollins

The high school years are complicated. So many physical changes and emotional challenges; so many decisions to make. For many teenagers, the choice of whether to attend a house party is too much temptation to resist. Are high school house parties as wild and dangerous as some we have read about recently? What goes on there? I asked Google, came upon the Quora (2016) question and answer site, and this is what I discovered.

Teenagers are asking Google questions much like mine and receiving a variety of answers. In response to one teen's question, "Do teen parties really happen in the USA like in the movies?" one teen quoted Oscar Wilde (1889): "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life." However, other entries spoke of parties that mimic Hollywood productions. For example, a 23-year-old young man described a party he remembers from his senior year:

At that party, there were a lot of things that shouldn't be present with teenagers. Cocaine, sex, meth, sex, alcohol, sex, and weed, and sex. So as far as I'm concerned, high school parties are as crazy as they seem to be. I'm only 23 now but I can still see how crazy teenagers can be. They do whatever is available because they want to experience it all.

In response to a 15-year-old boy who wanted to know how to approach girls at a party about having sex, a high school senior replied, beginning with a commentary about a party he had recently attended:

Overall, this was THE best party I've been to, out of all 4 years of high school. I myself got very drunk, but not bad drunk, just you know, let's say, loopy. For me it was fun, why? I kept myself under control—for the most part... Yes, there were very attractive girls there; yes, some were quite uh, slutty, I kept my hormones intact. Okay, maybe I made out with one, but still, be careful.

You're in a mass of teenagers, probably going to be drinking, a very fun mess. However, your judgment may be lost, you may think a girl wants to, but she doesn't. No means no. I can't stress this enough. Be careful. Be very careful. But enjoy yourself, you're only in high school and a teenager for so long.

Sexual Violence In High School

Although most teens seem to heed this teenager's advice, sexual assault and rape are a reality for some high school adolescents, often connected with alcohol and house parties. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2017a), in 2017, 7.4% of high school students had ever been forced to have sex (see Figure 1). A significantly higher percentage of female students (11.3%) were ever forced to have sex than male students (3.5%). There were no significant differences between the percentages of white students, black students, and Hispanic students who were ever forced to have sex. According to 10-year trend data, the percentage of students who were ever forced to have sex did not

change significantly from 2007 through 2017.

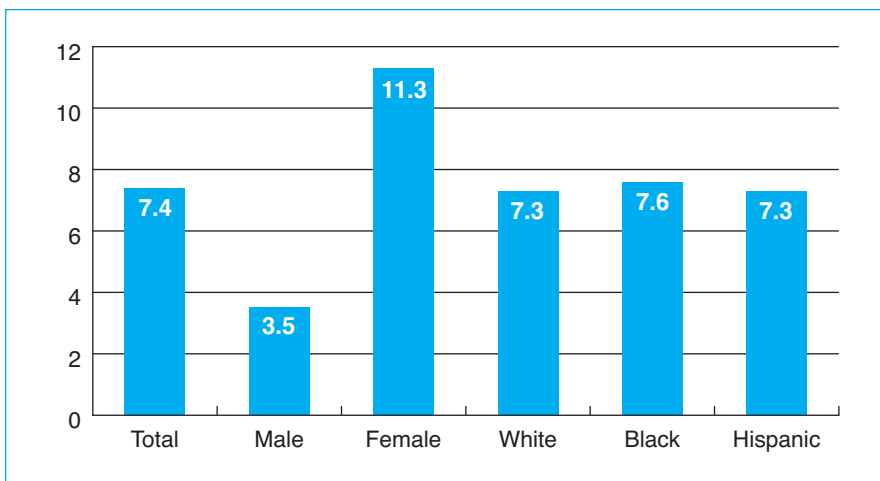
Regarding sexual dating violence, in 2017, 6.9% of high school students (among the 68.3% of students who dated or went out with someone in the past year) had experienced sexual dating violence—defined as being forced to do sexual things, including kissing, touching, or being physically forced to have sexual intercourse, they did not want to do by someone they were dating or going out with during the past year. The good news is that sexual dating violence has decreased significantly, from a high of 10.6% in 2015 (CDC, 2017a).

Teen Dating Violence

The CDC (2018) defines teen dating violence as the physical, sexual, psychological, or emotional aggression within a dating relationship, including stalking. These behaviors are further explained as follows (CDC, 2017b):

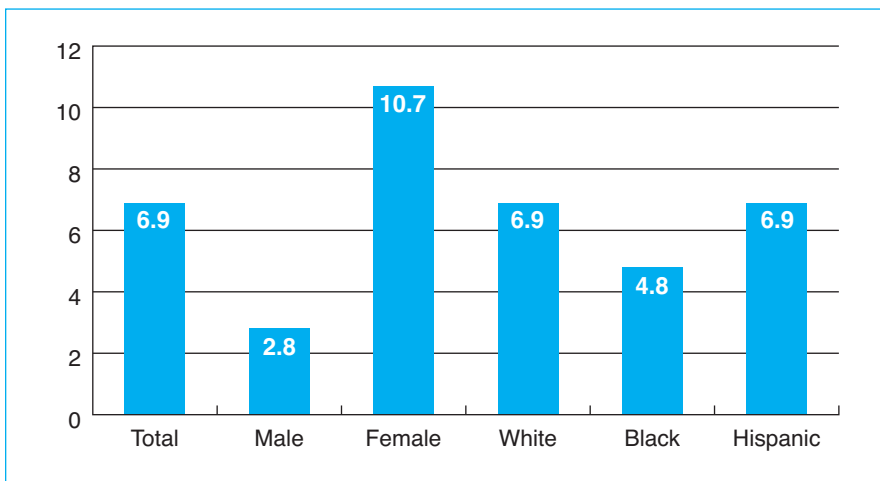
- **Physical violence:** When a person hurts or tries to hurt a partner by hitting, kicking, or using another type of physical force.
- **Sexual violence:** Forcing or attempting to force a partner to take part in a sex act, sexual touching, or a non-physical sexual event (e.g., sexting) when the partner does not or cannot consent.
- **Stalking:** A pattern of repeated, unwanted attention and contact by a partner that causes fear or concern for one's own safety or the safety of someone close to the victim.
- **Psychological aggression:** The use of verbal and non-verbal communication with the intent to harm

Figure 1.
Percentage of High School Students Who Were Ever Forced to Have Sex, by Sex and by Race/Ethnicity, United States, 2017



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017a.

Figure 2.
Percentage of High School Students Who Experienced Sexual Dating Violence in the Past Year, by Sex and by Race/Ethnicity, United States, 2017



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017a.

another person mentally or emotionally and/or exert control over another person.

Abuse can take place in person or electronically, and can occur between current or former dating partners. As we have been reminded of by the recent Supreme Court justice confirmation hearings, abuse often goes unreported.

The impact of dating violence in high school can have short- and long-term negative effects on developing adolescents: 1) depression and anxiety; 2) unhealthy behaviors, such as a use of tobacco, drugs, and alcohol; 3) antisocial behaviors; and 4) suicidal thoughts. Further, teens who are victims of dating violence in high school are at higher risk for victimization during college (CDC, 2018).

Preventing Teen Sexual Violence

Efforts to curb teen dating violence can begin in the pre-teen years. Young people need to learn to effectively manage their feelings and to use healthy communication skills. The CDC has developed many helpful resources, such as *Dating Matters: Strategies to Promote Healthy Teen Relationships* (www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/datingmatters). This model focuses on 11- to 14-year-olds and features multiple prevention components that focus on individuals, peers, families, schools, and neighborhoods. The CDC also offers a technical package of a multiple strategies intended to stop intimate partner violence, which includes teen dating violence, before it starts.

We know that peer guidance is very important to teenagers. Sometimes peer advice, such as the Google response below regarding sexual assault, could be the greatest deterrent of all:

It's a path you do not want to go down. It can ruin your professional future (if the police get involved). Many jobs do background checks. If you want to work for the government, and if you need the top secret clearance, the form to complete is 150 pages long... It asks about everything! ■■■

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