Experiences of Partner Violence among Young Men who Have Sex with Men: Implications for HIV and Violence Prevention Programs

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Background

- Research examining intimate partner violence (IPV) within the relationships of young men who have sex with men (YMSM) is scarce.

- Limited research has focused on providing estimates of the rates and types of violence that occur, which indicate that YMSM experience IPV at rates similar to those of heterosexual females; Rates vary between 12% and 78%

- In spite of this, evidence-based interventions targeting IPV among YMSM - or other sexual minorities - are nonexistent.

- Developmental period of emerging adulthood offers opportunities for intervention

- More in-depth research on the covariates of IPV in YMSM relationships is necessary to develop interventions
Young Men Who Have Sex with Men (YMSM)

- Among adolescent males ages 13-19, about 91% of all diagnosed HIV infections are from male-to-male sexual contact.
- There was a 22% increase in estimated new infections in this group from 2008 to 2010.
Young Men Who Have Sex with Men (YMSM)

Diagnoses of HIV Infection among Men Who Have Sex with Men, by Age Group, 2009-2013—United States and 6 Dependent Areas
Objectives

① Describe the types of IPV YMSM commonly experience;
② Explain how HIV risk is related to IPV perpetration and victimization;
③ Identify the factors that may influence IPV perpetration among YMSM; and
④ Identify intervention opportunities that may be effective with this vulnerable population.
Methods

**PHASE 1**

- **Focus Groups**
  - N=11

- **Surveys**
  - N=101

Inclusion Criteria: 1) ages 18-25; 2) identified as Latino/Hispanic, African America, White/Caucasian/API; 3) identifies as gay, bisexual or has had sex with a man; 4) in a primary partner relationship with a man in the last 12 months; 5) lives in LA County

**PHASE 2**

- **Case Selection**
  - Involved in "minor" forms of IPV based on CTS scores
  - Interpretation based on QUAN and QUAL

- **Qualitative Interviews**
  - N=26
  - History of IPV
  - Perceived causes and Motivations
  - Role of alcohol and drugs
  - Help-seeking behaviors
Results: Prevalence

Most common types:
- grabbing partner
- push/shove partner
- slapping partner
- kick/punch

Insisting on sex,
- insist on sex
- without a condom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Victim</th>
<th>Perpetrator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Aggression</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Assault</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Coercion</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Injury</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Psychological Aggression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Perpetrator</th>
<th>Victim</th>
<th>Mutual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Insulted or swore</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shouted at partner</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threatened to hit or throw something</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destroyed something of partner’s’s</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did something to spite partner</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Called partner fat or ugly</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accused partner of being lousy lover</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OVERALL</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OVERALL MEAN</td>
<td>27.24</td>
<td>29.17</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Psychological Aggression

- Usually not considered as a part of IPV - although after considering it, many young men acknowledged that this was damaging.
- Occur early on in relationships and often a precursor to more severe forms of violence.
- Respondents felt that their partners used their vulnerability against them.
- Jealousy most common reason for verbal aggression - social media and technology play a huge role in this.

And then Facebook got in the way. He had a picture of his body...I asked him to take it down...then I asked him for his password...So pretty much it started from Facebook, from not giving me a password, from him calling me a bitch, that I’m no good, that I have loose screws in my head...it just escalated to him choking me and then me socking him, giving him a black eye. It was just dumb I guess.

What’s gonna hurt me is you stop my money from coming. And that’s what he tried to do, in dumb ways like calling my job...and tell them they should random drug test me. Or he used to call my house and tell my grandparents the reason I don’t want to come out to them is because I’m scared they gonna cut me off...and he would talk about our sex life to my grandparents.
## Physical Violence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical Violence</th>
<th>Perpetrator</th>
<th>Victim</th>
<th>Mutual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kicked or bit</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slapped partner</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beat up partner</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hit partner w/something that hurt</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choked partner</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slammed partner against wall</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threw something at partner</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used knife or gun on partner</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pushed or shoved partner</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twisted partner’s arm or hair</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burned or scalded partner</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OVERALL (MEAN)</td>
<td>66% (16.47)</td>
<td>67% (16.07)</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Trajectory of smaller incidents of violence leading to more severe forms were described in about two-thirds of the interviews.

Less severe forms were described as “normal” part of a relationship - “little pats and slaps and stuff like that…”

In instances of more severe forms, similar to heterosexual descriptions, young men tended to describe these episodes as being provoked or pushed in physical violence.

Most of the time, these fights started by something “dumb” - but something quickly spiral the situation into violence.

He was just joking around, he was watching this gay video on TV...he was messing around about how he would love to fuck that one. I just had a really bad day and I just wasn’t having it, so I threw a plate and it hit his head and then we started fighting.

After that, he was like, ‘I can’t believe you fucking hit me’. I am all, ‘I can’t believe you fucking told me that. No one---I have never had to get to that place’. Ever since then, that’s when the violence started going on.
## Injury

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Perpetrator</th>
<th>Victim</th>
<th>Mutual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Passed out from fight</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Went to doctor for injury</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needed to see doctor but didn’t</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt pain the next day</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visible sprain or bruise from fight</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broken bone from fight</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OVERALL</strong></td>
<td><strong>24%</strong></td>
<td><strong>27%</strong></td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OVERALL MEAN</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.33</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.95</strong></td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Sexual Coercion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Perpetrator</th>
<th>Victim</th>
<th>Mutual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Used force to make partner have sex</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used threats to make partner have anal/oral sex</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insisted on anal/oral sex (no force)</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insisted on sex without a condom</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OVERALL</strong></td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OVERALL MEAN</strong></td>
<td>10.66</td>
<td>10.93</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Seems to occur when young men are younger and in their first relationships, feeling ill-equipped to advocate for themselves.

• Alcohol or drugs commonly involved.

• While such instances are relatively common, young men hesitant to call it rape.

I told him I’m a virgin and I do not want to have sex until we’ve been dating for like one or two months...[after a couple weeks] he came over....and we were messing around an then he kind of like turned me over and kind of like forced himself on me and I kept telling him ‘No, no, I’m not ready’. And he’s like ‘No, come on, come on. It’s OK’ He just like kept ignoring me....Now when I think back on it, would I consider that rape? Not necessarily, I don’t know.
Relationship of HIV and IPV: Syndemics Theory
**Contextual Stressors:** Socioeconomic, Racial/Ethnic Family of Origin (Abuse, Parental Psychopathology/Substance Abuse)

**General Stressors of Urban Life:** Higher Costs of Living, Relative Anonymity

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**Gay Identity Development**

- First Awareness of Same Sex Sexual Attraction—Wonder if I’m Gay—First Same Gender Sexual Activity—Decide I’m Gay—Disclosure of Being Gay to Others

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**Development of Internalized Homophobia**

- Devalue Other Gay Males Hide Self/Monitor Behaviors
- Withdrawal from Active Social Life
- Assume Marginalized Group Identity
- Overachieve
- Disassociate (e.g. During Sex Play)

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**Protogay Social Skills**

- Ambivalent Attachment to Mainstream Social Cliques
- Possible Delayed Identity Attachment to Any Social Clique
- Possible Attachment to Non-Mainstream Social Cliques
- Possible Development of Ability to Thrive in Adversity
- Possible Development of Vulnerability to Psychosocial Health Problems

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**Masculine Socialization Stress:** Shaming and Other Punishment of Gay Males for Failing to Achieve Masculine Ideals

**Cultural Homophobia:** Cultural Norms and Institutional Policies that Discriminate Against Gay Men (e.g. Marriage, Adoption, Tax Laws, Military Service, “Glass Ceiling” in Professional Settings)

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**Access to Minority Weaknesses**

- Continued Sexual Shaming/Silence
- Stress of Being Openly Gay in a Heterosexual Context
- Social Disconnect
- Increased Target for Abuse
- High Background Prevalence Rates of Substance Abuse, Violence, MH Problems, STDs, and HIV

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**Access to Minority Strengths**

Increased Opportunity for:

- Social Bonding
- Sense of Community
- Romantic Partners
- Healthy Sense of Being Male
- Healthy Sense of Being Gay
- Economic

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**Development of a Psycho-Social Health Problem**

- Substance Abuse
- Depression
- Violence Victimization
- HIV Sexual Risk Behavior

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**HIV Vulnerability**

SYNDROME
Example of Syndemics among YMSM

• Our own work found that young men who experienced physical violence from a partner were:
  • More likely to engage in substance use/misuse;
  • More likely to have depressive symptoms; and
  • In turn those individuals were more likely to have unprotected anal intercourse
Factors for Intervention Development: One Example

- Power dynamics are often cited in relationship to IPV
- Power in YMSM relationships is complex and dynamic and has different aspects to consider
Individual/Dyadic: Sexual Positioning

Young men expressed that taking on the receptive role in anal intercourse, or the “bottom”, often meant that this partner was in a less powerful position in the relationship.

Receptive partners were described as “submissive”, “weaker”, and the “female” in the relationship.

Some feel that the “bottom” may have a stronger emotional attachment in the relationship, thereby making him potentially more vulnerable.

Conversely, “tops” seen as more masculine and in control in the relationship.
Individual/Dyadic: Gender Roles

- Respondents often said that someone had to take on the feminine role or submissive role.
  - Females described as “catty”, “soft spoken”
  - Males as “independent”, “taking care” of a partner

- In several instances, young men commented that developing and sustaining a gay relationship was challenging in the absence of real role models.

- In spite of what was described as more typical in their own relationships, respondents seemed to desire more egalitarian relationships - 
  - I rather it be equal 100%, 50-50, than one person feeling like they can take it, almost like taking advantage of the other person.
  - Just because I feel like even though you are in a gay relationship you still go by a straight relationship-- like the way if there is a guy and there is a girl, it’s just, you just have to go with that flow. It’s always going to-- I am not saying be a complete female but there has be someone that’s more masculine and in control than someone that’s not.
Individual/Dyadic: Maturity

• Particularly salient as many had very limited dating or relationship experience given their age and/or their perception of having limited options for romantic relationships as young gay men.

• Not uncommon for young men to report physical, sexual, and emotional violence in their first relationships. They may remain feeling that they “couldn’t do any better” or are “insecure with low self-esteem.”

• Also common for young men’s first relationships to be with substantially older partners.

I have changed a lot. After being with [ex-boyfriend], I got to experience a lot more different men and as I grew older, I grew into my looks and I got a lot more opportunities. So, I feel like now I don’t feel like... that’s the only person that will love me and that will be attracted to me.
Societal Influences: Acceptability of Violence between Men

- Does IPV even exist in gay men's relationships?
  - Most respondents felt that partner violence existed between a man and a woman
- Described a "biological instinct" for men to fight
- Typical way of dealing with conflicts with brothers and friends growing up was to fight – "boys will be boys"

"I feel like the capacity for violence is a lot higher by default just based on the excessive testosterone in a male-male relationship... Also if possible, I feel like it's more possible for both partners to be violent and both partners to be simultaneously perpetrators and victims. Because they're both, I mean, they're both men, they're both capable of being violent and both capable of fighting.. have that desire to fight each"
Societal Influences:

- Respondents felt that limitations society has put on gay relationships were to blame for some of the ambivalence about gay relationships.
- Feeling unable to openly "bond" has limited their abilities to develop relationships in the same way as heterosexual couples.
- Partners' comfort in being "out" can lead to some power differentials as well.
- Reticence to acknowledge IPV as an issue in gay communities.

When I was in a relationship, my partner really wanted to show public displays of affection. And it made me kind of uncomfortable....he would try to like hold my hand or something, in public. And uh, I felt really uncomfortable about it. And it usually creates like an awkward atmosphere between the both of us... And then, it usually ends up in a fight. ‘cause he, he felt very unwanted, rejected, and stuff like that.

With a gay relationship, I feel like there is a lot of insecurity that happens. So, when it comes to abusive relationship, some guys I feel like they would back down and just take it because they don’t want to add another flaw on top of them.

Basically, you don’t, you don’t have the opportunity to get married. So it’s like, what are we doing, you know, how long is this going to go?
Intersectionality of Age, Sexual Identity and Gender: Key Factors Related to IPV among YMSM
Discussion

• Survey data found high prevalence rates of all types of IPV – as both victim and perpetrator - as measured by the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale

• Developing evidence-based interventions addressing IPV among YMSM may be an innovative approach for HIV prevention.

• Power dynamics do exist in same-sex relationships. As with heterosexual relationships, these dynamics are not created in a vacuum; they are highly influenced by societal factors

  ▫ Interventions targeted towards women are developed with a power and gender framework. Similar frameworks should be integrated into interventions for sexual minority populations
Discussion, continued

- Clear trajectory of violence in relationships
- IPV described as being a part of their early or first relationships – again early interventions are needed to develop anger management and conflict resolution skills
- Gender neutral programs in schools or other settings may be appropriate as YMSM may not feel a part of a “typical” dating violence curriculum
- What about social media and its role?
- Clearly implications for HIV given high rates of sexual coercion; YMSM don’t see this as rape typically
- YMSM already have higher rates of mental health problems than general population – IPV exacerbates this
- Mutual perpetration of self defense????
Discussion Questions

• What approaches for IPV prevention may be most successful with YMSM and other sexual minority (SM) groups?
• In your work, how often do you come across IPV among SMs?
Acknowledgements

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