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## Executive Summary

*“I have come to understand over the past few years how prevalent of a problem teen dating violence truly is. When I look back at my own situation, I always believed that I was alone. I believed that my situation was different. I wanted to feel as if I was doing the right thing by letting myself stay in the abusive relationship. What I know now is that if I had known I wasn’t alone, I may have been able to help him and to help myself. I usually have one message for young people who may go through something similar: You are not alone.”*

—female teen dating violence survivor

Sexual and dating violence is not only a crime that disproportionately affects adolescents and young adult women, it is a huge challenge for those who are responsible for the wellbeing of youth in New York City—this includes health professionals, educators, community leaders, and public officials. It is a central concern for young people themselves and for their parents.

Research has demonstrated that both male and female victims of sexual and dating violence are at greater risk for developing an array of health risk behaviors and adverse life outcomes affecting psychological, social, and physical wellbeing. Given that childhood and adolescence is a time of increasing risk and vulnerability for sexual and dating violence, as well as a time when sexual violence can have overwhelming and injurious effects, it is critical more learning and continued improvement occur, as well as a deeper understanding of how violence develops in relationships, how it is related to other negative behaviors, and how to prevent it. Assisting young people facing these problems and learning how to avoid the harmful outcomes resulting from these experiences is key.

The *Partners and Peers* study was conducted to establish baseline data on the prevalence and

nature of sexual and dating violence among young people in New York City area schools. This includes information on perpetration of sexual and dating violence, disclosure of violence, the degree of association with exposure to community violence, and the degree of mutual participation in partner violence, all with the aim of developing effective intervention and prevention programs. The study was carried out jointly by the New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault and the Columbia Center for Youth Violence Prevention. The study partners combined resources and expertise to conduct this study and to advocate for social and systems change in New York City.

The study was conducted in four public high schools in New York City and all students were invited to participate. The New York City Department of Education granted researchers permission to enroll NYC high school students anonymously, with their parents’ consent, and their own permission with the agreement of school principals and district superintendents. Students from four schools, reflecting a range of cultural groups, were asked to participate. Schools were selected through convenience sampling, three in Manhattan and one in Brooklyn. In all, the Alliance and CCYVP surveyed 1,454 students. Of these, 64 surveys were incomplete and were eliminated due to the extensive missing data. (See, for full explanation of sampling procedure, Appendix A: Methodology on page 75.) The total sample size for the analyses presented is 1,312 youth ranging in age from 13–21. This data collection took place during the 2006–2007 school year and was approved by three Institutional Review Boards.

The Alliance is one of the few nonprofit anti-sexual-violence organizations that conducts applied research for social change. The Alliance works with city agencies, rape crisis programs, hospitals, community-based organizations, and New Yorkers to improve care for survivors and end sexual violence in New York City. The CCYVP is a collaboration of researchers, policymakers, and community

representatives committed to understanding and reducing youth violence. The CCYVP is one of 12 Academic Centers of Excellence funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Both organizations are committed to ending sexual and dating violence *before* it occurs. The study seeks to assist youth experiencing this violence and represents the first comprehensive exploration of teen sexual and dating violence in New York City.

*Partners and Peers reports on male and female adolescent perpetration and victimization in their dating relationships. The study does not in any way wish to undermine the clear and widely accepted understanding that the impact of relationship violence falls primarily on women who suffer the majority of severe forms of violence—battering, stalking, rape, and murder.*

### **Key Findings:**

**Sexual and dating violence are extremely common among NYC youth.** In this study, 16% (or more than one in six students) reported experiencing sexual violence at some point in their lives. Of these youth, 10% reported ever experiencing nonpartner sexual violence (sexual abuse or forced sex). Fourteen percent reported experiencing partner sexual violence (either current or past). Youth were also asked how often in their lives any (current or previous) partner had hurt them physically. Among students with a dating history, more than half (56%) reported experiencing physical dating violence. Of these youth, more than a quarter (27%) reported ever being pushed or shoved by a dating partner, and 11% said that a dating partner punched them at some point in their lives.

**Dating violence is often inclusive of both physical and sexual violence.** There is tremendous overlap between the various forms of dating violence. In this study, 71% of youth who experienced threatening behaviors from a dating partner also experienced physical violence from that dating partner. Likewise, 63% of youth who reported experiencing sexual violence from their partner experienced physical dating violence from that same partner.

**The violence experienced by NYC youth can be serious and potentially lethal.** Though much of the violence reported here involves hitting, shoving, or unwilling/unwanted sexual touching, 8% reported that a dating partner had choked them, and 3% reported that a dating partner hurt them with an object or weapon. Nine percent reported having been forced into sexual activity, and 3% reported rape.

**Physical dating violence is not one-sided nor is it all males against females.** Thirty-two percent of students, both males and females, reported perpetrating one or more episodes of physical violence against their partners in the past year.

**Youth experience sexual violence from people they know.** In this study, 89% of youth who had experienced sexual violence at some time in their lives said it was committed against them by someone they knew. Youth are experiencing this violence at the hands of people they know and trust, such as their dating partners, family members, and other acquaintances.

**Many young people do not feel that being hit, shoved, or forced into sexual behavior is “abuse” or “violence.”** Only 20% of youth who had experienced physically or sexually violent behaviors from a dating partner said yes when asked if they had experienced “physical or sexual violence.”

**Youth tell their friends first, though about 40% never told anyone.** More than half (59%) of youth who reported they had experienced sexual or dating violence had told someone about their experiences. Youth are most likely to tell their friends *first*. Overall, 88% of youth told their friends about the violence, whereas 52% told their parents or another adult. Nearly a quarter (or 24%) sought help for sexual and dating violence from a health professional, teacher, or guidance counselor.

**Youth experience adverse health outcomes linked to physical and sexual dating violence.** Both victimization and perpetration of physical and sexual dating violence is linked with adverse health outcomes for youth. Youth currently experiencing physical *and* sexual violence in their dating relationships are nearly two times more likely to report high emotional discomfort and three-and-a-half

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times more likely to report high physical discomfort than youth not currently experiencing this violence. Likewise, youth who report either experiencing or perpetrating sexual violence in their current dating relationship are two-and-a-half times more likely to rate their health as fair to poor than youth who are not.

**Dating violence does not occur in a vacuum: Perpetrating other forms of youth violence is associated with perpetrating physical and sexual dating violence.** For boys, carrying a weapon within the last 30 days and/or gang membership in the past year were both risk factors for perpetrating sexual violence against an intimate partner. Girls who reported being in a physical fight within the past year were more likely to perpetrate physical violence against a dating partner than girls who did not.

**Youth who have experienced nonpartner sexual violence are at an increased risk of being either a perpetrator or a victim of dating violence.** Of the youth who reported nonpartner sexual violence, 19% reported sexual violence in an intimate relationship in their lives. Boys with a history of nonpartner sexual violence are almost four times more likely to report physical dating violence victimization than males without this history. Likewise, females with a history of nonpartner sexual violence are almost three times more likely to experience physical dating violence than females without. Nearly one in five youth that have experienced sexual violence have experienced *both* partner and nonpartner sexual violence.

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**Young people care about this issue:**

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*“Now I know how cruel people can be when they take you for granted and do sexual things to you without your okay to do it...”*  
—17-year-old female

*“It made me feel so bad about myself I tried suicide.”*  
—16-year-old female

*“I think that strong communication, trust, and lots of support between people can help reduce sexual or dating violence. Also I feel that information should be everywhere, in case people do need help.”*  
—18-year-old male

*“I haven’t been in an unsafe relationship that was seriously unsafe, just one or two events with one partner that I felt unsafe. But I see in other people’s relationship and if my friends go through it, it hurts.”*  
—16-year-old female

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## School principals care about this issue:

*“We knew it would be a valuable study that would provide us with a great deal of information about our students. Once we saw the results, we shared them with the entire school community because it was important to educate everyone about the problem.”*

—participating school principal

*“Conflict and violence in dating relationships is a large problem in our city and in my school, and it is imperative to better understand how we can help our young people maintain healthy relationships.”*

—participating school principal

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## Everyone should!

This study recommends following a two-pronged strategy: preventing sexual and dating violence among NYC youth and providing appropriate response to those who have experienced this violence. Pursuit of these strategies simultaneously is essential to address the scope of sexual and dating violence occurring among the young.

## Based on this data, the study recommends:



**Schools and programs that work with youth should include a focus on primary prevention.** Primary prevention focuses on examining and addressing the root causes of violence so that it can end *before* it occurs.

**Teens should have access to youth-friendly, culturally appropriate, and language-appropriate referral information.** Given that teens disclose incidents of sexual and dating violence to friends first, providing them with referral information is key to helping them support each other and reducing the stigma around sexual and dating violence. One such resource that the Alliance developed is the NYC Teen Health Map: a subway map on one side and a youth-friendly referral guide on the other, which folds into a discreet card to be tucked into the wallet. The referral guide includes information for youth who may have experienced sexual violence, hotlines to call, free counseling locations, and healthcare centers in each of the five boroughs (see text box: NYC Teen Health Map, page 72).



**School personnel and others who work with youth should be trained how to properly handle disclosures and refer youth to services.** Since many youth who have experienced sexual and dating violence tell someone about that violence, it is imperative that all those who work with youth are trained in how to properly handle disclosures and how to refer youth to services. Proper responses to disclosures of sexual and dating violence require that sensitivity and respect be given to the survivor. This training should be inclusive of several audiences: youth workers, including after-school program staff; school staff, including principals, teachers, guidance counselors, nurses, security guards, and janitors (among others); and healthcare professionals. This means that appropriate policies and procedures *must* be implemented in these settings.



**Healthcare professionals should speak with adolescents about sexual and physical violence.** This study expanded on the growing body of literature that shows the connections between sexual and physical violence and adverse health outcomes. These associations highlight the importance of talking about sexual and relationship violence during youth healthcare visits. Healthcare professionals, when assessing the health of teenagers, must consider the impact of current sexual and physical violence and past sexual abuse in contributing to the presentation and exacerbation of physical and emotional symptoms.