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YOUTH WHO EXPERIENCE VIOLENT VICTIMIZATION SEEK INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS AT AN EARLIER AGE

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A new *American Sociological Review* study has found that experiencing violence as an adolescent leads to early romantic relationships and cohabitating. On average, they found that victimized youth entered romantic relationships nine months earlier than non-victimized youth.

“Overall, we find that victims begin dating sooner and progress more quickly from dating to first unions than do non-victims,” the researchers report in their article.

“We theorize that these relationships could be a feasible coping mechanism because dating is more normative during adolescence,” said David Warner, Associate Professor of Sociology at University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He explained that relationships can provide “a source of social support, a resource for instilling and improving self-esteem... particularly for these older adolescent victims who are also on the precipice of a number of developmental changes as they enter into high school.”

The impact, however, depended on what age the violence episodes occurred. Those victimized in early adolescence are more likely to withdraw from dating and union formation whereas late adolescent victims appear to “overinvest in relationships—at least temporarily—displaying accelerated entry into dating and rapid progression to first unions.”

To assess victimization, the researchers used data from adolescents who reported direct experience with four types of trauma including being “jumped,” shot, stabbed, or threatened by a knife or gun.

However, Warner cautions, that while entering into relationships may seem healthy, entering them on average nine months earlier may be problematic. Nine months he says is “a whole different story for someone twelve or thirteen than for someone in their thirties.”

In addition to dating, the study showed that victims of violence also began cohabitating more quickly than their peers - again, nine months early.

“They start forming unions about nine months earlier too so, you’re really talking sort of 18 months ahead of schedule,” noted Tara Warner, the study’s lead author, also of the University of Nebraska.

The differences they found varied by age but not gender which surprised the researchers.

“We speculate that may be due to just the overwhelming effect of violent victimization,” said Tara Warner.

The researchers, along with Danielle C. Kuhl of Bowling Green State University, used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health. The results of their study, **"Cut to the Quick: The Consequences of Youth Violent Victimization for the Timing of Dating Debut and First Union Formation,"** were published in the December *American Sociological Review*.

Past research shows that early cohabitation is fraught with risks including an increased risk of experiencing intimate partner violence, communication problems, and other negative outcomes.

Tara Warner warns that both withdrawal and increased social activity could be symptomatic. For adolescents who are accelerating through relationships, she suggests the best advice is to “slow down.”

“If [young people] can slow down a little bit, the literature would suggest that would be the most positive outcome.”



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