



# Facts on Abuse and Violence

September 1997

## The Commonwealth Fund Survey of the Health of Adolescent Girls

Experience with abuse or violence during childhood or adolescence can affect one's health status through adulthood. Such violence can have a lifetime impact on physical and mental health, and often results in self-destructive behavior.

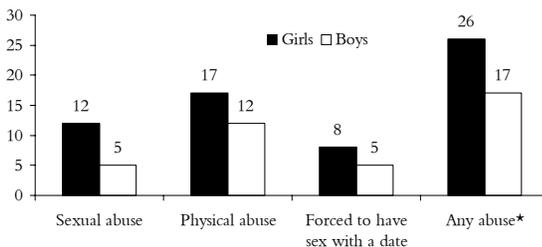
Findings from *The Commonwealth Fund Survey of the Health of Adolescent Girls* show a disturbingly high rate of abuse. One in five girls in grades nine through twelve report that they have been physically or sexually abused.

### PHYSICAL, SEXUAL, AND DATE ABUSE

High school girls surveyed were more than twice as likely as boys to report sexual abuse: among girls in grades nine through twelve, 12 percent reported abuse, compared with 5 percent of high school boys. In addition, 17 percent of high school girls reported physical abuse, compared with 12 percent of boys. Considerable overlap was found between sexual and physical abuse: half of girls who reported sexual abuse also reported physical abuse. Twenty-one percent of older girls reported that they had been either sexually or physically abused.

### Older girls are more likely than older boys to experience abuse.

Percent abused, grades nine through twelve



\*Any abuse = sexual, physical, or date-forced sex.

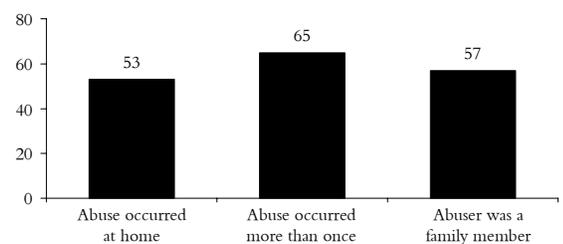
*The Commonwealth Fund Survey of the Health of Adolescent Girls, 1997*  
Louis Harris and Associates, Inc.

When asked if a "boyfriend or date has ever forced you to have sex against your will," 8 percent of older girls said yes. Including date rape, 18 percent of older girls reported some form of sexual abuse, and 26

percent reported either physical, sexual, or date abuse. Of all physically or sexually abused girls, 53 percent said the abuse had occurred at home, 65 percent said it had occurred more than once, and 57 percent said the abuser was a family member.

### Abuse occurs most frequently at home, it usually occurs more than once, and the abuser is most often a family member.

Percent of girls sexually or physically abused



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### ABUSE HAPPENS ACROSS REGIONS AND FAMILY TYPES

The survey revealed that sexual and physical abuse rates are high across the country, with little variation among urban, suburban, or rural areas or by region. More variation was discovered across income levels: using mother's education as a proxy for family income status, the survey found that 9 percent of adolescents whose mothers had a college education reported abuse, while 17 percent of those whose mothers had not completed high school reported abuse.

Rates of sexual abuse were fairly consistent across racial and ethnic groups, with the exception of Asian Americans. Rates of sexual abuse among white, black, and Hispanic girls were 9 percent, 10 percent, and 11 percent, respectively, yet only 5 percent of Asian American girls reported sexual abuse. Hispanic girls were the most likely to say that they had been physically abused (15 percent), followed closely by white girls (13 percent), and Asian American and black girls (11 percent and 10 percent).

## ABUSE ASSOCIATED WITH RISKY BEHAVIORS

The survey found high correlations among reports of abuse, fair or poor health status, and risky health behaviors (see table below). High school girls who reported some form of abuse were approximately twice as likely to drink alcohol, to smoke cigarettes frequently, or to have used drugs in the past month as those not reporting abuse. High school girls who reported abuse were also far more likely to report eating disorders: 32 percent said they had binged or purged, more than double the rate (13 percent) of girls who did not report abuse. Of all abused girls, 17 percent said they were bingeing and purging a few times a week or more.

### Health Risks: Abused vs. Nonabused Girls in Grades Nine through Twelve

Percent with the Following Characteristics	Abused Girls	Nonabused Girls	Ratio of Abused to Nonabused
<b>Health and mental health</b>			
Health fair or poor	26%	17%	1.5
Depressive symptoms	46%	17%	2.5
Low self-confidence	22%	9%	2.4
Suicidal ideation	54%	27%	2.0
<b>Risky behaviors</b>			
Binges and purges	32%	13%	2.5
Drinks frequently	22%	12%	1.8
Smokes frequently	26%	10%	2.6
Drugs in past month	30%	13%	2.3

Abuse = sexual, physical, or date-forced sex.  
Sample = 1,375 high school girls.

## ABUSE IS STRONGLY LINKED TO DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS

The survey found that physical and sexual abuse were also correlated with poor mental health. Among high school girls, nearly half of those who reported physical or sexual abuse also reported moderate or severe depressive symptoms—a rate more than twice as high as that reported by girls who had not been abused. Reports of suicidal thoughts were also much higher among girls who reported either physical or sexual abuse (47 percent vs. 26 percent of girls not reporting abuse).

## ABUSE OFTEN NOT DISCUSSED WITH PHYSICIANS

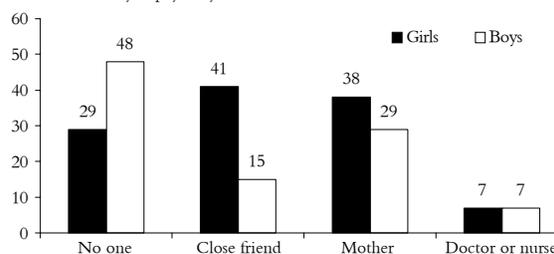
Although the survey found that abused adolescent girls were more likely than abused boys to have talked to someone about their abuse, nearly three in

ten abused girls and half of abused boys said they had not told anyone about it. When adolescent girls did share their experience with others, they most often spoke with a close friend rather than an adult.

Sixty percent of abused girls said they felt doctors should talk to them about sexual and physical abuse, but only 21 percent of abused girls reported ever having a discussion with their health care provider about physical or sexual abuse. Only 7 percent of abused girls said they had told their physician about being abused. Part of the problem may be that abused girls are often too embarrassed to initiate sensitive discussions: more than half of sexually abused girls (56 percent) said they would be embarrassed to discuss abuse with a doctor.

## Many abused adolescents never talk to anyone about the problem, and when they do, they talk least often to a doctor or nurse.

Percent of sexually or physically abused adolescents who talked to:



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## VIOLENCE AT HOME

Some adolescent girls also indicated that they were witnesses to violence in their homes, as well as targets of abuse. Across all grades, 25 percent of adolescent girls said they had wanted to leave home at some point because of family violence. Among high school girls, 29 percent reported experiencing such a time. Abused girls were far more likely than nonabused girls to report that they had wanted to leave home at some point because of violence or the threat of violence (58 percent vs. 18 percent). Girls exposed to violence also reported increased levels of depressive symptoms, risky behaviors, and lack of access to health care.

*The Commonwealth Fund Survey of the Health of Adolescent Girls, conducted by Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., from December 1996 through June 1997, consisted of in-class questionnaires completed by 6,748 adolescents—3,586 girls and 3,162 boys—in grades five through twelve. The classroom sample included a nationally representative cross-section of schools, with 265 public, private, and parochial schools participating.*