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Barriers to the Delivery of Teen Dating Violence Programs in Urban School and After-School Settings Serving Mexican-Heritage Youth

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Teen dating violence (TDV) is increasingly recognized as a national health priority, impacting overall well-being and school success. However, there are overlooked barriers to TDV program delivery in schools and youth-serving organizations and these are ideal settings to reach youth universally. In this study, we conducted 10 focus groups with school (e.g., administrators, social workers, nurses) and after-school personnel regarding barriers to TDV programming within a large urban community serving predominantly Mexican-heritage youth. Findings offer practice-driven considerations for the implementation of programs within urban communities. These include attention to limited resources, inhibitive and non-existent policies, competing demands, a lack of training, and demand for culturally competent curricula and wrap-around services.

Keywords: adolescent dating violence; qualitative; Hispanic; priorities; cultural competence

Dating relationships are an important and normative aspect of adolescence with most adolescents having some experience dating by 13 years of age (Connolly et al., 2013). Given the importance of physical, mental, and psychological development during adolescence, these early experiences carry importance unto adulthood (Exner-Cortens et al., 2013; Sabina et al., 2014). Unfortunately, many teens experience relationship violence during this time. School-based interventions are appropriate and advocated for in reaching youth with preventative efforts to curb teen dating violence (Temple et al., 2013; Tschann et al., 2009), however, there is a significant disconnect; they are often not offered to youth and we do not understand the barriers to implementing these programs from the perspectives of school administrators and practitioners. As compared to the perspectives of parents and adolescents themselves, school administrators and practitioners may offer unique insights concerning barriers to the preventative intervention of dating violence within school settings. Importantly, community-based youth-serving agencies—after-school programs in particular—can also provide dating violence programming to youth but neither do we understand barriers within these contexts. This gap in research is significant as the problem of teen dating violence cannot be addressed if the barriers to providing intervention services are invisible. The aim of this study is to identify and critically examine the barriers to implementing teen dating violence programs from the perspectives of both school and after-school program personnel within an urban area with a majority Hispanic population. Understanding the lived experiences of personnel attempting to deliver dating violence prevention services to Mexican-heritage youth is critically important to reaching this underserved population.

TEEN DATING VIOLENCE AMONG HISPANIC AND DIVERSE YOUTHS

According to the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey (Basile et al., 2020), Hispanic adolescents report being victimized by past-year physical (8.9%) and sexual (8.7%) dating violence at slightly higher rates than the national average (8.2%, 8.2% respectively; Basile et al., 2020). Dating health programs that are acceptable and effective to Hispanic and diverse youth populations are required. Among Hispanic

youth, considerations include acculturation and enculturation processes; among Hispanic and other diverse youths, culturally salient content may also include familism and gender role expectations (Malhotra et al., 2015). Hispanic adolescents, and particularly Mexican origin youth in close proximity to the border (Matsunaga et al., 2010), are often challenged with dual cultural orientations, meaning that they may endorse and adapt to both the mainstream U.S. culture (i.e., acculturation) and their culture of origin (i.e., enculturation; Knight et al., 2013; Milbrath et al., 2009). This can result in acculturative stress as youth experience within-group pressures to conform to one set of norms or the other (Romero & Roberts, 2003). At the couple level, these mismatches in acculturation may increase risk for physical dating violence (Williams & Rueda, 2016) owing to differing relationship expectations and cultural norms (e.g., gender roles, familism). Indeed, a longitudinal study of Mexican American youth revealed that egalitarian views were less strong and slower to develop among male versus female youth (Updegraff et al., 2012). Non-egalitarian views have been linked to dating violence (Haglund et al., 2019; Santana et al., 2006). Program content salient to ethnically diverse youth should challenge rigid masculine stereotypes (i.e., traditional machismo), which have been associated with anti-social behaviors and substance use, and foster positive ethnic identities and masculinities which can include providing for the family, emotional availability, and positive problem-solving (i.e., Arciniega et al., 2008; Rueda & Williams, 2015).

Along a similar vein, familism may serve as a protective factor for diverse and ethnic minority youth. One of the reasons for this is that strong family ties are reflected at least partly by increased parental monitoring, which has been associated with a greater likelihood of youth disclosing information related to dating violence (Dávila et al., 2017). Although youth from economically burdened communities are exposed to higher rates of violence (Williams & Rueda, 2020), having a supportive family with non-violence norms serves to protect youth from violence (Garthe et al., 2019). It may be that programs serving ethnic minority youth should include youth's parents and discussion of positive parenting behaviors. In a randomized control trial of Black and Hispanic middle adolescents, programming that included mothers was effective in promoting positive parenting including talking to youth about sexual risk-

taking (Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2011).

TEEN DATING VIOLENCE PROGRAMS FOR HISPANIC YOUTH

A meta-analysis found that school-based prevention programs were less effective in reducing dating violence among schools with majority Hispanic populations (Hahn et al., 2007). Of the 22 studies conducted with majority White student bodies (>50%), the median reduction in violent behaviors was 20%; this may be compared to six studies demonstrating a 0.5% reduction with majority Hispanic (>50%) student bodies (Hahn et al., 2007). Another more recent meta-analysis similarly found that teen dating violence programs were more effective for Caucasian or mixed-race samples as compared to those consisting of predominantly ethnic minority youths (Lee & Wong, 2020). Most dating violence prevention programs are not designed for Hispanic youth (Malhotra et al., 2015), noting a few exceptions (i.e., Belknap et al., 2013; Enriquez et al., 2012; Gonzalez-Guarda et al., 2015; Jaycox et al., 2006). Dating health programs that are acceptable and effective to Hispanic and diverse youth populations are required.

Research pertaining to teen dating violence prevention in out-of-school settings is lacking; rather, a recent meta-analysis of teen dating programs found that 74% of programs were delivered in school settings (Lee & Wong, 2020). Programs that are initially evaluated in school settings are, however, often adapted and utilized in after-school settings (see, for example, Elswick et al., 2022; Tebbs et al., 2007). Further, programs including teen dating violence content are often adapted by practitioners to be culturally competent (Weisz & Black, 2009). After-school settings are an important context through which to reach Hispanic youth with dating violence education. In fact, nearly one-quarter of youth enrolled in after-school programs are Hispanic and 16% of Hispanic children participated in such a program in 2020 (Afterschool Alliance, 2021). There is a need to understand the barriers to implementing dating violence prevention programs within these settings.

BARRIERS TO DATING VIOLENCE PROGRAMMING

Schools and community organizations providing youth-based services are ideal

con- texts to reach youth in their natural settings. However, schools often lack time and resources to implement universal dating violence prevention programming. Not all states mandate health classes (Piekarz-Porter et al., 2019), which is typically when such curricula could be delivered. Further, school administrators and teachers may prioritize academic achievement without knowledge of the impact of dating violence on youth's ability to perform well in school. Specifically, multiple studies have found that high school students who were in abusive relationships were more likely to have failing grades (see Temple et al., 2013). Clearly, there is a need for supporting youth to have healthy relationships; support from higher administration has been associated with more coordinated dating violence policy and preventative intervention efforts (Rueda & Fawson, 2018).

In addition to schools, after-school and other out-of-school time programs (e.g., summer camps, service learning) provide a natural context for reaching diverse youth with dating violence education. Whereas schools may struggle to find time to implement programming, out-of-school programs can offer a variety of learning opportunities that help youth to develop social and emotional skills including those related to dating violence prevention (e.g., effective communication, emotional coping, decision-making; Bell & Naugle, 2008; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Elias & Gordon, 2009; Gottfredson et al., 2004). Although there is a lack of research pertaining to the challenges of delivering dating violence-specific programs within these settings, a meta-analysis inclusive of urban after-school programs found that such programs commonly struggle with staffing, funding, space, transportation for youth, and youth participation (Pelcher & Rajan, 2016). Practitioner perspectives are required to give voice to these concerns, particularly with regard to how these and potentially other barriers may impact the delivery of dating violence programming.

Importantly, there are unique challenges to both schools and community agencies serving Mexican heritage youth—particularly as these youth and their families are more likely to be affected by low socioeconomic conditions (Shrider et al., 2021). As families immigrate, they are more likely to move into poverty-stricken areas which expose youth to increased neighborhood and community violence (Brady et al., 2008). This highlights the importance of reaching youth through after-school

programming, although one challenge is that there is a need for programs that are low-cost or free (Afterschool Alliance, 2020). There is also a demand for after-school programs and this lack is apparent in Hispanic communities. Specifically, a recent nationally representative study found that 55% of Hispanic children are not enrolled in an after-school program but would be if there were one available (Afterschool Alliance, 2020). Some Hispanic youth, however, are not able to attend after-school programs because they are responsible for helping their families with responsibilities such as babysitting younger siblings and performing domestic chores (Telzer & Fuligni, 2009). Furthermore, the family unit is particularly important within Hispanic culture and parent-involvement has been advocated (Rueda et al., 2014). This too presents challenges, however, as parents are often working multiple jobs, speak Spanish as the language in which they are most comfortable, and may struggle themselves with intimate partner violence in the home. Both parents and youth may also fear revealing violence in fear of being reported to police, particularly if they are undocumented (Rueda et al., 2015). A multi-systemic approach is warranted in which both school and youth-serving agencies reach youth with policies and programs that target the prevention of dating and other forms of violence. Understanding the unique barriers to implementing dating violence programming in school and community contexts is critical to culturally competent service delivery within Hispanic youth serving contexts. The aim of this study was to assess the barriers to the delivery of teen dating violence programming as perceived by school-and after-school personnel.

METHOD

Sample and Procedure

High schools and community agencies located in an urban community in the Southwest U.S. were invited via direct contact to participate in the study. Following approval from the governing Institutional Review Board, the first and second authors moderated 10 focus groups ($N = 38$ participants; 3–10 per group) with high school personnel ($N = 5$ school groups; 26 individuals; 73% women) and community agencies serving youth through after-school programs (e.g., Boys and Girls Clubs; $N = 5$ agency groups; 12 individuals; 67% women). The schools and community agencies

served predominantly Mexican heritage teens. Focus groups for high school personnel were held separately for school administrators (39%; e.g., principals) and helping professionals/practitioners (61%; e.g., nurses, counselors, social workers) so as to facilitate discussion among those holding similar roles and decision-making power within the school. Participants in the community agency groups were personnel who oversaw after-school youth programming and worked directly with the youth. Specifically, these roles included a Branch Director, Unit Directors (2), an Outreach Service Coordinator, Program Managers (3), and Teen Associates/Teen Impact Specialists (5). A sample of Mexican American students (aged 15–17 years) from each school or agency had completed an online survey as part the Mexican American Teen Relationships (MATR) study. All schools and agencies were invited to attend the focus groups, and all agreed to participate. We summarized the findings specific to students from each school/agency into a two- page report for each school and agency, including the prevalence of self-reported victimization and perpetration of each type of dating violence. Schools and agencies were provided the summary report at the beginning of the focus group. Rates of dating violence within the communities studied were higher than those reported in the most recent Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey (Basile et al., 2020). See Figure 1 for an example report.

Participants were asked a series of questions pertaining to youth dating violence (e.g., “How do adolescents’ dating lives affect the school as a whole?”, “What does your school do to foster healthy dating relationships among adolescents to prevent TDV?”). All groups were then asked: “What do you perceive are the biggest barriers to reaching adolescents with information and skill sets to equip them to have healthy dating relationships?” Participants were prompted to discuss specific barriers to the delivery of effective preventative intervention services at their locations. Data from focus groups included audiotaped recordings, verbatim transcripts, and field notes. Transcripts were uploaded into QSR Nvivo (i.e., a qualitative software program; QSR International Pty Ltd., Version 10) and were analyzed by two graduate students (one of whom is third author) and two research faculty (first and second authors). The researchers had extensive experience in teen dating violence research, and the graduate students were studying social work. Thematic analysis was used to code and categorize the data

A Report from the Mexican American Teen Relationships (MATR) Study

Thanks to your help we have made a lot of progress towards increasing our understanding of dating violence among Mexican American high-school aged youth, and are taking steps toward developing a school-based culturally sensitive dating violence intervention program for such youth. First, identifying the ways in which youth perceive and experience violence in their dating relationships is critical in order to improve prevention and intervention efforts. The experience of dating violence in the teen years is distinct from adulthood. For example, we found that boys and girls equally perpetrate violence, consistent with what has been reported in the literature, but a phenomenon that is unique to adolescence. Additionally, the nature of the school environment may expose teens to forms of violence not typically present in adulthood, such as slander, gossip, or threats to ruin ones reputation. Social status amongst peers becomes increasingly important throughout the teenage years. We know that having friends in violent relationships is associated with being both a victim and a perpetrator of dating violence, above the influence of parents, particularly for Latino youth. Given that peers are prominent in the lives of adolescents, they have the potential to play a critical role in the prevention of teen dating violence.

Second, the intersection of cultural values and beliefs of Mexican American youth with dating relationships and experiences with violence is complex. For example, research finds Latino youth are at greater risk for dating violence, while the social context of immigration has been identified as having a possible protection effect. Our results show such a protection effect for sexual violence (see Figure to the right).

Contact us:
Principal Investigator: blinded
Project Coordinator: blinded

Teen Dating Violence (TDV) is broadly defined as controlling or dominating acts that cause some degree of harm. This can include physical force, threatening behavior, emotional or verbal violence, sexual, and relational violence.

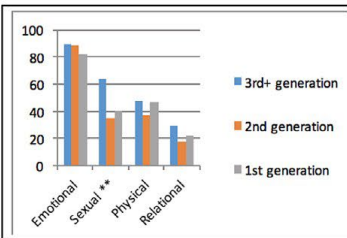


NAME OF SCHOOL/ AGENCY

DATE

Boys and girls are equally likely to perpetrate violence that is emotional, physical, threatening, and relational in their dating relationships.

"I think it's really good with your program that you guys are doing right now. I think it's really good because you can help out a couple or any future couple even people who don't think that they need it." Low acculturated adolescent girl



"I can handle it on my own"
low acculturated girl

"If it was somebody that was just no big deal they would probably leave but if it was somebody that really mattered they would stay no matter how drastic things got...like if they showed love and comforting, caring, and happiness, then maybe they would just always think about that when they were getting abused and how they don't wanna leave because they know deep down they love them, or maybe they just think that. So it's the thinking that keeps them holding on [or] maybe it's just the fact that they're afraid to leave because if they do they will follow them" High acculturated adolescent girl 1

"And it can lead to murder" High acculturated adolescent girl 1

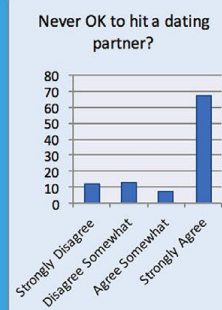
The teens at NAME OF SCHOOL/AGENCY who participated in the MATR survey were

- Aged 15 (32 teens; 34%), 16 (30 teens; 32%), and 17 (32 teens; 34%)
- Girls (41 teens; 44%) and Boys (53 teens; 56%)
- Of different immigration backgrounds: 1st generation (26 teens born in Mexico; 28%), 2nd generation (48 teens with parents born in Mexico; 51%), 3rd generation or more (20 teens and parents US born; 21%)

Teens' dating relationships at are important to them!

On a scale of 1-5, Boys and Girls Clubs teens most often answered 4 or 5 ("Extremely Much" or "the Most"):

- That their boyfriend or girlfriend likes or loves them
- That they protect and look out for their boyfriend or girlfriend
- That their boyfriend or girlfriend really cares about them
- And that their boyfriend or girlfriend treats them like they are admired and respected



"We know what to do - we know what not to do. We know the difference between right and wrong, but sometimes we just act like we don't."

- low acculturated girl

On average, teens at NAME OF SCHOOL/AGENCY who participated in MATR:

- Either disagreed or strongly disagreed with dating violence norms (e.g., "A girl who makes her boyfriend jealous on purpose deserves to be hit")
- Rarely experienced symptoms of depression in the past 12 months (e.g., "how much have you felt hopeless about the future?")
- Agreed with self-esteem items such as, "I feel that I have a number of good qualities".
- Felt that their families were cohesive at least some of the time

Their experience with violence in their current or last dating relationship:

- 43% perpetrated sexual violence, 52% experienced sexual violence (e.g., "I touched my partner sexually when he/she didn't want me to")
- 40% perpetrated physical violence, 46% experienced physical violence (e.g., "I kicked, hit or punched my partner")
- 37% perpetrated threatening behavior, 41% experienced threatening behavior (e.g., "I threatened to hurt my partner")
- 33% perpetrated relational violence, 34% experienced relational violence (e.g., "I spread rumors about my partner")
- 87% perpetrated emotional/verbal violence, 86% experienced emotional/verbal violence (e.g., "I insulted my partner with put-downs")

Figure 1. Example school and agency report.

(Braun & Clarke, 2006). This form of qualitative analysis allows the researcher to surmise recurring themes or conceptual ideas into a codebook with clear operationalizations. In this manner, themes and subthemes are integrated, connected, and refined by careful attention to emerging dialogue around the central research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). By using this approach, the codes (themes) originated from several careful readings of the data itself rather than from a pre-existing conceptual framework. Weight was given to comments on the basis of frequency, specificity, emotion, and extensiveness (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Although a majority of data came from asking participants directly about barriers to service delivery, we utilized all pertinent data which emerged from extensive and in-depth dialogue pertaining to teen dating violence. Any areas of discrepancy in the codebook were reconciled through multiple iterations and continued discussion until agreement was reached by all authors. The results include descriptions of the distinct themes which emerged from the data, along with supporting quotations from participants.

RESULTS

Focus groups from both high schools and agencies identified specific barriers to implementing teen dating violence intervention programming. These included the following themes: 1.) Lack of funding and resources, 2.) Policies, 3.) Program-related concerns, 4.) Lack of training, 5.) Students' immigration status as inhibitive of required wrap-around services, and 6.) Other priorities (e.g., education). These are listed in order of saliency to participants.

Lack of Funding and Resources

Funding played a large role in schools' ability to deliver TDV programs. Not only was finding funding an issue, but budget cuts were a constant struggle, as described by a school counselor, *"That's the first thing we lost a few years ago with budget cuts were intervention specialists and social workers."* Further, the social workers who were hired were limited with regard to the services that they could provide, often being asked to work specifically with special education students and not having the bandwidth for larger caseloads including youth experiencing relationship challenges. School

counselors spoke to the difficulty of attempting even small projects within a limited budget and with limited staff, *“Resources are limited. Man power is limited. Even if you have a fabulous prevention program and you start small, if it costs money, it will be a huge barrier.”* Agencies were also having similar problems with budget cuts to run other programs that may be helpful for the socioemotional well-being of adolescents. Both school and after-school personnel voiced that they needed help to identify funding sources, locate evidence-based programs, and generate priority for dating violence prevention grants: *“Unless you were able to work with the district, ‘Here is some grant money available. I can help you get this grant so that you can pay us to come in and do it.’”* Outside funding and resources seemed to be required in order to provide a dating violence program.

Policies

School personnel and agencies highlighted policies, and in some cases, the lack of a policy, as impediments to providing TDV programs for students. For example, an after-school staff remarked, *“Um, I think we would deal with it on a case by case. Like I would probably turn around and ask my boss like, you know, ‘What are your thoughts?’ ...Um, because we’ve never actually like talked about that at all.”* This lack of clear policy was further highlighted by an after-school staff who spoke to unwritten rules that attempted to thwart teen dating issues altogether, *“[We] try to discourage them dating each other just because we don’t want those relationships or those problems...but for the most part, we try to prevent everything.”* Although both after-school staff and school administration expressed an interest in dating violence programming, they lacked corporate and district-level policies to address youth violence as it occurred. Given their limited experience, there was a desire for an outside facilitator to deliver programs. However, the policies surrounding outside visitors also hindered easy access to schools in particular, *“...but not all of them have fingerprint clearance cards and that was the issue.”* Taken together, policy barriers existed both in terms of providing direct service intervention with youth experiencing violence as well as which would allow programs to target youth universally with preventative intervention.

Program-Related Concerns

Some dialogue suggested that dating violence programming had been attempted in the past without success, and described barriers that were program-related. For example, one after-school staff described that the program was boring and the students were not engaged, *“So I think that’s the biggest issue is that they’re not entertained... And then presenting it in a way that it’s not a lecture.”* Other after-school staff contended that program medium or set up could be an additional barrier, especially if it were to be delivered using technology, *“Every time they prefer hands on-telling them a story rather than staring at a screen reading something or watching a video...They’d rather have something engage them.”* Personnel across both high school and after-school programs asked that the researchers help them to bring a program to their site, and described components that would be important to consider. Specifically, they said that the program would need to consider the teens’ limited attention spans; school-based personnel also cited the need for free time amidst an already over-loaded schedule, and their own lack of ability to take on delivery of the program. Rather, school administrators and practitioners felt that this role would fall on teachers’ shoulders, *“I think even for teachers it is hard for them. And if you put it in schools that’s one more thing on the teacher’s plate, and they already have so much with the curriculum right now.”*

Cultural factors were also discussed as program-related barriers, particularly as content was not tailored to Hispanic youth and families. Dialogue from both school and agency personnel reflected examples of maladaptive traditional gender roles, which they felt contributed to intergenerational violence within the home. In one case in which a school had attempted to implement a dating violence program, a practitioner commented that, *“It’s so culturally imbedded; it was very difficult to overcome.”* Practitioners indicated that men were often the perpetrators of maltreatment within teens’ homes, and that the women lacked the agency to leave since the family was being supported by the father.

Lack of Training

Another barrier was a lack of training about dating violence. This theme

intersected with prior themes in that schools and agencies lacked funding that would allow for the hiring of trained facilitators, and policy barriers made it difficult to bring in outsiders. Given these considerations, school administrators felt that teachers were reluctant to deliver programs themselves as they lacked knowledge of how to intervene and struggled when situations came up, *“Teachers often times will say ‘I know that there is something wrong with this kid in terms of abuse or in terms of alcohol or in terms of relationships, but I don’t know what to do or how to deal with it.’”* School practitioners also struggled in their individual interactions with students, *“A kid’s crying and I just think ‘What do I say? What do I do?’ I find that a lot.”* They voiced that, if funding were available, they would like to be able to prioritize an administrative training position that would oversee counselors’ and social workers’ education related to dating violence and other needed trainings, *“If you have a trainer of trainers who sends the social worker who is committed to...your prevention program [and who can] come back and spearhead it.”*

Students’ Immigration Status as Inhibiting Community Wrap-Around Services

School- and after-school dating violence programming opened the possibility for youth needing further counseling and community services. In this sense, participants also identified students’ immigration status as a barrier, as being undocumented hindered an after-school agency’s ability to refer to necessary counseling services: *“We want to be able to have an open door to have them come to us. What happens when somebody needs counseling? The resources may not be there because of their immigration status.”* This theme was particularly salient in light of disclosure, since agencies worked hard to build rapport with youth and had as their targeted outcomes that they help youth to succeed. Rather than success, however, one after-school staff reiterated the following: *“We constantly are talking about limitations. Once the child does disclose [dating violence], if they don’t have insurance or they’re not documented, how do you provide services or give them the tools to make changes?”* When school practitioners would speak with an undocumented adolescent, they were concerned that the individual may not file dating violence charges for fear of their own deportation. Further, youth were required to list their

home address on the legal paperwork and instead would use a friend or neighbor's address in order to feel safe from the perpetrator. Administration also encountered issues with restraining orders against a perpetrator, "*They will maybe go to the police and file a restraining order against the aggressor. If that happens, then the aggressor is barred from coming to this school....*" Staff at both schools and agencies also acknowledged frequent relocation as a barrier, "*We might have a group of kids stay here for a couple of months and all of a sudden they move because they are either deported or afraid of deportation.*"

Other Priorities

Finally, both in schools and within after-school settings, education was voiced as the priority over dating violence programs. School practitioners discussed the following:

I think it's a low priority. I think it needs to be a high priority. Because what we all in this room know is that if their social and emotional needs aren't being taken care of, and they are having issues, they're not available to learn in that math class... But it's hard to get educators to understand sometimes...they just don't know the practicality of it. Let's take care of this piece in this little time here and then you will...make those benefits as far as academics.

Other priorities also surfaced with regard to youth's attendance. School counselors and social workers, who did not have a space in the students' regular school day to provide programming, relied on gathering students for therapeutic groups and classes outside of class time. Attendance to these depended on each individual teen's interests and schedules, "*Whether you have it here at the school or somewhere else, the fact that you're asking the kid to get there, wherever there is, is difficult.*" One school practitioner spoke to programs she'd delivered at another school; in one scenario, they had been able to offer school credit, whereas in the other they had not. This also affected youth's attendance greatly, "*...if they're not getting credit... it was difficult to require them to be there. Obviously, we want them to participate for their own good, but we...definitely didn't have the retention as when we were doing it for credit.*"

In addition, staff at the after-school programs noted that the youths'

responsibility to their families took precedence and inhibited their ability to regularly attend programming: *“He may join the program or she may join the program...but if parents need them to do something, this [programming] isn’t important—What I need you to do is important. You have to leave room for that...”* Traditional gender expectations hindered participation for Hispanic girls in particular:

Girls should stay at home, they should be babysitters, they should learn how to clean, and they have to go home before going to the [after-school] club...Or the mom will call here and say I need mihita [my daughter] home because we have to go to the store and she needs to help me.

DISCUSSION

Findings from this study identified specific barriers to the delivery of dating violence programs in schools and after-school settings serving majority Hispanic youth populations within a large urban city. These included a lack of funding, policy gaps, program-related challenges, a lack of training for helping professionals and teachers, an inability to deliver wrap-around services as a result of students’ immigration status, and other priorities including academic achievement and family obligations. Understanding these barriers is crucial to the buy-in of school and after-school personnel and to the successful implementation of programs. Recommendations are relevant to multiple ecological contexts and towards the design and delivery of culturally competent programs and services.

An increasing number of states have passed teen dating violence bills, including laws to address teen dating violence in schools. However, most of the state bills are unfunded as such. If we are to consider the issue of teen dating violence a national priority, a funded mandated is required. Schools need to be able to access federal school violence prevention funding to deliver TDV programs as an integral part of a comprehensive approach to school safety. With regard to access, some research finds that even when funding is available, schools and agencies may not know how to find and utilize it (Linton et al., 2017). Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has seen a projection of even greater school budget cuts than during the recession; and budget priorities have shifted to cover supplies such as social distancing, distance learning, and

sanitization resources (Burnette, 2020; Griffith, 2020). While the direct impact of the pandemic on teen dating violence programs specifically has yet to be assessed, the recent re-emergence of in-class learning and after-school programs will require increased attention to budgetary needs that prioritize students' safety and health to include relationship safety.

Policy barriers to the delivery of dating violence programs have been identified in prior research (see Jackson et al., 2013; Rueda & Fawson, 2018), although the extent of policy gaps vary from state to state. Currently 23 states legally allow, urge, or require school boards to include TDV prevention strategies in their curriculum (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2018). In the state of where this study was conducted, schools are allowed but not required to deliver dating violence curricula (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2018). Implications from this study include that states require the delivery of universal preventative interventions within schools, as well as draft clear dating violence procedures that could be utilized by both schools and youth-serving community-based agencies. States that require the latter include guidelines on reporting, protocols to respond to dating violence, and training for personnel. Among helping professionals in this study, a lack of guidance on how to handle dating violence when it occurred contributed to discouraging youth from dating and a focus on intervention rather than prevention.

Program-related barriers were similarly described by school administrators, practitioners, and after-school staff and suggested that programs had been attempted in the past without success. Findings mirror research with Mexican-origin youth who described the importance of programs being interactive and grounded in cultural values (Williams et al., 2012). Schools and agencies may need help from researchers to choose evidence-based and culturally competent programs, and programs designed for Hispanic youth populations are needed. Finding time to deliver programs, particularly within schools, was also a barrier. Not all states mandate health classes (Piekarz-Porter et al., 2019), which would provide an ideal setting and time during the school day for dating health curricula. Moreover, research points to the important role that teachers and high school personnel play in ensuring the effectiveness of dating violence preventative interventions (Jackson et al., 2013), and administrators in particular were

concerned about already over-burdened workloads.

Trained social workers and counselors who are knowledgeable about dating violence and healthy relationships can assist adolescents (Ashley & Foshee, 2005); however, adolescents are often unaware of teen dating violence services (Sabina et al., 2014). This may be due to schools or other agencies not promoting dating violence education (Khubchandani et al., 2012) or not having available trained professionals to provide these services. Although multiple studies have suggested that helping professionals often need additional training specific to partner violence, there continues to be a lack of education and training in this area (Khubchandani et al., 2012, 2013; Rueda et al., 2016). Research with school counselors and nurses identified that school policies that specifically addressed dating violence significantly increased the likelihood of helping adolescents with dating violence (Khubchandani et al., 2012, 2013). Additional research with social workers found that they overemphasized direct intervention via education and counseling at the expense of safety planning, policy changes, and schoolwide programs (Rueda et al., 2016). It is problematic that visible and reliable services are lacking and school districts struggle to implement evidence-based programs. Rather, the responsibility of educating teens and providing dating violence services falls on a myriad of professionals with insufficient training to adequately address TDV issues, creating role confusion and inhibiting adolescent help-seeking (Williams & Rueda, 2018).

Related, students' immigration status impacts help-seeking behaviors. Undocumented adolescents experience increased fears of being able to seek help, being treated fairly, and gaining access to resources that could help with dating violence (Cuevas et al., 2014; Finkelhor et al., 2011). Many Hispanics in the United States are in fear of being deported, which leads to increases in physical and mental health problems (McLeigh, 2010). Consequently, these youth may not seek help. However, schools are sometimes a main resource for children of undocumented parents, as they provide access to various services including counseling, tutoring, social supports, and interventions (Xu & Brabeck, 2012). Further, many undocumented immigrants do not understand their legal rights, especially for dating violence. In the United States, undocumented immigrants have the right to call 911 if in danger of domestic violence

and are able to report the violence regardless of immigration status; and victims of crimes, including domestic violence, may access services such as counseling regardless of immigration status (USCIS General Information, 2014). Efforts to curb dating violence and encourage help-seeking require that helping professionals from across the adolescent's ecosystem work together.

Finally, an important barrier to the delivery of TDV programs is that schools and youth-serving agencies prioritized academic success. Lavy (2007) posited that "academic achievement will always be the priority for public schools particularly given the current climate of linking student performance on standardized tests with teachers' compensation and with local and state funding sources" (p. 140). Although students' academic outcomes are associated with positive social and emotional skills (Fleming et al., 2005), these are not incentivized or understood in the context of dating violence. The use of school- and agency-specific reports in this study helped to elucidate the high prevalence of dating violence, as well as to build buy-in for preventative interventions into the future. The other barriers discussed, however, would need to be addressed and these include attention to funding, policy, and Hispanic cultural considerations. Regarding the latter, agency staff discussed that family obligations were prioritized above program attendance which further underscores the need for universal programming in schools with booster programs in after-school settings. For families affected by poverty, and some of whom may be also be experiencing violence within the home, programming must include culturally competent wrap-around services.

Limitations

This study is limited by a small number of focus groups in a specific region. Although these findings offer a rich insight into the barriers associated with delivering TDV prevention programs with Mexican-heritage adolescents living in an urban area in the Southwest U.S., we cannot generalize these findings to other regions and populations. Future research is needed from the perspective of other stakeholders (e.g., adolescents, parents, teachers, policy makers) to flush out the barriers to TDV implementation across the whole ecosystem (Smith-Morris et al., 2013). Additionally,

these findings point to a need to locate funding sources, a critical barrier in the implementation of TDV programs. Future research that illuminates the impact of TDV on school performance is needed to further those efforts. In order to effectively tackle the issue of TDV at a national level, we need to understand the unique barriers to implementing dating violence programming in the school and local communities in which youth live.

CONCLUSION

Reaching into schools and after-school settings with tailored reports regarding youth's dating violence experiences created a unique opportunity to discuss barriers to the delivery of programs from the perspectives of administrators, social workers, counselors, and nurses. Urban communities face multi-systemic challenges that require funding, policy changes, and additional training for helping professionals. Culturally competent programs and wrap-around services are additionally essential if we are to overcome barriers to serving Mexican-heritage youth. Teen dating violence is increasingly recognized as a national priority, and understanding these barriers is crucial to reducing its occurrence within youth-serving communities and schools.

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