

Domestic Violence and Family Dysfunction as Risk Factor for Violent Behavior among University Students in North Jordan

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Abstract The aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between family dysfunction and domestic violence with violent behavior of university students in North Jordan. A stratified random sample included 1560 undergraduate students from three universities. The distribution of self-administrated questionnaire was done based on the schedule of registration made by the department of the admission and registration at each university. The results revealed a prevalence rate of 11.9% concerning participation in violence (quarrels) among students at the three universities during the last 3 years. About 16.5% of students who participated in the study indicated that their families suffer from dysfunction. Participation of students in quarrels was significantly affected by witnessing and exposure to domestic violence. Students who participated in the study ranked first the family as institution that contributed to acquiring violent behavior, followed by the surrounding community, media, school, and finally university. In conclusion, domestic violence and family dysfunction appear to be significant factors leading to occurrence of violence among university students.

Keywords Domestic violence · Family dysfunction · University students · Violence

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Violence is a multifaceted matter associated with individual thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors. Several factors can influence violence occurrence, including biological, psychological, social, cultural, economic, and political factors (Hurrelmann and Richter 2006; Rappaport and Thomas 2004). Forming and shaping individual behavior starts from the family, the primary source of modeled behavior and basic social entity in which any person begins to acquire a behavior (Bandura 1973; Dahlberg 1998; Eron et al. 1991).

Domestic violence being physical, psychological, and/or sexual abuse against family member is a pattern of coercive control (McCord 1996). Most children learn how to respond to anger by observing how family members behave and thus establish style of aggressive behavior (Wolf and Foshee 2003). Children and adolescents who are exposed to family violence may develop different styles of aggressive behaviors more than children and adolescents who were not exposed to family violence, and they are more likely to behave spontaneously on the basis of previous experiences (DuRant et al. 2001; DuRant et al. 1994).

Family dysfunction has an important influence on students' behavior and provides powerful source of information about the risk for future violence (Scott and Resnick 2006; Rappaport and Thomas 2004). Family characteristics, such as communication, monitoring, support, and emotional cohesion play an effective role in lowering aggressive and violent behavior (Smith et al. 2004). Family conflict and poor parenting practices have been associated with increased risk of exposure to community violence among youngsters (Farrington 1998).

Violence in the community is regarded as a tool to exert power or dominance over others in a variety of ways related to difficulties in relationships with peers, educators, and own family (Finley 2006). It might be expressed as physical

attack and injury, verbal, emotional, and psychological aggression (Bonomi et al. 2006; Liang et al. 2007).

Studies that link violent behaviors of university students to domestic violence are rare. Some Jordanian universities witnessed a number of quarrels during the recent past with devastating outcomes including death (Ghayth 2007). Several intervention studies have focused on improving family relationships and parent skills to reduce risk of violence and related behaviors.

The objective of this study was to recognize the role of family dysfunction and domestic violence as a risk factor for violent behavior among university students in North Jordan.

Method

Subjects

This study was conducted in three universities in North Jordan. The study population consisted of all undergraduate students (graduate students were excluded) at the three universities (47102 students). The study was approved by the research and ethical committee in one university and by the administration at the three universities.

The sample included 1560 female and male students from different departments, different academic years and all faculties (with equal fractions) out of 1618 students who were approached to participate in this study with an overall response rate of 96.4%. Stratified random sampling was used; students were stratified according to faculties, departments, and classes to represent a broad range of students. The sample strata almost equals 3.31 % of population strata (sample fraction = $1560 / 47102 = 0.0331$).

Study Design and Instrument

A cross sectional study design was used to estimate prevalence rate of violence among university students in North Jordan and to understand the family role in the problem.

Data on students' characteristics and family background were retrieved from an especially designed for this study self administered questionnaire with an easy understood Arabic language and clear instructions. A pilot test was carried out in one class which resulted in due modifications of the questionnaire. The study was carried out during the period from October 2007 and February 2008.

The questionnaire (57 questions) was reviewed and approved for content validity by expert panel. Reliability was examined using Cronbach's Alpha for each dimension with average of 0.818. Prevalence of violence among university students the main outcome in this study, was measured as self reported participation in violent action

inside the university campus in the last three years. Other questions were about family size, current place of residence, type of residence (rent and own), nature of residence (alone, with family, with roommate students), average in high school, and scholar achievement for academic year 2007/2008. Questions about family role in violence occurrence were constructed to elicit appropriate responses using the 5-point Likert Scale. Domestic violence was measured by asking if students were exposed to or witnessed verbal violence and or physical violence, expelled from home, and or banned food or money. Family dysfunction was documented if a student checked the option indicating existing family dysfunction, and then was asked to check one or more of these items: unavailable parents, divorced or separated parents, and whether the student have a good relationship with parents.

Questionnaires were distributed based on class schedules made by the department of the admission and registration at each university. This method facilitated random distribution of questionnaires according to departments and classes. The process of data collection started in a randomly selected class from the predetermined sample strata. At the end of lectures, questionnaires were given to every third student who sits in classes on odd or even seats.

Instructions for completion of the questionnaires were made clear. Students were assured about the confidentiality and ethical appropriateness of the study. Student's names were not required and any written names were deleted guaranteeing the voluntariness of students. Accepting to join, students were provided guidance by the researcher or assistant who witnessed the process of filling the questionnaires.

Completed questionnaires were checked for missing information and then data were coded, entered, and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software program. Responses to questions with 5-point Likert scale were collapsed to a dichotomous scale of (yes no) coding.

Percentages and means were used for sample description. Chi-Square test was used to assess the association between prevalence of violence among university students and patterns of family dysfunction and domestic violence at statistical significance level $\alpha = 0.05$.

Results

Description of Study Sample

Table 1 describes the 1560 university students who participated in the study. The age ranged from 18 to 26 years (mean = 20.3 ± 1.17) years. Male to female students' ratio was (59.4:40.6). Average family income was 404.8 JD (\$528.2) per month. Students from the three

Table 1 Characteristics of the sample ($N=1560$)

Variable	Category	% Females ($n=633$)	% Males ($n=927$)
Age	18-20 years	371	539
	21-23 years	255	375
	23 + years	7	13
Family Income (JD/month)	≤ 300 JD	305	392
	301-600 JD	251	415
	601 + JD	77	120
Family Size	≤ 4 members	38	79
	5-8 members	474	681
	8 + members	121	167
Place of Residence	City	416	623
	Village	215	300
	Badya (Bedouin)	2	4
Type of Residence	Rent	140	251
	Own	493	676
Nature of Residence	Alone	23	44
	With family	471	654
	With students	139	229
Average at high school	50-59.9	35	43
	60-69.9	22	43
	70-79.9	194	213
	80-89.9	258	367
	90-99.9	124	261
University Rating ^(a)	Pass	110	173
	Good	340	490
	Very good	149	227
	Excellent	27	32
	Distinguished	7	5

^(a) To the end of first semester (academic year 2007/2008)

universities were represented as follows: University A: 42.4% of the sample ($n=662$), University B: 48.8% ($n=761$), and University C: 8.8% ($n=137$).

Prevalence of Violence

The overall prevalence of violence (students who stated they participated in violent actions that occurred in university campus among students) at the three universities was 11.9% (185 students out of 1560, 183 (98.9%) were males, and 2 (1.1%) were females). The proportion of violent students per university was 8.8% at University A, 14.2 at University B, and 13.9 was at University C.

Family Attributes

Students in the study were asked to order the institutions that had role in acquiring their violent behavior. Family was ranked first (49.4%), followed by the surrounding community (17.4%), media (16.2%), school (11.3%), and finally university (5.7%). Among students who participated in

quarrels family was ranked first by 49.7%, the difference was significant ($p=0.046$).

Domestic violence including witnessing and exposure to domestic violence was strongly associated with occurrence of violence among university students ($p=0.004$, and $p=0.008$) respectively (Table 2). Parental verbal violence and physical violence have had its effect on students. Results revealed that parental use of verbal and or physical violence was significantly associated with occurrence of violence among students ($p=0.035$ and $p=0.001$) respectively. However, threat, banning food or money, and expelling from home were not associated with occurrence of violence among university students ($p=0.584$, $p=0.442$ and $p=0.861$), respectively (Table 2).

About 16.5% of students in the study including 28.6% of those who showed violent behavior in universities ($n=185$) indicated that their families suffered from dysfunction. Results revealed that parents were unavailable for 14.9% of all students and 26.4% of those who participated in violence. In addition, 17.8% of all students and 32.9% of those who have at least one violent encounter inside the

Table 2 Violence among university students and patterns of domestic violence

Domestic Violence	Participation in violence		OR ^(a)	95%CI ^(b)	P-value ^(c)
	Yes <i>n</i> =185	No <i>n</i> =1375			
Witness of domestic violence					
Yes	126(68.1%)	782(56.9%)	1.619	(1.168, 2.246)	0.004
No	59(31.9%)	593(43.1%)			
Exposure to domestic violence					
Yes	77(41.6%)	438(31.9%)	1.525	(1.115, 2.087)	0.008
No	108(58.4%)	937(68.1%)			
Verbal violence					
Yes	168(90.8)	1169(85)	1.741	(1.035, 2.930)	0.035
No	17(9.2)	206(15)			
Physical Violence					
Yes	138(74.6)	855(62.2)	1.786	(1.260, 2.530)	0.001
No	47(25.4)	520(37.8)			
Threat					
Yes	115(62.2)	883(64.2)	0.915	(0.667, 1.257)	0.584
No	70(37.8)	492(35.8)			
Banned food or money					
Yes	64(34.6)	437(31.8)	1.135	(0.822, 1.569)	0.442
No	121(65.4)	938(68.2)			
Expelling from home					
Yes	30(16.2)	230(16.7)	0.964	(0.636, 1.460)	0.861
No	155(83.8)	1145(83.3)			

^(a) OR: Odds Ratio^(b) CI: Confidence Interval^(c) Using χ^2 test

university indicated that they have bad relationships with their parents. Only 1.2% of all students indicated their parents were divorced or separated, which was not associated with occurrence of violence among university students (Table 3).

Discussion

Findings of this study indicate that for a period of almost three years (2005 to October 2007 and February 2008), the prevalence of participation in violent actions inside univer-

Table 3 Family dysfunction patterns and university violence

	Participation in violence			OR ^(a)	95%CI ^(b)	P-value ^(c)
	(Yes <i>n</i> =185)	(No <i>n</i> =1375)	%			
Family dysfunction						
Yes	53	205	16.5	2.292	(1.612, 3.257)	0.000
No	132	1170	83.5			
Bad relationship with parents						
Yes	61	217	17.8	0.441	(.334, .582)	0.000
No	124	1158	82.2			
Unavailable parents						
Yes	49	183	14.9	2.062	(1.535, 2.771)	0.000
No	136	1192	85.1			
Divorced or separated parents						
Yes	3	16	1.2	1.337	(.469, 3.810)	0.485
No	182	1359	98.8			

^(a) OR: Odds Ratio^(b) CI: Confidence Interval^(c) Using χ^2 test

sities among university students was 11.9%, which offers an insight about this problem in Jordan. Among male university students the prevalence of violence was much higher than the prevalence of violence among female university students. Other studies have reported similar results concerning the male female ratio (Scott and Resnick 2006; Ellickson and McGuigan 2000).

This study has proved that past experience of domestic violence might be a strong predictor of present or future violent behavior of students. This was indicated in students' responses about the most influencing institution that contributed to acquiring their violent behavior. Family dysfunction as defined above in addition to witness and or exposure to domestic violence was a risk factor that exaggerated gaining and practicing violent behaviors of students which was apparent as statistically significant association. In this sense, we might be encouraged stating that the more a student is exposed to aggressive parents' behavior, the more likely a student to behave likewise in university. This means that the family is the most influential and immediate social system contributing to violence among students. Klassen and O'Connor (1988) found similar results.

Presence of family dysfunction such as absence of parental supervision or unavailable parents, and poor relationship between students and parents were linked to the violence among university students, similar results were found by other authors (Farrington 1998; Bell and Jenkins 1993).

It is obvious that interventions tackling this issue should understand the role of family in increasing or lowering the occurrences of violent behaviors among university students. It should be appealing to invite as many parents as possible to a public presentation of such findings and discuss with them ways to alleviate this problem. Offering help to families willing to or needing to improve their inter-family relationships is an opportunity for health care providers, social workers, families and community to work on behavioral issues to achieve healthy family environment. Concerned policy makers may benefit from these study findings to propose interventions at the national level.

Conclusion

Domestic violence and family dysfunction are deemed risk factors that lead to developing aggressive behaviors among university students. Exposure to different patterns of these two factors has proved to be dangerous with possible serious consequences on the student and the surroundings.

Violence in universities should be addressed at multiple levels and sectors of society including students, families, schools, universities, and media. University institution

should clearly play an active role in designing and implementing programs including providing educational sessions targeting violence at interpersonal relationships (Bryant and Spencer 2003).

Offering parents educational sessions about the risks of domestic violence and the role of good family environment may lessen the problem of university violence. It is reasonable to suggest that creating healthy family environment is a positive agenda for all community members. Providing professional help and support for dysfunctional families through establishing health education programs targeting families should also help.

Addressing the risk factors that contribute to the occurrence of domestic violence should be an objective of further studies in Jordan. In addition, future studies might want to concentrate on the patterns of university students' violence, e.g., recurrences, and whether domestic violence was an issue and how was it viewed at the time by the child?

Another feasible intervention includes education and discussion of family environment and family members' behaviors as early as an appropriate school age allows.

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