

Center for Youth Leadership

Why wait for someone else to make a difference?

CYL Alert

*Connecticut loves rankings.
Well, probably not this one.*

"The UConn women's basketball team is ranked number one in the country."

*"Connecticut is ranked number nine in the country for
physical dating violence among high school students."*

You tell us. Which headline is more likely to scream at you from the Hartford Courant, the Connecticut Post, or the New Haven Register? Here's a hint: it's not the second one.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and the Connecticut Department of Public Health, Connecticut - at number nine - is again ranked in the top ten nationally for physical dating violence among teens.¹

"But an important limitation of the survey used by the Connecticut Department of Public Health is that it asks about physical violence only," said Charlotte Sawyer of the Peace Project, which is a program of the Center for Youth Leadership at Brien McMahon High School.

"The numbers would be off the charts if questions about emotional and verbal abuse were asked. The survey, therefore, misrepresents the extent of what we consider an important public health issue in Connecticut."

¹ Center for Disease Control, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, June 6, 2008, Vol 57, page 9; Connecticut Department of Public Health, 2007 School Health Survey (Youth Behavior Component) of students in Connecticut public schools (see question 22). Go to www.ct.gov/dph and type "school health survey" in the search section.

"Members of the Peace Project have worked with the Department of Public Health for several months in an attempt to change the survey," said Paulina Hernandez of the Peace Project. "We want to add a question about emotional abuse, which, according to our research, is more prevalent than physical abuse."

Paulina continued. "But it's a slow process. The Centers for Disease Control is involved and we're trying to change a survey that a lot of people have a stake in. What a lot of people don't realize is that questions from the survey will have to be eliminated if our question about emotional/verbal abuse is added. That means that people involved in designing the survey will have to talk, which will take time. We're optimistic, though. We're hoping the Department of Public Health includes our question in the 2009 survey."

In August, the Peace Project will release an updated version of "I Love You, Baby," which is the report it published in 2006 about teen dating violence in Connecticut. The updated report includes, among other things, a summary of the steps taken by the Peace Project to change the survey.

Connecticut's ranking

In the meantime, we are left to think about Connecticut's ranking. Of the 39 states that participated in the survey, Connecticut ranks ninth, with 13.4 percent of its teens involved in a physically violent dating relationship. That's higher than the national average of 10 percent.²

Among Connecticut students, physical dating violence is most prevalent among seniors (18.9 percent) and Latinos (17.1 percent).

In the same survey, 9.7 percent of Connecticut's students reported being physically forced to have sexual intercourse when they did not want to. This includes 9 percent of the freshmen who participated in the survey.

Physical dating violence

Of the 39 states that participated in the CDC survey, Georgia ranked first with 15.7 percent of its students reporting physical dating violence. Other states in the top 10 are:

2. Maryland
3. Kentucky
4. Wyoming
5. Arkansas
6. Rhode Island
7. South Carolina
8. Mississippi/Idaho (tied)
9. Connecticut
10. North Carolina

² The national average is up from 9.2 percent in 2005 and 8.9 percent in 2003.

Arkansas ranked first in this category, with 14 percent of its students reporting forced sexual intercourse. Other states in the top ten are (in order): Wyoming, Utah, Kentucky, Idaho, Michigan, Arizona, South Dakota, Connecticut, and West Virginia.

Center for Youth Leadership: Teen dating violence public awareness activities 2008-2009³

"Fourteen girls in three days," said Steph Peckham, a health teacher at Brien McMahon High in Norwalk. "That's how many girls talked to me about their dating relationships or the experiences of their friends after they heard the Center for Youth Leadership's presentation. I cannot begin to tell you how valuable your work is. The presentation done by the Peace Project is hard-hitting and raw, but it's delivered in a very supportive and sensitive way." Peckham was talking about the dating violence discussion we led in her classes in November 2007.

Given the sensitive nature of the issues we deal with at the Center for Youth Leadership - dating violence, child abuse - many teens have told us that they feel more comfortable learning about the issues from people their age.

They want the help and guidance of adults when intervening in a situation, but the initial information appears to be best received when delivered by their peers. With that in mind we designed several public awareness activities and implemented them at Brien McMahon High and other locations in Fairfield County.⁴

Out were dry lectures with overheads and power point presentations. In were activities that use music, vocals, and the voices of teens; in were visual arts such as photography, exhibits, and demonstrations.

The activities listed below will be led by students from Brien McMahon High School, Stamford High School and Greenwich High School, which are three of the four schools in Fairfield County that use the Center for Youth Leadership's model of activism.

- 3 -

³ This is an excerpt from the Center for Youth Leadership's report called "I Love You, Baby." An updated version will be issued in August 2008.

⁴ Please note that we alert guidance counselors, social workers, and teachers before we conduct each activity. This is a standard operating procedure given that students will sometimes self disclose after participating in an activity about a sensitive issue.

When combined with the Center for Youth Leadership's grant making, volunteer programs and social change campaigns, the public awareness activities help advance an approach promoted by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation:

"Some communities have employed promising prevention strategies at the individual, relational, community and policy levels to reinforce positive norms and behaviors. Building Healthy Teen Relationships is based on this emergence of such promising approaches. Therefore, a fundamental element of our (teen dating violence) initiative is the expectation that youth will be central leaders in designing and implementing the funded site's activities. While the focus of this initiative is on 10-14 year olds, funded sites will need to involve 15-18 year olds as mentors in using strategies that capitalize on their energy and leadership."⁵

The Center for Youth Leadership's public awareness activities include:

• **Street Outreach Team** During the 2007-2008 school year we distributed our dating violence prevention cards to 1,097 teens at malls, outside movie theaters and in the parking lots of fast food restaurants. We're looking to exceed that total in 2008-2009.

- **RAD Campaign** This campaign is a key component of our street outreach. It was launched on January 26, 2006 at a high school basketball game in Norwalk. Two of our members took the microphone at halftime and asked everyone to program Connecticut's dating violence hotline number (888.774.2900) in their cell phones under the acronym RAD, which Peace Project members coined. RAD stands for "report abusive dates."

During the 2008-2009 school year our members will visit places where teens hang out - job training classes, sporting events, bowling alleys, movie theaters, fast food restaurants, etc - and ask them to do the same.

• **Body Art** "This is one of our favorite activities," said Meri Caguao, a graduate of the Peace Project. "We write slogans on members' arms and faces, take their photo and turn the photos into posters and magnets. Then we distribute them to schools, churches, and businesses. It's a great way to spread the word about dating violence."

• **Balloon Garden**⁶ "What better way to capture someone's attention than with hundreds of balloons," said Alex Coughlin of the MYLC Program at Stamford High. "This is one of the exhibits we'll take to several locations Fairfield County next year. It's low cost, travels easily, and can be seen from far away."

- 4 -

⁵ Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, "Call for Proposals 2008: Building Healthy Teen Relationships," Princeton, New Jersey, April 16, 2008.

⁶ The Balloon Garden planted by the Peace Project at Brien McMahon High was the topic of an editorial by Cablevision of Connecticut on February 14, 2007.

•**House Party** This performance piece is 40-minutes long and includes spoken word pieces, vocals and music. "It's pretty intense," said Charlotte Sawyer of the Peace Project, "but it works. I cannot begin to tell you how many students have come forward after the presentation to talk about their relationships or those of friends."

The House Party is performed in private homes, community centers, and classrooms. During the 2007-2008 school year, we performed the House Party 12 times and reached 422 teens and adults.

•**Parents** This is a group that is often overlooked when it comes to designing strategies that promote/prevent teen dating violence. We will plan and implement a strategy that educates parents about teen dating violence and how they can inform their children about its signs and outcomes.

•**Regional Approach** Three of the four high schools in lower Fairfield County that use the Center for Youth Leadership's model of activism will address teen dating violence with joint activities in Norwalk, Stamford and Greenwich.

The updated version of "I Love You, Baby" will include a description of the social change campaigns and the data collection activities that the Center for Youth Leadership will implement during the 2008-2009 school year. The report will be released in August.

~ ~ ~

For more information, please contact:
Center for Youth Leadership at Brien McMahon High School
300 Highland Avenue, Norwalk, Connecticut 06854
203/852-9488

CYL Alert 24
June 30, 2008