

Profile of violence perpetrated by adolescents

Abstract

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Introduction

Violence is a significant social issue within both domestic and community settings, impacting children and adolescents through physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, neglect, and commercial exploitation, all linked to power dynamics.

Objective

To describe the profile of violence perpetrated by adolescents.

Method

This cross-sectional quantitative study was conducted from April to June 2019 with 155 adolescents. Data were collected using questionnaires and analyzed using the BioEstat 5.3 program. The study was approved under protocol number 3.203.080.

Results

Most participants were female, aged 14 to 18, heterosexual, single, Catholic, and studied in the morning. The main perpetrators were girls (51; 57.9%), with physical violence being the most common form (34; 65.4%). There was a significant association ($p < 0.0001$) between psychological/physical violence and the victim's age between 10 and 19; and psychological/physical violence and the school environment.

Conclusion

Violence is prevalent in the daily lives of adolescents, underscoring the need for preventive actions in social spaces and the monitoring of risk factors to effectively address it.

Keywords

Adolescent Health; Adolescent Behavior; Violence; Exposure to Violence.

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Introduction

Globally, approximately 2.5% of all deaths are because of violence, with thousands suffering from non-fatal violence each day.^{1,2} This issue accounts for over a million deaths annually worldwide, making it the fourth leading cause of death among individuals aged 15 to 44 years.³ In Brazil, children and adolescents are often the primary victims.⁴ According to the World Health Organization (WHO), violence against children and adolescents includes physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, neglect, and commercial exploitation, typically occurring in contexts of responsibility, trust, and/or power.⁵ The primary setting for such violence against this group is at home, perpetrated by family members.

The issue of violence against this demographic is increasingly visible and has been widely discussed in recent years across various sectors of society, aiming to understand and identify the factors driving it⁶ and the conditions that place adolescents in three different roles regarding violence: as perpetrators, victims, or witnesses, with a significant portion being perpetrators.⁷

Adolescent-perpetrated violence is regarded as a contemporary social phenomenon directly linked to social inequalities, with cultural and relational aspects. A study conducted with 239 students in Salvador, Bahia, revealed that 60% had been victims of domestic violence. As a result of such victimization, adolescents exhibited aggressive behaviors, engaged in violent acts, and used alcohol and illicit substances.⁸

In Latin American countries, the perpetration of violence among males aged 13 to 24 is reported at 23%, often associated with physical and emotional violence by caregivers.⁹ Within the family environment, adolescents perpetrate 12% of physical violence, and approximately 16% are both victims and perpetrators. This behavior is routinely reproduced, motivated by the use of both licit and illicit drugs, especially from the age of 16 onwards, when they begin to engage in party activities.¹⁰

Consequently, experiencing violent episodes within the family setting directly influences adolescents to perpetrate such behavior across various social circles, including schools, where they often consider it normal and acceptable to use violence as a misguided tool for conflict resolution, a coercive act, or oppression.¹¹ Given such context, this study aimed to describe the profile of violence perpetrated by adolescents.

Method

This was a cross-sectional quantitative study conducted from April to June 2019 at a public high school in the municipality of Picos, state of Piauí (PI), Brazil. At the time of data collection, the school had 477 regularly enrolled students across elementary and high school levels, attending morning and evening sessions, of whom 254 were high school students only. The sample size was calculated using the finite population formula, targeting a 5% margin of error, a 95% confidence level, and an

estimated prevalence of 50%, which resulted in a sample size of 155 adolescents.

In line with the definition of adolescence by the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA), the inclusion criterion for adolescent participation was being aged between 12 and 18 years. The exclusion criterion was the absence of the adolescents from the school on the days when data collection occurred.

Following approval for the research from the school administration, a nominal list of enrolled adolescents was requested, defining the classes and periods for conducting the study according to pre-established research criteria. Permission for the researcher to enter the classrooms was granted after a preliminary meeting with the school's teaching staff, during which the project was presented and the dates for data collection were scheduled.

During the presentation phase of the research objectives, the students who agreed signed the Informed Assent Form, and their guardians signed the Informed Consent Form, granting permission to conduct the research. Finally, questionnaires were administered on the scheduled days and times.

The questionnaire, developed by the authors, encompassed questions about the adolescents' living conditions and the violence they perpetrated. This quantitative data collection tool was divided into four sections: (i) socioeconomic data—including questions about age, education level, family income, number of family members, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and marital status; (ii) physical violence; (iii) psychological violence; and (iv) sexual violence. The sections on violence contained questions related to the perpetration of these types of violence concerning the sex and age of the victim, the location of occurrence, and the frequency of alcohol consumption by the adolescents.

The quantitative data collected were organized in Microsoft Office Excel 2010 and later analyzed with the aid of the BioEstat 5.3 program. This software facilitated the description of the absolute and relative frequencies of the study variables, as well as the analysis of associations between predictor and outcome variables. The G-test with Williams Correction at a significance level of 0.05 determined the independence between these variables. This non-parametric test, similar to the Chi-Squared test, is used as a substitute when the latter does not meet the necessary conditions for its application. The Williams Correction aims to provide a closer approximation to the Chi-Squared test.

The Research Ethics Committee (CEP) of the Universidade Regional do Cariri (URCA) approved the study under number 3.203.080. The questionnaires were numbered from 1 to 155 in the order they were received, ensuring the confidentiality of the information provided.

Results

The study included 155 adolescents. Of these, 94 (60.9%) were female and 61 (39.1%) were male, aged between 14 and 18 years, with those aged 16 years ($N = 43$; 27.7%) being particularly notable.

The majority (132; 85.2%) were enrolled in morning sessions, 86 (55.5%) were of mixed race, 143 (92.2%) were heterosexual, 116 (74.8%) owned their homes, 96 (61.9%) were single, 124 (80%) were Catholic, with an average family income of one minimum wage (88; 56.8%), and with up to two to four siblings (98; 63.2%). Regarding the violence perpetrated, 88 (56.7%) revealed they had practiced violence at least once. The male sex was the major perpetrator of psychological violence (19; 54.3%) and the female sex of physical violence (34; 65.4%). A significant association was found between committing psychological and physical violence and the sex of the victim ($p < 0.0001$), highlighting that males were more frequently victims of physical violence, as shown in Table 1.

There was also a relationship between the perpetrator's age and the victims' ages ($p < 0.0001$), with victims most commonly in the age range of 10 to 19 years for both psychological and physical violence, as detailed in Table 2. Regarding the location of occurrence, there is an association between physical and psychological violence in a school environment ($p < 0.0001$), as shown in Table 3. As for the relationship between committing violence and alcohol consumption, see Table 4. There is no significant association between the variables; however, when there is violence, whether physical or psychological, it is estimated to occur if there is alcohol consumption once a week.

Table 1: Association between perpetrated violence and victim's sex – Picos, PI, Brazil.

Types of violence		Not reported		Male		Female		Both sexes		p-value
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Psychological violence	Did not respond	12	100	--	--	--	--	--	--	< 0.0001
	Practiced	08	22.9	14	40	10	28.6	03	8.6	
	Did not practice	105	97.2	02	1.8	01	0.9	0	--	
Physical violence	Did not respond	09	100	--	--	--	--	--	--	< 0.0001
	Practiced	05	9.6	25	48	16	30.8	06	11.5	
	Did not practice	88	93.6	02	2.1	04	4.3	--	--	
Sexual violence	Did not respond	21	100	--	--	--	--	--	--	0.8280
	Practiced	--	--	01	100	--	--	--	--	
	Did not practice	128	96.2	03	2.3	02	1.5	--	--	

Table 2: Association between perpetrated violence and victim's age – Picos, PI, Brazil, 2019

Types of violence		Not reported		1 to 5 years		6 to 10 years		10 to 19 years		p-value
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Psychological violence	Did not respond	12	100	--	--	--	--	--	--	< 0.0001
	Practiced	01	2.9	--	--	--	--	30	85.7	
	Did not practice	104	96.3	--	--	--	--	02	1.8	
Physical violence	Did not respond	09	100	--	--	--	--	--	--	< 0.0001
	Practiced	01	1.9	01	1.9	02	3.8	42	80.8	
	Did not practice	89	94.7	--	--	--	--	01	1.0	
Sexual violence	Did not respond	21	100	--	--	--	--	--	--	0.9992
	Practiced	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	
	Did not practice	129	96.7	01	0.7	--	--	--	--	

Discussion

The literature indicates that adolescents' involvement in violence as perpetrators is linked to factors that directly interfere with their social and moral development. These include violence in the home environment, exploitation of minors, and exposure to alcohol, drugs, trafficking, theft, and other harmful influences.¹² The data from this research highlight the problematic nature of adolescents as perpetrators of violence, with over half of the participants reporting they had engaged in

violence at least once. A study¹³ of 2,786 adolescents from 17 public schools in Mato Grosso, Brazil, found that 1,236 participants (44.36%) reported having been exposed to violence in the roles of victim, perpetrator, and both simultaneously. Authors¹⁴ note the violence experienced and perpetrated by adolescents significantly impacts their quality of life, affecting family, friends, and the community. This can lead to poor educational performance, risky health behaviors, disabilities, illnesses, and even death.

Table 3: Association between perpetrated violence and location of occurrence – Picos, PI, Brazil, 2019

Types of violence		Not reported		Residence		Public place		School		Residence and school		Residence and public place		Residence, Public Place, and School		Public Place and School		p-value
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Psychological violence	Did not respond	12	100	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	< 0.0001
	Practiced	--	--	07	20.0	05	14.3	16	45.7	01	2.9	--	--	02	5.7	02	5.7	
	Did not practice	104	96.3	--	--	01	0.9	01	0.9	--	--	--	--	01	0.9	--	--	
Physical violence	Did not respond	09	100	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	0.0	< 0.0001
	Practiced	2	3.8	14	26.9	08	15.4	15	28.8	08	15.4	01	1.9	01	1.9	02	3.8	
	Did not practice	92	97.9	--	--	02	2.1	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	
Sexual violence	Did not respond	21	100	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	0.9838
	Practiced	0	--	--	--	01	100	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	
	Did not practice	129	97	--	--	01	0.7	01	0.7	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	

Table 4: Association between perpetrated violence and frequency of alcohol consumption – Picos, PI, Brazil, 2019.

Types of violence		Not reported		Never		Once a month or less		Two to four times a month		Two to three times a week		Four or more times a week		p-value
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Psychological violence	Did not respond	05	41.6	03	25	02	16.7	02	16.7	--	--	--	--	0.7553
	Practiced	11	31.4	03	8.6	17	48.6	03	8.6	--	--	01	2.8	
	Did not practice	47	43.5	19	17.6	29	26.9	10	9.3	01	0.9	02	1.8	
Physical violence	Did not respond	03	33.3	01	11.1	04	44.5	01	11.1	--	--	--	--	0.1119
	Practiced	15	28.8	06	11.5	20	38.5	07	13.5	01	1.9	03	5.8	
	Did not practice	45	47.9	18	19.1	24	25.6	07	7.4	--	--	--	--	
Sexual violence	Did not respond	09	42.9	03	14.3	05	23.8	03	14.3	--	--	01	4.7	0.9797
	Practiced	--	--	--	--	01	100	--	--	--	--	--	--	
	Did not practice	54	40.6	22	16.5	42	31.6	12	9.0	01	0.8	02	1.5	

The higher prevalence of violent incidents among adolescents underscores existing social inequalities in housing, health, education, culture, and leisure. Poverty, economic disparity, and parental unemployment are known risk factors for youth involvement in violence.¹⁴ This was evident in the study sample, where more than half of the adolescent participants came from families with an income of up to one minimum wage.

Moreover, statistics indicate that young individuals, especially those who are black and economically disadvantaged, are more vulnerable to deaths from external causes and are often stigmatized for aggressive and violent behaviors.¹⁵ Despite most study participants identifying as mixed race (*pardos*), it is believed that black ancestry is present and possibly a concealment of color is preferable, as there is a difference in social behavior among black people. This is because the darker the skin, the more discrimination there is in society. Generally, these adolescents are more likely to engage in violence as

perpetrators and victims due to their color/race/ethnicity.¹⁶

Although females were reported as the major perpetrators of violence in absolute numbers, this finding could relate to the higher participation of women in the sample. The prevalence of involvement in violent situations, whether as aggressor or victim, is actually higher among male adolescents. Being male is identified as a predictor of violent responses in conflict or victimization situations.¹⁶ This could be due to societal tolerance for aggressive male behavior, often encouraged in patriarchal cultures.¹⁷

Literature suggests that boys are more exposed to violence, especially outside the family, making them a risk group for witnessing, suffering, and perpetrating violent acts.¹⁸ They often exhibit aggressive behaviors, which is why they get involved more in fights, thefts, violent crimes, and vandalism.¹⁹ The aggressive behavior that is more frequently practiced by and against male adolescents is part of constructing a masculinity that seeks social acceptance

through displays of virility.¹⁵ This is often supported by greater social tolerance for violent behavior among men.¹¹ The statement is corroborated by data from this study, which showed male adolescents as the most frequent victims of violence perpetrated by their peers, with the majority of these incidents occurring in the environment they frequent, the school.

Authors⁸ highlight that violence in school settings has become a global issue with both individual and collective health consequences. It is important to recognize that during adolescence, victims have limited resources to avoid or defend against aggression. Participating in physical fights, bullying, and carrying weapons are recognized as risk factors for violence among youth.¹⁴ Schools should be seen as critical venues for intervention and for amplifying control measures against violence. They are places of learning and development where adolescents acquire social, cultural, and hegemonic skills that they will use throughout their lives. Additionally, schools are spaces for social interaction where young people have direct contact with others in their age group. This makes them suitable locations for reducing risk behaviors related to violence.^{11,20} Schools, as creators of bonds, play a crucial role in identifying violent and withdrawn behaviors. Thus, educators commonly observe low academic performance, aggressiveness toward peers and teachers, isolation, and hostilities. Adolescents spend a significant part of their day in educational settings, where high rates of violence perpetration are recorded.²⁰ Therefore, schools are ideal for implementing strategies to combat these issues, requiring collaboration with other sectors and parents/guardians.

Colombia, a school-based violence rehabilitation program significantly reduced violence among school children.²¹ Similarly, a systematic review in the United States showed that parental involvement with schools in identifying risk behaviors led to reductions in both domestic and school violence.²²

A study⁸ with 239 adolescents found a statistical association between high risk for aggression and alcohol consumption (RP=2.26, CI: 1.25-4.11), underscoring alcohol as a significant situational factor that can precipitate violence among adolescents.

The reluctance to disclose alcohol use often stems from the shame and stigma associated with it, contributing to numerous blank responses in surveys. By facilitating violent episodes, society and families generally hold negative perceptions of adolescents who use licit and illicit drugs, leading to stigmatization.²³

Moreover, alcohol consumption during adolescence can seriously impair school performance, as memory—a key function in the learning process—can be compromised by alcohol use.⁸ Excessive alcohol consumption during adolescence raises concerns about school performance because it often leads to a significant drop in the effectiveness of the teaching-learning process.²⁴ According to the same author, adolescents who use alcohol are absent from classes more frequently, missing out on the entire educational process. Those who do attend classes often

exhibit drowsiness, sluggishness, and difficulties in understanding what the teacher says.

Research suggests that brain damage, particularly in the hippocampus, caused by alcohol use affects learning and memory, since the hippocampus is where memories are formed and then distributed to other brain areas.²⁵ Damage here can impair new memory formation, impacting learning processes.²⁶

Thus, the decline in school performance leads to a reduction in self-esteem, which likely increases the risk of further experimentation, consumption, and abuse of psychoactive substances.

Finally, the data from this study highlight non-compliance with public policies aimed at preventing alcohol and drug use among adolescents. Despite legal restrictions on selling alcoholic beverages to those under 18 in Brazil, as per Law 13.106 of March 17, 2015,²⁷ alcohol often serves as a gateway to more abusive use and initiation into illicit drug consumption,²⁸ as well as involvement in violent episodes. This requires societies to develop effective prevention strategies targeting this demographic.

In conclusion, the results demonstrate that adolescents often perpetrate violence against their peers, particularly in social settings like schools that facilitate interaction. Thus, schools emerge as strategic locations for addressing this issue, as they enable the identification and intervention of risk factors related to violence among adolescents, fostering the implementation of control measures such as preventive and educational actions and a culture of peace.⁸

Conclusion

The study revealed that adolescents frequently engage in acts of violence, particularly affecting their peers and manifesting within the school environment. These young individuals are subject to vulnerability factors both within and beyond the family context, with their involvement in violent acts yielding behavioral effects that can be detrimental throughout their lives.

A significant representation of females in the sample indicates a relationship between this group and the practice of physical violence. This finding underscores the need for new, in-depth approaches to the subject, employing matched samples to better understand the apparent relationships highlighted by this research.

Although the study presents important findings, it is constrained by limited access to scientific data focusing on violence perpetrated by adolescents. This lack of data underlines the necessity of further research, which would allow for a comprehensive analysis of the factors associated with this harm, as well as its manifestations and implications in the short, medium, and long term.

Authors' Contributions

Costa, JR: Conception and design of the study; Data collection; Data analysis and interpretation; Statistical analysis; Drafting and critical review of the manuscript.

Silva, MMO: Drafting and critical review of the manuscript.

Cruz Neto, J: Analysis and interpretation of data, Drafting and critical revision of the manuscript.

Lopes, MSV: Drafting and critical review of the manuscript. Albuquerque, GA: Conception and design of the study, Drafting and critical review of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest and Funding

No conflicts of interest were declared by the authors.

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