

Teen Dating Violence

By **Geoffrey Fattah**

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As a 19-year-old student at Brigham Young University, Sarah Southerland said she didn't recognize the signs that she was about to enter into an abusive relationship with a young man she met in religion class.

Dating violence U.S.

18%	High school females reported being hurt by someone
7%	High school males reported being hurt by someone
1 in 5	High school females reported being abused by a boyfriend
9 out of 10	Rape offenders and their victims were under age 18

Those having violent relationships in adolescence are more likely to experience substance abuse, eating disorders, risky sexual behavior, suicide and violence as adults.

SOURCE: American Bar Association

Deseret Morning News graphic

She thought his questions about where she was, what she was doing, even what she was wearing, were just the symptoms of a "lovesick boy."

"But it wasn't because he loved me," said Southerland, who ran off with him to marry in Vegas. Southerland told lawmakers Wednesday that during her 4 1/2-month marriage she was beaten with a golf club and baseball bat, and locked in a room and starved.

After being bound with tape and told by her husband he planned to kill her to collect on a life insurance policy, Southerland said she managed to escape to her family and press charges. Southerland told lawmakers the man served 22 days in jail.

Although numbers are scarce, advocates against domestic violence say abuse among dating teens appears to be a problem.

Susan Burke, with the Utah Substance Abuse and Anti-violence Coordinating Council, said an informal survey of teens across Utah showed that 50 percent of them thought there was a problem with violence among teens who date.

Rep. David Litvack, D-Salt Lake, read a letter from a 19-year-old who had been with her boyfriend since she was 13. Litvack said the boy would choke her and verbally berate her, but she did not know who to turn to for help.

Teen dating violence, Litvack said, is a shadow of things to come for many teens who become adults. "It's a precursor to domestic violence," he told members of the Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice Interim Committee.

Burke said although statistics are just now beginning to be collected, those who work with abuse victims say they are seeing teens who face abuse in dating situations. Since last February, Burke said the local domestic violence hotline (1-800-897-5465) has received five calls from teens seeking help. Currently teens as well as adults can seek help on the hotline.

Those who deal with teens say many do not know who to turn to for help and assume the domestic violence hotline is reserved for adults. "Many said they would go to a friend first for help" before going to an adult, Burke said.

Burke asked lawmakers to help support a campaign to spread awareness among teens of the warning signs and where to find help.

"Education is key," said Southerland, who has since taken to working with domestic violence victims at women's shelters.