

The perception of violence: A study of factors affecting the perceptions of violence in university students

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Abstract

Objective: This study determined the family and personal characteristics as well as the risk factors pertaining to students in the 1st and 2nd years of three Faculties at Hacettepe University in order to understand the factors that affect their perceptions of violence. **Method:** A total of 904 university students were reached. An informed consent form was attached to the questionnaire and students were asked to fill the questionnaire after giving their consent. Students were given 16 descriptions of behaviors involving violence, and they were asked to name this behavior as violence or not. The individuals who named an act as violent was given "1" and the total score for all the behaviors ranged from 0 to 16. Students with high scores were considered more sensitive towards violence. **Results:** The mean scores of female participants were higher than those of male participants. It was found that females were more aware of the violence and the difference between the genders was greater for perceptions of physical and sexual violence. Education and employment status of the parents were associated with the perceptions of young people about violence. **Conclusion:** Studies to increase the awareness of violence in males with the aim of reducing violence and its consequences would be a great value.

Key Words: University student, violence, perception of violence

Şiddet algısı: Üniversite öğrencilerinde şiddet algısını etkileyen faktörlerin İncelenmesi

Özet

Amaç: Bu araştırmada Hacettepe Üniversitesinin üç fakültesinin 1. ve 2. sınıf öğrencilerinin şiddet algısını ve şiddet algısına etki eden aile ve kişi özelliklerini ve bireye ait risk faktörlerini belirlemek amaçlanmıştır.

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Yöntem: Toplam 904 öğrenciye ulaşılmıştır. Katılımcılardan aydınlatılmış onam formu eklenmiş anketi doldurmaları istenmiştir. Ankette katılımcılara 16 adet şiddet içeren davranış tanımı sorulmuş ve farkındalıkları değerlendirilmiştir. Şiddet olarak tanımlanan her bir davranış için 1 puan verilmiştir. Toplam puan 0 ile 16 arasında değişmektedir. Yüksek puan alan kişiler daha duyarlı olarak kabul edilmiştir. **Bulgular:** Kadın katılımcıların şiddet tanımlamalarından aldıkları puan ortalamaları erkek katılımcılardan yüksek bulunmuştur. Kadınların cinsel ve fiziksel şiddet açısından farkındalıklarının erkeklerden daha fazla olduğu saptanmıştır. Ailenin öğrenim durumunun ve çalışma durumunun gençlerin şiddet algılarını etkileyen faktörler olduğu saptanmıştır. **Sonuç:** Şiddeti ve sonuçlarını azaltmak için bulunulacak müdahalelerde özellikle erkeklerin şiddet farkındalıklarını artıracak çalışmalar yapmak uygun olacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Üniversite öğrencisi, şiddet, şiddet algısı

Introduction

Violence causes physical, psychological and behavioral problems and may even result in death. It is a well-established fact that globally every year more than one million people die due to violence and even more are subject to non-fatal injuries¹. That is, violence is an important public health problem.²⁻⁷

Recent studies have examined factors that lead young people to acts of violence and it has been concluded that violence is the result of the combination of many factors. These factors can be grouped under five headings: individual-oriented (psychological state, problem solving skills, anti-social disorders, beliefs), family-oriented (low socio-economic status, anti-social family, poor relationships in family with children), school-oriented (being introvert, low level of success), peer-oriented (anti-social relation with peers, weak social ties), and society-oriented (unrelated to the immediate surroundings).^{1,8-11}

Violent behaviors can be perceived by different people in different ways; it is known that understanding the perceptions of differences between individuals is very significant for programs that need to be developed in order to prevent violence.^{12, 13} While a majority of people define arguments and physical violence between two lovers as "ordinary", others may regard it as a reason for separation. According to the Parliamentary Investigation Commission's

Report of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (2007) certain violent behaviors that are defined as "violence" are not regarded as "violence" by young people when these behaviors were considered.¹⁴

In order to understand ways in which to prevent violence, which is a preventable public health problem and has been defined as an international epidemic¹², this study aimed to determine the perception of violence among 1st and 2nd year students at the Faculties of Engineering, Education and Pharmacy of Hacettepe University and also to examine the family and personal characteristics and risk factors pertaining to individuals that affect their perceptions of violence.

Methods

The study was conducted in the Faculties of Engineering, Education and Pharmacy of Hacettepe University. The population of the study consisted of first and second year students. All of the students studying at these faculties were included in the study and the sample size was determined by the formula "sample size calculation when population is known"¹⁵. The sample size was calculated for a total of 2,748 students from the 1st and 2nd years as 688 while the target to be reached was 700 individuals when the prevalence of violence was taken as 10.7%¹⁶ and the margin of error as 2% within 95% confidence limits. The investigators tried to

Forms of violent behavior: students were asked if this was considered a violent behavior:

raising one's voice,
scolding,
upsetting others,
annoying others,
humiliating others,
gossiping about someone,
prohibition to talk with others
prohibition to communicate with others
swearing,
addressing with nicknames,
kissing by force,
holding hands by force,
caressing by force,
forcing sexual intercourse,
hitting,
limiting spending by others

reach all of the students studying in the Faculty of Pharmacy and totally 904 students were reached.

Data were collected by the research team during or after classes on certain days that were decided upon by permits from the faculties. Permission was obtained from the university administration and Local Ethics Commission. A questionnaire that included the family and individual characteristics as well as the risky behaviors of young people was used in the study. The informed consent form was attached to the front page of the questionnaire and students were asked to fill the questionnaire after giving their consents.

Students were asked about 16 forms of violent behavior and their evaluation of violence was assessed. In this analysis, the individuals who named of an act as violent were given a score of "1"; the lowest score was "0" and the highest was "16" for the perceptions of violence in the description of violence. People with high scores were considered more sensitive towards violence. Violence descriptions were grouped as

verbal, emotional, sexual, physical and economical.

The status of smoking and smoking waterpipe, drinking alcoholic beverages, taking drugs, carrying a gun, playing games of chance and gambling were regarded as risky behaviors and each risky behavior was given "1" point. The lowest score for risky behaviors was "0" while the highest was "7".

In the analysis of the collected data, the SPSS 15.0 statistics package software was used. In the analysis, the percentage distribution, chi-square and t-test were used. The upper limit for the margin of error in all analyses was taken as 0.05.

Results

The distribution of gender and family characteristics of students studying at the three faculties are given in Table 1.

More than half of the students were females and the mean age of participants was 20.2 (± 1.3). Almost half of the mothers (46.1%) and 68.5% of the fathers had had a high school and university higher education. Although 98.8% of the fathers had work experience, only half of the mothers (41.9%) had worked for an income in their life (Table 1).

Female and male students had different perceptions of actions included in the questionnaire about violent behavior. More males than females perceived gossiping as a violent behavior ($p=0.006$). Kissing by force, holding hands by force, caressing by force, forcing sexual intercourse and hitting were defined as violent act by females with a percentage higher than by males and the difference between the genders was found to be statistically significant ($p<0.001$ in total) (Table 2). 11.7% students smoked cigarettes, 47.4% drank alcoholic beverages,

Table 1. The distribution of gender and of the family characteristics of students studying at three different faculties of Hacettepe University

	n	%
Gender		
Male	356	39.4
Female	548	60.6
Educational background of mother		
Secondary school or lower	487	53.9
High school or university	416	46.1
Employment status of mother		
Never worked	525	58.1
Still working or retired	378	41.9
Job specifications of mother		
Working in jobs that do require higher education	154	42.1
Working in jobs that do not require higher education	212	57.9
Educational background of father		
Secondary school or lower	284	31.5
High school or higher	619	68.5
Employment status of father		
Never worked	12	1.3
Still working or retired	888	98.7
Job specifications of father		
Working in jobs that do require higher education	266	32.7
Working in jobs that do not require higher education	548	67.3

n=904

2.4% took drugs, 5.2% students carried a gun, 24.7% students played games of chance, 4.1% students gambled. For the each risky behavior, the total score for violence is given in Figure 1. There were no differences in the scores for any of the risky activities/behaviors reported by the students except for those who took drugs. Participants who do not take drugs accept more behaviors as violent as those who take drugs (p=.019).

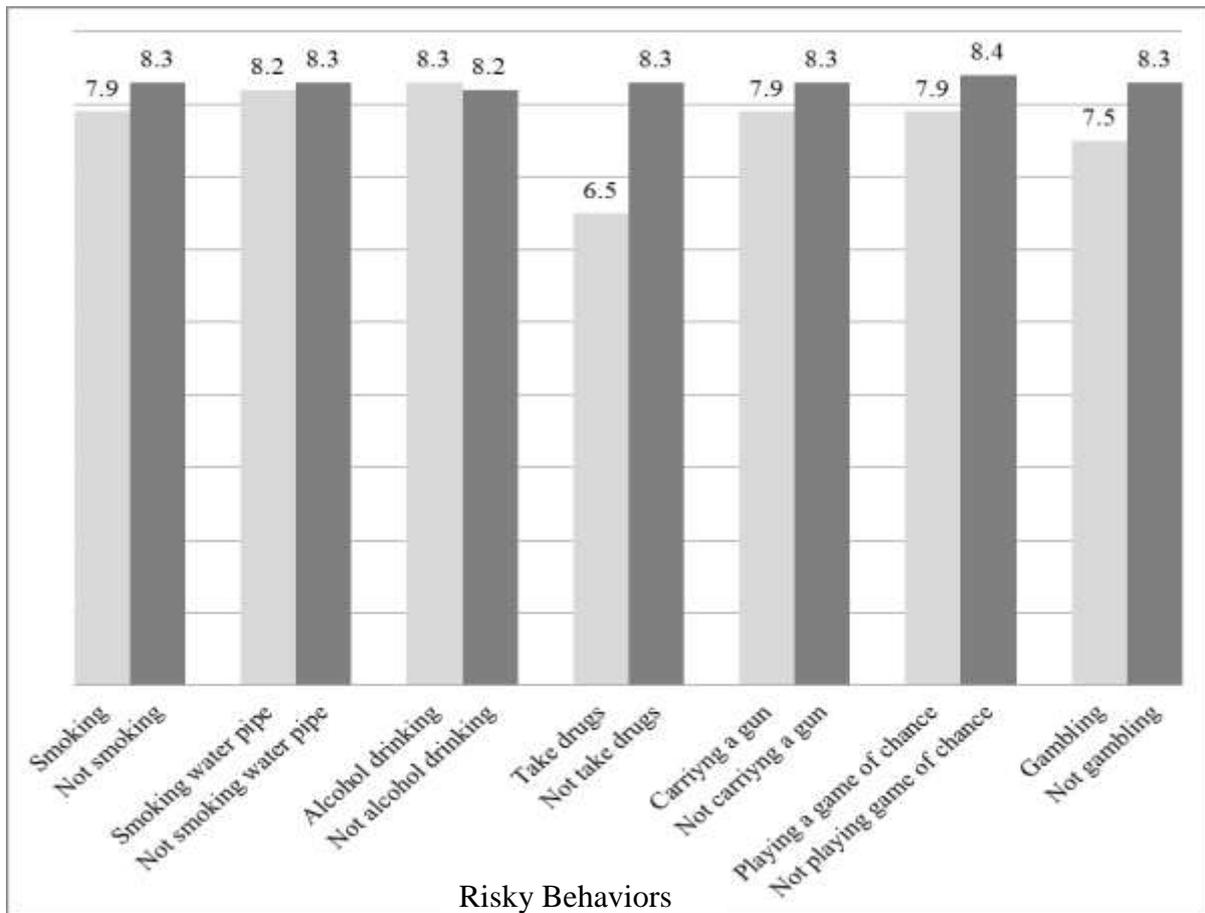
The number of risky behaviors of male participants is higher than that of females and this difference was found to be

Table 2. The distribution of violence description of students studying at three different faculties of Hacettepe University according to their genders

	Male (%)	Female (%)	p
Raising one's voice	20.6	24.9	.139
Scolding	46.1	47.0	.806
Upsetting others	23.5	18.5	.073
Annoying others	26.6	22.8	.195
Humiliating others	71.3	71.7	.898
Gossiping about someone	37.8	29.0	.006
Prohibition to talk with others	44.1	47.7	.295
Prohibition to communicate with others	35.8	41.8	.073
Swearing	80.2	82.0	.503
Addressing with nicknames	51.6	49.9	.627
Kissing by force	60.5	78.3	<.001
Holding hands by force	53.0	68.1	<.001
Caressing by force	63.9	77.1	<.001
Forcing sexual intercourse	76.2	89.5	<.001
Hitting	78.8	91.9	<.001
Limiting spending by others	21.8	23.7	.511

statistically significant (p<.001). The male students who engaged in more risky behaviors had lower scores for defining violent behavior (Figure 2).

For female participants the mean scores for the acts of violence were found to be higher than those for the males (p=.001). Similarly, the mean scores for the acts of violence of individuals who had been subject to violence during the past year were found to be higher than individuals that had not been subject to such violence, and this difference was statistically significant (p<.001) (Figure 3).



Smoking ($t=1.159$, $p=.247$), Smoking water pipe ($t=0.509$, $p=.611$), Alcohol drinking ($t=0.352$, $p=.725$), Taking drugs ($t=2.354$, $p=.019$), Carrying a gun ($t=0.674$, $p=.501$), Playing a game of chance ($t=1.712$, $p=.087$), Gambling ($t=1.275$, $p=.202$) Note that taking, carrying need to changed above as well.

Figure 1. The total score about violence description of students at three different faculties of Hacettepe University for the each risky behavior

The results showed that 90.8% females and 79.1% of males scored sexual violence positively and this difference between the genders was found to be statistically significant ($p<.001$). It was found that 91.9% females and 78.8% of males scored physical violence positively and this difference between the genders was found to be statistically significant ($p<.001$). It was found that 88.8% of students whose mothers had a high school or university education and 84.1% of students whose mothers had only a primary school education or less scored

sexual violence positively ($p=.044$). Students whose mothers were still working or had retired differed from those whose mothers had never worked about views concerning physical and economic violence and this difference was found to be statistically significant (physical violence $p=.024$, economic violence $p=.003$).

Similarly, in respect of economic violence the views of those whose mothers and fathers were working in a job requiring higher education compared to those that do

not require higher education scored higher (respectively $p=.024$, $p=.021$). Those that had not been subject to economic violence in the recent year produced higher scores than other students ($p=.22$).

Those that currently had a boyfriend/girlfriend produced higher scores about physical violence than did the other students ($p=.046$) (Table 3).

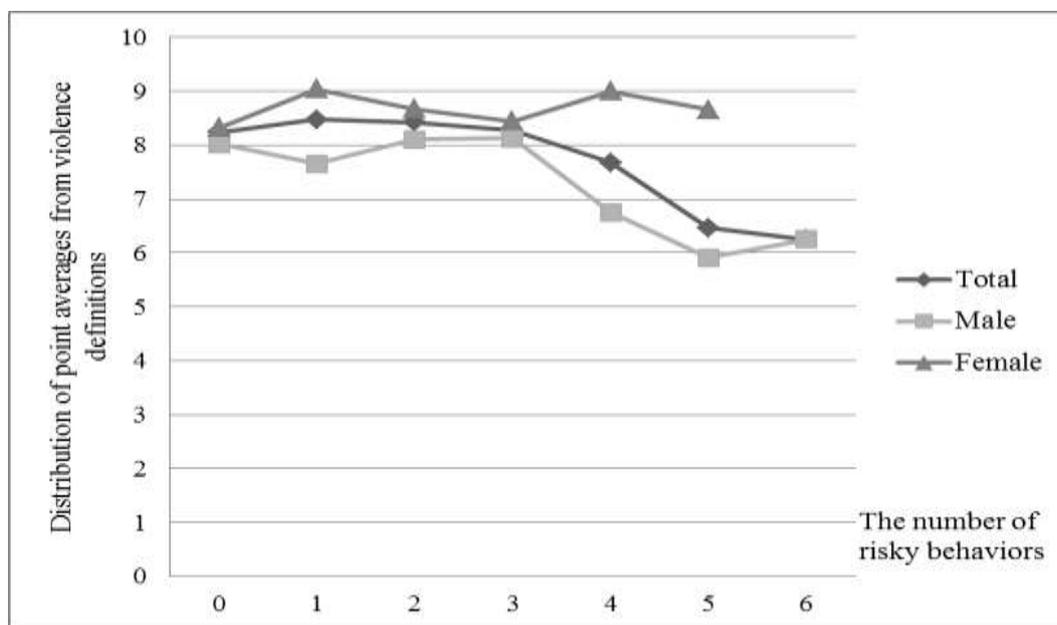


Figure 2. The distribution of the mean scores of students studying at three faculties at Hacettepe University from definitions of violence according by the number assigned to risky behavior

Discussion

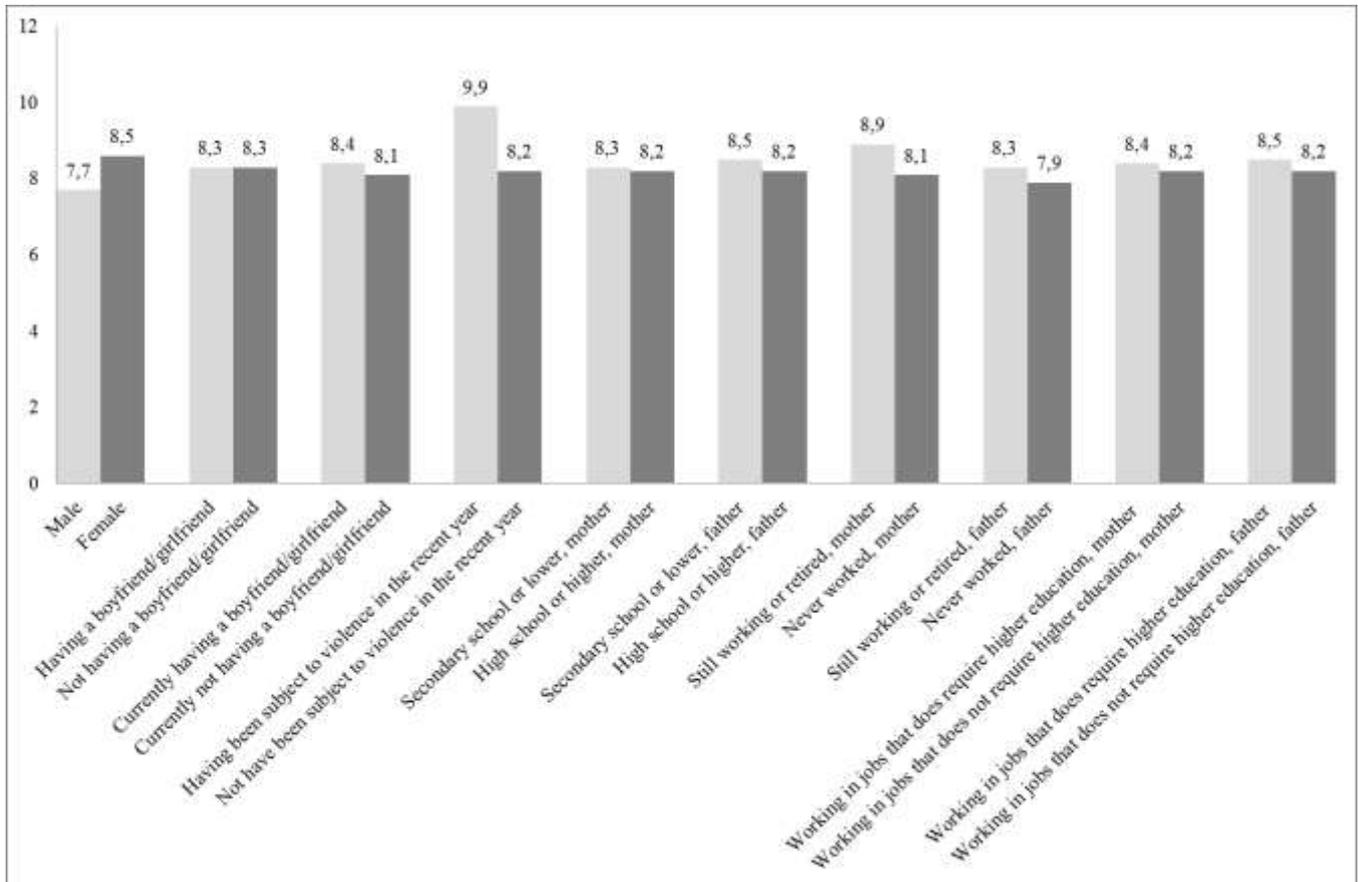
Violence is an important but preventable public health problem and it is handled differently by different individuals and societies. It is important to know how individuals perceive violence in order to be efficient in all interventions to prevent violence.

In this study, which was conducted with the aim of determining the perceptions of violence of university students also in relation to individual and family factors that may affect these perceptions, it was found out that awareness of violence of females is higher compared to males and that the difference between the genders is more visible in areas of physical and sexual violence. Females are more sensitive compared to males about sexually violent

behaviors and about certain physically violent behaviors. Although this is a significant conclusion of the study, it can be seen that males are more sensitive about verbal and psychosocial violence in particular. In a study conducted by Carroll et al., it was found that female students found violence more unacceptable compared to male students and that they are more aware and sensitive.¹⁷ In another study, the reason for differences in the perception of violence between genders was shown to relate to an encouragement for males in the society to act tough.¹⁸ In the same study, it was reported that gender is a very important factor in relation to violence awareness and that males witness and are involved in violence more than females.¹⁸ It has been suggested that difference in the perception of violence between genders may result from the social gender roles that are imposed on females and males and also

that awareness of violence of males is lower compared to females since they internalize the actions through witnessing or being involved in violence more.^{19,20}

In this study, the fact that the mean score of those that having been subject to violence in the past year was higher, makes one think that being subject to violence is a



Gender ($t=3.336, p=.001$), Educational background of mother ($t=0.604, p=.546$), Employment status of mother ($t=1.488, p=.137$), Job specifications of mother ($t=0.962, p=.610$), Educational background of father ($t=1.222, p=.222$), Employment status of father ($t=0.323, p=.747$), Job specifications of father ($t=1.483, p=.138$), Currently having a boyfriend/girlfriend ($t=1.058, p=.291$), **Have been subject to violence in the recent year** ($t=4.330, p<.001$)

Figure 3. Distribution of mean score of students studying at three different faculties of Hacettepe University obtained from violence definitions according to gender, family characteristics, having a boyfriend/girlfriend and the status of having been subject to violence

confusing factor about awareness of violence. It may be useful to perform studies that show how to increase the awareness of violence in males. In some studies it has been reported that certain individual behaviors such as carrying a gun, taking drugs or drinking alcohol are important risk

factors in relation to being involved in violence.^{9, 10, 21, 22}

In this study, it can be seen that young people have many risk factors. The fact that the mean score of participants having such risk factors is lower compared to those that do not have them suggests that the awareness of young people with risk

factor about violence is insufficient. And this shows that the sufficiency of the awareness about the healthy life style of young people affects more than one risky behavior of a young person. This can prevent young

people from having risk factors and that the forms of intervention making them adopt healthy living behaviors can affect the health of the young person in general.

Table 3. Distribution of violence description of students studying at three different faculties of Hacettepe University according to gender and family characteristics

		The groups of violence description (%)				
		Verbal violence	Emotional violence	Sexual violence	Physical violence	Economic violence
Gender						
	Male	91.1	84.8	79.1	78.8	21.8
	Female	93.2	86.4	90.8	91.9	23.7
	p	.249	.502	<.001	<.001	.511
Educational background of mother						
	Secondary school or lower	93.8	86.2	84.1	86.6	20.7
	High school or university	90.7	85.3	88.8	87.0	25.7
	p	.083	.724	.044	.836	.076
Employment status of mother						
	Never worked	92.5	85.2	84.6	84.6	19.4
	Still working or retired	92.2	86.6	88.5	89.8	27.9
	p	.879	.554	.099	.024	.003
Job specifications of mother						
	Working in jobs that does require higher education	92.3	86.0	85.8	86.4	21.5
	Working in jobs that does not require higher education	92.7	84.7	88.7	88.7	30.0
	p	.890	.665	.345	.459	.024
Educational background of father						
	Secondary school or lower	92.9	85.9	88.3	88.0	23.0
	High school or university	92.1	85.7	85.2	86.2	23.0
	p	.674	.959	.212	.471	.995

Table 3. -Continued.

	The groups of violence description (%)					
	Verbal violence	Emotional violence	Sexual violence	Physical violence	Economic violence	
Employment status of father						
Never worked	91.7	75.0	91.7	66.7	8.3	
Still working or retired	92.4	85.9	86.1	87.0	23.0	
	p*	1.000	.394	1.000	.062	.316
Job specifications of father						
Working in jobs that does require higher education	91.8	85.6	85.3	86.9	20.9	
Working in jobs that does not require higher education	93.9	86.2	88.5	86.6	28.0	
	p	.285	.820	.207	.905	.021
Having been subject to violence in the recent year						
Yes	96.6	91.0	92.1	92.1	32.6	
No	92.0	85.2	85.7	86.3	21.8	
	p	.118	.134	.092	.121	.022
Having a boyfriend/girlfriend						
Yes	92.1	85.7	87.1	87.3	24.6	
No	93.1	85.8	85.1	86.5	19.8	
	p	.604	.978	.418	.732	.109
Currently having a boyfriend/girlfriend						
Yes	93.0	84.1	88.6	90.0	25.5	
No	91.5	87.3	85.2	84.5	24.2	
	p	.503	.272	.221	.046	.731

*Fisher exact test p value

Generally, it is known that the number of risky behaviors in males is higher than in females.²³ Similarly, it was shown in this study that the number of risky behaviors of males is higher than that of females and that all risk factors are significantly more frequent in males. Moreover, it was shown that the higher the risky behaviors of male participants, the lower their mean score in recognizing violent behavior are. In order to be able to evaluate the effects of risky behaviors of males and females on their perceptions of violence, new extensive studies should be conducted that are supported by qualitative methods that can demonstrate the socio-cultural relationships in depth.

In programs that are conducted in order to prevent violence among young people, it has been emphasized that not only the cognitive, social and behavioral factors of the individual but also the social systems that shape these factors are important.¹⁰ The most important one of these social systems is the family. It is considered that the educational and employment status of the parents is very important in relation to the perceptions of violence of young people. In this study, the mean score that young people obtain from recognizing violent behavior did not vary according to the educational background, employment status and job characteristics of the parents. It was shown that the mother's having a high school or university education increases the awareness of sexual violence and that the employment of the mother increases the awareness of physical and economical violence, employment of parents in jobs requiring higher education increases awareness of economic violence. Further it was shown that having a boyfriend/girlfriend increases awareness of physical violence. Similarly, in a study that was conducted in Peru, it was reported that a mother's low level of education is related to violence²⁴ in young people. In another study, it was reported that the rate of being subject to violence among young people is

related to the educational background of the parents and that the rate of being subject to violence increases as the educational background and socio-economic level decreases.²⁵

In a study that was conducted in the USA, it was shown that aggression increases as the socio-economic level of the family decreases.²⁶ While the socio-demographic characteristics of the family affect the perception of violence of a young person, they also relate to the young person's exposure to such behaviors. For this reason, it will be important to undertake interventions by taking into account the characteristics pertaining to the parents.

Conclusion

There are differences in perceptions of different types of violence among young people. It can be seen that certain behaviors are not perceived as violence. The socio-demographic background of young people and especially that of their families significantly affect their perceptions related to violence. In young people, risky behaviors relate to a more accepting view of violence.

All these conclusions demonstrate that violence can be made "ordinary" in a society and consequently among young people. Starting from the family environment, perceptions of violence should be improved and interventions should bring in life skills.

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