

# A listening ear at your fingertips

A study on the different paths and profiles of young victims of domestic or family violence, through the analysis of data from the online chat [commentonsaime.fr](https://commentonsaime.fr)

EN AVANT  
TOUTE(S)

Study overview  
Part 1 - 2020



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# 1. Young people go “under the radar”

En avant toute(s) (“Go forward, women!”) is an organization fighting for gender equality<sup>1</sup> and to end violence against women and members of the LGBTQIA+<sup>2</sup> community. The association’s work is aimed at young people, regardless of social class, gender, sexual orientation, culture, or belief.

The association’s work follows two complementary approaches: the fight against sexism and support to young women and members of the LGBTQIA+ community experiencing violence within a relationship or their family. Their main tool of action is the online chat [commentonsaime.fr](https://commentonsaime.fr) (“how to love”, in English), the first one of its kind in France.

For En avant toute(s), it was of utmost importance to conduct a thorough analysis of the reality of young people’s lives when they experience violence within a relationship or their family, as such study had not yet been conducted. This data is invaluable in the sense that young people usually go “under the radar” when talking about violence and the care that is given to victims. Different factors can explain this: young people can struggle to identify themselves as “domestic violence” victims,

since the expression itself carries the image of a well-established relationship, often two people living together, which is rarely the case of young couples. Moreover, young people do not use the same means of communication as the organizations in charge of fighting violence and supporting victims. Finally, their problems often go unnoticed by the adults around them, making it difficult for said adults to provide the necessary support.

## a.

### The reality of young people's lives is widely misunderstood

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Violence against women and the LGBTQIA+ community is studied by many organizations, yet the available data on the subject remains incomplete or outdated.

For instance, the French national Survey on Violence against women, which is still often cited today, dates back to 2000. Moreover, research led today by State and institutional actors fails to provide a comprehensive picture of domestic violence. Smaller independent actors, who are in direct contact with abused women, also produce

research that systematically highlight a misunderstanding and underestimation of the reality of the field.

This problem is most acute regarding young people. The reality of what these young victims of sexual and gender-based violence go through is widely misunderstood and poorly documented, as people under the age of 26 do not readily turn to organizations that do not cater to them specifically, preferring instead to seek help online.

## b.

### Reaching out to young people: [commentonsaime.fr](https://commentonsaime.fr)

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En avant toute(s) managed to reach out to a wide audience of young people through its online chat [commentonsaime.fr](https://commentonsaime.fr), first one of its kind in France and particularly adapted to a young, internet-oriented public. Through its expertise, the association can

collect normally silenced viewpoints and bring hidden and taboo discussions to the forefront, thereby creating a safe space for struggling people to voice their shames or difficulties. Analyzing this invaluable new data should help improve the care of violence victims.

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1 Gender is a sociological idea defining the way society “constructs” women and men from a social point of view. Gender is usually distinguished from sex.

2 Acronym gathering identities, gender identities and sexual orientations that are usually seen as a “minority”. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual. The “+” sign serves to acknowledge the existence of more terms.

# 2. Survey methodology

**This study is based on the analysis of 1416 chat conversations (44 minutes long on average), carried out between the 25th of November 2019 and the 30th of June 2020, with 996 different interlocutors.**

This report will mainly focus on the 611 chat conversations conducted with young people under 26 (part IV) in order to better understand the specific issues affecting this age group.

## **Why this timeframe?**

- The 25th of November 2019 is the day the opening hours of the online chat were first extended.
- Choosing the 30th of June 2020 as the closing date let us include an entire month post-lockdown. Indeed, many people who suffered from violence during the lockdown preferred to wait until it ended to speak out, feeling that they would be safer then.

This study aims to highlight the reality of what these young chat users go through, their life paths and specific profiles. All the data analyzed in the study is based on what the victims chose to share with the respondents during conversations that were often very short. In a majority of cases, our professional respondents could identify other acts of violence that were only hinted at by the victims, either because they did not have time to go more in depth or because they had normalized some types of violent behavior. The numbers presented here only include acts of violence that were explicitly stated by the victims, which leaves out other more subtle hints. Therefore, the numbers presented here are probably downplaying the reality of the violence these persons are subjected to.

# 3. Chat users' profiles and life paths

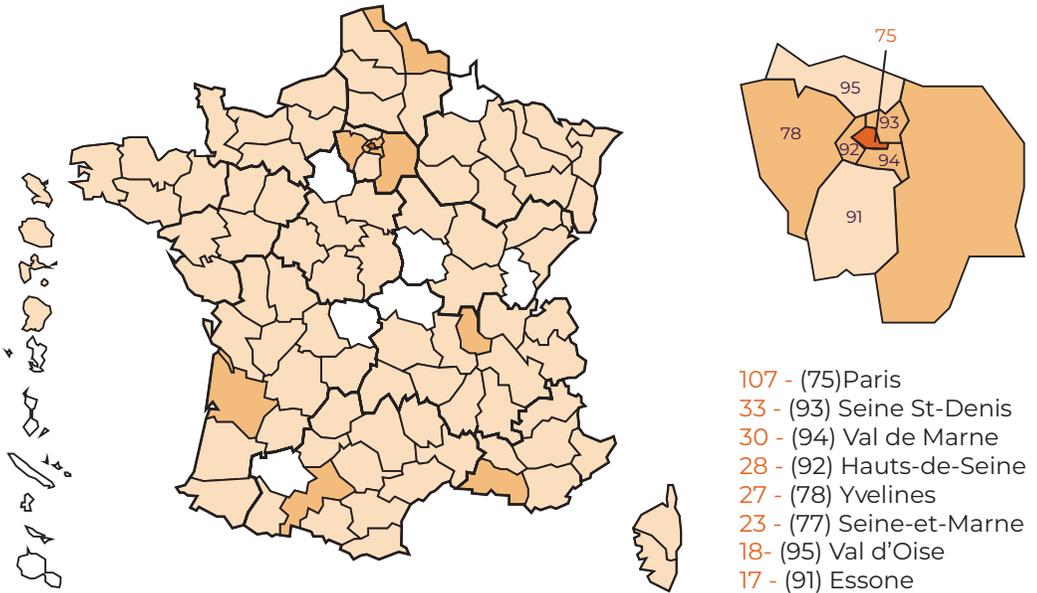




## An international use

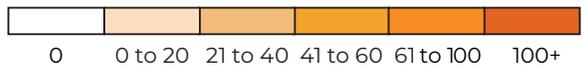
One of the strong points of the chat as a tool is that it can be accessed from all over the world, as is demonstrated by the fact that the interlocutors wrote from 15 different countries.

### Number of interlocutors per department



### Foreign countries

- Belgium (24)
- Switzerland (11), Morocco (5), Algeria (2), Germany (2), Tunisia (2), Canada (1), Spain (1), Greece (1), Haiti (1), Ireland (1), Romania (1), Senegal (1), Sweden (1), and Other unspecified foreign countries (6)





## The online chat: a tool to identify violence

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Another advantage of the chat is its use as a tool to help identify violence. A majority of the interlocutors are victims of abuse (85.1%), while 11.2% of them are witnesses or relatives of the victim seeking guidance.

### Categories of interlocutor profiles\*

\*out of 857 reported cases

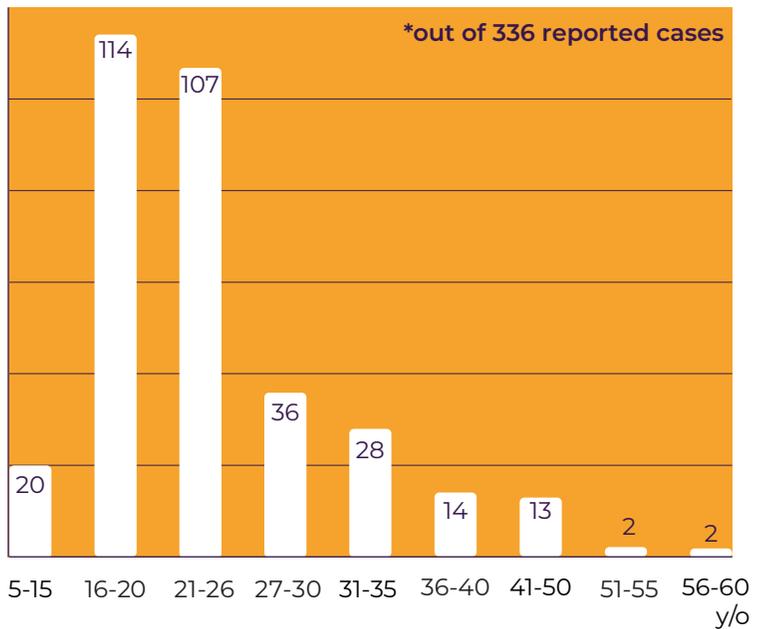
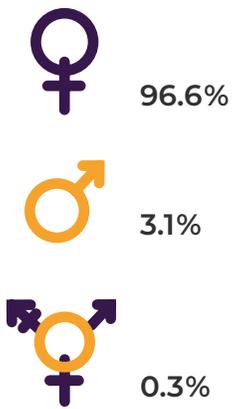




## Young victims who reach out to the chat are primarily women

Victims are on average 24.2 years old when they speak up. 71.1% of victims who reached out on the chat are less than 26 years old.

### Victims age distribution\*





## As described by chat users, abusers are mainly men aged 13 to 64 years old, primarily violent towards women

Individuals who use violence against young people under 26 are mainly males (94.6%). The average age of the abuser at the time of the events is 26.4 years old, with the youngest being 13 years old and the oldest 64.

Male abusers mainly use violence against women (541 instances against 9 where a male abuser used violence against another man).

It also appears that female abusers mainly use violence against other women (22 instances against 7 where they used violence against a man).

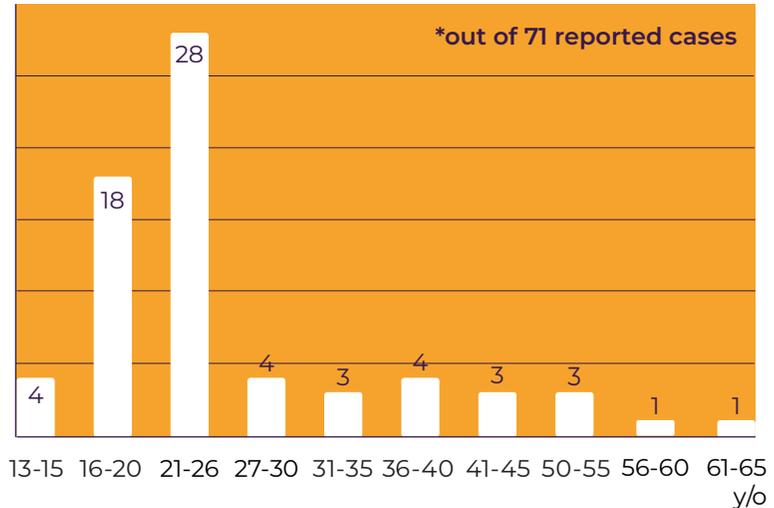
### Abusers age distribution\*



5.4%



94.6%





## Lockdown period

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The lockdown was a busy period for the chat. En avant toute(s) chose to extend opening hours 7/7, going from 19 hours weekly to 77 to offer better support. The number of visits went up accordingly, going from 49 monthly chat conversations in March to 536 chat conversations in May 2020, which represents a 993.9% increase.

Proportionally to all different types of violence that were declared for each period, the lockdown period saw an increase in physical violence as well as in family violence on a minor, which went from 1.6% of the demands before the lockdown to 6.1% of the demands during lockdown. It thus seems that the prolonged cohabitation during lockdown led to an increase in violent acts within the family unit. Moreover, the use of the online chat made perfect sense in this period of isolation since it allowed victims to reach out to professionals from home.



4. Young people  
under 26 are  
widely affected  
by sexual and  
gender-based  
violence



## General profile of victims and abusers

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### **Young victims are aged 10 to 26 when they reach out online**

The youngest victim we talked to was 10 when she first reached out to us online. Yet if you take the age of victims who suffered past abuse into account, the youngest was three at the time of the events.

Among those under 26, young people aged 16 to 20 are the most affected and make up 47% of the victims. This can be explained by the fact that they are entering adulthood and having their first sexual experiences at an age at which they are still vulnerable and misinformed, while the codes of a healthy relationship are not clearly established in our society and are too rarely discussed in an educative context.

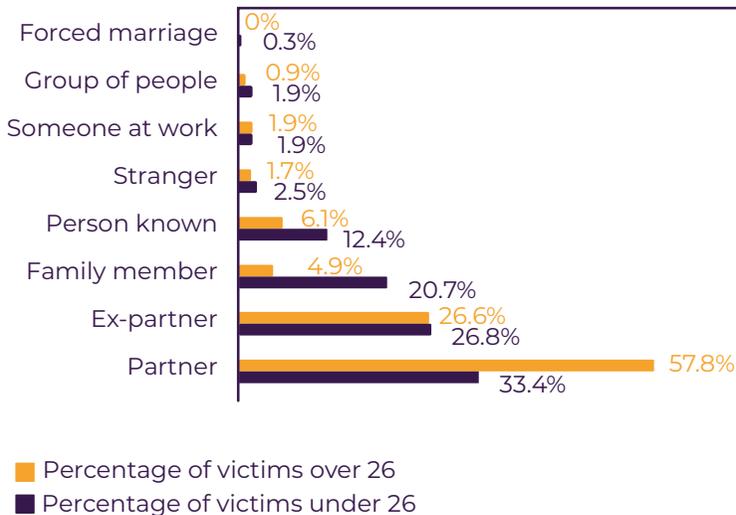
### **The abuser is often a relative**

Contrary to the common cliché of the sexual aggression that follows a night of heavy drinking or an unfortunate encounter, young victims of sexual and gender-based violence are, just like their elders, often abused by their current or ex-partner (respectively 33.3% and 26.7% of reported cases).

Family constitutes the third category of abusers of young people under 26. A younger person is more likely to be abused by a member of the family. Members of the family make up 20.7% of the persons using violence against people under 26, and 4.9% of the persons using violence against adults.

Only 8 acts of violence against a young person under 26 were committed by a stranger. They constitute 2.5% of the occurrences that were reported on the chat. The reality is thus quite far from the social imagery surrounding violence against women, which pictures an aggression by a drunk or mad stranger in a dark alley.

### Status of the abuser in relation to the victim (over and under 26 years old)



## Abusive persons are in a dominant position

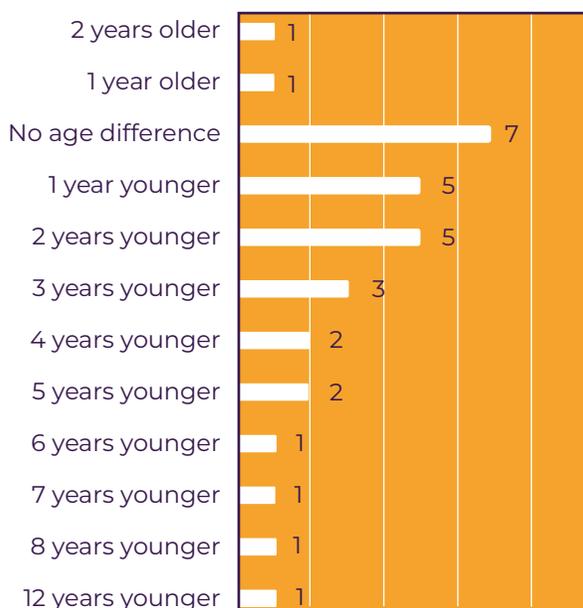
Abusers derive their power and advantage from being in a dominant position in relation to their victim.

### They are older

In 70% of reported cases, victims are indeed younger than their abusers (1 to 12 years). We can assume that the age difference makes it easier for the abusive person to hold power over their victim: they can claim to have more maturity or better knowledge of the world to refute the victim's arguments; they also have more material, social and symbolic resources.

### Age of the young victim under 26 in relation to their abuser\*

\*out of 30 reported cases

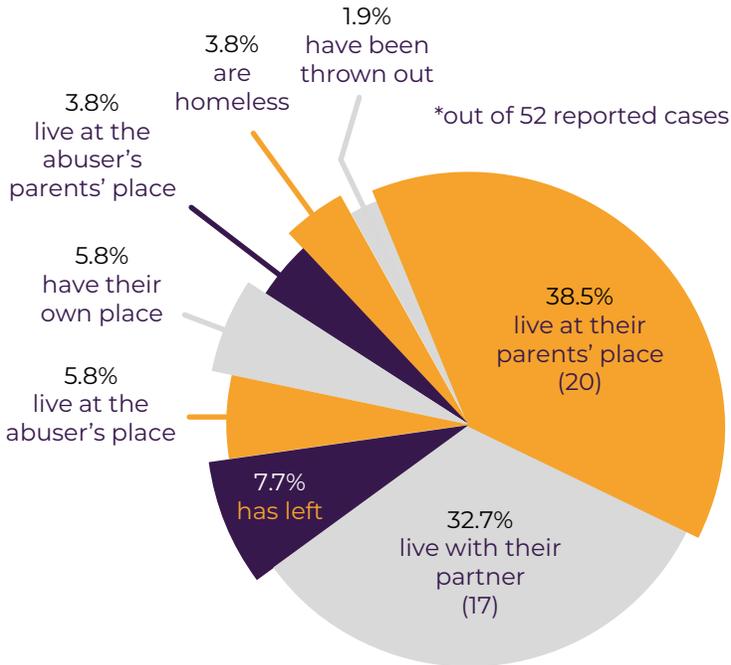


### They prey on victims that are financially dependent

Young people often lack financial resources. 80.1% of victims under 26 are indeed financially dependent or indigent, which means that they cannot have a home of their own. Out of 52 reported cases, only 5.8% of interlocutors had their own place to live.

This forced dependency worsens the victims' situation. 32.7% of them live with their partner, even at a young age. This goes to show that, aside from the dependency mechanisms established by their abuser, victims do not always have the financial option to live elsewhere.

### Living arrangements of young victims under 26 years old\*



## Abusive relationships are long-lasting

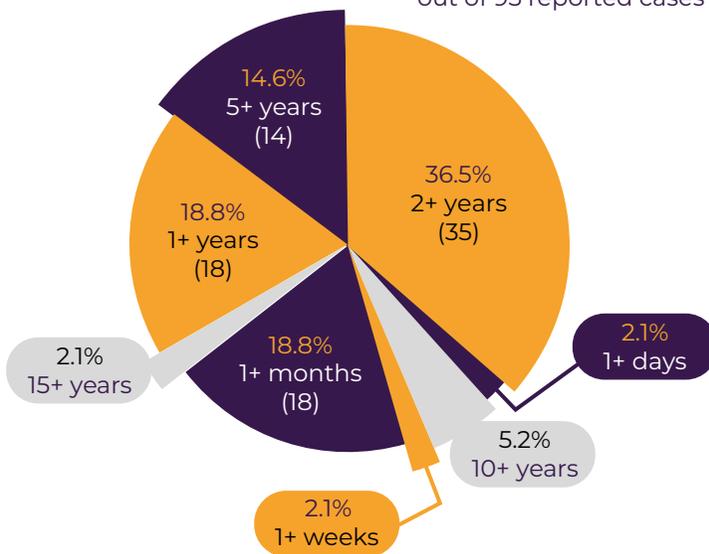
The abuser's dominant position makes it difficult for the victim to get out of a violent relationship.

In 58.4% of reported cases, a young victim under 26 years old is going to stay in an abusive relationship for two years or more. It is important to note the proportionality of long-term relationships in regard to the age of the victims: 7.3% of victims under 26 are in a long-lasting relationship (10 years or more). For victims over 26, one fifth of relationships last 10 years or more.

It is always difficult to get out of a violent relationship. But for younger victims, their lack of experience and resources as well as their young age contribute to their vulnerability and increase the problem.

### Length of the abusive relationship\*

\*out of 95 reported cases





## Recurring, sexual and online: young people's experience of violence is distinctive

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### Young victims are exposed to recurring acts of violence

Out of 105 victims under 26 who spoke about the frequency of the violence they were exposed to, 77.1% declared being exposed to recurring acts of violence, 20% of victims reported episodic acts of violence, whereas only 1.9% of them reported isolated acts of violence.

### Young people under 26 are more likely to experience sexual abuse

Emotional, verbal, sexual and physical abuse were the four main types of violence reported by victims of all age groups, in order of prevalence. The same person can sometimes experience a combination of two or more types of abuse. The fact that physical violence only ranks fourth in terms of prevalence helps to deconstruct the pre-conceived idea that domestic violence is centered around physical abuse (beating, for example).

Among those under 26, 67.4% of reported cases mention emotional abuse. Verbal and sexual abuse are next, coming up in 50.5% and 47.5% of declarations, respectively. Meanwhile 33.2% of reported cases mention physical abuse.

If the order of prevalence of those four different types of abuse is similar for victims over 26, proportions vary. Victims under 26 indeed report less occurrences of emotional abuse than their elders (67.4% versus 72%). This can be explained by the fact that young victims often do not see themselves as such.

Moreover, sexual abuse ranks third in terms of prevalence for victims both under and over 26. It is nonetheless more frequent among victims under 26, for whom it makes up 47.5% of violent acts, against 34.5% among victims over 26.

It is also worth noting that among underage victims, sexual abuse ranks second, with 24% of reported cases mentioning it. Underage victims have reported a narrower array of

abuse than other age groups. For instance, no underage victim reported instances of financial, administrative or legal abuse, which can be explained by the fact that most administrative and legal abuse is linked to legal procedures which, in France, are meant for adults (divorce, for example). It is also linked to the underage victim's lack of financial resources.

### **Cyberviolence is more frequent and diverse among young victims under 26**

Unlike older individuals, people under 26 report more cases of cyberviolence (15.5% against 20.6%, respectively).

People under 26 experience many different forms of cyberviolence, ranging from threats or blackmail to online shaming. In 15.3% of reported cases, victims of cyberviolence received threatening messages. In 14.1%, the abuser demands control over the victim's phone and access to their private data. In 11.8% of reported cases, photos or videos of a sexual nature have been leaked online without the victim's consent or knowledge. It is also worth noting that when asked what kind of cyberviolence they suffered from, most victims' experience do not fit into the categories predefined by the association, which shows that new ways of abusing someone online keep appearing every day.

When used with malevolent intent, digital tools can result in constant pressure and surveillance, especially for young adults under 26 who are the primary users of digital technology.



## Young people can identify the problem, but are more prone to romanticize the violence

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### Young people are quicker to identify a problem...

It seems that young victims of abuse speak up about it much earlier than adults over 26, sometimes as early as just a few days into a relationship: 18.8% of young victims under 26 used the online chat between 1 month and 1 year of relationship, against 7% of adult victims.

For the most part, young people under 26 reach out to En avant toute(s) after two years of relationship (36.5%). As demonstrated by the numbers (23% of young people use the chat in the first months of the relationship), young victims quickly realize that they are not in a healthy relationship. These numbers highlight the fact that violence emerges in a relationship as early as the first few months, if not straight from the beginning: an abuser does not become violent, they are violent to begin with.

### ... without really being able to identify themselves as victims

However, young people often struggle to see themselves as “victims of domestic abuse”. The survey results are unequivocal: interlocutors say they are “asking themselves questions about their relationship” or looking for advice because “something doesn’t feel right”. They are looking for reassurance and want to know whether what they are experiencing is real and serious or not. And indeed, in 42.2% of reported cases, the cause of incertitude is in fact domestic abuse, or past abuse (25.9% of cases).

The collective psyche pictures a listless woman – often a mother – bearing the marks of violent blows. This image is fueled by various communication campaigns which are meant to draw attention to the issue. Yet young victims, who often follow vastly different life paths, fail to associate this kind of violence to their own relationship problems: even when they experience abuse, most of them are still free to go out, party, study, and even rebel without enduring physical violence.

More importantly, violent relationships are so normalized nowadays that many young women experience abuse without even being able to identify it as such, be it emotional, sexual, financial, or even physical.

### **Romanticizing abuse makes it harder to detect**

Today's society tends to glorify jealous behaviors, often seen as professions of love, which in turns distorts the idea young people have of love. Controlling, shaming, and surveillance behaviors are normalized. Jealousy is often a pretext of choice when the abuser tries to justify his actions (24% of reported cases). This high number highlights the impact of romanticizing some behaviors in our society. If a jealous person commits violence, it becomes the victim's fault. The jealous person thus exerts a hold on the victim, who must now be careful not to do or say anything that might make the violent partner jealous.

The victim is therefore often held responsible by the abuser. It is a strategy that has been identified as being used by many violent persons to ensure their hold over their victim and to blame external circumstances. In 33.6% of reported cases, young people thus often cite the victim's actions as the trigger of violent behavior (for instance, "you were being annoying"). This type of behavior is similar to some found in a more general societal context, and which are part of the rape culture, like "she shouldn't have been out so late" or "of course, she was wearing a mini-skirt".



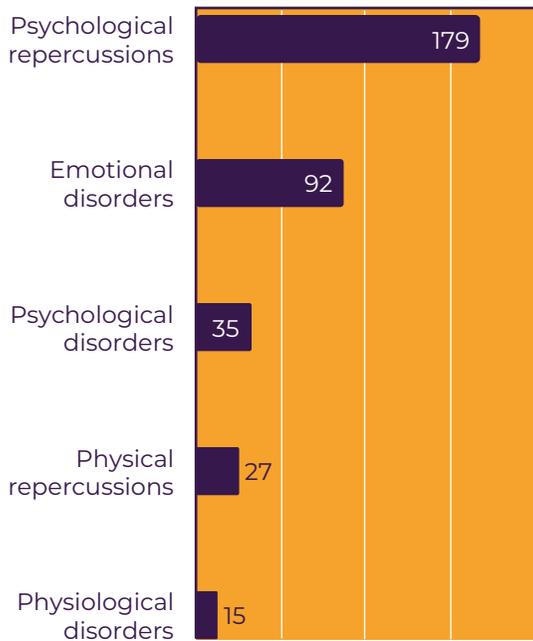
## Young people are more willing to act despite long-lasting consequences

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### Psychological repercussions on victims of violence

The impact violence has on victims under 26 is similar to the one it has on victims over 26. It is important to factor in all types of violence in the impact they have on the victims, be it emotional, psychological, or physical.

#### Repercussions of violence on young victims under 26 years old



The repercussions are mostly psychological and emotional. Indeed, more than half of the victims under 26 (51.4%) reported dealing with psychological repercussions following domestic abuse. This can be explained by the fact that not only all types of abuse can have a psychological impact but also that the abuser's own strategy relies heavily on making the victims doubt themselves.

Recurring patterns include a feeling of powerlessness or a sense of guilt, as well as low self-esteem. Cognitive disorders can also appear, such as reminiscences, periods of brooding over – or vivid flashbacks of – what happened. Physical repercussions, such as injuries or residual pains, must not be overlooked either – as well as the administrative and social impact that violence can have, like precarity.

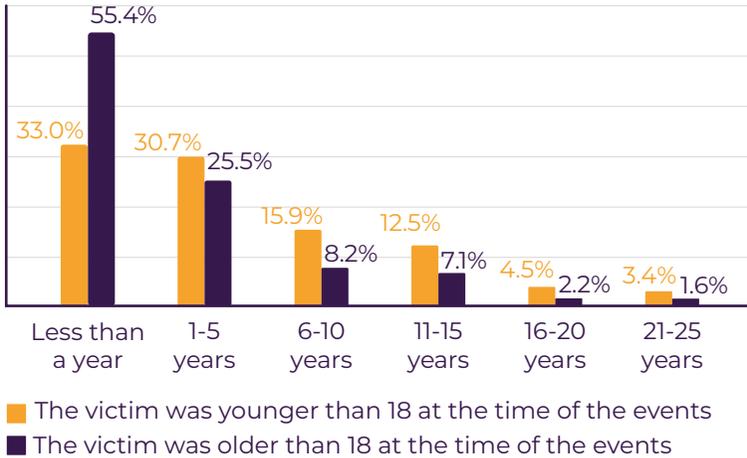
### **Opening up about abuse takes time**

Opening up about what they have gone through is an important step for the victims. However, they might not feel ready to do so right away. We note that when the events took place before the age of 18, the victim is more prone to wait a few years before speaking up. Indeed, 77% of people who experienced violence before the age of 18 reach out to the chat at least a year after the events, whereas 55.4% of people who experienced violence at a later age speak up in the year following up.

46.6% of victims under 26 reach out to the chat in the 10 years following the events.

## Elapsed time before speaking up based on the time of the events (before or after the age of 18)\*

\*Figures are proportional to the data collected for all age groups



### Victims under 26 tend to confront their abuser more, yet are less prone to seek out the help of outside organizations

According to the data collected for each age group, young people under 26 appear to confront the violent individual more often than their elders (33.3% of reported cases against 19%, respectively). In a majority of cases, we qualify confrontation by either saying “no”, openly disagreeing, clearly stating that the abuser’s behavior is bothersome, or even putting up a physical barrier to an act of violence, like fending off a physical attack.

In 23.2% of cases, the victim under 26 will speak out to a relative about the violence they are experiencing, and 16.2% of them get out of the abusive relationship. The same person might undertake different actions. These numbers show that young people are not inactive; they take steps to get out of the abusive relationship on their own.

Young people under 26 are however less prone than their elders to reach out to existing organizations meant to help them on a legal, social, or community level (3% against 10.4% respectively). These numbers can shed some light on the lack of organizations meeting their specific needs, or on the difficulty for young people to identify these structures. Moreover, the fact that they often do not see themselves as victims can further alienate young people from these organizations.

The police, however, seems to be the interlocutor of choice when the victim decides to act formally. Out of the 26 young victims who had undertaken an institutional action, more than half of them (14 people) had chosen to go to the

### Comparison of informal approaches taken by victims over and under 26 years old\*

\*211 reported cases for victims over 26 and 99 reported cases for victims under 26



# Conclusion

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The abuse that young people experience within their family or a relationship often slip under the radar. The study “A listening ear at your fingertips : A study on the different paths and profiles of young victims of domestic or family violence, through the analysis of data from the online chat commentonsaime.fr” aims to offer a better understanding of these issues.

What seems perfectly clear from this analysis is that young people are made vulnerable by a number of factors: the domination linked to the age gap, the emotional connection brought on by physical proximity with the abuser, the financial dependency, and the lack of markers defining a healthy relationship. Moreover, if the collective imagery surrounding domestic abuse still pictures a “beaten woman”, this study attests that emotional abuse is an inherent part of domestic violence, even at a noticeably young age.

Young victims actively try to cope with the problem and find ways to confront their abuser. Yet they are less likely to seek the help of institutional organizations – especially minors, which can be explained by the lack of institutions specifically directed at young victims of domestic abuse. It is thus difficult for them to find information and support to help them identify the abuse.

In order for young people to avoid violence and get better support, this following section provides recommendations aimed at improving the prevention and detection of domestic violence among young people as well as improving the care of young victims.

# Recommendations

The recommendations listed below are directed at French state actors in order to improve the prevention and detection of domestic violence among young people and to improve the care of young victims.

The following proposals present a non-exhaustive list supplementing the specific recommendations brought forward by organizations focusing on violence against women, like the National Federation for Women's Solidarity (Fédération Nationale Solidarité Femmes) or the Women's Foundation (Fondation des Femmes).

1.

## IMPROVING THE CARE OF YOUNG VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE WITHIN INTIMATE AND AFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

### 1<sup>ST</sup> RECOMMENDATION

Believe young people; stop romanticizing their emotional and romantic experiences; stop minimizing their experiences, feelings, and emotions:

- Promote mechanisms specifically directed at young people to ensure that their voices are heard by funding the extension of the opening hours of the chat [commentonsaime.fr](https://commentonsaime.fr) 24/7.
- Fund and broadcast research focusing on how young women and LGBTQIA+ persons experience sexual and gender-based violence (studies, articles, symposiums, action research, etc.).

- Produce public-awareness tools challenging stereotypes about the youth.
- Involve young people and their representative structures in the political consultation process on violence against women and gender equality.

## 2<sup>ND</sup> RECOMMENDATION

Use digital applications – which are widely used by the youth – to handle violence:

- Improve the knowledge on cyberviolence and its management.
- Open healthy, benevolent, and accessible spaces to promote prevention, care and sensibilization: platforms open to people with disabilities, chat versions of national hotlines, simultaneous interpretation.

## 3<sup>RD</sup> RECOMMENDATION

Strengthen the interdisciplinary aspect of policies fighting violence against young women:

- At the government level: name a government coordinator for the support of young victims of violence (education, care, accommodation, formation, health, legal advice, etc.).
- At different territorial levels (cities, departments, regions): improve the coordination between the different instances in charge of youth protection and fighting violence against women in order to improve the support of underage victims of violence within intimate and affective relationships.

#### 4<sup>TH</sup> RECOMMENDATION

Widely distribute tools and resources aimed at finding a global way to care for young victims of domestic abuse:

- Distribute tools and resources created by specialized organizations (the Violence Meter, for instance) that will complement the existing institutional tools (sexual and gender-based violence report platforms, hotlines, physical structures).
- Organize mainstream communication campaigns around these new tools and broadcast them online, on social networks, on tv, or on posters.
- Display these tools and resources in places frequented by youth: primary-, middle- and high-schools, youth associations, sports clubs, social networks (TikTok, Snapchat, Twitch).

#### 5<sup>TH</sup> RECOMMENDATION

Acknowledge in national legislation that domestic abuse can also happen out of a married relationship, a civil union or a common-law marriage, in order to recognize the reality of what young victims of violence – who often do not live with their partner – go through

## 2.

#### TRAIN PROFESSIONAL WORKERS

#### 6<sup>TH</sup> RECOMMENDATION

Enforce the law n° 2013-595 of July 8th, 2013 on public school reorganization, which states that:

- Educational and teaching staff must be trained about gender equality and to fight against discrimination.

- There should be, at all educational levels, courses on gender equality and on the fight against gender bias and violence against women, including domestic abuse.

## 7<sup>TH</sup> RECOMMENDATION

Train youth workers to detect violence. Give them tools to help them reorient young victims to the appropriate organizations by developing special training modules. Engage with:

- Future teachers while still in teacher-training school
- Special-needs educators
- Activity leaders
- Youth worker training students
- ASE (Child Welfare Services) and PJJ (Youth Judicial Protection Services) workers

## 8<sup>TH</sup> RECOMMENDATION

Train the professionals who already provide support for abused women to recognize the distinctive characteristics of the abuse experienced by young people. Engage with:

- Associations fighting violence against women
- Health professionals
- Police officers
- Justice professionals

## 9<sup>TH</sup> RECOMMENDATION

Raise awareness among politicians about violence within intimate and affective relationships and the specificities of what young people go through.

# 3.

## CHANGE THE PERCEPTION OF VIOLENCE WITHIN INTIMATE AND AFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS.

### 10<sup>TH</sup> RECOMMENDATION

Deconstruct the collective imagery around domestic violence:

- Prefer the expression “violence within intimate and affective relationships” to “domestic abuse”.
- Propose communication spaces where young people and professional workers can deconstruct gender stereotypes.
- Draw a more inclusive representation of violence within intimate and affective relationship by shedding some light on the different forms it can take (emotional, economic, administrative).
- Draw a more inclusive representation of violence within intimate and affective relationships by making all age groups visible, especially the youngest ones.

### 11<sup>TH</sup> RECOMMENDATION

Include young people in national communication and sensibilization campaigns around violence against women so that the youth can identify with them.

### 12<sup>TH</sup> RECOMMENDATION

Tailor national communication and sensibilization campaigns around violence against women to the communication habits of younger generations (social networks, Twitch, TikTok).

### 13<sup>TH</sup> RECOMMENDATION

Include young people in national surveys of victims like the VIRAGE (National survey on violence and gender relations) or the ENVEFF (National Survey on Violence against Women):

- Consult local organizations with an expertise in that domain.
- Systematize the analysis of young people's journeys in national surveys on domestic violence to improve the support we provide them with.
- Gather, transmit and analyze disaggregated data according to age in legal actions undertaken against violence within intimate and affective relationships (filing of complaints, crime prevention, incidences of femicide, etc.)

### GENERAL RECOMMENDATION

Support the necessary funding to implement the measures stated in the recommendations above.

**This study was conducted thanks to the support of the Bouygues Telecom Foundation and the Kering Foundation.**



The Bouygues Telecom Foundation supports initiatives in three distinct areas: environmental sustainability, support to people in health or social difficulty, and access to written cultural material. The Foundation aims at involving the company's partners and clients in all its initiatives. Its goal: create links and improve the day-to-day life, particularly by using digital technologies. By choosing to support En avant toute(s), the Foundation is fighting violence against women.



Fighting violence against women has been at the forefront of the foundation's actions since its creation in 2008. The Foundation provides comprehensive services to survivors, organizes international awareness campaigns, and seeks to involve all its employees worldwide. To maximize its impact, the Foundation works hand in hand with a limited number of local partners in the Group's six main countries of operation: China, France, Italy, Mexico, the United Kingdom, and the United States.



En avant toute(s) is a  
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