

Bystander-Focused Prevention of Sexual Violence

Research on the causes of sexual violence and evaluation of prevention efforts indicates that bystanders (also referred to as witnesses, defenders, or upstanders) are a key piece of prevention work.

Common Components of Bystander Intervention

- **Awareness.** A key first step is to heighten awareness so individuals and groups are better able to identify instances of sexual violence.
- **Sense of responsibility.** A sense of responsibility gives the bystander motivation to step in and take action. Bystanders are much more likely to help friends than strangers, and are more likely to help strangers if they see them as part of a group they identify with (like supporting the same sports team).¹
- **Perceptions of norms.** Perceptions of peer norms about helping (whether you think your friends are likely to help), and perceptions of authorities' (like teachers') attitudes are related to bystander attitudes. People often mistakenly think others are less supportive of doing something to address sexual violence than they actually are. Studies show links between perceptions of helping, trust, and commitment among community members; trust in campus authorities; and their willingness to take action as a bystander.²
- **Weighing pros and cons.** People weigh the costs and benefits of getting involved in a risky situation. These include threats to their own safety, negative consequences for their relationships with others, and the potential to change the outcome of a risky situation or to help a victim.
- **Confidence.** People who feel more confident in their ability to help are more likely to take action.³ A consistent research finding is that prevention programs, particularly in-person educational and skill workshops, increase individuals' sense that they can take effective action.⁴
- **Building skills.** People need to know what to do and how to do it. Population survey data shows that many people are at a loss for specific ways to help.⁵ Survivors tell us that friends and family do not always do things that are useful or supportive, and these negative or unhelpful responses make coping with and recovering from abuse much harder.⁶ Some of the promise of bystander intervention training is that it can give motivated community members skills to intervene in ways that protect their own safety and are truly supportive to victims.
- **Context.** Bystanders also need safety nets for themselves—resources they can call upon and community policies that support intervention.

Delivery Methods

- **In-person, skill-building curricula.** Workshops of varying lengths are the most researched prevention training for potential bystanders. Some of the first programs were Katz's [Mentors in Violence Prevention](#)^{7,8}

and Berkowitz's [Men's Project](#).^{9,10} Moynihan et al.'s [Bringing in the Bystander](#)¹¹ mainly addresses sexual violence but also includes segments related to relationship abuse.¹² [Green Dot](#)¹³ has an intensive training curriculum called SEEDS for college students that also is now being implemented and evaluated in high schools.¹⁴ Foubert's [One in Four](#)¹⁵ has programs for men and women that train them to be active bystanders, again with more of a focus on sexual assault.¹⁶

The biggest and most consistent impacts of bystander training are on attitudes, including confidence as a bystander, intent to take action, and perceived benefits of action.¹⁷ Students have also shown decreases in belief in rape myths and increases in knowledge.¹⁸ Published results exist for MVP, Bringing in the Bystander, One in Four, [Coaching Boys to Men](#)¹⁹ (for high school students), and Green Dot, though studies vary quite a bit in the methods used.²⁰ Berkowitz's Men's Project has some data to suggest that it may reduce perpetration of sexual assault among some participants in the program and change men's norms about coercion in relationships.²¹ The Coaching Boys to Men program and Bringing in the Bystander have both shown higher self-reported bystander behaviors among participants in these programs.²²

Several key studies of bystander programs used more rigorous experimental and quasi-experimental designs but more research is needed.²³ A recent meta-analysis found promising effects of bystander prevention curricula.²⁴

- **Social marketing campaigns.** These have been developed to raise awareness across many different groups of people. On campuses, [Know Your Power](#) is one of the best researched. It models positive bystander actions.²⁵ Green Dot is also a college-based antiviolence project that includes a social marketing awareness campaign. Evaluations of this work are underway.²⁶ The [Red Flag Campaign](#)²⁷ in Virginia has not yet been evaluated. These are merely a few examples as new local campaigns are being developed at a rapid rate.

Research suggests that these campaigns increase awareness of the problem of relationship abuse and sexual violence, as well as positive attitudes about being an active bystander across various groups of people.²⁸ However, social marketing campaigns alone have not yet been linked to changes in behavior and are likely to be particularly useful when linked with other prevention tools.²⁹ Evaluation data are limited with the exception of the Know Your Power campaign, which found promising attitude change results across several studies.³⁰

- **Online resources.** Bystander prevention is increasingly going online:
 - The [University of Montana](#)³¹ has a program for all students about sexual assault that includes a segment on how to be a helpful bystander.
 - [Emory University](#)³² has developed a three-hour training for college men that includes a bystander component.
 - [Haven](#)³³ and [Every Choice](#)³⁴ also have bystander components in their online sexual assault trainings.
 - The [National Sexual Violence Resource Center](#)³⁵ has an online training related to bystander action in broader community contexts.
 - [Agent of Change](#)³⁶ is another online training with some preliminary evaluation results.
 - The app [Circle of 6](#)³⁷ focuses on preventing sexual assault by helping individuals mobilize their support system to intervene when they might need help.

- These are a few examples, though no published evaluations exist and more research is needed to examine their effectiveness. A growing amount of research describes the effectiveness of online prevention efforts for certain health behaviors like problematic drinking and HIV prevention.³⁸ This is an interesting innovation that warrants rigorous evaluation research.
- **Interactive theater.** This is another strategy for reaching large audiences with fewer resources and is particularly popular as part of college campus first-year student orientations. Central Michigan's [No Zebras, No Excuses](#)³⁹ California State's [InterACT](#) program,⁴⁰ and [SCREAM Theater](#) at Rutgers⁴¹ are three of the most well-known examples that place bystanders at the center of the theater skits. A group of actors stages scenes related to sexual assault or relationship violence and at key moments asks for audience input or participation to model positive bystander intervention and risk reduction. To date, InterACT is the only one evaluated in the peer review literature using a pre-post design.⁴² A rigorous evaluation of SCREAM is currently underway.⁴³
- **Faculty training.** Also important, especially on college campuses, are the faculty, who are part of the community. Training for faculty is emerging as an interesting next step for bystander prevention at colleges and universities. To date, curricula have been developed but not evaluated.⁴⁴

Combining Tools

- Research is clear that using multiple tools for a multipronged approach to prevention is best.⁴⁵
- A recent study showed the benefits of combining a bystander-focused social marketing campaign with an educational workshop to improve attitudes about being an active bystander.⁴⁶
- A rigorous research study in middle schools showed the benefits of a classroom-based curriculum combined with schoolwide efforts—including policy changes and enforcement, involvement of teachers as active bystanders and monitors, and a schoolwide poster campaign. The schoolwide efforts seemed most crucial for violence reduction.⁴⁷

Challenges to Bystander Action

Research also tells us that bystanders are often unsure of themselves as responders. They are unclear about whether intervention is needed or welcome, or what they should do to help. For example, a national survey of adults found that over half the sample suspected they knew a friend, family member or coworker who was a victim of domestic violence, but 65 percent wanted more information about what to do about it.⁴⁸ A study of college students found that 58 percent did not know how to help a victim.⁴⁹ These studies show that bystanders often lack the awareness and skills to take helpful actions. Recent research also indicates that bystander action is different if they know the victim, the perpetrator, or both.⁵⁰ Further, some new findings suggest that compared to other forms of interpersonal violence, sexual violence may be less safe for bystanders,⁵¹ highlighting the importance of bystander safety as a critical component of prevention work. Part of increasing safety is changing community contexts so that there are adequate resources for bystanders to draw upon, peer norms encourage helping together, and bystanders learn skills for how to help without putting themselves in danger.

Bystander intervention is one promising component of sexual violence prevention. Research suggests it will be most effective if bystanders are provided with active learning experiences to build skills, if education is conducted in combination with peer norms shifts, and if intervention is supported by policies that provide safety nets for bystanders.

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