



PREVENTION UPDATE

Bystander Intervention

Overview

The bystander effect refers to incidents in which individuals do not offer any means of help in an emergency or potentially dangerous situation to the victim when other people are present. Often, the greater the number of bystanders, the less likely it is that any one of them will help. The mere presence of other bystanders greatly decreases intervention. In general, this is believed to happen because as the number of bystanders increases, any given bystander is less likely to notice the situation, interpret the incident as a problem, or assume responsibility for taking action. A bystander, or witness, is someone who sees a situation but may or may not know what to do, may think others will act, or may be afraid to do something. According to the [National Sexual Violence Resource Center](#), bystander intervention programs teach potential witnesses safe and positive ways that they can act to prevent or intervene when there is a risk for sexual violence. “A bystander approach gives community members specific roles that they can use in preventing sexual violence, including naming and stopping situations before they happen, stepping in during an incident, and speaking out against ideas and behaviors that support sexual violence. This approach develops skills to be an effective and supportive ally to survivors after an assault has taken place.”

According to [Review of Bystander Approaches in Support of Preventing Violence Against Women](#), the role of bystanders in the prevention of violence generally is consistently of interest within the national and international research literature. “The conditions impacting upon the likelihood that an individual witnessing a crime will take action to intervene in order to prevent harm to another person have long been of interest within the fields of crime and violence prevention generally. More recently, however, understanding of such bystander behaviours has begun to be translated and applied in the specific field of preventing violence against women. While there are a growing number of programs within both the sexual and intimate partner violence fields that seek to support bystander action to prevent violence against women, much of this work is not rigorously evaluated. Indeed, at present, the evidence regarding bystander approaches for the prevention of violence against women is continuing to be developed, and program details and evaluations are not systematically published and therefore rarely subject to analytical scrutiny. Much of the work undertaken in the field of violence against women is interdisciplinary, drawn from a range of academic disciplines including: criminology, psychology, sociology and gender studies. As such, there is reasonably little literature surveying the broad scope of bystander approaches to prevent violence against women, and very little that includes analysis of the range of theoretical underpinnings as well as the practical issues that inform bystander approaches in this field.”

What the Evidence Tells Us

Much of the recent research on bystander intervention programs at colleges and universities has focused on sexual violence prevention. A 2007 [study](#) evaluated a sexual violence prevention program based on a community of responsibility model that teaches women and men how to intervene safely and effectively in cases of sexual violence before, during, and after incidents with strangers, acquaintances, or friends. Results from the research reveal that up to two months after participating in either a one- or three-session version of



the program, participants in the treatment conditions showed improvements across measures of attitudes, knowledge, and behavior while the control group did not.

A 2011 [evaluation](#) of the Green Dot active bystander behavior training program found that trained students had significantly lower rape myth acceptance scores than did students with no training. Trained students also reported engaging in significantly more bystander behaviors and observing more self-reported active bystander behaviors when compared with nontrained students. When comparing self-reported active bystander behavior scores of students trained with students hearing a Green Dot speech alone, the training was associated with significantly higher active bystander behavior scores. Those receiving bystander training appeared to report more active bystander behaviors than those simply hearing a Green Dot speech, and both intervention groups reported more observed and active bystander behaviors than nonexposed students.

Lessons Learned From Colleges and Universities

Several nationwide prevention programs geared for campuses utilize a bystander approach to address and prevent gender-based violence. They included [Bringing in the Bystander Program and Know Your Power Social Marketing Campaign from the University of New Hampshire](#); [Green Dot, et cetera, Inc.](#); [Mentors in Violence Prevention](#); and [The Red Flag Campaign from the Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence Action Alliance](#).

The [Step UP!](#) program at the University of Arizona is a prosocial behavior and bystander intervention program that educates students to be proactive in helping others. It is based on the premise that teaching people about the determinants of prosocial behavior makes them more aware of why they sometimes don't help. As a result they are more likely to help in the future. The goals of Step UP! are to:

- Raise awareness of helping behaviors
- Increase motivation to help
- Develop skills and confidence when responding to problems or concerns
- Ensure the safety and well-being of self and others

Related Higher Education Center Resources

Publication

- [Preventing Violence and Promoting Safety in Higher Education Settings: Overview of a Comprehensive Approach](#)

Self-Paced Online Training

- [“Preventing Violence and Promoting Safety in Higher Education Settings: Creating Comprehensive and Effective Programs”](#)

Training Institute

- [“Bystander Intervention”](#)

This Prevention Update (offering an overview of current topics, news, legislation, research, or innovations in the field) was funded by the Office of Safe and Healthy Students at the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED-04-CO-0069/0005 with Education Development Center, Inc. The contracting officer's representative was Phyllis Scattergood. The content of this Prevention Update does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education, nor does the mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. government. This Prevention Update also contains hyperlinks and URLs for information created and maintained by private organizations. This information is provided for the reader's convenience. The U.S. Department of Education is not responsible for controlling or guaranteeing the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of this outside information. Further, the inclusion of information or a hyperlink or URL does not reflect the importance of the organization, nor is it intended to endorse any views expressed, or products or services offered.