

# Bystander Intervention Prevention Strategies as a Solution to Addressing Sexual Harassment and Assault

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As the #MeToo Movement has propelled the problem of sexual harassment and assault to the media headlines, bystander intervention prevention strategies are often cited as a solution to addressing these problems. Sometimes called a “community of responsibility” approach, bystander intervention strategies teach organizational members to know they *can* and *should* take an active role in creating a safe and respectful environment by shifting community norms and behavior expectations.

For almost 20 years, psychologists, sociologists, and public health researchers and practitioners working in the area of campus sexual violence prevention have been developing and evaluating different types of bystander intervention prevention strategies including in-person programs, social marketing campaigns, online programs, video games, and safety and prevention apps. Unlike prevention strategies directed mainly toward victims or perpetrators, bystander intervention strategies emphasizes the importance of a wider social ecology approach that involves active participation of constituencies representing a variety of populations. For example, in a campus community this includes administrators, faculty, staff, students, family members, and even local business owners who engage to prevent and reduce sexual assault and harassment.

The origins of the bystander intervention focus on leveraging community awareness and responsibility can be traced to the social ecology model first identified and engaged by sociologists at the Chicago School in their efforts to address prevailing urban problems. More recently, Bronfenbrenner (1977) is credited with the creation of the social ecological model. Both models hold that social change requires all five levels of a social ecological model (1) individual, (2) relational, (3) community, (4) institutional, and (5) societal to be activated so that desired behaviors at one level are

supported by actions and policies at higher levels (Bronfenbrenner 1977; Dahlberg and Krug 2002; Potter 2016). Organizational leadership must take the initiative in demonstrating that cultural change is necessary for preventing campus sexual assault and harassment. Drawing on the social ecology and social ecological models, the bystander approach encompasses key components of effective prevention efforts including the provision of an environment with survivor-centered policies and procedures and a safety net to protect people who come forward (Campbell 2008).

The bystander approach teaches community members how to intervene safely and pro-socially in situations that involve sexual assault, sexual harassment, or other forms of sexual violence, thereby widening the safety net for victims. Effective bystander prevention and intervention strategies increase community members’ awareness and knowledge of the problem, teach how to identify the problem, and provide them the skills to intervene when they see sexual harassment and assault occurring, about to occur, or in the aftermath of an occurrence (Moynihan et al. 2015).

Like a marketing campaign, one 20-minute program presented once is not adequate; successful programs require booster sessions for enhancing prevention education (Banyard et al., 2018). As community members gain awareness in their knowledge of the problem of sexual harassment and assault, organizational leaders can leverage the knowledge and skills of these trained bystanders so they can create environments that cultivate respect, community responsibility, and shared visions for safety.

While most communities are full of bystanders — people who witness sexual harassment and assault — most leaders have not activated these bystanders. When bystanders witness these situations, they need to feel empowered and be willing to act to address the problem, whether it be by defusing the situation or safely subtly or directly intervening

or seeking help from an authority. All community members need to know how to intervene in ways that do not feel risky or career limiting. Intervening as a bystander can be difficult as people feel their social status, friendships, or career can be at risk if they intervene, particularly if they call out a senior colleague or popular peer. Barriers to intervening as a bystander can be based on one’s gender, rank, race, and more (e.g., Brown, Banyard & Moynihan 2014). The choice to intervene is often shaped by a person’s own status. That is why it is especially important for senior leaders in secure positions to lead by example and intervene in a visible manner that signals to others that harassment and other degrading behaviors are not acceptable.

People who are nearby before, during, or after an incident can play a critical role in comprehensive prevention by building a community of active bystanders which engages all community members to end sexual harassment and sexual assault. Bystander intervention prevention efforts are impactful as they engage the community in the prevention of sexual harassment assault, instead of emphasizing the victim’s responses and perpetrator actions (Banyard, Moynihan, Plante 2007). Scientifically evaluated bystander intervention prevention programs need to be presented in a manner that resonates with target audience members (Potter, Moynihan, Stapleton 2011), and be administered through different mechanisms with the key knowledge and skills regularly reinforced to change the overall culture. For example, a focus on the campus culture would use mechanisms that may include facilitated in-person prevention programs (Moynihan et al. 2015; Coker et al. 2011; Katz 1995) and bystander intervention video games (Potter et al. 2019) that provide participants opportunities to practice the necessary skills. Additionally, social marketing campaigns (Potter 2012), which model active bystander skills, provide audience members with skills they can use to help other community members.

Safety apps that enable users or their friends to subtly exit dangerous or potentially dangerous situations are another bystander strategy (Black 2017; Merrow 2017).

Campus leaders should be encouraged to recognize the unique opportunity they possess to change the prevailing larger culture. The years that students spend on campus are a period of important cognitive development. The college experience encourages students to explore new identities and attitudes. Thus, college represents an opportunity for campuses to promote new attitudes and behavioral norms that students can bring to their future workplaces and families.

Larger cultural change is also possible. We saw this level of change occur in the anti-drunk driving movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s where broader normative intolerance for drunk driving gradually permeated the prevailing culture at the *societal* level; tolerance of drunk driving decreased, and behaviors like appointing a designated driver became the norm (Potter 2016).


By leveraging all levels of the social ecological model, the concepts of “designated drivers” “friends don’t let friends drink and drive,” were normalized and popularized. This was an example of bystander behavior, and the results were impressive. Between the mid-1970s and mid-2000s, the percentage of traffic fatalities resulting from alcohol use plummeted from 60 to 31 percent (Potter 2016).

The anti-drunk driving movement that started a generation ago shows that cultural change is possible. Reducing sexual assault and harassment in the campus community involves implementing strategies that stop violence before it occurs and creating organizational cultures that support safe and respectful environments. Bystander intervention strategies are an integral part of these efforts. Research examining the efficacy of bystander intervention prevention strategies demonstrate that this is an

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important tool in increasing both community members' understanding of the problems and providing tools and skills to prevent sexual assault and harassment. What we know about the effectiveness of bystander intervention strategies on campus may lead this generation in reducing the number of people who are sexually assaulted and harassed, thereby reducing the number of #MeToo accounts and being this generation's "anti-drunk driving movement." 

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