

Resources for the Prevention of Sexual Abuse



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### **"Engaging Males in Juvenile Facilities in Prevention and Bystander Education"**

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**QUESTION:** Can bystander intervention programs be useful in juvenile facilities with adolescent males?

#### **RESEARCH:**

Bystander prevention programs and the growing body of research have typically focused on men and women in college [who may or may not have significant histories of violence]. This sociological case study explored how the violent backgrounds of the adolescent males in a juvenile detention center affect their engagement with a bystander prevention program.

The authors observe that youth serving time in a juvenile facility are more likely to experience violence in their homes and community. They also note that youth who

experience violence increase their risk of a number of negative health and social consequences. Finally, little research exists on the implementation of bystander or gender violence prevention programs. The authors explored the potential as well as some of the problems of implementing this kind of programming as a part of treatment programming.

Juvenile facilities often enact a model of masculinity that reinforces particular forms of aggression and can be reinforced by the institutional context (e.g., staff regularly disparage juveniles, subordinate female employees, and enforce sexist ideals of behavior). Given that schools can be central to establishing a boy's gender identity, schools and treatment programs can also offer an opportunity to offer alternatives to the hegemonic masculinity norm.

The authors implemented a program based upon a popular bystander model (Mentors in Violence Prevention, MVP) that relies on peer education to increase knowledge about gender based violence and teach skills to prevent and intervene. The key program elements were to: 1) recognize that gendered violence is primarily a crime carried out by men against women, 2) teach individuals to view themselves as potential disrupters of violence and the norms that support gender violence, and 3) increase skills that enable participants to pro-socially intervene when they witness attitudes or behaviors supportive of violence.

The study supported the idea that therapeutic treatment groups may provide an ideal opportunity for incarcerated youth to try alternative modes of both gender expression and response to potentially violent situations. The study also recognized that during times of "heightened" emotions, where peers or the program challenged their masculinity, participants fell back on traditional (and often violent) responses. In these situations, non-violent responses were particularly challenging because being violent was a key component to their masculine identity and an unwillingness to be violent increased risk of victimization. In these cases, over time, the peer-facilitators were able to offer a "staged" approach to training that emphasized violence reduction versus violence prevention. Peer-facilitators were able to offer a range of responses that addressed different degrees of aggressiveness.

In addition, the authors acknowledged that when integrating bystander programs into a juvenile facility, where the most common pathway for youth is experiencing or witnessing violence in their homes, it is essential that the programs must adjust their focus to address this trauma history.

**BOTTOM LINE: Bystander programs offer adolescents in juvenile facilities the opportunity to see, understand and respond differently to violence surrounding them. But to be effective, these programs must address the trauma history experienced by most of these youth.**

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS:**

Effective treatment should always focus on enhancing and building on strengths and competencies as well as managing risks. The adolescents are taught to be able to talk about their behaviors and to hold themselves accountable for their choices. In a group setting, this notion is expanded to hold each other accountable as well. Bystander intervention programs teach these very same skills and is one way to move closer to this goal. Beyond sending the message, “don’t be violent,” bystander programs challenge young men in treatment to consider what kind of a man they want to become, how they want to treat others and how they want to see others in their spheres of influence interact with each other and with young women. Given the insights of this article about the impact on trauma on the decision-making process of these youth, additional work needs to be focused on building skills to prevent violence when they themselves are angry. This article further highlights the importance of trauma-informed care.

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD:**

The current conversations about sexual abuse prevention are beginning to focus on preventing the perpetration of sexual violence. The young men in treatment add an important piece of the prevention puzzle -- both as an opportunity to inform our current bystander prevention programs as well as to engage them as part of the solution. If survivor stories have been important for us to hear to learn about the impact of sexual abuse, these stories may also help to inform us about what is needed to build prevention programs across the spectrum of society. Further, we should never forget that many young people in treatment will eventually become parents themselves. Bystander intervention programs can help young people understand the role that they can play in raising their own children in a safe family and community. Further, a clear message of this program is that young people are essential members of their community and play a critical role by standing up to violence.

**Abstract:**

Drawing on interviews with and observations of boys enrolled in a bystander violence prevention program at a juvenile detention center, this article provides a sociological case study on how the boys' biographies and violent lived experiences shaped their engagement with the program. Previous research on bystander prevention programs has typically focused on men enrolled in college who do not have the same kinds of violent histories as the boys in this study do. This article builds upon prior research on prevention programs by demonstrating how at-risk youth participants understand and access the program. We offer suggestions for tailoring bystander prevention programs to more adequately address the specific needs of these populations.

**Citation:**

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