

Resources for the Prevention of Sexual Abuse



NEARI PRESS & TRAINING CENTER

February 2015 NEARI Press Newsletter

“Review of Perpetration Prevention Programs”

THE AUTHORS

DeGue, Valle, Holt, Massetti, Matjasko, and Tharp (*Please see below for full citation and abstract*).

THE QUESTIONS

Are there evidence-based programs that show a reduction in the first time perpetration of sexual abuse?

THE RESEARCH

A recent review by DeGue, Valle, Holt, Massetti, Matjasko, and Tharp offers the first systematic review of primary prevention strategies for sexual violence perpetration. The goal of this review was to offer an overview of the existing research in the area as well as to identify the evidence for best practices based upon sexual violence behavioral outcomes. The researchers stated that although many programs exist to reduce the risk for victimization, the metric that is most essential is a decrease in the rate of sexual violence perpetration to ultimately stop the harm.

Using the “nine principles of prevention” identified by Nation et al (2003), the researchers considered programs that had the following characteristics, including: 1) comprehensive, 2) appropriately timed, 3) utilized varied teaching methods, 4) had sufficient dosage, 5) were administered by well-trained staff, 6) were socio-culturally relevant, 7) provided opportunities for positive relationships, 8) were theory-driven, and 9) included outcome evaluation. The majority (two-thirds) of 140 strategies included in the review were brief, psycho-educational programs which showed little or no evidence of effectiveness. But the authors note, that many of these strategies targeted changes in attitudes and knowledge, while the most crucial objective is to prevent sexual abuse

perpetration **behaviors** (and the effects these behaviors have on the individual and the community).

Only three strategies (with research completed before 2012) had evidence of a positive effect on reducing sexual violence perpetration behavior using a rigorous evaluation design. They note that it is likely that none of these programs, in isolation would be sufficient to reduce rates of perpetration at the population level. But these approaches are potential components of a more comprehensive, multi-level strategy to end sexual violence.

- **Safe Dates** is a 10 session curriculum on dating violence prevention targeting middle and high school students. Results from one evaluation showed that after four years, students in the program were significantly less likely to be victims or perpetrators of reported sexual violence than the control group.
- **Shifting Boundaries** is a school-based dating violence program for middle school students with two key components: a six session curriculum and a building-level intervention that used “hot spot” mapping techniques and policy change to address safety concerns. Results showed that the building-level intervention and not the curriculum alone was effective in reducing self-reported perpetration and victimization of both harassment and peer sexual violence.
- **US Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) of 1994** increased the prosecution and penalties associated with sexual assault, stalking, and other forms of violence as well as funding research and programs and victim services. Research indicated that there was a small but significant reduction in rapes reported to the police as a result of VAWA related grant funding through the Department of Justice.

Other emerging programs that were considered promising but had not completed a rigorous evaluation at the time of this overview included bystander intervention programs such as Bringing in the Bystander, Green Dot, and Coaching Boys into Men.

As a result of this review, the authors’ noted that a critical gap in the field is the lack of community and societal level prevention strategies for sexual violence perpetuation prevention. The authors suggest a shift in prevention strategies that move away from the single dose educational programs towards the development of a more comprehensive, multi-level strategy that targets younger populations and involves changes in the community and cultural norms to support healthy relationships and interactions.

BOTTOM LINE:

There is a growing body of research that identifies effective primary prevention strategies to reduce or even stop first time perpetration. The most effective of these initiatives target younger populations in early adolescence.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

Since the majority of our readership works with those who have already engaged in problematic/abusive sexual behavior the main focus for this population will be to prevent the behavior from ever happening again (e.g., tertiary prevention). This research suggests the inclusion of certain evidence-based strategies that focus on developing safety policies within the environment surrounding our clients (e.g., families, schools, organizations offering pro-social activities) will be especially beneficial for the children or teens who have abused. Most notably, intervention should focus upon both protective factors for the individual (e.g., include a healthy sexuality component) as well as risk reduction approaches residing within the adolescent as well as within his/her environment. But beyond “tertiary” prevention which is naturally a part of our work, this research calls on us to consider primary prevention and expanding our reach with evidence-based approaches that might prevent a first offense from ever taking place. It is a role that professionals working with this population may be ideally suited to provide.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

Preventing first time perpetration through comprehensive research-based approaches with behaviorally oriented outcome measures is a relatively new endeavor. Accepting this challenge provides professionals in the field with a new opportunity to share our unique perspectives, expertise and skills and to join more deeply with the victim advocacy community towards our shared goals of safety. Just the act of working together provides a strong and hopefully shared sense of hope that children and adolescents can grow into healthy and safe adults. As we push our “point of intervention” back to “primary” prevention, it is essential that we avoid mistakes that come from using techniques that are intuitively grounded but lack the rigor that the authors of this article argue passionately is required for outcome success.

ABSTRACT

This systematic review examined 140 outcome evaluations of primary prevention strategies for sexual violence perpetration. The review had two goals: 1) to describe and assess the breadth, quality, and evolution of evaluation research in this area; and 2) to summarize the best available research evidence for sexual violence prevention practitioners by categorizing programs with regard to their evidence of effectiveness on sexual violence behavioral outcomes in a rigorous evaluation. The majority of sexual violence prevention strategies in the evaluation literature are brief, psycho-educational programs focused on increasing knowledge or changing attitudes, none of which have shown evidence of effectiveness on sexually violent behavior using a rigorous evaluation design. Based on evaluation studies included in the current review, only three primary prevention strategies have demonstrated significant effects on sexually violent behavior in a rigorous outcome evaluation: Safe Dates (Foshee et al., 2004); Shifting Boundaries (Taylor, Stein, Woods, Mumford, & Forum, 2011); and funding associated with the 1994 U.S. Violence Against Women Act (VAWA; Boba & Lilley, 2009). The dearth of effective prevention strategies available to date may reflect a lack of fit between the design of many

of the existing programs and the principles of effective prevention identified by Nation et al. (2003).

CITATION

DeGue, S, Valle, LA, Holt MK, Massetti, GM, Matjasko, JL, & Tharp, AT. (2014) A systematic review of primary prevention strategies for sexual violence perpetration. *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 19, 346–362.