EVIDENCE-BASED BYSTANDER PROGRAMS TO PREVENT SEXUAL AND DATING VIOLENCE IN HIGH SCHOOLS

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Abstract

High school students are often involved in sexual and dating violence. The bystander approach aims to stop sexual and dating violence from their initial occurrence by promoting social norms supporting victims and tolerating no violence. Recent studies of high school bystander programs report promising evidence of effectiveness in improving attitudes and reducing violence. The theoretical frameworks of the approach and examples of bystander programs are provided. When implementing, administrators are encouraged to commit to fully adopt the program, collaborate with community partners, address cultural relevance, and use policies to create safe and equitable schools for all students.

Keywords: dating violence, sexual violence, high school, violence prevention, bystander program

High school students are often involved in sexual and dating violence. Sexual violence includes unwanted sexual acts ranging from fondling to penetration (i.e., rape) that are often drug- or alcohol-facilitated, and verbally, psychologically, and/or physically forced (Basile et al., 2016). Sexual harassment, often non-contact unwanted acts, sits within a sexual violence continuum, and may include pressuring for sexual favors, showing sexual materials or gestures, and telling sexual jokes. These are serious concerns as they limit educational opportunities for targeted students (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2008). Dating violence occurs between two people who are in a dating, courting, or in a form of intimate relationship where one abuses the other. The abusive tactics may be physical (e.g., hitting or kicking), sexual (e.g., unwanted touching or rape), psychological (e.g., verbal aggression or controlling acts), and stalking (e.g.,

repeated and unwanted attention) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2019). These types of violence are personal in nature and pervasive in their impacts on individual youth. Research suggests that these debilitating acts are often perpetrated by students on school properties and negatively affect youth in various areas, including mental health, behaviors, and educational outcomes (see Ozaki, 2017).

Over the years, high schools have adopted many programs in an effort to prevent sexual and dating violence. More recently, evidence-based programs have emerged using an innovative bystander approach. This article introduces bystander programs to educational leaders for consideration to adopt in high schools. First, the historical background of bystander programs in high schools is described, followed by the theoretical foundation of the approach. The article will then describe some programs with evidence of effectiveness and concludes with recommendations for educational leaders. This article is partly drawn from a dissertation study that examined active bystander behaviors among high school students (Ozaki, 2017). Rather than reporting the results of the dissertation study, this article aims to inform educational leaders on current literature on bystander programs.

Understanding the Bystander Programs

Historical Background

High school violence prevention programs historically focused on sexual harassment that were influenced by the first national study on sexual harassment (AAUW, 1993) and the federal guidance on schools' responsibilities in handling of sexual harassment cases and prevention efforts (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2001). Available guidance and curricula show that the programs are generally

educational (see Ozaki, 2017)). Although subsequent studies identified prevalence and consequences of sexual harassment among high school students, there is dearth of literature detailing sexual harassment prevention programs and their effectiveness (see Ozaki, 2017). Sexual harassment has been addressed in the bullying prevention programs as bullying often involves behaviors that are sexual in nature.

Bullying prevention programs and research proliferated in the United States in the early 2000s because of high profile high school shooting cases committed by bullying victims (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP), developed in Norway in the 1980s, is one of the most notable programs globally and has been implemented in the United States. OBPP targets not only students but also parents, adults in the school, and the surrounding community in its effort to stop the current and future bullying (Olweus & Limber, 2010). Although some positive results were reported about bullying prevention programs, they primarily focused on middle schools (e.g., Espelage, Low, Polanin, & Brown, 2013; Olweus & Limber, 2010). A recent OBPP program evaluation included grades 3 through 11 but did not find significant program effects on grades 9-11 students (Olweus, Limber, & Breivik, 2019).

During the late 1980s and 1990s, studies revealed that university women were at high risk for sexual assault victimization (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987). A subsequent federal mandate led to implementation of sexual violence prevention programs across the United States (Morrison, Hardison, Mathew, & O'Neil, 2004). Traditionally, these college programs focused on women as potential victims and men as potential perpetrators in their educational efforts to stop sexual and dating violence (Lonsway et al., 2009; Gidycz, Rich, & Marioni, 2002). The traditional approaches lacked evidence of effectiveness in long-term improvement of knowledge and

attitudes about sexual and dating violence as well as changes in behavior and reduction of violence (see Ozaki, 2017).

High school sexual and dating violence prevention programs have not been evaluated as much as university programs. The limited literature revealed that traditional prevention programs in high schools, like university programs, aimed to improve attitudes and increase knowledge on sexual and dating violence in participants (Hickman, Jaycox, & Aronoff, 2004; Morrison et al., 2004; Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007). These studies commonly had mixed results in immediate and short-term attitudes and knowledge change with no measurement of behavior change.

In the meantime, the focus of the prevention programs began shifting from individual-based education to community involvement in the late 1990s when mass shootings began to occur in schools where adults with knowledge of warning signs did not act to prevent the incidents (Stueve et al., 2006). Against this backdrop, the bystander approach used in middle school bullying prevention programs was adopted by sexual violence prevention programs for universities (Katz, Heisterkamp, & Fleming, 2011). With the rigorous evaluation of several university-based programs, the bystander approach received the federal recommendation as the promising and evidence-based strategy to prevent sexual violence on college campuses (CDC, 2014; White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, 2014). These university-based bystander programs for sexual and dating violence then found their way into high schools along with other bystander and community-focused programs that were developed for middle and high schools.

Theoretical Foundations of Bystander Programs

The bystander programs have a unique set of theoretical foundations that distinguish them from traditional programs. While there are variations in their development and operations, many share the theoretical foundations described below: public health model, social norm change, bystander effect theory, and personal buy-in for community engagement.

Public health model. Bystander programs employ the *primary prevention* approach to prevent violence based on the public health model. CDC (2004) refers to *primary prevention* as activities conducted *before* the initial occurrence of violence. What is done immediately *after* the incidents is defined as *secondary prevention* while long-term activities are considered *tertiary prevention*. Practitioners in the fields of sexual and dating violence traditionally engage in activities such as supporting victims in crisis and dealing with perpetrators in the aftermath of the incident (i.e., secondary prevention) as well as longer-term activities including mental health services for traumatized victims and offender counseling (i.e., tertiary prevention). The public health model calls for clear strategies of primary prevention that work well with secondary and tertiary prevention. It is also crucial that the programs make efforts to impact changes at multiple levels of social ecology including individual, relationship, community, and societal levels (CDC, 2004). Evidence-based bystander programs include components that target individuals to challenge attitudes, teach skills related to relationship building, and engage larger systems to create a culture of non-violence (Banyard, 2011; Katz, Heisterkamp, & Fleming, 2011). Targeting multiple levels of social ecology is particularly appropriate for high school level students because their everyday activities are rooted in their relationships and communities. For instance, they interact with peers

and family as well as adults in the school. Further, high school youth are connected to their community through local businesses and service providers.

Social norm change. A central theme of bystander programs involves changing the social norms related to sexual and dating violence. Extant research indicates community norms as a significant risk factor to perpetration of violence such as sexual assault and relationship violence among adults and youth, including high school students (Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 2000; Reyes, Foshee, Niolon, Reidy, & Hall, 2016). Bystander programs assert that the social norms that accept and support sexual and dating violence must shift to the social norms that reject and condemn violence (Banyard, 2011; Edwards, 2012). Social norms theory posits that people act according to their perceptions of the norms of their community (Berkowitz, 2010); therefore it is crucial that the social norms of non-violence that support victims are widely adopted in high schools.

Bystander effect theory. Bystander effect theory suggests that people, when others are present, do not act to help someone in emergency situations because they believe that others would help (Latané & Darley, 1970). Bystander inaction is influenced by pluralistic ignorance, diffusion of responsibility, and evaluation apprehension (Latané & Darley, 1970). Individuals tend to downplay the risk of the situation when others do not act (i.e., pluralistic ignorance) and shift responsibility of helping to other bystanders (i.e., diffusion of responsibility), leading them to not intervene. People may also be afraid that others may have negative views on their intervention (i.e., evaluation apprehension).

Bystander programs encourage the audience to take action, despite bystander effects, if they see situations with potential risk of violence (Banyard, 2011; Edwards,

2012; Katz et al., 2011). In order to do so, the programs often address steps of bystander intervention: noticing and interpreting the emergency, feeling personally responsible to act, and having skills and resources to act (Latané & Darley, 1970). For example, bystander programs often teach how to notice a situation of potential violence before it actually occurs (Edwards et al., 2019). Some programs use a guided imagery and ask participants to imagine their loved ones being harmed in order to help them feel personally responsible to act (Katz, 1995). The bystander programs usually include skill-building activities to help participants practice how to safely intervene in situations that might be risky (Edwards et al., 2019).

Personal buy-in to engage community members. The bystander programs aim to engage community members as empowered bystanders who have the potential to stop sexual and dating violence. Having a program component that emphasizes the personal buy-in for engagement is crucial in any bystander program due to its impact on the commitment to act as active bystanders, eventually leading to a cultural shift and reducing violence. The programs also provide information such as prevalence of violence in their community, consequences, and examples of the incidents to help participants recognize the violence as problems in their own community (Edwards et al., 2019).

Bystander Programs for High Schools

In this section, four bystander programs are introduced as examples of promising programs appropriate for high school adoption: Bringing in the Bystanders, Coaching Boys Into Men, Green Dot, and Mentors in Violence Prevention.

Bringing in the Bystander

Bringing in the Bystander (BITB) is a program developed to prevent campus sexual assault and other interpersonal violence at University of New Hampshire in the early 2000s. One of the unique theoretical models used by BITB is the transtheoretical model (TTM) of change by Prochaska and DiClemente (Banyard, Eckstein, & Moynihan, 2010). According to TTM, individuals go through a process of change before actually changing their attitudes and behaviors (Banyard et al., 2010). Thus, BITB incorporates components that appeal to individuals at various stages of change (Banyard et al., 2010). The high school BITB is a seven-session program that is delivered by male-female co-facilitators in mixed-gender groups (Edwards et al., 2019). The sessions occur during the class periods and include education on sexual and dating violence as well as bullying, bystander roles in prevention, how to notice at-risk situations, and skill-building for safe intervention. BITB also provides an hour-long session for school personnel to help them act as active bystanders in their high schools.

The recent evaluation study randomly assigned 26 New Hampshire high schools to the treatment or control condition and found some differences among students. Edwards and colleagues (2019) observed significant changes in victim empathy and barriers to and facilitators of active bystander behaviors two months after BITB training in treatment schools (n = 1,081) compared to control schools (n = 1,322). Over a year after BITB training, significant changes were observed in several variables in treatment schools including reduction in false beliefs about rape, increase in readiness to help as bystanders, and increase in knowledge about violence. Although the study found significant reduction of stalking and sexual harassment in schools with BITB than

schools without, no difference was observed in rates of sexual assault and dating violence as well as the actual bystander behaviors (Edwards et al., 2019).

Coaching Boys Into Men

Coaching Boys Into Men (CBIM) started in 2001 as a media campaign to promote awareness of violence against women and girls and has since evolved into a primary prevention program (Futures without Violence, n.d.), utilizing the influence of sports as a vehicle of change for youth (CBIM, n.d.). The ultimate goal of CBIM is to reduce male violence against females in dating relationships by increasing positive bystander behaviors of youth through promotion of social norms of gender equity and respect in dating relationships (Miller et al., 2012). CBIM takes a unique approach in that it engages coaches to act as positive role models for male athletes in high school. The program includes a one-hour training for coaches on dating violence as well as ways to engage youth. Coaches then will have 10-15 minutes weekly conversations on violence prevention with their players throughout the season of the sport (Miller et al., 2012).

In a cluster-randomized controlled trial with 26 high schools in Sacramento County, California, male athletes who participated in CBIM (N = 2,006) reported improvement in their intention to intervene as bystanders, self-reported positive bystander behaviors (e.g., saying something), and recognition of abusive behaviors at the end of the season (approximately 12 weeks) compared to athletes with no program exposure (Miller et al., 2012). No significant changes were observed in dating violence perpetration and negative bystander behaviors (e.g., laughing about abuse). In the one-year follow-up, 9-11th grade students who participated in CBIM (n = 1,513) reported less dating violence perpetration and less negative bystander behaviors (e.g., laughing about

abuse) relative to those in the control condition (Miller et al., 2013). However, there was no significant difference in intention to intervene, gender-equitable attitudes, recognition of dating violence, and positive bystander behaviors based on CBIM participation status.

Green Dot

Green Dot was originally developed as a bystander program at the University of Kentucky to reduce campus sexual and dating violence (Coker et al., 2011). The program utilizes a green dot as a symbol representing something one can do to prevent violence. Adapting the marketing and branding framework, Edwards (2012) asserts that a prevention program must be an inclusive brand that is accepted by a critical mass of people in order to reach a shift in the social norm that leads to reduction of violence. For example, Green Dot does not use the term "violence against women" when referring to sexual and dating violence because it often provokes resistance from the audience (Edwards, 2012). Green Dot is also grounded in diffusion of innovation theory by Rogers (2003) which assumes that new ideas are spread through certain communication paths within the community before being widely adopted. Green Dot trains select students so they can diffuse the newly adopted active bystander attitudes and behaviors through their social networks within the school (Edwards, 2012).

Implementation of Green Dot in high schools began in 2010 as a randomized controlled trial to evaluate effectiveness of a primary prevention program throughout Kentucky (Cook-Craig et al., 2014). The program was delivered by trained local rape crisis center staff. It begins with a speech (up to 60 minutes) for students and school personnel to introduce Green Dot and encourage involvement, followed by a bystander training for early adopters. The training educates the students on the issues of violence and provides skill-building opportunities to learn how to safely intervene and message

positive norms change. Green Dot also uses a social marketing campaign to promote and sustain the non-violent culture throughout the school.

The trial evaluated the impact of Green Dot on rates of violence in 26 Kentucky high schools (N = 89,707) between 2010 and 2014 (Coker et al., 2017). The researchers found that rates of perpetration and victimization of sexual violence, sexual harassment, stalking, and physical and psychological dating violence were all significantly lower at schools with Green Dot compared to schools without. Green Dot was associated with 120 fewer incidents of sexual violence at third year of implementation and 88 fewer incidents in the fourth year as well as 17-21% reduction of sexual violence perpetration in the third and fourth year (Coker et al., 2017).

Mentors in Violence Prevention

Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) was developed in 1993 to educate male athletes at Northeastern University to prevent violence against women (Katz, 1995). Since then, the program has incorporated several changes such as inclusion of women in the training as well as implementation in high schools. MVP is a program specifically focused on the leadership quality of young people in their role to prevent violence in their community (Katz, 2018). In a high school setting, MVP can be incorporated as part of the school's leadership program or an independent school-wide program (MVP Strategies, n.d.). Initially, teachers, coaches, and other identified adults are trained on the philosophy and approach of MVP so they can train juniors and seniors who will then serve as mentors to younger students. Students learn about various risky situations involving abuse, violence, and bullying and have opportunities to practice how to respond.

An MVP evaluation with matched pre- and post-tests (n = 1,744) found that students in high schools with MVP identified violence as wrong more and were more likely to intervene in risky situations compared to students in non-MVP schools (Katz et al., 2011). More recently, a qualitative exploration of an MVP pilot in Scotland reported that school staff and students had positive experiences with MVP implementation as well as positive perceptions of program impact on attitudes and bystander behaviors (Williams & Neville, 2017). The Scottish participants reported the peer-led model to be helpful to engage students and support peer networks outside the classroom. Williams and Neville (2017) concluded that cultural relevance and integration of MVP into the general school environment was key in long-term success; however, research so far has not examined MVP's impact on changes in actual bystander actions or rates of violence in high schools.

Recommendations

The authors, based on their experiences in a high school bystander program implementation and evaluation, make the following recommendations for high schools adopting a bystander program. These recommendations align with the CDC's technical packages on primary prevention of dating violence (Niolon et al., 2017) and sexual violence (Basile et al., 2016) that provide information on strategies and approaches from the current research evidence.

Prepare to Fully Commit to the Program Adoption

It is vital to recognize the importance of fidelity to the original program design when considering whether to implement a bystander program. Bystander programs are not a one-time educational session just for students. Educational leaders should expect various activities including multiple student learning sessions, booster follow-up

sessions, school-wide activities, and community-based activities. These are necessary components of successful primary prevention programs that develop skilled and confident active bystanders and promote safe schools. Extant literature supports these efforts as approaches that create protective high school environments (Basile et al., 2016; Niolon et al., 2017).

Additionally, engaging individuals who are influential for youth is a recommended prevention approach (Basile et al., 2016; Niolon et al., 2017) used by the programs introduced in this article. School administrators, teachers, and staff may be asked to actively participate in that effort. It is also an important consideration for success to allow many of these activities to occur during the school hours because high school students are often unavailable after school due to extracurricular activities, part-time jobs, or family responsibilities.

Bystander programs specifically aim to shift the school culture, which is created not only by students but by all individuals in the school. It is helpful for all school personnel to be aware of any bystander programming and actively participate as much as possible so they can support students' new, positive behaviors. A vital aspect of the culture of safety is directly connected to how the student victims are treated. Bystander programs teach skills to safely intervene, such as telling someone to stop harassing another student, asking someone in distress if they are okay, and accompanying someone to speak with a safe adult. When all members of the school commit to the bystander strategies, there should be support for the victims that also reduce the negative consequences of violence (Basile et al., 2016; Niolon et al., 2017).

Collaborate with Community Partners

High school administrators should seek to collaborate with professionals trained to implement bystander programs in their region. Staff at the local rape crisis centers and domestic violence programs may be trained to deliver bystander programming. The state coalitions of sexual assault and domestic violence may also offer assistance. It is beneficial to work with the trained bystander preventionists who have the understanding of the local context in addition to the resources to implement the bystander program. Coinciding to the bystander program staff, engaging members of the surrounding community, including social service agencies, businesses such as restaurants and stores, and parents, should be part of the efforts. These community partnerships will help promote positive social norms and provide support as advocates for survivors (Basile et al., 2016; Niolon et al., 2017).

Address Cultural Relevance

While the programs introduced in this article have been rigorously evaluated and show promising evidence of effectiveness, they all have limitations. In particular, applicability of the selected program for each high school must be carefully considered. All of the programs above were developed by highly educated White individuals in academia. BITB and GD were originally developed with majority White college students and implemented in majority White high schools in their research trials (Coker et al., 2017; Edwards et al., 2019). On the other hand, MVP high school study and CBIM evaluation were conducted in school districts with students of diverse racial and economic backgrounds (Katz et al., 2011; Miller et al., 2012).

Critically, safety of all students must be considered. In particular, issues faced by members of socially marginalized groups (e.g., race/ethnicity, sex and gender, religion,

and immigration status) may influence student safety and program buy-in. For example, a study on a college bystander program found that White female students were less likely to intervene when a Black woman was at risk for sexual assault compared to White or unspecified race (Katz, Merrilees, Hoxmeier, & Motisi, 2017). While bystander programs suggest reporting a potential incident to police as one of the options to deal with risky situations, studies reveal that crime reporting to law enforcement is low and/or viewed negatively due to fear of serious consequences in communities of color (e.g., Desmond, Papachristos, & Kirk, 2016), immigrant communities (e.g., Messing, Becerra, Ward-Lasher, & Androff, 2015) and sexual minority communities (e.g., Wolff & Cokely, 2007). Further, some program components may not be culturally relevant to students from marginalized communities. School personnel involved in the program implementation are encouraged to address these issues with the bystander program staff. These discussions and subsequent program adjustments can lead to an enhanced approach in creating the supportive and protective environment for all students which is key in successful bystander strategies (Basile et al., 2017; Niolon et al., 2017).

Further, to the authors' knowledge, there is no research to date investigating the programs' impact on youth with severe behavior problems, developmental delays, learning disabilities, and other special needs. Strategizing to include and support students with diverse needs is vital in creating environments that can protect students from sexual and dating violence.

Use Policies to Create Safe Schools

Applying policies consistently in addressing sexual and dating violence is an important part of creating a safe and equitable learning environment as well as providing

support to reduce harm for victims (Basile et al., 2017; Niolon et al., 2017). School administrators must pay special attention to Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 which prohibits sex discriminations in federally funded educational programs and activities. Issues related to sexual and dating violence that prevent students from participating in educational activities safely may be considered violation of Title IX (Stader, 2011; United Educators, 2015). Currently, 138 elementary-secondary schools are under investigation for sexual harassment and 107 for sexual violence by the Office of Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Education (USDE, 2019). If there is a situation with a potential for Title IX violation, it is crucial that the school district act to prevent it even when no complaint is filed (United Educators, 2015).

Consultation with experts on Title IX and other laws is vital in developing school policies on these complicated issues. Local rape crisis centers and domestic violence programs as well as state coalitions may be of immense assistance in policy development aiming to create safe and equitable educational environments that enhance support for victims and tolerate no violence. Notably, involving students who actively participate in the bystander program in the effort to create school policies would be empowering for students and promote buy-ins. School policies play a crucial role in creating infrastructures that allow students to seek help.

Conclusion

School administrators are tasked with providing students a learning environment that promotes academic success. Sexual and dating violence can impede student success by impacting the "whole child – the physical, social, emotional and intellectual aspects of the child" (Ohio Department of Education [ODE], n.d.). It is imperative to reduce these

types of violence and their negative consequences in schools. For high schools that seek to create a safe and equitable learning environment for all students, the bystander approach to preventing sexual and dating violence is an effective match because of its focus on social norms supporting victims and tolerating no violence. This article introduced common foundational frameworks of bystander programs and research evidence on the effectiveness of select programs that have been implemented and evaluated in high schools. High school administrators are encouraged to consider adopting evidence-based programs such as the ones described above.

With ever increasing federal and state mandates on academic expectations, adding another program in the busy school schedule is challenging for high school administrators and educators. The good news is that there are experts in the local and state non-profit organizations who can help with implementation of evidence-based bystander programs. The first step in this process may involve strategizing with the identified expert in removing potential barriers to the effort. In case of Ohio high schools, introducing the bystander program as integral to the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) may help in gaining support from the school districts. ODE (2019) describes PBIS as "a framework that guides school teams in the selection, integration, and implementation of evidence-based practices for improving academic, social and behavior outcomes for all students." Evidence-based bystander programs fit well into strategic plans as an approach to reduce negative health outcomes and promote healthier schools.

With support from the school district and other major players, an advisory committee should be convened to choose a comprehensive bystander approach and work towards promoting behavior change. This dedicated team could include the school

personnel, rape crisis/domestic violence centers, other community agencies, researcher/evaluator, and local businesses as well as parents and students. The authors recommend inviting influential teachers and students to encourage buy-ins within the school. The committee should undertake tasks necessary to implement a bystander program as a public health approach. The tasks of the committee may include: 1) Obtaining existing data to understand the needs of the district; 2) aligning the school policies with state and federal requirements such as Title IX and anti-harassment; 3) selecting a bystander program and connecting the local data to address in the program; 4) implementing the bystander strategies across all levels of social ecology; 5) evaluating strategies and outcomes; and 6) sharing challenges and successes with the community. It is highly recommended that schools apply for collaborative grants with community agencies.[1]

With an increasing number of high schools with bystander programs across the United States, school administrators interested in prevention of sexual and dating violence have more examples follow. Educational leaders should take advantage of the accumulated knowledge and expertise in the field of violence prevention to promote safer learning environments for high school students.

[1]As of this writing, Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence is planning financial resources for violence prevention efforts in Ohio's school districts.

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