

Who sees opportunity to help?

A prospective study on adolescents' detection of intervention opportunities in situations of sexual and dating violence

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

Past research shows that bystanders (witnesses) are often present during incidents of sexual violence and emotional and physical dating violence. In such situations, there can be a number of different opportunities for a bystander to intervene. These opportunities can range from speaking up when hearing someone make a sexist comment, to helping a friend leave an abusive relationship, to finding support for a friend who confides that they have been assaulted. In order to be an effective bystander, an individual must first detect that these are opportunities to intervene. This study examined factors that might predict young people's detection of such opportunities in their everyday lives.

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO KNOW?

- The findings suggest that youth vary in their detection of opportunities to intervene in situations of sexual and dating violence.
- Sexual minority girls were more likely than boys and heterosexual girls to detect opportunities in their everyday lives to intervene.
- Youth with greater empathy for victims of violence and youth who binge drank were more likely to detect opportunities to intervene (compared to those with lower empathy and those who did not binge drink).

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

The data from this study were collected as part of an evaluation of a bystander-focused violence prevention program. Data from the control group (who did not participate in the program) were included in this study. The sample included 1,322 high school students from 13 schools in Maine, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire, USA. Students were between the ages of 13 and 19, with an average age of 15.8. Half of students were girls/women. The majority of participants identified as White/non-Hispanic and heterosexual. Participants completed a survey and then were invited to complete the survey again about three months after. About 85% of participants from the first survey went on to complete the follow-up survey.

The survey included questions about participants' knowledge about sexual assault and relationship abuse; acceptance of rape myths; empathy for victims of relationship abuse and sexual assault; and experiences of binge drinking. Participants also completed six questions asking about "opportunity detection". These questions provided examples of scenarios where a bystander might intervene prior to, during, or after a sexual assault or instance of dating violence. Examples of scenarios included: "tell someone to stop talking down to, harassing, or messing with someone else", "ask someone that looked very upset at a party/dance/sports event if they were okay or needed help," and "get help for a friend because they had been forced to have sex or were physically hurt by a boyfriend/girlfriend". Participants indicated whether or not they had encountered that scenario in the previous two months.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?

Some adolescents were more likely than others to detect opportunities to intervene. Older participants were more likely to detect the following two opportunities to intervene: asking someone who looked upset at a party/event if they were okay or needed help, and speaking up to someone who was bragging or making excuses for forcing someone to have sex. Sexual minority girls were more likely than all other groups to detect most of the opportunities described; the authors posited that their greater risk for victimization may lead to a greater awareness and sensitivity to situations that may be risky. Greater empathy was also associated with a greater likelihood of detecting most of the opportunities described. Adolescents who binge drank were more likely (than their peers who did not binge drink) to report bystander opportunity in almost all of the scenarios. The authors hypothesized, given the high rates of sexual and dating violence that take place in the presence of alcohol, that those who binge drank may have been in more scenarios to detect a bystander opportunity.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

These findings highlight the importance of understanding the first step in bystander intervention: detecting the opportunity to intervene. The results show a number of potential factors for researchers and practitioners in the field of adolescent violence to consider when designing bystander intervention programs, including gender and sexual identity, empathy, and binge drinking. Youth who are at risk for victimization may also detect opportunities to intervene, and thus may need support in order to be able to intervene in a safe manner. Intervention programs need to develop ways to address adolescent binge drinking effectively, as it is a risk factor for sexual and dating violence, and bystanders may often be present to intervene.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

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