

Bystander programs increase bystander intervention but no effect on perpetrating sexual assault



Bystander sexual assault prevention programs encourage young people to intervene when witnessing sexual assault

What is the aim of this review?

This Campbell systematic review examines the effects of bystander programs on knowledge and attitudes concerning sexual assault and bystander intervention, bystander intervention when witnessing sexual assault or its warning signs, and the perpetration of sexual assault. The review summarizes evidence from 27 high-quality studies, including 21 randomized controlled trials.

Bystander sexual assault prevention programs have beneficial effects on bystander intervention but there is no evidence of effects on sexual assault perpetration. Effects on knowledge and attitudes are inconsistent across outcomes.

What is this review about?

Sexual assault is a significant problem among adolescents and college students across the world. One promising strategy for preventing these assaults is the implementation of bystander sexual assault prevention programs, which encourage young people to intervene when witnessing incidents or warning signs of sexual assault. This review examines the effects bystander programs have on knowledge and attitudes concerning sexual assault and bystander behavior, bystander intervention when witnessing sexual assault or its warning signs, and participants' rates of perpetration of sexual assault.

What studies are included?

This review includes studies that evaluate the effects of bystander programs for young people on (1) knowledge and attitudes concerning sexual assault and bystander intervention, (2) bystander intervention behavior when witnessing sexual assault or its warning signs, and (3) perpetration of sexual assault.

Twenty-seven studies met the inclusion criteria. These included studies span the period from 1997 to 2017 and were primarily conducted in the USA (one study was conducted in Canada and one in India). Twenty-one of the studies were randomized controlled trials and six were high quality quasi-experimental studies.

Do bystander programs have an effect on knowledge/attitudes, on bystander intervention, or on sexual assault perpetration?

Bystander programs have an effect on knowledge and attitudes for some outcomes.



How up-to-date is this review?

The review authors searched for studies up to June 2017. This Campbell systematic review was submitted in October 2017, revised in October 2018, and published January 2019.

What is the Campbell Collaboration?

The Campbell Collaboration is an international, voluntary, non-profit research network that publishes systematic reviews. We summarise and evaluate the quality of evidence about programmes in the social and behavioural sciences. Our aim is to help people make better choices and better policy decisions.

About this summary

This summary was prepared by the authors of the Campbell Systematic Review 2019:1 “Effects of bystander programs on the prevention of sexual assault among adolescents and college students: a systematic review” by Heather Hensman Kettrey, Robert A. Marx, and Emily E. Tanner-Smith (DOI 10.4073/csr.2019.1). The summary was designed, edited and produced by Tanya Kristiansen (Campbell Collaboration) Financial support from the American Institutes for Research for the production of this summary is gratefully acknowledged.



The most pronounced beneficial effects are on rape myth acceptance and bystander efficacy outcomes. There are also delayed effects (i.e., one to four months after the intervention) on taking responsibility for intervening/acting, knowing strategies for intervening, and intentions to intervene outcomes. There is little or no evidence of effects on gender attitudes, victim empathy, date rape attitudes, and on noticing sexual assault outcomes.

Bystander programs have a beneficial effect on bystander intervention. There is no evidence that bystander programs have an effect on participants’ rates of sexual assault perpetration.

What do the findings of this review mean?

The United States 2013 Campus Sexual Violence Elimination (SaVE) Act requires post-secondary educational institutions participating in Title IX financial aid programs to provide incoming college students with sexual violence prevention programming that includes a component on bystander intervention.

Bystander programs have a significant effect on bystander intervention. But there is no evidence that these programs have an effect on rates of sexual assault perpetration. This suggests that bystander programs may be appropriate for targeting the behavior of potential bystanders but may not be appropriate for targeting the behavior of potential perpetrators.

Beneficial effects of bystander programs on bystander intervention were diminished by six months post-intervention. Thus, booster sessions may be needed to yield any sustained effects.

There are still important questions worth further exploration. Namely, more research is needed to investigate the underlying causal mechanisms of program effects on bystander behavior (e.g., to model relationships between specific knowledge/attitude effects and bystander intervention effects), and to identify the most effective types of bystander programs (e.g., using randomized controlled trials to compare the effects of two alternate program models). Additionally, more research is needed in contexts outside the USA so that researchers can better understand the role of bystander programs across the world.