

## Literature Review of Sexual Violence in the United States

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### 1. Abstract

The purpose of this review is to examine sexual violence in the United States (U.S.) and discuss prevention and intervention methods used to lower these rates. Sexual violence remains a pervasive issue across the U.S. that causes negative impacts on victims' health and wellbeing, as well as their ability to thrive socially, academically, and professionally. It is experienced and perpetrated more or less often by different demographics of people. This review uses twenty six sources from Internet searches centralized in Google Scholar to discuss the effects of sexual violence and different ways of preventing it among different populations. Although some prevention and intervention methods such as sexual education, bystander intervention education, and policy responses have been proven to effectively lower rates of sexual violence perpetration, more research is needed to fully understand the effectiveness of existing prevention and intervention programming. Additionally, innovative prevention methods need to be developed, implemented, and evaluated to more adequately reduce rates of sexual violence, especially among high-risk populations, which may involve changes to existing policy or implementation of new policy.

### 2. Introduction

Sexual violence is defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as a sexual act done without consent. This has deep negative consequences on a person's mental health, physical health, financial status, etc. Sexual violence can occur online or in person (*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022*) and is an issue that affects millions of individuals every year in the U.S. There are over 460,000 reported cases of sexual violence every year in the U.S. (*RAINN, 2020*), though existing research points to this number being deeply underreported, with only one third of rape cases being reported in 1994 and 1995 (Allen, 2007). Sexual violence can happen to anyone regardless of age, gender, or sexuality. However, certain groups of people experience or perpetrate it in higher numbers. The majority of those who have experienced sexual violence did so before turning 25 years old. People who are between 12 and 34 years old are more likely to experience sexual violence than their younger or elder counterparts, with 54% of sexual violence victims being within that age range (*RAINN, 2020*). Additionally, 50% of people who perpetrate sexual violence are over 30 years old (*RAINN, 2020*). In America, 17.6% of women are a victim to attempted or completed rape. Women make up 90% of all rape victims and are more likely to experience sexual violence in their lifetime. Men are subject to sexual violence at lower rates than women and non-binary individuals. Out of those who report it, 3% of American men are victims of attempted or completed rape, and 10% of all rape victims are male (*RAINN, 2020*). Alarmingly, 50% of people who are transgender have been a victim to sexual violence in their lifetime, drawing attention to the unique needs of this population in relation to sexual violence (*Forge Forward, 2012*). Native Americans are also disproportionately affected by sexual violence, being two times more likely to experience sexual violence than any other race (*RAINN, 2020*).

Direct effects of sexual violence include sexually transmitted infections (STIs), physical injury, and unintended pregnancy (*CDC, 2022*). Other physical health issues can arise in the long term as well. Long term issues have also been observed in the mental health of survivors, as victims of sexual violence may struggle from disordered eating, depression, suicidal thoughts, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and/or anxiety (*CDC, 2022*). PTSD emerges in

94% of women who experience rape, for up to two weeks after being raped, and in 30% of those women long-term (RAINN, 2020). Approximately one-third of women who have experienced rape engage in suicide ideation. Victims of sexual violence are also more likely to develop unhealthy habits in relation to substance use and abuse. Those who have experienced sexual assault are 3.4 times more prone to use marijuana and 6 times more prone to use cocaine. Over one-third of sexual violence victims develop issues with friends or family, pointing towards the depth of impact sexual violence can have on victims (RAINN, 2020). Additionally, emotional disorders following sexual violence can also lead to loss of productivity. Loss of productivity in professional spaces can impair quality of work, resulting in job loss. Loss of productivity therefore leads to negative economic outcomes (CDC, 2022). The approximate loss of money per individual rape victim is \$122,461. In the U.S. alone, the collective economic burden of rape is estimated to be around \$3.1 trillion (Chen et al., 2017), demonstrating the need to address sexual violence stretches past individual level.

Preventing sexual violence is a step towards a better life for U.S. citizens. Studies have found that sexual violence prevention education lowers rates of sexual violence behaviors. By providing these services, mental health and economic issues can be avoided. Prevention begins with educating the population about the issue and how to stop it. This includes education about consent and the negative consequences of perpetrating sexual violence, both for survivors and people who cause this type of harm.

### 3. Methods

Twenty six articles published after the year 2000 were selected in order to make use of recent and relevant facts. Articles were picked that were relevant to the topic of sexual violence, rape, effects of sexual violence, or prevention programming. Articles were also picked based on corroborating data or if they provided useful contextualization for this article. The search was conducted from January 2023 to November 2023. The manuscript's author was able to identify articles for use from online scholarly databases such as Google Scholar and PubMed. Key words were used for searching included *sexual violence*, *effects of sexual violence*, and *sexual violence prevention methods*. The articles were read thoroughly and key findings were identified, then synthesized. Data extracted from scholarly papers came from the Abstract or Results sections of the paper, meanwhile data from non-paper sites (i.e., CDC statistics) was extracted from the whole article.

### 4. Results

Originally introduced to the public sphere in 2006, the #MeToo movement was created by Black feminist scholar Tarana Burke (Bhattacharyya, 2018). This social media campaign took off in 2017, when a Hollywood actress asked her followers on X (formally known as Twitter) to post "#MeToo" if they had experienced any form of sexual violence (including sexual assault, harassment, stalking, or intimate partner violence) (Bhattacharyya, 2018). This led to a major increase in mainstream attention given to the issue of sexual violence. Additionally, in 2014 the White House created the Task Force to Protect Students From Sexual Assault, meant to minimize rates of sexual violence against college-aged students. This group collaborated to identify five elements that should be considered when handling programming related to the issue of sexual violence: comprehensive prevention, infrastructure, audience, partnerships and sustainability, and evaluation (Dills, 2016). Thus, research looking at effective programming and preventing sexual violence has become popularized. More so, research has expanded to identify the magnitude of the problem of sexual violence, as well as the many impacts it may have at the individual and macro levels.

#### **4a. Structuring Prevention Programming Before Implementation**

Prevention programming is defined as teaching strategies and behaviors which are meant to minimize the likeliness of a damaging event happening later on (Ohio Department of Education, 2023). In the case of sexual violence, prevention programming is meant to minimize perpetration of the violence and increase positive bystander behavior in risky situations.

Literature points to the importance of structuring intervention and prevention programs before implementation. One article examined several pieces of literature and found that audience, facilitation, content, and general formatting were all contributing factors to the program's amount of success in preventing sexual violence from occurring. This means that when organizations or institutions plan on rolling out new prevention and intervention programs, first a thorough assessment of these key parts should be done to ensure that the program is fitting for the target audience (Vladutiu, 2010). Engaging men is a type of prevention programming defined as teaching men about sexual violence and how they can educate others and ally against it (Howard, 2022). One study found that men underrate the power that they have to reduce rates of sexual violence (Fabiano et al., 2010), highlighting the importance of taking demographics into consideration when designing prevention programs.

#### **4b. Prevention Programming for College Students**

College students are statistically at a higher risk of sexual violence than other groups. Accordingly, a "red zone" is thought to be a period of high risk of sexual violence when entering college. One article found that a specific timeframe for this red zone has not been properly established, although defining this zone as the first one to two years within entry to college may be useful. This zone is relevant as it has the potential to outline a frame of time when bystander intervention may be the most useful; therefore, it should be taught at or near this time (Follingstad et al., 2022).

To maximize the impact of prevention programs, a factor to consider when teaching prevention is the age of the audience. One article found that students' age had an impact on the effectiveness of bystander programs. Students in their first two years of college were found to have stronger bystander intention to intervene when seeing a risk of sexual violence (Follingstad et al., 2022).

#### **4c. Bystander Intervention**

One form of sexual violence prevention is teaching bystander intervention, where students are taught to intervene when seeing signs of a situation which could possibly put someone at risk of sexual violence. The effectiveness of the program's content is still a topic of discussion. However, one article found that bystander programs had a positive effect on bystander intervention, meaning that more people who went through the bystander program engaged in bystander intervention (Kettrey & Marx, 2019).

Another article explored if gender should be a factor to consider in bystander intervention program implementation among college-aged and adolescent students. This article found that there was no evidence to support that the sex of the group of students (i.e., male, female or non-binary) to which bystander education was given had any effect on the program's effectiveness (Kettrey & Marx, 2019).

One article found that there were several different types of college bystander intervention education programs and different effectiveness of each program. It proposed a solution, which was to take the best features of each program to create an interconnected program which leads to the highest rates of success. Interconnectivity is important to consider as one existing program may not be the best possible, and more research needs to be done to create safer

college campuses (Orchowski et al., 2018). Also, interconnectivity of audience is necessary, as all demographics of people can experience sexual violence. Because of this, engaging all people regardless of gender or race is necessary.

#### **4d. Bystander Intervention on Perpetration**

Although bystander education helps learners to intervene in situations where risk is present, there is no clear understanding of how bystander education affects perpetration of sexual violence. One study noted that no effect was observed on rates of perpetration within the student population which had gone through bystander education (Katz & Moore, 2013).

Teaching people to intervene in risky situations is important and proven effective, but stopping people from perpetrating in the first place would stop the root of the problem of sexual violence. More research needs to be done in order to determine which method is most effective to teach people not to perpetrate this violence (Katz & Moore, 2013).

#### **4e. Policy Responses and Its Issues**

Another form of prevention programming for sexual violence prevention is policy response. "Policy," as defined by the CDC, can take form as rules, actions, or management used by institutions. As sexual violence has contemporarily been viewed as a public health issue, policies against it can be implemented in law, workplaces, educational institutions, etc (CDC, 2015). Specifically in colleges and universities, policies are implemented for safety against sexual violence. However, college students are still at a higher risk of sexual violence. This is why a closer examination of these policies and their effectiveness is necessary, as there is a clear gap between the policies in place at institutes of higher learning and the actual breadth of the problem of sexual violence.

One article examines the policies higher education institutes have and their problems. One important issue is that there is no hard line on the definition of sexual violence, and this may vary across thousands of colleges. The article highlights that the sexual violence policies of 13% of higher education institutions do not include a definition for consent, which is essential to defining and identifying sexual violence. Without a clear definition, college students cannot practice or adhere to the tenants of consent. Additionally, colleges' policies are often vaguely worded, using terms such as "sexual misconduct," which is not clearly defined and may cause confusion (Perkins & Warner, 2017). This lack of clarity is harmful, as it leaves potential for exploitation of the loose and vague terminology. Thus, a more uniform and clear definition of sexual violence needs to be placed in college policies. This will lead to better identification of sexual violence cases, which in turn can point to more at-risk populations and the development of more effective and sustainable prevention programs.

#### **4f. Sexual Education**

Sexual education is defined by the World Health Organization as education about sexuality, reproduction, and the health of both (*World Health Organization, 2023*). In some sex education programs, information about consent is taught, which is essential for prevention programming. Teaching young people, particularly those in high school and middle school, about consent and respecting boundaries is important to tackle the root of sexual violence, which are those that perpetrate this type of violence.

Sexual education is important for various reasons outlined by one 2020 article. The first is the most important, which is that teaching about consent is critical to ending sexual violence. Another reason is that sexual education can help those learning about it create proper boundaries and avoid being victims of or perpetrating violence in a relationship. Sexual education also allows learners to eliminate uncertainty about their sexual health to promote

security in their body and self-esteem (Rollston, 2020).

Another article focused on the importance of how sex education is structured. The article stated that consent education should be inclusive and sex positive. Also, the authors found that including information about how social, economic, and cultural contexts impact consent and sexual experiences is important (Burton et al., 2021).

#### **4g. Why Prevention Programming Can Save Financial Resources**

Rape is commonly associated with emotional and behavioral effects impacting victims. However, rape can also lead to loss of money during the victim's lifetime. This can include medical costs, legal costs, and damage costs. A review paper shows the relationship between sexual violence and monetary loss. The paper lists several reasons, one being the medical cost, and the cost of receiving mental health services (Loya, 2015). Also, in some cases, victims may need to move entirely, causing expensive moving costs (e.g., moving trucks, security deposits, etc.), which are paid for entirely by the victim. Costs that are less indirect include sexual violence's effect on a person's ability to work and make a living. A victim of sexual violence may need time off of work which may be unpaid, and are more likely to become unemployed than those who have not experienced sexual violence. Lack of motivation following sexual violence can also lead to reduced earnings. Victims who are in their adolescent years can also experience the monetary effects of sexual violence, as the experience can lead to lack of motivation with their educational career. Low educational attainment subsequently leads to a lower paying job. If a victim of sexual violence does not have enough resources to cover the price of sexual violence, they may be forced to go into debt or to not pay for different services at all, which could negatively impact their overall wellbeing.

One study calculated that in the U.S., the economic burden of being raped was \$122,461 per victim (Peterson et al., 2017). Of this lifetime economic burden, only 32% of it would be paid for by the government. Considering that over 25 million adults in the U.S. have been reported as rape victims, the study calculated that the economic burden of rape for the U.S. was almost 3.1 trillion dollars. Of this economic burden, 1.6 trillion was due to less productivity in the workplace (which included victims and perpetrators), 1.2 trillion was due to medical costs, and 234 billion was due to legal costs (Peterson et al., 2017). The overwhelming cost of loss of productivity after experiencing sexual violence is highlighted by a 2018 study which measured the amount of productive days which were lost following violence from a partner, stalking, or sexual violence. The study found in the short-term, each victim lost on average 4.9 productive days, which equated to \$730 (Peterson et al., 2018).

Another paper highlighted that survivors with the proper financial resources and savings to pay the costs of sexual violence could take more time to focus on their mental health (Loya, 2015). This shows how, although the cost of sexual violence is an unfair one for all socioeconomic statuses alike, individuals in a lower social class may face even harsher financial consequences following sexual violence. One study found that 1355 privately-insured female rape victims paid on average \$948 for the cost of rape, while their insurers covered the other \$5789 (Tennessee et al., 2017). This evidence points to necessity for rape costs to be reduced, as these female victims paid quite a large sum of money, despite being previously insured. This data also shows that the cost to uninsured women is likely to be extremely high. According to one study, Hispanic people are the ethnic group which were most likely to be uninsured from 2010-2022 (Vankar, 2023). This likely means that Hispanic people are most likely to suffer from higher costs if they become victims of sexual violence, creating inequity in terms of money.

Highlighting another vulnerable group, another study on the economic burden of child

sexual abuse shows how sexual violence is an economic crime that affects not only adults, but also children. The economic burden of child sexual abuse can include medical, child welfare, special education, productivity loss, suicide, and crime costs. In 2015 alone, there were 40,387 cases of non fatal child sexual abuse, showing the prevalence of this issue. The resulting lifetime economic cost of these cases was 9.3 billion. The lifetime costs for victims of non fatal child sexual abuse was around \$282,734 for female victims (Letourneau et al., 2018).

Overall, the evidence provided shows that rape is also a monetary crime, and thus the consequences of rape need to be observed and studied on multiple facets, including economically. The multifacetedness of rape's consequences calls for more prevention programming to be created and implemented in order to reduce rates of rape and sexual violence in general. Also, reducing rates of rape would diminish economic burden on U.S. citizens, contributing to the importance of effective prevention programming. If sexual violence rates were decreased through prevention programming, the money thus saved could be allocated to improving the quality of U.S citizens' lives, including education, food, shelter, entertainment, etc.

## 5. Discussion

This review paper discusses the definition and impacts of sexual violence, then delves into the nuances of prevention programming. Although prevention programming is effective, it has its flaws and is far from perfect. This is why sexual violence remains a public health issue that demands more effective prevention efforts across different demographics of different populations. Effectiveness of prevention programs such as consent education programs (in public and private educational institutions) can be increased by further research and then expansion of reach. This will ensure that the programming reaches all audiences and educates people in the best possible manner. To encourage funding for these programs, the effects of sexual violence need to be emphasized more clearly and brought to the attention of policymakers, private donors, and federal and state institutions. These effects need more attention because sexual violence is a public health issue which affects more people than is reported every year, often leading to poor health outcomes among those who experience it or are impacted by it. The effects that could most prominently influence funding streams include the negative monetary impact of sexual assault on the economy at large, which is often left out when discussing this form of violence.

In general, social awareness needs to be spread about this issue. One way is to create advertisements and public messaging campaigns with anonymous personal experiences highlighting the negative effects of experiencing sexual violence. While this would require the consent and hard work of survivors of this form of violence, it would be greatly impactful on a larger audience. This is because a campaign like this would show to audiences how sexual violence is not just a number and how it affects individuals on a deep and long-lasting level.

People without proper insurance are more likely to have worse economic outcomes if they experience sexual violence, creating inequality between these people and those who can afford to pay legal and medical costs. Because of this, support especially needs to be provided for victims of sexual violence without insurance. Folks who are unable to work full-time or who are living in the US without documentation may be at particular risk of not having insurance, making these populations particularly vulnerable to the adverse economical impacts of sexual violence.

Apart from preventing sexual violence, social support needs to be provided to victims. One step towards supporting victims is encouraging attitudes against perpetration of sexual

violence to create empathy for survivors. This social support should be taught in the classroom and at home to create a culture against sexual violence. Paralleling the #MeToo movement, there is opportunity for social support to be manifested through various media outlets, creating a sense of community and accountability internationally in relation to sexual violence. Creating a culture against sexual violence has many benefits as it would be reflected in people's daily lives. Culture has a large influence on people's beliefs, and so the normalization of being opposed to sexual violence behaviors would in turn lead to lower rates of it.

A cultural shift towards rejecting sexual violence would also create confidence for victims to speak out and seek support, as many victims do not report their experience(s) in fear of not being brought to justice or receiving backlash and retaliation. Social support could be utilized more to encourage victims of sexual violence to come forward with their story; this would create more accurate quantitative data of sexual violence, as it is currently deeply unreported. In total, a shift past just in the educational setting, and rather in the cultural one, towards supporting and believing victims, and away from tolerating sexual violence, would lead to victims feeling more comfortable coming forward, ultimately creating an opportunity to more holistically understand the breadth of the problem.

Finally, further research needs to be done in order to draw accurate conclusions about the effectiveness of different types of prevention programming. This is essential in order to give the most effective methods of prevention to the public and maximize the outcomes of resources and time put in to stopping sexual violence. Ineffective or outdated methods need to be replaced with productive ones to reach as many people as possible and provide long-lasting, long-term results. Thus, new and innovative ways of developing prevention programming that is engaging and sustainable is crucial to ending sexual violence across the globe. More so, rigorous evaluation of these new programs will be needed to properly determine their impact. If found to be successful, the most promising forms of prevention programming need to be implemented in various institutions that reach broad audiences for maximum effect. If done properly, prevention programming could be a major catalyst in reducing rates of sexual violence, ultimately helping to solve both this public health and economic crisis.

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