



Bystander Intervention: The Facts

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What is Bystander Intervention?

Bystanders are defined as “individuals who witness a crisis event or emergency situation,” and research on bystander intervention examines the factors that distinguish “bystanders who intervene in a conflict (with either escalatory or de-escalatory acts) from bystanders who do not intervene.”[1,2] In the United States, common barriers to intervention include the normalization of harmful behavior, fear of retaliation, legal liability concerns, and gender bias (e.g., acceptance of rape myths).[1,2] These factors often discourage individuals from stepping in during incidents of violence or misconduct. A key related concept is the bystander effect, defined as “people being less likely to offer help when they are in a group than when they are alone.”[3] This effect illustrates how social dynamics, like the diffusion of responsibility, can inhibit action. Understanding barriers is essential to promoting safe, supportive communities.

Have You Heard?

- Research on bystander intervention is frequently traced to the 1964 murder of Kitty Genovese, which led psychologists John Darley and Bibb Latané to study the bystander effect, revealing that people are less likely to help in emergencies when others are present.[4] Studies have examined bystander intervention in several victimization contexts, including interpersonal violence and cyberbullying.[1]
- Adults are more likely to intervene when children are present, as they feel a stronger moral obligation to protect younger individuals from harm.[5]
- Intervention does not always require confronting the aggressor. Sometimes, offering the victim emotional support, directing them to resources, or reporting the incident can be effective ways of intervening.[6]

What Are the Consequences?

With issues like fear of retaliation, the normalization of harmful behavior, and others, bystander intervention becomes less likely to occur. When intervention is rare, several negative effects can arise, including internal distrust within communities, a cycle of violence, and a lack of accountability for offenders. Additionally, failure to intervene can lead to significant emotional, mental, and physical harm for victims.

How to Spread Awareness

One effective way to address the lack of bystander intervention is by increasing the number of people actively involved in helping. Encouraging collective responsibility through group intervention can reduce the inclination to shift responsibility that often discourages individual action. Bystander intervention training is essential for teaching individuals to recognize harmful situations and respond appropriately.[1] Creating supportive environments where people feel empowered to act, without fear of retaliation or legal consequences, also increases the likelihood of intervention. Supporting victims involves acknowledging their experiences and providing emotional validation. Access to professional resources, such as counseling or legal support, is vital for healing. Fostering a compassionate and responsive community can also empower victims and help prevent future harm.[6,7]

Resources

Texas

- **Texas Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) –**
<https://texascasa.org/2023/07/31/bystander-intervention-educational-advocacy/>
- **BeVocal –**
www.healthyhorns.utexas.edu/lwc/bevocal.html

National

- **National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) –**
https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/2018-02/publications_nsvrc_tip-sheet_bystander-intervention-tips-and-strategies_1.pdf
- **Survivors –** <https://www.survivors.org/steps-for-effective-bystander-intervention/>

References

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Resources

- Aging and Disability Resource Center 855-937-2372
- Cyber Civil Rights Initiative 844-878-2274
- Mothers Against Drunk Driving 877-623-3435
- National Child Abuse Hotline 800-422-4453
- National Domestic Violence Hotline 800-799-7233
- National Human Trafficking Hotline 888-373-7888
- National Sexual Assault Hotline 800-656-4673
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 988
- Texas Abuse Hotline 800-252-5400
- Texas Council on Family Violence <https://tcfv.org/survivor-resources/>
- Texas Association Against Sexual Assault <https://taasa.org/get-help/>
- Victim Connect Resource Center 855-484-2846