



ADVANCING HEALTH EDUCATION & RESEARCH



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AVA Research Review

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Review Title: Effectiveness of a Bystander Intervention for Violence Prevention

Reviewers: Xiaoyue Sun & Qianwen Xie, Department of Social Work and Social Administration, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Article: Coker, A. L., Bush, H. M., Fisher, B.S., Swan, S. C., Williams, C. M., Clear, E. R., & DeGue, S. (2015). Multi-college bystander intervention evaluation for violence prevention. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/>

Introduction:

Interpersonal violence is a serious global public health issue that threatens millions of people as it often correlates to health problems such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and suicide, etc. (Chan, Straus, Brownridge, Tiwari, & Leung, 2008).

Violence prevention strategies usually empower victims by equipping them with knowledge and skills or helping perpetrators address violent behaviors (Eckhardt et al., 2013). However, both are typically secondary prevention strategies. This article evaluated a bystander intervention that incorporates primary prevention strategies, aiming to reduce individual and community violence.

Brief Overview: The Green Dot bystander is a violence prevention program that engages all community members as potential witnesses to violence through awareness, education, and skill training to stipulate a zero-tolerance environment for violence. Specifically, it employs the Popular Opinion Leader strategy, that is, to recruit influential community leaders. Overtime, the influential leaders are used to convey the information through their existing relationships and programs

with the goal of reducing community violence. Coker and colleagues examined the effectiveness of the Green Dot program by comparing the violence rates at the University of Kentucky (the intervention campus site of the Green Dot program) to two other campuses (the University of Cincinnati and the University of South Carolina) of similar sizes with students of similar demographics. The authors proposed two hypotheses: (1) the reporting rates of victimization and perpetration among students attending the Intervention campus would be lower than those among students attending Comparison campuses across the four years between 2010-2013; and (2) the reporting of violence on the Intervention campus would be lower than those on the Comparison campuses in each of the same four years.

The Green Dot bystander program has been implemented since 2008 in the University of Kentucky. In the program, a 50-minute speech connecting issues related to dating and sexual violence was delivered to first-year students and bystander training was given to selected student leaders (Coker et al., 2011). The student leaders received 4-6 hours of group training at least once a semester from between 2010 and 2013.

Data were collected in the spring terms of 2010-2013 through online surveys. Coker and his colleagues defined interpersonal violence according to the CDCs definitions of: (1) unwanted sex, (2) sexual harassment, (3) stalking, and (4) physical and psychological dating violence. All forms of violence were measured by widely used instruments National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, Sexual Experiences Questionnaire, National Violence Against Women Survey, and revised Conflicts Tactic Scales.

Controlling for a series of confounders like gender, age, race, ethnicity, fraternity or sorority membership, and sexual orientation, the authors employed log-binomial regressions to compare the violence rates for each violence form by victimization and perpetration with all four-year data (Hypothesis 1). Next, the authors analyzed data by year to test Hypothesis 2.

Relevant Findings:

The study invited 22,468 first-year students across the three campuses to participate in the online surveys, including 9,124 from the Intervention campus and 13,344 from the Comparison campuses.

However, only 35.4% responded on the Intervention campuses and 41.9% on the Comparison campuses. excluding the incomplete data, the final sample size comprised 7,111 students (32.7% of the invited students).

The study observed lower rates of unwanted sex victimization, sexual harassment, stalking, and psychological dating violence for the Intervention campus relative to Comparison campuses. In addition, it found reduced rates of four victimizations (unwanted sex, sexual harassment, stalking, and psychological dating violence) and three perpetrations (sexual harassment, stalking, and psychological dating violence) for the Intervention campus versus Comparison campuses, which provided supportive evidence for Hypothesis 1.

The rates of interpersonal violence victimization and perpetration were both lower among the students on the Intervention campus than those on the Comparison campuses in each year between 2010 and 2012. However, the difference was not significant in 2013 which the authors note could be related to the less intensive bystander training in

2012-2013 due to personnel changes. Therefore, the study partially supported Hypothesis 2.

Authors' Conclusions

The authors' note that this was the first multiyear evaluation of the impact of the bystander intervention program on rates of interpersonal violence victimization and perpetration at the college campus level. results supported that the bystander intervention was associated with reduced the rates of some forms of perpetration and victimization; however, stronger conclusions on the causality require more rigorous study design.

Limitations

The authors noted several limitations. For instance, the exclusion of 800 students in 2013 might have resulted in the bias towards the null. However, propensity score matching could have been employed to reduce this bias. In addition, using reporting rates as measurements could still be problematic because increased awareness may only lead to increased reporting rates while does not influence the true prevalence of incidents though the authors tried to control measurement error by using similar data collection methodology.

The authors also addressed other study limitations including the lowered representativeness of the sample due to the non-randomized design and the low response rates.

Reviewers' Comments

This article provided supportive evidence for the long-term effects of a bystander intervention program which aimed to reduce interpersonal violence victimization and perpetration. The study evaluated the effects of this bystander program on preventing some forms of sexual violence on a college campus. However, it might be possible to apply such a program to reduce and prevent other forms of violence in school settings, such as bullying, fighting, and vandalism, etc. In addition, the bystander program also might be applied in wider communities. The definition of bystander could be expanded to include parents, relatives, neighbors, and other potential social contacts. Given the significant effect of the program on campus violence prevention, the influence on the whole society could be significant.

In addition to the merits of this program, we also have a few concerns. First, the study employed a posttest-only design, which affects the internal validity when the sampling distribution in the Intervention group is not symmetrical. Many unobserved variables might have been missed,

thus making it difficult to control for biases caused by selection and historical development. For instance, individual drug or alcohol use, childhood experiences of violence and victimization, and previous victimization or perpetration experiences in interpersonal relations may have had direct or indirect influences and could have been controlled (Chan, 2011; Chan, Yan, Brownridge, Tiwari, & Fong, 2010).

Second, the intervention program was composed by general speeches to all first-year students, group training to student leaders, as well as some programming elements (marketing and advertising). However, the study did not examine the effectiveness of the three components of intervention separately. Therefore, it was difficult to conclude which component corresponded to the reduction of a certain form of violence; especially when the social programs might dynamically change across years. The lack of separate tests for the effectiveness of individual components compromised the ability of this study to make significant contributions to social policy and practices in the related fields.

Overall, this study sheds lights on some potentially effective strategies for preventing campus sexual violence,

strategies which not only equip individuals with adequate knowledge for preventing violence victimization and perpetration but also promote a zero-tolerance for violence in the community setting.

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