



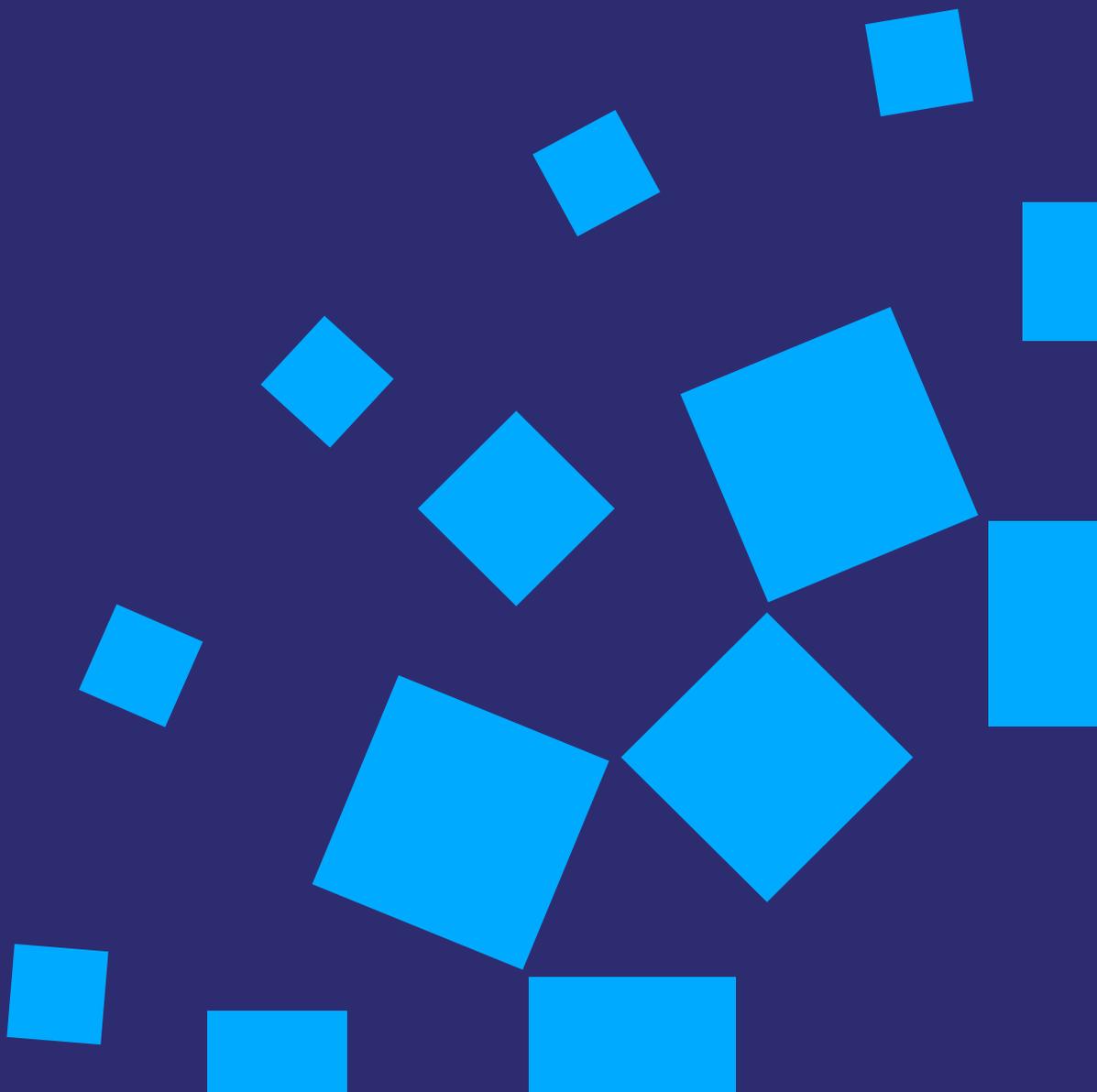
College of  
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# Bystander programmes

## Evidence briefing

**March 2022**



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## Key findings

- This review summarises the evidence on the effectiveness of bystander programmes to prevent sexual assault among young people. These programmes, which are mainly delivered in educational settings, aim to encourage young people to intervene when witnessing incidents or warning signs of sexual assault. Evidence suggests that bystander programmes can have a beneficial impact on bystander behaviour and can improve an individual's:
  - identification of situations that are appropriate for an intervention
  - sense of responsibility and confidence in intervening
  - intervention in occurrences or warning signs of sexual assault
- Bystander programmes have also been shown to reduce rape myth acceptance both immediately and six months after delivery of the programme. There is no evidence that these programmes have an impact on gender attitudes and there is very limited evidence suggesting a positive impact on date rape attitudes.
- Impact on incidences of sexual assault were measured in a number of studies through self-reported perpetration. There was no evidence to suggest that bystander programmes effected incidences of sexual assault using this measure.

Evidence suggests that bystander programme content should be age-appropriate, socio-culturally relevant and fully embedded into the curricula. The course should be delivered by well-trained individuals and underpinned by theory.

# Introduction

Bystander programmes to prevent sexual assault among young people aim to encourage young people to intervene when witnessing incidents or warning signs of sexual assault. Bystander programmes are usually delivered in an educational setting, through a single training or education session (for example, as part of university induction). They are sometimes supported by advertising campaigns that post signs across university campuses to encourage students to act when witnessing incidents or signs of sexual assault<sup>1</sup>. A key aspect of these programmes is providing individuals with the understanding that they are empowered bystanders who have the ability to help, rather than potential victims or perpetrators<sup>2</sup>.

This briefing synthesises evidence from one meta-analytic systematic review<sup>3</sup> covering 27 studies, which examined the impact of bystander programmes on young people in secondary schools and universities. The review examined the effect of the programmes on attitudes and knowledge towards sexual assault and victims, bystander behaviour and self-reported perpetration of sexual assault. Of the included studies, 25 were conducted in the US, while the other two were set in Canada and India respectively. While the systematic review provides the most comprehensive assessment of the evidence, some additional research taken from evidence reviews conducted by Public Health England, the Scottish Government and the Welsh Government were also included where their findings provided a UK context to bystander programmes.

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1 Kettrey, Marx and Tanner-Smith (2019).

2 Miller (2020).

3 Kettrey, Marx and Tanner-Smith (2019).

## Effect – how effective are they?

The impact of bystander programmes was measured in the included studies through a range of outcomes, including individuals' attitudes, bystander knowledge and behaviour, and self-reported sexual assault perpetration. This section discusses the findings from the systematic review against each of these outcomes.

### Bystander attitudes

The studies included in the systematic review measured impact against a number of different attitudes. These included rape myth acceptance, gender attitudes, date rape attitudes and victim empathy<sup>4</sup>.

Rape myth acceptance was measured in 12 of the studies. Rape myths are defined as 'prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists'<sup>5</sup>. Evidence within the systematic review showed that bystander programmes reduce rape myth acceptance among participants immediately post-programme, at one to four months, and at six to seven months after the programme. No studies included in the review assessed the impact after seven months.

Other attitudes used to measure impact of bystander programmes include gender attitudes<sup>6</sup> (six studies), date rape attitudes<sup>7</sup> (four studies) and victim empathy<sup>8</sup> (two studies). There was no evidence in the systematic review to suggest that bystander programmes have an impact on gender attitudes at any point within the following year, nor on date rape attitudes for the first two months following the intervention. However, there was limited evidence (one study)

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4 Attitudes are generally measured in the included studies using scales such as the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale. For more details on how the attitudes described are measured, see: Kettrey, Marx and Tanner-Smith (2019).

5 Burt (1980); cited by Miller (2020).

6 Gender attitudes consist of gender role beliefs such as 'if men pay for a date, they deserve something in return'.

7 Date rape attitudes are beliefs such as 'many women pretend they don't want to have sex because they don't want to appear 'easy''.

8 Victim empathy measures agreement with statements such as 'in general, I feel that rape is an act that is not provoked by the rape victim'.

suggesting that date rape attitudes had improved six months after the programme. Findings relating to the impact on victim empathy were inconclusive<sup>9</sup>.

## Bystander intervention – knowledge, intentions and behaviour

Many of the studies included in the systematic review measured the impact of bystander programmes on different aspects of bystander intervention: their understanding of when to intervene, intentions of intervening and actual intervention.

- Noticing a sexual assault or its warning signs (four studies) – no evidence was found to suggest that bystander programmes improve individuals' ability to notice sexual assaults or its warning signs occurring.
- Identifying a situation as appropriate for an intervention (six studies) – there was evidence to suggest that the programmes had a beneficial effect on this outcome for the six months following the programme. No included study assessed the impact after six months.
- Taking responsibility for acting or intervening (four studies) – there was evidence of delayed beneficial effects (one to four months post-intervention) on participants for this outcome.
- Knowing strategies for helping or intervening in sexual assault or its warning signs (four studies) – there was no evidence of an effect immediately after the intervention. However, one study that measured this outcome at a four-month follow-up found a significant positive effect.
- Bystander efficacy (11 studies) – the studies defined bystander efficacy as a measure of the confidence that the participant would undertake a range of variously described behaviours to intervene. The evidence suggests that bystander programmes can improve individuals' confidence in their ability to intervene in occurrences or warning signs of sexual assault, immediately post-intervention

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9 It was not possible to synthesize an effect size for victim empathy, due to contradicting findings and differing time frames.

and one to four months following the intervention. However, there is limited long-term evidence. Only one study measured the outcome at six months and found no significant effect.

- Bystander intentions (11 studies) – there was evidence to suggest that individuals’ reported likelihood to engage in bystander behaviour improved immediately post-programme and was sustained at one year post-intervention<sup>10</sup>.
- Bystander intervention (13 studies) – there was evidence to suggest that the extent to which the individuals engaged in bystander behaviour increased at one to four months, and at six months to one year post-intervention.

## Perpetration of sexual assault

Six studies in the systematic review included self-reported sexual assault perpetration as an outcome, with participants being asked to self-report perpetration of sexual coercion or sexual abuse. There was no evidence that bystander programmes had an effect on self-reported perpetration of sexual coercion or sexual abuse at any time following the intervention. However, self-report measures are vulnerable to many influences and no studies included other measures of perpetration.

## Moderators

The systematic review found that the effectiveness of bystander programmes on bystander intervention behaviour was not affected by the:

- age of the participants
- education level of the participants
- gender composition of the group
- gendered content of the programme (the gender of the perpetrators and victims)

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<sup>10</sup> This outcome was only significant immediately post-intervention when one non-randomised study was removed from analysis, Amar and others (2015).

Analysis of moderators was not conducted on the other outcome measures, due to small sample size in the meta-analysis.

## Programmes in the UK

### Educational settings

Three bystander training programmes conducted in educational settings in England and Wales have been evaluated. All three evaluations were non-randomised studies, two of which did not have control groups. The programmes – The Bystander Initiative, Mentors in Violence Prevention, and The Intervention Initiative – covered topics such as culture and gender, sexual assault and domestic abuse, the role of the bystander, and roleplay scenarios<sup>11</sup>.

### The Bystander Initiative

The Bystander Initiative was piloted by Welsh Women’s Aid in four universities in Wales<sup>12</sup>. Findings suggested that students who attended the programme had increased knowledge of domestic abuse and sexual violence, improved understanding of when and how to intervene, and increased confidence that they would intervene, compared to both before the programme and the control group.

### Mentors in Violence Prevention

The Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) bystander programme has been piloted in three Scottish secondary schools following its success in the US<sup>13</sup>. During the programme, students are placed in groups (either single-sex or mixed-gender) and discuss scenarios of inappropriate, abusive or violent behaviour with a peer mentor. The process evaluation

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11 Fenton and Mott (2018), Williams and Neville (2017), Welsh Women’s Aid (2018).

12 Welsh Women’s Aid (2018).

13 Williams and Neville (2017).

of the implementation found self-reported changes among the participants, including:

- increased awareness of gender-based violence and knowledge of what is acceptable behaviour
- increased confidence in intervening and confidence that their peers would also intervene
- improved knowledge of how to intervene calmly, without violence

However, some female participants disputed the claims of male participants, who stated that their (male participants') attitudes and behaviour towards women had changed post-intervention. It was suggested that for successful future implementation, the programme needs to be fully embedded into school curricula, and the content should be continually updated to remain relevant.

## The Intervention Initiative

The Intervention Initiative was delivered to students in an English university<sup>14</sup>. The evaluation found significant improvement between pre-test and post-test results in attitudes and beliefs towards rape and domestic abuse. However, no evidence was found to suggest that the bystander programme increased bystander behaviour among the participants. The authors suggest that these results may have been affected by the limited follow-up time<sup>15</sup> and by the validity of the survey questions.

## Community settings

One evaluation of a bystander programme for the prevention of domestic violence and abuse also found bystander programmes to be effective at a **community level**<sup>16</sup>. The study took place across three local authority areas in the southwest of England in 2019 with

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14 Fenton and Mott (2018).

15 The follow-up questionnaire was conducted eight weeks after the programme. The authors therefore suggested that participants may not have had opportunities to conduct bystander behaviour.

16 Gainsbury, Fenton and Jones (2020).

a self-selected group of 68 participants. The participants, who either identified as a community member or undertook a community-facing role, rated the programme highly, and reported a statistically significant positive change, both post-programme and at the four-month follow-up, in the following:

- domestic violence myth acceptance (self and perception of peers<sup>17</sup>)
- bystander efficacy (confidence in intervening)
- bystander intent<sup>18</sup> (self and perception of peers)
- perceived knowledge of law relating to domestic violence and abuse

Effect size for these outcomes improved between the post-programme and four-month follow-up scores (apart from perceived peer myth acceptance). Minimal backlash was reported, in terms of increased domestic violence myth acceptance (3%) and bystander intentions (2%).

A change in bystander behaviours was also observed post-programme and at the four-month follow-up but was not statistically significant. The study identified limitations in its design, as the self-selecting sample resulted in predominantly female participants, many of whom had an occupational reason for attending. This, together with the lack of a control group, suggests that the results should be considered with caution.

## Mechanism – how do they work?

The review suggested a number of mechanisms by which bystander programmes might have an effect on sexual assault perpetration.

- Bystander programmes seek to sensitise young people to warning signs of sexual assault, create attitudinal changes that foster bystander responsibility for intervening (for example, creating

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<sup>17</sup> Perception of peer myth acceptance was not significant at the four-month follow-up (only self-myth acceptance was significant). Domestic violence myth acceptance was measured using the Domestic Violence Myth Acceptance Scale. For more information on measures used in this study, see Gainsbury, Fenton and Jones (2020).

<sup>18</sup> Bystander intent measures participants' attitudes and likelihood of helping others.

empathy for victims), and build the skills, knowledge of tactics and confidence they need to take action.

- By treating young people as potential allies in preventing sexual assault, bystander programmes have the capacity to be less threatening than traditional sexual assault prevention programmes, which tend to address young people as either potential perpetrators or victims of sexual violence.

The mechanism has been summarised as: ‘bystanders must notice the event and understand it as a problem requiring intervention, decide that they are part of the solution and so assume responsibility, and finally, have the capacity and skill set to intervene’<sup>19</sup>.

## Implementation – facilitators and barriers

Evidence has highlighted the following factors as facilitators for effective bystander programmes:

- a wide range of teaching techniques (for example, roleplay)<sup>20</sup>
- longer programmes that are cumulative, sequential and delivered
- conducted over time by well-trained facilitators<sup>21</sup>
- age-relevant and culturally relevant content, delivered at the right time<sup>22</sup>
- administered by well-trained staff<sup>23</sup>
- content that is underpinned by theory and continually monitored for unintended backlash effects, evaluated and refined<sup>24</sup>

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19 Fenton and others (2016).

20 Gainsbury, Fenton and Jones (2020).

21 Gainsbury, Fenton and Jones (2020).

22 Gainsbury, Fenton and Jones (2020), Fenton and others (2016).

23 Fenton and others (2016).

24 Fenton and others (2016).

While the systematic review did not find that the gender composition of groups had an impact on the effectiveness of the programmes, there is some evidence to suggest that mixed-sex groups are more effective than single-sex programmes.<sup>25</sup>

There is also mixed evidence around the success of a peer-led approach. Some research has highlighted the peer-led aspect as a strength, due to its ability to help create new social norms within schools<sup>26</sup>. However, the benefit of peer educators has been disputed by other research, due to the significant resources required to train and prepare them<sup>27</sup>.

## Conclusion

Bystander programmes have been demonstrated to be a promising method of improving bystander attitudes and intervention behaviour towards sexual assault. There are varying reported impacts on attitudes. While rape myth acceptance decreased, there was little or no evidence of an effect on gender attitudes, date rape attitudes and victim empathy. However, bystander programmes were found to have a beneficial effect on individuals' identification of incidents, knowledge of strategies and confidence in taking responsibility for intervening in sexual assault. The programmes reported in the systematic review also had a positive impact on engagement in bystander behaviour. No evidence was found to suggest that bystander programmes affect sexual assault perpetration among participants, although this may be challenging to measure. A number of bystander programmes have been piloted in the UK in recent years. However, due to limitations in the evaluations, there is currently only limited evidence to support the fact that benefits identified in other countries transfer to the UK context.

For successful implementation of these programmes, it is important that the content is continually refined and remains socio-culturally relevant, well-managed by trained members of staff, and both conducted and

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25 Miller (2020).

26 Katz and others (2011).

27 Cissner (2009); cited by Fenton and others (2016).

evaluated over a long period of time. Research has raised concerns that reported positive effects of the programmes fade over time. However, limited funding means that it is unusual for programmes to be longitudinally evaluated<sup>28</sup>. Therefore, further research is needed to investigate the longer-term impacts on bystander behaviour.

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