



ResearchLink

Addressing Teen Sexual Violence Through Prevention Education

There is a critical need for prevention education about rape and sexual assault for teenagers. Over the last 10 years, a professional collaboration to prevent sexual violence developed curricula for adolescents. Lessons are targeted for use in schools and afterschool settings to give youth accurate information and prevention skills. Many challenges exist for training professionals to use the material and for getting permission to bring it into classrooms and other youth programs. Yet evidence from using the curricula shows that when adolescents have accurate information, they have a better understanding of sexual violence.

The Case for Rape and Sexual Assault Prevention Education

Rape and sexual assault are devastating experiences.

- Most victims of rape and sexual assault are female (86%); most sex offenders are male (96.3%).
- Many women victims develop stress disorders, frequently experience guilt and fear, have trouble focusing, and avoid sexual activity.
- For male victims, the experience is compounded by taboo, homophobia, and lack of resources to help.
- For child victims, it can often impair development in ways that lead to lifetime difficulties.

The effects of rape and sexual assault reach much farther than just the victims.

- People close to the victim may feel anger, disbelief, fear, guilt, and helpless to comfort the victim.

- The financial cost of treating victims, trying rape cases, and rehabilitating offenders is billions of dollars annually.
- Sex offenders tend to repeat their crimes, and good assessment and treatment options are often not available.

The majority of sexually violent crimes are committed against adolescents; many offenders are youth themselves.

- 75% of sexual assault victims are between the ages of 12 and 24.
- Girls who are 16 to 19 years old are four times more likely to be attacked than any other group.
- Of those who commit sex crimes against minors, 36% are youths themselves.¹

Challenges to Preventing Sexual Violence

Inconsistent Definitions and Information

Talking about rape and sexual assault and reporting them effectively is a complex issue.

- The legal definitions differ by state. Furthermore, many states distinguish between rape and sexual assault and handle them differently.
- The state of Arizona does not define rape, but includes it in its definition of *sexual assault*: “intentionally or knowingly engaging in sexual intercourse or oral

¹Finkelhor, D., Ormrod, R., & Chaffin, M. (2009). *Juveniles who commit sex offenses against minors* (Juvenile Justice Bulletin, December). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice.



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sexual contact with any person without consent of such person.”²

- One reason for public concern over how sexual violence is handled in the criminal justice system is that people are unaware of the legal definitions.

Difficulties Reporting Rape

Inconsistent definitions of sexual violence can also make it hard for human service and governmental agencies to report rape cases.

- Agencies must follow strict confidentiality laws between patients and service providers. Thus, a hospital cannot report a rape if victims who get treated for their wounds at the hospital are unwilling to report it. In such cases, hospitals would record the wounds but would not label them the result of rape.
- Some states may have no clear methods for capturing rape reports that victims make informally to family members, friends, or therapists.
- Some states may not have effective methods for tracking the progress of sex offense cases through the criminal justice system. For example, reporting sex crimes to the FBI is not mandatory, so not all law enforcement agencies report them.
- Also, counties may not have funding for personnel to input and maintain data. For many reasons, many sexually violent crimes may go unreported.
- During 2007, Arizona law enforcement agencies received 1,856 reports of forcible rape; however, arrests of only 215 people were made in connection with the crimes.³ The same year, 517 charges of sexual assault were filed, but there were only 87 convictions.

Best Approaches to Preventing Sexual Violence

What then is the best approach to prevent sexual violence? Rape and sexual assault are learned behaviors and don't have to be “givens.” Communities can work toward a zero tolerance for rape, sexual assault, and child sexual abuse. Methods to reduce tolerance for rape include:

- Education
- A strong criminal justice response
- Treatment and confinement for offenders
- Treatment and support resources for victims

²Arizona Revised Statutes (2007). Retrieved from <http://www.azleg.state.az.us/FormatDocument.asp?inDoc=/ars/13/01406.htm>

³Arizona Department of Health Services. (2009). Sexual violence in Arizona (Rape Prevention and Education Program Fact Sheet). Retrieved from http://azrapeprevention.org/sites/azrapeprevention.org/files/Arizonafactsheet_09.pdf

The CARE initiative represents one promising model for schools and communities eager to address sexual violence (see “Communities Against Rape Initiative”). CARE recognizes that the decision to include sexual violence prevention information in a school's curriculum is locally driven. Factors such as community values and policies often mean that many groups must be included in the decision-making process; this means that reaching decisions may take longer. To help this process, CARE uses many delivery methods to match issues and concerns unique to each community and school, including:

- Agency speakers
- Medical personnel
- Teen theater groups
- Student assemblies
- Panel discussions
- Commercially produced materials

CARE's goal is to expose every child to prevention information multiple times through multiple venues; thus it uses both in- and out-of-school curriculum. Unfortunately, a single lesson often has little effect on preventing sexual violence; a series of lessons that can be easily copied in many classrooms is generally more effective. Educators and social service workers dedicated to helping teenagers deal with issues of violence need reliable programs.



Communities Against Rape Initiative (CARE)

CARE is a statewide collaboration, developed in Indiana, to help prevent sexual assault and rape, particularly among youth. Since 1998, it has helped develop and carry out many violence-prevention programs and services, including:

- Forming the CARE Commission to prepare a report to the governor
- Developing data collection methods to measure the prevalence of rape and sexual assault in Indiana
- Developing in- and out-of-school prevention curricula
- Giving mini-grants to colleges and universities to conduct sexual assault prevention activities
- Initiating a statewide media campaign
- Beginning a statewide series of youth speak-outs and activities
- Providing professional training in prevention for sexual assault service providers



Findings from a Rape Myth Study

A community-based program developed by CARE shows promise for reducing factors related to sexual violence. Project Equality is a rape and sexual assault prevention curriculum for grades 7-9 and 10-12. *Its unique approach focuses not only on helping potential victims reduce their risk; it also aims to help potential offenders and the general public to learn equality and respect for others.* Based on experiential learning, the activities:

- Help youth learn facts and examine gender roles and relationships in developmentally appropriate ways
- Become aware of harmful myths that contribute to rape and sexual assault
- Learn ways to build positive relationships and break negative ones

The Danger of Rape Myths

Is Project Equality effective in reducing the number and level of rape myths that middle school students endorse? This question guided a study of 611 youth in grades 7-9 who participated in the Project Equality curriculum. Students were asked before and after the intervention about the degree to which they accepted 17 rape-related myths (see “What Are Rape Myths?”).

Findings:

- In the pre-test, boys believed more myths than girls.
- In the post-test, the gap between boys and girls was still there. However, both boys and girls believed much fewer rape myths than they did before the intervention.
- In summary, Project Equality was effective in reducing the number of rape myths believed by both boys and girls.



What are Rape Myths?

Rape myths are attitudes and beliefs that are largely false but widely held. These myths are used to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women. They are based on the false belief that rape is driven by passion rather than power and control.

Examples of rape myths include:

- “Women tend to make too big of a deal about rape.”
- “If a woman doesn’t fight back, you can’t really call it rape.”
- “It is usually only women who dress sexy who are raped.”
- “If the rapist doesn’t have a weapon, you can’t call it rape.”
- “Rape is unlikely to happen in a woman’s own neighborhood.”
- “Men don’t usually mean to force sex on a woman, but sometimes they get carried away.”
- “A woman dressed in sexy clothes should not be surprised if a man tries to force her to have sex.”
- “Rape happens when a man’s sex drive is out of control.”
- “A lot of women lead men on and then they blame rape on the man.”
- “If a woman is raped when she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of control.”

In contrast to these myths, some facts about rape include:

- Men are more likely than women to believe in rape myths.
- Men who believe strongly in rape myths are more likely to hold negative attitudes toward women. They are also more likely to commit rape.
- Women who believe strongly in rape myths are more likely to hold negative attitudes toward feminism. They also report more hostility toward men.
- People who accept rape myths are more likely to accept interpersonal and domestic violence.



Implications

- Prevention efforts for youth need to begin at the elementary school level. By the time youth reach junior high and high school, they have already developed their values and morals. They are also already exposed to persistent myths about rape.
- Educators and social service workers need to be aware of differences between boys and girls in rape myth beliefs. They need to design curricula that examine gender roles, explore behaviors and relationships, and encourage self-reflection.
- Legal, health, and community professionals must work to improve the process of reporting and punishing sexual violence crimes. Citizens, too, must know their state's legal definitions of rape and sexual assault to improve how these cases are handled. Media campaigns that present accurate definitions about sexual violence could help this effort.

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This *ResearchLink* summarizes three reports:

(1) Communities Against Rape Commission (CARE). (1998). *The status of rape and sexual assault in Indiana: Report to the governor*. Indianapolis, IN: Indiana State Department of Health.

(2) Pilat, M. (2001). CARE-ing models of sexual assault prevention education programs. *NOAPPP Network (Fall)*, 13-14.

(3) Dyehouse, M., & Pilat, M. (under review). Prevalence of rape myths among middle school students across gender and socioeconomic background. *Journal of Youth Development*.

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