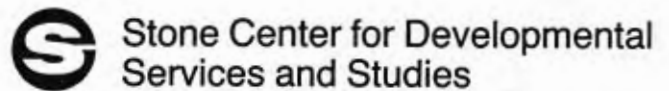


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Invited Paper:

A Social Change Approach to the Prevention of Sexual Violence toward Women

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About the Authors

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Ideas presented in this paper were developed as part of the authors' work on Community Action Strategies to Stop Rape, a rape prevention project in Columbus, Ohio.

Abstract

Little research has been done on the prevention of sexual violence against women because conceptual confusion about a model for analyzing violence hinders progress. Current prevention programs, rooted in offender control and victim control strategies, do not transcend a view of assault as an individual violent crime. Prevention of sexual violence against women requires analyzing the place of violence against women in society and approaching prevention as a problem of systems change. The goal of primary prevention programs is the pursuit of social justice for women by deinstitutionalizing sexual violence and institutionalizing the principle of respect for persons. This principle can be integrated into law, public policy, and social action programs that affirm women's strength and self-control as individuals and as a cohesive class of people.

Most research on sexual violence is concerned with treatment of victims or offenders, not with prevention. The paucity of research in prevention can be explained by both the lack of a clear conceptual framework for the prevention of sexual violence and by problems in translating prevention concepts into practical strategies and programs. We shall (1) discuss the confusion surrounding the concept of prevention and how our understanding of prevention promotes or hinders the development of effective prevention programs; (2) suggest changes in the conceptualization of sexual violence; (3) present a rationale for a social change approach to prevention accompanied by strategies and tactics for use in the field.

Current public policy on prevention

Primary prevention, as developed in the fields of public health and mental health, encompasses activities that (a) identify a hazard which constitutes a risk for a particular population, then (b) reduce the risk by modifying or eliminating the hazard and by providing safeguards so that the people exposed to the hazard can cope with it successfully. Primary prevention strategies fall under two categories: (1) strengthening individual capacities and/or

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decreasing individual vulnerabilities; and (2) making environmental modifications through planned social change. A primary prevention program focuses on an entire at-risk population through a community-wide approach.^{1,2,3}

Strategies used to prevent sexual violence generally fall short of *primary prevention*. Current strategies focus on the interaction between offender and victim in each sexually violent event instead of on an analysis of the *causes and the function of sexual violence in our society*. Because of this focus, prevention efforts have been based on control of one party or the other—offender or victim.^{4,5}

Offender control

Sexual offender control techniques rely on three strategies: deterrence, incapacitation and rehabilitation.⁶ Deterrence of sexual assault has been attempted through early detection and tracking or treatment of boys likely to become rapists^{7,8} and through attempts to increase arrests and convictions.^{9,10} Increased convictions which result in incarceration are intended to incapacitate rapists by isolating them from society. Rehabilitation through offender treatment programs is supposed to lower recidivism, although success rates vary.^{11,12,13} A combination of these last two techniques has been tried, primarily in Europe, where several countries have offered either castration^{14,15,16} or chemotherapy to reduce testosterone in career rapists and child molesters.^{17,18,19,20,21}

In an overview of research, Wolfgang commented that the weight of empirical evidence indicates that no current preventive, deterrent, or rehabilitative schemes have reduced violent crime.²² Not only is there reason for skepticism about the effectiveness of sexual offender control strategies, but also some interventions—such as early detection and labelling of potential offenders and castration—raise grave ethical issues.

While conviction rates vary within the criminal justice system, sexual assault is a crime in which conviction rates are low. Estimates place the percentage of rapists identified, arrested, and subsequently convicted at less than 20 percent.^{23,24,25,26,27} Such low conviction rates mean that very few offenders can be exposed to treatment programs.

Even if the mental health and criminal justice systems could be improved to provide increased conviction and effective rehabilitation, it is likely that we would identify, detain, and treat only a small proportion of the offenders or potential offenders. We would not eliminate sexual violence. We still must find ways of intervening to alter the conditions in our communities that continue to *produce* offenders.

With estimates of women's risk ranging from 1 in

3 for spouse abuse,^{28,29} to 1 in 5 for child molestation,³⁰ to 1 in 8 for rape,^{31,32,33} it is reasonable to believe that learning to be sexually violent is normative for men in our society and that it will not be possible to isolate a static group of offenders. Sexual violence is rooted in the current social structure and in a culture supportive of rape.^{34,35,36} Individual characteristics that may predispose someone to commit sexual violence are themselves a product of the social structure which is the context for learning violence. It is also reasonable to believe that if violent behavior is learned, it can be reduced through relearning. However, it is important to recognize that programs devoted to relearning presuppose the initial learning and are, therefore, remedial—falling short of the optimal prevention solution. *We need a social order in which men do not learn to be sexually violent toward women.*

Victim control

Victim control, the second strategy currently in use to prevent sexual violence, is more frequently confused with primary prevention than is offender control. The techniques involve educating potential victims about a variety of safety precautions and a variety of situations to avoid—for example, those in which the probability of attack is presumed to be high. These strategies, variously referred to as "victim avoidance" or "opportunity reduction," indicate a traditional approach to women's victimization.

For generations, society has tried to protect women from sexual assault by controlling our activities. But this mode of protection has gone far beyond reasonable precautions and has contributed to women's oppression. Sanctions on women's conduct, dress, and activities have been incorporated into social and sexual norms so that women's morality has been judged by obedience to the proscriptions.

Although avoidance advocates often claim that women are simply cautioned to stay out of dangerous situations and exercise common sense, there is a tendency to assume that the woman who does not take avoidance action has caused, or at least contributed to, her assault. This shifts the responsibility for attack from the offender to the victim. Obviously, an approach which burdens the victim with the blame for the attack should be unacceptable. Yet the approach is still widespread. The invidious effect of the belief in victim precipitation undermines women's right to choose freedom and reinforces a sense of shame and guilt about "provocation."

As crime rates have risen in the last decade, so have reiterations of the protective controls on women. Police in many cities sponsor programs for avoiding sexual assault in which the public is exposed to