Together, We Can Build Connected Communities

Each of us is a part of one or more communities, often many, and these communities shape our experiences in life. By creating a better-connected community, we can help reduce the likelihood of sexual abuse, assault, and harassment. A community is any space where people gather, including neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, places of worship, online spaces, and many more. Everyone in a community can play a role in preventing sexual violence by building a more connected, respectful, and inclusive community.

What is sexual violence?

Sexual violence is any unwanted sexual contact and includes words or actions of a sexual nature against a person's will. A person who commits abuse may use force, threats, manipulation, or coercion. Over 53% of women and over 29% of men have reported experiencing contact sexual violence (Chen et al., 2023) and 47% of all transgender people have experienced sexual assault at least once in their lifetime (James et al., 2016). Sexual abuse, harassment, and assault can have short- and- long-term physical, emotional, and psychological effects on a person's well-being and impact an entire community (Prevention Institute & National Sexual Violence Resource Center [NSVRC], 2021).

The good news is that we know what contributes to sexual violence and what helps prevent it. Research shows that connected communities with equitable access to educational,

economic, and job opportunities are safer (NSVRC, 2019). Strong social support and access to resources for mental health and substance abuse also promote the safety and well-being of the entire community. The environment around us, everything from sidewalks to bike lanes and green spaces, plays a role in preventing sexual violence (Prevention Institute & NSVRC, 2021).

To stop sexual assault and other forms of abuse before they start, we need to address the bigger picture in which they occur. **The main forces behind sexual violence are not individual actions but the ways society has been shaped by systems of oppression, attitudes, and norms that allow the unequal treatment of certain groups over others.**

Building Connected Communities is more than changing individual behaviors.

Most of us want to make a difference in the lives of others and do our part to build communities where everyone has their needs met and can thrive. The challenge is that, for a very long time, our society has sent a harmful message that it is an individual's responsibility to make the "right" choices to keep themselves safe. This very idea creates a baseline for victim-blaming attitudes that unfairly place the responsibility on survivors (NSVRC, 2017). When we think of prevention as not just protecting individuals but promoting the safety and well-being of everyone, we unlock the potential for our communities and society to change.

To draw a comparison, safe and clean drinking water is a resource many of us take for granted. It's likely that in your community, you personally did not have to decide whether you wanted clean water to drink. It's probably not the case that you, as an individual, must filter or treat your water to clean it. Many of us live in places with a system to treat and clean water because water is vital to the health and safety of the entire community. It's not simply up to individuals to keep their water safe. Just as putting systems in place necessary for the entire community to have access to clean drinking water is a broader priority, preventing sexual abuse, assault, and harassment and ensuring safer communities for all also need to be a priority.

To stop sexual assault and other forms of abuse before they start, our efforts need to go beyond changing individuals.

There are many actions each of us can take as individuals to learn more about sexual violence, show our support for survivors, and treat others with respect. We can even share those beliefs and model those actions in our close relationships with partners, peers, family, and others. We can go out and teach others important information about the prevalence

of sexual violence, how to ask for consent and respect the answer, and how to be proactive bystanders who get involved when they see or hear something inappropriate and harmful. These are all meaningful things we can do, but since they focus only on changing individuals or maybe the relationships of those individuals, they don't necessarily reach the level of changing an entire community or society.

> **When we change our communities to be more inclusive and equitable for people of all gender identities and expressions, races and ethnic backgrounds, ages, faiths, and abilities, we are better able to protect everyone within those communities against the risk of sexual violence.**

Community-level prevention means making changes to larger-level factors and conditions to reduce the likelihood that people will perpetrate sexual violence. These broader conditions that can impact an entire community include the physical environment and surroundings, predominant community attitudes, norms, standards, and policies and rules such as a code of conduct. Community-level prevention refers to more than just communities of people within a town — it can also mean workplaces, campuses, organizations, or any space (online or otherwise) with their own policies, rules, and norms that impact others (NSVRC, 2021).

What does community-level prevention look like?

Community-level prevention goes beyond just changing individual community members; it aims to cement changes and policies that will impact every community member whether or not they get involved in the effort. Understanding the differences between prevention efforts focused on changing individuals and those focused on changing communities can help us understand the importance of community-level prevention.

When prevention efforts focus on changing individuals: Imagine there's a group who is passionate about consent in your local school. They may decide to hold a schoolwide event for Sexual Assault Awareness Month (SAAM) that is promoted with posters and signs. Unfortunately, if most students don't attend the event, or if only some students notice and read the signs, it's hard for this effort to have a long-term impact that will result in lasting change for the entire school community.

When prevention efforts focus on the community-level: If this same group of students notices a school dress code that unfairly targets Black students, girls, and LGBTQ+ students and involves both students and parents in updating the school district-wide policy – they are making a difference that will have a lasting impact to make the school district more equitable. Equitable policies also set a tone for the values that the school community is built on and send a message that biased attitudes and behaviors will not be tolerated on a policy level or an individual level.

At the center of Building Connected Communities is ensuring our communities are inclusive and equitable.
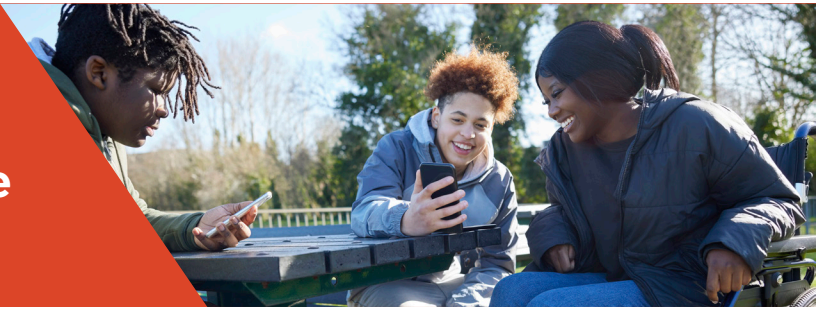
What is equity?

Equity is different from equality. Many of us were taught that it's only fair to treat everyone the same and that everyone should have the same opportunities. However, equality falls short because every individual and community has different needs and resources. Equity considers that individuals and communities have different needs based on lived experiences of oppression and/or privilege. Different needs call for different types or amounts of resources and access (National Resource Center on Domestic Violence [NRCDV] & [NSVRC], 2021).

Specifically, Building Connected Communities brings us closer to the goal of health equity. **Health equity** means that everyone, no matter their situation, has a chance to achieve their best possible health, creating a fair and just opportunity for all to reach their highest level of well-being (Prevention Institute & NSVRC, 2021).

Addressing factors such as education, income, employment, community safety, and social support is crucial to improving the conditions in which we live, learn, work, and play. In a connected community, we can look out for one another and make choices to promote the health, safety, and well-being of all.

Additional Resources

We Can Stop Sexual Assault, Harassment, and Abuse Before They Happen: https://www.nsvrc.org/we-can-stop-sexual-assault-harassment-and-abuse-they-happen

Risk and Protective Factors: https://www.nsvrc.org/risk-and-protective-factors

The Differences Between Equity And Equality – Things to Know: The Differences between Equity and Equality (nsvrc.org)

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