



Sexual Assault
DEMONSTRATION INITIATIVE
Enhancing Sexual Assault Services



IT MATTERS!

HOW DEFINING SEXUAL VIOLENCE DEFINES ADVOCACY PROGRAMS

How advocacy programs view and define sexual violence shapes their identity. It also impacts the concrete ways they offer services and speak to the community. If we have a narrow definition, we only see survivors who fit within it. By widening our view of sexual violence, we can open our doors to a wider diversity of survivors.

One narrowing of advocacy services is the belief that sexual violence is experienced in similar ways as domestic violence, and therefore should be addressed in the same way. This can lead advocates to offer the same options to every survivor. However, the needs of survivors of sexual violence are not the same as those of domestic violence. We have a responsibility to tailor our response to the unique lived experiences of each survivor. This isn't about putting people in categories, but building the skills and knowledge needed for a holistic and individual response to all the survivors in our communities.




Our knowledge starts with understanding that sexual violence has its roots in oppression, as do domestic and dating violence, and stalking. All of these exist because of oppression: racism, sexism and rape culture, classism, homophobia and transmisogyny, ableism, among others. Oppression shapes what is recognized as violence, how survivors are targeted, the healing and justice options available, and how those who commit violence are treated and held accountable. All survivors benefit when advocates recognize both the shared roots of domestic and sexual violence and the differences in the needs of survivors.

Sexual violence is a range of sexualized behaviors, both contact and non-contact [National Sexual Violence Resource Center [NSVRC], n.d.]. Some examples include sending unsolicited sexual images, inappropriate touch during medical treatment, masturbating in front of a child, and groping someone's butt in the locker room. Whether each act is considered criminal or not, what matters to advocates is the impact on the survivor's wellbeing. To use sexual behavior to harm another is a profound violation. One of the important differences between sexual violence and domestic/dating violence is that sexual violence is not defined by a type of relationship but by the unwanted behavior.

ANYONE CAN COMMIT SEXUAL VIOLENCE

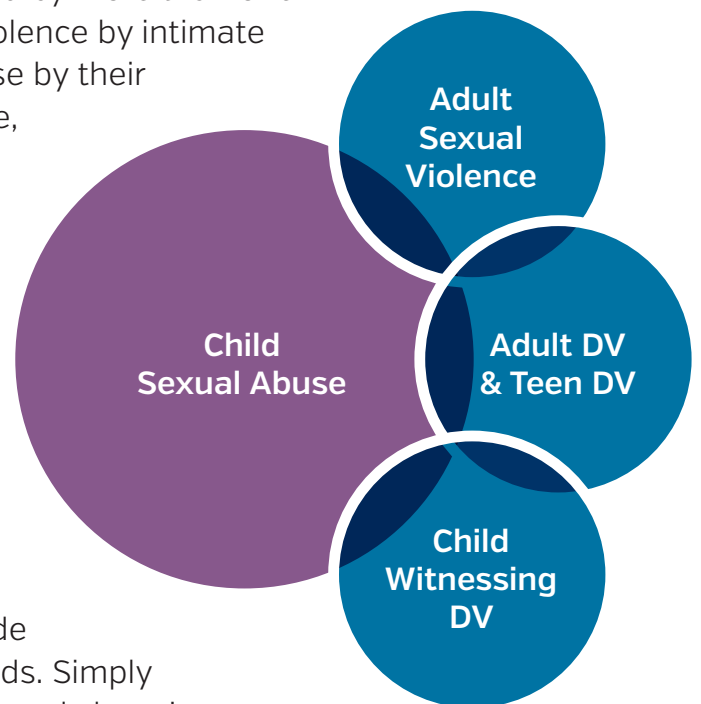




The majority of those who commit sexual violence choose to harm someone close to them: 45.4% of women have been sexually assaulted by a current or former intimate partner and 46.7% by an acquaintance [Breiding, Chen, & Black, 2014]. Many people also experience sexual violence from a family member, colleague, teacher, or other person of authority. And yet all these different relationships have different meanings and effects on survivors' experiences and healing. The relationship in which sexual violence is done affects survivors' emotional healing, access to justice and safety, and the support they receive from their community.

Many people experience sexual violence and other interpersonal violence more than once in their lifetimes [Wilkins, Tsao, Hertz, Davis, & Klevens, 2014], and by more than one person. Many survivors of sexual violence by intimate partners have also endured sexual abuse by their parents or other family members, for example, and many children who witness domestic violence are also sexually abused by other adults in their lives. This simple graphic at right shows just some of the many overlapping experiences.

While it's vital for advocates to understand the spectrum of sexual violence, it is not advocates' role to define each survivor's experience. Only the survivor can do that. Advocates can use our knowledge of sexual violence and how it affects survivors to provide appropriate support based on each one's needs. Simply by widening our definitions of sexual violence and changing the assumptions we hold about survivors and our community, we can shift our organizational identity and response in profound ways. When advocacy programs see the full spectrum of sexual violence, they can serve each unique survivor.



REFLECTIONS FOR PRACTICE

ALEX WAS SEXUALLY ABUSED ON A SECOND DATE...

- How might this affect Alex's beliefs about dating and intimacy?
- Is Alex likely to think of this as dating violence? Why or why not?
- What concerns might Alex have about safety?

DANNY EXPERIENCED SEXUAL VIOLENCE BY AN UNCLE A LONG TIME AGO...

- How might this affect Danny's beliefs about family and intimacy?
- What can advocacy offer Danny?
- What justice options might be available to Danny?

EJ WAS GROPED BY A BUSINESS CLIENT DURING A LUNCH MEETING LAST WEEK...

- What can advocacy offer EJ?
- What concerns might EJ have about safety?
- Is EJ likely to need support related to family and intimacy? Why or why not?



REFERENCES

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FURTHER READINGS

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