**Advancing Situational and Developmental Approaches To Prevent Sexual Violence**

*Growing evidence supports using situational and developmental crime prevention approaches to complement traditional law enforcement and criminal justice interventions to combat sexual violence.*

By Joan Tabachnick

Awareness about sexual violence has grown over time, sparked in part by the passage of the Violence Against Women Act in 1994 and continuing more recently as victims share their stories and garner more media and public attention. Funding for programs to protect victims and hold individuals accountable for their crimes has also increased during this same timeframe.[[1]](#endnote-2) However, focus on how to *prevent* sexual violence has lagged.

Research demonstrates that sexual abuse and assault can have lifelong impacts on the emotional and physical well-being of the victim and their family,[[2]](#endnote-3) and justice is often elusive.[[3]](#endnote-4) There is also a substantial financial cost. Research estimates that the lifetime cost of rape is $122,461 per individual harmed. This equates to a population economic burden of almost $3.1 trillion, based on estimates that more than 25 million U.S. adults have been victims of rape.[[4]](#endnote-5) Investments in prevention could not only increase public safety but could also realize significant cost savings.[[5]](#endnote-6)

Efforts to prevent sexual violence generally consist of three approaches: primary, secondary, and tertiary. Primary approaches aim to prevent individuals from initially committing a crime and causing harm or engaging in a specific behavior. They focus on reducing the opportunity to commit crimes in certain situations and places.[[6]](#endnote-7) Secondary prevention includes immediate responses to a crime, and tertiary prevention includes long-term responses to those who have committed crimes.[[7]](#endnote-8) Criminal justice has traditionally relied on secondary and tertiary prevention strategies, but primary prevention has gained traction more recently.

Crime prevention must challenge the assumption that a given strategy will work equally well for various individuals committing disparate crimes. Crime is diverse and complex, and different strategies are needed depending on the type of crime, the person who commits the crime, and the context of the crime. Given this diversity, traditional law enforcement and criminal justice approaches cannot be the only strategies to safeguard communities.[[8]](#endnote-9) Primary prevention strategies are useful for crime prevention but cannot stop crime alone.[[9]](#endnote-10) Comprehensive crime prevention should include both strategies to prevent criminal behavior and effective responses after crimes have occurred. Ideally, prevention and response strategies need an individualized approach focused on the types of crimes, the people who commit these crimes, and the communities in which they occur.

Brandon Welsh and David Farrington describe two prevention concepts that have emerged:

* **Situational crime prevention** recognizes that many crimes are contextual or opportunistic in nature.[[10]](#endnote-11) The goal is to decrease the opportunities for a crime through systemic (rather than individual) strategies. In the context of sexual assault, situational crime prevention could be helpful in examining “the immediate behavioral setting to identify factors that encourage or permit sexual abuse.”[[11]](#endnote-12)
* **Developmental crime prevention** aims to prevent the development of criminal behaviors in individuals, particularly children and youth.[[12]](#endnote-13) The approach focuses on known risk and protective factors related to sexual abuse perpetration for individuals in a particular context, such as a family or school.

Criminal justice practitioners have used both approaches to prevent sexual violence. This article discusses recent research applying situational and developmental crime prevention and describes promising programs that use these frameworks to prevent sexual violence. (See sidebar, “The SMART Office Invests in Situational and Developmental Crime Prevention.”)

**SITUATIONAL CRIME PREVENTION**

Situational crime prevention involves examining the various situations — conditions, locations, circumstances, or policies — associated with specific criminal opportunities. The theory, which holds that most crime is opportunistic, puts forth that people can be deterred from criminal activity by increasing their perception of the difficulty of execution and the risk of apprehension and reducing the perceived rewards associated with the crime.

Instead of focusing on individuals, situational crime prevention looks at the surrounding environments — social, cultural, and physical. It assumes that the immediate environment is more than a passive backdrop but plays a fundamental role in shaping behaviors.[[13]](#endnote-14) For example, some situational crime prevention techniques specific to preventing sexual assault at colleges and universities include:

* Removing or limiting access to potential targets by offering free transportation on college and university campuses after dark.
* Controlling disinhibitors of violence (for example, limiting alcohol sales near campuses or increasing alcohol prices).
* Increasing natural and formal surveillance (for example, ensuring streets are well-lit and installing clearly visible security cameras).
* Raising public awareness through posters and educational programs.

Situational crime prevention is used in youth organizations, schools, and sports organizations to prevent sexual violence.[[14]](#endnote-15) In 2007, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released guidance for youth-serving organizations on policies and procedures to prevent child sexual abuse.[[15]](#endnote-16) The guidance went beyond individual behaviors to include organizational and community responsibility. Limited but promising research has shown that structural, environmental, and policy strategies have the potential to significantly reduce sexual violence perpetration in youth-serving organizations.[[16]](#endnote-17) By focusing on environments, policies, and high-risk situations, situational prevention can mitigate the factors that encourage (or fail to inhibit) sexual violence. In fact, John Eck and Rob Guerette found that situational strategies were effective in preventing crime in recreational settings.[[17]](#endnote-18) These results suggest the benefits of wider situational crime prevention.

Keith Kaufman and colleagues discovered that situational prevention is relevant for organizations that work with children, adolescents, and young adults — where the actions and responses by peers and adults have the most influence.[[18]](#endnote-19) For example, when the Boys & Girls Clubs of America intended to identify sexual abuse risks specifically in a youth-serving organizational setting, clubs using the situational prevention approach were able to identify seven to 10 times more environmental risks than control clubs doing business as usual.[[19]](#endnote-20)

Another example is Shifting Boundaries,[[20]](#endnote-21) a school-based dating violence prevention program[[21]](#endnote-22) that has been designated as a promising evidence-based practice.[[22]](#endnote-23) In the Shifting Boundaries program, 30 middle schools in New York City randomly received one of four interventions:

* A six-session curriculum focused on gender roles, healthy relationships, and the consequences of perpetration.
* A building-level intervention that included temporary school-based restraining orders[[23]](#endnote-24) and increased levels of faculty and security presence.
* Both the curriculum and building-level interventions.
* No intervention at all.

For the building-level intervention, students identified and mapped safe and unsafe areas of the school and grounds. Schools placed more faculty and security in the unsafe areas and used posters to increase awareness and information about reporting. The group with only the building-level intervention had the best results, with a 47% reduction in peer physical and sexual violence in the six months following the intervention.[[24]](#endnote-25)

Many college and university intervention programs have focused on affecting individual attitudes. According to one meta-analysis, fewer than 10% of school- or college-based programs examine organizational norms or policies that may hold more promise.[[25]](#endnote-26) Some institutions of higher education have recently adopted situational prevention approaches[[26]](#endnote-27) that explore situational factors, such as risky situations, routine activities that may heighten risk, environmental factors, and policy limitations.[[27]](#endnote-28) For example, alcohol use is a risk factor for sexual misconduct and victimization. Researchers examined the impact of alcohol policies on behavior, demonstrating that pricing, sale time, outlet density, barroom management, and policies banning alcohol on campus can limit access to alcohol.[[28]](#endnote-29) However, despite the evidence that a situational approach to prevention is effective, such programs remain rare on campuses.[[29]](#endnote-30)

Sports organizations have also used the situational prevention approach. Following high-profile cases of sexual abuse in U.S. Olympic sports, the U.S. Center for SafeSport was established to develop abuse prevention policies and resources. [[30]](#endnote-31) SafeSport’s efforts include applying a situational prevention approach to this highly competitive sports context[[31]](#endnote-32) with the goal of tailoring it to the culture, practices, and needs of elite athletes. From May 2019 to March 2021, the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking (SMART) funded a project in which 20 Olympic, Paralympic, and younger elite development teams used the sport situational prevention approach.[[32]](#endnote-33) The project included surveying 177 athletes, 89 sports coaches and staff, and 75 athletes’ parents. An evaluation found that all three stakeholder groups reported high levels of satisfaction with the program, on average, across 15 different indicators (satisfaction indicators included: (1) satisfied that “important risks were brought up” during the risk brainstorming focus group with key stakeholders; (2) satisfied with the “group of people who participated” in the risk brainstorming focus group; and (3) overall a “good use of time”).[[33]](#endnote-34) It resulted in development of the “SSPA Implementation Manual,” available free of charge to guide sports organizations through the situational prevention approach.[[34]](#endnote-35)

Finally, research demonstrates that changing an individual’s environment — reducing triggers and increasing obstacles — can also affect sexual recidivism. For example, an approach called Circles of Support and Accountability(CoSA) is based on the premise that even a high-risk individual who has committed sexual offenses is less likely to reoffend if they have a different and more watchful community around them.[[35]](#endnote-36) CoSA provides trained volunteers to help with adjustment issues; housing, employment, or other challenges; and positive community engagement.

**DEVELOPMENTAL CRIME PREVENTION**

Developmental crime prevention aims to stop the development of problematic behaviors in children or adolescents through early interventions and responses to risk factors and behaviors.[[36]](#endnote-37) Children in earlier stages of life are more receptive to change — positive and negative. Because sexually problematic behaviors (particularly peer-to-peer[[37]](#endnote-38)) often start in adolescence, it is important to work with children before the onset of such behaviors.[[38]](#endnote-39)

In a 2014 meta-analysis of several large evaluations of sexual violence prevention covering a range of ages, researchers identified two promising primary sexual violence interventions.[[39]](#endnote-40) These two strategies — Safe Dates and Shifting Boundaries — focused on middle and high school youth, and outcome evaluations found both to be effective in reducing sexually violent behaviors. Green Dot, a program for high school students not included in the meta-analysis, also demonstrated effectiveness in reducing sexual violence based on rigorous evaluation.[[40]](#endnote-41)

Many treatment interventions have moved away from a one-size-fits-all approach, recognizing that developmental and cognitive growth are different for each child and that individualized interventions can be most effective. Assessment tools offer an opportunity to better understand each individual. They measure risk for problematic sexual behaviors and exposure to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)[[41]](#endnote-42) — such as substance use, mental health issues, and other factors known to be related to causing harm — to develop targeted interventions. Risk and protective factors for adult sexual offending are well-established[[42]](#endnote-43) and researchers have also identified dynamic risk and protective factors associated with adolescent sexual reoffending. Different ages call for different interventions, and best practices include family, community, and cultural risk factors as well as individual ones.[[43]](#endnote-44) Robert Prentky and colleagues developed a dynamic *intervention needs and progress scale* to identify risks relevant to the adolescent’s needs, along with creating individualized intervention plans and monitoring corresponding progress.[[44]](#endnote-45)

Prevention is more likely to produce positive results if it focuses on more than one risk factor, lasts for a relatively long time (e.g., at least one year), and begins before adolescence.[[45]](#endnote-46) But research suggests that even short-term, developmentally appropriate interventions can reduce sexually problematic behaviors in both children and adolescents.[[46]](#endnote-47) The engagement of a child’s caregivers is essential to the intervention’s success.[[47]](#endnote-48)

Another approach that reduces families’ risk factors and increases protective factors involves shoring up parenting skills. A study of ACEs connected various adverse childhood experiences to lifelong physical health, mental health, and social problems.[[48]](#endnote-49) Parenting skill interventions have successfully addressed ACEs by reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors, likely decreasing later problematic sexual behaviors. For example, the Home Visiting model offers services and support to pregnant women and those with young children who have various risk factors.[[49]](#endnote-50) Evaluations found a statistically significant impact in several areas, including reductions in child maltreatment, juvenile delinquency, family violence, and crime.[[50]](#endnote-51)

Recognizing the value of early intervention, the National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth (NCSBY) developed the Problematic Sexual Behavior – Cognitive-Behavior Therapy model. This family-oriented cognitive behavior intervention aims to eliminate problematic sexual behaviors, improve prosocial behaviors, and enhance parenting skills. One study of 135 children ages 5-12 analyzed NCSBY’s cognitive behavior and play therapy approaches. A 10-year follow-up study showed child protective services and law enforcement reported low rates (2-3%) of sexual offenses for the group that received cognitive behavior therapy compared to the children randomized into an alternative play therapy group, who had significantly higher rates of problematic sexual behaviors (10%).[[51]](#endnote-52)

**LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH**

Although funding and programming for sexual violence prevention have increased over time, critical gaps and challenges remain.[[52]](#endnote-53) The number of individual studies of sexual violence prevention programs has grown, but researchers have noted difficulties in comparing these studies or conducting meta-analyses because there are no widely accepted definitions of sexual misconduct or sexual violence. The lack of consistent use of research tools, methods, and sampling and the absence of consistent success metrics further exacerbate the problem. For example, many prevention programs evaluate success based on increasing knowledge or changing participants’ attitudes pre- and post-test, while others measure significant behavior change.[[53]](#endnote-54) Future research should measure behavior to further enhance the knowledge base.

In addition, most prevention programs are brief, one-time educational programs that focus on changing participants’ knowledge or attitudes. Unfortunately, none of these one-time programs have been proven effective in reducing sexually violent behaviors.[[54]](#endnote-55) Research shows that the most effective prevention programs are comprehensive, rather than a single education session. But funding can be a barrier. Evaluating comprehensive approaches can be expensive because researchers must implement complex longitudinal research designs to adequately isolate and understand the mechanisms by which programs work.

**CONCLUSION**

Growing evidence supports using situational and developmental crime prevention to complement traditional law enforcement and criminal justice interventions. Along with existing criminal justice and public health strategies — such as prosecution, treatment, educational campaigns, training, and public policy initiatives — these approaches constitute a comprehensive prevention and response model.

More recently, situational and developmental crime prevention approaches have shown promise with sexual violence prevention. But more rigorous evaluation is needed. Given the promising results, these strategies have the potential to be cost-effective for crime prevention or even ultimately reduce the costs for law enforcement interventions, arrests, and prosecution — while improving outcomes for individuals and increasing public safety.

**Sidebar**

**The SMART Office Invests in Situational and Developmental Crime Prevention**

The U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking (SMART)[[55]](#endnote-56) is the only federal office with a sole focus on those who have committed a sexual crime. It provides information about differences in the types of sexual offenses, the people who commit those crimes, and tactics to help develop primary prevention strategies.[[56]](#endnote-57)

The SMART Office has funded initiatives to address both situational and developmental crime prevention strategies. Its investment in situational prevention on college and university campuses was the approach’s first comprehensive application within higher education.[[57]](#endnote-58) Following that success, the U.S. Center for SafeSport used the same approach. In conjunction with the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the SMART Office’s investments in developmental prevention include the funding of programs developed by the National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth for children ages 5-12. The National Children’s Alliance and child advocacy centers working with sexually abused children delivered the programs. Each of these initiatives focused on a crucial missing element of preventing sexual abuse, sexual assault, and violence.

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**Notes**

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