

Imagine a world with no sexual or domestic violence...

What do you think that would look like? Is it even possible?

What would have to change in your life, community, and society for that to be the reality?

Who would have to be a part of those changes?

Preventing sexual and domestic violence from occurring is called primary prevention. And it IS possible.

Prevention is typically divided into three time-frames – Before perpetration ever occurs (**primary prevention**), immediately after violence has occurred to address short-term consequences and prevent further harm to the victim (**secondary prevention**), and long-term after violence has occurred to deal with lasting consequences and provide healing (**tertiary prevention**).¹

The anti-sexual and domestic violence movements are strongly rooted in a history of women advocating for survivors and for holding perpetrators accountable (typically considered secondary and tertiary prevention). This remains the foundation of our work and most sexual assault and domestic violence organizations focus on providing much-needed services to those who have already experienced violence.

But consider: How can the response of your organization, the response of the community, and the response of other systems involved contribute to **both** the prevention of further harm for a survivor and the prevention of future occurrences of violence in the community?

For example, when the criminal justice system responds to survivors by offering trauma-informed services, and protecting them from further victimization, they are engaging in secondary and tertiary prevention and therefore able to prevent some negative outcomes for that survivor. But importantly, these responses also send a message to the entire community that violence is not acceptable, survivors will be treated with respect, and perpetrators will be held accountable. This contributes to primary prevention.

In general, a community that supports survivors is also contributing to violence prevention and a community that engages in primary prevention efforts is also going to better support survivors. Challenging and changing social biases and institutional practices is a component of both primary prevention and supporting survivors. **Violence prevention efforts and support for survivors work hand-in-hand.**



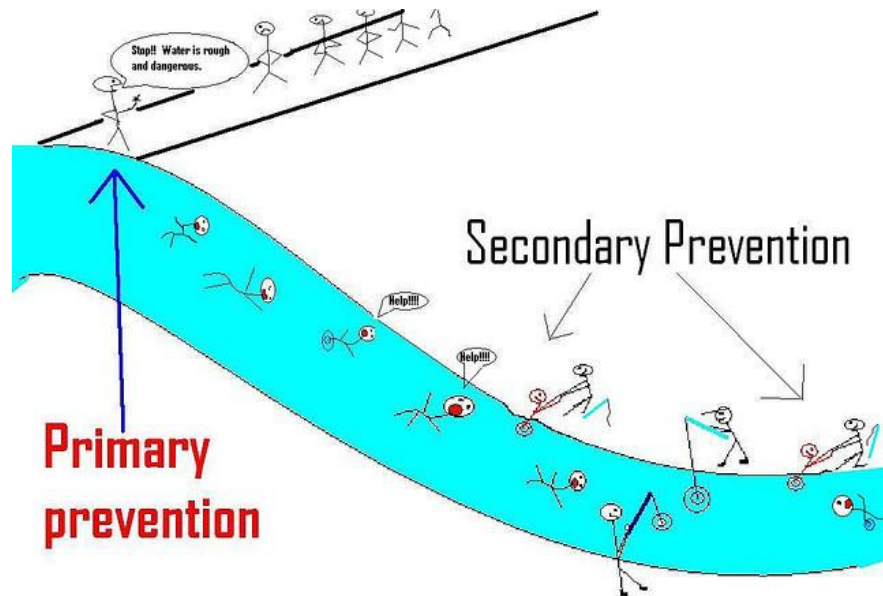
A common sexual assault awareness event is Take Back the Night, where a community rallies to hear the stories of survivors and say, enough is enough. Take Back the Night is a powerful event and strong stand against violence. However, it occurs as a result of violence (tertiary prevention) rather than stopping violence from occurring in the first place. Consider what complementary primary prevention programming could exist to ensure people have healthy understandings of sex and sexuality, have healthy boundaries and understandings of equality in relationships, and don't seek to control or hurt others. We seek to engage entire communities as allies in both supporting survivors and preventing violence from occurring in the first place. What role can your organization and each staff member play in preventing violence from occurring in your community?

Primary Prevention is the idea of MOVING UPSTREAM.

You may have heard the story of a fisherman who sees someone struggling in the river. The fisherman runs into the water and rescues the drowning person. After some time, another person comes down the river in distress and struggling to stay afloat. Eventually, after rescuing dozens of people from the river, the fisherman wonders why all these people are caught in the river at all. Is there someone upstream pushing them in? Is there a dangerous ledge where they all fall into the water?

The fisherman eventually goes up the river to find why, at the source, all these people are winding up in the water. When he gets to the source, he has the ability to do something to stop people from ending up in the river at all. Maybe the fisherman takes action by stopping someone from throwing people in the river. Perhaps he begins building barricades or putting up signs warning of danger.

The fisherman could stay down at his favorite fishing spot, dragging people out of the water all day, but that could get exhausting! And while it is important to have a support system down there to catch people in crisis, wouldn't we all prefer if no one were caught in the river? This is the core concept of primary prevention: preventing violence and harm from occurring in the first place, reducing the number of individuals who need support and care after victimization.



Primary Prevention is about enhancing protective factors and addressing risk factors for violence perpetration.

The goal is to STOP PERPETRATION from occurring.

People at risk of experiencing sexual violence have often been taught they should learn self-defense, carry pepper spray, walk in pairs, wear modest clothing, never drink too much, not draw too much attention, or otherwise avoid anything that might make them a target. The reasoning is that there will always be people looking to cause harm and it is each individual's responsibility to protect themselves. Similarly, we often focus on safety planning for people experiencing domestic violence. While safety planning is extremely important, we also need to consider whether we as a society are holding perpetrators accountable.

While we do believe it is important for everyone to look out for their own personal safety ("risk reduction"), this is only one small piece of comprehensive violence prevention. Ideally, violence would instead be prevented before it ever reached the point of someone needing to defend themselves. **And importantly, placing the focus on potential victims' behaviors and actions does not actually make our communities safer.** Keeping one person safe simply diverts a potential perpetrator elsewhere. Risk reduction messages can also have a negative impact on survivors by contributing to victim-blaming mentalities. Risk reduction messages are often based on myths or misconceptions about sexual assault, rather than realities, as well.

Instead of taking it for granted that there will be dangers in the world, we can **question whether those dangers have to exist at all.** For this reason, sexual and domestic violence prevention efforts focus predominantly on reducing the likelihood that anyone will *cause* harm and on addressing the culture that normalizes violence and inequity. Consider what underlying factors contribute to violence and how we can change those things, referred to as risk and protective factors.

If we take a walk upstream, what do you see? What causes sexual and domestic violence?

Many of the things we take for granted in day-to-day life are not “just the way things are,” but a representation of social attitudes and norms, whether good or bad. When we accept interpersonal violence as an inevitability, assume that men will naturally be aggressive, overly sexualize women, and allow for the marginalization of various groups of people, these are all expressions of social values. **These complex and deeply-rooted beliefs, held on both personal and societal levels, lead to attitudes and actions that support violence.**

Social norms that contribute to rape culture, and also those that support racism, classism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism, and other forms of oppression, all play a role in perpetuating violence. Many of these social constructs are deeply ingrained in all of us and, perhaps more problematically, deeply ingrained in our social structures and institutions. We cannot hope to end sexual and domestic violence without an intersectional framework addressing oppression in its many overlapping forms.

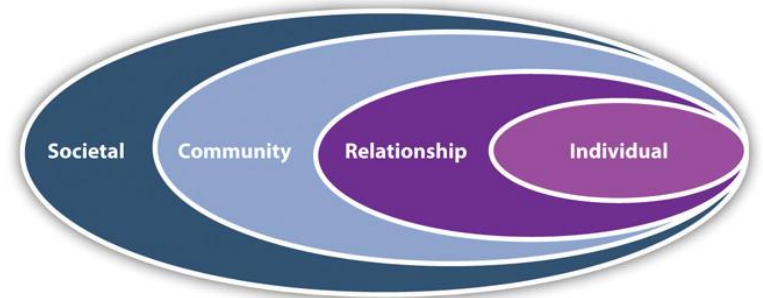
We also know that various forms of violence do not stand alone. Many forms of violence commonly co-occur and/or share common risk factors. For example, harmful norms around masculinity and femininity, community violence, and family conflict are just three of the many shared risk factors for bullying and sexual violence perpetration.ⁱⁱ By “connecting the dots” between various forms of violence (e.g. child maltreatment, teen dating violence, intimate partner violence, sexual violence, youth violence, suicide, elder maltreatment) and addressing common risk and protective factors, we can have a greater impact overall and partner with multiple prevention-focused fields.ⁱⁱⁱ

Connecting the dots around prevention efforts can be a strategic way to make a case for the value of your programs in a community that may feel very strongly about a certain form of violence linked to the one you are specifically trying to address.

So, what can we change?

If you can identify causes of violence and identify both risk and protective factors, you can begin to strategize on ways to create change.

The **Social-Ecological Model** is a public health framework that takes into account the complex interplay between individual, relationship, community, and societal factors in understanding and addressing violence. Each factor exists within the context of the others and addressing them *all* allows for a comprehensive and effective approach to prevention.



On an **individual** level, consider everything from personal beliefs and values to biological factors and previous life experiences.

- How do personal attitudes and beliefs contribute to accepting, supporting, or perpetrating violence?
- How do personal attitudes and life experiences cultivate or discourage attitudes that are supportive of peaceful, equitable, and healthy relationships with all people?
- How do our own experiences with both privilege and oppression affect compassion for the experiences of others?
- What are our strengths in advocating alongside those who face various forms of oppression? How can we align our philosophies with intersecting movements to have a greater impact and greater inclusivity?

Many of the school or community center-based prevention programs offered by SCCADVASA members address students' individual attitudes and beliefs or focus on developing life skills as a prevention method at the individual level.

Relationships are often the level where violence occurs. Many violence prevention programs focus on relationship skills and development of healthy behaviors.

Relationships tend to have lower risk for and occurrence of violence when both partners:

- Engage in healthy communication
- Respect each other
- Adhere to healthy and flexible gender roles
- Know and use non-violent conflict resolution strategies

By developing healthy relationships and recognizing red flags, violence can be reduced and prevented. Many of the prevention programs offered by SCCADVASA members in schools or community settings address relationship skills and healthy communication.

Every person and relationship exists within the context of their **community**. Communities play a vital role in supporting healthy relationships, supporting survivors, and condemning sexual and domestic violence.

Consider:

- How does violence in communities impact violence in relationships?
- How can all members of a community engage in conversations relevant to violence prevention, gender equity, and addressing rape culture and oppression?
- At what points and in what ways can community members intervene to change their community's overall culture?
- How can community members be active bystanders in everyday life, not just in clearly violent situations?
- What does it take to have safe communities, protective environments, and cultural norms that support healthy relationships and freedom from violence?

A community level prevention effort could be targeted at changing community norms around healthy relationships or intervening in negative situations. For example, bar outreach programs seek to change community norms in bar settings (e.g. changing multiple drink-serving practices, bar staff having a plan in place to proactively support customers, intentionally creating a safer bar environment). Enhancing cohesion in a community and establishing opportunities for economic improvements would also be community level strategies. You can consider climate and policies (including violence response policies) in schools or workplaces as important elements of community level prevention as well.

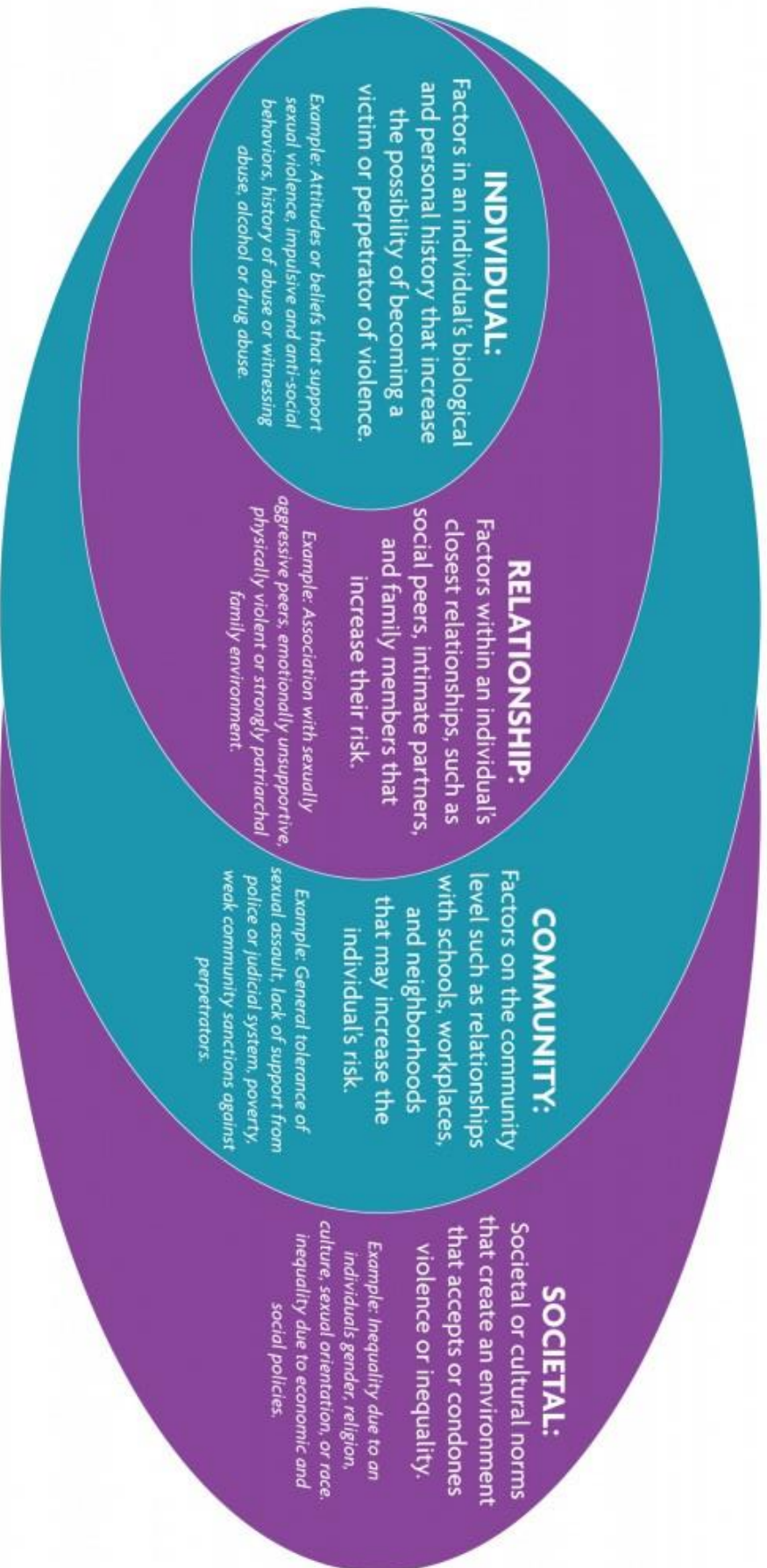
The broadest level of the social-ecological model is the **society** in which we all live. Government, policy, social institutions, media, and national public discourse impact and contribute to rape culture, oppression, gender equity, and resources and support for survivors. Many policy initiatives, including changes to health, economic, educational, and social policies that help maintain economic and social inequalities between groups, contribute to societal level prevention.^{iv} Consider how the following might contribute to prevention of sexual and domestic violence:

- A society that values equal pay for female employees (and legislation reflecting that value)
- Employers that proactively engage a diverse workforce
- Media that gives equitable coverage to male and female community leaders, describing all individuals with characteristics unrelated to their sex or gender
- Advertisements that avoid objectifying anyone based on gender or other characteristics

While these issues can feel difficult and slow to change, it is important to consider and speak out against societal level factors that contribute to and perpetuate violence.

Through social norms changes and cultural shift, we can decrease the likelihood that someone will perpetrate violence, develop communities that promote healthy relationships and respect for others, and increase the likelihood that someone will intervene if a problematic situation does arise. Strategies at all levels of the social-ecology are needed in order to achieve this goal.

SOCIAL ECOLOGICAL MODEL



Consider how all areas of your organization can be thinking about and contributing to violence prevention.

Community educators are often the leaders in prevention programming, but they should not be the only ones working from the vision of ending violence and stopping perpetration. Everyone has a role to play in prevention. If we hope to end violence, it is vital to incorporate a prevention mentality throughout the entirety of our work and actively support primary prevention strategies.

ⁱ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Sexual violence prevention: beginning the dialogue. Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; 2004.

ⁱⁱ Wilkins, N., Tsao, B., Hertz, M., Davis, R., Klevens, J. Connecting the Dots: An Overview of the Links Among Multiple Forms of Violence. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Oakland, CA: Prevention Institute; 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wilkins, *et al.* Connecting the Dots: An Overview of the Links Among Multiple Forms of Violence.

^{iv} Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The Social-Ecological-Model: A Framework for Prevention. Accessible at: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/overview/social-ecologicalmodel.html>