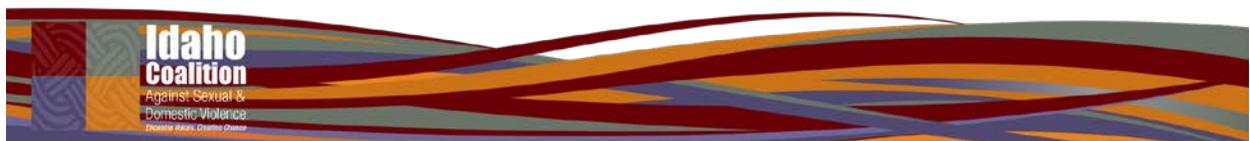


**Barriers to Bystander Interventions as Explained Through the Green Dot Strategy and the  
Socio-Ecological Model.**

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## Introduction

In the fall of 2010, ABC's hit television show "What Would You Do" placed hidden cameras in a public park and filmed two teen actors pretending to engage in a highly abusive argument<sup>1</sup>. The premise of the show derives from filming bystander reactions to instances in which actors of all different ages and race engage in activities that are oftentimes either illegal or aberrant in nature. In this particular episode, an adolescent male continuously berates his female companion in a public park while third party community members pass by. Over the course of two days of filming, 188 people walked by the couple and noticed the couple arguing, while only 23 individuals intervened. In the fall of 2011, the show filmed the same scenario but instead of using two white actors, two African American actors engaged in a similar argument in the same public park<sup>2</sup>. Over the course of two days of filming with the African American couple, 290 people walked by and noticed the couple arguing, while only 14 individuals decided to intervene.

The question that ABC producers had, along with other concerned citizens and other social sciences researchers alike, is why the large majority of individuals passing by choose to not do anything when they noticed the two teen couples engaging in an abusive situation. How can bystanders who witness high-risk situations choose to do nothing and pretend like nothing was happening? This was a question that sparked an interest among social psychologists in the 1960s after a similar and tragic incident had occurred involving a young female named Kitty Genovese<sup>3</sup>. Since then, there has been decades of research that has provided a framework for the varying individual and group choices that influence bystander behaviors. The prevention of power-based personal violence through the use of bystanders requires an understanding of the factors that inhibit individuals from intervening in potentially high risk situations. Using the Center for Disease Control's Framework for Prevention<sup>4</sup> to better understand an individual's interactions with their surrounding environment, this paper seeks to elaborate on the common barriers to bystander intervention as explained through the Green Dot Strategy.

## The Socio-Ecological Model

The socio-ecological model recognizes the interwoven relationship that exists between the individual and their environment. This model acknowledges the convoluted interactions that occur between individuals, relationships, communities, and societal factors<sup>5</sup>. It allows us to examine the wide spectrum of barriers that exist on an individual level and how they interact and are expressed with other factors throughout the model.

## The Green Dot Strategy

Green Dot is a school-based program that utilizes a comprehensive approach to preventing power-based personal violence by capitalizing on the effectiveness of peer and cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Baum- Rossen, Danielle (2010). What would you do: Abusive boyfriend [Television series episode]. *Primetime: What would you do?*. ABC Studios.

<sup>2</sup> Baum- Rossen, Danielle (2011). Teen couple fights: Would you intervene? [Television series episode]. *Primetime: What would you do?*. ABC Studios.

<sup>3</sup> Latane, B., & Darley, J. M. (1970). *The unresponsive bystander: Why doesn't he help?* New York, NY: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

<sup>4</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, & The Division of Violence Prevention. (2009). The socio-ecological model: A framework for prevention. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/overview/social-ecologicalmodel.html>.

<sup>5</sup> See citation 4.

influence, while creating positive changes with social norms across all levels of the socio-ecological model. Green Dot seeks to engage individuals through creating a personal connection to the issue of violence (e.g., through overview/inspirational speeches), and educates students by providing them with the tools and skills needed to increase their likelihood of becoming proactive and reactive bystanders. Green Dot provides students with safe and alternative proactive and reactive approaches to situations in which bystanders possess the ability to reduce violence within the school. The intervention tools and skills are researched-based practices that are relevant to how students can, and are willing to intervene (e.g., taught through a bystander training).

### **Identifying Barriers through the use of the Socio-ecological Model**

Based off of the research, there is a current body of knowledge that facilitates our understanding as to why individuals choose to intervene or remain passive when they are in the role of a bystander in a potentially risky, dangerous or emergency situation. The Green Dot Strategy has examined the decades of bystander research and has amalgamated the information into to three main categories of influences that can reduce the likelihood of an individual intervening in a potentially high risk situation. The three main categories include Personal Obstacles, Peer Influences, and Bystander Dynamics.



#### *The Socio-ecological Model: Individual*

The first level identifies biosocial and personal history factors that decrease the likelihood of and an individual intervening in a potentially high risk situation. The Green Dot Strategy identifies these barriers as Personal Obstacles<sup>6</sup>. Personal obstacles are facilitated through our personalities and are considered the internal thoughts and feelings that we experience when faced with inappropriate behaviors or potentially high risk situations<sup>7</sup>. Whether an individual classifies themselves as an introvert or extrovert, all individuals experience personal obstacles that decrease the likelihood of intervening. Personal obstacles can involve shy personalities, having a lack of confidence, not knowing what to do, not wanting to be embarrassed, and/or considering the situation to be a private matter.

#### *The Socio-ecological Model: Relationships*

The second level examines close relationships among peers that may inhibit individuals from saying or doing something to prevent any form of power-based personal violence. These relationships revolve around a person's closest social circles (e.g., peers, partners and family members). The Green Dot Strategy acknowledges the powerful influences of our peers as another barrier as to why individuals do not intervene. Especially with adolescent populations,

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<sup>6</sup> Edwards, D. (2009). *Green Dot curriculum manual*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press.

<sup>7</sup> See citation 6

increased anxiety can occur within bystanders about having our peers perceive our actions in a negative light<sup>8</sup>. Increased anxiety is commonly apparent when a “popular” peer makes a sexist joke or an influential individual bullies another student, but because of their status and group dynamics, it is often difficult to say or do something to express a complete intolerance of violence in any form. Although individuals may want to intervene in a situation in a prosocial way, the fear of embarrassing themselves or their friends can have a significant effect on the ultimate decision.

#### *The Socio-ecological Model: Community*

The third level explores the various settings, such as schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods, in which social relationships occur and seeks to identify the characteristics of these settings that are associated with hindering an individual’s ability to become an active bystander. Green Dot acknowledges prevention at a community level through emphasizing the importance of having a critical mass of individuals within each setting express a complete and visible intolerance of violence. Because of the varying numbers within each population, barriers exist in terms of educating every individual. Through the use of strategies revolving around theories such as the Social Diffusion and the Diffusion of information, prevention efforts focus on providing education and training to carefully selected individuals that possess the ability to effectively and efficiently impact the attitudes and behaviors of their peers. By having these selected individuals utilizing the tools and skills learned in the bystander training, they then go back to their own circles and diffuse the information. Because these individuals have an influence over their peers attitudes, actions, and beliefs, this allows for their peers to identify with the message and endorse and engage in the proactive and reactive behaviors themselves.

#### *The Socio-ecological Model: Societal*

The fourth level looks at the broad societal factors that facilitate and create a climate in which violence prevention is suppressed. The Green Dot Strategy identifies these barriers as Bystander Dynamics. Bystander Dynamics are factors that impact our decisions to intervene across a wide variety of situations on the societal level. The first bystander dynamic involves the Diffusion of Responsibility<sup>9</sup> – when faced with a potential crisis, we are less likely to intervene if there are more people present. This is justified in the sense that each person assumes that someone else will handle the situation and therefore, the responsibility is diffused. The next Bystander Dynamic involves Evaluation Apprehension – the risk of being embarrassed if we intervene, only to find out that the situation was not an emergency or what we originally perceived<sup>10</sup>. Pluralistic Ignorance refers to the idea we base our decision to intervene on the perceptions and actions of others. For example, if an individual notices a high risk situation, they are going to look around to see if other people are noticing it as well. If no one else intervenes or demonstrates any concern, the original individual will not perceive the potentially high risk situation as an emergency as well. The last of the Bystander Dynamics involves the Helping Model<sup>11</sup> – If we see that someone else is intervening and modeling a helping behavior,

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<sup>8</sup> Banyard, Victoria L (2011). "Who will help prevent sexual violence: Creating an ecological model of bystander intervention." *Psychology of violence*, 1 (3), p. 216.

<sup>9</sup> Chekroun, P., & Brauer, M. (2002). The bystander effect and social control behavior: The effect of the presence of others on people’s reactions to norm violations. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 32, 853-868.

<sup>10</sup> See citation 3.

<sup>11</sup> Rushton, J. P., & Campbell, A. C. (1977). Modelling, vicarious reinforcement, and extraversion on blood donating in adults: Immediate and long term effects. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 7, 297-306.

the likelihood of others intervening increases. Based off of the countless studies examining human behavior, our actions and decisions are influenced by our surroundings whether it is apparent to us or not. This is an important factor for bystander interventions as it relates to the prevention of power-based personal violence. If we see one person taking a stand and doing something instead of nothing, that one person's actions affects others and has an impact on those who witnessed.

## **Conclusion**

Considering the footage in both "What Would You Do" episodes, it is visually apparent that all Bystander Dynamics are present. Because of the increased amount of other people in the park, individuals that choose to keep walking and pretend that nothing is happening more than likely assume that someone else will help the couple – Diffusion of Responsibility. Other individuals stop to assess the situation and examine their surroundings to see if the situation is really an emergency. When they notice that other people are not demonstrating concern for the couple or intervening themselves, bystanders tend to become passive – Evaluation Apprehension. Once the 23 or 14 active bystanders intervene in each situation, others begin to stop and feel more comfortable in voicing their concern for the couple – Helping Model.