

# Bystanders: An Untapped Resource for Violence Prevention

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*"I had just got done with my last class and I got a text from my friend Amanda to meet her in the parking lot of the school where everyone was hanging out. When I got to her car, I started to tell her and a few of my other friends about something funny I saw on YouTube the night before. As I was telling the story, I noticed this girl from my English class talking with this guy across the way. I'm not sure what they were talking about because they were kind of far away, but she looked pretty upset by the way she was reacting. While I was telling the story, my other friend noticed that I was getting more and more distracted and eventually, everyone in my group was watching the guy yell at her. I don't know what it was about, but I just got this feeling like something wasn't right and I sort of felt nervous about it. All of the sudden, the guy slammed his fist on top of the car and we heard him yell "Get in the car!" I had no idea what to do and nobody else in my group or in the parking lot was doing anything about it. The boy and the girl drove off and my friends and everyone else in the parking lot went on with their conversations like nothing had happened."*

- Michelle, 11<sup>th</sup> Grade

## Introduction

Unfortunately, this scenario is not all that uncommon among adolescents in Idaho. Looking at national statistics, as many as 1 in 3 high school students will experience the most serious forms of dating violence and abuse including sexual abuse, physical abuse, or threats of physical harm to a partner or self.<sup>1</sup> According to Futures Without Violence, almost half of all female victims who have been sexually assaulted experienced it before they were 18.<sup>2</sup> People who are victims of being bullied are 2 to 9 times more likely to commit suicide.<sup>3</sup> Between 1 in 6 and 1 in 7 boys will experience sexual abuse by the time they are 18.<sup>4</sup> Gay and lesbian individuals experience similar rates, with the additional risk of violence committed against them because of their sexual orientation. According to the recently published 2011 Idaho Youth Risk Behavior

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<sup>1</sup> Liz Claiborne, Inc. and Family Violence Prevention Fund, *Troubled Economy Linked to High Levels of Teen Dating Violence & Abuse Survey 2009*. (June 2009). Conducted by Teenage Research Unlimited. Retrieved from <[http://www.loveisnotabuse.com/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?p\\_l\\_id=45693&folderId=72612&name=DLFE-202.pdf](http://www.loveisnotabuse.com/c/document_library/get_file?p_l_id=45693&folderId=72612&name=DLFE-202.pdf)>.

<sup>2</sup> Futures Without Violence. (2009). *Family violence prevention fund: The facts on tweens and teens and dating violence*. Retrieved from <http://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/userfiles/file/Teens/The%20Facts%20on%20Tweens%20and%20Teens%20and%20Dating%20Violence%20FINAL.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Kim, Y.S., & Leventhal, B. (2008) Bullying and suicide: A review. *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health*, 20(2), 133-54.

<sup>4</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2011). *National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey*. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/nisvs/>.

Survey,<sup>5</sup> 8.7 percent of Idaho students were hit, slapped, or physically hurt on purpose by their boyfriend or girlfriend during the past 12 months. When asked about sexual assault, 8.8 percent of Idaho students indicated that they have been physically forced to have sexual intercourse when they did not want to.

Given the alarming statistics, dating abuse and sexual assault among adolescent populations is now considered a national public health crisis. As a result, numerous endeavors to create evidence-based prevention programs have emanated and have focused their attention on educating youth by providing them with tools and skills needed to remain safe from unhealthy relationships among friends and dating partners. Although there are a wide array of various dating abuse and sexual assault prevention programs available, there is little evidence that demonstrates their effectiveness in reducing rates of violence. Certain programs tend to focus on women as victims and men as perpetrators, and have demonstrated success at increasing basic knowledge and attitudinal change, but generally in a short term manner. Understandably, changing knowledge and attitudes is an important aspect among prevention work, however, just because an adolescent male is aware and understands sexual abuse is bad, it is not necessarily going to stop him from doing it. Furthermore, prevention tactics have shifted towards strategies to change behaviors consecutively with knowledge and attitudes.

### **Bystanders as a Means of Prevention**

When considering the number of the violence prevention programs that are available, along with the staggering statistics that were mentioned earlier, clearly there is something that is not working effectively. More recently, the amalgamation of researchers and practitioners alike have shifted their efforts to examining prevention strategies using a seemingly untapped resource – bystanders. Bystanders are considered third party witnesses that possess the ability to intervene in situations in which a person might be hurt. Prevention strategies that utilize bystanders are based off the simple premise that there are more people within a school or community that have the ability to do something when they see a situation of dating abuse or sexual violence. When examining the literature, there is a large consensus that most people do not commit violence and will adamantly avert that they do not want others to be hurt. However, although most people agree that violence towards others is wrong, they oftentimes have inherent obstacles that prevent them from doing something about it.

It is not uncommon for an adolescent to witness a situation of bullying or to have a friend who makes inappropriate jokes. As simple as it may seem to encourage them to step up and speak out against these incidences, it is not always that easy. Acknowledging this, bystander approaches to violence prevention have focused their attention on identifying factors that inhibit individuals from intervening in situations that are considered at-risk. Taking these inhibitors into consideration, bystander intervention and prevention programs target situational factors and varying personalities by concocting methods and skills to overcome these barriers. One program in particular has sparked the interest of the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare (IDHW) and the Idaho Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence (ICASDV). Through a

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<sup>5</sup> Centers for Disease Control and prevention. (2012). 2011 Idaho Youth Risk Behavior Survey. Retrieved from <http://www.sde.idaho.gov/site/csh/docs/2011%20YRBS%20Fact%20Sheets.pdf>.

collaborative effort, the IDHW and the ICASDV have chosen a bystander intervention program call “Green Dot” to implement into two high schools in the Treasure Valley.

### **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 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). In addition to overview speeches and bystander trainings, Green Dot also includes a social norm campaign within the school to raise awareness of this innovative program.

Originally a strategy developed for college campuses, Green Dot has been implemented on over 60 campuses in the U.S. and Canada, and 26 high schools throughout Kentucky. Green Dot is research-based program that has been evaluated at the college level. Results indicated that individuals who have been exposed to the program (at least the overview speech) increased willingness to accomplish green dots, which are behaviors that prevent or intervene in an abusive situation. The five-year high school evaluation, funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), is only half way through their evaluation and is already seeing very positive results. As of May 2012, the Idaho Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence has already implemented Green Dot into two schools in Idaho and has trained over 90 students ranging from ninth to twelfth grade.

### **Conclusion**

Although incidents of dating abuse and/or sexual violence may not always occur out in the open, it’s still important to understand the warning signs and be knowledgeable about how to help. The benefits of bystander intervention programs are far and many, especially when they focus on engaging everyone as a bystander and someone who possess the ability to help. It’s difficult to distinguish what someone would do should a situation arise, but if they are educated through bystander prevention programs such as Green Dot, and are willing to fully commit to a complete and total intolerance of violence of any kind, Idaho’s youth will be more likely to do something, instead of nothing. An important aspect of Green Dot is to provide individuals with effective skills and tools to not only increase people’s awareness of knowing when to intervene, but how to do it safely and effectively.