



Moving toward prevention

A guide for reframing sexual violence

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berkeley **media** studiesgroup

 **NSVRC**
national sexual violence resource center

Preface

Have you ever felt lost trying to explain your work in preventing sexual violence — or even explaining that sexual violence can be prevented? I know I have. Even when I was confident about my own messages, I also know the overwhelming feeling of looking into the eyes of my audience and seeing their uncertainty, confusion, and skepticism.

When I began my journey at the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, I often felt lost when navigating how to communicate about prevention. But after reading the guide you are holding now, I feel empowered to embrace these conversations and enthusiastic to share this tool with you.

Although I had joined our team with over a decade of experience working in public health including sexual health promotion, I found the complicated jargon, acronyms, and language experts use in talking about sexual violence prevention to be a challenging barrier. It wasn't that I didn't understand prevention. The underlying idea of primary prevention — stopping sexual violence before it starts — was easy for me to understand. In fact, I found it inspiring. The vision that we can work to build safer communities, organizations, and institutions where safety and respect are the norm is what motivated me to join this field in the first place. But it was difficult to share this vision with others when the language that field experts use is miles away from how everyday people and the general public talk about this issue.

That's why I was excited to learn about our work with the Berkeley Media Studies Group to support our field in communicating more effectively about sexual violence and reframing the dialogue to lead with prevention. This guide, the result of that five-year collaboration, will help you develop effective messages about preventing sexual harassment, abuse, and assault that will resonate with different audiences across a variety of settings. Not only are compelling prevention messages necessary for us to communicate more effectively, but they are vital for us to continue expanding the audiences we reach and the partners we engage.

At NSVRC, we recognize that our partners leading prevention are embedded in communities and contexts surrounded by

inaccurate information and problematic frames around sexual violence. We know this faulty narrative affects our intended audiences, but we also know the way we communicate can shift how they understand sexual violence and what to do about it. Whether in conversation with friends, family, neighbors, or colleagues, it is an incredible feeling when we break through misunderstandings and illustrate prevention. These successes are critical to prevention, and that's why I'm so excited to share this message guide with you.



We also believe it is critical for us to see successes in illustrating prevention through the media. Over the years we've worked with BMSG we've also looked deeply at how media inform and educate the public. News and media coverage provide us with a window to understand the public conversation, which makes it a critical site for us to illustrate prevention. Not only does the scale of the mass media's reach dictate what we think about by deciding what topics receive attention, but the way information is presented also influences how we think about and perceive those topics. The absence of prevention in the headlines creates both messaging challenges and opportunities for prevention practitioners.

Since long before my tenure at NSVRC, our team has worked with journalists at local, regional, and national outlets to support their coverage on sexual violence. Over time, through providing timely information and resources, we are proud to have established relationships with reporters and industry leaders

such as The Poynter Institute. We wanted this guide to support our long-standing work with the media and equip prevention practitioners to confidently serve as sources engaging the media to elevate sexual violence prevention. We also developed the accompanying *Media relations toolkit*¹ to support field experts in building skills for pitching engaging and newsworthy stories that can make prevention visible to a broad audience.

Shifting the public conversation about sexual violence toward prevention will take all of us. The messaging recommendations provided in this guide would not have been possible without the insight, support, and vision of our partners in the field working to prevent sexual harassment, abuse, and assault. I am grateful to have the opportunity to share these tools with all of you who are leading prevention work across the country.

We are living in an incredible time. This is in an unprecedented cultural moment where a bright light is shining on sexual harassment, abuse, and assault. It's our job to keep the light focused on prevention to demonstrate that change is possible — and it's happening now.

Thank you for joining us as we continue to move the conversation forward.

In partnership,



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Yolanda Edrington'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Yolanda Edrington

COO, National Resource Center
NSVRC Director

Acknowledgments

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In particular, we'd like to thank Karen Baker and Donna Greco (PCAR) and Delilah Rumburg (formerly of PCAR), as well as Yolanda Edrington, Laura Palumbo, Jen Grove, Emily Bigger, and Megan Thomas (NSVRC).

Thanks to all current and past members of the NSVRC Advisory Council, without whose support and leadership this book would not have been possible.

We were privileged to share our work with the Rape Prevention and Education (RPE) program directors and state sexual violence coalition staff throughout the five years of this project, including at regional meetings, at RPE leadership trainings, and at RPE stakeholders' meetings. We are so appreciative of their insightful questions and invaluable feedback.

This book was made possible thanks to a whole community of practitioners and experts who generously gave of their time and wisdom to develop and strengthen the material and help us build connections to ensure the final product reached its intended audience. We give special thanks to Joan Tabachnick of DSM Consulting for shaping our thinking, providing invaluable insights at all stages in the process, and helping us frame prevention; to Cordelia Anderson of Sensibilities Prevention Services for helping us conceptualize prevention of child sexual abuse; and to Maia Christopher of the Association for the Treatment

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We greatly appreciate those who provided thoughtful comments on our manuscript drafts. Any errors are, of course, our own.

Thanks to the Berkeley Media Studies Group team, especially Daphne Marvel and Sarah Han, for their support throughout this process. We are also grateful to our dedicated former staff members and interns who contributed, including Andrew Cheyne, Laura Carter, Lillian Levy, Allison Rodriguez, Alisha Somji, Alysha Aziz, Leeza Arbatman, and Karra Gardin.

Last but never least, we want to again express our deep gratitude to two people without whom this project could never have come to fruition: Karen Baker of PCAR (formerly of NSVRC), whose vision this was; and Laura Palumbo of NSVRC, an unfailingly supportive and thoughtful partner.



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Who we are

Berkeley Media Studies Group (BMSG), a project of the Public Health Institute, is dedicated to expanding stakeholders' ability to improve the systems and structures that shape health and safety. BMSG analyzes news to learn how the media characterize public health and social justice issues, and harnesses lessons from that research to help community leaders, practitioners, and others become strong voices in local and national conversations about health, safety, and justice. Since its founding in 1993, BMSG has partnered with a wide variety of organizations and individuals to build the capacity of public health professionals and community decision-makers to achieve common health goals.

The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) is the leading national organization in the U.S. providing information and tools to prevent and respond to sexual violence. NSVRC translates research and trends into best practices that help individuals, communities, and service providers achieve real and lasting change. The center also works with the media to promote informed reporting. The organization was chartered in 2000 by the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape through a cooperative agreement with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.



Introduction

“The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”
- Lao Tzu

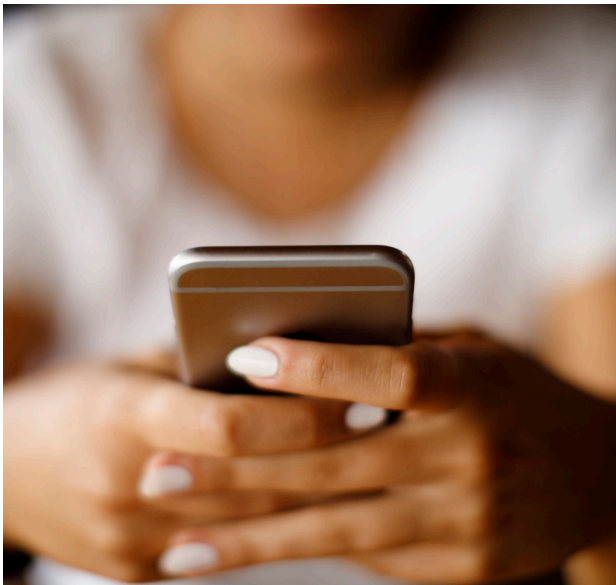
The first step on our journey to writing the guide you’re reading now was a phone call. In December 2012, the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) called Berkeley Media Studies Group (BMSG) to ask, “Can you help us reframe sexual violence to focus on prevention?”

In the years since that call, we learned about the promising approaches experts working to end sexual violence across the lifespan are using on their own journeys toward creating and maintaining places where sexual violence doesn’t occur — strategies like promoting social norms that protect against violence, providing opportunities to empower girls and women, and creating and maintaining protective environments.² We learned, to quote a field leader who participated in one of the meetings that informed the writing of this guide, that “prevention is not one quick thing, nor does it have a price tag on it. Rather, it is woven into the daily fabric of our lives, our communities, social and political structure. It requires being informed, attentive, vigilant, and anticipating potential problems before they arise.”

In the guide you are about to read, we review best practices in framing sexual violence to inform the public about preventing sexual assault. We highlight ways to communicate with the media, which plays an important role in educating the public.

We hope readers will come away able to:

- identify and address problematic and inaccurate frames around sexual violence, including news frames;
- develop effective messages about preventing sexual harassment, abuse, and assault that will resonate with different audiences and in many contexts;
- identify the value of the media as a tool for informing and educating the public around sexual violence and how to prevent it;
- be more accessible and effective sources for journalists covering sexual violence in general and sexual violence prevention in particular;
- include prevention in news stories about sexual violence; and
- pitch engaging and newsworthy stories that can make prevention visible to a broad audience.



How we wrote this guide

Our focus at BMSG is on helping people communicate effectively about the changes to communities and institutions that improve public health and well-being. Our process is iterative and rooted in the guidance that experts share with us.

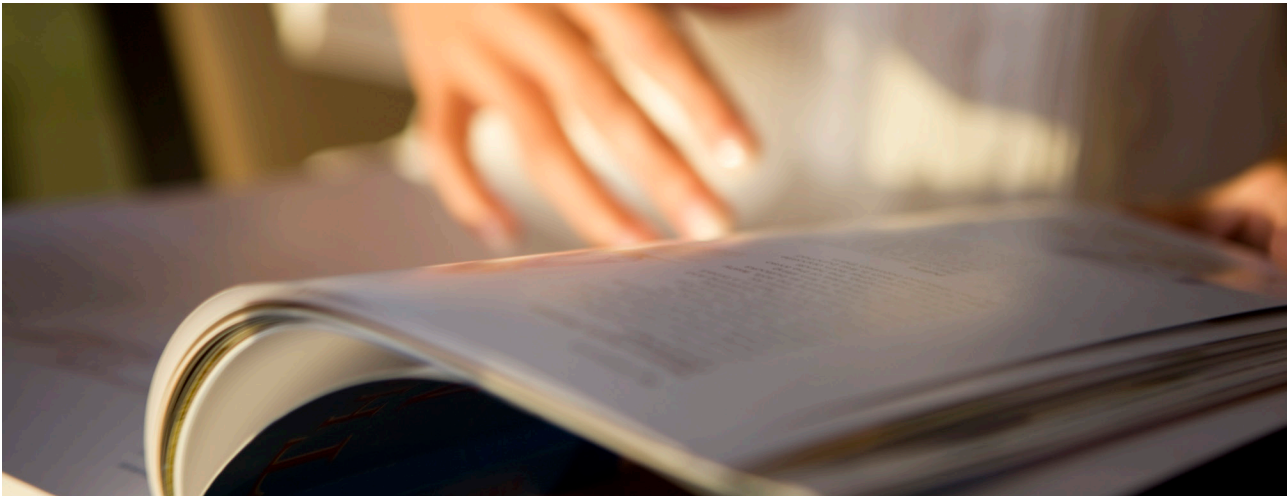


For this guide, we gathered data in multiple ways over five years, always centering the experiences of those who are most deeply involved in prevention work. We first conducted an extensive review of the literature on communicating about sexual violence. We then assessed how sexual violence appears in news media, an important tool for informing and educating the public.³ That analysis helped us understand what people regularly see and hear about sexual violence and sexual violence prevention — and what they don't. Over the five years of the project, we followed evolving research on sexual violence communication and news coverage through regular research updates and ongoing discussions with field experts.

To learn how field leaders communicate, we participated in a meeting of NSVRC's Advisory Council, which includes prevention experts from around the country. There, we created structured

situations where these experienced professionals discussed prevention and why it matters. We zeroed in on the places where experts disagreed with one another or had unanswered questions.

With guidance from our partners at NSVRC, we attended a number of meetings and conferences around the country, including the National Sexual Assault Conference, annual meetings of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers, annual Rape Prevention and Education (RPE) stakeholders' meetings, and meetings of the National Coalition to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation. At some of these gatherings, we presented data and shared information about the project; at others, we simply listened and observed. We collected notes on questions that were difficult to answer, points of disagreement, and challenges and opportunities in communicating about prevention. Building on the connections we made at these conferences, we were able to conduct interviews with key thought leaders who provided additional ideas and feedback. Any unattributed quotations in this guide come from those interviews or from conversations we had at meetings and conferences. All of this data, together with supporting public opinion research,⁴ serves as the basis for what you are about to read.



How to use this guide

This guide is for practitioners who want to communicate effectively about sexual harassment, abuse, and assault across the lifespan and how to prevent it. It begins with an overview of framing and highlights the special case of news frames — which typically elevate some aspects of sexual violence and obscure others, including solutions. We next list recommendations based on research that can help you shape effective and impactful values-based communication about preventing sexual harassment, abuse, and assault before they happen. Finally, we discuss opportunities to put those guidelines into practice and inform the public about preventing sexual violence by engaging the media. You can practice applying what you learn using the tools and resources available in the *Media relations toolkit*.¹

In the course of writing this guide, we learned that it is helpful to characterize preventing sexual violence as an ongoing journey, a metaphor we will return to again and again. In fact, the words you are reading now are a destination of our own journey, the one that began with a phone call from NSVRC.

But the journey continues, and we know that you will adapt and improve the information here. Ultimately, our hope is that field leaders, prevention experts, practitioners, and other allies will use this guide as a resource for ideas whenever they need to communicate with the media — or with anyone — about preventing sexual violence before it happens.



Chapter 1

How audiences (mis)understand sexual violence and prevention

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Before we can educate and inform the public about what it means to prevent sexual harassment, abuse, and assault, we need to understand the “background” against which they form their opinions about sexual violence and what to do about it.

There are no blank slates: People already have their own ideas and beliefs about sexual violence. The ideas that people already hold in their minds about sexual violence (or any topic) come from mental structures or “frames.”

In this chapter, we describe the frames that form the starting point for many people’s thinking about sexual violence and preventing it. Knowing and preparing for those potential roadblocks can help keep us on track to communicating effectively about prevention.

An introduction to framing

Frames affect how people understand and make sense of the world. Political scientist Frank Gilliam describes framing as “a translation process between incoming information and the pictures in our heads.”⁵ That means that people attach meaning to the information they receive based on what they

already know. They construct frames on top of all the information they've received and the experiences they've had over time.

Just a few cues — a word, an image — can trigger whole frames with a much deeper meaning. For example, think about what a word like “victim” evokes. Many people choose the word “survivor” to communicate resilience and avoid the connotations of lifetime trauma that the “victim” frame might inspire.

Without even knowing it, we use frames to create meaning. Frames create tracks for a train of thought, and once on that track, it's hard to get off. That means framing can cause communication problems when the frames people construct are inaccurate or when the frames we use as communicators don't take into account the way our audience thinks about and has experienced this topic. As we'll see, when it comes to sexual violence, one frame that can cause problems is the idea that sexual violence is an unfortunate part of life to be managed — rather than a series of behaviors that can be prevented.

The default frame: Rugged individualism

In the U.S., one common frame people use to understand the world emphasizes personal choices and resolve: rugged individualism. The idea is that if you work hard in the U.S., you will succeed and, conversely, if you fail, it's your own fault.⁶ Because this frame is so deeply rooted, when we explain other people's behavior, we tend to focus on personal characteristics, like morals and individual choices. That also means we tend to ignore any role the world *around* the person might play in shaping behavior.

For most Americans, “rugged individualism” is the starting point for any conversation about how to solve a problem. We call it the default frame because if no alternative is presented, it is where people's minds tend to go first. So, if someone is asked why sexual assault happens, they will often focus first on the behaviors of the people involved in an assault. That might mean questioning where the victim went, what he or she drank, or what they wore.

The default frame might also play out in the idea that sexual violence is a crime committed exclusively by “mentally disturbed violent people” or “violent strangers.”⁷ If someone sees every action as only happening because people make choices, then

they might naturally assume that only people with some serious personal failing would choose to hurt someone.

The rugged individualism frame is so strong that people will focus only on personal choices and failings — and ignore how institutions or social norms could affect what happens — even when they see evidence that there might be other factors to consider. That could be because focusing on other people’s choices makes the world seem more manageable: It is less



frightening to think about how to help people control themselves than it is to think about how to change the world. It may also be that it’s difficult to name the root causes of sexual violence or see all the factors that create environments where sexual abuse and assault can happen. It’s easier to imagine and point to bad behavior than to structural issues (like standards about alcohol use on university campuses) or cultural factors (such as marketing and pop culture that teaches young people harmful lessons about sexuality).

In turn, when people only think about the problem at the individual level, they may think about services for individuals as the only solution

— instead of thinking about changes to communities or institutions that also need to happen. The pervasiveness of the default frame can make it harder to build support for changing environments like schools, universities, youth-serving programs, and faith communities. If people don’t see that the world around them could play a role in shaping behavior, then any efforts to change that world don’t make much sense. But environmental and institutional changes are important — not just because that’s where assault and abuse can happen, but because changes there can make *everyone* healthier, safer, and stronger.

The special case of news frames

Frames aren’t just in our minds: They also exist in our language and in the ways we talk and write about the world around us.

One place where frames are communicated — and a place where they have a particular power — is in the media, especially the news.

News coverage has made cases of sexual violence more visible, as with high-profile rape trials in Marysville,^{8,9} Missouri and Steubenville,¹⁰ Ohio; in stories about online harassment;¹¹ and with charges of sexual harassment and assault against powerful figures like Bill Cosby and Harvey Weinstein.^{12,13} But how journalists report on sexual violence is just as important as the number of stories they write. The way that news is framed affects how the public understands sexual assault and how to prevent it.



In news coverage, the frame is the way an issue like sexual assault is presented in a story. The majority of articles about any issue (including sexual violence) are framed like portraits — they tend to focus narrowly on a specific person or incident.³ Portrait stories emphasize an individual's role in causing or fixing problems.¹⁴ In other words, when we see portrait stories, we're more likely to talk and think about what an individual did that affects what happens to them or to someone else. For example, after seeing a portrait story about rape, audiences who are asked to talk about solutions might focus on the victim's actions or the character of the perpetrator.

Stories that are framed more broadly, like landscapes, appear less frequently in news coverage. Those stories might depict an individual or a specific case as typical news stories do, but they also show some aspect of the broader context surrounding the person or incident.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ The story might include information about

the place where a crime happened, for instance, or data about how often this kind of problem has occurred in the region.

Landscape stories are important because when people see them, they are more likely to see the role institutions — like colleges, youth-serving organizations, or businesses — play in solving the problem.^{15,18} So, after seeing a landscape story about rape on campus, audiences asked to explain what should be done might be more likely to talk about what the campus could have done or is doing to address the problem. In other words, landscape stories help create openings to talk about solutions that go beyond individuals making better choices to include community and institutional change.

How the news frames sexual violence

When we look at framing through the lens of news coverage, we can learn what the public might know or not know about sexual violence, particularly if the news is their main source of information about the topic.

For someone without direct personal experience of sexual assault, abuse, or harassment, the way the news frames the issue may strongly influence their understanding.

As part of the process of writing this guide, BMSG explored how all forms of sexual violence and prevention are framed in national news coverage.³ This research built on our earlier analyses of how other forms of violence,¹⁹ including child sexual abuse,²⁰ appeared in news coverage.

Our studies of news coverage of sexual assault showed that portrait frames dominated the news conversation about different types of sexual violence, and that stories about individual crimes regularly appeared. But preventing, or even diminishing violence — part of the landscape view — wasn't headline news.

We rarely saw any mention of prevention, and when we did, the references were vague. For every occasional reference to specific actions like “training for students, administrators, and faculty members”²¹ in schools to prevent sexual violence, there were many more ambiguous calls that failed to name any specific action. For example, following the rape of a teenage girl in Steubenville, Ohio in 2012, one columnist concluded,

“beyond... punishment after the fact, more needs to happen in homes and schools to keep teenagers on the right track.”²² Unfortunately, “more” is never described in the story. Similarly, an article about assault in the military included a quote from an action network representative who argued that “ending the widespread issue of sexual harassment and sexual assault in the military starts by ending it at the service academies,”²³ but the story did not go on to name what should be done at the academies or who was responsible for doing it.

One reason that prevention can be challenging to talk about is the idea, rooted in the default frame, that only “monsters” or “deviants” commit sexual violence.⁷ In our study of all types of sexual violence in the news, one in five stories used language that described people who commit harm as “beasts”²⁴ or “perverts [who take] deranged pleasure”²⁵ in hurting people.³



Perhaps it's not surprising, then, that the news conversations about child sexual abuse, as well as sexual violence in general, focused on sexual violence as a crime to be punished solely through criminal justice approaches. Criminal justice responses are an important component of efforts to comprehensively address acts of sexual violence that have occurred, but by themselves, they're not enough to prevent sexual assault from happening in the first place. Painting sexual violence only as a series of past crimes for which criminal justice is the sole response could make it harder for audiences to see themselves or their loved ones in the problem — after all, most people don't see themselves, their students, their children, their friends, or their relatives as potential criminals. This frame could also make

it harder for audiences to see sexual harassment, abuse, and assault as problems that all of society has a responsibility and ability to work toward ending.

Key frames around sexual violence prevention

People have complex and sometimes conflicting feelings, doubts, and beliefs about sexual violence and the possibility of prevention. These feelings and beliefs are shaped by their own life experiences and values, the media, and how they understand the problem and why it happens. Here we focus on some of the most common frames and how they may make people more — or less — open to receiving messages about prevention.



Protection and safety.

Most people have a strong desire to protect others, to provide the best possible support to the people around them, and to keep young people and vulnerable people safe, nurtured, and supported. These widely shared values of support, protection, and care present an opportunity to boost prevention efforts and make prevention messages stronger.

Many of the other frames people hold are based on fear, hopelessness, and limited belief in the possibility of prevention. Some of these will be familiar, and unfortunately, they are likely to be a common starting point in conversations about preventing harassment, abuse, and assault.

Consequently, building on peoples' heartfelt desires to support and protect the people around them, especially young people, is very important.

Isolated, terrible — but inevitable — incidents.

People feel discomfort, anxiety, and disgust when they think or talk about sexual violence, and many doubt it can be prevented. These strong emotions can make them avoid thinking or talking about the problem, so they're less open to discussing how to solve it — especially if they think there aren't any tangible or clear ways to act on that anxiety and concern to make things better.

As we will see, clearly describing what prevention looks like is essential to constructing an effective message: People may doubt that prevention is possible because they don't have concrete examples that could help them imagine what it could look like, or because they confuse prevention approaches with other solutions (like crisis response or strategies an individual might take to reduce their own risk of being assaulted). They may also think that prevention is limited to awareness raising. Crisis response, risk reduction, and awareness raising are all important parts of an overall approach to ending sexual assault and abuse, but by themselves they will not necessarily prevent sexual violence in the future.



People who commit sexual violence are “bad apples” who can't be changed.

Many people fall back on the default frame of rugged individualism and personal responsibility when it comes to talking and thinking about who commits abuse and assault.

For years, prevention experts have pointed out that sexual violence isn't a crime committed just by “the monster in the bushes,” but often by the people we know, and sometimes even the people we love, admire, or trust. One barrier that may keep people from accepting that “normal” people — including people like their friends and family members — could commit sexual violence is the belief that once someone commits sexual violence, their path is set. People have trouble believing that a person can change their own behavior or stop harming others or that intervening early could change a person's behavior.

Sexual violence is too big a problem to solve.

People feel powerless when they think about trying to address a problem as big as sexual violence. That overwhelmed feeling can lead people to feel a certain amount of apathy and to view



sexual violence as just an unfortunate part of life. That's not a moral judgment: Most people believe strongly that sexual violence and abuse is a serious problem, and they want to protect others from harm. But despite those good intentions, many people have become fatalistic about this problem — whether they realize it or not.

The good news is that illustrating what prevention looks like and modeling journeys out of complacency and into action can disrupt this flawed thinking. Illustrating prevention reminds audiences of what they already know (that some prevention is better than no prevention) and leads them to consider the possibility of preventing sexual violence in a new way.

Disconnection from prevention.

Some people have negative reactions to vague examples of prevention programming and messaging. For example, though many parents support the idea of younger people having information about sexual violence and prevention, some may worry that vaguely defined prevention activities for young people could expose children to topics they are not yet ready to discuss or teach values that they don't agree with.

In addition, certain terms like “rape culture” or “toxic masculinity” distance people from prevention practices they actually agree with. These terms make many people think they have to adhere to a certain belief system in order to play a role in preventing sexual violence.

The role and responsibility of institutions in preventing sexual violence is murky.

Many people doubt that institutions can be effective at preventing sexual violence. Perhaps they have been through

unsuccessful efforts to prevent violence in the organizations where they work or study and now view prevention as a series of one-time efforts to limit the institution's legal liability after something bad has happened. For other people, beliefs around family and personal responsibility — the default frame again — prevent them from seeing a role for institutions in solving what they see as a personal or family problem.



Some questions about the role of institutions in preventing sexual violence are rooted in concerns about logistics. For example, busy people may feel that they already have too much on their plates to add anything else or worry that they lack the training or expertise to have sexual violence prevention added as part of their job responsibilities. They may be concerned that, given the capacity of their organization, the organization should do what it can to prevent sexual violence so long as it doesn't take away from its core missions and other priorities.

Whatever the reason, providing models for successful institutional prevention approaches can help counter this frame and alleviate doubt or concern about whether prevention is possible.

Taken together, the dominance of rugged individualism frames and these common frames about sexual assault, abuse, and harassment demonstrate why communicating about prevention can be difficult — and reinforces the importance of developing effective messages that can meet the challenge.

“But I heard that...”: What to do when flawed frames meet facts

As we have seen, many people understand sexual violence and what to do about it in complicated and even inaccurate ways. They may have fears or concerns that could seem unimportant or are completely inaccurate. For example, in a discussion about sexual violence prevention, someone might say that sexual violence is too big a problem to solve, or they might take the stance that people who commit sexual violence are “bad apples” and nothing can be done to change them. Both of these ideas reinforce the belief that sexual violence is inevitable — they are the ruts in the road we’re trying to avoid on our journey to prevention.

It’s easy to want to focus on correcting inaccurate information. The problem is that just providing corrections isn’t enough to change audiences’ minds. “Tit for tat” discussions about difficult or emotional issues often work against us because people make decisions and judgments based more on emotions and values — and frames — than facts.

To inform and educate our audience about sexual violence, a topic that stirs up complicated and strong emotions, we must understand and respond to our audiences’ emotions *first*. Only then can we deliver our messages and be heard.

Let’s imagine you are trying to provide information about the approach of providing sexual violence prevention education to young people. It may be the case that many parents feel that only they should educate children about anything related to sex and have anxieties about what their kids are hearing and seeing when they are away from home. Even without knowing specific information about the program’s goals and scope, they might worry that their kids will be taught values at school that go against the ones parents are trying to teach at home. Others may fear that if schools teach about the topic, then children will ask their parents questions that they can’t answer.

Offering parents only facts — for example, about the effectiveness of such programming or the benefits of children learning about healthy relationships and consent — will probably not calm these emotions. In fact, it may make them worse.

Responding to emotion works differently. You could first remind parents that kids learn many things outside of the home, but they

learn their most important values at home from their parents — and that what is important is open communication. You might also reassure parents that education about sexual violence is designed to be age-appropriate. That, in turn, could make parents think about the value of being more open about these topics with their own children than their parents were with them.

This type of response can reassure parents by reminding them at an emotional level about their key role in teaching and nurturing their children. With that reminder in place, it will be easier to get back to providing information about this prevention strategy.

The more attention you give to inaccurate information, the more you reinforce it.

Even when you have good rebuttals, it's better to acknowledge the emotions underneath the objection and then get back, as quickly as you can, to the way you want your audience to understand the problem. **Pivot phrases** (see Appendix A) can help you move away from the frame that's challenging to steer the conversation back on target. It may also be helpful to anticipate the **toughest questions** people could ask and prepare to answer them in a way that keeps the focus on providing information about preventing abuse and assault (see Appendix B).

Closing thoughts

Now we have an idea of how framing works and understand the starting point for many people when it comes to sexual violence, what to do about it, and the role that institutions can play in preventing sexual violence. Unfortunately, most people start from a place of disgust and fear, paired with a deep-seated belief that sexual violence is inevitable and that people who commit it can't be changed. Many people also think that sexual violence is too big a problem to solve, in part because they feel disconnected from prevention and unsure about the role and responsibility of institutions. Once you understand something about how your audience frames sexual violence, you will be better prepared to avoid pitfalls by strategically selecting and shaping the information about prevention that you will provide to help your audience work through their complex feelings and receive your message.



Chapter 2

Developing effective messages about preventing sexual harassment, abuse, and assault

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Communicating effectively about sexual violence prevention is not as simple as repeating pre-formed messages. In this chapter, we'll focus on the components that will help you build effective messages to inform and educate people about what preventing sexual violence can look like in their own lives and communities based on what we've learned from public opinion research⁴ and our decades of experience reframing public health and social justice issues.

Some of the suggestions and strategies we outline may feel out of sync with your previous experiences of communicating about sexual violence and how to prevent it. However, as we will discuss, sometimes what feels “right” for experts is not what resonates most with the audiences we want to reach.

Planning your approach

Before you build your message, it is important to map out who will hear it and who will deliver it. Our focus in this guide is on strategies to develop messages that can reach

a wide range of audiences. Those messages can become the starting point for tailoring messages for different audiences if you need to, since what works for one group may derail another.

Remember that your message will be received differently depending on who delivers it. You may want to choose and train different spokespeople to deliver the message in different contexts. The different combinations of potential speakers are your “messenger mix.” For example, parents or community leaders might be especially important speakers for one audience, while researchers or practitioners could be more effective for another. In general, the messenger who is the best choice for a particular audience is one that that audience can identify with — the messenger with whom they feel they share experiences or values.



Guidelines to shape effective messages

There are four overarching guidelines that can keep you on track at every stage of developing your message:

1. Speak plainly;
2. Acknowledge negative or divided feelings;
3. Show that prevention is possible by modeling journeys to understanding and action, including starting points and key moments; and
4. Focus on conduct, not character, when talking about people who commit sexual abuse and assault.

Speak plainly.

No matter who your audience is, it's important that whenever possible, you (or your messenger) speak plainly and avoid “insider” language — like “rape culture” or “toxic masculinity.” Using plain language with concrete examples is much more effective in helping audiences understand complex ideas and consider the possibility of preventing sexual harassment, abuse, and assault. So instead of rape culture, you could talk about messages society sends about sex, violence, and what it means to be a man or a woman. As another example, instead of bystander intervention, you could talk about strategies that help people look out for one another's safety and well-being.



Of course, for some audiences, terms like “rape culture” may be effective. However, remember that using plain language means you can reach both insiders and outsiders at the same time, which is good since different groups may get exposed to the same message, even if they aren't the primary audience.

Acknowledge negative or divided feelings.

Our messaging needs to recognize and name people's strong emotions about sexual violence so we can help them stay connected. If we talk as if things are clear and simple, and don't leave room for our audience to feel uncertainty or inner conflict, they may resist and reject our message as being overly simplistic.

You do not have to fully resolve all of the conflicts the audience feels, bring them into complete agreement with how you see sexual violence and what to do about it, or dwell on the discomfort — you just have to acknowledge it (view the example below).

Show that prevention is possible by modeling journeys to understanding and action.

When we acknowledge people’s anxiety about how bad sexual abuse and assault are, we raise their fears — so it’s important that we also provide next steps or pathways toward change that will help them channel their fears into action. If we don’t provide those pathways, the heightened fear means our audiences will just become overwhelmed and could “shut down.”

We can show pathways to change by modeling the journeys that people our audiences can identify with have taken to institute prevention practices. That can mean telling stories about people whose starting point is discomfort, or doubt that sexual violence could be prevented, or a belief sexual violence is “just something that happens.” Then, we can show what motivated that person to act to prevent abuse and assault in their institution and describe what they did (view the example below).

To begin modeling a journey that acknowledges discomfort, someone in the field might start a presentation or meeting with a simple statement like,

I know this can be a difficult topic to think about — let alone talk about. Even though I talk about sexual violence a lot, sometimes I still feel a little shaky, and I can hear my voice start to crack. What helps me is knowing that if we are going to prevent it, we have to be able to talk about it, so I push through. And just like today, when I am in a room with committed people like yourselves, my resolve strengthens and I become more confident than ever that, even though it won’t be easy, we will be able to work together to prevent sexual harassment, abuse, and assault before they happen.

People need to understand *why* people go on their journeys as well as *how* their journeys unfold. For audiences that feel a great deal of discomfort, skepticism, and inner conflict about prevention, we may need to tell stories that include more details about the journey and describe more steps in the change process.



Focus on conduct, not character.

If our language and messages consistently focus on people’s *conduct* rather than their *character*, we can help people understand that prevention is possible: As one field expert noted, “[words like “offenders,” “abusers,” or “perpetrators”] make me feel like, okay, that’s not about me... It links up with thinking that you can’t do anything about it because it’s not about behavior; it’s about who people fundamentally are.”

One option is to talk about *people who commit* sexual violence, *people who abuse others*, and *people who cause sexual harm*, rather than rapists, offenders, abusers, or perpetrators. You can also help your audience move beyond thinking only about “bad apples” whose behavior can’t be changed by lifting up stories about early, successful efforts to have conversations about tough topics like consent, or to stop problematic sexual behavior before it escalates.

Of course, there are audiences for whom talking about these types of efforts will not be effective — or could even be offensive. You'll need to decide how to frame people who commit sexual violence based on what you know about your audience, as well as your own beliefs, expertise, and comfort level.



What makes an effective message

The four guidelines above can be applied to any message you are developing for preventing sexual abuse and assault. Next, we describe the components of an effective message.

A good message should include:

1. A values statement
2. A concise problem statement
3. A description of a solution

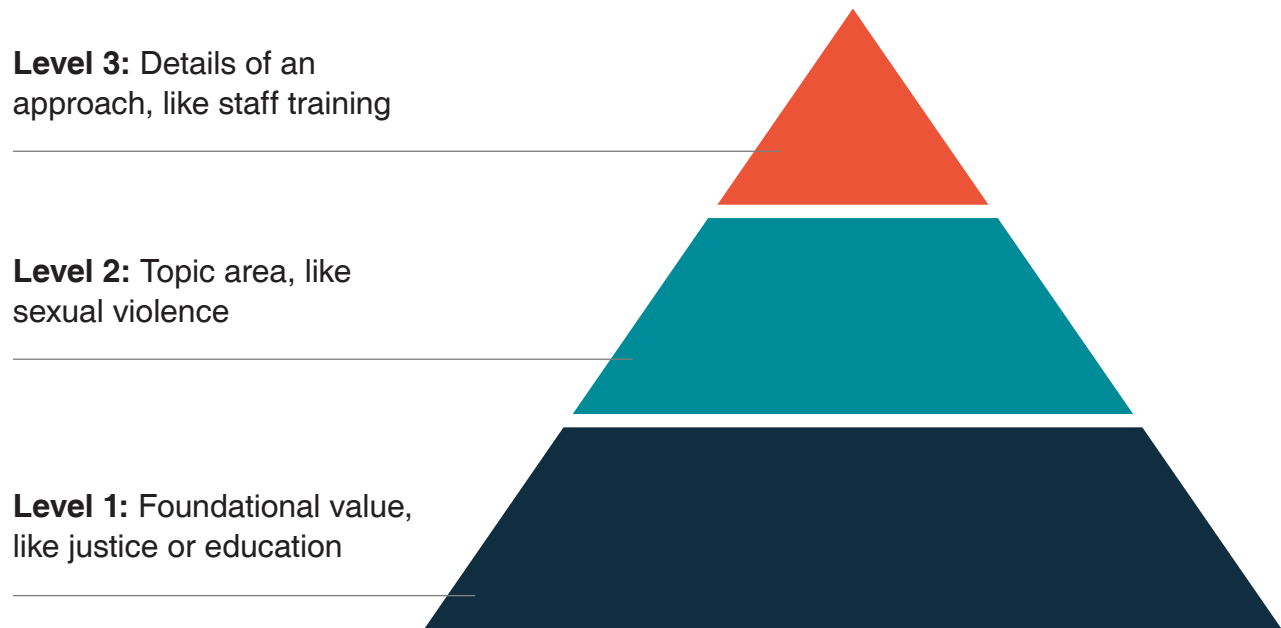
First piece of the message: Values statement

This message component answers the question, “What are the shared values that motivate change?” Leading with shared values helps people connect with messages and motivates them to act. Evoking those values can also help offset feelings of fear, disgust, and hopelessness that your audience may feel and help them build connections with the speaker.

How can we build values into our communication?
Cognitive linguist George Lakoff describes three “levels” of communication.¹⁵ (See Figure 1)

- Level 1 is about the foundational values which most people connect with, such as health, justice, or education.
- Level 2 is about the issue area — sexual assault on campus, abuse in institutions, human trafficking, sexual harassment, etc.
- Level 3 is about the details — facts and figures, statistics, etc.

Figure 1: Three levels of communication



Experts often make the mistake of starting at Level 3, zeroing in on minute details, and indeed, sometimes communicating about strategy details will be important. However, even then you'll want to anchor the communication at Level 1 and lead with your values. Overloading people with facts and figures is rarely effective, since people make decisions based on emotional reactions.²⁶ Including values with the information we present about preventing sexual violence helps audiences connect what they hear with their own goals of doing good and helping others. Evoking shared values can also help audiences remain open to the information we present and overcome their doubts and fears.

Focus on the core values you hold that you share with your audience. In Table 1, we list some groups of values that you may find are helpful in grounding your work:

Table 1: Evoking values

If you want to evoke...	...evoke values such as	Example
Ingenuity and innovation	Can-do spirit, moral courage, optimism, hope	We can and we will do the right thing even when it is hard.
Community and caring	<p>Empathy, respect, personal responsibility, accountability</p> <p>Redemption (the belief that even if a person or institution has made mistakes in the past, there is an opportunity to grow and change and do better)</p> <p>Caring for young people (wanting children to grow up to be healthy adults and fostering open communication between parents and kids)</p>	We are responsible for ourselves and for one another.
Common sense and logic	<p>Investing wisely, common sense, resourcefulness</p> <p>Personal growth (the desire to continue to educate one's self and grow and improve)</p>	Let's do what works.
Protection and safety	<p>Protecting vulnerable people, including children</p> <p>Safety is a right (all people have a fundamental right to feel safe and be safe in every part of their daily lives)</p>	All people should feel safe and be safe at home, at school, in recreation, and other parts of their daily lives.
Education and growth	<p>Education has inherent value</p> <p>Intergenerational wisdom (the idea, embodied by the Ghanaian term <i>sankofa</i>,²⁷ that each generation learns from the mistakes of the past and tries to do better for themselves, their families, and society)</p>	We all benefit when young people can learn and reach their full potential.

Second piece of the message: Concise problem statement

This message component answers the question, “What’s wrong?” It clearly and concisely defines the problem you want to solve. How you define the problem affects how people think about solving it. If it is the system you want to change, be sure you’ve included it in the problem definition. For example, defining sexual violence among young people only as a failure of parenting points away from systems change in places where young people spend time, such as schools or youth-serving organizations.

In your desire to communicate how big, and how important, sexual violence prevention is, it can be tempting to try and say everything that you know any time you have the opportunity to talk about it. But remember:

It is impossible to be comprehensive and strategic at the same time.

To make your statement of the problem clear and understandable, focus on just one aspect. Once you have narrowed the problem, you can choose the information to highlight in your message. Including carefully selected facts as part of your messaging can help your audience see that there might be some important things about sexual violence that they did not know, which could make them more open to learning

about prevention. What data could you use to illustrate the problem you want to solve?



Third piece of the message: Description of solution

Though the strategy will vary depending on your audience and other contextual factors, it’s important that your message reference an approach to preventing sexual harassment, abuse, and assault. If your message doesn’t give your audience some idea of what can be done or is being done to stop sexual violence before it happens, they may feel so overwhelmed by their fear of and anxiety about the topic that they “close down” and don’t hear what you have to say. The good news is that there are many different approaches to preventing sexual

violence, ranging from individual education and skills-building to broad systemic changes in environments and social norms.²

When you're describing your solution, remember to:

- Be concrete
- Be realistic
- Show success



Be concrete. Clearly state the strategy you want to inform your audience about. Preventing a problem as complex as sexual violence will require such a wide range of approaches that it can feel overwhelming to pick just one — or it might feel like you are betraying all the other things that must be done in the big picture. But by naming your immediate strategy, you will help people see how one specific and realistic step contributes to larger, long-term prevention efforts.

Avoid vague phrases like “changing culture” or “training and education.” Those are important ideas, of course, but people do not have a clear idea of what they mean. With so few models of success that come to mind for people, it’s up to us to help “bring prevention to life” with concrete stories and examples. So, for example, instead of talking about “engaging men,” you could talk about specific strategies to engage men and boys as allies in targeted settings, like in fraternities or on sports teams.

Be realistic. For many people, phrases like “ending sexual violence” don’t feel realistic. It can be difficult to imagine a world in which sexual violence does not exist or even a world where it is rare. One way to help audiences see prevention as possible is to narrow the focus from preventing all acts of sexual violence to creating specific environments in which people who might commit abuse or assault do not believe they can get away with it, whether at work, at school, or in other community spaces.

It can also be helpful to remind people of other social problems or norms that once seemed inevitable or taboo, yet large-scale attitude, norms, and behavior changes have been made. Several public health issues — like drinking and driving, second-hand smoke, or using car seats for infants and children — are good examples of these types of changes, and they can be helpful when illustrating that something big like preventing sexual violence is possible. Stories that evoke these kinds of issues can remind people that while preventing sexual harassment, abuse, and assault can feel challenging, it isn’t the first time we’ve taken on big issues and dramatically reshaped how the public thinks about them. See page 32 for examples of public-health success that show prevention is possible.

Audiences are most likely to connect success in other public health issues to sexual violence when the examples of problems — and solutions — apply to broad swaths of society, involve individual behaviors that could harm others, and are seen as “settled” issues rather than ongoing problems that are up for debate.⁴

Show success. People need to know not only that prevention is possible — they need to know that it works. Success measures probably won’t be dramatic, and they don’t have to be.

Think about the measures of success that will connect with your audience. Stories and anecdotes can be powerful tools to show success. Even stories that focus on one person’s experience with prevention can illustrate the possibility and power of systems-level change to prevent sexual harassment, abuse, and assault, like this example, paraphrased from comments made by a practitioner:

My school’s priority is making sure that the young people who are the future of our community can learn, and they can’t do that if they don’t feel safe. That’s why I wanted to make sure that everyone on campus received ongoing training about what

they could do to prevent sexual violence. But I was nervous about how students and staff would react. And to be honest, at first, there were some challenges. But recently I spoke with a student who went through the entire program at new student orientation. He told me that he started out feeling defensive about the training and resistant to participating. He had even planned to voice a complaint about why this course was even necessary! But it ended up being incredibly eye opening and important for him. It made him think differently about a lot of things he hadn't thought about before. Not only did it influence his own behavior and prompt him to have hard conversations with his friends and classmates, but it also led to him joining our student prevention organization and becoming a real prevention champion. That's a story that motivates me to keep working, despite the challenges we sometimes face, to make sure that we as a school do everything in our power to prevent sexual harassment, abuse, and assault and make this a place where young people can thrive.



However you illustrate success, be honest about the challenges (like limited time due to other organizational priorities or inadequate training) that could come up on the road to success, and talk about what can be done to overcome them. That way, the audience can see what an effective, real-world solution could look like and find themselves on the journey to making prevention real in the places where they have influence.

Examples of public-health success that show prevention is possible

You can adapt the descriptions below to incorporate these analogies into your own messages.

Drunk driving: ...In the past, it was common after a night out and a few drinks for many Americans to have “one for the road” and hop behind the wheel and drive home. Drunk drivers killed thousands of people and devastated many lives. Most Americans thought of the problem as an individual one — as someone making a bad choice with bad consequences — or as just part of what came along with the culture of bars and drinking. Over many years, public health and safety officials and mothers who had lost children to drunk driving accidents worked hard to change the way we think about drunk driving and change the laws governing drinking and driving. Today, we as a culture demand greater accountability from those who serve or consume alcohol. That accountability has become a new norm, and as a result, thousands and thousands of lives have been saved. The same can be true for preventing sexual harassment, abuse, and assault. Like drinking and driving, we can make changes and establish new social norms that protect everyone.

Second-hand smoking: Preventing sexual abuse and assault can feel challenging — but this isn’t the first time we’ve taken on such a big issue and won. Not long ago, smoking was an activity that took place virtually everywhere, even on airplanes. Second-hand smoke was a part of everyday life — and it had serious health consequences. Yet, few people felt empowered to ask someone else not to smoke — even if it was causing problems for others. Public health professionals worked for many years to expose the dangers of smoking and second-hand smoke, hold tobacco companies accountable, and pass laws that prohibited smoking in many public places. Over time, smoking rates dropped significantly, and our expectations about where people could or should be allowed to smoke changed. As a result, today Americans are healthier. And just like with smoking, taking on a big challenge like preventing sexual harassment, abuse, and assault is worth it when we know there will be enormous benefits for our whole society at the end of the journey.

Building the message

Constructing an effective message about sexual violence prevention requires thought and planning, and it will need to be adapted to your audience and other contextual factors. But no matter your messenger or audience, structure your message

using these basic guidelines (for more background, see *Where we're going and where we've been: Making the case for preventing sexual violence*⁴):

- Evoke shared values
- Acknowledge discomfort or negative feelings
- Describe a journey toward change, its starting point, and pivotal moments
- State the problem precisely
- Illustrate success
- Name a concrete solution
- Throughout the message, speak plainly and focus on conduct, not character

Some of the pieces of the message may overlap with one another or may appear multiple times. For example, stating the problem may also be the starting place on a journey.

The sequencing of these message components is important. Leading with shared values is a good idea because it gives people an entry point into a difficult conversation. Acknowledging feelings like fear or disgust early on can help the messenger connect with the audience and establish their credibility as a speaker.

Closing thoughts

There's no one message — or even set of messages — that works all the time for everyone. That can make communicating about prevention feel difficult and frustrating. But educating and informing people about preventing sexual harassment, abuse, and assault is an important and worthwhile goal. Fortunately, when we illustrate that prevention is possible; speak plainly; acknowledge doubts and divided feelings; start from a place of shared values; and are thoughtful, clear, and concrete about describing the problem and solution, our communication efforts are stronger and more effective, whatever the context.



Chapter 3

Engaging the media to elevate sexual violence prevention

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How and where will you use these guidelines for developing messages about preventing sexual harassment, abuse, and assault to inform and educate the public? The news media offers important opportunities for raising awareness of an issue and shaping how it is framed, because the public pays attention to news. The news media confer credibility and legitimacy to the topics they report, just by virtue of those topics being chosen to be news.

But the media landscape is crowded, and it can be hard for prevention to “break through” — especially given the dominant frames about sexual violence that focus narrowly on individual stories without the broader context (see Chapter 1). Expanding the news about sexual violence to include prevention can help.

In this chapter, we review ways to generate opportunities to create news that elevates prevention and to engage reporters. It’s not enough to just attract news coverage —

how the stories are framed also matters. We will also describe how you can help reporters tell a more complete story about prevention so they can inform the public about what is possible.

Getting news coverage

“People are interested in stories, not issues, even though the stories may be about people coping with issues...”
- Don Hewitt, longtime 60 Minutes producer²⁸

Legendary producer Don Hewitt’s comment reflects the reality of working with the media: All reporters are in the business of telling stories. To make preventing sexual violence headline news, practitioners must find ways to tell timely, compelling stories about sexual violence through a prevention lens. Here we review three ways to do that: creating news, piggybacking off of breaking news, and generating opinion pieces.

However you choose to create news, remember that reporters and opinion editors will respond to what is newsworthy. Many things make something newsworthy, like timeliness, broad interest, and anniversaries. For example, is the story about something new? News is, well, new, and it can be challenging to find a new angle when we’re working on chronic problems in society like sexual harassment, abuse, and assault. Will the story appeal to a broad audience? The broader the appeal is, the better. Tying your story to a key anniversary date or a familiar, recurring event can also be effective. Other newsworthy elements include injustice, irony, or celebrities and popular culture.

Highlighting what makes your story newsworthy will increase your chances of getting media attention. Your story won’t have to include all of the newsworthy elements listed above, and one element isn’t necessarily better than another. Just be sure the story has at least one or two newsworthy elements.

Creating news

As we saw in Chapter 1, sexual violence is often narrowly framed as a criminal justice issue. But there are many approaches to preventing sexual harassment, abuse, and assault that go beyond criminal justice. To make those approaches visible — and show why they make sense — you can work to expand the range of stories on sexual violence. For

example, instead of only quoting sources who have experienced or perpetrated sexual violence, stories could highlight the people who are working to prevent it; instead of reporting primarily from criminal courtrooms, news stories could explore schools, businesses, or other sites where systems change must happen or is happening so that prevention can take hold; and instead of focusing mostly on solutions that punish people who have committed abuse or assault, articles could also explore what is happening at the local, state, and national levels to foster — or stymie — efforts to stop sexual violence before it starts.

To create news, your organization has to do something worth telling a story about. Think about the elements of any story: a plot, a scene, and characters. Who will the characters be in your story about prevention? What will they do? Where will they do it? Where do they hope to end up?



There are different ways to make different prevention approaches newsworthy, including releasing studies, giving awards, hosting a press conference, or holding a community event. For a guide to writing a press release that can help build awareness of your sexual violence prevention approach, please see *Media relations toolkit*.¹

Expanding the coverage pays off — our analysis of sexual violence in the news found that stories published for reasons other than an act of violence were more likely to include contextual information that makes it easier to talk about prevention.³

Piggybacking on breaking news

In addition to creating news, there will sometimes be opportunities to take advantage of a groundswell of media attention on a related issue and put prevention into the frame. In other words, you should be ready to “piggyback” off of news attention and respond quickly to current and notable stories with strong, timely comments and actions that move the conversation toward prevention. When you identify a connection between your issue and the news of the day, be sure journalists know about it. The issue in the news doesn’t have to be directly related to preventing sexual violence, because issues like immigration,

other types of violence, and poverty are linked with sexual violence and how to stop it from happening. When you see a story that seems like a good opportunity to piggyback, you can build the connection for a reporter and in the process create a newsworthy story.

Unfortunately, but predictably, the most likely opportunity for piggybacking will arise after the next high-profile case of sexual abuse or assault. In that situation, it can be harder to bring prevention forward since the coverage will, by definition, focus on details of a violent act and what to do after the fact. But even when the news is focused on the criminal justice aspects of high-profile arrests and trials, you can take advantage of the groundswell of media attention and insert prevention into the conversation — as many prevention experts did following the arrests and trials of Penn State defensive coach Jerry Sandusky, legendary comedian Bill Cosby, or prominent Hollywood executive Harvey Weinstein.²⁹⁻³⁴

You can start planning now for how to bring prevention into upcoming news conversations. You may be able to anticipate times during the year when stories on sexual violence prevention may be particularly newsworthy. Are there dates or events that have special significance for your work? For a sample calendar that can help you plan piggybacking opportunities, please see *Media relations toolkit*.¹

Contributing opinion pieces

Opinion pieces, including letters to the editor, op-eds, blogs, and editorials, are important because they can illustrate the range of public opinions and concerns about a topic. They also represent opportunities to shift the conversation or elevate perspectives that might be missing. You can contribute opinion pieces to mainstream and online news outlets and blogs.

Opinion pieces can be proactive or reactive. Both strategies provide opportunities to inform the public about prevention. One proactive strategy is to meet with editorial boards and request an editorial to inform readers about prevention approaches and why they matter. A reactive strategy would be to write a letter to the editor to tactfully address problematic or inaccurate news coverage on sexual violence — or to compliment a reporter for effectively bringing up prevention in an article about abuse or assault.

For more information about how to construct an op-ed (an opinion piece written from the point of view of someone who is not affiliated with the publication) or a letter to the editor, please see *Media relations toolkit*.¹

Reporting on sexual violence presents unique challenges. Fortunately, there are many resources available to help journalists provide information about preventing sexual harassment, abuse, and assault (including sample interview protocols, up-to-date statistics, guides to potential sources, and other reporting tools). These tools include:

- Media and press resources compiled by the National Sexual Violence Resource Center³⁵
- “Reporting on Sexual Violence,” offered by the Poynter Institute³⁶
- The DART Center for Journalism and Trauma’s resource page on sexual violence³⁷
- Resources on violence against women from the Solutions Journalism Network³⁸

With input from many of the field leaders who contributed to this research, Berkeley Media Studies Group has also developed recommendations for journalists as part of its analyses of child sexual abuse³⁹ and sexual violence in the news³ to help reporters bring prevention forward in their stories. For more information, see:

- *Case by case: News coverage of child sexual abuse*³⁹
- *What’s missing from the news on sexual violence? An analysis of coverage, 2011-2013*³

Engaging journalists

Engaging the media is about more than getting immediate media attention. It’s also important to build relationships with the journalists who shape the media discussion. Journalists and their editors make daily decisions about which stories to cover and which to pass up. Whatever the story idea, practitioners and allies bolster their chances of being selected for the news by developing relationships with reporters. Put another way,

journalists can only include information about prevention in stories if they know about the people and organizations who are making prevention happen.

To identify reporters with whom you want to build relationships, follow media coverage to determine which outlets and reporters are writing about sexual harassment, abuse, and assault — particularly those who write about it well and include solutions in their coverage. Keep a media list so you can stay in contact with those journalists.

You can foster and sustain relationships with journalists by:

- meeting with reporters to introduce yourself and your organization so they can learn about the types of data and other information you can provide;
- connecting with them on social media, particularly on Twitter;
- complimenting reporters who include prevention in their stories;
- contacting reporters after they've written about sexual violence to tell them you appreciated the article, to provide information about prevention, and suggest ways to include it in future stories; and
- inviting reporters to news conferences, community events, and other opportunities for news coverage. For a guide to writing a media advisory and inviting reporters to your event, please see *Media relations toolkit*.¹

If prevention stakeholders connect with reporters and become trusted sources, reporters will have somewhere to go for data and information when they have a story to tell. Being a trusted source means being ready and willing to talk with journalists and share resources — and to do it on a tight deadline when journalists are covering breaking news. That requires developing media skills, including the ability to concisely frame sexual violence prevention and why it matters.

When you have limited time to share information (for example, in an interview with a reporter in which you want to provide a quick media bite) you might not be able to deliver a message that includes everything you'd like to say.

When time is limited, what information should you plan to include? You'll need to decide as you prepare for the interview, because if you don't choose, the reporter will, and the reporter might not choose correctly. That may feel frustrating, but when it comes to working with reporters, the constraints of time, word count, and attention are real and pressing. That's why it is helpful to identify one key message and example you think will be especially important for your audience so the reporter will have a tangible example of prevention and you won't deliver more than the reporter can use.

You won't be able to say everything you know about preventing sexual violence in every instance. You simply can't be comprehensive and strategic at the same time. But even in a short message, lead with shared values and include a concrete statement of what your approach is and why it's the right one. Even if you don't have the opportunity to model a full journey, you can still use journey language such as "I've learned..."

For example, imagine that a reporter you've built a relationship with calls and asks you about a high-profile sexual assault that happened at the local community college. You will have to respond to the specifics of the case and the reporter's questions, but you can also take advantage of the opportunity to put prevention in the conversation. Don't wait for the reporter to ask you about it — instead, as you answer, say, "...and what really upsets me is that I know we can do a better job at prevention." You could then add what your organization is doing about prevention on college campuses.

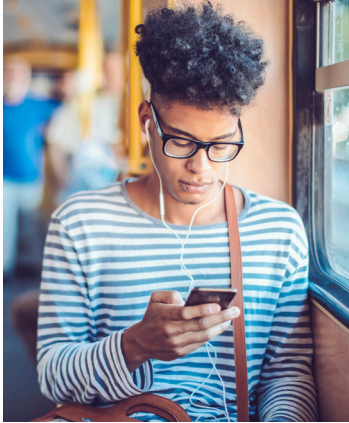
The key point here is that prevention won't be included in the conversation unless you introduce it explicitly.

Developing and providing story elements

Another way to be a trusted source for reporters is to provide them with the resources that help them tell a compelling story that provides information about preventing sexual violence. We call those "story elements," and they can include things like authentic voices, compelling visuals, social math, and media bites.

Authentic voices: Authentic voices can be an important part of your "messenger mix" (see page 21). That's because we know that reporters tell stories and stories need characters.

Authentic voices, or people who have been directly impacted by a problem, make especially compelling characters. And as we have seen, sharing personal journeys can be a powerful way to provide information about prevention, what it looks like, where it can happen, and who can be part of it.



Different members of your networks have personal experiences that give them the authority to provide information about different aspects of our journey as a society toward preventing sexual violence before it happens. In sexual violence prevention stories, authentic voices who could share their prevention journeys might include survivors of sexual abuse or assault; college administrators who see the value of campus-wide prevention efforts; or the staff of after-school programs who can speak about their experiences with teaching children about consent and healthy relationships from an early age.

When you connect a reporter with an authentic voice, make sure the speaker is prepared with the skills they need to succeed. Preparing your messengers means you have to do some preparation yourself. You will need to spend time and resources figuring out what messengers you need and finding them, especially if you need to enlist people outside your organization or coalition.

Authentic voices will need to be trained: This could be as simple as an informal mock interview between two staff members or more formal opportunities to practice making the case for prevention. For help structuring mock interviews, Appendix A lists **pivot phrases** that you can share with your messengers to help them keep an interview on track. Appendix B has information that can prepare your messengers for **answering difficult questions**.

For more information about how to help an authentic voice prepare for an interview, please see *Media relations toolkit*.¹

Compelling visuals: Visuals can help make complex ideas accessible. In this guide, for instance, we've used some images that illustrate journeys because we know that the metaphor can help people visualize and better understand prevention in a variety of contexts.

Compelling visuals can quickly frame a story and help journalists cover prevention or convince an editor to place the story more prominently. Dramatic visuals are important for print or online news stories because these days, all media rely on images in our increasingly visual culture. Television or video news is by necessity dependent upon images for telling stories, so if you're hoping to have news cameras at your event or news conference, you will have to have good visuals!



Photo courtesy of Peace Over Violence. Participants in Denim Day, an annual event designed to raise awareness of and engagement around sexual violence prevention and support for survivors.

Use your creativity and strategic thinking to brainstorm images that can help advance your goal. To do that, think: What would I want the audience to see that will help them understand that preventing sexual violence is not only possible but really happening? Typical news stories will picture people talking (to each other, the reporter, or at a news conference); more engaging news stories will picture people — the characters in the story — *doing* something. What would they be doing that can illustrate prevention?

As you're selecting visuals to use, it can be helpful to think about questions like:

- Does this image reinforce problematic frames?
- Does this image represent my community?
- Will seeing this help my audience understand more about approaches to preventing sexual harassment, abuse, and assault in different places?

Social math: Every day, people are bombarded with big numbers. After a certain point, those numbers stop making sense, which is why social math (translating statistics and other data so they become meaningful) is useful. By placing statistics in a context that provides instant meaning, social math helps audiences see why large numbers matter and makes them comprehensible, compelling, and memorable.

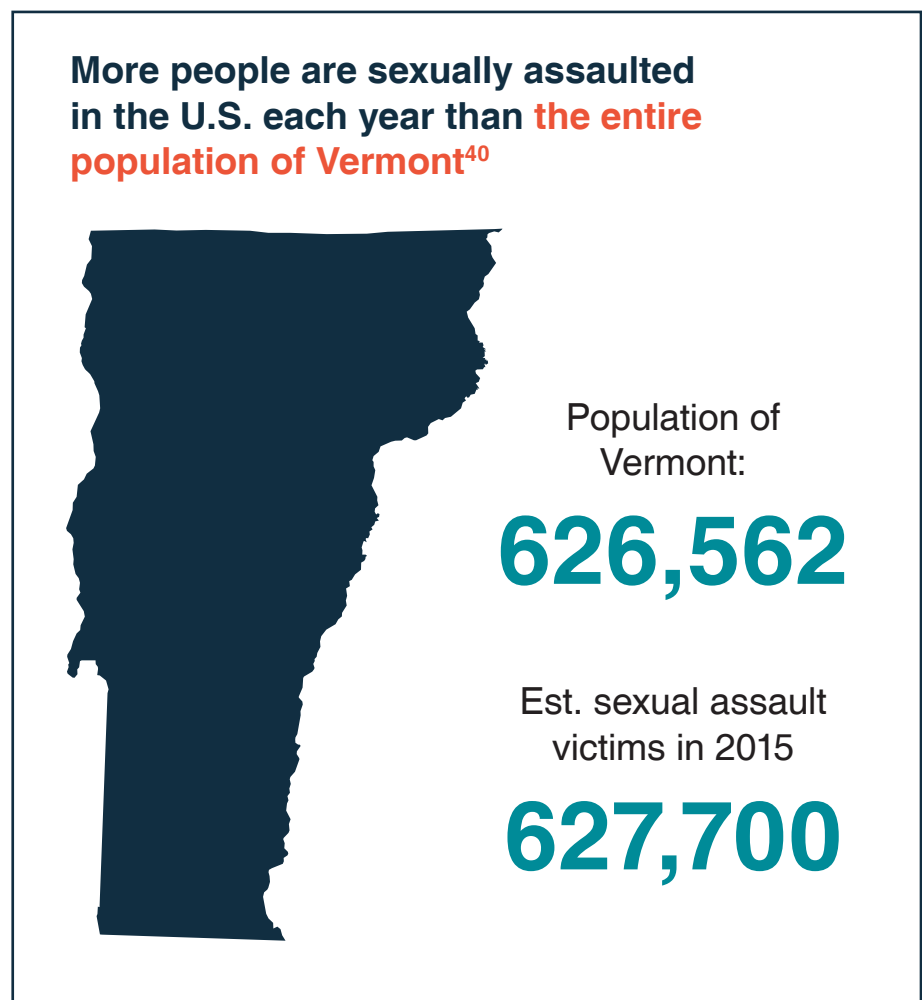
To develop effective social math, choose statistics that convey the information you want to share in an understandable way — if the data you want to present are available only in a statistical model that is understandable to very few people, it might be hard to make meaningful for a lay audience. Also, keep the overall number of statistics you use in interviews, graphs, and other media-related materials to a minimum. The more numbers you provide, the more likely your point will be lost.

Once you've selected which numbers to use, it's time to make some creative comparisons. Try breaking the numbers down by time — if you are trying to illustrate the number of cases of sexual harassment, abuse, or assault over a year, what does that look like per hour? Per minute? Or, you could break down the numbers by place — comparing a statistic with a well-known place, or someplace local and familiar to news consumers, can give people a sense of the statistic's magnitude. For instance, an article in *Vox*

reported that more people are sexually assaulted in the U.S. each year than the entire population of Vermont (see Figure 2).⁴⁰

You could also provide comparisons with familiar things. Data showing that the lifetime cost of rape is \$122,461 per victim⁴¹ (including physical and mental health treatment, lost productivity, criminal justice costs, and property loss or damage) presents a number of opportunities for social math: For example, you could find out how many children could receive mentoring in your community in a year for that amount of money, or find out how much a four-year degree at your local university costs and see how it compares. The comparison could highlight the prevention approach you're taking while illustrating how those dollars could be better spent.

Figure 2: Social math illustrating scope of sexual harassment, abuse, and assault in the United States.



The choices you make will depend on what you know about the people who will see or hear the story, and what you want them to take away from it — the point is for people to focus on the meaning behind the numbers, rather than the numbers themselves.



Media bites: One essential fact of the media is that news time (and space) is limited — there are always more stories than will fit in the newspaper, TV broadcast, or even online. That means people are quoted in stories for only one or two sentences. You're more likely to be quoted in the newspaper or on a news program if you can make your point in a short, concise, compelling fashion — in other words, if you can use a media bite.

Media bites are the short, memorable statements that communicate your message and can be easily quoted. Think of the news interviews you have heard in which the speaker said something that got you to pay attention or agree with a point he or she raised. Perhaps it was a summary statement or a response to a question. Maybe the speaker elicited irony, humor, values, or images. In any case, the speaker said something concise and clear with conviction that resonated with you. He or she used a media bite. For example, in her editorial pointing to the connection between sexual abuse and power imbalances, Alissa Quart, contributor at *The Guardian* and executive editor of the Economic Hardship Reporting Project, pulled back the lens to show root causes of sexual harassment, noting, "Sexual harassment routinely feeds on income inequality. After all, it's much harder to exploit an equal."⁴²

How do you develop media bites? Use our message elements, and speak to shared values such as community and caring,

or protection and safety. Mention a fact that helps concisely illustrate the problem. Provide information about an important approach. Help people see themselves on a journey toward change. Your media bite doesn't have to contain all of these elements; just try one or two.

Try answering a reporter's typical question about your program or prevention approach, or even a general question like, "How can we prevent sexual violence?" and see if you can synthesize the message elements into a sentence or two. Then try again, out loud, with colleagues. They'll tell you when you've captured the essence and when you need more practice.

Closing thoughts

The media can be a megaphone that can help us reframe sexual violence and communicate with a broad audience about how to prevent sexual harassment, abuse, and assault. We hope that after reading this chapter, your head is filled with creative ideas to attract media attention and engage journalists so that you can use the news media effectively.



Conclusion

Sexual violence is a widespread public health and social justice problem — but it is a problem that, together, we can prevent. The recommendations in this guide are grounded in the experiences of people leading prevention work across the country. Over the last five years, those experts have helped us identify the best ways to effectively frame approaches to preventing sexual harassment, abuse, and assault across the lifespan.

Problematic frames that emphasize fear and hopelessness dominate the public conversation about sexual violence. Fortunately, there are many opportunities to widen that frame by elevating shared values around community, caring, safety, and education and illustrating possible approaches that can prevent it before it happens. The news media, in particular, is an important space for disseminating these messages and shifting the conversation, though “breaking through” the crowded media landscape will require prevention experts to create news and engage journalists in ways that will necessitate time and planning.

Preventing problems as big as sexual harassment, abuse, and assault can feel overwhelming. But over the five years of being immersed in the field of sexual violence prevention and being lucky enough to work with many experts, we’ve become surer than ever that embedding prevention in our institutions, our beliefs, and our communities is possible, and that it’s moving forward — maybe slowly, but always surely. We hope this guide will be a valuable resource on that journey.

Appendix A: Pivot phrases to keep an interview on track

When a discussion is veering off track, how can you redirect the conversation to where you want to end up? Here are some options to consider.

When the conversation is focused more on treatment after-the-fact, you can pivot to **prevention** by saying:

It's important to think about what we can do to protect ourselves, but it's also important to think about steps we can take to make everyone safer. That's why...

When the discussion isn't broad enough, you can pivot to **inclusion** by saying:

I want to make sure we have a chance to talk about a group that sometimes gets forgotten when we talk about sexual abuse and assault...

Of course parents are responsible for their children. But when it comes to sexual assault, responsibility goes beyond parents. It's every adult's responsibility to protect children...

I think it's important we take a step back...

When people back away because the topic is making them **uncomfortable**, you can say:

This topic makes many of us uncomfortable. But we talk to our children about fire safety, stranger danger, drug use, and bullying. This is just one more really important topic we need to cover to help keep kids safe.

When people are having a hard time moving from a **portrait to a landscape**, you can say:

We need to hold people accountable — and we need to hold systems accountable too, because we know abuse like this doesn't happen in a vacuum. Our question is, "What can we learn about how systems and structures affect behavior, and how we can do better?"

This is a terrible story, and as we talk about it and how we can support the victim, it's also important that we think about what can be done to spare other people, families, and communities the pain we are feeling now...

Parents have a very important role to play. Parents also need help. We can make it easier for them by...

This person has absolutely done huge damage. That trauma will be with us for a long time. We can't lose sight of that. And we also can't lose sight of the fact that if we're all going to be safe, we need to make sure we're doing everything we can to stop something like this from happening in the future. One thing we can do today is...

And to pivot from almost anything to **get to where you want the conversation to go**, you can say:

I think what's most important here is...

Appendix B: Answering tough questions

As you prepare to communicate about sexual violence prevention, take some time to think through difficult questions that you might be asked. Sometimes, a question is hard to answer because it's very broad, and you'll need to narrow the focus to include the prevention strategy you're working on right now. Other questions may be difficult to answer because they fall outside your area of expertise; in that case, you'll need to refer the questioner to someone who does have the expertise. Sometimes questions are based on problematic frames about sexual violence, and you'll need to reframe.

Here are a few examples of hard questions and some points to consider in thinking about how to respond to them. You can use pivot phrases, and keep in mind that you may need to respond first to the difficult emotions that might lie behind someone's question. When you can, elevate values and tangible solutions on your journey to prevention. And although thinking through potential responses is good, practicing them out loud with your colleagues or other allies is even better.

Tough question: How do we end sexual violence?

This question is extremely broad, and where you choose to focus your response should be guided by your overall strategy. Remember that you can't be comprehensive and strategic at the same time, but you can use the question as an opportunity to highlight the key strategies you're working on right now. For example:

Ending sexual violence is a big task of course; I used to find it daunting. But over time I have seen that there is a lot that can be done to prevent sexual violence before it happens in the first place. I've been amazed by what some groups are doing. For instance...

Tough question: Is it even possible to prevent sexual violence?

This question is rooted in the idea that sexual violence is an inevitable fact of life. Your first task may be to address the

emotions that can underlie this belief, such as resignation, hopelessness, or overwhelm. One effective way to do this is to show how you came to believe that prevention is possible. Include concrete examples of what prevention looks like and how it has worked in the past. For example:

When I first started out in my career, I wondered the same thing. I didn't think that we could really do anything beyond supporting victims. But then I started learning more about what other organizations have done to prevent sexual abuse and assault before they happen, and I thought, we can do that too! Now we're excited because...

Tough question: What are five things students can do to stay safe on campus?

There are a number of pitfalls to avoid in answering this question. First, resist the temptation to rattle off a laundry list of prevention strategies. Instead, make sure that your response is focused on your overall strategy.

Second, notice that the question reflects the “default frame” of rugged individualism: It's asking what individuals can do to reduce their risk of becoming victims, rather than what the campus community can do to keep everyone safe. In order to answer this question effectively and make the case for prevention, it will be important to shift that framing.

All students should feel safe and protected on campus to learn and grow up into the adults who are the future of our community. But safety isn't just up to students. Along with the things individual students can do to protect themselves, I want to make sure we don't lose sight of what campuses can do and are doing to help students and staff feel confident about stepping in and speaking up when something doesn't seem right, or changing the norms on campus so people know that harming someone else or violating their boundaries won't be tolerated. The tips for individuals are here but the most important one is that each person joins us in making sure the campus is a safe place where everyone is supported to do their best.

Tough question: What does prevention look like?

Unless you're writing a book, you will have to choose among the many approaches to prevention² when you answer this question. How do you decide which approach to emphasize right now? Just like everything else, that will depend on your overall strategy. Of course you can say that your approach is one of many, but you'll want your questioner to understand why you've chosen this particular approach in this time and place. Once you've specified that, the question is an open door to bring in your values and apply all of the message recommendations you've studied in this guide.

I used to think that the best we could do with sexual violence was to help victims after the fact, but over my years working with kids, I've seen that prevention is possible — it's about creating safe and nurturing environments that support everyone. That will look different depending on where you are. When I worked in our pre-school program, prevention meant training our staff to recognize problematic behavior so they would know how to intervene and talk with families. In our after-school program, where I now work with teens, prevention is about helping everyone talk comfortably about consent and safe dating so our kids feel supported and able to stand up for themselves and each other. I'm proud of the work the staff does. It reminds me of why I entered this field to begin with: I want to help create a world where our kids grow up safe and healthy. We still have more to learn, for sure, but the practices we follow here mean we are definitely on the road to supporting our kids and helping them reach their highest potential.

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