



New York City Alliance
Against Sexual Assault

“Communicating Effectively about Support Service Information: What Works with Teens Seeking Help for Violence in their Lives?”

A Summary Report of Findings

Executive Summary

- *Many participants provided stories of their experiences with friends, acquaintances, or family members who experienced some form of dating or sexual violence. Depending on the type of violence experienced, participants either were able to help their friend by providing information on available services, they were unaware of existing services and wished they had more information, or they expressed feelings of hopelessness to change particularly violent situations. The participants’ accounts indicate a need for tailored information on specific support services that reflect the range of violence that youth may encounter.*
- *Overwhelmingly, the participants believed that *the first step to take when experiencing a rape or sexual assault was to go to the police.* Though many participants also mentioned getting help for the emotional impact that sexual violence may have, the students’ focus on criminal justice outcomes reflects a need to increase education on the importance of seeking help for emotional trauma as well.*
- *Participants mentioned a range of people to whom they would go for help with a problem of dating or sexual violence, including: school guidance and non-school counselors, friends, other family members including older siblings, parents. The younger students in particular emphasized the importance finding a confidant older than themselves.*
- *When asked *where they would go for information about sexual or dating violence, students mentioned schools, hospitals, the Internet.* Many of these students attended the McBurney YMCA “Monsta’ Health Fair” in December 2005, and nearly all who attended kept many of the materials on youth-specific health services they received – indicating the importance of creating more opportunities and events for youth to gather information on local services.*
- *The majority of participants mentioned *confidentiality* as a concern when accessing services, demonstrating the need to be clear about young people’s rights and stating exactly what services are confidential. When discussing where they would go for services, *all participants said they would go somewhere farther away from their neighborhood to avoid being recognized in their community.**
- *Participants suggested a range of formats for developing youth-specific resources, including wallet cards, key chains, bookmarks, classroom posters, refrigerator magnets, and school folders or academic planners. The students emphasized that *the more functional and practical the product, the more likely they will be to keep it and use it in the future.**
- *Students mentioned a range of places to distribute information to teens, including schools, libraries, hospitals, shopping malls and movie theaters. Several students discussed the importance of doing *presentations or workshops in schools,* indicating an area for future collaboration with NYC junior and high schools.*

I. Introduction/Objectives

A recent survey of young women between 15 and 24 in New York City found a high prevalence of current dating relationships characterized by coercion (60%), forced sexual experiences (27%), and physical violence (22%). This study also found a significant relationship between the frequency of sexual and physical violence and condom use at last sex. In addition, the study found that young women reported that they participated in violent and coercive behavior to the same degree as that of their male partners.¹

Developing a better understanding of the factors characterizing the adolescents participating in the behavior and of the range of outcomes experienced is essential to developing effective violence prevention programs.² Given the significant numbers of youth – both girls and boys – who experience dating and sexual violence in their lives, it is crucial that we develop effective support service information targeted at young people, based on their needs and experiences with violence.

The New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault (the Alliance) aims to address this issue by asking youth in New York City: What types of support service materials are most effective for young people seeking help for violence in their lives?

The goal is to determine the most effective means of providing resource information to youth (i.e. is it through text messaging referral and hotline numbers to cell phones, or through developing a wallet-sized card, etc.?) Using a health communication model, the Alliance has conducted four focus groups with youth to determine an effective means for developing and distributing resource information to young people. The overarching purpose is to ensure that youth have information about and access to support services.

II. Methodology

In order to meet these objectives, the Alliance used a focus group tool covering two main areas:

1. Questions on help-seeking options for people who seek help for violence in their lives
2. Questions on the effectiveness of existing resource materials, and suggestions for improvement

Four focus group discussions were conducted with a total of 16 adolescents and young adults. The participants' ages ranged from 14-23 years and parent consent forms were obtained for all participants under the age of 18. The focus groups were conducted at the High School for Leadership and Public Service, McBurney YMCA, and the NYC Alliance Against Sexual Assault during March and April of 2006. Each group lasted

¹ Davidson LL. *Prevalence of intimate partner violence in urban young women: Experiences with disclosure in health care settings*. Washington, DC: APHA presentation; 2004.

² Carolyn Olson E, Rickert VI, Davidson LL. Identifying and supporting young women experiencing dating violence: what health practitioners should be doing NOW. *Journal of pediatric and adolescent gynecology*. 2004; 17(2):131-6.

approximately one hour, and all groups were moderated by the Research Associate of the Alliance.

A summary of the findings from these research groups follows.

III. Findings

Help-Seeking Behaviors: What Young People Would Do When Looking for Information or Help about Violence

- When asked if they had ever known anyone who had experienced sexual or dating violence, *a significant number of participants reported having known someone, often a friend or family member, who experienced some type of violence in their lives.* Many of the younger and older students shared stories of knowing a friend or another young student who was raped.
 - “It’s real sad ’cause I do know girls that have been raped in the past. They don’t tell anyone, they don’t tell the authorities, they feel ashamed or they think it’s their fault. Sometimes it’s like things happened in the past and it’s too late and you should have told your mom or gone to the police. Regardless...they don’t have a right to do it. It’s usually a boyfriend or someone they know, an acquaintance. It was never a stranger. I never known a girl that said she was walking and someone just snatched her... Something that’s heavy out there, it’s serious, a lot of girls are getting raped. That’s why I wanted to participate ’cause I could sort of relate. It’s part of trying to get information out to people who’ve been raped or abused.” – *Male student, 17 years old*

The same student shared an account of how a friend confided in him and his response:

- “I had a friend who was raped. I asked her if she told anyone else and she said no, so I gave her some numbers to call to get a check up, like a teen clinic. I got the numbers through a friend. She was keeping it to herself, didn’t tell anyone...she was bleeding and I told her to get a check up.”

One young student recounted a situation that involved her aunt and uncle. This student’s story addressed issues of immigration and border-crossing, as well as the shame one often experiences following a rape. In thinking about how she could try to help her aunt, the student expressed feelings of powerlessness to change the violent situation, on the part of her aunt as well as herself and other family members:

- “My aunt...she had to cross the border and my grandfather...he sent this guy to go with her and this guy brought his cousin. When they were in Tijuana, the guy, who’s now my uncle, was like ‘let’s stop at a hotel’. Her parents didn’t tell her anything about sex or anything because they’re old fashioned, and she was just 17. The guy...he ended up raping her. And he’s my uncle now. She felt dirty because back in the day they used to be like, ‘oh if someone does that to you you’re not the same anymore’. So she didn’t know what to do. She didn’t say stop because no one told her what to do...After that, she had a boyfriend here in the USA but she didn’t go to him ’cause she felt dirty. So she stayed with the guy and he made her abort

because she found out she was pregnant two weeks later. He...hits her and everything, and he made her have four children...my aunt, she didn't want to tell anyone what was happening. She just revealed the truth two months ago, and even her sisters didn't know what was happening. She doesn't know what to do cause he threatens to kill her...I feel bad but we can't do anything. We tell her to get a divorce and to go to the police, but she already asked for a divorce and he got even madder. My parents are trying to help because it's my dad's sister but [my uncle] threatened to kill her and he doesn't want to make anything worse because he might kill her..."
– *Female student, 15 years old*

- The majority of the participants believed that *the first thing to do if a friend was raped was "go to the cops"*. One student told a story of an adult she knew was beating his wife who then went to the cops. Interestingly, this student closed by referring to the adult's problem as "anger management", reflecting her understanding that he had a problem but referring to the treatment as though it were an affliction:
 - "They should go to the cops. To go to counseling, for me, it's going to take forever to get better, but if you go to the cops they'll stop. This person I knew yelled at her husband saying 'you cheated on me with a 16 year old girl' and he was 18 and he just closed the door and he had a daughter and two kids and the daughter was awake and was crying and all you could hear was ripping, the clothes, and screaming, and then when she got out this person slammed the door on him and called the cops... So he was in jail and he came back two days later, he calmed down, he stopped, apologized to her. He has anger management, all his children have it, but it stopped because probably the police said something to him and it worked. Right now they're just fine." – *Female student, 15 years old*

Several of the young adult participants also agreed that going to the police was the first step they would take, although this was often due to lack of knowledge about other resources:

- "I know of several friends who either didn't do anything because they wanted to forget it and just put it behind them, or maybe they thought about going to the police. But generally I know a lot of people who don't know what's available." – *Female student, 22 years old*
- Several students, however, raised concerns about going first to the cops and felt it was just as important *to seek counseling, get help, and talk to others*:
 - "Sometimes you don't want to go to the cops first, because you're traumatized, and the cops, they just want to focus on arresting the perpetrator, they don't want to focus on the victim. They ask you questions and stuff that make it hurt worse; they might still feel worse. Then you go through counseling. You want to go to the point where you can come out and tell people about it and then you can tell the cops. 'Cause when you get to the jury, they put you on the stand and you got everybody looking at you, they got stenographers and stuff like that and sometimes you're embarrassed 'cause people don't want to even admit that this happened to them, then you gotta tell it to everybody and then the

person who did this to you – they got a right to be there but you don't want them to be there too.” – *Male student, 15 years old*

- “Seek help is the first thing to do. I know it's not an easy situation to go through but if you let others know what happened there's more chance that they'll get better.” – *Female student, 14 years old*
- One student shared a story of how she helped a friend go to a specific youth organization: “I have one friend that was getting beat up by her boyfriend...so I took her to someplace called The Door...I brought her in to get counseling, and then the second time she went back with her boyfriend. They ended up breaking up, but he's in some anger management program there now. He still goes there and she doesn't.” – *Female student, 15 or 16 years old*
- In general, students mentioned the following people when asked *who* they ask for help (apart from going to the police, as mentioned above):
 - School guidance counselors (though several students expressed concerns about confidentiality, and would not go to their counselor if they thought their parents would become involved). One student preferred to go to a counselor not at her school, so that others didn't wonder why she was in the “counseling room”.
 - Friends they trusted
 - An administrator or principal (in the case of sexual harassment by another student at school)
 - Other trusted family members (in the case of someone experiencing sexual abuse in the family)
 - Some students mentioned their parents, though many disagreed on this point:
 - “It depends on the relationship with your friends, or your mom. Most people I know wouldn't go to their mom. They'd go to their friends.” – *Female student, 17 years old*;
 - “I don't feel comfortable going to mom unless it's a really big thing, I'm too scared of what she's going to say.” – *Female student, 15 years old*
 - Older siblings. Younger students tended to mention the importance of confiding in someone older than them:
 - “Someone older definitely. There's always a fear that if you tell them you will be judged, but go to someone older you can trust.” – *Female student, 14 years old*
- When asked *where* they would go for information about sexual or dating violence, the participants mentioned the following places:
 - School
 - Hospital
 - Internet
 - Many students mentioned having received – and kept – a lot of information at the “Monsta' Fair” held at the McBurney YMCA in

December 2005, indicating the need to increase opportunities and events like these for youth to learn about local services.

- When asked about their knowledge about existing services, *several students expressed concern at the lack of information available to them* around their homes and at school, indicating a need for increased publicity about the problem of sexual violence and existing services:
 - “There’s not a lot around the neighborhood, mostly you just see a lot about clothes and perfume, things that are not important, and things that are important you don’t find. Only on commercials sometimes.” – *Female student, 15 years old*
 - “I don’t see much [around my building], I think people start to do things when something happens, like after something horrible happens.” – *Female student, 15 years old*

Support Service Information: Youth Feedback on How to Develop Effective Materials

- Using as an example a bookmark created by the Alliance for high school presentations, the focus group participants offered their opinions on its usefulness and suggestions on how it could be improved. Students suggested including *additional information* such as:
 - Information on places they can go if they need someone to stay with
 - Names of youth groups, including the times that they meet and where
 - Information on after school programs
 - Information in Spanish and on resources for Spanish-speakers
 - Highlight information on confidential services
 - One student suggested involving young survivors of sexual violence:
 - “You could have people who went through something like this, they can write something. Having someone that went through your situation helps ’cause then you think ‘oh this person went through it too and they got through it.’” – *Female student, 15 years old*
 - Other participants mentioned the importance of making information on services available to all youth who are interested, and not just those who have experienced rape:
 - “I feel like I know a lot of people who are in sort of mildly abusive relationships or mutually abusive relationships and that seems to be more like people don’t realize it’s wrong, more than a direct violent rape or something like that...that kind of stuff people don’t get help for because they don’t realize it’s wrong. So it should mention everything that could be harmful, not just rape.” – *Female student, 23 years old*
 - “Should make clear that services are open to all people, not just those who have been raped or think they might be pregnant as a result.” – *Female student, 23 years old*
 - Be sure the information listed is clear about what services the organization offers and why one would go there (i.e., one participant pointed out that

she didn't know what RAINN stood for or why she would call them. RAINN was listed as a hotline on the youth bookmark).

- When asked if there was any information they believed should NOT be included or if there was anything that would discourage them from seeking help, *the majority of the participants expressed concerns regarding confidentiality and feelings of shame and fear of judgment:*
 - Several youth expressed that they are often “afraid of being judged”, and suggested that materials should include assurances that they won't be judged.
 - “Sometimes you're not comfortable 'cause sometimes they say it's confidential but then they let your parents know.” – *Female student, 15 years old*
 - “Don't say you'll involve your parents. Like I'd rather go to a teen clinic than a regular clinic, because I don't want my parents to know.” – *Male student, 17 years old*

Other participants were concerned about including any information that tells them they are obliged to do certain things when reporting a rape or sexual assault:

- “[I would try not to include] anything that made it sound like I HAD to do something, like ‘first you have to do this, then this, then this’ etc. It could be more daunting than saying ‘maybe you should get help for this.’” – *Female participant, 23 years old*
 - “Initially, [I would want to know what happens when you go to the police] but not everything. It might deter you down the line to know that you have to do this and this and this... but it's good to know what happens initially.” – *Female student, 23 years old*
- Participants also provided suggestions on *other formats they would be interested in* receiving or ways they would be interested in learning about issues related to violence:
 - Pens
 - T-shirts
 - Wallet card
 - Postcard
 - Brochures
 - Refrigerator magnets
 - Subway advertisements
 - Text messages (useful because people throw away flyers)
 - Key chains (this was mentioned by several participants as a useful product, since everyone carries keys and a key chain is always readily available)
 - Commercials (one student mentioned programming on Lifetime Television)
 - Bracelets (such as the “Lance Armstrong” bracelets)
 - Internet pop-up advertisements
 - Information included on school folders or academic planners
 - Classroom posters

- Pocket guide

Several students expressed how important they felt this information was, and how they often kept useful and handy materials around, indicating how essential it is to develop practical and functional youth-specific resources:

- “I have everything – I have these cards, key chain, bookmark – all this stuff comes in handy. Like I wasn’t reading a book so I didn’t have a bookmark but then my friend was looking for information so she could get some testing done and I just looked at my key chain and gave her the address to go to The Door and gave her the number so she could make an appointment. Key chains are better than a piece of paper, ’cause I always have my keys on me.”
- Regarding the distribution of youth-specific resources, the participants mentioned the following locations to make resources available for teens:
 - Schools, bulletin boards
 - Hospitals
 - Libraries
 - Shopping malls
 - Movie theaters (one suggested handing out bookmarks at the box office together with the movie tickets; another mentioned making a trailer for viewing at the theater)
 - Clinics
 - Internet

Several students also mentioned the importance of working with schools and conducting workshops where support service information would be made available, indicating opportunities for collaboration with NYC high schools.

- When asked if they would prefer to go somewhere in their neighborhood or somewhere farther away when seeking help, *nearly all of the participants would go somewhere farther away* where there was little risk of being recognized by another person in their community:
 - “I would prefer someplace farther away. People would ask what you’re doing here. I’d go farther; like I live in Queens and I’d go to the Bronx.” – *Female student, 15 years old*
- When asked about their awareness of other public health campaigns, such as the “Know HIV/AIDS” campaign, *nearly all participants recognized the campaign and emphasized the effectiveness of such campaigns that involve celebrities*:
 - “They’re good, ’cause if you see other people like you’re friends doing something like get tested you think you should do it. It’s like that with everything, like if your friend’s smoking weed. So if your friends are getting tested you think you should – and when you see celebrities doing it, you say ‘I wanna be like P. Diddy, or Cameron Diaz. I wanna know my status.’” – *Male student, 15 years old*

One student even suggested getting Oprah Winfrey to make an announcement on her

show. Others mentioned the effectiveness of the Hepatitis C advertisements seen on NYC subways, Aldo Shoes HIV/AIDS advertisements, and posters on acceptance of homosexuality (showing Ben Affleck and Casey Affleck together).

- When asked about developing *resource materials for people who are seeking help for being abusive or violent in their relationships*, all participants emphasized the importance of seeking help, getting counseling, finding a therapist, or attending some sort of anger management therapy. Participants made the following suggestions:
 - Messages should start at a young age, perhaps even younger than high school-age, to educate about healthy and unhealthy relationships
 - Information should be culturally sensitive: sometimes certain violent behaviors may be more acceptable within certain cultures. Perpetrators of violence might be aware that their behavior is wrong but information should not be accusatory, which may discourage some people from seeking help.
 - Information should be blunt and to the point, and make them aware that they need to get help
 - One participant suggested letting people know of the consequences of their behavior (though others felt that fear of getting arrested may make some people afraid of admitting they need help)

IV. Conclusion

Based on the findings from the youth focus groups, several options for development of youth-specific resource materials are suggested:

- Youth seemed to indicate the police as a first step for getting help. It would be useful to emphasize the importance of seeking help for emotional trauma as well as for criminal justice outcomes in any material on sexual violence.
- Any materials developed should be clear regarding policies of confidentiality and young people's rights when accessing services.
- The format of the resource material should be practical and functional. Youth mentioned that they are more likely to keep something that they will use. Informal conversations with after school program coordinators similarly indicated that young people like free things. The formats suggested most frequently by teens included key chains and bookmarks. Another option is to make a school folder or include an informational page in an academic planner.
- All teens said that they would go outside of their neighborhood when seeking services, indicating the importance of perhaps including a city-wide map or listing of services throughout the five boroughs.
- The materials should be distributed in a variety of places where teens gather, however, several participants mentioned the importance of working with schools to engage students in talking about issues related to sexual or dating violence, and speaking explicitly about the range of available services. Developing a partnership with NYC school principals and the Department of Education will be vital for future opportunities in education about sexual and dating violence among youth.