

# The Bystander Effect

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If you work in the field of violence prevention, you are probably familiar with the story of Kitty Genovese. In New York, 1964 Kitty Genovese was murdered on the street while 38 witnesses watched from their apartments and failed to intervene. Her story has become influential to the field of social psychology and has promoted the development of ideas around the psychology of helping or “bystander effect” (Latane & Darley, 1970).

The bystander effect is described as the idea that individuals are more likely to help when alone than when in the company of others (Latane & Darley, 1970). There is a large amount of literature examining helping behaviors and trying to understand under what conditions do people decide to help others and models of the bystander effect have developed over time. The literature includes studies that examine individual and situational factors that promote or hinder pro-social bystander intervention (Banyard, Moynihan, & Plante, 2007). Factors that have been found to affect helping behavior are group size, which accounts for the diffusion of responsibility or the idea that someone else will intervene. Perceptions and reactions to situations are negatively affected by the presence of other people. These perceptions can be either real or imagined. Other studies have found that if a group is cohesive and communication occurs, a consensus to help develops and they are more likely to intervene (Banyard, Moynihan, & Plante, 2007). Living in a rural environment may increase the likelihood of someone intervening (Banyard, Moynihan, & Plante, 2007).

Interpersonal factors that affect if a person intervenes includes: mood, individual perceptions of the event, mood, nature of relationship to the person in need of help, and perceptions that will be able to actually help the person (Banyard, Moynihan, & Plante, 2007).

There appears to be ambiguity around intervening in several situations, especially those that are violent. Norms about what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior in particular social contexts are found in most aspects of individual’s daily lives and they also exist in the area of helping behaviors (Hart & Miethe, 2008). Understanding these norms can facilitate a greater understanding of bystander behaviors and contribute to creation effective programs for increasing bystander awareness and behaviors in the area of sexual violence prevention.

Exploring the bystander effect is important because bystander actions and reactions may affect both the risks of violence and consequences of violence for a victim. A witness or bystander may deter a crime from occurring or their intervention may help a victim if a violent attack is in progress (Hart & Miethe, 2008).

Many people believe that violent crimes occur in secluded places out of the site of others. However, many crimes are committed in the presence of a social audience (Hart & Miethe,

2008). According to a National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) completed in the 1990's, bystanders were present in approximately 70% of assaults, 52% of robberies, and 29% of rapes and sexual assault (Planty, 2002 as cited in Hart & Miethe, 2008).

When faced with a potentially dangerous situation, bystanders have choices. They can choose to do nothing, provide indirect support (calling police or others to help), or directly intervene.

**Remember, when people intervene for the good of others, it creates a safer community.**

## References

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