WCSAP Prevention Special Edition Resource

The public health approach has been widely adopted in sexual violence prevention. Before we dive into the nuances behind public health data, here is a quick review of what public health suggests effective prevention strategies will do:

- Focus on first-time perpetration.
- Impact the root causes of violence.
- Utilize the [Social Ecological Model](#) framework to address factors across individual, relationship, community, and societal levels of influence.
- Aim to mitigate factors associated with greater likelihood for perpetration, called risk factors.
- Bolster factors which may lessen the likelihood of sexual violence victimization or perpetration, called protective factors.

While some public health guidance has been helpful in our efforts to prevent sexual violence, there are also limitations to its effectiveness. Here, we are going to take a critical look at the current framework of factors. The impact of public health strategies and data trickles down from the top, whether or not a program explicitly names risk factors in their work.

A Closer Look at the Data

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and other federal agencies have funded numerous studies[1,2,3] to better understand sexual violence perpetration in order to determine the most effective sexual violence prevention strategies. These types of research have led to a commonly accepted list of risk factors. It's important we consider the shortcomings of, and impact of systemic oppression on, the design of the studies, data collection methods, and criteria for evaluation.

Given that our social norms and structures are deeply entrenched in oppression, and especially racism, it isn't surprising that public health data and research have replicated these systems themselves. The CDC acknowledges that, "Very few evaluations have looked at diverse populations (e.g., racial/ethnic or sexual minorities). It is also important to note that few programs have been designed for diverse populations, so tailoring programs and more evaluation may be necessary to address different population groups."[2]

The limitations of who is and is not represented in the research base are widespread. Data often does not accurately reflect communities based on race, socioeconomic status, physical or cognitive ability, geographic region, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Institutional oppression also clouds the availability of data related to the prevalence of violence perpetrated by white, affluent, powerful people.

These limitations and concerns have been documented by several national sources:

> "The focus on sexual violence against some of our most privileged young people has distracted us from the victimization of those enjoying less social and economic advantage.… After an exhaustive search, colleagues and I could find no major study that focuses on the relationship between social and economic disadvantage and rape and sexual assault risk in the United States." (The New York Times[4])

> "Youth with disabilities are largely excluded from sex education and health education... In the United States, youth with mental health disabilities are nearly five times as likely to experience sexual victimization." (End Rape on Campus[5])

> "Most of the evaluated programs were conducted in suburban schools, predominately populated by White, middle and upper-middle class students. In fact, these evaluations fail to even address the possibility that the racial, ethnic, geographic, or economic characteristics of students may impact a program's effectiveness." (GLSEN[6])

> "Not one of the published evaluations of sexual assault prevention programs in this review discussed the inclusion of same-sex assaults on non-heterosexual survivors, or examined the impact of these prevention programs on gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered youth. If the programs for adolescents and young adults present an overwhelmingly heterosexual focus of date and acquaintance rape conceptualizing victims as female and perpetrators as male, how do they affect youth whose experiences with dating, sex, or sexual assault are with those of the same sex? It is quite possible to imagine that these adolescents may feel further alienated by a program designed to help them with these issues." (GLSEN[6])

APPLYING AN ANTI-OPPRESSION LENS TO THE CREATION AND USE OF DATA

When viewing these data and research practices through an anti-oppression lens, many of the established conclusions about these risk factors promote ideas that are based in white supremacy, classism, ableism, and cis- and hetero-sexism. Many of the established risk factors are directly correlated with societal factors that disproportionately affect people from lower socio-economic backgrounds[7,8], often overlapping with structural oppression aimed at disenfranchising Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC).[9] Promoting these ideas falls in line with society's tendency to protect socially successful, affluent, straight, cisgender, white males from being seen as agents of harm, and further criminalizes lower income people and/or BIPOC.

Despite the lack of representative research and robust data, the prevention field has adopted ideas about the root causes of sexual violence from these problematic studies, and has been perpetuating harm as a result. One of the ways this is being done is by leaving the list of risk factors for perpetration unchallenged.

Examining Risk Factors Further

One example of a problematic risk factor is "Poverty or low socioeconomic status."[2] This suggests that there is a greater likelihood of sexual violence perpetration from people experiencing poverty than from people from the middle and upper classes. What this overlooks is that research about perpetration is typically limited to those who are identified as sex offenders. The important context to consider here is that people experiencing poverty have been historically criminalized and are more likely to be convicted than people protected by wealth and power.[10]

Making sure our violence prevention work is steeped in anti-oppression will help us to untangle problematic ideas and add important context. To better understand how this risk factor has emerged in the data, let's connect it back to the systemic issues that produced these conclusions and that perpetuate white supremacy and other biases as a result.

American society is structured to give white, formally educated, cisgender people a disproportionate amount of wealth and power. Typically, we see that power protects them from their behavior being viewed or convicted as "criminal". Similarly, as BIPOC, queer people, people with disabilities, and people who come from generational poverty are more likely to be discriminated against for education, jobs, and housing, these populations are given less opportunities to accrue wealth.

We also know that American society disproportionally criminalizes BIPOC, queer people, people with disabilities, and poor people. If these communities are more likely to be reported for crimes, then logically they will be over represented in the data on the population of perpetrators. Similarly, if people do not feel safe reporting crimes to law enforcement because they come from communities which are criminalized, data will not reflect the experiences of survivors on the margins. Consequently, it will not include information about who perpetrates violence against people with little societal power. This results in researchers collecting misleading data when looking for shared characteristics correlated with sexual violence perpetration.

We see this pattern repeated with other risk factors identified by the CDC, such as "involvement in delinquent behavior," or "exposure to community crime and violence."[2] Once again we have to examine the social context and trace back how that influences data collection and results.

These risk factors create a profile of potential perpetrators that is covertly asserting racist and classist implications due to unjust, disproportionate experiences. So much of our society is set up to ensure that BIPOC live in under-resourced communities and are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system. This ties back into the narrative that higher incidents of reports or arrests equals higher rates of perpetration. Therefore, these labels about "delinquency" and "community crime" are often used as a coded way to identify low-income people and/or BIPOC as being more likely to perpetrate violence.

From there, we start to see the legacy of racism and other forms of oppression embedded into every step along the way to determining the list of risk factors.
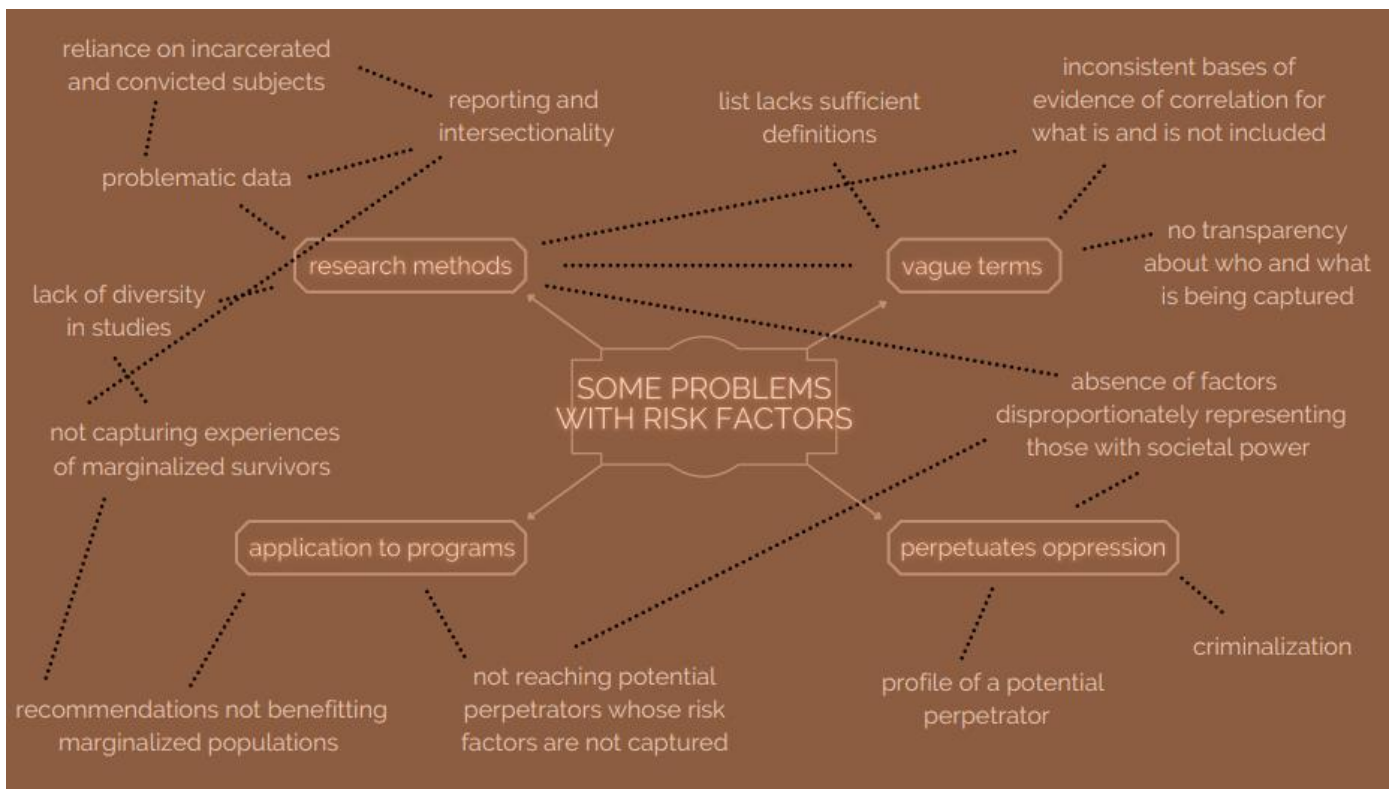
Moving Forward at the Intersections

With these limitations and the bias that exists in violence prevention research, we have to consider some critical questions: What purpose does the established summary of risk factors serve? Does it significantly impact the effectiveness of prevention strategies and programming?

The ripple effects of this framework of risk factors can be seen in several directions. We've established that it reinforces myths that particular populations, namely BIPOC and low-income communities, are more likely to perpetrate sexual violence. But how else are we seeing its influence?

> **Marginalized populations are still experiencing disproportionate rates of sexual violence victimization despite decades of prevention work.[11,12]**

When we accept research and data practices that leave out the experiences of the populations most disproportionately targeted, we perpetuate responses which do not meet their needs. This framing of risk factors does not take into account the experiences of marginalized survivors, nor does it account for the risk factors associated with perpetrators who are protected by their power in society. Promoting it perpetuates a perspective of sexual violence that harms people on the margins once by criminalizing them, and again by devaluing their safety. White, straight, cisgender women from the suburbs are still being centered as the population worth protecting through prevention efforts both in theory and in practice. People at the intersections of sexual violence and oppressed identities are overlooked by prevention research, models and program implementation.

Those of us in the prevention field must challenge the lack of diversity in the research studies that contribute to data that we rely on. We need to embrace approaches to research that consider marginalized populations' experiences and needs as essential to any work being done to prevent sexual violence. We must demand that these communities are at the center of our research in order to create effective violence prevention.

Practical steps to utilize data through an anti-oppression lens:
- Acknowledge the ways that white supremacy and other oppressive fixtures of American society are being perpetuated through conclusions about certain risk factors.
- Choose research and data that better reflects anti-oppression values.

- Interrogate what context is behind any data being used. Keeping in mind that:
  - Systemic oppression has led to BIPOC and people with little socioeconomic power being more likely to be reported for causing harm, and the full scope of perpetration is not reflected in most data.
  - The intersections of a person's identities are relevant to whether or not they are convicted in the American criminal justice system.
- Demand the development and inclusion of trauma-informed approaches to gathering data for those who are falling through the cracks. This includes sex workers, people without immigration documents, houseless people, etc.
- Value bolstering protective factors just as much as countering risk factors. Protective factors are more often rooted in strengths-based and community-centered approaches.
- Create opportunities for collaborations between communities working to end sexual violence for marginalized populations to provide data that is reflective of a diversity of experiences.

How will focusing on these steps lead to preventing sexual violence?
- By embracing an approach to prevention that is anti-oppression, anti-racist, anti-classism, pro-disability rights, and pro-queer, we can better understand structural power dynamics that contribute to sexual violence.
- Critical information that is currently being understated in the research and underrepresented in programming will only come from the inclusion of people who have been historically marginalized.
- Cultural humility provides opportunities for influential organizations to partner with the people who have earned the trust of populations who experience barriers to participating in prevention efforts: Agencies, religious institutions, grassroots services, and other trusted stakeholders.

As a field dedicated to preventing harm, we must commit to not contributing to the criminalization of BIPOC, Two Spirit, LGBTQIA people, people with disabilities, undocumented people, and low-income people. It is our responsibility to create a safer environment for all marginalized people to participate in the process of changing the ways that racism, classism, ableism, heterosexism, and transphobia intersect with sexual violence. Before long, we will no longer have our work underscored by problematic foundations of research methods and data which perpetuate oppression. Our efforts will change the dominant narratives driving prevention work and move us towards liberation[13].

References:

1. [An Evidence-Based Review of Sexual Assault Prevention Intervention Programs](#)
2. [STOP SV: A Technical Package to Prevent Sexual Violence](#)
3. [A systematic qualitative review of risk and protective factors for sexual violence perpetration](#)
4. "[Privilege, Among Rape Victims](#)"
5. [Reclaiming Prevention Education](#)
6. [Educating for the prevention of sexual abuse: An investigation of school-based programs for high school students and their applicability to urban schools](#)
7. [Classing Sex Offenders: How Prosecutors and Defense Attorneys Differentiate Men Accused of Sexual Assault](#)
8. [Violence and Socioeconomic Status](#)
9. [The Poor Get Prison: The Alarming Spread of the Criminalization of Poverty](#)
10. [Does a Man's Social Class Have Anything to do With the Likelihood He'll Commit Sexual Assault?](#)
11. [Domestic and Sexual Violence and Communities of Color](#)
12. [Responding to Transgender Victims of Sexual Assault](#)
13. [Prevention Through Liberation: Theory and Practice of Anti-Oppression as Primary Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence](#)

Note: This "Prevention Special Edition" resource was authored by Vane Dettakis, with editing and support from WCSAP. Vane is invested in detoxifying nonprofit culture through working collaboratively with individuals and organizations who are committed to growth. From many years in various roles as a recipient of social services, a primary prevention educator, a survivor advocate, an outreach worker, a counseling assistant, a trainer, a grant writer, a supervisor, and a program administrator, they have personal experience with the myriad ways that social services can be either harmful or helpful. Now, their focus is on collaborating to ensure that services are achieving the latter, both internally and externally.