Original Research

Bystanders to Sexual Violence: Findings From a National Sample of Sexual and Gender Diverse Adolescents

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Abstract

Mobilizing bystanders to prevent sexual violence is an increasingly popular prevention strategy. While research has identified characteristics related to opportunity and actions around helping, a more nuanced understanding of how helping behavior and its modifiable levers may differ for youth of various genders is needed. The current study examined bystander-helping behaviors in sexual violence situations in a national, social media-recruited sample of adolescents 14 to 16 years of age. Measures of opportunity and self-reported actions were included in an online survey along with items assessing attitudes related to violence and helping. Given that prevention programs may work differently for cisgender, transgender, and nonbinary young people, between-group differences in amount of opportunity and helping behaviors were examined. Further, we examined correlates of opportunities to help as well as helping behaviors within each group. Overall, few attitude and personal experience characteristics consistently predicted opportunities and behaviors across groups. Group differences that emerged,

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such as the association between attitudes supportive of rape and lower helping for cisgender but not trans or nonbinary youth, support attending to these group differences in both basic and intervention research to inform tailoring of prevention programs.

Keywords

bystander behavior, adolescents, gender minority, sexual violence, transgender, nonbinary

Sexual violence is a significant public health problem: Youth have the highest rates of sexual violence victimization and perpetration compared to other age groups, and experience a variety of negative impacts (Ngo et al., 2018). A promising sexual violence prevention strategy is to mobilize third parties, often referred to as "bystanders" or "actionists," who may witness escalating risk for sexual violence in others and who may be able to respond and interrupt this escalation (Banyard et al., 2017; Coker et al., 2020; Schlesener et al., 2023). Bystander behaviors are usually studied by examining both how often a person is in situations where they have or notice the opportunity to be a bystander, and whether and what they did to help when they did have the opportunity (McMahon et al., 2017). Bystander strategies in situations where there is immediate risk for sexual violence include: creating a distraction, confronting the aggressor, or involving others to get help for the potential or actual victim (Banyard et al., 2017). Bystanders can also be an important source of support for survivors by listening without judgment or helping them access resources for coping (Hoxmeier & McMahon, 2021; McMahon, 2022). Survivors also describe the harmful effects of non-intervention or missed opportunities where bystanders do nothing creating feelings of isolation or allowing risky behaviors to escalate (McMahon, 2022), highlighting the importance of prevention efforts that increase bystander responses.

While bystander intervention has been studied for several decades, only recently has research begun to examine how bystander action may differ for groups based on youth characteristics, including gender (López et al., 2023). To contribute to this nascent literature, in this study, we explore bystander opportunities and behaviors for gender minority youth, including transgender youth, who identify with a gender that is different than their sex assigned at birth; and nonbinary youth, who do not ascribe to a binary understanding of gender and do not take on either "boy" or "girl"; versus cisgender youth,

whose gender is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth. Sexual identity (e.g. gay, lesbian, and heterosexual) was considered separately.

Understanding Group Differences in Opportunity and Actions

Research on bystander intervention, like studies of sexual violence victimization and perpetration more generally, overwhelmingly focuses on or assumes cisgender heterosexual relationships (Kirk-Provencher et al., 2023). Yet, emerging literature suggests an increased risk of victimization for sexual and gender minority youth compared to their cisgender heterosexual peers (Edwards & Banyard, 2022; Ybarra et al., 2022). Further, groups who do not fit into the cisgender heterosexual experience often are targeted by discrimination and oppression, expressed as homophobia and transphobia. Within minority stress theory, chronic exposure to this discrimination and stigma (both societal and internalized) leads to psychological distress (Meyer, 2003). The same stressors combined with distress may also suppress bystander intervention among LGBTQ+ individuals because they may be at greater risk of retaliation for stepping in or may already have experienced negative consequences for being an active bystander. This is an understudied question. To date, some research has focused on differences in opportunity and actionist behaviors by sexual and gender identity. Conceptually, researchers hypothesize that greater victimization rates among lesbian, gay, transgender, and other sexual and gender minority (LGBTQ+) individuals may result in more opportunities for them to be actionists. Marginalized individuals may also be sensitive to the risk and consequences of sexual violence and thus perceive a greater responsibility to act and address noted problems as a result (Hoxmeier et al., 2022).

Between-group differences in opportunities to help, barriers to helping, and attitudes that may promote bystander intervention are documented in the research. LGBTQ+ students reported greater opportunities to be helpful bystanders in situations of risk for sexual violence (Hoxmeier et al., 2022; Waterman et al., 2020) and sexual minority adolescents reported greater bystander intentions and behaviors to prevent sexual or relationship violence (López et al., 2023). On the other hand, a study of sexual and gender minority men found similar barriers to intervening as those reported in other studies of cisgender heterosexual young people (Marcantonio et al., 2023). In one of the only studies we could identify that examines both gender and sexual identity separately, bystander behavior varied by aspects of both gender and sexual identity (Hoxmeier et al., 2022). For example, cisgender bisexual women and cisgender gay men both reported greater expressions of concern (a bystander

action) when they saw abusive behavior compared to cisgender heterosexual women and men. However, transwomen and genderqueer individuals reported fewer actions, perhaps because gender-diverse individuals are at greater risk of retaliation by others and experience greater forms of discrimination, rendering it less safe for them to intervene (Mennicke et al., 2020). It is unclear if these similarities and differences extend to adolescents, especially when focusing on gender identity separately from sexual identity.

Levers to Increase Bystander Helping. Theories of bystander action highlight an array of factors that can promote or hinder helping, though within-group testing of these models is understudied. These models posit an array of key potentially modifiable factors within individuals, groups, and situations that may act as barriers or facilitators of bystander opportunities and actions. The situational model (Darley & Latane, 1968) specifies that features of a situation (whether other bystanders are present) along with attitudes within the person (awareness of the need for help, sense of responsibility to take action, and having tools to act) influence the decision to step in. The original situational model of bystander intervention focused on number of bystanders as a key contextual factor. Contextual factors, such as alcohol use, are related to greater opportunities to intervene, but are not always coupled with helpful actions and may impede helping (see, e.g., Banyard et al., 2022; Waterman, Lee & Edwards 2022).

Casey et al (2017) created an expanded Situation-Cognitive theory of bystander intervention by integrating the Theory of Planned Behavior. Casey et al. (2017) expanded categories of factors that may explain bystander behavior. Attitudes that might affect the steps of the earlier situational model are key (e.g., attitudes that may affect awareness that intervention is needed or sense of responsibility to take action). Attitudes about violence such as rape myths acceptance or awareness of sexual violence as a problem can suppress helping perhaps by reducing noticing a problem or sense of responsibility to act (Banyard et al., 2021). Empathy is related to greater opportunity detection (Waterman et al., 2020) and helping, but interacts with attitudes like rape myths (Leone et al., 2021). Behavioral control, often measured as confidence to act, is also related to increased actions (see Mainwaring et al., 2023 for a review of research on these individual factors). Social norms are another key facet of the theory, as individuals may be more likely to act if they perceive that peers support bystander helping (Rothman et al., 2019) but also may be less likely to act if they perceive social norms that condone sexual violence (Berkowitz et al., 2022).

Using Casey et al.'s model, these attitudes, confidence, and perceived social norms combined with situational factors (presence of barriers or factors like alcohol use) directly influence intentions to help which in turn affects

actions taken. Indeed, decades of research on bystanders have helped expand original theories and make them more complex. For example, Banyard's (2015) action coils model highlights that one's own personal history (including experiences with sexual violence as a victim or perpetrator and other adversities), and protective/strengths-focused variables need to be added. Further, social location as indicated by social identity variables (gender, race, ethnicity, and religious affiliation) and as linked to social determinants of well-being (such as income and access to helping resources) may moderate models of helping beyond just producing higher or lower rates of helping.

Emerging research indicates that correlates derived from bystander theories may not apply equally across all groups. Again, the case of gender and sexual identity is illustrative. Overall, research on characteristics that facilitate or hinder helping has underutilized gender as a moderator of the relationship between variables like attitudes and outcomes, instead mainly using it as a variable for describing between-group differences. For example, women tend to report greater helping and also tend to hold less violence-supportive attitudes than men, a key correlate of action (Mainwaring et al., 2023). Overall, however, this research has focused on defining gender as the binary (man/woman) or conflated it with sex (male/female) or conflated gender with sexual identity in a broad LGBTQ+ group. More research to unpack separate influences of gender and sexual identities on attitudes that affect behavior is needed. For example, Cowie et al. (2019) did not study bystander attitudes but did find significant interactions between gender identity and sexual identity in levels of hostile and benevolent sexism. Relatively few studies have examined more nuanced gender differences in applications of bystander theories. College students in a combined gender and/or sexual minority group reported greater knowledge/support for sexual consent relative to their cisgender, heterosexual counterparts and while men had greater perceptions of peer support for rape than women, these groups did not differ from nonbinary participants (and gender/sexual minority overall group status was not significantly related to rape-supportive peer norms; Glace & Kaufman, 2020). Research on early-mid-adolescence is scarce; emerging work has examined sexual minority group differences rather than gender identity among high school students (López et al., 2023). For example, some work suggests sexual minority students reported more gender-equitable attitudes but greater binge drinking (López et al., 2023), and higher gender-equitable attitudes were significantly related to greater bystander intentions (binge drinking was not significant).

Current Study. Recent evaluation research suggests that LGBTQ+ youth may benefit less from bystander prevention programs than their cisgender heterosexual peers (Coker et al., 2020). This may be because most sexual

violence prevention approaches are overly focused on heterosexual relationships and content that expects participants to identify as cisgender (Bang et al., 2016; Kirk-Provencher et al., 2023). Further, while prevention programs are designed to create change in correlates that promote or diminish helping, we know little about how those key levers may differ by gender when considered more expansively. Research on specific models of action for different groups can suggest places where prevention training needs to be tailored to better address participants' experiences. This is important given that, while evaluation of bystander prevention programs began with assumptions that programs would have relatively consistent effects across a group (e.g., college students) (Banyard, 2015), more recent studies show that programs often work better for some sub-groups within a school or community than others (Coker et al., 2020; Edwards et al., 2022; Waterman, Edwards, Banyard & Chang, 2022). Recent work argues for the need to tailor prevention approaches to fit better with the unique needs and experiences of different communities (McMahon et al., 2020). Tailoring efforts require a more nuanced understanding of gender, including the range of opportunities for helping that transgender and nonbinary youth report, helping behaviors that are used, and correlates that increase or decrease helping behaviors. To date, more of this work is being conducted with college students than with early-to mid- adolescents despite the proliferation of bystander training for both age groups (Banyard et al., 2020). Further, research to date has focused more on group comparisons of amount of opportunity and behaviors rather than on whether the array of variables that may promote or inhibit helping differ among youth by gender.

To address these gaps, the current study investigated variation among adolescents in opportunities to prevent sexual violence and self-reported use of helping behaviors. It was exploratory, with a focus more on overall aims than specific hypotheses related to the presence of or direction of differences between groups. We extended the literature on three fronts. First, we described and then compared self-reported opportunity and helping behaviors across gender identity groups. Second, we examined correlates of helping behaviors (levers as outlined in the TPB and commonly studied in prevention programs) for cisgender, transgender, and nonbinary youth. Third, we examined these differences among mid-adolescents, to inform interventions that might take place before college.

Methods

Growing up with Media is a national, longitudinal survey of youth designed to study sexual violence in adolescence (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2013; Ybarra &

Petras, 2021; Ybarra & Thompson, 2018). Specific to the current study, a cohort of 4,404 youth, ages 14 to 16, was recruited between June 2018, and March 2020. Youth in the current analyses are solely from this new cohort. The response rate for the new cohort, using AAPOR response rate 4, was 7.5%. (American Association for Public Opinion Research, 2020) The analytic sample for the current paper is 4,193; details are provided in (Ybarra et al., 2022). As stated in that paper, 60.7% of the sample identified with a sexual minority identity, 78.3% identified with a cisgender identity, 21.9% identified as Hispanic, and 66.9% reported White as their race (Ybarra et al., 2022). The mean age was 14.8 (0.7).

Participants were primarily recruited through study advertisements on Facebook and Instagram. Online ads encouraged youth to "have their voice heard" and "make a difference." Survey aims were not mentioned to reduce self-selection bias based on interest in a particular topic. Those interested clicked on the online advertisement, which linked them to a secure survey website. Those who were eligible (i.e., 14–15 years of age and living in the United States, English or Spanish speaking), were then asked to read an assent form and to indicate their willingness to participate in the survey before continuing with the main survey. Sixteen-year-olds were added to the eligibility criteria toward the end of baseline to increase the sample size. Multiple steps were taken to ensure the authenticity of the sample, including reviewing open ends for "gibberish," confirming age, and not mentioning the incentive in the recruitment advertisements to reduce malicious completers.

To promote a diverse sample, demographic quotas were identified and determined at the screener phase of the study. This included seeking equal numbers of participants who were assigned female and male at birth, seeking 40% of participants who identified with a different race or ethnicity than white, 20% rural residents, and 20% gender minority. Once the targeted number of youth in a particular group had been achieved (e.g., White, non-Hispanic, and cisgender girls), subsequent youth in this group who were otherwise eligible were deemed ineligible and not invited to participate in the study. We requested and were granted a waiver of parental permission for participants under 18 years of age which is necessary to avoid fatal sampling bias in the LGBTQ+ sample that would occur by only including those who are out to their parents (Cwinn et al., 2021). Appropriate mechanisms were in place to support youth, such as localized referrals to mental health support. The protocol was reviewed and approved by Pearl IRB and Advarra IRB, OHRP-approved IRBs overseeing CiPHR's projects.

Participants were given a $15 incentive as an Amazon gift card for completing the survey. Ineligible youth were directed to a web page that included links to general resources for youth (e.g., https://youngwomenshealth.org).

Measures

Exposure to Sexual Violence Behaviors (Opportunities to Intervene)

Participants were asked: Have you ever in real life, seen or heard about someone you know in-person who . . . (a) Said something sexual to someone when that person did not want to hear it (sexual harassment); (b) Made someone kiss, touch, or do something sexual when that person did not want to (sexual assault); (c) Made someone have sex when that person did not want to (rape); and (d) Got someone to give into sex when they did not want to (coercive sex). Response options were: Yes, No, and Not sure. These items were created for the study and were consistent with other studies (Banyard, Edwards et al., 2021). We recognize that wording of these items is not mutually exclusive but analyses were conducted by considering a response to any of these as a "yes" to opportunity, and response of no to all as "no."

Bystander Behaviors

If the participant responded positively to any of the above situations, they were asked a series of questions about things they may have done in response. The question was introduced thusly: "What, if anything, did you do when you heard that someone you know said or did. . ." for each specific type of sexual violence and followed by helping types (e.g., tried to make the person it happened to feel better) was presented (the full list is provided in Table 1). Participants could mark all options that applied to each sexually violent situation. Given the novelty of the research questions, these measures were created for the current study using a bystander frame for types of sexual violence described in the field, attending to reducing the number of items and wording revised to be relevant to adolescent participants.

Social Norms Around Violence

The Peer Pressure to Engage in Sex Scale (Krahe, 1998) asked all youth to think about the opinions of their friends who are about their age and then determine how much each of six statements describes the opinions of their friends. Participants responded to each item using a 5-point scale ranging from (1) Does not describe my friend's opinions at all—(5) Describes my friends' opinions completely. Three items are specific to boys (e.g., the more sexual things a boy has done the more popular he is with his friends) and

Table I. Types of Bystander Behaviors for Sexual Violence by Gender Identity.

Bystander behavior	All youth (n=4,193) n (%)	Cisgender boys and girls (n=3,282) n (%)	Transgender boys and girls (n=329) n (%)	Nonbinary youths (n=582) n (%)	p Value
Opportunity to help					
Types of sexual violence witnessed					
Sexual harassment	1,502 (33.2)	1,112 (32.5)	155 (43.3)[a]	235 (38.4)[a]	.002
Sexual assault	1,020 (21.5)	727 (20.5)	112 (32.8)[a]	181 (30.5)[a]	<.001
Rape	547 (10.7)	386 (9.9)	69 (23.1)[a]	92 (15.4)[a,b]	<.001
Coercive sex	559 (12.1)	401 (11.5)	67 (21.4)[a]	91 (15.4)[a]	<.001
Any of the above	1,704 (37.5)	1,267 (36.6)	173 (49.4)[a]	264 (43.6)[a]	<.001
Helping behavior					
Any	1,366 (78.4)	996 (77.7)	150 (86.2)	220 (82.9)	.11
Tried to make the person it happened to feel better	968 (54.6)	686 (53.4)	115 (69.7)[a]	167 (60.6)	.005
Told an adult about it	299 (16.8)	205 (16.4)	38 (20.1)	56 (20.1)	.32
Told the person it happened to tell an adult or the police	498 (26.3)	327 (24.4)	70 (45.9)[a]	101 (38.1)[a]	<.001
Talked about it with other people my age	598 (34.5)	448 (34.3)	61 (32.4)	89 (37.9)	.64
Gave the person it happened to advice on how to deal with the experience	788 (44.6)	559 (43.7)	95 (56.1)	134 (47.3)	.07
Tried to be nicer to the person so they knew they had a friend	903 (51.9)	644 (51.0)	106 (63.4)	153 (55.6)	.06
Other bystander behaviors					
Threatened the person who did it	187 (10.7)	120 (9.9)	23 (16.1)	44 (16.7)[a]	.01
Ignored or avoided the person who did it	514 (27.4)	350 (25.9)	65 (37.3)[a]	99 (40.3)[a]	<.001
Something else	84 (5.4)	64 (5.5)	10 (4.9)	10 (4.3)	.79

[a]Significantly different from cisgender boys and girls; [b]Significantly different from transgender boys and girls.

three parallel items are specific to girls (e.g., Girls get a lot of pressure from their friends to have sex). Three separate scales were created for analysis based on average mean score: (a) peer pressure for boys to have sex ($\alpha = .80$), (b) peer pressure for girls to have sex ($\alpha = .70$), and (c) a combined total scales score ($\alpha = .82$).

Attitudes Toward Violence

The Acceptance of Violence in Relationships Scale (Maxwell et al., 2003) consists of eight statements that show different ideas about relationships—four that were specific to violence against boys (e.g., Boys like to be treated roughly in relationships) and four parallel items that were specific to violence against girls (e.g., Girls sometimes deserve to be hit by the people they date). Participants are asked to respond to each question on a 5-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Three separate scales were created for analysis based on average mean score: (a) acceptance of violence toward boys ($\alpha = .68$), (b) acceptance of violence toward girls ($\alpha = .62$), and (c) a combined total scale score ($\alpha = .81$).

The Rape Attitudes Scale (Maxwell et al., 2003) was also included and asked youth how much they agreed or disagreed with six statements (three items specific to boys and three parallel items specific to girls). For example, "It is okay for a boy to force his date to have sex if he spent a lot of money on their date." Three separate scales were created for analysis based on average mean score: (a) rape attitudes for boys ($\alpha = .86$), (b) rape attitudes for girls ($\alpha = .88$), and (c) a combined total scales score ($\alpha = .91$).

Experience/Behavior

Sexual assault was measured by asking a respondent if someone kissed, touched, or did anything sexual to them when the participant did not want to. Participants who reported *attempted rape* said that someone had *"*Someone tried, but was not able, to make me have sex when I did not want to." *Rape* was measured by asking if the respondent had: "Someone made me have sex when I did not want to". *Coercive sex* was indicated if they had "I gave in to sex when I did not want to." A positive response to any of the above experiences was coded as sexual victimization (Ybarra et al., 2016).

Alcohol use was measured with one item asking participants whether, in the past 12 months, they "had a drink of alcohol, like beer, wine, or vodka, other than a few sips without your parents' permission." Response options were yes/no.

Psychosocial Characteristics

Empathy was measured with an abbreviated measure of empathy (Davis, 1980), in which the seven perspective-taking items were utilized, for example, "I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both." The response options ranged from "does not describe me at all" (1) to "describes me completely" (5). Average mean scores were calculated (Cronbach's $\alpha = .69$).

Environment

Non-victimization adversity was measured using nine items, including lifetime exposure to non-violent traumatic events (serious illnesses, accidents, and parental imprisonment) and chronic stressors (substance abuse by family members and homelessness; Turner et al., 2006). As this is not a scale posited to reflect a latent variable; thusly, reliability is not reported.

Demographic Characteristics

Gender identity was measured with the following question: "What is your gender?" Youth were told that gender refers to roles, behaviors, and activities that a society associates with boys and girls and also how a person labels themself. Response options were male; female; female-to-male (FTM)/transgender/trans man; male-to-female (MTF)/transgender/trans woman; genderqueer/nonbinary/pangender; other (specify), unsure; I don't understand this question; and decline to answer. [We recognize that these response options do not reflect appropriate language based upon today's norms but provide the exact language for accuracy.]

Individuals who endorsed 'male' or 'female' and reported a different sex assigned at birth, declined to answer either question about sex assigned at birth or gender identity, or said that their gender was other were asked, "Are you of transgender experience?"

Gender: Those who endorsed male or female gender and reported the same sex assigned at birth or reported a different sex assigned at birth and did not endorse being of transgender experience were categorized as cisgender boys and girls (3,282 individuals). Those who endorsed FTM/transgender/trans man or MTF/transgender/trans woman were together categorized as transgender boys and girls (329 individuals). Those who endorsed genderqueer/nonbinary/pangender (448 individuals), other (62 individuals), or unsure (15 individuals), and those who endorsed being of transgender experience but did not identify as transgender (57 individuals) were categorized as

nonbinary youths (582 individuals). Six additional youths declined to answer, and 11 individuals did not understand the gender question. These youths were coded as the majority category (i.e., cisgender) and included in the 3,282 cisgender boys and girls listed previously. We do not further stratify gender to look at boys and girls because we lack a sufficient sample size for transgender girls.

For multivariate analyses, age was included as a categorical variable given the small age range: 14 versus 15 versus 16 years old. Self-appraised *household income* comprised three answer choices: lower than average, about average, and higher than average. For multivariate analyses, those who indicated their family income was "lower than average" were compared to all other youth. Youth reported their *race* (coded as White vs. other for multivariate analyses) and *ethnicity* (coded as Hispanic vs. other).

Data Analysis

Rates of "decline to answer" (missing data) did not exceed 2.5% across variables. Yes/no responses were conservatively coded as 0 and missing scale items were replaced with the item mean (Ybarra et al., 2007). Descriptive analyses of rates of opportunity and action were tallied to address the first study's aim. To examine between-group variation in these outcomes, differences in reports of witnessing any sexual violence, and among specific types of sexual violence, were compared by gender (i.e., cisgender boys and girls, transgender boys and girls, and nonbinary youth) using chi-square statistics with pairwise comparisons between genders. Then, among those with opportunity (i.e., had witnessed any sexual violence), we compared reports of any bystander behavior and specific forms of action by gender using chi-square statistics and pairwise comparison tests (see Table 1). Correlates of opportunity and helping were explored within groups of young people based on gender, as displayed in Tables 2 and 3. Specifically, three sets of logistic regression models were conducted by gender for cisgender boys and girls, transgender boys and girls, and nonbinary youth to compare: (a) youth without opportunity versus those with opportunity (regardless of helping behavior) and (b) among those with opportunity, those with and without helping behavior. Analyses initially included race which was not found to differ across gender identity groups nor to be related to bystander outcomes at the bivariate level; therefore this variable was left out of final multivariate analyses, though Latino/a ethnicity was retained. Supplementally, bivariate comparisons were conducted for the overall sample between youth reporting no opportunity, opportunity but no bystander behavior, and opportunity and bystander behavior across

Table 2. Logistic Regression Analyses of Youth Personal and Psychosocial Factors Related to Bystander-Helping Behavior in Response to Exposure to Sexual Violence Across Transgender and Nonbinary Youth[a].

Construct	Transgender youth				Nonbinary youth			
	Any opportunity versus No opportunity (n = 329)		Helping behavior versus No helping behavior (n = 173)		Any opportunity versus No opportunity (n = 582)		Helping behavior versus No helping behavior (n = 259)	
	aOR [95% CI]	p Value	aOR [95% CI]	p Value	aOR [95% CI]	p Value	aOR [95% CI]	p Value
Social norms								
Peer pressure to engage in sex	1.17 [1.09, 1.25]	<.001	1.05 [.92, 1.20]	.47	1.04 [0.99, 1.09]	.12	1.07 [0.97, 1.18]	.15
Attitudes toward violence								
Acceptance of violence in relationships	0.98 [0.89, 1.08]	.71	0.97 [0.79, 1.18]	.77	0.96 [0.89, 1.03]	.25	0.96 [0.85, 1.08]	.51
Permissive rape attitudes	0.77 [0.61, 0.96]	.02	1.01 [.49, 2.07]	.98	1.04 [0.85, 1.28]	.70	1.18 [0.85, 1.64]	.33
Psychosocial characteristics								
Empathy	1.04 [0.94, 1.14]	.45	1.14 [0.93, 1.40]	.21	1.04 [0.97, 1.11]	.27	1.03 [0.89, 1.19]	.68
Experience/behavior								
Sexual victimization [any]	1.91 [1.03, 3.53]	.04	0.15 [0.03, 0.78]	.02	2.90 [1.81, 4.63]	<.001	1.13 [0.46, 2.78]	.78
Past year alcohol use (any)	0.63 [0.33, 1.17]	.14	3.58 [0.92, 13.94]	.07	1.47 [0.90, 2.39]	.12	1.11 [0.48, 2.56]	.80
Other marginalized identities								
Female gender	0.72 [0.23, 2.20]	.56	1.39 [0.22, 8.83]	.73	—	—	—	—
Sexual minority	2.90 [0.74, 11.32]	.13	14.09 [1.95, 101.50]	.009	8.45 [2.15, 33.27]	.002	omitted	—
Hispanic ethnicity	0.51 [0.20, 1.29]	.16	0.43 [0.08, 2.24]	.32	0.77 [0.42, 1.39]	.39	0.88 [0.33, 2.30]	.79
Low income	1.18 [0.60, 2.30]	.63	1.13 [0.29, 4.35]	.86	1.15 [0.67, 1.95]	.62	0.58 [0.24, 1.42]	.23
Environment								
Non-victimization adversity	1.01 [0.86, 1.17]	.95	1.64 [1.18, 2.26]	.003	1.22 [1.07, 1.38]	.002	1.24 [1.01, 1.53]	.04

[a]Multicollinearity was assessed by calculating the variance inflation factors among the independent variables and was found to be within acceptable parameters.

13

Table 3. Logistic Regression Analyses of Youth Personal and Psychosocial Factors Related to Bystander-Helping Behavior in Response to Exposure to Sexual Violence Among Cisgender Boys and Girls[a].

Construct	Any opportunity versus No opportunity ($n = =3,282$)		Helping behavior versus No helping behavior ($n = 1,267$)	
	aOR [95% CI]	p Value	aOR [95% CI]	p Value
Social norms				
Peer pressure to engage in sex	1.02 [1.00, 1.05]	.01	1.07 [1.03, 1.12]	.001
Attitudes toward violence				
Acceptance of violence in relationships	1.01 [0.99, 1.04]	.27	1.03 [0.98, 1.09]	.17
Permissive rape attitudes	0.96 [0.91, 1.00]	.06	0.88 [0.79, 0.97]	.01
Psychosocial characteristics				
Empathy	1.05 [1.02, 1.08]	.002	1.06 [1.00, 1.13]	.06
Experience/behavior				
Sexual victimization (any)	2.02 [1.64, 2.48]	<.001	1.38 [0.93, 2.03]	.11
Past year alcohol use (any)	1.70 [1.38, 2.09]	<.001	1.08 [0.72, 1.61]	.71
Other marginalized identities				
Female gender	1.01 [0.82, 1.25]	.91	2.07 [1.38, 3.11]	<.001
Sexual minority	1.22 [1.00, 1.50]	.05	0.98 [0.67, 1.44]	.92
Hispanic ethnicity	0.75 [0.59, 0.95]	.02	0.80 [0.51, 1.26]	.34
Low income	0.97 [0.75, 1.25]	.81	1.03 [0.64, 1.65]	.90
Environment				
Non-victimization adversity	1.10 [1.04, 1.15]	<.001	1.05 [0.95, 1.16]	.38

[a]Multicollinearity was assessed by calculating the variance inflation factors among the independent variables and was found to be within acceptable parameters.

a number of constructs representing social norms, attitudes toward violence, psychosocial characteristics (i.e., empathy), experience/behavior (e.g., personal sexual victimization), environment (i.e. non-victimization adversity), and demographic (e.g., sexual identity, sex assigned at birth female, age, race and ethnicity) characteristics that are described in theories of bystander intervention. Supplemental Table 1 provides overall models for the full sample without regard to gender.

Weighting was accomplished using Sample Balancing, a special iterative sample weighting program that simultaneously balances the distributions of all variables using a statistical technique called the Deming Algorithm (Deming & Stephan, 1940). Data were weighted to approximate the behavioral and demographic characteristics of 14 to 16 year-olds in the Youth Risk Behavior Survey. Weights were trimmed to prevent individual interviews from having too much influence on the final results. Trimming was done by forcing all weights greater than the 95th percentile to the 95th percentile weight and forcing all weights less than the 5th percentile to the 5th percentile weight.

Results

Describing Opportunity and Types of Bystander Behaviors for Sexual Violence

Nearly 4 in 10 (37.5%) youth in this national sample reported exposure to sexual violence in their lifetimes and thus had opportunity to help (Table 1). Exposure to someone else being sexually harassed was the most commonly reported type of sexual violence exposure—indicated by 33.2% of all youth. Other exposures included, exposure to someone else who was sexually assaulted, (21.5%), raped (10.7%), and coerced into having sex (12.1%).

The majority (78.4%) of youth who witnessed or heard about sexual violence engaged in one or more forms of bystander behavior (Table 1). The most common forms of bystander behavior for all youth were trying to make the person it happened to feel better (54.6% of those with opportunity) and trying to be nicer to the person so the other person knew they had a friend (51.9%). Many gave the person advice on how to deal with the experience (44.6%) and talked about it with other people their age (34.5%). Encouraging the person it happened to tell an adult or the police was endorsed by 26.3% of youth and 16.8% themselves told an adult about it.

Comparing Helping Opportunities and Bystander Behavior for Sexual Violence by Gender Identity

Transgender and nonbinary youth were significantly more likely than cisgender boys and girls to have opportunity to be an active bystander to potentially prevent sexual violence (though transgender and nonbinary young people did not differ from each other) (Table 1). Nearly half (49.4%) of transgender boys and girls and 43.6% of nonbinary youth compared with 36.6% of cisgender boys and girls ($p < .001$) reported opportunity. No significant differences were found between transgender and nonbinary youth.

Overall, there were no significant differences in taking helpful bystander action given the opportunity between cisgender boys and girls (77.7%), transgender boys and girls (86.2%), and nonbinary (82.9%) youth ($p = .11$); the majority of youth across genders reported engaging in at least one form of helping behavior (Table 1). Significant differences were noted by gender for some but not all specific types of bystander behavior. Specifically, transgender boys and girls were more likely than cisgender boys and girls to say they had tried to make the person feel better. Transgender and nonbinary youth were more likely than cisgender youth say they told the person it happened to tell an adult or the police. Interestingly, nonbinary youth were more likely to

report taking direct action by threatening the person who did it. Both transgender and nonbinary youth were more likely to report ignoring or avoiding the person who did it than cisgender youth.

Psychosocial and Demographic Characteristics Associated with Opportunity and Bystander Behavior Within Gender Groups

Among transgender boys and girls (Table 2), increased odds of having opportunity to help were related to higher scores indicating peer pressure to engage in sex using the total scale rather than the gender-specific scales given their higher alpha coefficients and a similar pattern of bivariate results for the gender-specific scales (aOR=1.17, $p<.001$) and having a history of personal sexual victimization (aOR=1.91, $p=.04$). Lower scores on permissive rape attitudes was also significant, though in the direction of less opportunity (aOR=0.77, $p=.02$).

Both similarities and differences were noted for correlates associated with opportunities to help for nonbinary youth. Like transgender youth, a personal history of sexual victimization was related to an increased opportunity to help in situations of sexual violence (aOR=2.90, $p<.001$). Nonbinary youth who also identified with a sexual minority identity (aOR=8.45, $p=.002$) and had more non-victimization adversity exposures (aOR=1.22, $p=.002$) had higher odds of opportunity to help. For both transgender and nonbinary youth, more non-victimization adversity exposure was related to increased odds of helping in situations of sexual violence, given the opportunity (aOR=1.64, $p=.003$ & aOR=1.24, $p=.04$, respectively). Increased likelihood of helping was also noted for transgender youth who also identified with a sexual minority identity (aOR=14.09, $p=.009$) while transgender youth with a history of sexual victimization were less likely to help (aOR=0.15, $p=.02$).

For cisgender boys and girls (Table 3), opportunity was greater among those with higher empathy scores (aOR=1.05, $p=.002$), those with their own sexual victimization history (aOR=2.02, $p<.001$), those who reported alcohol use in the past year (aOR=1.70, $p<.001$), and who had high scores related to peer pressure to have sex (aOR=1.02, $p=.01$). Cisgender youth who had more non-victimization adversity experiences also had increased odds of opportunity to help (aOR=1.10, $p<.001$). Those youth with higher scores on permissive rape attitudes (aOR=0.96, $p=.06$) and were of Hispanic ethnicity (aOR=0.75, $p=.02$) had lower odds of opportunity to help. Cisgender participants who identified with a sexual minority identity had increased odds of opportunity (aOR=1.22, $p=.05$). For cisgender youth, odds of helping were increased for those with higher scores on peer pressure

to have sex (aOR=1.07, *p*=.001), and were female gender (aOR=2.07, *p* < .001); lower odds of helping was associated with permissive rape attitudes (aOR=0.88, *p*=.01).

Discussion

This study explored rates of opportunity detection and bystander helping to address sexual violence across transgender, nonbinary, and cisgender youth. The study aims were twofold. First, we compared rates of opportunity and helping behavior across gender identity groups. Second, we explored the correlates of bystander engagement within each group. More than one third of participants reported exposure to a potential sexual violence situation. The majority of those reporting such opportunity took action, consistent with prior work examining adolescents' opportunity detection (Banyard et al., 2022; Waterman et al., 2020) and rates of bystander helping (Banyard et al., 2021) including a more specific study of sexual and gender minoritized men who were bystanders to sexual violence against male victims (Marcantonio et al., 2023). The current study found that transgender and nonbinary youth reported greater opportunities. There were not differences in rates of helping overall, but some differences emerged in types of help offered by gender identity. Overall, measured variables that were drawn from the situational-cognitive model of bystander intervention did not explain a great deal of variance in bystander outcomes for the current sample within any of the gender groups studied.

Consistent with a previous study with college students (Hoxmeier et al., 2022), transgender and nonbinary youth report higher rates of opportunity to help than their cisgender peers across all four types of sexual violence. This is consistent with the action coils model of bystander action that describes how social identities may sensitize individuals to the need for help (Banyard, 2015). Layering a sexual minority identity onto gender identity significantly increased the odds of opportunity detection for nonbinary youth and cisgender youth but not transgender participants. It may be that for some gender identity groups, it is gender identity that leads to greater exposure/opportunity while for others it is intersecting identities (for nonbinary participants adding a sexual minoritized identity increased opportunity by eight times). Sexual identity only increased opportunity by 20% for cisgender young people. Future work centering intersectional aims and analyses is needed to understand how multiple identities and the challenges and strengths that go with them, interact in bystander behaviors (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016). Youth who carry dual stigmatized identities may have unique needs that could be

addressed in bystander intervention programs that more clearly center their experiences.

Interestingly, the multivariate analyses showed few significant variables related to opportunity for transgender and nonbinary participants (only three correlates were significant for each) while for cisgender participants, seven correlates were significantly related to opportunity. This is perhaps not surprising since models of bystander intervention such as the situational-cognitive model were developed by centering heterosexual sexual assault scenarios and research participants. This finding points to the need for qualitative research with sexual and gender minority participants to better understand facilitators and barriers to opportunity detection among these communities. Interestingly, sexual victimization history increased odds of opportunity for all three gender identity groups. This finding underscores previous research that lived experience with an issue improves recognition of risky situations as a problem. It is also interesting that non-victimization adversity, while increasing opportunity odds for nonbinary and cisgender participants, produced a much smaller odds ratio than sexual victimization, suggesting that opportunity sensitivities may be specific to the concordance between the type of victimization history and the type of bystander situation. Beyond this one consistent finding for sexual victimization, different specific correlates were significant for different groups. Theories of bystander opportunity and behaviors such as the action coils model, encourage tailoring helping models based on social location and indicate that one overall model to explain bystander opportunity detection may not be possible. Models of correlates of opportunity detection may also need to be developed and studied separately from models of actions taken as variables like alcohol use that increased opportunity detection, were not significantly related to actual helping. Future work should also further explore the impact of this exposure on young people, considering whether opportunities might create distress or anxiety not captured in the current study.

Descriptive data about how young people tried to help showed that overall, a majority of youth did something to try to help, and "trying to make the victim feel better" was the most common form of helping. This is consistent with findings of previous studies that show high rates of helping by young people (Banyard et al., 2021). These findings are encouraging given the importance of positive social support for survivors of sexual assault when they disclose (Ullman, 2021). There were low rates of threatening the perpetrator, a direct strategy that might be unsafe for the bystander. However, there were also low rates of connecting with peers so that bystanders are not acting alone. This may be a strategy that needs more attention in bystander training.

One in four youth encouraged the victim to talk to an adult. Fewer, 17%, told an adult themselves; this did not differ by gender. While emerging work suggests that programs that engage adults as resources for youth or in partnership may be needed so that youth are not coping with these complex situations alone (Banyard et al., 2022; Edwards et al., 2022), there is also potential for adults to intervene or take control of the situations in ways that youth find unhelpful. Future research could examine barriers to engaging adults, such as concerns about mandatory reporting laws and anticipated disclosure reactions. This may be especially relevant in the context of substance-involved assault, where parents are more likely to respond to disclosures with unsupportive reactions (e.g., victim-blaming), relative to peers (Kamke et al., 2023). These complexities further reinforce the need to understand victims' perspectives on bystander behaviors that are helpful or unhelpful (McMahon, 2022).

Overall, there were no gender differences in taking action, although some gender differences emerged for specific types of helping behaviors. Specifically, transgender boys and girls, and nonbinary youth reported even higher levels of specific types of helping (assisting victims, confronting perpetrators) than their cisgender peers. This finding might be understood in light of strengths of transgender youth such as activism and empathy (Riggle et al., 2011). Future work should consider whether the victim was a member of the transgender community to better contextualize this finding. Koon-Maginin and Schulze (2019) found, for example, that among young adults both sexual identity and own history of victimization were related to the specific types of support provided to sexual assault survivors. In the current study, transgender youth were also more likely than cisgender youth to tell the victim to tell an adult or the police. For sexual violence that takes place within the transgender community, this finding is somewhat counterintuitive, as perceptions of institutional transphobia in the criminal justice system may dampen help-seeking from the police (Shields, 2021). More broadly, sexual and gender minority victims experience unique barriers to disclosure to adults (e.g., fear of being outed) (Edwards et al., 2023), and recent anti-transgender legislation may intensify these concerns (Barbee et al., 2022).

The current study found few significant correlates of bystander actions that are consistent with the situational-cognitive model (permissive rape attitudes, experiences of victimization) and supported by previous studies (Banyard et al., 2021). Further research is needed to continue to identify and measure correlates of helping to prevent sexual violence. Patterns of significance were also unique within different gender groups. For example, permissive rape attitudes lowered helping and peer pressure to engage in sex

increased helping only for the cisgender group. The measures of these attitudes may have carried more relevance for cisgender participants given that they derive from a body of research that drew from binary gender categories and heteronormative studies of sexual violence. On the other hand, sexual identity increased the odds of helping among transgender youth while sexual victimization lowered helping, again only for transgender participants. Transgender youth who also identified with a sexual identity including lesbian, gay, or bisexual were fourteen times as likely to help while sexual identity was not significant for cisgender and nonbinary participants. The intersection of transgender and sexual minority identities warrants additional inquiry and bystander intervention theories and practices need to integrate theories of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2013).

Inconsistent with work on the role of victimization in helping, sexual victimization history was either not significant or reduced helping (Koon-Maginin & Schulze, 2019). Yet exposure to other adversities, at least among nonbinary and transgender young people, did increase helping actions as these previous studied suggested. Qualitative inquiry is needed to elucidate how victimization history may inhibit helping in light of minority stress theory. Specifically, the adversity burden of discrimination, while sensitizing an individual to the need to intervene, may also create mental health distress that inhibits taking action and taking on the responsibility and potential burden of the bystander role (McMahon et al., 2024). Trauma-informed interventions might leverage survivors' insights and experiences as both help recipients and providers across these types of situations and tailor training accordingly.

The significance of gender in the current analyses supports work that calls for violence prevention programs that address gender socialization (Brush & Miller, 2019). Attitudes and social norms have notable patterning by gender and may also interact with sexual identity, especially attitudes related to sexual aggression (Cowie et al., 2019). Such findings suggest that levers that facilitate helping or barriers to helping may differ in important ways by gender and other intersecting identities including race and sexual identity. Key targets of bystander training may need to be more tailored to different communities of young people (Hoxmeier et al., 2022). For example, bystander programs often work to lower rape-supportive attitudes and increase helping, a finding that was significant for cisgender participants in the current study but not for other gender groups. Some programs also focus on a combination of sexual violence prevention and reductions in problematic substance use (Zinzow et al., 2018), but in the current study, alcohol use was not significantly related to helping any group. Trauma exposure in the bystander's own history may create sensitivity to opportunities to help but

for a number of participants that did not connect to taking action. Following on work by Kirk-Provencher et al (2023), sexual violence prevention programs need to be more attentive to the needs of young people across gender and sexual identities.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although youth self-selected into this survey from social media ads, because they did not specifically know that we would be querying exposure to others' sexual violence, it seems unlikely that these data reflect a biased perspective of exposure. The cross-sectional nature of this study limits inferences about temporal associations. The current study relied on self-report and thus it was not clear whether opportunity to intervene was under-reported due to lack of recognition. Future research with larger samples of transgender individuals is also needed to unpack differences between transgender boys and transgender girls. Further, measures of bystander intervention to prevent sexual harassment and assault for adolescents are still being developed and the current measures have limitations. For example, talking with friends about sexual violence could include negative gossip, not just positive prevention conversations. Language in items often required participants to infer things like that "the person did not welcome" sexual comments leading to muddiness related to whether the situation was a true bystander opportunity. Measures did not permit nuanced exploration of the timeframe for opportunities and for helping (before, during, and after risky situations). Further measurement development is needed. Further, many measures of attitudes related to violence use heteronormative language or have items specific to gender binary identities. It is unclear whether transgender and nonbinary participants in the current study may have had a negative reaction to these items and whether these items reflect constructs relevant to their lived experiences. Indeed, the measure of attitudes about violence in relationships was not significant for any group in the current analyses. Further, the use of lifetime as the time frame may have led to memory errors in measurement. Finally, we examined whether helping behaviors took place, but little is known about the effectiveness of such behaviors. Some well-intentioned helping behaviors such as telling others or confronting the perpetrator may be in fact unhelpful to some victims (McMahon, 2022). Ultimately, understanding whether and how an action provided effective support to a victim is a crucial next step to inform interventions. Future work could explore experiences with discrimination or access to resources and supports that may explain differences in helping behavior associated with gender.

This study unpacked opportunity and bystander helping in response to others' sexual violence experiences for cisgender, transgender, and nonbinary adolescents. Bystander opportunity and helping vary by ecological niche. Gender appears to play a role in bystander experiences and levers for intervention. Research to date has not adequately explored the complexity of bystander intervention by gender and this may hamper the uptake of bystander prevention messages. Bystander prevention strategies need to be designed to be responsive to this variation to fully engage potential actionists (Gilmore et al., 2022).

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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Kimberly J. Mitchell, PhD is a Research Professor of Psychology at the Crimes against Children Research Center, located at the University of New Hampshire. Her areas of research include youth exposure to violence generally, with specific emphasis on the areas of technology-facilitated crimes against children, child sex trafficking, exposure to suicide, bias and hate crimes, and sexual violence perpetration. Her work also focuses on these issues among populations with health disparities, particularly sexual and gender minority youth. She has expertise with various national survey methodologies, including those involving law enforcement as well as social media recruitment of youth.

Kimberly L. Goodman, PhD, is the Director of Research and Evaluation at Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN). She studies the concerns of victims who use anonymous hotlines across military and civilian populations, to inform the provision of phone and online services. Her research interests include victimology and violence prevention, as well as disclosure and online help-seeking in the aftermath of victimization.

Michele L. Ybarra, PhD, is a recognized researcher in technology-related health issues for young people. She has published extensively in the areas of youth violence, particularly internet harassment and other types of online victimization, as well as sexual violence and dating abuse. She also is known for her contributions to research methodology as it relates to technology.