

## PRIMARY PREVENTION OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AMONG RURAL POPULATIONS

New Mexico is the fifth largest state but is 36th with respect to population. It has been given frontier status based on its population density (17 persons per square mile versus 87.4 in the United States as a whole), and distance and travel time to get to service markets (National Center for Frontier Communities, n.d.).

Underreporting of sexual violence in rural areas is a significant problem, making it difficult to document the prevalence of sexual violence in rural communities. There are many reasons for this underreporting, including a lack of anonymity related to small population density and familiarity of community members with each other (Lewis, 2003). Survivors may not be comfortable reporting to police as law enforcement and assailants may be part of the same social network. Typically, services are not nearby and public transportation is lacking. Phone service may be limited or nonexistent. Rural localities also often have a culture of independence and self-reliance, with an underlying distrust of authority, persons perceived to be “outsiders” and government-supported systems of care. Loyalty to family is often part of the culture. There may also be practical considerations related to disclosing abuse, such as the victim being reliant on the abuser for food, housing, transportation or child care (Lewis, 2003).

- According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, community and societal risk factors that have been associated with sexual violence perpetration include poverty, lack of employment opportunities, lack of institutional support from police and judicial systems, general tolerance of sexual violence within the community, weak community sanctions against sexual violence perpetrators, societal norms that support male superiority and sexual entitlement, and societal norms that maintain women's inferiority and sexual submissiveness (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.-c). Research has shown these risk factors to be prevalent in many rural communities.
- In 2013, New Mexico was 49th in the nation with respect to poverty: 21.9% of the population was living in poverty compared with 15.8% in the United States as a whole (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). In more than a third of New Mexico counties (12) in 2013, greater than 25% of the population lived in poverty (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2013).
- Retention of qualified sexual assault service providers is difficult in rural settings, which may contribute to further marginalization of already underserved populations, such as people living with disabilities and LGBTQ people (Averill et al., 2007).

From 2005-10, females living in rural areas experienced sexual violence at a rate **36%** higher than females in urban areas.

(Planty et al., 2013)

**46%** of rural NM women in a study of domestic violence had also experienced sexual violence; **59%** had experienced sexual violence as a child.

(Krishnan, Hilbert, & McNeil, 2002)

In rural areas, the rate of sexual violence is **1.9 times** higher for female college-age nonstudents than students.

(Sinozich & Langton, 2014)

**Social determinants:** Social determinants of health include societal factors that contribute to health. For example, poverty may make it more difficult to avoid unsafe environments; social norms around gender roles, inequality, and expression are directly related to sexual violence (Bott, 2010); and norms of secrecy and privacy contribute to spousal sexual assault and child abuse (Davis et al., 2006). Community responses of disbelief and victim-blaming not only cause harm to survivors, but also perpetuate a permissive environment that allows future perpetration. Programs that focus on victims protecting themselves, especially child victims, do not reduce victimization (Finkelhor, 2009). Only by changing the societal factors that permit sexual violence will we be able to substantially reduce sexual violence.

**Evidenced-Based and Promising Practices:** So far, no sexual violence prevention curriculum developed specifically for rural settings have been shown to be effective in preventing sexual violence victimization or perpetration. Research shows that the best way to stop sexual violence is through primary prevention strategies – preventing sexual violence before it occurs. Successful prevention efforts combine multiple strategies aimed at reducing risk factors for sexual violence perpetration and victimization related to cultural norms, beliefs and behaviors at the individual, relationship, community and society levels (Davis et al., 2006). Strategies may include programs, policies and environmental changes. Effective prevention programs are comprehensive; employ a variety of teaching methods; provide multiple sessions; are based in behavior-change theory; foster the development of positive relationships; are appropriately timed; and are developed in conjunction with the targeted community so practices are culturally and socially relevant (Nation et al., 2003).

In rural communities, practitioners need to engage both formal networks (e.g., rape crisis centers, law enforcement, medical providers) and informal networks (e.g., friends, family, churches) to address community violence (Averill et al., 2007; Bosch & Schumm, 2004).

Use of technology, such as Skype, to include geographically isolated partners in prevention planning may be a promising practice but necessitates funding to ensure that technology systems are adequate (Cook-Craig et al., 2010).

The following programs may be effective with rural youth, although culturally specific programming should be developed and evaluated specifically in rural communities:

- **Safe Dates:** <http://www.hazelden.org/web/go/safedates>
- **Men Can Stop Rape:** <http://www.mencanstoprape.org/>
- **Coaching Boys Into Men:** <http://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/engaging-men/coaching-boys-into-men/>
- **SafeChurch:** <http://scclanc.org/clergy-congregation-care/safechurch/>

Research continues on effective sexual violence prevention programming and policies. Go to <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/sexualviolence/index.html> for the most up-to-date information.

**Gaps:**

- Sexual assaults are vastly underreported in rural areas.
- There is a clear need for more research regarding sexual violence in rural communities.
- Rural communities often receive lower levels of funding because of population density and caseload levels. The funding is often inadequate to support the outreach efforts and relationship-building activities vital to development of prevention efforts and programming in rural communities (Lewis, 2003).

**Community Resources:**

**New Mexico Rape Crisis Centers and Mental Health Center Sexual Abuse Program Coordinators:** Contact for individual centers and prevention information can be found at the New Mexico Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs website: <http://nmcsap.org/>

“It is critical to get out to [the rural communities] because they’re isolated and that just continues the secrecy and the abuse.”

- Focus Group Participant