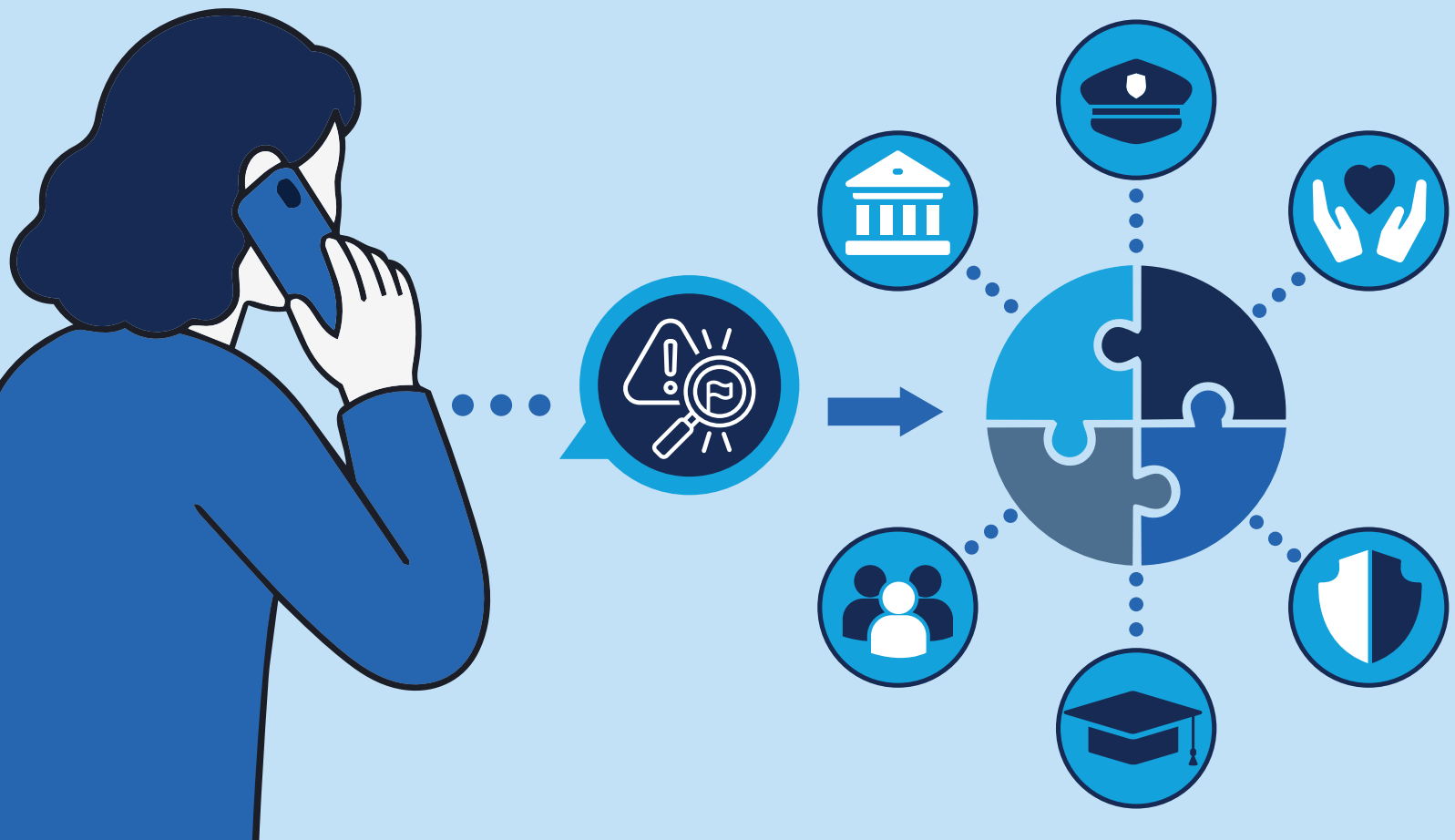


Bystander Intervention Training Across Contexts: Lessons for Preventing Targeted Violence

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Abstract

This literature review examines strategies for increasing bystander intervention as a means of preventing targeted violence. Research shows that most perpetrators of targeted violence exhibit observable warning behaviors before an attack, and bystanders are frequently aware of these signs, yet reporting often does not occur. Because few programs and evaluations focus specifically on bystander intervention for targeted violence, this review also draws on the more developed areas of research in this field, namely bullying and suicide prevention programs that focus on bystander intervention and behavior, examining 17 programs in total. Across the contexts and programs included in the literature, these approaches are generally associated with gains in participants' knowledge, confidence, and willingness to intervene, although some included evaluations rely on self-reported outcomes or nonrepresentative samples. The review identifies areas, including recognition training, clear reporting pathways, and empathy building that practitioners should consider when designing bystander intervention programs specific to targeted violence.

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Approved by:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Vivian Elliott', is placed next to the 'Approved by:' text.

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Executive Summary

Perpetrators of targeted violence frequently signal their intentions before acting. Analyses of targeted violence incidents have found that many attackers exhibit observable warning behaviors before committing a crime, and that bystanders, often family members or peers, were aware of concerning behavior or direct statements of intent in a substantial share of cases. Despite this, bystanders often do not report what they observe, citing reasons such as disbelief that an attack would occur, fear of damaging a relationship, distrust of authorities, or the belief that someone else would act. Because so few programs and evaluations exist that focus specifically on bystander intervention for targeted violence, this review broadens the scope to identify programs across three domains: targeted violence, suicide, and bullying prevention. The programs discussed in the literature each include a bystander intervention or bystander behavior improvement component to draw out lessons that may transfer to targeted violence programming.

Methods

This rapid review synthesized peer-reviewed, English-language journal articles published since 2010 that tested or evaluated a strategy for increasing bystander intervention in the targeted violence, suicide, and bullying space. Included studies were coded using a standardized template capturing population, setting, program content, type of bystander intervention, outcome measures, key results, and study limitations. This process identified 17 relevant programs (2 targeted violence, 2 suicide, and 13 bullying), which were then further analyzed for common delivery modes and content approaches.

Key findings

- *Program delivery mode.* Programs used four primary delivery approaches: asynchronous virtual instruction, in-person group discussion, in-person lecture-based instruction, and role-play or scenarios. In-person lecture-based instruction was most common and delivered variously by program staff, certified trainers, or graduate students. Role-play or scenario-based learning components offered participants opportunities to practice skills. In-person group discussion was used by only two programs, both bullying-specific, and was associated with increased teacher confidence in handling bullying and greater ability to help students identify bullying and act as bystanders. Asynchronous virtual formats were less costly and more scalable, and programs using this delivery mode generally showed positive effects on participants' knowledge and stated willingness to intervene.
- *Program content.* Four recurring content areas emerged: teaching concrete intervention steps (e.g., how and when to report), recognition training to help bystanders identify warning signs, general awareness about the issue, and empathy-building exercises. Programs incorporating these

elements were generally associated with improved bystander knowledge and confidence, though results for actual behavior change were more mixed. These patterns point to several content priorities for practitioners building targeted violence-specific bystander intervention programs: teaching people how to engage safely with someone showing warning signs and making clear that concerns should be reported immediately, building skills to recognize those warning signs in the first place, providing context on how common targeted violence is and what its consequences look like, and incorporating material that strengthens empathy across a community as a protective factor.

Of note, the findings related to bullying- or suicide-specific programs do not always directly translate to a targeted violence context. In targeted violence scenarios, emphasis should be placed on reporting concerns to appropriate authorities rather than directly intervening. Overall, these findings suggest an urgent need to develop bystander training programs that draw on promising practices from these domains but address the specific characteristics and contexts of targeted violence. Training to increase bystander reporting of warning signs is an essential component of a comprehensive approach to targeted violence prevention.

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Introduction

On a Monday in 2005, a 16-year-old killed nine people and injured nine others at a local high school before dying by suicide. In its analysis of the incident, the Federal Bureau of Investigation found that *39 separate individuals* knew that the perpetrator was thinking about conducting a school shooting.¹ This incident was not isolated; rather, the data on bystander awareness before acts of targeted violence reveal that opportunities for intervention are often missed.

In its analysis of 41 incidents of targeted violence at schools that occurred between 2008 and 2017, the National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) found that all attackers exhibited externally observable concerning behaviors; in 80 percent of these cases, the attacker engaged in behavior worrying enough to elicit concern from bystanders.² A study of 319 US domestic terrorists who committed attacks between 2001 and 2020 found that 60 percent engaged in observable behaviors generally considered warning signs (e.g., obsessive interest in firearms or mass violence).³ Other studies have looked more specifically at what terrorism and targeted violence researchers call “leakage”^{*4} and found evidence of it in 44 to 95 percent of cases, with most leakage taking the form of verbal statements to family or friends.⁵ For example, one study of targeted school shootings that occurred between 1997 and 2000 found that in 80 percent of cases, at least one person knew that the attacker was thinking about or planning an attack, and in 60 percent of incidents, more than one person knew of the attacker’s plan.⁶

Bystander intervention refers to the actions taken by individuals who witness warning signs or other indicators of violence to prevent or interrupt the potential harm.⁷ Given the prevalence of pre-attack warning signs and leakage among perpetrators, many scholars have highlighted the key role bystander intervention can play in preventing targeted violence.⁸ Unfortunately, in approximately 67 percent of the cases in NTAC’s analysis, bystanders failed to report at least one concerning communication that expressed an intent to attack.⁹ Their reasons for not reporting included belief that the attacker was joking, fear of violent reprisal, belief that any act of violence would not occur at school, or belief that someone else was already taking action.¹⁰ Researchers have also identified other barriers to bystander reporting, including inadequate knowledge of how or when to report, fear of damaging their relationship with the person of concern, fear of causing harm to the person of concern, mistrust of law enforcement, and lack of nonpunitive remedies.¹¹

Few studies have focused on the effectiveness of strategies intended to increase bystander intervention to prevent or disrupt targeted violence. In fact, very few programs aimed at doing so even exist. To identify promising practices (Table 1), we drew on the limited literature on increasing bystander intervention in the prevention of targeted violence. To supplement this literature, we drew on research related to behaviors with underlying dynamics that are similar to targeted violence: suicide and bullying. Although the specific

^{*}*Leakage* is defined as behaviors that intentionally or unintentionally reveal an individual’s motivation or capability to commit an act of targeted violence.

actions and threat profiles differ, all three behaviors are often preceded by observable warning signs or indicators that peers are often better positioned to notice and act on than professionals. Across this literature, we identified 17 programs that aim to increase bystander behavior. Of these programs, 2 focus on preventing targeted violence, 2 focus on preventing suicide, and 13 focus on preventing bullying. Table 2 describes each program.

Table 1. Number of articles by behavior

Behavior	Number of Articles
Targeted Violence	2
Suicide	8
Bullying	24
TOTAL	34

Source: CNA.

Table 2. Reviewed bystander intervention programs

Program	Behavior	Audience	Setting	Description
Know the Signs (KtS)	Targeted Violence	Juveniles	School	The KtS program has two components. Start with Hello is delivered in three 20- to 40-minute sessions that cover addressing social isolation, increasing inclusion and empathy-building, and fostering a welcoming school community. Say Something is a single 45- to 60-minute session that covers warning signs, the importance of acting immediately, and options for reporting concerns. ¹²
Networks Against School Shootings (NETWASS) program	Targeted Violence	Adults	School	The NETWASS program trains school staff to recognize when students are engaging in warning behaviors or showing signs of crisis and to report serious concerns to the campus crisis prevention team (e.g., behavioral threat assessment team). ¹³
Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR)	Suicide	Adults	School; Community	QPR is a training program that teaches everyday people and professionals working with at-risk or youth populations to recognize suicide warning signs, directly ask someone about suicidal intent, persuade them to seek help, and connect them to appropriate resources. ¹⁴
Sources of Strength	Suicide	Juveniles	School	The Sources of Strength suicide prevention program trains peer leaders to conduct school-wide messaging activities to enhance protective factors, such as increasing trust and communication with adults, promoting help-seeking norms, and reducing stigma around struggling with suicidal thoughts. ¹⁵
Bully Busters	Bullying	Adults	School	Bully Busters training covers seven topics: awareness of bullying, how to recognize bullying behaviors, how to recognize victims of bullying, effective interventions, actions for helping victims of bullying, ways to prevent bullying, and relaxation and coping skills. ¹⁶
Bullying Literature Project (BLP)	Bullying	Juveniles	School	The BLP is a five-session classroom-based intervention that uses children's literature as a springboard to teach social skills and encourage bystander intervention. ¹⁷
FearNot!	Bullying	Juveniles	Digital	FearNot! is an interactive virtual simulation through which children observe bullying scenarios and actively influence the storyline through their choices. It aims to build empathy for victims while teaching effective response strategies, including intervening, seeking adult help, and using coping skills. ¹⁸

Program	Behavior	Audience	Setting	Description
KiVa Antibullying Program	Bullying	Juveniles	School; Digital	KiVa is a whole-school antibullying program that emphasizes the role of bystanders; it aims to shift student norms so that peers support victims rather than reinforce bullying. ¹⁹
LGBTI+ Youth Program	Bullying	Adults	Community	This 10-hour training is delivered over two to three sessions and covers LGBTI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex) concepts, violence in the digital era, bystander intervention approaches, root causes of violence, and community involvement in violence prevention. ²⁰
Professional Development Network	Bullying	Adults	School	This professional development network for teachers in Basque Country hosts several three-hour seminars monthly that aim to help participants encourage bystander intervention among their students. ²¹
Social Media Intervention	Bullying	Adults	Digital	This social media–based intervention provides participants with empathy nudges (i.e., prompts asking users to reflect on the victim's feelings) and accountability nudges (i.e., notifications to increase social transparency), both with the goal of increasing bystander intervention. ²²
STAC	Bullying	Juveniles	School	The STAC program has three goals: teach students to identify bullying, intervene as peer advocates, and gain confidence with STAC strategies. These strategies include s tealing the show (i.e., using humor or distraction to disrupt the bullying situation), t urning it over (i.e., reporting the bullying to an adult), a ccompanying others (i.e., supporting the victim of the bullying), and c oaching compassion (i.e., fostering empathy in the student who is doing the bullying). ²³
STAC-T	Bullying	Juveniles	Digital	The STAC-T app has the same goals as the core STAC program and trains participants on the STAC strategies through a 40-minute session with a 15-minute booster session. It also incorporates role-play exercises that are conducted virtually using an avatar. ²⁴
STAC Parent Module	Bullying	Adults	Digital	The parent module is a variant of the STAC program. It consists of a 30-minute session that covers what bullying is, what the STAC strategies are, and how parents can support their adolescents using the STAC strategies. The objective is to encourage parents to report bullying when appropriate and to support their children when they engage in bystander behavior. ²⁵
STAC Teacher Module	Bullying	Adults	School	The teacher module is a variant of the STAC program. It consists of a 50-minute session that covers information about bullying and how teachers can support students who use STAC strategies. The objective is to encourage teachers to report bullying when appropriate and to support students who engage in bystander behavior. ²⁶
Steps to Respect	Bullying	Juveniles	School	Steps to Respect is a school-wide program that includes both classroom lessons and staff training components that aim to foster a positive school climate and positive norms. The goal is to help students recognize bullying, improve assertiveness and communication skills to help them deter and report bullying, and engage in appropriate bystander responses to bullying. ²⁷
Text Message Intervention	Bullying	Juveniles	Digital	In the text message intervention, participants receive one text message per day for 15 days that contains a link to a mobile site where a scenario is presented about a peer being in trouble, being bullied, or being harassed. Participants are asked how they would respond, and then they receive a short educational message about the importance of acting and strategies for bystander intervention in that specific scenario. ²⁸

Source: CNA.

In this paper, we examine delivery formats used in bystander intervention programs, including virtual activities, group discussion, in-person lecture-based instruction, and role-play or scenario-based exercises. We then discuss program content, focusing on the specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes these programs seek to develop.

Delivery Mode

In the literature reviewed, we identified four modes of delivering bystander intervention training: asynchronous virtual instruction, in-person group discussion, in-person lecture-based instruction, and role-play or scenario-based exercises. We discuss each of these delivery modes in the following subsections. For each, we focus on the programs that are using that mode as the primary delivery mechanism, although other programs discussed in this paper may also have incorporated it.

Asynchronous virtual instruction

Of the 17 programs we reviewed, we found that 5 are delivered virtually and asynchronously (all 5 address bullying). STAC-T uses an app to guide users through a 40-minute training on bullying, the role of bystanders, and the STAC strategies; users then receive a 15-minute booster session. Throughout the modules, users can earn badges that reward learning and encourage engagement.²⁹ The STAC parent module also uses an asynchronous format in the form of a 30-minute pre-recorded presentation.³⁰ FearNot! is a computer-based virtual simulation that participants play for 30 minutes per week for three consecutive weeks.³¹ Another intervention delivers training content to adolescents via text message.³² Finally, an intervention that is designed for implementation on social media (but was tested in a survey environment that mimicked a social media platform) uses empathy and accountability nudges to increase bystanders' sense of empathy for victims and personal responsibility to act.³³

The evidence suggests that asynchronous virtual training delivery is generally effective. An evaluation of STAC-T found it was both acceptable to and relevant for students, and 88.8 percent of participants who witnessed bullying post-training reported using at least one STAC strategy to intervene.³⁴ Similarly, parents who took the STAC parent module training reported an increase in knowledge of STAC strategies and confidence to support defenders, confidence in intervening in bullying situations, and comfort intervening in bullying situations.³⁵ The text message intervention increased participants' likelihood to intervene if they witnessed online, but not in-person, bullying or harassment.³⁶ The social media intervention also showed mixed effectiveness. The accountability nudges increased participants' likelihood of reporting bullying posts, but the empathy nudges were associated with only low-effort supportive behaviors, such as liking bullying victims' posts.³⁷

The literature highlighted several advantages of delivering bystander intervention training in an asynchronous virtual format. This delivery mode can be significantly less expensive than in-person training, which is often cost-prohibitive for many school districts, businesses, and community organizations.³⁸ It is also more scalable than many in-person or synchronous virtual training options and thus potentially a good way to quickly expand access to bystander intervention training.³⁹ Asynchronous training offers several benefits, for teachers and youths in particular. Unlike in-person training, it does not have to be completed during school hours, so it does not cut into valuable instruction time. In addition, given the growing trend

of youth radicalization online, text message or social media interventions have the added benefit of reaching adolescents in the same spaces where they are likely to observe warning signs or threats.

In-person group discussion

Of the programs reviewed, only two—both of which address bullying—use in-person group discussion as a core delivery mode. In the Bully Busters program, teachers attend seven monthly support groups, each of which focuses on a specific topic (e.g., increasing awareness of bullying, relaxation and coping skills). During these sessions, the group spends approximately 30 of 45 minutes engaged in discussion.⁴⁰ The professional teacher development network in Basque Country hosts several three-hour seminars monthly that target educators across the preschool, primary, and secondary levels. Using a dialogic teacher training approach, the seminars help teachers create space for critical thinking and dialogue with their students in order to prevent and reduce bullying.

Studies of these two programs suggest that in-person group discussion can be a promising delivery mechanism for bystander intervention training. The evaluation of the Bully Busters program found that the teacher support groups increased teachers' confidence around handling bullying-related student behavior.⁴¹ Similarly, qualitative analysis of interviews with teachers in the Basque professional development network found that the teachers were better able to help their students identify bullying and act as bystanders.⁴² The authors also noted that "not only the content but also the type of training in which the content is delivered is crucial."⁴³ They stated that the use of dialogic interaction helped normalize constructive responses to school violence (e.g., positive bystander intervention).

In-person lecture-based instruction

Of the 17 programs reviewed, 10 used in-person lecture-based instruction as a core delivery mode. Of these, six were bullying-specific programs, two were suicide-specific programs, and two were targeted violence-specific programs. The programs were delivered by either program staff, certified trainers, or graduate students, as discussed in the following subsections.

Program staff

Four interventions (three bullying-specific programs and one targeted violence-specific program) were delivered by the program's creators or dedicated program staff. The trainings were therefore implemented with high fidelity, but the availability of these trainings was more limited.

Targeted violence. The Networks Against School Shootings (NETWASS) program (the only targeted violence-specific program in this category) has an "extensive" implementation model in which school staff receive a two-hour training from psychologists on the NETWASS research team. Staff who received this training showed significant gains in expertise regarding school shootings and evaluation skills.⁴⁴

Bullying. In at least one iteration with junior high students, the core STAC training was delivered by Dr. Aida Midgett, who co-created the program alongside her research team.⁴⁵ The STAC Teacher Module was also delivered by Dr. Midgett and a master's student. Both STAC and the STAC Teacher Module were found to be effective at increasing knowledge of bullying and confidence to act as a defender, although the evaluation of STAC found no significant difference between the intervention and control groups.⁴⁶ Steps to Respect is delivered by research staff from the Committee for Children (its original creators) and has been found to be effective at increasing bullying interventions and positive bystander behavior.⁴⁷

Certified trainers

Six programs are delivered by certified trainers through a train-the-trainer model. This option may be more scalable than having all trainings delivered by program staff, but care must be taken to ensure that the program is implemented as intended.

Targeted violence. Both of the targeted violence programs we reviewed are delivered by certified trainers. Sandy Hook Promise's Know the Signs (KtS) program is facilitated by teachers, school counselors, and other school staff—all of whom are trained by the KtS program.⁴⁸ The NETWASS program also has a "multiplier" implementation model in which school psychologists or police officers receive specific NETWASS multiplier training, they then train the school principal or other members of the school's Crisis Response Team, and those members then train school staff. Staff trained in this model outperformed those in the extensive training condition—possibly because the "multiplier" trainers were individuals familiar to and trusted by school staff.⁴⁹

Suicide. Both of the suicide-specific programs we reviewed use a train-the-trainer model. Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR), a suicide prevention gatekeeper training program, certifies individuals as master trainers through its QPR Institute. Master trainers or instructors trained by the master trainers then deliver the QPR training. It is most often delivered as a one- to two-hour in-person training that consists of an introductory video, lecture, distribution of booklets and referral cards, and Q&A. Studies have consistently found that QPR training increases participants' suicide prevention knowledge, confidence, and willingness to intervene with individuals at risk of suicide.⁵⁰ In the Sources of Strength program, peer leaders are trained by certified trainers and by adult advisors who have been trained by the certified trainers. Studies have found that the peer leaders showed improvements in help-seeking attitudes and were able to refer distressed peers to trusted adults.⁵¹

Bullying. Two programs taught by certified trainers address bullying: the KiVa Antibullying Program and a program that trains teachers to prevent violence against LGBTI+ youth. The KiVa Antibullying Program is implemented by class teachers who are all trained by members of their school's teaching team who have attended a two-day training course led by certified KiVa trainers.⁵² The LGBTI+ youth program trainers were trained by members of the project consortium that created the program. These trainers delivered the

⁺ Both the intervention and control groups reported an increase in knowledge and confidence, likely because the intervention group students shared what they learned in the training with control group (waitlist) students.

intervention, a 10-hour training course divided into several sessions, primarily through official PowerPoints with some supplemental Q&A and brainstorming activities.⁵³

Graduate students

Two programs—both of which address bullying—leverage graduate students to deliver the training. Similar to a train-the-trainer model, the students are trained by faculty members; however, these programs lack a formal, standardized training program and certification process. STAC is most frequently delivered by master's students in counseling programs, although in one case the students co-led the training with faculty.⁵⁴ In one iteration, the only training that the graduate students received before delivering the training was watching a STAC training video made by the program's creators.⁵⁵ The Bullying Literature Project (BLP) was administered by two graduate students who were trained by the BLP's developer and received ongoing feedback over the five-week intervention period.⁵⁶

Role-play or Scenarios

Role-play or scenarios are a core delivery mechanism for 5 of the 17 programs we reviewed. The evidence suggests that role-play or scenarios offer opportunities to practice skills and may help bystanders recognize situations in which they need to act.

Suicide. In the QPR program, participants listen to the challenges that cause people to think about suicide and practice asking directly about suicide in a frank, yet compassionate, manner. QPR participants who completed additional role-play practice demonstrated better objectively observed gatekeeper skills (e.g., recognition of warning signs, ability to connect a person in distress with help)⁵⁷ than those who received standard training alone.⁵⁸

Bullying. Four of the five programs are related to bullying. In the FearNot! virtual learning environment, children view bullying scenarios and make choices that affect how the story unfolds. The evidence regarding FearNot!'s effectiveness is mixed. In the German sample, previously uninvolved students in the intervention group were significantly more likely to become defenders than were those in the control group, but in the United Kingdom (UK) sample, no significant differences were found between the intervention and control groups.⁵⁹ Role-play is also a critical component of the STAC program: students act out bullying scenarios in small groups to practice using STAC strategies and build concrete intervention skills.⁶⁰ STAC-T translates these role-play activities into a virtual format in which students choose an avatar, view a bullying scenario, select each STAC strategy, view how it plays out, and receive feedback.⁶¹ The text message intervention also uses this delivery mode by sending adolescents brief bullying or harassment scenarios via links in daily texts, asking how they would respond and then offering suggested bystander intervention strategies for each scenario.⁶²

Content

We identified four core content areas in the programs we reviewed: concrete intervention steps, recognition training, awareness raising about the issue, and empathy building. We discuss each in the following subsections.

Concrete intervention steps

Of the 17 programs reviewed, 13 provided instruction on what effective bystander intervention strategies are and how to use them. The targeted violence programs focus on outlining pathways to reporting and seeking help for students engaged in warning behaviors. The suicide-prevention programs are mixed: one program encourages direct intervention, whereas the other encourages seeking help from adults. The bullying-specific programs provide strategies that often call for direct intervention.

Targeted violence. Both targeted violence-specific programs prescribe “next steps” once concerning behavior is observed. Sandy Hook Promise’s KtS program emphasizes the importance of acting immediately and options for reporting. KtS showed some promising positive effects on reporting beliefs (i.e., self-efficacy for reporting, comfort level for reporting, and intention to report), with attendees reporting higher confidence in their ability to report warning signs and stronger intentions to do so compared to non-attendees, although changes over time were not statistically significant.⁶³ NETWASS encourages school staff who observe potential warning signs to report their concerns to a central prevention appointee for further investigation. Staff expertise regarding school shootings, evaluation skills, trust in organizational systems, and knowledge of whom to contact about a student in crisis all increased from baseline to post-intervention, suggesting participants became better equipped to identify and report potential threats.⁶⁴

Suicide. Both suicide-specific programs include information on specific steps to intervene. QPR trains participants to ask at-risk individuals if they are considering suicide (question), reassure the person there is hope (persuade), and refer them to professional help (refer).⁶⁵ The training significantly increased participants’ intentions across all three targeted behaviors, with especially strong effects for referral.⁶⁶ Sources of Strength does not encourage direct intervention; instead, it focuses on encouraging reporting of suicidal ideation to trusted adults. The study found mixed evidence regarding the program’s effectiveness. It significantly improved students’ attitudes related to seeking help for suicidal peers from trusted adults, though increases in connecting distressed peers to adults were positive but not statistically significant.⁶⁷

Bullying. Bully Busters, BLP, KiVa, Steps to Respect, the text message intervention, and STAC (and all STAC variants) teach specific intervention strategies. Module six of the Bully Busters curriculum teaches specific intervention skills for teachers, including the “four Rs” (i.e., recognize that a problem exists, remove yourself from the situation if you cannot effectively handle it, review the situation, and respond to the situation).⁶⁸ Similarly, the BLP teaches students to use bystander intervention strategies such as asking the bully to stop,

being a good friend to the victim, and seeking help on behalf of the victim. It also encourages behavioral strategies for peacefully resolving peer conflict (e.g., walk away, ignore, talk it out, and seek help (WITS)). One evaluation of the BLP found that it increased students' self-reported positive bystander behavior compared to the control group; however, a separate study found no significant change.⁶⁹ Evaluations of the KiVa Antibullying Program, which provides students with safe ways of responding to bullying incidents, returned similarly mixed results. KiVa significantly increased defending behavior across age groups in Finland, but it was less effective in seventh through ninth grade.⁷⁰ In a UK sample, KiVa was associated with a decrease in bullying victimization but did not have a positive effect on defending behavior.⁷¹

All STAC programs provide instruction on four specific intervention strategies: stealing the show (distraction), turning it over (reporting), accompanying others (supporting the victim), and coaching compassion (confronting the bully). In a sample of fourth- to sixth-grade students, those in the intervention group reported a significant improvement in their knowledge of STAC strategies.⁷² Separate evaluations found that STAC was similarly effective for middle school and high school students.⁷³ The STAC parent and teacher modules provide participants with specific actions they can take to support student intervention, such as intervening when necessary to ensure safety, reassuring students that they did the right thing by intervening, and reinforcing that bullying is unacceptable.⁷⁴ Teachers reported a significant increase in knowledge and confidence to support defenders, confidence in intervening in bullying situations, and comfort in intervening in bullying situations.⁷⁵

Recognition training

Of the 17 programs we reviewed, 11 emphasized recognition skills, a critical precursor to bystander intervention. Specifically, the programs train participants to notice warning signs or behavioral indicators and to interpret them as being related to targeted violence, suicide, or bullying.

Targeted violence. Recognition training is a critical component of both targeted violence-specific programs. One component of KtS, Say Something, is a training of 45 to 60 minutes for middle and high school students that covers targeted violence warning signs and signals, the importance of acting immediately, and options for reporting. As previously noted, KtS showed some promising positive effects on reporting beliefs.⁷⁶ NETWASS trains school staff to recognize when students are engaging in warning behaviors or showing signs of crisis and to report serious concerns to the campus crisis prevention team (i.e., the behavioral threat assessment team).⁷⁷ Teachers who participated in the program showed small but statistically significant improvements in their knowledge about school shootings and ability to intervene as bystanders immediately after the training, but these effects declined over time.⁷⁸

Suicide. All iterations of the QPR training for suicide prevention train participants on suicide-related warning signs (e.g., seeking access to means; finding no sense of purpose in life; withdrawing from friends, family, or society).⁷⁹ Studies have consistently found that QPR improves knowledge of these warning signs. In a sample of college students, faculty, and staff, the majority (67.5 to 90 percent) of participants were able to recognize common warning signs of suicide.⁸⁰ In several studies across diverse contexts, participants showed significant improvements in suicide prevention knowledge.⁸¹

Bullying. The bullying-specific programs seek to enhance participants' ability to recognize bullying as it is occurring. Two modules of the Bully Busters curriculum are dedicated to recognizing the bully and recognizing the victim.⁸² One component of the KiVa Antibullying Program offers primary school students the opportunity to test their knowledge about bullying.⁸³ The study evaluating the Basque professional teacher development network noted that "the dialogues developed by students...[and] facilitated by the interviewed teachers greatly contribute to students being able to identify school violence that they did not previously recognize."⁸⁴ All STAC trainings, including the parent and teacher modules, open with a section that teaches participants what does and does not constitute bullying. STAC training is generally effective at improving participants' bullying knowledge, with most studies finding medium or large increases in knowledge between baseline and follow-up.⁸⁵ However, in a randomized controlled trial with a sample of US junior high school students, STAC did not lead to greater increases in bullying knowledge, confidence, or use of STAC intervention strategies compared to the control group.⁸⁶ In the Steps to Respect program, some skills lessons focus on recognizing, refusing, and reporting bullying. A study evaluating the effectiveness of Steps to Respect found strong positive outcomes: students from schools participating in the intervention reported greater increases in bullying intervention and positive bystander behavior at post-test than did students from control schools.⁸⁷

Awareness raising about the issue

Of the 17 programs reviewed, 7 bullying-specific programs sought to raise awareness among participants about the issue. One of the seven 45-minute modules of the Bully Busters curriculum increases awareness of bullying by providing an overview of bullying in schools, definitions of bullying, examples of common bullying locations, and the role of teachers in prevention.⁸⁸ Similarly, STAC and the STAC teacher and parent modules include content on the prevalence of bullying, background information and definitions related to bullying, and misconceptions about bullying.⁸⁹ Both STAC-T and FearNot! aim to educate users about bullying, with the STAC-T app dedicating a module to bullying-related background information, definitions, and statistics.⁹⁰ The LGBTI+ program dedicates a module to explaining LGBTI+ concepts, the reality facing LGBTI+ youth, and the nature of the violence against them in Europe. The training significantly improved participants' awareness of bystander intervention, their knowledge of effective strategies to address violence, and their intention to implement upstander actions in their workplaces.⁹¹ The text messaging intervention includes an educational message about the importance of intervening as a bystander. As previously noted, this intervention increased the likelihood of bystander intervention to prevent online, but not in-person, bullying or harassment.⁹²

Empathy building

Empathy building was a core component in 5 of the 17 programs we reviewed; 4 of these programs were related to bullying, and 1 was related to targeted violence.

Targeted violence. One component of Sandy Hook Promise's KtS program is Start with Hello, which consists of three sessions that teach students to recognize social isolation, practice empathy and inclusion strategies, and build a more welcoming school community. KtS attendees reported significant improvements in school climate, including greater school connectedness and feelings of safety, compared to both their pre-test scores and the scores of non-attendees.⁹³

Bullying. Several bullying-specific programs focus on developing empathy and a sense of personal responsibility. For example, the KiVa Antibullying Program aims to help students (including bullies) understand the victim's experience and feel personally responsible for supporting victims of bullying through lessons on emotions, inclusion, and the role of bystanders in either reinforcing or stopping bullying.⁹⁴ A study evaluating KiVa in primary and secondary schools in Finland found that it increased affective empathy (i.e., the ability to feel and share another person's emotions) but not cognitive empathy (i.e., the ability to understand another person's perspective).⁹⁵ Two books in the BLP curriculum, *Bully Beans* and *Say Something*, specifically aim to help build empathy for students being victimized.⁹⁶ Separately, FearNot! is designed to foster empathy for victims by having participants play the role of a friend to the victimized character in the simulation.⁹⁷ Both BLP and FearNot! have improved participants' positive bystander behavior, although this effect materialized in only FearNot!'s German subsample (not the UK subsample).⁹⁸ An intervention on social media focuses on building empathy by using empathy nudges (i.e., prompts asking users to reflect on the victim's feelings) on social media. As previously noted, this intervention resulted in increased empathy associated with only passive bystander behavior, such as liking a bullying victim's social media post.⁹⁹

Discussion

The literature on strategies and interventions for increasing bystander behavior to prevent targeted violence, bullying, and suicide indicates that most of these programs are generally effective across a range of contexts and with diverse audiences. However, these findings have limitations. Most studies have limited generalizability due to small, nonrandomly selected, or nonrepresentative samples or the lack of a control group. Furthermore, all the studies included in this review relied on self-reported data regarding behavior or behavioral intentions, which may not accurately reflect actual behavior. In addition, it is not possible to disaggregate format from content. Thus, in most cases, we cannot ascertain what aspect of these programs (delivery format or content) makes them effective.

Despite these limitations, we identified content in these programs that practitioners designing targeted violence-specific programs should consider including:

- Training in concrete intervention steps, including how to safely interact with individuals exhibiting warning signs, pathways to reporting, and the importance of reporting immediately
- Information and training on recognizing key warning signs
- Information on the prevalence and ramifications of targeted violence
- Content that aims to increase empathy within communities as a protective factor

Approaches that incorporate these elements have been effective in building the knowledge and confidence needed for people to act. In delivering the training, practitioners should consider combining lecture-based delivery with interactive skills practice (including role-play or scenario-based exercises). Practitioners should also consider options for online training to enhance accessibility while still providing opportunities for experiential learning.

Note that the findings related to bullying- or suicide-specific programs are not directly translatable to targeted violence-specific efforts. In targeted violence scenarios, the potential threat to bystanders' safety is significant and should not be overlooked. Programs must account for these risks and avoid encouraging behaviors that could place bystanders in dangerous situations. Emphasis should be placed on reporting concerns to appropriate authorities rather than directly intervening.

Conclusion

Our findings, particularly regarding the importance of raising awareness and improving the ability to recognize and report warning signs, are consistent with recent theoretical scholarship on this topic.¹⁰⁰ Most existing bystander intervention training, programs, and evaluations have primarily focused on bullying, sexual violence, domestic violence, and suicide. There is an urgent need to develop similar programs that draw on lessons from these domains while addressing the specific characteristics and contexts of targeted violence.¹⁰¹ Given that such a high percentage of attackers exhibit warning signs beforehand, increasing bystander intervention should be an essential component of targeted violence prevention efforts.

Appendix: Methodology

For this rapid literature review, we synthesized peer-reviewed literature on strategies to increase bystander intervention. We analyzed the limited existing literature on bystander interventions in terrorism/targeted-violence scenarios and drew lessons from related domains, including suicide and bullying prevention, to identify promising practices. Before beginning, we established search strategies and inclusion criteria to minimize bias; specifically, we included peer-reviewed journal articles that were published in English since 2010, that used US or European data, and that employed quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods, or descriptive designs to test or evaluate a strategy to increase bystander intervention. We also required the literature to clearly operationalize outcomes related to intervention effectiveness and to report study timing, data sources, data collection methods, and methodology. We conducted this rapid review in Google Scholar using predefined keyword combinations, and we downloaded articles until we reached a full page of clearly irrelevant results. We then coded all included studies using a standardized template capturing study characteristics, population, setting, type of bystander intervention, outcome measures, key results, and limitations or potential biases. Once we completed this coding, we conducted a search for additional literature for each named intervention. For our complete methods, please see our report [*Bystander Intervention Literature Review: Methodology*](#).

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