

PROJECT

Soundcheck



Ending **Sexual Violence** at Mass Gatherings:

**A Guide to Safe and Effective
Bystander Intervention for
Music Festivals, Large Events,
and Parties.**



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What is Project SoundCheck?

In 2013 & 2014, staff at The Ottawa Hospital conducted a study of local emergency room visits. This research found that 25% of new cases of sexual assault reported in Ottawa happened at or around mass gatherings. This can mean a big party, a music festival, or any event where there are lots of people. In 2015, The Sexual Assault Network and The Ottawa Coalition to End Violence Against Women launched Project SoundCheck with funding from Crime Prevention Ottawa. Project SoundCheck seeks to end sexual violence at mass gatherings. Informed by current local research, the project teaches event staff and volunteers about risk factors and prevention strategies.

In the Summer and Fall of 2015, Project SoundCheck partnered with local events and festivals to learn about the issue of safety at their gatherings and to provide bystander intervention training to their staff and volunteers. These festival partners provided valuable information and ideas, and they gave their time and resources to learn about how they could prevent and better respond to sexual violence at their events.

With valuable feedback from volunteers, we've written this guide to answer some of the questions people have about how to prevent sexual assault at mass gatherings. Project SoundCheck exists thanks to our funder, Crime Prevention Ottawa. We thank them for their support, and we are also so grateful to our festival partners who have given us space to share ideas, teach, and learn.

Thank YOU for taking the time to read about sexual violence prevention. By coming to one of our training sessions, watching our presentations, and reading this manual you are taking an important step in being an engaged bystander. We hope you will take this information and use it in your life to prevent and respond to sexual violence. We are always looking to share ideas, and we welcome your feedback. Thanks for being part of creating a culture of consent.

Sexual Assault at Ottawa Festivals & Events: What happens?

With so many people there to look out for one another, big events can become truly positive places where lots of people in the community are keeping each other safe. Unfortunately, there are some people who use large events as an opportunity to commit sexual violence. New research from The Ottawa Hospital medical staff tells us that 25% of reported cases of sexual assault in our city happen at or around mass gatherings. At these big events women, especially young women, are at an increased risk of being sexually assaulted. Many of the young women coming to the hospital after being sexually assaulted at a mass gathering were assaulted by a man they didn't know, sometimes having been slipped drugs before they were attacked.

Festivals, concerts, and parties are supposed to be fun for all of us. Volunteers and staff work hard at events so that everyone can enjoy themselves. Attending shows as an audience member also gives us a chance to help keep each other safe in all kinds of ways, like sharing our sunscreen or calling a taxi for a friend when they need one. Project SoundCheck exists to help people add sexual violence prevention to the list of

ways we try to look out for one another. It's powerful when we take steps to make sure everyone is safe and having a great time. Festivals are so much fun, and by watching out for dangerous situations we can help keep the positive experience going.

Most people want to end sexual violence, but we don't always know what to do. We need to practice helping those around us when they may be at risk for experiencing sexual violence. Even if you don't know someone, you have the power to check-in with them and intervene to stop an assault from happening.

Most sexual violence is not committed by 'strangers'. Abuse and assault happen in dating relationships, marriages, and families. People who experience sexual violence often know the person who assaults them – it could be a friend, an acquaintance, or a partner. What we know is that at mass gatherings there is an increased risk for violence by a stranger. None of this abuse or violence is acceptable. If you have been assaulted by anyone, it is not your fault.

Drug & Alcohol Facilitated Sexual Assault

At a mass gathering, women are particularly vulnerable to alcohol and drug-facilitated sexual assault. This can mean someone slipping something into their drink and assaulting them later, or it can mean someone taking advantage of the fact that a woman has voluntarily used drugs or alcohol and is intoxicated. No matter what substances someone has consumed, it is not ok for someone to assault them. **If someone seems really drunk or high and is falling over, looks confused, sick, cold, or lost, you can stop and ask them if they need help. If you see someone who seems vulnerable to assault because they are very intoxicated you don't have to figure out at that moment if they were drugged or took something on their own. The most important thing in that moment is not how they got in that state, it is keeping them safe.** Help them find their friends, a paramedic, security, or a safe way home.

Some people find it hard to intervene because they are concerned about being wrong about someone needing help. Sometimes it is confusing and we need help to figure out whether someone is over-intoxicated or if they just have

a communication style, language ability, or cognitive or physical condition that makes them interact differently than we are used to. Involving paramedics is a great idea – paramedics are specially trained to determine if someone is in danger due to drugs or alcohol. Don't worry, paramedics aren't there to get anyone in trouble, and they can help you figure out what's going on and keep everyone safe. If you don't know if someone might be at risk, it's better to check in than to do nothing.

A check-in can help you ensure that people are leaving safely with someone they know.

- ✔ **Ask her if she knows the person she is leaving with.**
- ✔ **Ask her if she wants to leave with them.**
- ✔ **Confirm with her friends that she knows them.**
- ✔ **If she isn't safe leaving with them, stay with her.**
- ✔ **Help her get a safe way home.**

People who will commit sexual assault might try to get someone alone.

They use someone's intoxicated state to make it easier to assault them. If you see someone following someone or slipping something in their drink, tell somebody! Warn the person who is being targeted. If you hear someone talking about trying to take someone home because they are very drunk, or trying to buy someone drinks to convince them to have sex, let others around you know what you heard. You might want to tell the person directly that what they are planning is wrong, or involve someone on staff like a bartender or security guard. Let the person they are targeting know what you heard, and help her find friends or get to a safe place.

Sexual violence happens to men, women, and people of any gender.

We hope Project SoundCheck offers skills to increase safety for people of all genders. Research from The Sexual Assault and Partner Abuse Care program at the Ottawa Hospital, a gender inclusive program, found that young women are at particularly high risk to be sexual assaulted at large events. This information is important because it helps us know what to look for when we are identifying risk, but the same safety strategies can be used to help someone of any gender.

How do we check-in? What are the strategies?

We call it bystander intervention. This can be as simple as checking in with someone you are worried about, and helping them get safe. You don't have to intervene alone, and you can do it in a way that is comfortable for you. **When you are intervening you want to keep everyone's safety in mind, including your own.** Bystander intervention is not about being an action hero who runs into a scene and gets in a fight to save a damsel in distress. An effective bystander doesn't escalate the situation; instead they depend on non-violent techniques. You want to use non-violence, and show respect for those around you, including respecting the person you are trying to help.

Some men in Ottawa have used large events to find women they don't know to target with violence. We know this is scary information, but there are things we can do about it. You can be part of preventing sexual violence and keeping events safe and fun. Because the perpetrators are in public and in front of crowds when they are finding someone to target, there is an opportunity for someone to notice, and to stop an assault from happening. We can recognize specific behaviour and intervene in a safe, positive way. If you see someone who might be vulnerable to sexual violence, you can check-in with them and offer help. Most men do not commit violence, and most men want to help be part of the solution. Bystander intervention is one way for people of all genders to help reduce violence against women and everyone.

So what can you do?

Start by paying attention. If you see someone who looks like they might be in trouble, but you aren't sure, keep an eye on them. You might see them meet-up with friends, and then you might not be concerned any more. Or you might watch the situation and still wonder if they are in trouble. What can you do if you are unsure? Ask those around you. Get input from security, other volunteers, or a friend. If you decide that someone might need help, you can do a check-in. You don't have to be sure that someone is in trouble – it's ok if you are still figuring out what's happening. When you do a check-in, you don't need to accuse anyone; you are just getting more information.

Some ideas of how to check-in:

- ✓ **Start a conversation: "I love this party!"**
- ✓ **Ask a question: "Do you know which band is on next?"**
- ✓ **Say hi, ask what's up, and see how they respond.**

There are all kinds of ways you can intervene, and that can be different for everyone.

Use a strategy that works best for you. Your method can be subtle or direct. You can start by just going up to someone and asking what time it is, or if they know where the bathroom is. Any question that gets them talking means you can try to figure out how they are doing, plus it lets them know you are there to help if they need it; sometimes that's enough.

Volunteers play a special role in keeping people safe at events. As a volunteer, you can use your position to help people find resources, and connect them to more help. Find out what security services and medical support are available at your event. Are there specific people with radios whom you can contact if you see a dangerous situation? What about paramedics on site? As a volunteer, you can alert staff about dangerous behaviour at an event. With information from you, security can step in and stop someone from leaving with someone who might harm them.

Sometimes intervening as a bystander can seem overwhelming, but when you are a volunteer it can be easier because you have lots of support in place. All of the organizers who partner with Project SoundCheck understand that volunteers are acting as the eyes and ears of the security team at their events. If you see someone who might be in trouble, the organizers you are volunteering for want you to help them. You have the support of your event staff if you need help reaching out. While you are doing your job at a merchandise table or taking tickets, you can keep an eye on what's happening around you, and if something doesn't seem right, we all want you to let others on your team know.

There are lots of ways you can help prevent sexual assault. Involving security, asking someone if they are ok, and calling out uncool behavior are all part of being an effective bystander and creating a culture of consent. We hear from volunteers all the time that one of their favourite approaches is the distraction technique. When you use distraction to diffuse a situation you can put your own spin on it, and you don't have to be confrontational or accusatory.

Distraction Technique

If you are concerned about the way two people are interacting, you can use distraction as a way to disrupt the situation. This works even if you aren't sure what is happening in the situation; you can use distraction to address the person who might be vulnerable, or the person who you worry could be an aggressor. Someone who commits drug or alcohol-facilitated sexual assault at a large event is going to do what they think they can get away with. These predators feel invisible in the big crowd, and they act when they think no one is watching them or no one will stop them. Sometimes just being a presence and letting people know that you see them can make a huge difference. If you worry about how a man is talking to a woman, but you aren't sure if the woman is

comfortable, you can engage either one of them in conversation. Distracting him for a moment is a non-confrontational way to offer her a chance to disengage from the conversation if she wants to. Distracting her for a moment offers her a chance to ask you for help if she wants, and to leave the situation without having to escalate it by accusing anyone. Some volunteers start a conversation about the music, or ask a question to start the distraction. There are no set rules for distractions, just say something that feels safe, comfortable, and natural to you. By speaking to either or both of the people involved, you can buy some time while you send someone else to get event staff. If you need help, delegate a task to a specific person by asking them to go get security.

What happens when we check in? How does it feel?

At big events sometimes we see something and wonder if we should intervene. A lot of people think maybe someone else will do it, or because there are so many people around, it isn't their responsibility. Predators know this, and they go to spaces full of people and feel confident that when they victimize someone everyone else will keep on walking, and no one will help out the person in trouble. **They rely on everyone being too polite, too busy, or too uncomfortable to say anything.** You can be one person who steps up and does something, and by doing that you can help change the culture at that event. Your actions let others know that they are in a space where we look out for those around us. When you intervene and break the silence, you help make it easier for other people to do the same.

Practice, practice, practice! Do you have the confidence to intervene?

Sometimes we see something and want to check-in, but in the moment it feels overwhelming. We feel anxious, or we forget what we want to say. This is normal. One way to overcome this is to practice. It may sound silly at first, but it really helps! When you are getting ready to head out for the night, you can practice check-in techniques alone or with a friend. Maybe you want to pick a phrase and repeat it a few times before you go out, so you will be ready with the words if you see a situation where you want to intervene. One example is “Hey, what’s up? Do you need some help?” Practicing the phrase helps you feel more prepared, and it will increase your confidence and comfort level if you do have to intervene. Ask other volunteers or friends if they have suggestions and share ideas together. If you’re still having trouble feeling confident, remember that after people intervene to prevent violence they report that they feel relieved and glad they did something. You don’t have to be perfect to make a difference.

If an assault happens remember that it is not your fault.

Sexual violence is the fault of the person who commits the violence, and no one else. If you see violence or a situation which makes you uncomfortable, remember to take care of yourself too. Whether you intervene in violence which is already happening, or to stop it from occurring, it can feel like a lot to take on. You might want to connect about it later with someone, or take time alone to calm down. It’s totally normal to be upset afterwards or to have a rush of adrenaline or emotion. While intervening may feel intense, especially the first time, people report that when they step in and do something, they are glad they did.

What if someone does get assaulted?

If someone tells you they have experienced sexual violence the most important thing you can do in that moment is believe them.

When someone is assaulted, the reaction of the first person they tell can leave a lasting impression. It is not about saying the “perfect” thing, it’s about listening, telling them you believe them, and finding support.

If you are at a festival or big event and someone tells you they were assaulted, or you see an assault, offer that person help. Stay with them until they are safe. If they want to be alone, keep an eye on the other people around them.

If someone tells you they were assaulted

- ✔ **Believe them.**
- ✔ **Express that you believe them: “I’m so sorry that happened to you” works.**
- ✔ **Listen.**
- ✔ **Let them tell you what they want to tell you. Asking for details is not necessary, and pressing for more details can be harmful, and break trust.**
- ✔ **Stay Away From Blaming Them: it is important not to ask them why they went to that party or why they were on a date with that person. It is not their fault.**
- ✔ **If they are in immediate danger, offer to go with them to get help.**
- ✔ **Keep their story private. If you must tell someone, let the survivor know that you will be telling someone, and why.**

Why do we intervene sometimes and not at other times?

We all have stories of times we were in trouble and someone helped us. We all know that if someone could stop us from being assaulted, we would want them to do that for us. We all know that if someone we loved was in trouble at an event, we would hope the people around them would act and get them help. So why don't we always act when we see something?

The reasons are different for everyone. Even really good people deal with bystander apathy – the feeling that other people will take care of the problem. The best way to overcome this is to practice intervening, like acting it out with friends or other volunteers. The more you think about what you might say, the more ready you will be.

Sometimes we don't intervene because we are scared. This is normal. Some of us have been through trauma that makes it hard to speak up. This is understandable. You should always take care of yourself too, and if you feel too scared to directly intervene in a situation, you can still act by going to get help, creating a distraction, or asking someone around you to do something.

We know from research that we are more likely to intervene if the person who is vulnerable is our friend, and less likely to intervene if we are friends with the person committing violence. With strangers this may mean we are more likely to intervene to help the people that seem like they could be our friends. When we evaluate a situation we sometimes have to make quick decisions and go with our gut feelings. Unfortunately this can mean we don't always act as fairly as we might hope to, and we base our actions on stereotypes or false ideas that society has given us.

It's a powerful thing to stop and think about who you will help, and to not let harmful messages from our culture influence you or keep you from intervening. **You have the ability to cut through the noise and recognize that no one deserves to be sexually assaulted.**

Sometimes we hear that women who are drunk or high, or women who are dressed a certain way, or women who are sex workers don't deserve to be safe. This is not true. No one should have to expect to be assaulted, no matter what choices they make. Take the time to think about your motivations and check your own assumptions about people who are different from you or unfamiliar to you. We all carry biases, and part of being an active bystander is unpacking some of these. **Ask yourself if ideas about race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation are keeping you from helping someone.** Try to overcome these prejudices and help everyone out the way you would want someone to help you or your friends. When we stop and recognize an unconscious bias, it gives us the power to correct it, and to act as the truly fair community members we want to be.

While women are at particular risk at large events, it is important that we don't let someone's gender determine if we will help them when they are in trouble. People of all genders, including transgender and genderqueer people, experience sexual violence. For some people these issues of gender identity can seem confusing or overwhelming, and it feels easier to just ignore everything and keep moving when we see someone in trouble. But it's really not that complicated. No matter the gender of the person, we can say "Hi, how are you, do you need help?" and be part of making a difference.

We all have a role to play in making our communities safer, and by noticing what is happening around us and offering help to those in need, we can prevent sexual violence.

Noticing how race plays a role in our decision making

is a step towards creating a safer community where we all act with care and compassion for those around us. White people in particular tend to over identify with other white people, and may be more likely to see them as innocent. This can mean failing to notice when white men are committing violence, and over-suspecting men of colour. Everyone holds some ideas about who can be a 'good guy' and who can be a 'bad guy'. We need to interrupt these kinds of messages and ask ourselves what situations look suspicious to us and why. If you tell yourself that a

guy who is making you uneasy is probably harmless, ask yourself why you feel that way: is it because he is white? No one should be permitted to harass women. If you tell yourself that a woman in trouble can probably handle it herself, make sure race isn't playing a role in your decision not to help. Women of colour face harassment and often lack support from the white people around them. They are perceived by white people as being less vulnerable, but you can be someone who looks out for women of colour facing violence at events. We need to step in and help someone who is in trouble, regardless of race. You can be part of creating a community that cares for the safety of everyone.

Project SoundCheck's 2015 Festival & Event Partners

We want to send a big thank you to all the festivals and organizations who partnered with us in 2015 to help make their events safer! We appreciate their time and their commitment to ending violence against women. Learning with these teams made this project a success and we could not have done it without them!

Arboretum Festival

House of Paint

**Carleton University
Orientation Week**

**Nuit Blanche
Ottawa Gatineau**

**Canada Day in
Kanata Festival**

**Ottawa Burlesque
Festival**

Capital Pride

**Ottawa Rock
Camp 4 Girls**

City Folk

RBC Bluesfest

**Escapade Music
Festival**

Resources

If you or someone you know is in crisis or needs help, there are people to talk to. Reach out to those around you. Here are some resources for support.

**Ottawa Rape Crisis Centre
24 hour crisis line**

613.562.2333 www.orcc.net

CALACS francophone d'Ottawa

613.789.8096 www.calacs.ca

Sexual Assault Support Centre

613.234.2266 www.sascottawa.com

**The Ottawa Hospital - Sexual Assault
& Partner Abuse Care Program**

613.798.5555 ext. 13770 www.ottawahospital.on.ca

Thank You To Our Project Founders & Supporters

We would like to thank the community organizations and all the people who started the momentum of addressing the issue of sexual violence at large events. Without the work of the Ottawa Coalition to End Violence Against Women, Hollaback! Ottawa, Draw The Line, and the Ottawa Hospital Partner Assault and Sexual Abuse Care Program this project would not exist today. We would also like to express gratitude for the contributions from the Ottawa Rape Crisis Centre, the Sexual Assault Support Centre, and Centre d'aide et de lutte contre les agressions à caractère sexuel franco-ophone d'Ottawa; these organizations provide necessary care and resources to survivors living in Ottawa, and Project SoundCheck has been able to confidently refer people to their excellent services during the program. A special thank you goes to MANifest Change for the insightful contributions from their team and the solidarity from their volunteers. These community partners are responsible for the inception of Project SoundCheck and they continue to provide the vital education and survivor support services needed in our city.

Finally we would like to thank Dr. Kari Sampsel for the research which pointed to sexual violence at large events as an issue for our community. We are honoured to have her findings to guide us as we try to create change.

How to Reach The Sexual Assault Network

**If you have questions or comments
about Project SoundCheck or this
manual, please contact us!**

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