

By Talking about Sexual Violence, Grassroots Effort Aims to Prevent It

by Spencer Woodman

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Photo by [Ken Lu](#)

Correction: This article originally overstated the effects on budget cuts on treatment and prevention programs. The article now has been corrected.

It took Harriet Lessel a over a decade of lecturing high school students about sexual violence to realize that, while her work was important, it was "barely a drop in the bucket."

"We have been raising awareness about sexual violence this way since the 1970s and sexual violence rates have remained pretty much the same," said Lessel, the executive director of the [New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault](#)

. "It was clear that a new approach was needed. ... We needed something deeper than these one- or three-off lectures at high schools."

Indeed, while crime rates have fallen over the past two decades in New York City, sexual

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violence remains such a pervasive public health issue in the city that advocates have begun to call it a "silent epidemic."

Despite this, in June the New York City Council unexpectedly voted to cut all funding -- over \$300,000 annually -- for city programs that help victims of sexual assault, forcing rape crisis centers to scale back programs they consider vital. For example, [St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center](#) had to cut back its program giving free treatment to male victims of sexual assault, the only such program in New York, and the [Kingsbridge Heights Community Center](#) in the Bronx was forced to downsize its free and long-term child sexual abuse treatment and prevention program.

The Mother of Invention

The funding problems and the persistence of sexual violence have caused the city's rape crisis centers to try a new approach. They are banding together to launch [Project Envision](#), an unprecedented citywide initiative that seeks to prevent sexual violence before it happens by attacking its root causes. Spearheaded by the NYC Alliance Against Sexual Assault, the effort is the first in the U.S. in which a city's rape crisis centers join forces to focus not only on treatment, but grassroots activism to affect social change.

The project approaches sexual assault as a public health issue with clear causes that can be isolated and controlled.

"We often use the analogy of rescuing people from drowning in a river. Up until now, we just stood on the banks and threw lines to people who were already in trouble," said Cathleen Cogswell, an employee at the alliance. "Now we are walking upriver to find and deal with what is causing this in the first place."

The Level of Violence

A 2008 [study](#) by Columbia University and the NYC Alliance Against Sexual Assault found that 16 percent of New York high school students have experienced sexual violence at some point in their lives. For female adolescents in the city, the rate rises to 25 percent. Youth in neighborhoods such as Central Harlem and Brownsville, Brooklyn experience even higher rates, with 60 of 98 participants in a study of severely distressed households in these areas

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having experienced forced sexual contact by the age of 13.

The cost to victims of sexual violence is tremendous. Most suffer depression and post-traumatic stress disorder directly resulting from an encounter. Although law enforcement could vastly improve its handling of sexual assault, it is one of the most difficult crimes to crack down on, as the vast majority of sexual assaults are never reported to authorities, and only a tiny fraction of rapists are ever charged for their crimes. Contrary to common belief, most victims of sexual assault are in some way acquainted with their assailant.

Starting the Conversation

Borrowing strategies from prevention efforts like the anti-smoking campaign and clean-drinking water initiatives, Project Envision seeks to correct social norms that enable rape and other forms of sexual violence by influencing discourse on the community level.

"The idea that rape is inevitable, the continued blaming of victims and the fact that people are afraid to talk about it -- this all needs to change before we can make real headway here," Billye Jones-Mulraine, a member of Project Envision's South Bronx community effort, said. "It is an issue that still remains very much in the shadows. The fact that it's not talked about really seems to keep it alive as a problem."

Rape crisis centers have not ignored prevention. Essentially, though, their strategy has been to send experts into communities, hold forums and lectures with young people and move on to the next community hoping to have made an impact. Project Envision hopes to fundamentally shift this approach by making the community members the experts, who can in turn, train fellow community members, thereby solidly entrenching the issue in the local conversation.

The NYC Alliance Against Sexual Assault began work on Project Envision in 2007. Since then, it, has since launched three pilot projects in the South Bronx, Williamsburg and the Lower East Side. The project is in the early stages. So far, it has focused largely on t how change the discourse at a community level, and how to design and implement such a broad effort.

"Parts of this are very abstract," said Deesha Narichania, a rape crisis worker in Bushwick and member of the Williamsburg pilot program. "People don't really know how to wrap their heads around it because it's less concrete than intervening with victims, which is what we're used to."

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The project has spent much of its time trying to assess awareness of and attitudes about sexual violence in various communities. The project's members have taken to the streets to talk with pedestrians about their knowledge of sexual violence. Focus groups gathered more detailed information from longer conversations and exercises.

Making It Local

"This is very important that our plans are being shaped around these perceptions -- the community's perceptions," said Laura Fidler, employee at the Alliance and member of the Williamsburg pilot program. "It is what makes this community driven -- that this is by the community and for the community."

Envision members used this information to design action plans that reflect the specific community's strengths and weaknesses. For example, researchers in the South Bronx found cycles of abuse that are passed from generation to generation are a commonly perceived cause of sexual violence in that community. Thus the South Bronx project will include an effort to reinforce healthy relationships between parents and children.

The Williamsburg coalition identified verbal sexual harassment as a major problem, so it will focus on educating young men and boys on the negative effects of such behavior -- that the mindset that enables verbal harassment also leads to rape and other forms of sexual violence.

The research unexpectedly turned out to have the extra benefit of garnering local support and recruiting members. "We found that it was also this effective community mobilizing tool. People that participated in our focus groups turned into important members of our project and in some cases leaders," said Fidler. "It was definitely challenging getting people who were rushing to catch a bus or subway to talk to us, but we did have a number of people stop and thank us for starting the conversation in Williamsburg. And that's what this is about -- starting the conversation."

Each pilot project is currently building partnerships with community organizations that they believe can have a deep and lasting impact on the area's residents. Like in the anti-smoking campaign, Envision's strategy plans to work with existing organizations. Schools and afterschool programs are one component of this, but Envision seeks to cast a wider net that includes religious, cultural and neighborhood organizations. Each of these organizations has

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leaders who already hold sway in their communities. Envision hopes to make these leaders experts on sexual violence.

"We will figure out how to support and train the community leaders in this work until they will not have to rely on us at all," Narichania said. "We want this to stay in the community, not just with us."

In 2011 Envision plans to begin turning its work into concrete community programs in the three pilot neighborhoods. Members recognize that implementation too will be long process involving much trial and error.

"This has just never been done before," Harriet Lessel said. "We are not only continuing to treat victims of sexual violence as best we can, but we are now recapturing that activism that started the women's movement in the first place. We have arrived at a point where rape crisis programs are pretty expert at treating victims, but wouldn't it be better if there were fewer of them?"