



Understanding Sexual Violence

Sexual violence refers to behaviors of a sexual nature that are used to put down or embarrass another person, or to force, pressure, or trick another person into sexual activity. In this book, we also refer to these behaviors as *sexual assault* or *rape*. We refer to someone who uses these behaviors as a *perpetrator, offender, or rapist*.

Sexual violence happens in a variety of contexts. Sexual violence happens within families; between intimate partners; between friends and acquaintances; and within social or institutional circles, such as community groups, places of employment, churches, and schools.

Sexual violence happens to people of all ages, genders, and backgrounds. Sexual violence can happen to anyone no matter their race, nationality, ethnicity, gender identity, or sexual orientation. Children, teens, and young adults are at highest risk, but people of all ages experience sexual violence.

Most of the time the perpetrator is someone the victim knows, such as a family member, intimate partner, or acquaintance.¹ Like victims, perpetrators can come from any background, be of any race, nationality, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation, live in any kind of neighborhood, and have any kind of job.

Sexual violence does not always include force. The term *sexual violence* can be confusing because we usually think of *violence* as a physical attack that causes injury. However, when we refer to *sexual violence*, we are talking about a wide range of things, from words, gestures, or jokes, to threats, intimidation, or forced sexual contact.

Any unwanted sexual contact can be experienced as intrusive and violating. The type of sexual violence a person experiences does not determine how much harm the experience could cause. All types of sexual violence should be taken seriously.

It is important for survivors to define their own experience. Some survivors may not use words like *sexual assault* or *rape*. They may not think of the person that violated them as a *perpetrator* or *rapist* and they may not think of themselves as a *victim* or *survivor*. If you are supporting someone who has experienced sexual violence, allow them to find their own way to talk about what happened to them. The most important thing for you to focus on is the experience itself and how it is affecting the person you care about.

1. Black, M.C. et al. (2011). The national intimate partner and sexual violence survey: 2010 summary report. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control.