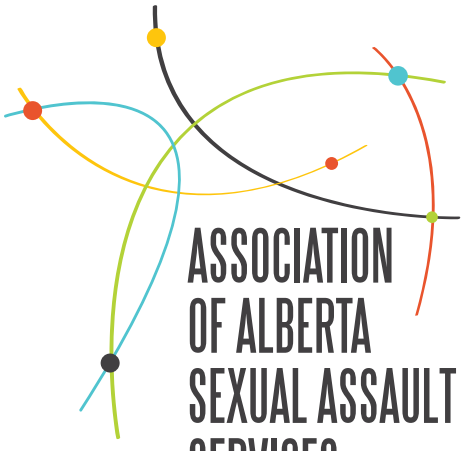
Sector Priorities for Primary Prevention of Sexual Violence



Working Together for an Alberta Free From Sexual Violence

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Introduction and Background

In 2020, IMPACT partnered with Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence (Shift) and the Government of Alberta, to develop the Alberta Primary Prevention Framework for the prevention of domestic and sexual violence. This work determined sexual and domestic violence are "distinct yet interrelated forms of violence" that must be concurrently addressed while also drawing out sexual violence-specific primary prevention recommendations.[1]

As part of this journey, Shift developed 12 primary prevention action plans including Alberta's Primary Prevention Playbook,[2] as well as a key document entitled A Suite of Policy and Legislation Recommendations for the Government of Alberta to Advance Primary Prevention of Sexual Violence.[3] This document centres evidence-based system-level structural and cultural changes specific to the prevention of sexual violence.

The Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services (AASAS) sought to draw from this work and, in collaboration with AASAS member agencies, develop a set of high-level priorities for the prevention of sexual violence for their sector. The aim of this work was to review Shift's prevention reports, integrate these findings with a community-practice lens, and identify priorities for AASAS and their membership over the next 5 years.

This document presents the identified priorities for AASAS and their membership. It is intended to be used as a guide for primary prevention work in the sexual violence sector in Alberta. The implementation of the priorities in this plan are dependent upon additional funding and resources.

Process

STEP 1:

Dr. Sarah Fotheringham was contracted to review four Shift documents and draw out specific priorities for AASAS and their membership to consider in their planning. Dr. Fotheringham has an extensive background in sexual violence research and practice and has worked with AASAS and other member organizations for several years. It is through this lens Dr. Fotheringham reviewed Shift's documents and drew out priorities for consideration. The four documents examined were the following:

1. A suite of policy and legislation recommendations for the Government of Alberta to advance primary prevention of sexual violence.[4]
2. Winning against domestic and sexual violence: Alberta's primary prevention playbook.[5]
3. Advancing gender equality in Alberta: A critical strategy to prevent gender-based violence.[6]
4. Recommendations for the IMPACT collective on advancing social inclusion of equity-deserving groups to stop violence before it starts.[7]

Utilizing Shift's report, A Suite of Policy and Legislation Recommendations for the Government of Alberta to Advance Primary Prevention of Sexual Violence as the foundational document, Dr. Fotheringham listed all recommendations and coded them in Excel using the following method:

Green:

- The recommended action/strategy is already a part of the work for AASAS and/or member organizations
- The recommended action/strategy is similar to work already underway and could be expanded
- The recommended action/strategy reflects recent conversations/sector trends by AASAS and its membership or has been identified in other sector work (e.g., children with problematic sexual behaviour)

Yellow:

- Is somewhat related to work underway, or some member agencies are doing similar work
- The recommended action/strategy is somewhat related but may not be a priority

Red:

- Outside of AASAS mandate
- Falls within government responsibility

Dr. Fotheringham developed a new, distilled report summarizing the above process and including all green recommendations, while excluding red. Because the intention was to present the working group with a condensed summary, yellow recommendations were only included when there were few green to include. The yellow recommendations chosen were those that most closely aligned with other sector work. In addition, recommendations drawn from the other reports listed above, and relevant to AASAS, were also added.

This report was reviewed by the Shift team and feedback integrated.

STEP 2:

The working group met in-person over a 2-day period. Three AASAS staff members along with 6 senior leaders from 6 member organizations attended. The working group reviewed the distilled report and the evidence from the literature, and over the duration of the two days, integrated their extensive experience in the area of sexual violence while considering key contextual factors to identify key priorities.

Day 1: The group reviewed Dr. Fotheringham's condensed report and further themed the presented recommendations using the red, green, yellow approach. Comments, rationales, and decisions were recorded.

Day 2: The working group organized Green and Yellow coded recommendations from day 1 into 7 themes.

Members then voted on their top 10 priorities; considering what recommendations they would prioritize for action within the next five years. Every member was given 10 votes. The group then reviewed the results of the vote and engaged in group discussion to determine a final set of priorities.

Strong Women's Circle: Supporting Alberta Primary Prevention Framework by Mapping Root Causes of Violence and Identifying Policy Recommendations to Stop Violence Against Indigenous Peoples Before it Starts. AASAS leadership staff and Dr. Fotheringham attended Shift's launch of their Strong Women's Circle Report[8] and heard from Elders about the work they have undergone and how the sector can support change. Actions have been integrated into this report.

STEP 3:

From this work, Dr. Fotheringham drafted the priorities. A second in-person meeting was held with the same AASAS member agencies and the priorities were reviewed in detail and revisions integrated.

STEP 4:
Priorities go to AASAS Membership for review and approval.

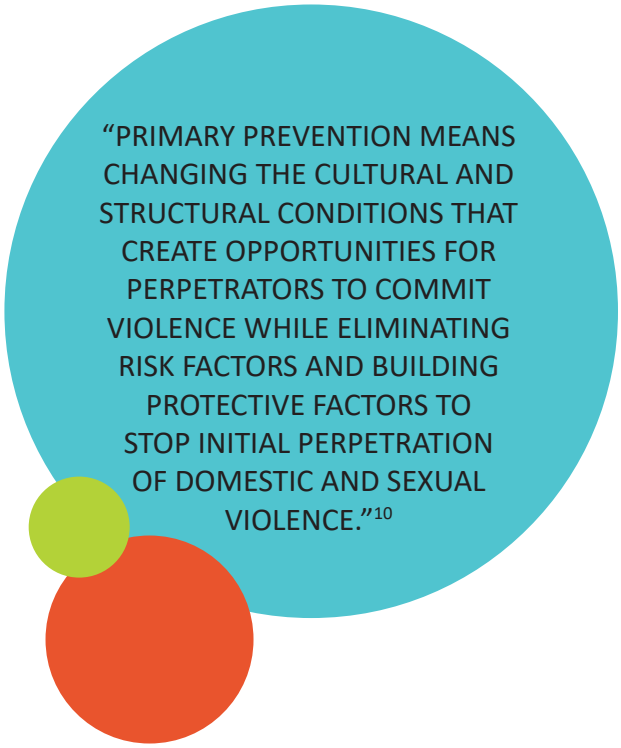
Defining Primary Prevention

Shift offers the following definitions for primary prevention, secondary prevention and tertiary prevention:

"**Primary prevention** involves upstream efforts to improve social conditions so that people will not become perpetrators and will not inflict violence on anyone in the first place.

When the risk of violence is already present, we implement initiatives that mitigate that risk through early interventions, known as **secondary prevention**.

When violence is already happening and people are in crisis, we implement initiatives to stop violence through crisis intervention, known as **tertiary prevention**. Tertiary prevention also involves rebuilding the lives of survivors, perpetrators, and their families. Survivors receive long-term supports that help them heal, improve their health, find safety, and access all the necessary resources, such as housing, education, employment, and social networks. Perpetrators also receive supports to help them take responsibility for the harm they have caused, be accountable, heal, repair, and prevent the transmission of violence across generations."[9]



This document is principally focused on the primary prevention of sexual violence. There are strategies and actions included that fall into secondary and tertiary prevention. These were included as they support primary prevention efforts such as social inclusion or promoting new social norms. Further, secondary and tertiary prevention work towards disrupting and preventing future acts of violence and abuse. The need to maintain these efforts and enhance investment into these other levels is an important component of ending sexual violence.

A Note on Language

Equity Deserving Groups

The language in this document aligns with that used by Shift. Equity-deserving groups (EDGs) are defined as "any group of people who, because of systematic discrimination, face barriers that prevent them from having the same access to the resources and opportunities that are available to other members of society, and that are necessary for them to attain just outcomes."[11]

IMPACT Domestic and Sexual Violence Collective note that EDGs identify significant collective barriers to just participation in society in which all can participate and thrive and actively seek social justice and reparation. These barriers exist due to disadvantage and systemic discrimination, and can include attitudinal, historic, social, environmental, and systemic barriers based on age, ethnicity, disability, economic status, gender, nationality, race, sexual orientation, or transgender status. The term Equity-deserving groups has evolved from definitions of marginalized or vulnerable populations. Equity seeks to understand what people need to enjoy full participation in society, rather than ensuring everyone gets the same thing (equality).

Indigenous Peoples

When the term EDG is used in this document, it does not include Indigenous Peoples. Shift explains:

> Indigenous Peoples are often considered an equity-deserving group, including within government policy. However, based on feedback from Indigenous IMPACT members, our research committee, and Elders that led the Strong Women's Circle primary prevention project, the collaborative has adopted the perspective that Indigenous Peoples are distinct from equity-deserving groups because advancing Indigenous sovereignty and reclamation of land, identity, language, services, and culture differs from addressing the challenges and inequalities experienced by equity-deserving groups. As a result, we advocate for a distinctions-based approach in policy development and implementation, which we have articulated through a parallel research process in partnership with three Indigenous researchers/leaders and eight Elders and Knowledge Keepers (called the Strong Women's Circle) to better understand the root causes of violence against Indigenous Peoples and to identify Indigenous-specific policies and recommendations to prevent domestic and sexual violence against Indigenous Peoples.[12]

AASAS is committed to truth and reconciliation, as well as embedding equity, inclusion and belonging as guiding values and foundational principles within their organization and network.

Recommended Themes and Actions

Foundational elements for primary prevention of sexual violence

In order to forward the work of primary prevention in a sustainable and effective manner, foundational work needs to occur in the sector. This involves creating the necessary infrastructure through growing a skilled primary prevention workforce via training and professional development while also establishing mechanisms of accountability.[13] It also includes ensuring the continued/enhanced health and wellbeing of workers through workplace supports and overall working conditions.[14]

Another important foundational component is the development and institution of inclusion frameworks in the sexual violence sector, referred to as Centring an Equity Lens below. This ties to some of the drivers of sexual violence including colonization, racism and ableism[15] and involves building the internal capacity of the sector for social inclusion, a form of primary prevention, in of itself.[16] It also involves deepening understanding of colonization and a commitment to a process of decolonization amongst member organizations.[17] While many member organizations already practice from an inclusion perspective, establishing and adopting particular frameworks allow for the formalization of such work, standardization and alignment with best practice.

AASAS and its members have further identified key pieces of work that need to occur first, in order for future priorities to ensue. Conducting a provincial audit of educational activities will inform future educational campaign development and work towards a coordinated educational approach across the sector.[18] A prevention-based outcome framework will help set the stage and align prevention efforts across the sector as well as more effectively demonstrate the work that is occurring, and the impact made.[19]

1.1 Worker Wellness & Prevention Capacity

Priorities

1.1.1 Support the continued development and retention of an inclusive, healthy and dynamic workforce by:

- Implementing workplace equity measures
- Continuing to develop standards and practices to promote healthy working conditions and fair workplace practices
- Continuing to enhance supports for those working in high-stress and high trauma environments; focusing on supports that address the impacts of trauma, burnout, and vicarious trauma.

1.1.2 Build worker's understanding of, and capacity for, sexual violence prevention, for example by:

- Providing ongoing professional development opportunities about primary prevention such as:
  - ◊ Taking Shift's five primary prevention modules (shifttolearn.com)
  - ◊ Hosting a forum amongst the membership to engage in generative conversations about advancing primary prevention
- Providing ongoing professional development opportunities for workers to examine own biases, values and belief systems that may reinforce violence
- Advocate for AASAS resources to support a dedicated primary prevention position whose role is to advance and support sector priorities for primary prevention.

1.2 Infrastructure & Foundational Work

Priorities

1.2.1 Develop a primary prevention working group that includes AASAS and member agencies. This group would be responsible for seeking funding and advancing these priorities.

1.2.2 Conduct a provincial audit of internal sector work involving sexual violence awareness/education/training campaigns and programs.

1.2.3 Design and implement a sexual violence prevention outcomes framework connecting all sexual violence prevention initiatives to demonstrate impact.

1.2.4 Continue to partner with IMPACT to support their domestic and sexual violence primary prevention campaign.

1.3 Centre an Equity Lens

Priorities

1.3.1 Ensure programs and services use a Universal Design,[i] so that all people, including people with diverse needs, can access services and participate.

1.3.2 Develop an anti-oppressive framework and equity lens[ii] to support the work of AASAS and the member agencies.

1.3.3 Develop reconciliation and decolonization approaches, including the creation of Ethical Space, and integrate them into organizational practices, service delivery, and staff capacity building.

[i] Universal Design is "the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood, and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability." See: https://universaldesign.ie/what-is-universal-design/

[ii] An equity lens "is a process for analyzing or diagnosing the impact of the design and implementation of policies on under-served and marginalized individuals and groups, and to identify and potentially eliminate barriers." Retrieved from University of California https://www.ucop.edu/ethics-compliance-audit-services/_files/2019_symposium_presentations/bk1-2-policy.pdf

Equity Action

Promoting social inclusion of EDGs in the sexual violence sector is a form of primary prevention as it aims to foster equal access to resources and services, while also ensuring access to decision making power so that the rights and needs of EDGs are reflected in organizational services, policy and sector practices.[20] In doing so, risk factors for violence are reduced and eventually eliminated, and protective factors are enhanced.[21]

An important step forward in this regard, is to engage with EDGs to review, revise and deepen the priorities to ensure they align with lived experience and identified needs.[22] Also ensuring the sector provides culturally appropriate programs and services for EDGs will enhance inclusion "and increase their chances of thriving" in other systems thereby reducing risk for violence.[23]

Through Shift's work with Indigenous researchers and Elders, it was determined that Indigenous Peoples are distinct from EDGs "because advancing Indigenous sovereignty and reclamation of land, identity, languages, services, and culture differs from addressing the challenges and inequalities experienced by EDGs."[24] Consulting and collaborating with Indigenous Peoples on the prevention priorities while centering relationships and Indigenous ways of knowing are important means to advance this work.[25]

Priorities

2.1 Engage with Indigenous Peoples and EDGs to build on/deepen sexual violence prevention priorities to ensure they reflect the needs and experiences of Indigenous Peoples and EDGs.

2.2 Centre the rights and voices of Indigenous Peoples and EDGs in planning, advocacy, service development, governance and decision making. This includes engaging with hard-to-reach groups and provide supports such as compensation and accommodations to ensure meaningful and respectful engagement.

2.3 Provide/enhance community-based, culturally appropriate trauma-informed, anti-oppressive sexual violence services with Indigenous Peoples and EDGs by:

- Identifying wise and best practices from the literature and through centring our relationships with Indigenous Peoples and EDGs
- Reviewing current services/programs from this lens to identify gaps and change needed
- Implementing needed changes, including staff training
- Evaluating using an equity lens

Educational Campaigns & Shifting Social Norms

In order to prevent sexual violence, we need to raise people's understanding of what it is, why it occurs, and what we can do to prevent it.[26] We also need to shift the beliefs, attitudes and social norms that perpetuate sexual violence.[27] Focusing on developing a province-wide sexual violence public educational campaign that targets increasing knowledge about sexual violence as well as skills to respond and interrupt it, are strategies that help shift social norms from those that perpetuate, condone or ignore violence to those that actively promote empathy, respect and safety.[28]

Priorities

3.1 Develop public education campaigns that raise awareness about sexual violence including attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that perpetuate it.

3.2 Develop public education campaigns and initiatives that change behaviours and prevent violence.

Capacity Building & Training

Another aspect to increasing people's knowledge of sexual violence and capacity to prevent it occurs through targeted training of professionals in various sectors, paraprofessionals and community members.[29] Many member agencies already conduct extensive trainings with various sector partners and other stakeholders. What is needed to extend/increase this work, is to explicitly align it with prevention content such as the structural and system conditions that contribute to sexual violence[30] and to demonstrate this work through a sector-wide prevention outcome framework (see 1.1.3).

Priorities

4.1 Build on findings from provincial audit on education/awareness/training campaigns and programs, by identifying new priorities for enhanced capacity building/training that targets prevention.

4.2 Building on the findings from the provincial audit of education/awareness/training campaigns and programs, advocate for resources to enhance coordination and scaling up of best practices in the design and evaluation of capacity building/training activities.

Adults who use Sexual Violence and Children and Youth with Problematic Sexual Behaviour

Working with adults who use sexual violence is a core service in the sexual violence sector and aligns with tertiary prevention. These services are offered by some AASAS member agencies as it helps prevent further sexual violence victimization and diminishes "the breadth and depth of the ripple effect sexual offending creates."[31]

Further, children and youth need skills and supports to have healthy, safe and empathetic relationships and interactions.[32] This includes for young people with problematic sexual behaviour. Recent work conducted by AASAS determined more intervention and specialized treatment is needed for this population.[33] Specialized treatment for children and youth with problematic sexual behaviour is also identified as a primary prevention strategy by Shift.[34]

An important component of this work is around pornography usage. Research indicates pornography exposure/usage is associated with problematic sexual behaviour in children and youth[35] and impacts young people's concepts of sex/sexualization, relationships, and consent while increasing risk for technology-assisted sexual violence.[36]

Priorities

5.1 Develop specialized treatment programs for those who exhibit harmful sexual behaviours across the life span.

5.2 Develop safe and confidential spaces for people to talk about harmful sexual thoughts or behaviours before they occur (e.g., sexual attraction to younger children or siblings).

5.3 Develop initiatives that address the impact of pornography use on sexual knowledge and behaviours.

Work with Men and Boys

Working with men and boys is espoused as an important primary prevention strategy[37] as adherence to sexist and patriarchal gender norms are predictors of gender-based violence.[38] Men and boys thus have an important role to play in building and fostering safe, healthy, equitable relationships and spaces with partners, peers, family, community and society.[39]

Online radicalization of men and boys is of particular concern with rising focus on Incel, alt-right movements and the "manosphere" all of which have been linked to the perpetuation of gender-based violence.[40,41]

Priorities

6.1 Develop/expand initiatives that increase boys' and men's capacity to build and maintain respectful relationships, promote positive masculinity, and practice allyship in sexual violence prevention.

6.2 Develop or leverage initiatives that teach digital literacy for sexual violence prevention amongst men and boys in online spaces to counter radicalization.

Systemic Change

An important aspect of primary prevention occurs at the structural and systemic level.[42] Structures and systems interact with individuals and communities and uphold conditions that drive sexual violence.[43] Member agencies continue to work to advance policies in institutions that prevent sexual violence in their respective communities. The first priority detailed below allows for this work to continue and for member agencies and AASAS to be responsive as opportunities arise.

Advocating to regulating bodies for mandatory training and education in sexual violence is a structural change while also providing increased knowledge and capacity for future professionals, aligning with Theme 4.0.

Priority three below was identified as important as research indicates weak laws and policies are risk factors for the perpetration of sexual violence.[44] Working to change, enact or enforce laws are seen as important community and system-level prevention approaches.[45] Therefore understanding the legislative gaps for sexual violence, including sexual harassment in Alberta was deemed an important priority for the sector.

Regulation of online content and pornography is a structural change connected with protecting young people from access and reducing risk for harm described in Theme 5.0. This is an important part of creating structural change in digital spaces that protects children and youth and fosters a protective environment in this realm.[46]

Priorities

7.1 Advocate for and advance policies, practices and oversight to prevent and address sexual violence within systems, institutions, and organizations.

7.2 Advocate to regulating bodies to require a mandatory course on sexual violence in faculties within post-secondary institutions who work with people (e.g., Nursing, Social Work, Law, etc).

7.3 Examine gaps in legislation around sexual violence including sexual harassment. Enhance advocacy around identified gaps to prevent sexual violence.

7.4 Advocate for regulation of online content and pornography access.

Research & Evaluation

Further research is needed to understand sexual violence in Alberta and how it can be prevented.[47] It is important for the sexual violence sector to set their own research agenda and collaborate with key partners in its execution. Sharing findings with stakeholders and others involved in prevention efforts is an important step in raising knowledge about the issue and collaborating on prevention initiatives.[48]

Priorities

8.1 Develop a practice-informed research agenda on sexual violence to build capacity of the sector and to enhance practice-informed prevention knowledge.

8.2 Design and implement regular provincial surveys on sexual violence and abuse prevalence. Compare findings with police-reported data and other relevant surveys related to sexual violence.

Healing & Recovery is Prevention

Continued investment and practice at the secondary and tertiary prevention level is necessary in order to advance primary prevention. Intervention work including trauma healing, services for those who use violence and supporting children who have experienced abuse are all means to preventing future acts of violence or abuse. A core belief held by the AASAS network is "we believe that treatment is a form of prevention because healthy individuals and healthy communities break the cycle of abuse."

It is well established in the literature that exposure to sexual violence in childhood results in a host of complex negative outcomes including increased risk for later sexual violence victimization as well as perpetration.[49] Thus, it follows, supporting survivors to heal, especially children and youth, may work to prevent the transmission of violence onto future generations.

Priorities

9.1 Maintain and enhance specialized intervention services to support sexual violence survivors to heal.

9.2 Advocate for increased capacity of Children's Services to assess, recognize and respond to children who have experienced sexual violence.

9.3 Advocate for increased supports for non-offending parents to be able to support their children who have experienced sexual abuse to be safe, heal and thrive.

9.4 Advocate for changes in legislation to allow children who may have experienced sexual abuse to attend treatment with one guardian's consent or upon child's request.

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