The Socio-Ecological Model. This is Part 3 of an Orientation to Violence Prevention.

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:
- Describe how violence results from a complex interaction of factors: biological, cultural, economic and political
- Describe the “Socio-Ecological Model”
- Provide violence-prevention examples for levels of the model

Before we begin, let’s review some important definitions as they relate to violence.

There are three levels of prevention that address who is at risk for violence or perpetration.

- Universal – Focusing on everyone regardless of risk
- Selected – Focusing on those at risk
- Indicated – Focusing on those who are already affected

Universal and selected approaches are primary prevention, since they are aimed at stopping violence before it happens.
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Violence Risk and Protective Factors

- **Risk Factors** are those which increase one’s vulnerability to becoming a victim or perpetrator.
- **Protective Factors** are those which reduce one’s vulnerability to becoming a victim or perpetrator.

Prevention Terminology

- **Primary Prevention** (before the violence starts)
- **Secondary Prevention** (right after victimization or perpetration)
- **Tertiary Prevention** (efforts to lessen long-term impact)

You may recall from “The Story of Prevention” that there are three levels of prevention that address “When” an intervention takes place.

- Primary Prevention (before the violence starts)
- Secondary Prevention (right after victimization or perpetration)
- Tertiary Prevention (efforts to lessen long-term impact)

Of these, only primary prevention is aimed at stopping violence before it starts.

The value of primary prevention is that it can focus on some risk factors that are known to contribute to multiple forms of violence, such as:

- Poor economic and educational opportunities
- Access to lethal weapons
Prevention is evidenced-based. This means that the data supporting the problem or solution is based on scientific research. Prevention consists of gathering data, organizing around a problem, developing, implementing and evaluating interventions and disseminating and replicating models.

Public health is driven by the socio-ecological model that outlines how the health status of an individual is influenced not simply by the attitudes and practices of that individual, but is also influenced by personal relationships as well as community and larger societal factors.

This complexity is why the socio-ecological model can be helpful. This model can be applied to violence prevention. CDC and the World Health Organization break influencing factors down into four categories:
- Individual
- Relationship
- Community
- Societal

Source: WHO World Report on Violence and Health
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There are variations in the socio-ecological model. Sometimes the circles represent: Individual, Relationship, Institutions/Organization, Community/Society.

There are also other variations. For this lesson, we will use the model preferred by CDC and the World Health Organization (WHO).

The first level of the model is Individual. Each individual has his/her own personal beliefs, attitudes and behaviors that influence health status. An individual may also be influenced by demographic characteristics such as age, income and education. Protective factors could include high self esteem, tolerance and good conflict resolution skills. Risk factors could include low self esteem, childhood history of sexual or physical violence and substance abuse.

The next level of the model is Relationship. A person’s closest circle-family, friends and peers-have the potential to shape a persons individual behaviors and range of experiences. Again this can be positive or negative. Having friends that are in gangs may increase the likelihood of someone becoming a gang member. Likewise, a fraternity that denounces violent hazing or date rape is sending a positive behavioral message to its members. It is important to note that relationship influences can
also be historical, such as a family history of violence.

The third level of the model is Community. This includes areas and organizations where social interactions occur—schools, workplaces, churches and neighborhoods. There are many positive and negative influences at this level. Is the neighborhood safe? Are there anti-bullying policies in the schools? Are there jobs and resources? Are drugs, alcohol and guns readily available?

The fourth level is Societal. Though there is some overlap with Community, societal factors tend to refer to those influences on a much larger scale. This would encompass economic policies, religious and cultural beliefs, including tolerance of harsh physical discipline of children, norms about how persons are treated based on their gender, sexual preference, ethnicity, or disability, and laws about the availability of weapons or stigmatization of those seeking mental health services.”

This chart represents the prevention continuum. Let’s look at it through the sexual violence lens. Ideally, primary prevention efforts should reach the largest number of people as possible. Many violence professionals work in this area. These are interventions that occur after someone has been victimized. While unfortunately necessary, this is secondary and tertiary prevention—not primary
prevention. An organization or agency can begin to expand programs and services to address efforts to stop violence before it starts. For example, at the selected level, you might work with a local university or college to identify those factors of Greek life that increase the risk of sexual violence, such as alcohol abuse. At the community level, you can work with social service agencies to enforce policies for screening caregivers who work with vulnerable populations such as children, the elderly or disabled individuals. At the same time, you could be working with a neighborhood coalition to remove public advertising that objectifies women. Finally, you can be working in your community or nationally to promote the full implementation of Title IX laws which mandate gender equity in sports. Laws such as this counter societal norms regarding the status of women. The point of this continuum is that agencies need to broaden their work instead of being limited to just one area of violence prevention.
Now let’s focus on interventions at the various levels of the socio-ecological model. What is really working and what is not. In 2004, WHO published, Preventing Violence.


WHO categorizes effective and promising approaches into the following:
- Investing in early childhood interventions
- Increasing parent involvement
- Strengthening communities
- Changing cultural norms
- Reducing income inequality

WHO notes that early interventions have potential to shape attitudes, knowledge and behavior in children while they are still open to positive influences that affect lifelong behavior. These types of programs are designed to impact risk factors for multiple types of violence.

Similarly, programs focusing on achievement and social development between 12-19 are also promising. These include:

- Educational incentives for those at risk
- School-based dating violence prevention
- Services for children who witness violence


Primary prevention strategies at the relationship level include:

- Home visitation for new parents
- Parenting Training
- Mentoring of at risk youths
- Family Therapy

At the community level, primary prevention includes:
- Safe havens for children in high risk areas
- Recreational programs
- Reduction of alcohol availability


Still other examples include:
- Community policing
- Promotion of safe weapon storage
- Public awareness campaigns about violence


Primary prevention at the Societal level includes programs that:
- Reduce media violence
- Reduce poverty
- Enforce gun laws

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Societal (cont.)

- Change cultural norms that support violence against women and children.


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No Evidence of Effectiveness

- Gun buy backs
- Drug resistance education
- Gun safety training
- Shock probation or parole
- Residential programs in psychiatric or correction institutions

WHO has also listed programs for which there is no evidence of effectiveness in the long-term. These include:
- Gun buy backs
- Drug resistance education
- Gun safety training
- Shock probation or parole
- Residential programs in psychiatric or correction institutions


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No Evidence of Effectiveness

- Boot camps
- Trying young offenders in adult court
- Laws permitting gun carrying in public.

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Key Points

• Violence is a complex phenomenon with its roots in the interaction of many factors—biological, social, cultural, economic and political.

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Key Points (cont.)

• The Socio-Ecological model has four levels: Individual, Relationship, Community and Societal that can be impacted both positively and negatively.

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In summary, violence is a complex phenomenon with its roots in the interaction of many factors—biological, social, cultural, economic and political.

The Socio-Ecological model has four levels: Individual, Relationship, Community and Societal that can be impacted both positively and negatively.