

A new prescription for tackling sexual violence

How some advocates are looking to dismantle rape culture using public health strategies.

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When Tahir Duckett talks about consent with elementary and middle school boys, he often talks about video games first.

“If I just hop on your Xbox without your consent, what’s your response?” Duckett says he asks the boys. Almost always, the young boys he’s talking to say they’d fight him.

“They recognize something about their consent has been violated,” he says, speaking with ThinkProgress. “We ask them to interrogate how it feels to have your consent violated. Is that anger? Are you hurt? Are you betrayed?”

And usually, that's exactly how the boys say they feel. The question, then, is why those answers often change when Duckett presents a romantic or sexual situation where someone doesn't consent.

"A lot of times we'll talk about it in those types of concepts, and then we'll shift to maybe saying, 'OK, you're going out with someone, your partner for two months, and [they invite] you over to their house, right? And their parents are out of town, have they consented to anything?'" Duckett says. "That's where you'll start to get more pushback."

When presented with this situation, Duckett says the boys sometimes start to say things like, "Well, she knows what she's doing by going over to his house while his parents are out of town."

"And then you can dig in, and...talk about what we were just talking about," Duckett says. "What's the assumption, can [you] still say no?"

Duckett is the founder and director of ReThink, a group that works with adolescent boys (and, in some cases, older men) to help them rethink cultural norms about toxic masculinity and rape culture. The group has been working in schools in the Washington, D.C. area, holding sessions in which the ReThink team spends several days with adolescent boys talking about rape myths, consent, and toxic masculinity.

In recent weeks, their work has begun to feel prophetic.

Last month, a wave of allegations against movie producer Harvey Weinstein opened the door for a subsequent avalanche of accusations against other powerful men, including James Toback, Mark Halperin, Charlie Rose, Roy Moore, Sen. Al Franken (D-MN), and Rep. John Conyers (D-MI), just to name a few. While a few have been punished or reprimanded, the majority have been able to escape any major consequences.

Additionally, a recent study done by researchers at Columbia University makes clear that the issue isn't confined to rich and powerful titans of industry. The study found that 22 percent of students surveyed had experienced sexual assault since starting college, with particularly high rates for lesbian, gay, and bisexual students, as well as for gender-

nonconforming students and those who had difficulties paying for basic necessities.

In other words, as House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) said, backtracking after defending Conyers on Meet the Press Sunday, we've reached "a watershed moment on this issue." It's also prompting questions about what comes next, what avenues are available for justice, and how to cut rape culture's long, toxic tentacles — which is exactly what ReThink is trying to do, starting at adolescence.

A public health approach

ReThink uses traditional public health strategies — data collection, treating high-risk individuals, changing behavioral norms — to address sexual violence with young boys, working to control the "disease" and change behaviors and beliefs of those who might catch it.

It's a strategy that the authors of the Columbia study recommend, based on their findings.

"Our findings argue for the potential of a systems-based public health approach — one that recognizes the multiple interrelated factors that produce adverse outcomes, and perhaps particularly emphasizes gender and economic disparities and resulting power dynamics, widespread use of alcohol, attitudes about sexuality, and conversations about sex — to make inroads on an issue that stubbornly persists," the authors write.

When ReThink visits schools, one public health-style tool they use is the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA). IRMA presents different situations and myths to students, such as, "If girl is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of hand", or "A lot of times, girls who say they were raped agreed to have sex and then regret it." Students are asked to rate the rape myths from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

"If you accept all these rape myths you're more likely to commit an act of sexual violence," Duckett says. "When we work with boys, after we do these exercises...[and] consent education, breaking down stereotypes,

working on a wide range of healthy masculinity ideas...they reject these rape myths at much higher rates.”

This finding, Duckett says, is both discouraging and encouraging.

“We do pretests and posttests, and the pretests show the extent of the problem,” he says. “This is the kind of stuff that our culture has taught them... It’s everywhere, it’s in the TV that we watch, it’s in the music that we listen to.”

“To be completely honest we’ve failed a lot of these boys,” Duckett adds. “Very few even comprehensive sex ed programs have serious conversations about consent, what consent looks like and doesn’t look like, how to ask for it, how to listen for it, [and] how to look for it.”

ReThink’s mission, in public health terms, is primary prevention: trying to stop sexual violence. But, Duckett says, there’s still much more that needs to be done.

“I’ll tell you what,” he says, “I believe strongly, if we invested in sexual violence prevention as a public health issue — like we did with drunk driving campaigns, anti-smoking campaigns, teen pregnancy campaigns — if we put that type of money and emphasis into sexual violence prevention work, I strongly believe that we could cut our rates in half in a generation.”

The good news is that Duckett and ReThink aren’t alone in their efforts. Jessica Raven, the executive director of Collective Action for Safe Spaces (CASS), is working to address sexual violence as a public health issue as well.

CASS has a partnership with the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) to run awareness campaigns about harassment and assault on public transit; it’s also working on the Safe Bar Collective, which is a program that trains bar staff to recognize sexual harassment and stop it before it turns into assault.

Raven tells ThinkProgress that it’s not enough to call out and take down powerful men in Hollywood. “We have all had these experiences where we witness incidents of harassment,” she says in an interview. “It’s our

responsibility to call that out in our friend groups, in our families, in our neighbors.”

Raven says it’s crucial to implement more programs like CASS and ReThink, which work with men to unpack preconceived notions of rape culture and masculinity, as well as safe rehabilitative spaces for aggressors.

“There are really no services for these men to heal,” she says, explaining that it’s vital to “create an environment where they’re able to be open about the changes they’re going to make.”

It’s important to treat the problem like any other disease, Raven adds. “How are we going to address alcoholism without providing rehabilitative services to alcoholics?” she says.

The problem with prisons

While Raven believes in providing more rehabilitative spaces, those spaces shouldn’t be inside prison walls, she says.

Both Duckett and Raven have chosen to focus on public health strategies to address the epidemic of sexual violence rather than the criminal justice system for several important reasons.

“I think we have to be really, really, really careful about our kind of knee-jerk [conclusions]...when it comes to some of these particularly tertiary sort of prevention questions, like increased incarceration, tougher sentencing,” Duckett — a lawyer himself — explains. “There’s not much about our incarceration system that is feminist.”

Prisons, Duckett notes, are one of the major centers of sexual violence in the United States. According to the Bureau of Justice, about 80,000 people are sexually abused in correctional facilities in the United States every year.

The actual number is almost certainly higher than official tallies. Just as a significant majority of rapes and sexual assaults in the United States go unreported, it’s highly likely that the same is true in the prison

system. Statistics *do* suggest that rates of rape and sexual assault are higher among male inmates than female inmates; the same is likely true among African American inmates, who statistically experience higher rates of sexual assault than Caucasian inmates.

“The prison system is and will forever be biased against black bodies and to the extent that we create tougher sentencing laws,” Duckett says, adding that people of color will ultimately be punished much more harshly than their white counterparts.

“Sending someone to prison as we understand it right now, I have a hard time thinking of that as an objectively feminist act,” Duckett argues. “It’s not to say that someone who causes trauma and pain shouldn’t face consequences, but just from a prevention standpoint, I don’t think that prison is the answer there.”

Raven is of the same mindset. “CASS has always had an anti-criminalization position. We don’t see the criminal legal system as a strategy,” she says.

“For starters, we recognize that the communities most affected by gendered and sexual violence are the communities most affected by police violence,” she continues, specifically mentioning women, people of color, gender minorities, and LGBTQ people among those communities. “Prison is punishment, but it’s not accountability, [and] there are no studies that show that prison is increasing safety. The public health approach actually tackles the problems at the root.”

Expanding legal avenues

As ReThink and CASS work toward furthering progress on a public health front, other advocates are looking to expand legal avenues for victims, including abolishing statutes of limitations and expanding affirmative consent laws.

“The abolition of the statute of limitations is a tool,” Jill Stanley, a former prosecutor and district attorney who now focuses on celebrities and the legal system, tells ThinkProgress.

As Stanley explains, “We understand that there are times you can’t recall [an incident]. When you are strong enough or when you have a clear picture of who your assaulter is, we can have evidence.” At that point, Stanley says, no matter how long it’s been since an assault took place, the victim should be able to go to law enforcement.

Stanley also points to the expansion of affirmative consent standards as a possible way of strengthening legal avenues for victims. At present, affirmative consent — a “yes means yes” standard rather than “no means no” standard — applies only to certain colleges and universities.

“[Affirmative consent standards] are very narrow,” Stanley says. “It only applies to state-funded colleges in New York and California.”

Some private universities — including each of the Ivy League schools other than Harvard — have adopted the standard, but so far, New York and California are the only states to have enacted laws mandating *all* state funded universities use the affirmative consent standard.

Stanley notes that the expansion of affirmative consent laws could be especially valuable because victims often don’t have the capacity to consent.

“The bigger issue in all of these laws is that we need capacity to say no,” she says.

While she believes such a standard could be helpful, Stanley doubts changes will come on a national legislative level. “The country is very slow,” she says.

One way she believes affirmative consent *could* become the standard? By putting it in employment contracts.

Here, California State Sen. Hannah-Beth Jackson (D), who co-authored California’s affirmative consent law, agrees.

“That might be a great thing,” Jackson tells ThinkProgress. Like Stanley, she has her doubts, but remains optimistic. “Could we get that passed? We could try!” she says.

Jackson also believes it could be beneficial to pass laws aimed at making educational initiatives — similar to ReThink’s curriculum — the standard for children, starting from a young age.

“What we really need is...education, whether it’s in the workplace or with our youngest children,” Jackson says. “Our culture has frequently rewarded men behaving badly.... We have to change it.”