

## Public spaces aren't designed to keep women safe

*Experts weigh in on how that can change*

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As a scary movie fan, Brian Finnerty regularly attends the Monster-Mania Con held in Cherry Hill each year.

When he heard about actor Gary Busey's arrest for reported sex crimes at the convention last month, he was stunned.

But Finnerty, a Collingswood licensed professional counselor specializing in compulsive sexual behaviors, also isn't surprised behavior like what Busey is accused of continues to happen.

The current response to sexual violence, he said, falls short by focusing on reaction rather than prevention.

"I think that sometimes just from a societal perspective, and prevention perspective, our society kind of does a disservice by having almost an overreliance on punishment and reaction after the fact," Finnerty said.

Victims 'shouldn't bear the brunt of preventing violence'

From advising women to take self-defense classes or carry a gun when they go out, to suggesting they dress more modestly, conversations about women's safety in public spaces often puts the onus on women to not become a victim instead of making spaces safer for women, according to the New Jersey Coalition Against Sexual Assault.

If this continues to be the case, if offenders aren't held accountable, and if people don't start considering one another's safety, there will be more cases of sexual violence like what allegedly occurred at Monster-Mania, experts warn. Aria Geiser, prevention specialist with the New Jersey Coalition Against Sexual Assault, describes some

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of this and other initiatives centered around potential victims as risk reduction. But she too said the response to women's safety in public spaces problematically focuses on what do to when an assault has already happened.

“While risk reduction efforts have their place, they’re not above critique primarily because they’re putting the burden of preventing harm on the person,” Geiser said. “Potential victims and survivors, they shouldn’t bear the brunt of preventing violence.”

South Jersey experts and those who work with victims and offenders of sexual violence said there are ways to reframe how safety in public spaces is addressed to relieve women of bearing the brunt of prevention.

Too often, risk reduction makes assumptions, Geiser argued, pointing to the idea of teaching women self-defense in response to domestic or sexual violence.

“It makes the assumption that when confronted with a threat, the potential victim has to fight and that you are going to remember the moves you learned. It assumes that your assailant isn’t going to be stronger than you or more well trained than you or armed or not going to be a group of people,” Geiser explained.

Furthermore, risk reduction efforts too often are used as a replacement for calling out those who perpetrate such behaviors in the public.

“Risk reduction efforts aren’t primary prevention. So when we want to talk about what primary prevention actually is, we have to think about the various situations of sexual violence that encourage sexual aggression,” Geiser said.

Instead, Geiser argues conversations about sexual violence should be centered around human dignity.

“One can justify a lot of things. One can even justify self defense and doing what they have to do to make a relentless assailant stop attacking them. But there’s absolutely no conceivable way to justify sexual exploitation or assault against another human being,” she said.

“In many ways, facilitating that shift toward recognizing our shared humanity and fostering a respect for human dignity is really the goal of primary prevention,” Geiser said.

Geiser said making public spaces safer requires promoting empathy for others, understanding how and why sex assaults happen and emboldening bystanders to speak out.

“Knowing how to analyze and revert to one’s own personal ethics and principles –all efforts are concerned with intervening before harm occurs and creating this cultural change. It’s very proactive in its approach,” she said.

Help stop sexual assault with the 5 D strategy

Laura Luciano, associate director of the Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance at Rutgers–Camden, has been teaching bystander intervention for about a decade and is soon introducing a new program at the campus.

The Up to Us program, scheduled to rollout in October, consists of five workshops that help students recognize what situations are intervention-worthy and how bystanders can recognize and react to problematic situations.

In the incident involving Busey, who is charged with groping at least three women during a meet-and-greet photo opportunity event at the convention, Luciano said if others in the room understood how to respond they could have had an impact on the situation.

The Up to Us program uses a “5 D” strategy, where the Ds stand for direct, distract, delegate, delay and document.

“We spend a lot of time really talking about being a community that serves each other and just because the person that’s being targeted is not your person — it’s somebody’s person, right? It’s somebody’s loved one,” she said.

Luciano emphasized the importance of skill-building through practice. Bystander intervention, to be effective, requires quick decision-making, and like any skill, needs development.

“Part of the practice is coming up with scenarios that might seem relevant to my life and then being able to say something because I practiced a little bit,” Luciano explained.

Bystander intervention also works effectively as primary prevention because victims or potential victims don’t have to bear the responsibility of creating safer public spaces alone.

“Primary prevention is largely focused on everyone else; it’s not necessarily for the victim or potential victim,” Luciano said. “The beauty of bystander intervention is, it’s about everybody else.”

As data shows most women and LGBTQ people will experience sexual harassment or sexual violence in their lifetime, we can no longer wait for the criminal justice system to play out as the only response to making public spaces safer, experts argued.

“That level of street harassment and sexual harassment that happens, it’s over 80% of women and LGBTQ folks worldwide who have experienced this. That’s significant. We have to do something about it,” Luciano reflected. “In some ways, we are starting to recognize that the criminal justice process is not great and is not the only option for holding people accountable.”

Taking a hard look at patterns in sexual abuse

Conversations about sexual assault often can become politically and emotionally charged, leaving little room for nuanced discussions and, consequently, letting some offenders off the hook, experts said.

“It’s very, very challenging to find a therapist or a counselor who focuses on this kind of work, or who even feel comfortable talking about it,” Finnerty said. “I think if we’re waiting until the sexual abuse has happened, or until someone’s got hurt, we as a society really just waited too long.”

To thoroughly address problematic sexual urges and sexual offenses like what reportedly happened at the convention, offenders need to hold themselves accountable and work to understand why they thought their behavior was acceptable.

In Busey’s case, the actor reportedly asked local police to apologize to the women and ask them to not pursue charges, according to investigators. Court documents show the Malibu, California, resident also tried to explain allegedly inappropriate touching as accidental.

“In some ways, it’s kind of similar to some of the conversations that are happening around like race,” Finnerty observed. “We’re trying to encourage white people to look inward and recognize what privilege is. I think I try to have similar conversations with a lot of the men I work with, like recognizing what lessons have you learned, growing up as a man in our society, about what is and what isn’t OK.”

Finnerty also noted that oftentimes, people who exhibit sexually abusive behavior are more likely to have experienced it themselves in early life, as research in his field indicates. Though it’s not an excuse for harassing or violent behavior, we should treat psychological wounds with the same fervor we treat physical wounds, he said.

“You see that if somebody can start healing from their past trauma, they’re going to start being able to kind of live an overall healthier life in the present,” he continued. “And something that comes along with that is just having better impulse control, and being able to think through decisions a little bit better, engage in more than pro social interactions and relationships.”

But taking a hard look at oneself can be difficult and painful, Finnerty said.

“We tend to teach (boys and men) to kind of ignore pain and suppress feelings. If we can kind of get better from day one ... just teaching boys that it is OK to have emotions, that it is OK to feel pain, and it’s OK to acknowledge pain, and ask for help — it’s kind of idealistic to say, but that’s really that holistic early intervention way of getting at this stuff before it ever reaches a point of somebody’s hurt somebody and the criminal justice system has to step in.”

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