

Victim Blaming

Victim Blaming occurs when the victim or survivor of sexual violence is held partially or completely responsible for the harm that they experienced. Victim blaming is a symptom of rape culture, in which our society minimizes the impacts of sexual violence and normalizes attitudes and beliefs that defend those who cause sexual harm. While victims of other violent crimes usually do not have to explain what they “did” to become victimized, victims of sexual violence are all too often forced to defend their actions leading up to an experience of sexual violence. This creates a difficult environment for survivors to share their stories when they are blamed, disbelieved, and shamed. To learn more about victim blaming and rape culture, check out MCASA’s *Sexual Violence and its Impact on Survivors* training module in our online training library: <https://mcasa.org/providers/online-training-library>.

Victim blaming has severe negative impacts on survivors’ healing and can lead to increased experiences of self-blame, shame, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and suicidal thoughts or actions.¹ It can also make it less likely for survivors to report or seek support, care, and treatment.² In Maryland, more than **1 out of every 4 (26.8%)** adult Maryland women—about 664,454 women—has been the victim of rape sometime in her lifetime. **Nearly half (47.6%)** of Maryland’s adult women—about 1,180,150 women—and **one third (30.7%)** of Maryland’s adult men—about 722,571 men—have experienced other forms of sexual violence.³

Even though prevalence of sexual violence is high, the majority of sexual assaults are never reported. Victim blaming is one of the barriers that Maryland survivors face. To learn more, see MCASA’s *Why Survivors Don’t Report* fact sheet: <https://mcasa.org/stats-info/statistics>.

The Psychology Behind Victim Blaming

The **just-world theory** explains that people have a strong belief that the world is generally a just and fair place. Thus, when something bad happens to a good person, there is a tendency to blame the victim in order to psychologically separate ourselves from them and maintain the view that the world is just. This mindset reassures us that nothing bad will happen to us. The problem with the just-world theory is that it overlooks the reality that those who cause harm are responsible for their actions, not victims.⁴

A 2019 study published by *Frontiers in Psychology* analyzed factors that increase the likelihood of victim blaming occurring:⁵

- **Traditional gender role endorsement:** Those with limited beliefs about women’s roles and rights are more likely to blame the victim. Specifically, researchers have found a connection between benevolent sexism (attitudes that suggest that women are lower in status and in need of men’s protection) and victim blaming.
- **Presence of drugs and alcohol:** 11 out of the 16 studies that included intoxication level found that victims using drugs or alcohol are blamed more often than sober victims for an acquaintance rape. Additionally, the more drunk the perpetrator was, the more participants excused their behavior.

¹ Schroeder, M. (2016, April 19). ‘The Psychological Impact of Victim-Blaming – and How to Stop It.’ U.S. News and World Report. Retrieved from: <https://health.usnews.com/wellness/articles/2016-04-19/the-psychological-impact-of-victim-blaming-and-how-to-stop-it>

² Schroeder, M. (2016, April 19). ‘The Psychological Impact of Victim-Blaming – and How to Stop It.’ U.S. News and World Report. Retrieved from: <https://health.usnews.com/wellness/articles/2016-04-19/the-psychological-impact-of-victim-blaming-and-how-to-stop-it>

³ National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The National Intimate Partner, and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2016/2017 Report on SA Data Brief. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nisvs/nisvsReportonSexualViolence.pdf> (last accessed March 1, 2024) (Numbers adjusted to match current population data.)

⁴ Felderman, David. (2018, March 2). Why do People Blame the Victim? *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/supersurvivors/201803/why-do-people-blame-the-victim>

⁵ Gravelin, C., Biernat, M., Bucher, C. (2019, January 21). Blaming the Victim of Acquaintance Rape: Individual, Situational, and Sociocultural Factors. *Frontiers in Psychology*. Retrieved from: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02422/full>

- **Appearance:** When victims are perceived as wearing revealing clothing, they are more likely to be blamed for their assault. Victims who wear revealing clothing are often judged as “provocative” or told they were “asking for it,” which is harmful and inaccurate.
- **Media and sexual objectification:** Media often depicts women as sexualized objects and portrays sexual aggression as normal behavior. Media also normalizes sexual dominance and continues harmful myths about sexual violence experiences, all of which can contribute to victim blaming.

“Within this culture of victim blaming, women are told to change their own behavior in order to avoid being assaulted or raped. Women are told repeatedly to dress less provocatively, drink less alcohol, and not put themselves in risky situations. This proliferates the belief that [victims] are at fault when they are attacked, and leads to a lack of accountability for [abusers and perpetrators of sexual violence].”

Changing the Culture of Victim Blaming. *Women’s Health Research Institute Northwestern University*. Retrieved from: <http://www.womenshealth.northwestern.edu/blog/changing-culture-victim-blaming>

Underserved Populations

Research on victim blaming tends to focus on women and girls, and often does not include data specific to underserved populations. However, victim blaming may be worsened by prejudiced views related to intersecting identities. Future research should explore how victim blaming affects members of the LGBTQ+ community, men, people of color, individuals with disabilities, and additional communities.

Tips to Combat Victim Blaming

- Listen to survivors when they share their story and let them know that it is not their fault.
- Speak out against jokes about sexual violence and comments that blame the victim.
- Speak up when others are behaving in a way that is sexist, racist, homophobic, transphobic, or misogynistic.
- Challenge your ideas about gender norms and roles. Call out stereotypes and harmful language directed at women.
- Hold those who cause harm accountable and responsible for their actions.
- Be an active bystander: *Remember to keep your own safety in mind as you choose a way to intervene:*
 - **Direct:** Intervene directly with the person doing harm or the person being targeted.
 - **Distract:** Create a distraction to draw the attention of either person away from the situation to interrupt or stop the harmful behavior.
 - **Delegate:** Bring in another person such as a friend, a trusted adult, or a person of authority to help.⁶

To learn more about Bystander Intervention, check out MCASA’s *Prevention in Action: In-person and Online* training module in our Online Training Library: <https://mcasa.org/providers/online-training-library>. You can also review our Bystander Intervention page: <https://mcasa.org/prevention/it-only-takes-one>.

⁶ Green Dot Violence Prevention Strategy. Alteristic. Retrieved from: <https://alteristic.org/green-dot>