**Social-Ecological Model**[[1]](#footnote-1)

Ultimately, the goal of primary prevention is to stop violence before it starts by implementing identified primary prevention strategies using the Social-Ecological Model. The comprehensive use of these strategies will build environments that promote respect, equality, civility, healthy relationships, and healthy sexuality. Focusing on primary prevention is the only way to eliminate violence. “While we would all like to believe that informing everyone about the nature of sexual assault and its consequences would keep people from ever committing the act, it is simply not enough to overcome the complex factors that lead to sexual assault.[[2]](#footnote-2)”

Sexual violence is complex and there isn’t just one factor that influences the perpetration of sexual violence; there are multiple influences on an individual’s behavior. The Social-Ecological Model is a framework for sexual violence prevention because each level in the model can be interpreted as a level of influence in individuals’ lives. It is “how individuals relate to those around them, [individual and relationship levels], and to their broader environment, [community and societal levels].”[[3]](#footnote-3) By understanding the levels as influence across the social-ecology, it provides a framework for identifying prevention strategies that will reduce risk factors and increase protective factors. The following are level-based influences that may put individuals at risk (risk factors) for perpetrating sexual violence:

* **Individual Influences**: attitudes and beliefs that support sexual violence; impulsive and antisocial behavior; childhood history of sexual abuse or witnessing violence; alcohol and drug use.
* **Relationship Influences**: association with sexually aggressive peers; family environment that is emotionally unsupportive, physically violent or strongly patriarchal.
* **Community Influences**: general tolerance of sexual assault; lack of support from police or judicial system; poverty, lack of employment opportunities; weak community sanctions against perpetrators.
* **Societal Influences**: inequalities based on gender, race, sexual orientation, religious or cultural beliefs, social policies.

It is important to note that these are general influences and most likely are present in every community. However, the most valid prevention strategies take into consideration specific influences in individual communities and populations. Primary prevention focuses on the identification of risk factors and the development of strategies to influence these risk factors. The four levels of this model, as adopted from the CDC, are:

**Individual Relationship Community Society**

**Societal:** examines the societal factors that create a climate in which violence is encouraged or inhibited. Factors include social and cultural norms. Other large societal factors include the health, economic, educational and social policies that help to maintain economic or social inequalities between groups in society.

**Community** explores the settings, such as schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods, in which social relationships occur and seeks to identify the characteristics of these settings that are associated with becoming victims or perpetrators of violence.

**Relationship:**includes factors that increase risk because of relationships with peers, intimate partners, and family members. A person’s behavior may be influenced by their peers, partners and family members and can contribute to their range of experience of sexual violence.

**Individual:**Identifies biological and personal history factors that increase the likelihood of becoming a victim or perpetrator of violence. Some of these factors are age, sex, education, income, substance use, or history of abuse.

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2004). Sexual violence prevention: beginning the dialogue. Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Curtis, M.J., Love, T. (2009). Tools for change: An introduction to primary prevention of sexual assault. Texas Association Against Sexual Assault. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2007). “The Social-Ecological Model: A Framework for Violence Prevention”. <http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/pdf/SEM_Framewrk-a.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)