

By



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Genres

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In the summer of 2015, Kate Lloyd [wrote a piece](#) for Vice's Broadly vertical entitled "There's a rape problem at music festivals and nobody seems to care." Based on what we've seen transpire throughout 2016, Lloyd was probably right. Particularly during peak music festival season, every day seemed to bring new reports of sexual assaults from all over the world.

Twelve sexual assaults and five rapes were [reported](#) at Sweden's Bravalla Festival, and another 35 sexual assaults were [reported](#) at Putte I Parken festival, also in Sweden. At Denmark's Roskilde festival, there were five [reports](#) of rape or sexual assault. In Ontario, a 20-year-old Oakville man [was charged](#) after an alleged sexual assault at the WayHome Music and Arts festival. A young woman by the name of Melanie Doucet [posted publicly](#) about being roofied at Montreal's Osheaga festival and asked that organizers take more safety and preventative measures going forward.

These reports are devastating, but not shocking — at least not to women. [In Canada](#), more than 80 per cent of sex crime victims are women, and just six of every 100 sexual assaults are reported to the police. [In America](#), women account for 90 per cent of all adult rapes. Sexual assault has been normalized and gendered to the extent that girls grow up being taught how to avoid it, as if the presence of an additional X chromosome is almost complicit in the inevitability of experiencing sexual violence. Add to these stats the [increased risk](#) of experiencing sexual violence in mass gatherings, as well as the prevalence of alcohol and drugs, and it's easy to understand why music festivals have a rape problem — but it certainly doesn't make it easier to accept.

[Project SoundCheck](#), an Ottawa-based organization, is hoping to prevent sexual assault at mass gatherings with its unique program that focuses on bystander intervention and training. The project is

a partnership between the Sexual Assault Network of Ottawa and the Ottawa Coalition to End Violence Against Women, and was started in response to a 2013 study done at the Ottawa hospital emergency room that found one in four new cases of sexual violence happened at or around a mass gathering. Project SoundCheck lead Kira-Lynn Ferderber says that since the program began in 2015, she's delivered training to "a few thousand people" at a variety of festivals, including the Ottawa Blues Festival, and at least 5,000 people have received the group's abbreviated bystander intervention checklist card. The handout includes six steps to help check in and prevent sexual violence, beginning with the basics — "Watch what's going on: is everyone having fun?" — to the more specific: "Seems like things #JustGotWeird? Yes? Time to check in!" and "Stick around: say hi, ask what's up, ask the person who may be at risk, 'Do you need help?'"

Ferderber says that bystander intervention is important because women are constantly told to watch their drinks, be careful, remain on guard (writer Scaachi Koul called it [surveillance culture](#) in her powerful BuzzFeed essay).

"Women are trying to be careful and so that's why I do bystander intervention," Ferderber says. "Because it engages everybody else. No matter how vigilant you are, you're one person. Someone could slip something in your drink. Bystander intervention is really pragmatic. Convincing every single person not to commit sexual violence, like, I'd need everyone to be onboard with 'no means no' for sexual violence to end.... And I'm not against those safety messages, but it's not a guarantee, and it puts the onus on women and we're already doing it."

"Friends don't let friends drive drunk" is bystander intervention, Ferderber explains.

"If a person is hosting a party and someone's drunk and they're going to get in their car and drive, you [the host] are actually totally safe from them and you're not gonna get arrested and you're not gonna get hit, you're not gonna be a perpetrator or a victim. You're on the sidelines, but you intervene."

It seems simple, but the basic act of talking about it and giving people instructions for how to do it themselves empowers people to intervene.

"The phenomena of bystander apathy is very real," Ferderber says. "We feel safe in a big crowd. But it's that weird thing where if you fall and break your leg you're better off having two people walk by than 100 people. At the same time [there's] diffusion of responsibility, 'someone else will take care of it.'" But, she continues, "People do want to prevent sexual violence, they just don't know how to talk about it and they don't know what to say. It's weird. They just need the training and then a lot of times once they have it they're able to use it, but it is a bit of an intimidating topic."

It's also an increasingly important one.

If 2015 introduced the phrase "rape culture" into the mainstream, 2016 affirmed it's not just the buzzword of feminists and the "politically correct." Rather it's a phrase that's infuriatingly, heartbreakingly relevant, and naming it and framing it is critically important to dismantling it.

"'Friends don't let friends drive drunk' is bystander intervention."

Kira-Lynn Ferderber

Stacey Forrester, the [founder of Good Night Out Vancouver](#), says that the increased media attention around sexual assaults at music festivals doesn't mean it's happening more or that it's a new issue, but rather it's reflective of the fact that people are speaking up against it and demanding that festivals do more to ensure the safety of its attendees, and that complaints are taken seriously.

“Rape culture has historically been buttressed by a pressure to stay silent about these issues,” Forrester says, “so the more people [are] talking about it in a way that calls for more accountability and less victim blaming is a positive thing.”

Good Night Out works with clubs, pubs, venues and festivals to identify issues around safety and sexual assault, work with owners and promoters to resolve them, and engage with bystanders about spotting and acting on harmful behaviours.

The instant community feeling of a festival might contribute to lowered barriers or provide the perfect hunting ground for predatory sexual violence, but bystander intervention acts on that community impulse and amplifies it.

“It’s the perfect opportunity to create a culture that looks out for one another,” Forrester says. “Let’s all carry some of that ‘vigilance’ instead of it weighing on a select few people — women — and all bear some of the responsibility for our community. Let’s learn how to recognize and intervene on behaviors that are harmful, let’s look out for lost strangers, and get people water, and not leave people ‘to sleep it off’ and know when and where to get help.”

Munroe Craig is the owner of [Karmik](#), a Vancouver-based harm-reduction program that services festivals and nightlife events throughout B.C. Karmik began incorporating a [workshop by the Consent Crew](#), co-founded by Kim Dohms, into its regular training sessions, and agrees with Forrester about the potential for an empowered and engaged community.

“Let’s create a culture where we do not externalize or transfer responsibilities to others unless we are otherwise unable to do it ourselves,” Craig says. “Then we are truly creating an evolved and less primal society that is better skilled and able to handle itself in the future.”

"This insta-community feeling [of a mass gathering] also gives us a really good opportunity to share 'norms' and create a culture that's different from one that's driven by rape culture narratives," says Dohms, who lists a number of ways to communicate these "norms": greeters at gates, ambassadors engaging people in conversations throughout the festival, posters, signage and social media among them.

Dohms is already seeing the potential long-term benefits of bystander intervention.

"If people understand the culture that they're coming into," says Dohms, "they're more likely to engage in the community in respectful ways that keep safety and fun working together for the best experience possible. If we create a space that promotes consensual interactions, that allows for calling in and education around behaviours that won't be tolerated, we set ourselves up for more buy-in from community members — people can become participants and community members rather than just consumers of an experience. Setting up those expected behaviours from the outset and keeping messaging consistent throughout the lead up and during the festival can truly go a long way and trickle into everyday life. We've seen consent and harm-reduction conversations continue on well past festival season among people who saw these initiatives at work."

Everyone should feel safe at HPX and keeping people as safe as possible means that we need to be constantly evolving.

Stephanie Purcell, board chair of the Halifax Pop Explosion

Ottawa Bluesfest has been one of the earliest proponents of Project SoundCheck and takes its bystander intervention training seriously. Anna Wood is the HR manager of volunteer services, and she estimates that she's been through more than five training sessions.

“When I first learned about why Project SoundCheck was being created, I was shocked by the statistics,” Wood says. “After receiving more background information about what bystander intervention is, and the positive approach that is being taken with Project SoundCheck, I am so proud to be part of it.... The simplicity of bystander intervention is such a positive message to spread, and I feel like I am much more aware and confident in large gatherings because I now have all of these effortless tools to check in and help someone.”

Stephanie Purcell is the board chair of the Halifax Pop Explosion music festival, and says that sexual assault prevention is hugely important to the festival — not just for its patrons, but also performers, staff and volunteers, which is why they have begun consulting with Project SoundCheck.

“Everyone should feel safe at HPX and keeping people as safe as possible means that we need to be constantly evolving,” Purcell says. “We need to continually review all of our policies and work towards helping identify and prevent horrible events like sexual assaults from occurring.”

Purcell admits that HPX is “afraid” that if incidents have happened, they’ve gone unreported.

“We want to change that,” she says. “We want to make sure that everyone attending feels comfortable to report sexual violence and that’s why we feel working with Project SoundCheck is so key to the process. Their bystander intervention manual is helping us understand what we can do better to prevent and support victims of sexual violence.... We are including their manual as well as their sexual assault prevention tip sheets in our volunteer and staff training and [we’re] currently looking to having a representative come to Halifax in 2017 to help further educate our staff.”

Ferderber, who is also a musician and raps under the name the Mayor of Ottawa (“Because I run this town!”), hopes that artists will also use their leverage to encourage music festivals to take safety seriously. It’s exactly what Mumford & Sons did following Bravalla, issuing [a statement](#) that they

wouldn't play the festival again until they had assurances from the police and organizers that "they're doing something to combat what appears to be a disgustingly high rate of reported sexual violence."

"People can ask promoters, 'What do you do to keep women and other people safe at your events?' And artists can just ask that. Even if they didn't refuse to play, even if they just say, 'This matters to me,'" Ferderber says, pointing out that President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden are refusing to speak at campuses that don't have a comprehensive sexual assault prevention strategy. "Imagine if it was like, 'Oh no, you can't book Kanye West unless you care about preventing sexual violence.'"

**Update:** Melanie Doucet, who was mentioned earlier in this article (she [posted publicly](#) alleging she was roofied at Montreal's Osheaga festival), reached out to CBC Music this morning to let us know that she's [petitioning](#) the City of Montreal to require festivals incorporate sexual violence prevention and intervention.

"The experience made me realize how ill-equipped festivals are in dealing with sexual violence and the serious lack of training of security staff in properly responding to reports of such incidents," Doucet says. "I am a seasoned festivaler and have been attending all sorts of festivals since the early 2000s. This was the first time I felt unsafe, victim-blamed and shocked at the blatant rape culture that exists — it really opened my eyes to that. As a social worker by profession and a PhD candidate at McGill, I could not just let this go because the next girl this happens to could have much more tragic results than my situation."

Doucet says that her lawyers, who are working on the case pro bono, will submit the petition on Doucet's behalf in early November. You can check out the petition [here](#).

**Resources:**

[Project Soundcheck](#)

[Goodnight Out](#)

[Karmik](#)

[The Consent Crew](#)

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