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LEARNING NETWORK

# LearningNetwork Brief 25

**Training Social Work Students in  
Domestic/Sexual Violence Work:  
Key findings from the literature.**

*Facilitate. Educate. Collaborate.*

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## Training Social Work Students in Domestic/Sexual Violence work: Key findings from the literature

Several research studies have been conducted recently evaluating students' preparedness for working with victims and survivors of domestic violence, particularly in the field of social work. Some key findings from these studies are summarized. This review includes publications from 2009 to 2015. There were no Canadian studies identified for inclusion in this review.

A study of social work students' views on the causes and dynamics of domestic violence were assessed through case study scenarios. Most study participants graduated from a master of social work (MSW) program with a mental health perspective on domestic violence. Study participants recommended counselling for the scenario identified but not specific to domestic violence. Substance abuse was considered to be a contributing factor or primary factor to be addressed as well as anger management. (Black, Weisz & Bennett, 2010). The study concluded that students appeared to have limited knowledge on how to intervene effectively in domestic violence cases.

Social workers in the State of Virginia were surveyed regarding their training needs relevant to domestic violence. Benefits workers were less likely than other social workers to participate in domestic violence trainings, screen regularly for domestic violence, or identify clients as victims of domestic violence (Payne & Triplett, 2009).

A survey of MSW students at a university in the United States found that less than half had taken a course that included a section on domestic violence or sexual assault while completing their degree. Just over half of survey respondents had received information, training or education about domestic violence or sexual assault outside of the MSW coursework (Postmus, McMahon, Warrener, & Macri, 2011). Students reported personal knowledge or experience of domestic violence with more than one third experiencing domestic violence and one quarter experiencing rape. More than half reported knowing a family member or friend who had experienced abuse. Almost half of the students reported that they never or rarely screened for domestic violence in their field placements.

Factors that contribute to competent social work practice include attitudes and beliefs that are supportive of survivors of violence against women and professional efficacy or confidence to work effectively with survivors. MSW students in the United States were

### KEY FINDINGS

One study found that students appeared to have limited knowledge on how to intervene effectively in domestic violence cases.

In the US less than 1/2 of MSW students surveyed had completed any course work on sexual or domestic violence for degree completion.

Just over ½ of students reported receiving training or education on domestic and/or sexual violence outside of MSW coursework.

surveyed regarding their confidence in asking clients about sexual or domestic violence (Warrener et al 2013). External training was a major indicator of increased professional efficacy, as well as exposure to the issue through education, training or professional experiences. Those with more experience reported greater professional efficacy. It was presumed that external training was a major indicator of professional efficacy because these trainings were more likely to be specific to the topic of violence against women.

Students who participated in courses specific to violence against women in adulthood significantly decreased their negative attitudes and beliefs about violence against women compared to students in other courses (McMahon, Postmus, Warrener, Plummer & Schwartz 2013). Examples of attitudes and beliefs measured include: women who are rape when drunk are somewhat responsible for what happened; and domestic violence is more likely to occur in lower socioeconomic neighbourhoods.

A letter to the editor to the journal *Social Work* in April 2013 called for a systematic approach to training social workers on intimate partner violence issues. A survey of Social Work Boards in the United States found that only 2 states made coursework on intimate partner violence mandatory. The authors recommended mandatory continuing education on intimate partner violence for all social workers seeking to obtain or maintain licenses (Stylianou & McMahon, 2013).

### What should students learn?

The following knowledge areas were identified as key learning areas for social workers and other support workers:

- the rights of survivors of violence;
- knowledge of how oppression, power and privilege affect violence against women
- current research and practices in the area of violence against women;
- how to locate and connect victims with local community resources for domestic violence victims
- impact of social environment on victimization, perpetration and outcomes for victims;
- how to engage, assess, intervene with and evaluate clients who may be victims of violence.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT LEARNING

Key learning areas in social work education regarding violence against women identified:

- Current research and practice
- Intersectional aspects of violence
- Survivors' rights
- How to engage, assess, and intervene with clients experiencing domestic violence
- Linking to community resources

Students who have participated in domestic violence pre-service field orientation identified a need for greater collaboration between placement agencies and schools of social work.

Passageway, a domestic violence program in a Boston hospital offers an internship program for social work students. In order to prepare the students for the internship, a two-day orientation is offered to prepare the students for work with victims of domestic violence. Social work students are introduced to various approaches including empowerment, ecological perspective, and trauma theory. Students who have participated in this orientation have identified the need for greater collaboration between placement agencies and schools of social work to ensure a stronger education base on domestic violence as a social work issue. (LeGeros & Borne, 2013).

### Things to consider moving forward:

- How is domestic violence covered in current social work programs in Ontario?
- Is domestic/sexual violence a mandatory course requirement for successful degree completion?
- Is domestic violence education considered a core competency for licensing of social workers in Ontario?

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