

Sexual Violence Fundamentals

What is sexual violence?

The Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault

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There is no single, all-encompassing definition of sexual violence. Sexual violence is discussed differently in different places, contexts, and communities. Therefore it is important to understand that your understanding of sexual violence may diverge from how others understand it.

Here are some broad definitions to consider:

- Sexual violence is the use of sexual actions and words that are unwanted by and/or harmful to another person. – [MNCASA](#)
- Sexual violence means that someone forces or manipulates someone else into unwanted sexual activity without their consent. – [NSVRC](#)
- Sexual violence refers to any sexual activity when consent is not obtained or given freely. – [CDC](#)
- Sexual violence occurs whenever a person is forced or coerced into any unwanted sexual activity, including when the person is unable to consent due to age, illness, disability, or the influence of alcohol or other drugs. – [PCAR](#)
- Acts of a sexual nature against one or more persons or that cause such person or persons to engage in an act of a sexual nature by force, or by threat of force or coercion, such as that caused by fear of violence, duress, detention, psychological oppression or abuse of power, or by taking advantage of a coercive environment or such person's or persons' incapacity to give genuine consent. – [United Nations](#)

There are many forms of sexual violence and multiple ways of categorizing them. However, regardless of how you categorize various forms of sexual violence, there is no hierarchy of violence or harm. People experience sexual violence differently, and may experience similar acts of sexual violence very differently. People also may report more or less trauma than others who have experienced similar acts.

In the [STOP and SASP Administrators' Academy](#), you were introduced to a model that organizes all forms of sexual violence into three overlapping categories:

Visual

Visual sexual violence consists of actions that are meant to be seen or watched. Examples include posting sexually explicit images where they will be seen by others and sharing sexually explicit images of another person without that person's permission ("revenge porn").

Verbal

Verbal sexual violence consists of anything language-based. Examples include street harassment ("catcalling"), the use of sexually demeaning names for specific groups of people, and any verbal sexual harassment.

Physical

Physical sexual violence consists of actions involving physical touch, including but not limited to physical penetration. Examples include rape, sexual assault, and groping.

The Visual-Verbal-Physical model of organization is particularly helpful because it calls attention to non-physical types of sexual violence, which are often less discussed and understood and because it demonstrates that many acts of sexual violence may fall into more than one category.

One particularly common way of distinguishing between different forms of sexual violence is by categorizing them as criminal or non-criminal. Sexual violence is often considered an inherently criminal problem, but there are many forms of sexual violence that do not meet the definition of a crime, such as sexual harassment in public transportation.

Whether or not a particular form of sexual violence is considered criminal, along with the potential charges and sentencing attached to it, will vary depending on where the act occurs and the type of court considering it.

Typically, criminal forms of sexual violence include rape, forcible sexual assault, child sexual abuse, and sex trafficking.

Depending on the jurisdiction in which they take place, the forms of sexual violence considered non-criminal include sexual harassment, street harassment (“catcalling”), alcohol- or drug-facilitated sexual assault (particularly when the victim/survivor became intoxicated consensually), and sharing sexually explicit images of another person without that person’s permission (“revenge porn”).

As stated previously, there is no hierarchy of violence or harm. A criminal act of sexual violence should not be considered inherently “worse” or more harmful than a non-criminal act of sexual violence, just as a physical act of sexual violence should not be considered inherently more harmful than a visual or verbal act of sexual violence.



Questions?

Please contact the Sexual Violence Justice Institute at SVJI@mncasa.org.

To learn more about various forms of sexual violence, please see our list of [Essential Terms for STOP Administrators](#).

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