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2021: Building the new “Normal”?

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2020 was a challenging and difficult year all around, with 2021 having some teething issues (i.e., Brexit and the riots on Capitol Hill in the USA) as well as rays of hope (i.e., the COVID-19 vaccine). 2021 provides opportunities to redefine the socio-political landscape and develop a new “normal” with the positive aspects of the previous normal as well as the chance to change the problematic aspects. In this blog, we will each offer our perspectives on what we should focus on moving into 2021.

KIERAN: 2020 highlighted the centrality of community, collaboration, and coalition to our everyday life. The COVID-19 pandemic and resultant vaccine have demonstrated, very clearly, that we all need to consider other people in our actions and behaviors. The COVID-19 virus is spread through contact and interaction. Therefore, “[Hands, Face, Space](#)”, and lockdown is as much about self-protection as it is about protecting other more vulnerable people. We are being asked to say away from others to protect them and not spread the virus. This reminds us that we are part of a community and that we need to think beyond others beyond ourselves and the unintentional consequences of our behavior. This resonates with the field of sexual abuse in terms of how we prevent abuse, rehabilitate those who offend, and integrate them back into the community. The most effective way to tackle sexual abuse is to create a supportive, inclusive, and proactive community. In 2021, we need to develop more inclusive communities that recognize the importance of individual actions and their impact on collective wellbeing. Therefore, the more that society recognizes the reality of sexual abuse, its impact, and has knowledge of how they can build safer communities with those who have abused as well as those who have been victimized, the better.

DAVID: If there was anyone series of events that shaped (or should shape) our research and practice agenda for the future, it would be the shootings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Jacob Blake (and others) by police officers. The lack of accountability manifested by few if any, charges or corrective practices by the police has laid bare the realities that many of our client’s face – and have faced – since long



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SAJRT Bloggers' Profile

We are longtime members of ATSA dedicated to furthering the causes of evidenced-based practice, understanding, and prevention in the field of sexual abuse.

The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers is an international, multi-disciplinary organization dedicated to preventing sexual abuse. Through research, education, and shared learning ATSA promotes evidence based practice, public policy, and community strategies that lead to the effective assessment, treatment, and management of individuals who have sexually abused or are risk to abuse.

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before there were technologies such as smartphones to record them. It doesn't need to be like this; the city of Newark, NJ, where police officers received [effective training in de-escalation techniques](#) saw no shots fired by police this past year.

Our field has a wealth of research and knowledge about disparities in arrest, sentencing, probation and parole that people from minority backgrounds face every day. Practitioners are rightly coming to consider racism and discrimination its own category of trauma and adverse childhood experience. Still, we have been ineffective at getting policymakers to understand and act on the widespread disparities that exist. Even the word "disparity" seems a cruel understatement when people are dying, communities are experiencing more [poverty and violence](#) and not less, and the [US Justice Department](#) is seeking to undermine (at the 11th hour of the current administration) to undermine the Civil Rights act. Of critical importance is that the US is not the only nation ambivalent about addressing its abusive past.

Although this may seem a purely a political statement, the effects of the current climate on our clients in treatment, many practitioners, and our practices themselves can no longer be denied. While we may differ on the end game of combating these inequities, the events of 2020 have shown that the time to act is long past due.

KASIA: One of the most confronting issues that arose during the pandemic was the fact that despite all our efforts we still fail to protect numerous children and adults from (sexual) violence. In order to protect society members from a deadly virus, authorities across the world have imposed curfews and lockdowns. However, these measures seem to have unwittingly elicited a rise in domestic violence cases, including a rise in sexual abuse cases. The combination of exacerbating stressors at home and at work, self-isolation, and fear are believed to underly this surge. Victims were forced to stay home with an abuser to avoid contracting the virus. Many perpetrators have also abused the situation by threatening their victim(s) to throw them out onto the streets if they would not obey and by using the public safety measures to isolate their victim(s) even more. Consequently, the measures have led to more limited opportunities for victims of violence to seek out and receive support from formal and/or informal resources. Police officers tell me that several adolescents -victims of domestic violence- are reluctant to seek help during the pandemic out of fear that this action would tip off their abuser and would only result in retribution. Many victims also fear to leave the house to seek help after the curfew out of fear of being arrested.

Thanks to early warnings of numerous organizations, including the World Health Organization (WHO), services, and advocates we have seen many initiatives at local and national levels is swiftly implemented. For instance, in Belgium, additional space was created in a hotel for females and children who needed to escape their violent home situation. In several countries, including France, Spain, and Belgium, codewords for victims of domestic violence were being implemented so they could discretely summon police help in pharmacies. These efforts were widely applauded in the media; policymakers were immediately patting themselves on the back. It's not my intention to spoil the party here, but I'm afraid it is just far too soon to be blowing our trumpets. The fight is clearly not over yet and many concerns remain. To name a few: These initiatives are accessible for many victims but not for all. Many victims do not know of these initiatives; they do not read papers or listen to the news or don't have any access to the internet. Also, the pandemic has revealed our stereotypical thinking about domestic violence even more. During (but also before) the pandemic, males are consistently portrayed as perpetrators of domestic violence and females and children as victims, even by leading organizations like the WHO. Such portraying will not encourage male nor female victims from female violence to step up and seek help. In addition, media coverage and the calls for initiatives are mainly focused on cases of intimate partner

violence and child abuse, often neglecting other types of domestic violence, like sibling and elder abuse. Consequently, victims of these types of abuse will not feel addressed by these initiatives.

As the world remains under siege from the pandemic, it is high time for us to tackle the challenges ahead. We need to be more creative and to be more critical about our efforts to prevent violence. Professionals, researchers, and policymakers should clearly invest in evaluations of our campaigns and initiatives: How can we reach more victims? How can we facilitate their help-seeking behavior? Is what we are doing enough? How can we protect public health without causing this much collateral damage? We should also invest more in primary and secondary prevention. It goes without saying that all the tertiary prevention strategies being implemented, are highly needed. But shouldn't we *also* prevent violence before it happens, even during a pandemic? So how can we help vulnerable couples and families in developing non-violent conflict resolution strategies and proper coping behaviors to address stress and negative feelings? How can we facilitate help-seeking behavior in violent perpetrators and in people who are at risk of becoming violent?

One thing is certain in these uncertain times: One day we will be able to protect ourselves from the COVID-19 virus and our society will overcome this pandemic. But how wonderful would it be if we could also assure all children and adults that one day we will be able to protect ourselves from the violence that is holding the world hostage for far too long now.