

The Bystander Effect

IAC Ethics Mini-Exercise

Today we are going to look at a social phenomenon occurring in many places across the US. It's called The Bystander Effect. Does anyone know what that is?

In general terms, **it's when an individual or group stands by while a violent crime is committed.** The violent nature of the crime is often compounded by bystanders recording the event on their cell phones for later posting on social media. Or, standing by and cheering the aggressor on. It begs the question...should those who stand by without intervening or seeking assistance from law enforcement be criminally prosecuted? What keeps people from jumping into these situations? Today, we are going to look at two possible factors that turn regular citizens into bystanders.

The first component is called "Pluralistic Ignorance". As a bystander, we may not recognize that a crime is being committed. We look to those around us to see how they are reacting and may assume that others know something we don't. With pluralistic ignorance, we gauge the reactions of other people before deciding how we will respond. This is often why people don't ask questions in a group setting. The majority of the group members privately believe one thing, but assume (incorrectly) that most others believe the opposite. We don't want to be wrong or look foolish. Pluralistic ignorance gives us an out.

The second factor that may prevent people from getting involved is called "Diffusion of Responsibility". The more bystanders there are present, the less responsible each individual feels. When you are the only eyewitness, 100% of the responsibility is yours. The more bystanders there are, the perceived level of responsibility decreases. People may assume that someone else will help or that someone is better qualified to provide assistance.

Now, let's bring these terms into the realm of County Elected Officials and Ethics. I'm not suggesting that we are bystanders to violent crime, but is it possible that we are bystanders when it comes to carrying out our responsibilities in an ethical manner? Let's overlay the concept of The Bystander Effect across our roles as leaders and decision makers.

Think about your roles and responsibilities. What are some activities/actions that might be impacted by "Pluralistic Ignorance"?

What about "Diffusion of Responsibility"? Where does this come into play as you carry out your duties?

Today, I have introduced you to The Bystander Effect. We have discussed the two main reasons why regular folks become 'bystanders' when faced with violent crime and we have made those reasons relevant to Ethics by showing how we might become 'bystanders' when it comes to carrying out our duties. It's not that hard to get derailed, so rather than standing by, stand together and get back on track.