

REPORT BRIEF • NOVEMBER 2013

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## ESTIMATING THE INCIDENCE OF RAPE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT

Rape and sexual assault are among the most injurious crimes a person can experience. The effects are devastating, extending beyond the initial victimization to such consequences as unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, sleep and eating disorders, and other emotional and physical problems.

Understanding the frequency and context in which rape and sexual assault occur is vital in directing resources for law enforcement and in designing and supporting programs for victims.



Reliable data can help in the formation of public health and mental health policies, including interventions that can reduce the risk of future attacks. Sadly, accurate information about the extent of sexual assault and rape is difficult to obtain because most of these crimes go unreported to police.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics' (BJS) National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) obtains information on how often Americans are victims of all crimes, including rape and sexual assault. However, there has been significant concern

that rape and sexual assault are undercounted in the NCVS. BJS asked the National Research Council to investigate this issue and recommend best practices for measuring rape and sexual assault in the agency's household surveys.

The study panel's report, *Estimating the Incidence of Rape and Sexual Assault*, concludes that it is likely that rape and sexual assault are undercounted in the NCVS. Accurate counts of these crimes cannot be achieved without measuring them separately from other types of criminal victimizations, the report says. It recommends that BJS develop a separate survey for measuring rape and sexual assault. The new survey should more precisely define ambiguous words,

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such as “rape,” give more privacy to respondents, have better trained interviewers, be designed to include those most at risk for these crimes, and take other steps that would improve the accuracy of responses.

## Barriers to Accurate Measurement

The report concludes that while the National Crime Victimization Survey is efficient in measuring many types of victimizations across the United States, it does not measure rape and sexual assault with the precision needed for policy and research. There are four major barriers to measuring rape and sexual assault on the NCVS:

**The sample design is inefficient for measuring low-frequency incidents, such as rape and sexual assault.** Although the NCVS is efficient for measuring most crime victimizations, it experiences difficulties in measuring rape and sexual assault because they are statistically low-frequency events.

Rape and sexual assault accounted for 1 percent of the criminal victimizations identified through the NCVS in 2011. Changing the sample design to make the NCVS more efficient for measuring rape and sexual assault would require a major redesign of the entire survey – and such a redesign would likely make the survey less efficient for measuring other types of victimizations.

**The context of “crime” that defines the survey may inhibit accurate responses.** The questions about rape and sexual assault are being asked in the context of a criminal victimization survey and

are embedded within questions that describe other types of crimes. This context may inhibit the reporting of incidents that the respondent does not think of as criminal. Or a respondent may think that since she or he did not contact the police about the incident, it should not be reported on a government survey about crime. Or a respondent may understand that a sexual victimization was criminal but may not report it on the survey out of fear of reprisal or a desire not to get the perpetrator “in trouble.”

**A lack of privacy for those responding to the survey may inhibit accurate responses.** The NCVS is

administered by an interviewer, with 43 percent of all interviews conducted in person. Field representatives interview everyone in the designated household who is 12 and older. This approach presents privacy problems: for example, everyone in the household is interviewed and therefore knows the questions being asked and the oral interview might be overheard. Privacy in interview-

ing about sexual violence is critical because most rapes and sexual assaults are committed by individuals whom the victim knows; the offender may, in fact, be a member of the household. NCVS’s lack of privacy may be a major reason for under-reporting of rape and sexual assault.

**The questionnaire uses words with ambiguous meaning.** The complex and multifaceted definitions of what is meant by rape and sexual assault are translated into a few simple words in the questionnaire such as “rape,” “attempted rape,” and “other type of sexual attack.” These words do not describe behavior or convey the complexity of the

### The National Crime Victimization Survey

The NCVS is a survey of American households with the goal of obtaining information about a broad set of crimes from the victims rather than police. It covers most crimes, from theft of a cell phone to armed robbery, as well as rape and sexual assault. It is conducted on an ongoing basis for the BJS by the Census Bureau, which selects households to survey through the same infrastructure built for the decennial census. In 2011, the NCVS had reports from approximately 143,000 household members. Each household address remains in the sample for 3 years, with interviews every 6 months.

intended concepts; a respondent might not realize that what she or he experienced did in fact fit the definition of attempted rape, and the questionnaire does not provide definitions.

The first three barriers are intrinsic to the basic structure and processes of the NCVS. Although these aspects of the NCVS appear not to impede the measurement of other types of criminal victimization, they are problems for measuring rape and sexual assault, which cannot be overcome by making modifications to NCVS.

## Recommendations

The best methods for measuring rape and sexual assault cannot be achieved without separating their measurement from the context of a crime survey and from that of other criminal victimizations. The Bureau of Justice Statistics should develop a separate, independent survey for measuring rape and sexual assault.

**The survey should include additional sampling of higher risk populations.** The overall incidence of rape or sexual assault in the population could be estimated with greater precision by more intensively surveying subpopulations that have a higher likelihood of being victimized by rape and sexual assault – people treated for trauma in emergency rooms, for example, college students, and residents of shelters for abused women. Survey weights can be used to ensure that the oversampling does not artificially inflate the overall victimization rate.

**The questionnaire and protocols for the new survey should have a neutral context,** such as a health survey, which is less likely to inhibit full responses than a crime survey.

**The questionnaire should use behaviorally specific wording instead of only using general terms like “rape” and “sexual assault.”** States, the FBI, and BJS use different definitions for the

word “rape,” so it is not reasonable to assume that individual respondents will all interpret this word identically. The survey’s language should explicitly describe the behavior involved rather than solely using terms like rape. For example, on the National Violence Against Women Survey, respondents were asked: “Has a man or boy ever made you have sex by using force or threatening to harm you or someone close to you? Just so there is no mistake we mean putting a penis in your vagina.” This question describes a specific action, which is more likely to be clearly understood than asking a respondent if he or she has been raped.

**To protect privacy, the data collection should be self-administered by the respondent, and only one person in each household should be a respondent.** In a survey done with audio computer-assisted self-administered interviewing (ACASI), the interviewer first obtains the respondent’s consent and provides basic instruction in person. The respondent is then seated in front of a laptop or tablet computer and puts on a set of earphones. Survey questions appear simultaneously on the computer screen and through the earphones, and the respondent types his or her answers. The parts of the interview that involve interaction between the field representative and the respondent should be recorded using computer-assisted recorded interviewing (CARI) to identify areas where additional training for interviewers is needed.

If it is not possible for BJS to develop and field an annual survey specifically to measure rape and sexual assault given the current fiscal climate, the report offers lower cost options that could be used until it is possible to develop a separate annual survey.

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**For More Information . . .** This brief was prepared by the Committee on National Statistics based on the report *Estimating the Incidence of Rape and Sexual Assault*. The study was sponsored by the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not reflect those of the sponsor. Copies of the report are available from the National Academies Press, 500 Fifth Street, NW, Washington, DC 20001; (800) 624-6242; <http://www.nap.edu> or via the CNSTAT web page at <http://www.nationalacademies.org/cnstat>.

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