



# BJS Activities on Measuring Rape and Sexual Assault

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## BACKGROUND ON BJS ACTIVITIES

### Purpose

Challenges exist in the collecting of self-report data on rape and sexual assault. For almost two decades, there have been a number of competing national estimates of the level and the change in level of rape and sexual assault. The official estimates of these crimes released by BJS and based on the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) have typically been lower than estimates obtained from surveys contracted for by other federal agencies and by private groups. For example, the National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS), sponsored by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and conducted in 1995–96, estimated an incidence rate for rape (counting multiple rapes) of 8.7 per 1,000 women aged 18 or older, compared with an incidence rate for rape (including attempted rape) and sexual assault in the previous 12 months of 2.3 per 1,000 women aged 12 or older from the 1996 NCVS.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the differences in these estimates result from more and less inclusive definitions of rape and sexual assault. The NCVS, for example, emphasizes felony forcible rape, while the National Women’s Study (NWS) employs a much more inclusive definition. Even when the surveys use comparable definitions, however, the methodology used to elicit reports of these events can differ dramatically and produce very different estimates of the incidence of these crimes. A number of discussions have taken place regarding the desirability of various survey design features, including sample design, screening strategy, reference period, bounding, cueing strategy, types of cues, context, and respondent selection. In addition, differing interviewing modes have been discussed, including telephone interviews in NVAWS, in-person interviews as in the NCVS, and more private, Audio Computer Assisted Self-Interview (ACASI) options like those used in the BJS-sponsored National Inmate Surveys of sexual violence among correctional populations.

The differences that arise from using different methodologies and surveying different populations have resulted in debate over the ideal method for collecting self-report data on rape and sexual assault.<sup>2</sup> In addition, these differences have resulted in confusion among stakeholders as to which estimates are more accurate. This debate has had the negative consequence of raising doubts about the self-report methodology itself.

### Importance

There is no consensus in the field for the optimum set of procedures for self-reports of rape and sexual assault and to date no survey has employed all of the apparently beneficial design features.

No set of official statistics will be taken as definitive unless there is agreement on the methods behind them.

## The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) Has Initiated Two Projects to Identify, Develop, and Test the Best Methods for Collecting Self-Report Data on Rape and Sexual Assault

**National Research Council Committee on National Statistics  
Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education  
Measuring Rape and Sexual Assault in Bureau of Justice Statistics Household Surveys**

**Methodological Research to Support the National Crime Victimization Survey:  
Self-Report Data on Rape and Sexual Assault—Pilot Test  
Westat**

## Research Outcomes

### Goals

- Develop methodology for measuring rape and sexual assault within NCVS program
- Compare the methodology to existing methods
- Evaluate the quality, utility and cost of the methodology

### Objectives

- Develop and pilot test an optimal design to collect self-report data on rape and sexual assault
- Develop and pilot test a comparison design using Random Digit Dialing (RDD) to collect self-report data on rape and sexual assault
- Conduct detailed analytical comparisons of the two designs against each other and the existing NCVS program

### Benefits

- Determine the optimal design for measuring rape and sexual assault
- Develop improved collection procedures for self-report data on rape and sexual assault
- Evaluate the accuracy, utility, and costs of improved collection procedures relative to those used heretofore
- Determine whether the optimal design can be accommodated within the current NCVS program or whether an alternative collection is necessary
- Provide improved measurement of rape and sexual assault
- Improve national estimates of rape and sexual assault
- Improve data collection methodology and measurement within the NCVS program

## References

<sup>1</sup> Tjaden, P and Thoennes, N. 2000. Full Report of the Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence Against Women. NCJ 183781. National Institute of Justice and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Washington, DC; Ringel, C. 1997. Criminal Victimization 1996. NCJ 165812. Bureau of Justice Statistics, Washington, DC.

<sup>2</sup> Fisher, B. 2009. The Effects of Survey Question Wording on Rape Estimates: Evidence from a Quasi-Experimental Design. Violence Against Women. 15: 133-147; Fisher, B. and Cullen, F. 2000. Measuring the Sexual Victimization of Women: Evolution, Current Controversies and Future Research. In National Institute of Justice (ed.), Measurement and Analysis of Crime and Justice, Vol. 4. National Institute of Justice, Washington, DC; Kilpatrick, D. 2004. What is Violence Against Women? Defining and Measuring the Problem. Journal of Interpersonal Violence. 19: 1209-1234; Rand, M. and Rennison, C. 2005. Bigger is not Necessarily Better: An Analysis of Violence Against Women Estimates from the National Crime Victimization Survey and the National Violence Against Women Survey. Journal of Quantitative Criminology. 21: 267-291.

**See also:** Kilpatrick, D., Edmunds, C., and Seymour, A. 1992. Rape in America: A Report to the Nation. Arlington, VA: National Victim Center and Medical University of South Carolina; Kilpatrick, D., Resnick, H., Rugiero, K., Conoscenti, L., and McCauley, J. 2007. Drug-facilitated, incapacitated, and Forcible Rape: A National Study. Charleston, SC: Medical University of South Carolina and National Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center.

## DIFFERENCES IN RAPE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT ESTIMATES

### Why Do Self-Report Estimates of Rape and Sexual Assault Differ?

- Context
- Populations
- Definitions of target events differ
- Reference periods
- Focus and structure of screeners
- Identification and classification of events

These differences represent a public health versus criminal justice approaches to measuring rape and sexual assault.

Design Feature	Survey						
	NISYS CDC—2010	NVAWS Tjaden & Thoennes—2000	NCVSW Fisher—1996	NWS (1st wave) Kilpatrick—1989	NWS (2nd wave) Kilpatrick—1991	NWS (drug-facilitated) Kilpatrick—2006	NCVS ongoing
Sample Design	RDD	RDD	Student listings	RDD	RDD	RDD Student listings	Address frame
Mode	CATI	CATI	CATI	CATI	CATI	CATI	CAPI, CATI, in-person
Reference Period	Lifetime 3 years 12 months	Lifetime 12 months	Since the beginning of the fall quarter 1996	Lifetime 12 months	Lifetime 12 months	Since September August 2005	6 months
Populations	National females (18+)	National females (18+) males (18+)	College women	National females (18+)	National females (18+)	National and college women (18+)	National Females (12+) Males (12+)
Context	Health and injuries "Rape" not used	Personal safety "Rape" not used	Crime and safety "Rape" not used	Women's health Unwanted sexual advances "Rape" not used	Health "Rape" not used	Health and safety "Rape" not used	Crime "Rape" not used
How are rape and sexual assault classified?	Directly from screener cues	Directly from screener cues	Screener cues & incident report	Directly from screener cues	Directly from screener cues	Directly from screener cues	Incident report
Cueing strategy	Explicit Extensive Behaviorally specific	Explicit Extensive Behaviorally specific	Explicit Extensive Behaviorally specific	Explicit Extensive Behaviorally specific	Explicit Extensive Behaviorally specific	Explicit Extensive Behaviorally specific	Not explicit Not extensive Short cues
Target Events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychological aggression (intimates and others)</li> <li>• Physical violence (intimates and others)</li> <li>• Coercive control and entrapment (intimates and others)</li> <li>• Stalking</li> <li>• Sexual Violence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sexual violence</li> <li>• Physical assault</li> <li>• Stalking</li> <li>• Threats</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completed and attempted unwanted sexual violence</li> <li>• Complete and attempted sexual touching</li> <li>• Threats of nonphysical punishment</li> <li>• Promises of rewards</li> <li>• Pestering and verbal pressure</li> <li>• Other type of unwanted sexual contact</li> <li>• Stalking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completed and attempted sexual contact</li> <li>• Sexual touching or fondling</li> <li>• Physically attached</li> <li>• Drug/alcohol involved sexual violence</li> <li>• Emotional stress</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sexual violence</li> <li>• Sexual touching or fondling</li> <li>• Attempt sexual contact</li> <li>• Physically attached</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 out of 13 sections focus on sexual assault</li> <li>• Unwanted sexual violence</li> <li>• Drug or alcohol-facilitated unwanted sexual violence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rape</li> <li>• Other Sexual Assault</li> </ul>

## Design Differences Between Public Health and Criminal Justice Approaches to Measuring Rape and Sexual Assault

### 1. Screening Strategies

#### Public Health Approach

- One step strategies screen for incidents and classify events in the same step
- One to one correspondence between screener questions and crime classification
- Difficult to distinguish between legal and illegal acts

#### Criminal Justice Approach

- Two step strategy screens in one step and classifies in another
- No one to one correspondence between screener questions and crime classification
- Events may be deemed ineligible based on incident form information
- Collect incident-level information useful for classification and analysis

#### Implications

- Lower rates in two step procedure because some events may not be classified as a crime

### 2. Cueing Strategy

#### Public Health Approach

- Explicit use of terms for sexual acts and body parts

#### Criminal Justice Approach

- Volume and density of cues

#### Implications

- The more cues and the more explicit the cues, the more reporting
- Requires significant resources to administer survey concentrating on just rape and sexual assault

### 3. Context

#### Public Health Approach:

- Respondents not only react to questions but to the context (e.g. health; safety) of the questions within the instrument

#### Criminal Justice Approach:

- Crime surveys are a different context than health surveys

#### Implications:

- Respondents may exclude rapes and sexual assaults that are not perceived as crimes (e.g. involving intimates; date rape)

### 4. Respondent Selection

#### Public Health Approach:

- One person per household
- Random selection
- Head of household

#### Criminal Justice Approach:

- Multiple persons per household

#### Implications:

- Multiple persons per household is cheaper
- More complete reporting of household crime
- Multiple respondents decrease confidentiality among household members
- Multiple persons design increases risk to respondent of retribution

## DETAILS OF TWO PROJECTS

### National Research Council Committee on National Statistics Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education

## Measuring Rape and Sexual Assault in Bureau of Justice Statistics Household Surveys

In July 2011, BJS charged an expert panel from the National Research Council’s Committee on National Statistics (CNSTAT) to examine conceptual and methodological issues surrounding survey statistics on rape and sexual assault and to recommend to BJS the best methods for obtaining such statistics on an ongoing basis.

The panel has been asked to review the state of self-report methodologies with respect to rape and sexual assault, make recommendations as to the definition of these crimes within the mandate of the NCVS, and identify the optimal methodology for measuring the incidence and prevalence of these crimes using self-report surveys. The panel will organize a workshop and commission papers as principal means of gathering information to support its deliberations and will issue a report with its findings and recommendations at the conclusion of the 21-month study.

### Charge to the Panel

- To consider a wide range of alternative self-report survey designs to measure the incidence and prevalence of rape and sexual assault and to recommend an optimum design.
- To recommend whether this optimum design (see below) can be incorporated into the on-going NCVS program and, if so, how.

### Limitations on the Inquiry

- Any design recommended must be optimum relative to measuring behavior defined by the law as criminal.
- The principal population of interest is the non-institutionalized residential population of the United States.
- The most important estimates to be obtained from the survey are national level and change estimates for a specified unit of time.
- Provide detailed information on the victimization incident, the sequelae of victimization and the criminal justice and treatment responses.

### Field Test

- Whatever is recommended by the panel must be field tested.
- Budgetary considerations require that the field test proceed in tandem with Panel’s work.
- Panel is asked to share their recommendations with Westat and BJS as soon as prudence and the requirements of the deliberation process allow.

## Methodological Research to Support the National Crime Victimization Survey: Self-Report Data on Rape and Sexual Assault—Pilot Test Westat

In September 2011, BJS made a competitive award to Westat to develop and test two different survey designs for collecting self-report data on rape and sexual assault. One design is to be an optimal design identified by the CNSTAT panel and the other will be similar to designs used in the public health approach for measuring rape and sexual assault. Estimates from these two designs will be compared to data from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS).

### Optimal Design

- Address-based sample frame
- Initial household contact, rostering, and respondent selection using CAPI
- Individual interviewing using ACASI
- 1 adult female interviewed per household
- 12-month reference period
- Explicit cueing with two-stage cueing and crime classification
- Crime classification scheme that allows for the unfounding of out-of-scope incidents

### Comparison Design

- Dual frame RDD with cell phone component
- Centralized CATI for all components of data collection
- 1 adult female per household
- 12-month reference period
- Explicit cueing with one-stage cueing and crime classification

### Up to 10,000 Interviews for Each Mode Will Be Conducted in the Following 5 MSAs

- New York-Northern New Jersey-Long Island, NY-NJ-PA
- Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana, CA
- Miami-Fort Lauderdale-Pompano Beach, FL
- Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington, TX
- Phoenix-Mesa-Glendale, AZ

Additional sample design considerations include oversampling of young women, use of college student listings, oversampling high crime areas, and seeding the sample with known victims of rape and sexual assault.

### Timeline

National Research Council Committee on National Statistics	
Project length is 21 months	
July 2011	Project start date
December 8-9, 2011	First meeting of the panel
June 5-7, 2012	Second meeting of the panel
August 27-28, 2012	Third meeting of the panel
Expected December 2012	Fourth meeting of the panel
Expected Spring 2013	Final report of the Panel delivered to National Academies Press

Panel meetings have consisted of both open and closed sessions. BJS and Westat staff have participated in the open sessions meetings.

### Timeline

Methodological Research to Support the National Crime Victimization Survey: Self-Report Data on Rape and Sexual Assault—Pilot Test Westat	
Project length is 30 months	
October 2011	Project start date
January–October 2012	Methodological development
November 2012	Exploratory and cognitive interviewing
March 2013	Feasibility test
November 2013–February 2014	Pilot test data collection
September 2014	Project summary and findings