

The Prevalence of Rape in the United States

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Introduction

There is a long history of controversy over statistics on the prevalence of rape and other forms of sexual violence in the U.S. The heart of the controversy revolves around the question “How *big* of a problem is sexual violence?” Those who use faulty data or faulty interpretations of accurate data either to minimize or to exaggerate or unduly maximize the social and public health epidemic of sexual violence do a great and cruel disservice to its victims. We can only provide victims appropriate social, emotional, legal and medical support when we as a culture understand the breadth of the problem in our midst. For this reason, the controversy over the prevalence of rape must be resolved. And it can only be resolved when we use sound data, reported and interpreted accurately.

In any attempt to measure something scientifically, several issues must be addressed. Chief among them are, a) what, specifically is being measured; and b) is the measurement we’re using *reliable* (repeating the measure will yield the same results) and is it *valid* (the measurement measures what it is supposed to be measuring.)

There is a range of acts that comprise sexual violence, yet we have no culturally or legally accepted agreement on a single definition. Therefore, different statistics on the prevalence of rape and other forms of sexual violence are used by different people, often without clearly indicating what forms of violence were measured. Our culture is still wrestling with the question of what is “real” rape, and “real” sexual violence. Different groups or people define the problem differently, using different data based on their definitions of sexual violence and rape.

Compounding the issue, we know that methodological factors in how we measure the prevalence of sexual violence – however it is defined – make some statistics scientifically unreliable and invalid. Additionally, many people who use statistics simply mis-speak when they cite the data. This occurs, for example, when someone looks at data that show there were 100 *incidents* of rape in a period, and says “100 *people* were raped.”

Our goal is to publicize the reliable and valid data that exist, to explain clearly what the data mean, and to encourage others to use these statistics correctly. Ours is a conservative estimation of the scope and scale of sexual violence in America. As such, the data that follow should be reviewed with this important fact in mind: Rape and all forms of sexual violence remain a vastly underreported crime in this country. Therefore what is reported here does not reflect the full scope of the problem.

Finally, we ask readers to remember that behind the data on sexual violence are the individuals whose trauma and testimony inform our work. Their stories make these numbers not only heartbreaking, but humbling, reminding us of the important work we have to do to end sexual violence.

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Summary of Rape Prevalence Statistics

Definitions

This fact sheet only focuses on rape, not the broader and more encompassing experiences that constitute sexual violence. The statistics we cite come from studies that define rape as forcible penetration. We do this because this is the term that is most clearly defined in our country. Generally speaking, “rape” is defined from a legal standpoint as forcible penetration by a penis or object where there is no consent. However, it is important to note that there are variations in the definition of rape from state to state largely around what constitutes “force” and “consent”.

We must emphasize that “forcible penetration” is not the only legal definition of rape. There are other legal definitions of rape, including statutory rape, which vary from state to state. There are also many research definitions of “rape” that vary from study to study.

Because many other aspects of sexual violence have fewer legal and “real” agreed-to definitions, studies that measure these forms of sexual violence must be used with caution: users must carefully consider how the variable was defined and measured. Some of those forms of sexual violence include unwanted sexual touching; forced sexual contact or activities other than sexual intercourse; and unwanted exposure to sexual activities as a forced participant or observer.

We do not suggest that only forcible penetration is “real rape,” or the only form of real and devastating sexual violence. However, this most conservative definition provides us with a uniform and consistent definition of the problem, enabling comparisons to be made across time and studies and generating greater confidence in the validity of the findings.

We are certain that the statistics we cite here, though reliable and valid, measure only a part of the full problem of sexual violence. How big a part of the problem yet remains to be soundly measured.

This fact sheet cites statistics primarily on the prevalence of rape. We include only one figure on incidence. “Prevalence” refers to the number of people who are victims of rape. “Incidence” refers to the number of rapes (incidents) that occur. The distinction is critical, because an individual victim may be raped multiple times in a lifetime, or over any time period. The incidence of rapes in this country is higher than the prevalence.

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The Prevalence of Rape Among Women

A recent national household survey, the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), reported 12.3% of American women 18 and older have experienced a completed forced rape in their lifetime.ⁱ This translates to 14.6 million women who are living with the consequences of forced rape.

These latest study findings are consistent with previous findings from four national household surveys spanning a period of 15 years that showed between 1 and 6 (16%) and 1 in 8 (13%) women were forcibly raped in their lifetime.ⁱⁱ Together, these five studies provide strong indication of the stability of rape prevalence over time.

The Number (Incidence) of Rapes Among Women in a Year

Approximately 620,000 women 18 years and older were forcibly raped in 2010.ⁱⁱⁱ This number is an underestimate of the total number of females sexually assaulted and raped each year for a number of reasons. Among them are the lack of inclusion of many women at high risk of sexual assault who have no access to telephones, such as women who are homeless, in hospitals, nursing homes or mental health institutions or other controlled environments like jail or residential treatment. Additionally the survey did not include girls under the age of 18.

The Prevalence of Rape Among Men

Between 1 in 47 men (2%) and 1 in 71 men (1.4%) of men reported being raped *within their lifetime*.^{iv}

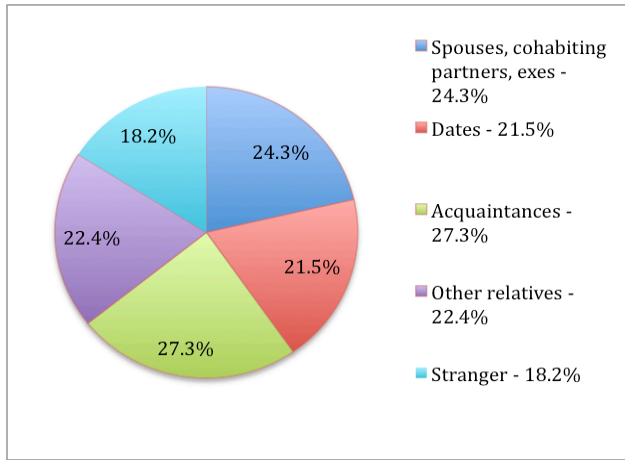
Children

Recent studies report that from 7% - 13% of adult women and 2% - 3% of adult men report that they experienced forced sexual assault before the age of 18. Please note that the framework for these statistics is *sexual assault*, which is a broader range of experiences than rape (forced penetration.)^v

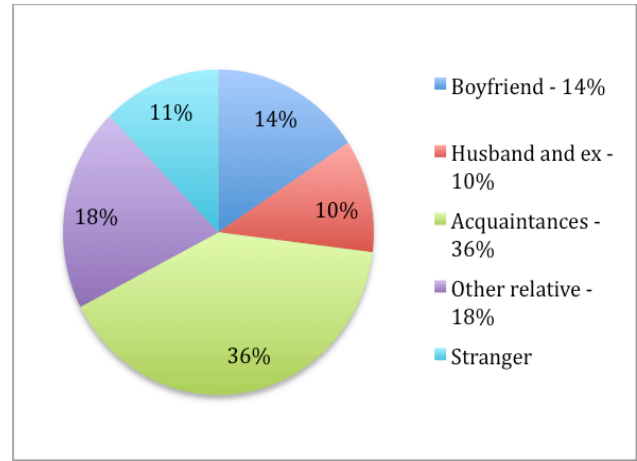
Relationships Between Rapist and Victim

Most frequently rapes are committed by acquaintances of the victim. Rapes by a stranger account for between 11% - 18% of rapes, with the most recent national study – the NISVS – finding that 13.8% of rapes and sexual assaults were committed by strangers to the victim. The figures below provide more specific information about the relationship of the victim to the perpetrator, defining the relationships in slightly different ways.

NWAVS^{vi}



Kilpatrick community sample^{vii}



Reporting to Police

Only between 16% and 19% of rapes are reported to the police.^{viii}

Incidence of False Reporting

2% - 8% of police reports of rape are proven false. These data come from methodologically rigorous research, applying consistent definitions for a false report.^{ix}

Notes and Comments

Definitions. This fact sheet primarily focuses on rape, which is defined as forcible penetration. The term sexual assault is also used in this fact sheet. “Sexual assault” incorporates a broader range of sexual violence whose definitions vary from study to study. It is important to note specific terms and definitions between studies vary, making comparisons and prevalence estimates difficult.

Prevalence reports. The time frame used to examine rape prevalence will impact estimates. Lifetime prevalence rates are good indicators of actual prevalence because they include rapes experienced in childhood.

Problematic estimates of rape. The Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) compiles reports made to law enforcement agencies and are often used by the media to estimate rape prevalence. Given that only a small proportion of rapes are ever actually reported to the police, reports to police agencies are not an accurate reflection of rape prevalence. In addition, the UCR uses a confusing and narrow definition of rape and participation is voluntary for each police department. Others allege that some police departments remove “unfounded cases” from the report lists, when they should only be removing demonstratively false cases.

Another problematic estimate of rape is that from the U.S. Department of Justice National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). These results generally provide far lower estimates for the annual prevalence of rape (the number of women raped in one year). They also report far higher rates of reporting to police than other methodologically sound studies.

In the past, this survey asked participants whether or not they were raped within the last 12 months, and definitions were only provided if the respondent asked for them. Recently research procedures were amended, making comparisons from year-to-year now impossible.

An example of how methodology impacts results: One researcher asked one sample of college students using the NCVS methodology and another sample using standard social science methodology and found the prevalence rates to be 11 times higher using the latter methodology compared to the NCVS.^x

Race and ethnicity. Estimates of rape prevalence were not reported by race or ethnicity because data is widely varying and inconclusive at this time. The NISVS 2010 study summarizes findings for sexual assault (completed and attempted forced penetration and alcohol or drug facilitated penetration) as follows: “(a)pproximately 1 in 5 Black (22.0%) and White (18.8%) non-Hispanic women, and 1 in 7 Hispanic women (14.6%) in the United States have experienced rape at some point in their lives. More than one-quarter of women (26.9%) who identified as American Indian or as Alaska Native and 1 in 3 women (33.5%) who identified as multiracial non-Hispanic reported rape victimization in their lifetime.”

Research limitations. Much research in the past has relied upon telephone surveys, which create undercounts for several reasons. One reason is that people may be reluctant to report their victimization experience to researchers, particularly one unknown to the victim or just introduced over the phone. Another reason for undercounts with telephone surveys is that many women at risk do not have telephones or cannot be reached by telephone (homeless women, women in jails and prisons, women in drug treatment facilities). Women and men in these environments are at higher risk of sexual assault, and so their exclusion from the research is particularly notable. Further, until recently, cell phone numbers were not accessible to researchers.

Overestimating rates of rape. It is common to see the statistic that 1-in-3 women will be raped over the course of her life time, This finding is not supported by reliable data. Often the 1-in-3 life time figure is further misstated to be a 1-in-3 prevalence within time in college. The exact origin of this 1-in-3 statistic cannot be traced. The first prevalence study of rape

on college campuses by Mary Koss found 27.5% of women reporting experiencing forced or attempted rape since the age of 14, which might have been rounded up to 1-in-3. Subsequently, Koss re-analyzed her data, removing data from an ambiguous question, and found a 20% prevalence rate of rape since age 14.^{xi}

ⁱ Black, M., Basile, K. Breiding, M., Smith, S., Walters, M., Merrick, M., Chen, J., & Stevens, M. (2011). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010 Summary Report. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (Survey data collected in 2010).

ⁱⁱ Kilpatrick, D., Edmunds, C., & Seymour. (1992). A. Rape in America: A Report to the Nation. Arlington, VA: National Victim Center. (Survey data collected in 1991); Tjaden, P. & Thoennes, N. (2000). Full Report of the Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence against Women. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice. (Survey data collected in 1995); Basile, K., Chen, J., Black, M., & Saltzman, L. (2007). Prevalence and Characteristics of Sexual Violence Victimization among U.S. Adults, 2001-2003. *Violence and Victims*, 22, 4, 437-448. (Survey data collected from July 2001 through February 2003); Kilpatrick, D., Resnick, H., Ruggiero, K., Conoscenti, L., & McCaluley, J. (2007). Drug-facilitated, Incapacitated, and Forcible Rape: A National Study. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice. (Survey data collected in 2006).

ⁱⁱⁱ Black, M., Basile, K. Breiding, M., Smith, S., Walters, M., Merrick, M., Chen, J., & Stevens, M. (2011). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010 Summary Report. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

^{iv} Basile, K., Chen, J., Black, M., & Saltzman, L. (2007). Prevalence and Characteristics of Sexual Violence Victimization among U.S. Adults, 2001-2003. *Violence and Victims*, 22, 4, 437-448; Black, M., Basile, K. Breiding, M., Smith, S., Walters, M., Merrick, M., Chen, J., & Stevens, M. (2011). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010 Summary Report. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Tjaden, P. & Thoennes, N. (2000). Full Report of the Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence against Women. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice.

^v Laumann, E., Gangnon, J., Michael, R., & Michaels, S. (1994). The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press; Kilpatrick, D., Saunders, B., & Smith, D. (2003). Youth Victimization: Prevalence and Implications. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice; Tjaden, P. & Thoennes, N. (2000). Full Report of the Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence against Women. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice.

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^{vii} Kilpatrick, D., Resnick, H., Ruggiero, K., Conoscenti, L., & McCaluley, J. (2007). Drug-facilitated, Incapacitated, and Forcible Rape: A National Study. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice.

^{viii} Kilpatrick, D., Edmunds, C., & Seymour. (1992). A. Rape in America: A Report to the Nation. Arlington, VA: National Victim Center; Tjaden, P. & Thoennes, N. (2000). Full Report of the Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence against Women. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice; Basile, K., Chen, J., Black, M., & Saltzman, L. (2007). Prevalence and Characteristics of Sexual Violence Victimization among U.S. Adults, 2001-2003. *Violence and Victims*, 22, 4, 437-448; Kilpatrick, D., Resnick, H., Ruggiero, K., Conoscenti, L., & McCaluley, J. (2007). Drug-facilitated, Incapacitated, and Forcible Rape: A National Study. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice..

^{ix} Lonsway, K., Archambault, J., & Lisak, D. (2009). False Reports: Moving the Issue to Successfully Investigate and Prosecute Non-Stranger Sexual Assault. The Voice, (Newsletter of APRI), 3, 1, http://www.ndaa.org/publications/newsletters/the_voice_contents.html.

^x Fisher, B., Cullen, F., & Turner, M. (2000). The Sexual Victimization of College Women. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice.

^{xi} Koss, M. & Cook, S. (1993). Facing the Facts: Date and Acquaintance Rape are Significant Problems for Women. In Gelles, R. & Loseke, D. (Eds.). Current Controversies on Family Violence, (pp. 104-119). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications; Koss, M., Gidycz, C., & Wisniewski, N. (1987). The Scope of Rape: Incidence and Prevalence of Sexual Aggression and Victimization in a National Sample of Higher Education Students. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 55, 2, 162-170.

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