

The Prevalence of Rape in the United States

Updated and Expanded May 24, 2016

Introduction

There is a long history of controversy over 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 data either to minimize or to exaggerate the problem do a great and cruel disservice to victims. We can only provide victims appropriate social, emotional, legal and medical support when we, as a society, fully and accurately acknowledge the breadth of the problem. For this reason, the controversy over the prevalence of rape must be addressed through the use of sound data that is accurately reported and interpreted.

There is a range of acts that comprise sexual violence, yet we have no culturally or legally accepted agreement on a single definition. Our culture is still wrestling with the question of what is “real” rape, and “real” sexual violence. Thus, different people define the problem differently, using different data based on their own definitions of sexual violence and rape. This is one reason why prevalence estimates of rape and other forms of sexual violence vary.

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 misspeak 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 work toward publicizing the most reliable and valid data that exist to date, to clearly define what is being measured, and to encourage others to use these statistics correctly. This paper provides information for 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 vastly underreported crimes 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 that we must continue the important work 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 cited here use the narrow definition of rape as forcible penetration. We do this because this is the term most clearly defined in our country. Generally speaking, “rape” has been 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.

In fact, in 2012 the FBI updated its definition of rape from “The carnal knowledge of a female forcibly and against her will” to “Penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim.” Newer studies are more likely to be more inclusive, whereas relying on Uniform Crime Reports, and other law enforcement data prior to 2012 will be more restrictive in who is considered a rape victim.

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. “Prevalence” refers to the number of people who have experienced 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 Lifetime Prevalence of Rape Among Women

A 2010 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 over 14.6 million women 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 almost 20 years that showed relatively stable rape prevalence rates among women:

12.6% (NWS 1992);
14.8% (NVAW 2000);
10.6% (ICARIS-2 Basile et al., 2007);
16.4% (NIJ General Population study, Kilpatrick et al., 2007)ⁱⁱ

The Lifetime Prevalence of Drug Facilitated Rape

Further, eight percent of women in the U.S. experienced alcohol/drug-facilitated rape (defined as completed penetration when the victim “was drunk, high, drugged, or passed out and unable to consent.”)ⁱⁱⁱ

The Prevalence of Rape Among Women in a Year

Approximately 620,000 women 18 years and older were forcibly raped and 781,000 women 18 years and older experienced alcohol/drug-facilitated rape in 2010.^{iv} 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*.^v

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.)^{vi} Another way to consider sexual violence that children experience is to examine the women and men who reported lifetime experiences of rape. One study found that of those who experienced rape, 42.2% of women were raped for the first time before they were 18 years old and 27.8% of men were raped for the first time before they were 11 years old.^{vii}

The Prevalence of Campus Rape

Three research teams have found annual prevalence of rape among college students of around 3% in studies from 2000-2007.^{viii} A 2016 major Department of Justice-funded survey of 23,000 undergraduates at nine schools found an average of 10.3% of students had experienced a completed rape during the 2014-15 academic year, from a low of 4.2% at one school to a high of 20% at another school.^{ix}

Relationships Between Rapist and Victim

Far fewer women are raped by a stranger than by someone known to them. Across several studies, estimates were that between 11 and 19 percent of victims were raped by someone who was a stranger to them.^x The tables below provide more specific information about the relationship of the victim to the perpetrator, defining the relationships in somewhat different ways. In NISVS, for example, first dates are classified as “acquaintances.” It is not clear how Kilpatrick et al. (2007) categorized first, or other “dates.”

NISVS, 2010 ^{xi}	Current or former partner	Acquaintance	Family member	Person of authority	Stranger
Attempted or Completed Forced Penetration	52.5%	40.8%	12.5%	2.5%	13.8%
Alcohol/drug facilitated penetration	43%	50.4%	6.6%	--	9.6%

Kilpatrick et al., (2007) ^{xii}	(Ex) Husband	Boy-friend	(Step) Father	Other Relative	Friend	Classmate	Other non-relative	Stranger
Community sample								
Completed forced penetration	10%	14%	11%	18%	12%	2%	22%	11%
Completed alcohol/drug facilitated	3%	13%	1%	4%	31%	6%	21%	19%

College sample								
Completed forced penetration	3%	26%	4%	15%	19%	10%	15%	6%
Completed alcohol/drug facilitated	0%	9%	2%	1%	40%	21%	11%	17%

Incidence of Reporting to Police

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

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.^{xiv}

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.^{xv}

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.^{xvi}

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