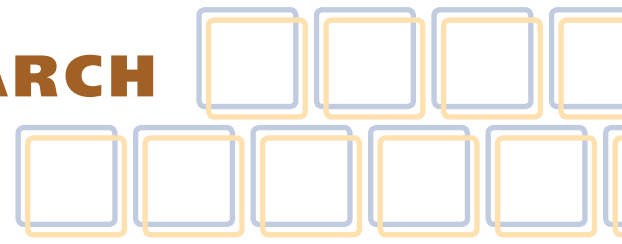




SOMAPI RESEARCH BRIEF

SEX OFFENDER MANAGEMENT ASSESSMENT AND PLANNING INITIATIVE

Luis C.deBaca, Director • July 2015



Incidence and Prevalence of Sexual Offending (Part I)

by Jane Wiseman

Introduction

It is extremely difficult to estimate the actual number of sex crimes committed because of low levels of reporting. Sex crimes are not only often unreported, they are often unseen by anyone other than the victim and perpetrator. Nevertheless, statistics on the incidence and prevalence of sex crimes, as well as trend data, can provide important insight into the nature and extent of sexual violence that policymakers and practitioners can use to design and deliver more effective prevention and intervention strategies.

This brief addresses the incidence and prevalence of sexual offending. It summarizes what is scientifically known about the topic and identifies policy implications, knowledge gaps, and unresolved controversies that emerge from the extant research and that might serve as a catalyst for future empirical study.

Summary of Research Findings

Creating a complete and accurate accounting of the extent of sexual offending is challenging. First, there is no single definition of sexual offending. Statutory definitions of sex offenses differ from jurisdiction to jurisdiction; a sex crime committed in one state might not be classified as a sex crime in an adjacent state. Comparing recorded crime and victimization statistics is also challenging due to the variety of reference periods, as some sources measure lifetime victimization while others measure annual or college semester victimization. Finally, rate comparison can be problematic given the different ways in which the sample being studied is measured. With these challenges in mind, following is a review of key data sources and what they reveal about the incidence and prevalence of sexual offending.

About SOMAPI

In 2011, the SMART Office began work on the Sex Offender Management Assessment and Planning Initiative (SOMAPI), a project designed to assess the state of research and practice in sex offender management. As part of the effort, the SMART Office contracted with the National Criminal Justice Association (NCJA) and a team of subject-matter experts to review the literature on sexual offending and sex offender management and develop summaries of the research for dissemination to the field. These summaries are available online at <http://smart.gov/SOMAPI/index.html>.

A national inventory of sex offender management professionals also was conducted in 2011 to gain insight about promising practices and pressing needs in the field. Finally, a Discussion Forum involving national experts was held in 2012 for the purpose of reviewing the research summaries and inventory results and refining what is currently known about sex offender management.

Based on the work carried out under SOMAPI, the SMART Office has published a series of Research Briefs, each focusing on a topic covered in the sexual offending and sex offender management literature review. Each brief is designed to get key findings from the literature review into the hands of policymakers and practitioners. Overall, the briefs are intended to advance the ongoing dialogue related to effective interventions for sexual offenders and provide policymakers and practitioners with trustworthy, up-to-date information they can use to identify what works to combat sexual offending and prevent sexual victimization.



Uniform Crime Report

The FBI compiles its Uniform Crime Report (UCR) from data submitted by law enforcement agencies across the Nation. The UCR indicates that 88,097 forcible rapes were reported to law enforcement in 2009, a rate of 28.7 crimes per 100,000 inhabitants of the United States (FBI, 2009). The key strength of the UCR is that it is a consistently collected source of data that covers most of the Nation. The key weakness of the UCR for purposes of assessing sexual offending is that the UCR crime incident data reflect only crimes reported to police and this type of crime frequently is not reported to police.

National Crime Victimization Survey

The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) is a nationally representative survey of approximately 42,000 households, and all individuals over age 12 in the household are interviewed. Based on the NCVS data, an estimated 243,800 rape/sexual assault victimizations occurred in the United States in 2011, a rate of 0.9 victimizations per 1,000 persons age 12 and over (Truman & Planty, 2012). Two key strengths of the NCVS are that it measures unreported victimization incidents as well as victimizations reported to police, and that these data are collected and reported annually. A weakness with the NCVS is that, because it is a crime victimization survey, some respondents may not report victimizations that they do not personally label as a crime, such as unwanted sexual contact by an acquaintance. This may lead to an undercount of sex crimes.

National Violence Against Women Survey

The National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS) was administered in the mid-1990s to assess the extent of violence against women in the United States. The NVAWS found that 17.6 percent of women and 0.3 percent of men who responded to the survey had been victims of rape at some time in their life. Based on this finding, the authors estimate that almost 18 million women and almost 3 million men in the United States have been raped (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). The key strength of the NVAWS is that it was a nationally representative sample of both men and women. A second key strength of this study was the design—respondents were asked a series of questions (referred to as a scale) about their experiences of sexual assault

rather than being asked yes/no questions. The key weakness of the NVAWS is that it was conducted 15 years ago, and the findings may or may not reflect the experiences of women and men today.

National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS)

The NISVS is an ongoing, annual, nationally representative telephone survey that began collecting information about sexual violence, stalking victimization, and intimate partner violence among adult women and men ages 18 and older in the United States in 2010. The 2010 survey found that nearly 1 in 5 women (18.3%) and 1 in 71 men (1.4%) in the United States have been raped in their lifetime (Black et al., 2011). Key strengths of the NISVS are its use of a public health approach, its exclusive focus of sexual violence, the fact that it assesses 60 different violent behaviors, its coverage of more than select populations (such as college students), and its use of both cell phone and landline phone samples. The NISVS also collects information on forms of sexual violence that have not been measured in a national survey before. The weakness of the NISVS is that it relies on self-reports of victimization experiences.

National College Women Sexual Victimization Study

The National College Women Sexual Victimization Study (NCWSV) was conducted using a telephone survey of a randomly selected national sample of women attending 2- or 4-year colleges during the fall semester of 1996 (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000). Fisher and colleagues found that 2.8 percent of college women who responded to the survey had experienced either a completed or an attempted rape during the semester. Of those who reported rape, 23 percent reported multiple rapes. The key strengths of the NCWSV are the sample size and the fact the sample of colleges was a probability sample proportionate to female student enrollment and college location (urban, suburban, and rural) (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000). A key weakness of this study is that it addresses a narrow population—women attending college. Another weakness is that comparisons to other studies are difficult because the reference period is 7 months rather than 12 months and lifetime victimization is not measured (Cook et al., 2011).



2008). A weakness is that this study is not conducted annually. NISMART-2 was conducted only in 1999 and NISMART-1 was conducted only in 1988, making comparison between the two difficult.

National Women's Study

The National Women's Study (NWS) is a 3-year longitudinal study of a national probability sample of adult women in the United States age 18 and older. The results indicated that 13 percent of women reported being victims of at least one completed rape in their lifetime. Based on this, it was estimated that 12.1 million women in the United States have been victims of one forcible rape in their lifetime (NVC & CVRATC, 1992). The strength of this study was the probability sampling process that created greater representation in the sample. In addition, the longitudinal nature of the study allowed for variation in response over three interviews in a 2-year period. One weakness is that a telephone survey is limited to those who live in households with a phone; therefore, those without phones were not represented in the sample. In addition, this survey excluded females under age 18 and males from the survey; therefore, it is only valid for adult women in the United States.

Trend Data

Historical data on the incidence of sexual assault can provide important insight about trends over time. Data from law enforcement as well as victimization surveys suggest that sexual assaults, much like other types of crime, have substantially declined over the past 10 to 20 years. According to the FBI, the number of forcible rapes reported to the police fell 14 percent between 1990 and 2009, from 102,555 to 88,097. The number of rapes reported to police per 100,000 U.S. residents also fell during that time (from 41.1 to 28.7), a decline of 30 percent (FBI, 2009). Data on sexual assault victimization surveys follow a similar pattern. According to NCVS, the number of rape/sexual assault victimizations for those age 12 and older in the United States fell by more than 30 percent between 2002 and 2011, dropping from 349,810 to 243,800 over the 9-year period. Overall, the estimated number of rape/sexual assault victimizations fell by more than one-third in 2011 (from about 383,000 in 1990 to 243,800) (Rennison, 2000; Truman & Planty, 2012).

Underreporting of Sex Crimes

One of the greatest challenges to developing an accurate estimate of the incidence and prevalence of sexual offending is the fact that not every victim will disclose the incident to law enforcement; also, many will not disclose the incident to a researcher during a survey. Research has clearly demonstrated that many sex offenses are never reported to authorities. For example, NCVS data suggest that only about 1 in 4 rapes or sexual assaults have been reported to police over the past 15 years, with some year-to-year fluctuations (Bachman, 1998; Truman & Planty, 2012). In addition, Tjaden and Thoennes (2006) found that only 19 percent of women and 13 percent of men who were raped since their 18th birthday reported the rape to the police. Finally, the results of the NWS indicate that 84 percent of victims did not report the rape to the police (NVC & CVRATC, 1992).

Research Limitations and Future Needs

Although increased scholarly attention has been paid to sexual victimization and victimization surveys in the past two decades, and notable improvements regarding the reporting of sexual assault crimes have recently been made in the national UCR program, much remains to be done to develop standard definitions of sex crimes and to measure victimization in a way that elicits self-report of a traumatic experience many victims may choose not to discuss. What is known about victims and offenders is based on an incomplete picture of the true extent of victimization. Studies of victims rely on self-report, resulting in dramatic undercounts of victimization. What is known to date is that sexual victimization is far more common than existing sources indicate and that more needs to be done to develop a credible literature on the extent, causes, and consequences of sexual victimization.

With so many inconsistencies and uncertainties in the available data, identifying the most important knowledge gaps and priorities for future research is a daunting task. Nevertheless, to improve our understanding of the incidence and prevalence of sexual offending, several of the most pressing issues that warrant examination include the victim's perception of the crime, the wording of questions, prevention, and vulnerable populations, among others.



Tjaden, P., & Thoennes, N. (2006). *Extent, Nature, and Consequences of Rape Victimization: Findings From the National Violence Against Women Survey*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice.

Truman, J.L., & Planty, M. (2012). *Criminal Victimization, 2011*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children’s Bureau. (2010). *Child Maltreatment 2009*. Retrieved from: <http://archive.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs/cm09/cm09.pdf>

This research brief was produced by the National Criminal Justice Association under grant number 2010-DB-BX-K086, awarded by the Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking (SMART), Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this research brief are those of the author(s) and contributors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the SMART Office or the U.S. Department of Justice.

ABOUT SMART

The Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006 authorized the establishment of the Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking (SMART) Office within OJP. SMART is responsible for assisting with implementation of the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (SORNA), and also for providing assistance to criminal justice professionals across the entire spectrum of sex offender management activities needed to ensure public safety.