**How Much Domestic Violence Is There? We Don’t Know. Here’s Why. And Here’s How to Improve It**

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In May 2023, the White House released the U.S. National Plan to End Gender-Based Violence. While the Plan was far reaching, it identified research and data as an important pillar. In so doing, the Plan recognized that preserving different and complementary agency approaches to gender-based violence questions is critical to capturing a full and accurate picture of such violence in the United States. At the same time, the Plan also highlighted the need to expand the scope of data to improve inclusion of historically marginalized and undeserved communities as well as the need to better disaggregate data in order to be better able to report upon, understand, and design policy efforts on intersectional characteristics (e.g., race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, and disability)—a point also made by the Inter-Agency Working Group on Criminal Justice Statistics in their report to President Biden on ‘Equity and Law Enforcement Data Collection, Use, and Transparency’ (led by Dr. Piquero).

While there has been much research and attention given to domestic/intimate partner violence, especially in the 1980s as national organizations placed the issue in the spotlight as well as the documented reports concerning increases in domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns—as documented by the Council on Criminal Justice and other researchers, this crime type remains one of the most difficult and perplexing to capture, in large part because of the dual challenges of (1) definitional issues as to what constitutes domestic violence, (2) crime reporting/under-reporting and (3) different reporting persons, avenues, and agencies. As a result, it has been very difficult to obtain a precise estimate of the prevalence of domestic violence, which undermines policy options and responses. Given that documenting and understanding the extent and seriousness of violence against women “remains a major question for the field” (Gelles, 2000, p. 785). Attending to this problem is important for the U.S. to better improve its data infrastructure.

Figure 1 shows the different reporting mechanisms that are available to victims/survivors of domestic and/or intimate partner violence and how the same underlying victimization experience may be documented in one or more of the data sources – or perhaps not even at all. As can be seen, there are a number of different reporting avenues and agencies to which domestic violence can be reported to (e.g., local and national hotlines, shelters, social service agencies, pastors, police agencies, victimization surveys, university offices, doctor’s offices, emergency rooms), which underscores the extent to which capturing a true prevalence, both in general and then across demographic and other categories, is both difficult but important to arrive at.

After an extensive scoping review, we arrived at the conclusion that there are only two, regularly reported federal statistical data collections that permit measuring and estimating domestic violence, the Bureau of Justice Statistics National Crime Victimization Survey, which is a survey of over 200,000 persons in over 100,000 households, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation crime statistics reporting program, which amass incidents and arrests from the nation’s law enforcement agencies.

This report seeks to accomplish two objectives, while acknowledging issues surrounding reporting and disaggregated data concerns: (1) show how reliance on certain data sources may distort the prevalence of domestic and/or intimate partner violence over time; and (2) discusses the implications of these challenges for documenting crime trends over time. In so doing, the report will engage in a few approaches to better estimate such prevalence estimates more accurately. One approach would be to estimates bounds, or confidence intervals, around estimates from each of the reporting systems and potentially use the lowest and highest numbers to form an overall estimate. This could also include not just the estimated prevalence but potentially provide preliminary estimates across certain victim characteristics for which data are available.

Definition & Measurement

Measuring domestic violence depends on both the definition of domestic violence as well as how incidence and prevalence (via clinical, official, or self-reported estimates) are measured (Gelles, 2000, p.786). As would be expected, answers to the second question relies on the former—how domestic violence is defined. Unfortunately, it has been difficult to attain consensus among researchers, practitioners, and even policymakers as to what constitutes domestic violence. Questions remains regarding physical versus emotional violence, degree of severity, the sex/gender of both the offender and the victim/survivor, and so forth. Some reporting systems do not define domestic violence and instead just list the term, while the others rely on a law enforcement coding decision.

Official Estimates from the FBI

Since 1930, law enforcement agencies have voluntarily provided crime statistics through the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program to the FBI. Known as the summary reporting system, the crime data collection captured basic information on the number of crimes and arrests for seven part one offenses and a larger number of part two offenses. Recognizing that very little incident-based information had been captured with that summary data collection system and that there were a wider array of offenses that needed to be measured to provide a more complete national picture of crime in the United States, on January 1, 2021 the FBI sunsetted the summary reporting system and moved to the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS), which includes all of the individual offenses and arrests that were part of an incident, and also included information about the victim, offender, property involved, and arrestees. Because transition to the more expansive but complex reporting system had been slow and only about two-thirds of agencies reported NIBRS data, for the initial NIBRS release in fall 2022 (which included data from calendar year 2021), the FBI worked with BJS to also include estimates for the crime data. And for the 2022 data year (for which data were released in fall 2023), the FBI decided to also accept summary reporting data submission for the non-transitioned agencies in order to provide more nationally representative data.

Starting in 2019, the FBI UCR Program (2019) began collecting data about domestic and family violence in accordance with the following definition:

Domestic and Family Violence—The use, attempted use, or threatened use of physical

force of a weapon; or the use of coercion or intimidation; or committing a crime against

property by a current or former spouse, parent, or guardian of the victim; a person with

whom the victim shares a child in common; a person who is or has been in a social

relationship of a romantic or intimate nature with the victim; a person who is cohabiting

with or has cohabited with the victim as a spouse, parent, or guardian; or by a person

who is or has been similarly situated to a spouse, parent, or guardian of the victim.

Specific changes within NIBRS to pinpoint such occurrences included replacing the data value of

Lover’s Quarrel with Domestic Violence as a circumstance for murder and aggravated assault

offenses. In addition to other data values that specify the relationship of victims to their

offenders, an additional value for Ex-relationship was added.

Self-Reported Survey Estimates

Within the Bureau of Justice Statistics’ National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) administered in consultation with the Census Bureau, is a nationally representative sample of several hundred thousands of persons age 12 and older within over one hundred thousand households who respond about their victimization experiences. Within the NCVS, domestic violence is defined as attacks, threatened attack, and/or unwanted sexual activity by someone they know, such as a relative or family member. Specific questions within the NCVS cover aggravated assault and assault as well as rape/sexual assault (<https://ncvs.bjs.ojp.gov/terms#terms>). For aggravated assault, these would include an attack or attempted attack with a weapon, regardless of whether the victim is injured, or an attack without a weapon when serious injury results. For assault, these would include the threat, attempt, or intentional infliction of bodily injury. Assault may be classified as aggravated or simple. Excludes rape, attempted rape, sexual assault, robbery, and attempted robbery. The severity of assault ranges from minor threats to near fatal incidents. For rape, this would include unlawful penetration of a person against the will of the victim, with use or threatened use of force, or attempting such an act. Includes psychological coercion and physical force. Forced sexual intercourse means vaginal, anal, or oral penetration by the offender. Also includes incidents where penetration is from a foreign object, such as a bottle. Includes male and female victims, and heterosexual and same-sex rape. Attempted rape includes verbal threats of rape. Rape and sexual assault are combined into one victimization measure. For sexual assault, this would encompass a wide range of victimizations, separate from rape or attempted rape. Includes attacks or attempted attacks generally involving unwanted sexual contact between victim and offender, with or without force. Includes grabbing or fondling and verbal threats. Rape and sexual assault are combined into one victimization measure. The NCVS has administered stalking supplements to its NCVS but has not done so recently.

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics’ (2023) Criminal Victimization 2022 report, there were an estimated number of 1,370,440 domestic violence incidents (or a rate of 4.9 per 1,000)[[1]](#footnote-1) as well as an estimated number of 951,930 intimate partner violence incidents (or a rate of 3.4 per 1,000)[[2]](#footnote-2) reported in 2022. Both of these numbers and rates were the highest over the five-year period covered in the report. It is also noteworthy that 53.8% of domestic violence victimizations and 51.5% of intimate partner violence victimizations were reported to the police (both slightly higher than 2021 figures; see Table 4). Another way to look at these estimates is that almost half of domestic violence and intimate partner violence victimizations are not reported to law enforcement and hence would not show up in police statistics, and consequently the annual estimates published by the FBI. (Note: When converted to rates per 1,000 persons, BJS reports that 2.6 and 1.7 (per 1,000 persons) of domestic violence and intimate partner violence victimizations were reported to the police in 2022 (see Table 6).[[3]](#footnote-3)

Within the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) implemented through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and administered by the Centers for Disease Control, a wider range of behaviors tapping into domestic violence are considered including physical and non-physical sexual and intimate partner violence such as verbal/online sexual harassment, stalking, and psychological aggression. These acts measure both lifetime and past-12 month prevalence of various acts of violence and harassment through telephone surveys.

According to the latest NISVS report published in 2022 covering data from the 2016/2017 survey (Basile et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2022), there were a number of different estimates provided by victimization type, for both males and females, and for past-12 month and lifetime timepoints. With respect to stalking, lifetime prevalence estimates for women and men were 31% and 16%, respectively, while past 12-month estimates were 6.9% and 4.1%, respectively. Turning to sexual coercion, 58% of female victims reported this type of perpetration by an intimate partner, 41% by an acquaintance, 9% by a family member, and 4.6% by a brief encounter. Among males, 49% were victimized by an acquaintance or an intimate partner (45.8%) and5.3% by a family member. With respect to unwanted sexual contact, more than half of females reported the perpetrator was an acquaintance, 22.9% was a family member, and 16.8% was by an intimate partner. Among male victims of unwanted sexual contact, 62.4% reported their perpetrator to be an acquaintance followed by 9.2% being an intimate partner and 8.3% being a family member.

One thing to note is that while both the NCVS and the NISVS are self-report (victimization) surveys, they tap different types of victimization experiences, using different questions, reporting periods, and survey respondents. Thus, it should not be a surprise as to why estimates emerging from both sets of self-report surveys point to different domestic violence estimates.

Methodology

Based on our review of potential data sources to estimate spatial and temporal trends in domestic violence, we have conceptualized the project as using NCVS and NIBRS to estimate more fine grained and up to date estimates of domestic violence. We provide an example analysis to illustrate the ability to use both in conjunction with one another, and in this process will illustrate how potentially other sources of information can potentially be leveraged in a similar capacity.

We do this via estimating the probability of underreporting for specific cases via the NCVS, which only provide yearly and national estimates, to up-adjust reported domestic violence rates from NIBRS data, which can be estimated at smaller localities and with more up to date data.

For a simplified example, imagine we estimate the probability of reporting a domestic violence incident is 10%. If a particular county had reported 100 domestic violence incidents in their NIBRS data, this would then suggest there were actually 100/0.1 = 1,000 domestic violence incidents in that county over that time period. You up-adjust the observed reported rates based on the underreporting percentage.

Now imagine we show in the NCVS that those who are 20-50 years old have a reporting rate of 20%, but those over 50 years old have a reporting rate of 5%. Now imagine our hypothetical county had a breakdown of reported domestic violence rates as below:

* 40 reports victims 20-50 years old, total estimate of 70/0.2 = 140
* 60 reports victims 50+ years old, total estimate of 30/0.05 = 600

You can see that by estimating a more precise underreporting percentage, based on the shared characteristics in the NCVS and NIBRS, one can get a more accurate estimate of the true, total number of domestic violence rates. One can apply this logic to more fine-grained demographic characteristics, as well as incorporate uncertainty into the estimates (e.g. a total of 740 +/- 100 incidents).

We show an example of generating such analyses using NCVS and NIBRS data from 1992 through 2022, including open source replication code. Such logic can be applied not only towards domestic violence trends, but to any particular crime segment that is captured in both NCVS and NIBRS.

Outline

For an outline of current progress and subsequent work to finish the project, we have:

* Front end conceptualization of research design [Finished]
* Front end description of different reporting mechanisms and limitations [Finished]
* Preparation of NCVS & NIBRS data files for analysis [in progress]
* Script to create predictive model based on NCVS [ETA end of February]
* Script to apply NCVS predictions to NIBRS data [ETA mid March]
* Analysis and Charts, [ETA end March]
* Finalized Report to CCJ, [ETA end March]

Recommendations

We can recommend a comprehensive surveillance domestic violence reporting system like the one in Rhode Island, which triangulates data from police reporting forms, RI court system database, RI restraining order registry, and RI Department of Health Medical Examiner records (check to see if this is still active).

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The Domestic/Intimate Partner Violence Data Eco-System

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1. Includes the subset of violent victimizations that were committed by current or former intimate partners or family members. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Includes the subset of violent victimizations that were committed by current or former spouses, boyfriends, or girlfriends. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. During Piquero’s term as Director of the Bureau of Justice Statistics, our team of statisticians provided members of the National Plan to End Gender-Based Violence with specific estimates of domestic violence over time. As noted in the Plan (p.18: “An analysis of NCVS data over the past three decades indicates significant declines in incidences of rape, sexual assault, and intimate partner violence. Between 1993 and 2019, the NCVS reflects a 74% decline in intimate partner violence crimes and a 60% decline in rapes and sexual assaults, which tracks a similar (and indeed, even more substantial) decline in other criminal victimizations over the same period.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)