

The Underdetection of Rape: Methodological Choices Influence Incidence Estimates

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This paper discusses the extent of rape in the U.S. today, including a critical analysis of federal and independent sources of incidence data. Rape incidence estimates derived from the National Crime Survey (NCS) are flawed because of measurement methods that undermine full disclosure of victimization. Conclusions include (a) the incidence of rape is much higher than federal statistics suggest, but data are insufficient to resolve whether an epidemic is underway, (b) acquaintance rape is far more common than documented in crime surveys, and (c) improvement in rape detection is promised by the proposed revisions in the NCS.

All the data from which generalizations about the scope of rape can be made depend on information volunteered by victims themselves (Hindelang & Davis, 1977). However, hesitancy to disclose rape is fostered by a historical tradition of skepticism toward rape victims and denigration of them as "damaged goods." Because of these influences, rape incidence estimates are very sensitive to the methods used to measure them. The desire to withhold information about victimization often can be quite high; in one reverse records check only 54% of acquaintance rape victims who had reported an assault to the police would admit to an interviewer that they had been raped (Curtis, 1976). Therefore, any data collection effort that purports to describe rape incidence must include methods to overcome the compelling forces that favor nondisclosure.

Definition of Terms

The traditional offense of common law rape is defined as "carnal knowledge of a female forcibly and against her will" (Bienen, 1981, p. 174). Carnal

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knowledge means penile–vaginal penetration; other forms of penetration and sexual offenses are excluded. This definition of rape is used in compiling the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), which are published by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (e.g., FBI, 1991, p. 17). Only women can be the victims of forcible rape according to the UCR definition. Included in the rape rate are attempts to rape where no penetration took place. Excluded are sexual offenses other than penile–vaginal penetration; intercourse with girls below the statutory age of consent, rapes where the offender was the legal or common-law spouse of the victim, and nonforcible rapes of incapacitated victims. The National Crime Survey (NCS) also adopts the UCR definition of rape with the exception that “homosexual rape” is also included (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1991a, p. 141). By this term the compilers of the NCS identify male victims raped by other men. It appears that the compilers have not considered that the carnal knowledge definition, which specifies penile–vaginal penetration, cannot be extended unchanged to male victims. To include male victims of rape requires an expansion in the types of penetration considered to be rape, and this change would have implications for female victims as well.

In recent years reform rape laws have been passed by many states and by the U.S. government, which has jurisdiction over crimes that occur on federal property (Searles & Berger, 1987). *Reform-statutes rape* is defined as nonconsensual sexual penetration of an adolescent or adult obtained by physical force, by threat of bodily harm, or when the victim is incapable of giving consent by virtue of mental illness, mental retardation, or intoxication. Included are attempts to commit rape by force or threat of bodily harm (Searles & Berger, 1987). *Sexual penetration* refers to “sexual intercourse, cunnilingus, fellation, anal intercourse, or any other intrusion, however slight, of any part of a person’s body, but emission of semen is not required” (Michigan Stat. Ann., 1980). Often, reforms have replaced the word “rape” with other terms such as “sexual assault,” “sexual battery,” or “criminal sexual conduct.” In this paper I have retained the word “rape” to refer to the most serious form of sexual assault.

The concept of *incidence* is borrowed from the field of epidemiology. This term, which has a precise meaning in relation to disease, is now routinely applied to mental health and crime phenomena. Incidence refers to the number of new cases that appear within a specified time frame (Kleinbaum, Kupper, & Morgenstern, 1982). When applied to crime data, incidence refers to the number of separate criminal incidents that occurred during a fixed period of time—often a one-year period. Crime incidence is usually expressed as a *victimization rate*, which is obtained from dividing the number of incidents that occurred in the time period by the number of persons in the population. The rate is then set to a standard population base, often 1000 people.

Not addressed in this paper is the large literature on rape *prevalence*, which refers to the percentage of persons who have been victimized during their entire

lifetime. These studies are not included because they do not allow a direct comparison with federal data sources. In addition, extensive reviews of the prevalence research are available elsewhere (Best, Kilpatrick, Kramer, & McNeill-Harkins, in press; Koss, in press).

Federal Data on Rape Incidence

The two federal sources of rape incidence data are the UCR (FBI, 1991), and the NCS from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS, 1991a). Statistics on crimes reported to local authorities have been compiled by the FBI for the past five decades. Because it is common sense that not all crimes that occur are reported to the police, the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice issued a contract in 1966 to conduct the first nationwide, household-based crime victimization survey. The successor of this survey is the NCS.

Uniform Crime Reports

A total of 102,555 reported crimes qualified as rapes in the 1990 UCR (FBI, 1991). This figure represents a victimization rate of 80 per 100,000 female Americans. Approximately 84% of the rapes reported in 1990 were completed by force, the remainder were attempts. Rape accounted for 6% of the total violent crime volume. It is widely accepted that the reported rapes represent only the tip of the iceberg. The compilers of the UCR have cautioned, "Even with the advent of rape crisis centers and an improved awareness by police in dealing with rape victims, forcible rape is still recognized as one of the most underreported of all index crimes" (FBI, 1982, p. 14).

National Crime Survey

The NCS data result from a panel design wherein respondents are recontacted multiple times. Included in the sample are persons living in group quarters such as dormitories, rooming houses, and religious group dwellings, but crew members of the armed forces living in military barracks and institutionalized persons do not fall within the scope of the survey. The sampling plan of the NCS is a stratified, multistage cluster sample in which the primary sampling units are counties. The stages of sampling were designed to obtain a self-weighting probability sample of dwelling units and group quarters. The 17th NCS report was based on a representative sample of approximately 97,000 inhabitants over age 11 living in 62,700 housing units in the U.S. (BJS, 1991a). Interviews were obtained from 48,400 of these dwellings. Approximately 8600 units were vacant, demolished, nonresidential, or otherwise ineligible. No respondents were

successfully interviewed in about 1800 dwellings because of unavailability or refusal to participate. The participation rate was 96% of eligible dwellings, but the number of individuals within these dwellings who refused to participate was not reported.

Once selected as an NCS household, a given dwelling remains in the sample for three years with interviews occurring every six months. During each contact, occupants are asked to indicate only those criminal victimizations that have occurred since the last interview, which serves to "bound" or delineate the recall period. The first and fifth contact with the housing unit is in person; all other interviews are conducted by telephone (approximately 74% of the interviews are by telephone under current procedures). Respondents are asked only about victimizations that they have personally experienced. Prior to July 1986, crime experiences of 12- and 13-year-olds were relayed to the interviewer by a knowledgeable adult proxy respondent. Since then 12- and 13-year-olds have been interviewed directly unless an adult household member objects. Proxy respondents are also used in cases of temporarily absent household members, and persons who are physically or mentally incapable of granting interviews.

Early versions of the NCS resulted in only 15 rapes being reported among 10,000 households (Hindelang & Davis, 1977). Current methods for rape screening also identify only a small number of rapes each year. To obtain the 1000 cases needed for a 1985 descriptive profile of rape, it was necessary to aggregate *all* the incidents of rape and attempted rape that were reported in *every* NCS interview across the decade from 1973 to 1984 (BJS, 1985). Yet in spite of this low rate of detection of rape cases, the approach to measuring rape remained entirely unchanged between 1973 and 1991.

Estimated rape victimization rates in 1989 NCS data are 1.2 per 1000 women and girls and 0.1 per 1000 men and boys (BJS, 1991a). Of the 135,410 rapes that were projected to have occurred in 1989, only 34% were completed; the majority were attempts. All the perpetrators were male, and about half of them (53%) were strangers to the victim. Rape represented just 3% of the violent crimes reported in the NCS (BJS, 1985). Of the rapes identified, 51% were said to have been reported to police. Yet comparison of NCS and UCR data reveal that the NCS projects far less than twice as many rapes to have occurred in 1991 (135,410) as were actually reported to the police (102,555).

Features of NCS Rape Measurement that Undermine Disclosure

Many experts who work closely with rape believe NCS estimates of rape are too low because the methodology undermines the self-disclosure of relevant incidents (Kilpatrick et al., 1985; Koss, 1990a; Russell, 1984). There are at least six problems with the NCS handling of rape that could lead to a failure to detect relevant incidents. The NCS has recently undergone revisions, but only the

content of screening items has been changed. The other procedures remain as described below.

Lack of Confidentiality

The compilers of the NCS acknowledge that "violence or attempted violence involving family members or close friends is underreported in the NCS . . . because some victims . . . are reluctant to implicate family members or relatives, *who in some instances may be present during the interview*" (emphasis added, BJS, 1984, p. 10). Police files contain approximately three and a half times more acquaintance violence than is revealed in the household interviews (Skogan, 1981). Nevertheless, a recent comprehensive report on the crime of rape produced with NCS data reached the conclusion that "A woman is twice as likely to be attacked by a stranger as by someone she knows" (BJS, 1985, p. 2). This conclusion is premature in the absence of empirical data on the rates of self-disclosure comparing data collection with and without other family members present.

Characteristics of Interviewers

The interviewers used for NCS data collection do not have any special training to handle sensitive issues. Although many interviewers are women and matching along ethnic lines is provided whenever possible, these procedures are not uniformly followed. Variations in the volume of crime disclosure have been discovered in studies conducted as part of the NCS data collection effort; these variations appear to depend on the closeness of ethnic and gender matching of interviewer and respondent (Bailey, Moore, & Bailar, 1978). Interviewer effects are most notable on sensitive topics, particularly rapes, intrafamilial disputes, and public brawling. The large proportion of attempted rapes that are reported on the NCS (66%) as opposed to the UCR (26%) could reflect victims' attempts to minimize the stigma of acknowledging full-fledged rape victim status in front of family members and/or an interviewer with whom they lack rapport.

Context of Questioning

The NCS is clearly presented to the respondent as a survey of crimes that have been personally experienced. If a woman does not consider her unwanted, forced sexual experience to be a crime, she is unlikely to report it to the NCS interviewer. The compilers of the NCS acknowledge that violence involving family members or close friends is underreported because, among other reasons, victims "do not consider such incidents crimes" (BJS, 1984, p. 10). Empirical studies have revealed the existence of rape myths, which are widely accepted

false beliefs about rape (Burt, 1980; Feild, 1978; Weis & Borges, 1973). Assaults that go against the stereotypes of "real rape" because they involve acquaintances or the use of minimal force often are not seen as rape, even by the victim (Estrich, 1987). Among college women who had an experience that met legal requirements for rape, only a quarter labeled their experience as rape (Koss, 1988). Another quarter thought their experience was some kind of crime, but not rape. The remaining half did not think their experience qualified as any type of crime. This evidence strongly suggests that underdetection will occur if identification hinges on the respondent conceptualizing her victimization as a crime.

Rape Screening Items

Most of the NCS crime screening questions are behaviorally concrete and are written to specify the types of experiences that can qualify as a particular crime. An example is the following item: "Were you knifed, shot at, or attacked with some other weapon by anyone at all?" (BJS, 1991a, p. 108). Until 1991 the screening question designed to alert the interviewer to a possible rape was, "Did anyone TRY to attack you *in some other way?*" (BJS, 1991a, p. 108, italics added). The rationale behind this item was that "each victim defines rape for herself . . . no one in the survey is ever asked directly if she has been raped" (BJS, 1985, p. 2). This loose approach to the definition of a central concept is not seen in the remainder of the NCS, where screening questions clearly specify in concrete language the intended crime respondents might have experienced.

In 1988 the BJS issued a statement saying that it was phasing in "new instruments and screening procedures . . . that carefully probe for possible sexual assaults" (cited in Freiberg, 1990, p. 25). The revised items have the following proposed text: "Has anyone attacked or threatened you in any of these ways—with any weapon . . . with anything like a baseball bat . . . by something thrown . . . any grabbing . . . any sexual attack. . . ?" (BJS, 1988, p. 11). Whereas assault is described at a level of specificity that lists possible weapons, the reference to rape gives no clues as to what might constitute a sexual attack. Furthermore, the query about sexual attacks appears in the context of other attacks involving guns, knives, baseball bats, rocks, or bottles. This procedure clearly fuels stereotypes of rape as a violent, stranger-perpetrated offense and decreases the likelihood that acquaintance rapes will be reported. In response to public criticism (e.g., Koss, 1990a; Russell, 1984), further revisions in the rape screening protocol have been developed. The details of the re-revisions are described later in the paper.

Definition of Rape

The UCR definition of rape that serves as the foundation of the NCS is "carnal knowledge of a female forcibly and against her will" (FBI, 1989, p. 15).

Excluded from this definition are rapes where the offender was the legal or common-law spouse of the victim, rapes involving forms of penetration other than penile-vaginal intercourse, and rapes without actual force where the offender took advantage of a victim incapacitated by drugs, mental illness, or mental retardation. These omissions are unjustified. The definition underpinning the NCS needs to be modernized and brought into compliance with federal law.

Handling of Repeated Assaults

A final problem with the NCS approach to rape is the handling of "series victimizations." The NCS uses this term to refer to three or more repeated victimizations that are similar or identical in nature, where respondents are unable to identify separately the details of each act or to recount accurately the total number of such acts. Series crimes presently are excluded from the calculation of victimization rates in the NCS. The elimination of series incidents distorts the picture that is painted of rape. Almost all series victimizations involve assaultive violence; intimate violence is second only to occupationally related violence, such as experienced by police officers, in accounting for series incidents (Dodge & Lentzer, 1978). Because acquaintance rape is more likely than stranger rape to involve multiple incidents, elimination of series incidents exaggerates the extent to which rape is attributed to strangers. And because people who are acquainted are likely to be of the same race, the elimination of series incidents exaggerates the incidence of interracial rape. The treatment of series incidents has been described by a noted crime expert as "indefensible" (Skogan, 1981, p. 31).

Independent Epidemiologic Research

Rape incidence has been estimated in various specialized studies that have focused on adolescents (Ageton, 1983a,b), college women (Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987), and adult women (Kilpatrick & Best, 1990; Koss, Woodruff, & Koss, 1991; Russell, 1982). In the material that follows, each of these studies is described briefly.

Russell (1982) conducted a pioneering study in 1978 that involved interviews with a random sample of 930 women residents of San Francisco. Detailed interviews were administered in respondents' homes by trained female interviewers. Whenever possible, race and ethnicity were matched. There were 38 questions about sexual assault, only one of which used the word "rape." The results indicated that in the 12 months prior to the survey, respondents experienced 25 rapes and attempts that met the UCR definition, which translated into an estimated incidence rate of 2688 per 100,000 women. This figure is seven times higher than the NCS estimate for San Francisco during the same year (Russell, 1984). In contrast to the picture painted by NCS data of that era, which

reported two-thirds of rapists as being strangers, in Russell's data only 11% of the rapes and attempted rapes were perpetrated by strangers, whereas 62% were committed by current or former husbands, boyfriends, lovers, and other male relatives (the remainder were perpetrated by nonromantic acquaintances—Russell, 1984).

Ageton (1983a,b) included questions about sexual assault in the National Youth Study. The nationwide sample of 1725 adolescents aged 11–17 years were interviewed yearly for five years. In this study sexual assault was defined "to include all forced sexual behavior involving contact with the sexual parts of the body. Attempted sexual assaults were counted" (Ageton, 1983b, p. 11). Two questions were used to operationalize this definition of sexual assault, including the following item: "How many times in the last year have you been sexually attacked or raped or an attempt made to do so?" (1983b, p. 12). The estimated rape victimization rates for adolescent girls were developed by extracting incidents involving violent force and/or the use of a weapon. Apparently not considered as a form of rape was nonconsensual intercourse subsequent to threat of bodily harm. Nevertheless, the resultant estimates were 9.2 per 1000 for 1978, 6.8 per 1000 for 1979, and 12.7 per 1000 for 1980, much larger than NCS data for girls aged 13–19 years in 1978 (3.5/1000) and 1979 (4.2/1000). In hindsight, Ageton criticized herself for the assumption inherent in the screening item that girls who have had an experience that would legally qualify as rape would conceptualize their experience as a "sexual attack" or "rape." It is dismaying to see that the NCS still clings to this wording that has been discredited by specialists.

Koss et al. (1987) administered 10 sexual victimization screening questions to a nationwide sample of 3187 women college students at 32 colleges and universities selected to represent the higher education enrollment in the United States. Six screening questions for attempted and completed rape were used that described various behaviorally specific scenarios operationalizing a reformed-statutes definition. Typical items included the following: "Have you had sexual intercourse with a man when you didn't want to because he used some degree of force such as twisting your arm or holding you down to make you cooperate?" In a 12-month period, 166 per 1000 college women experienced one or more attempted or completed rapes defined according to the reform-statute definition. (In comparison, use of the UCR definition reduced the incidence figure to 76 per 1000 women.) Responses to follow-up questions revealed that 95% of the completed rapes involved one offender and 84% of them involved an offender known to the victim. In 57% of the rapes, the perpetrator was a date (Koss, 1988).

To generalize these results to another population, a second study focused on 2291 adult working women in Cleveland, Ohio (Koss et al., 1991). A mailed survey was sent to over 5000 women, and a 45% response rate was obtained. A

total of 5 questions were used to screen for rape and attempted rape as defined by a reformed statute (Ohio Revised Code of Rape, 1980). A typical item was the following: "Has a man made you have sex by using force or threatening to harm you? When we use the word sex we mean a man putting his penis in your vagina even if he didn't ejaculate (come)." The incidence of rape in a 12-month period was 28 per 1000 women based on the UCR definition. Many of these assaults occurred in highly intimate contexts. Specifically, 39% of the rapes were perpetrated by husbands, partners, or relatives of the victim. Only 17% of the rapes were committed by total strangers.

It can be instructive to compare these incidence rates to NCS figures for the year in which the data were collected. However, there are several inherent limitations on the validity of this comparison. The first limitation involves differences in the populations from which the data were obtained. Whereas the NCS involves a representative sample of all U.S. households, the work by Koss and colleagues involved specialized and, in the case of adult women, localized samples. Both of these samples had a higher average education level than the norm. Educated respondents tend to recall more crimes than do other respondents, particularly in the category of assaultive violence (Skogan, 1981; Sudman & Bradburn, 1974). The validity of comparisons with NCS data is also influenced by phenomena known as "telescoping"—the tendency of respondents to recall victimizations as having happened closer to the present than they actually did (forward telescoping), or further away from the present than they actually did (backward telescoping). Forward telescoping is considered to be the most serious problem in crime reporting (Sparks, 1982). Single, retrospective reports of victimization have been found to produce rates that are about one-third higher than those obtained with panel designs (Reiss, 1978).

To address these concerns, previously published figures of incidence rates presented by Koss et al. (1987) were reduced by one-third to adjust for forward telescoping. The telescoping adjustment lowered the estimate of rape incidence among college women from 76 per 1000 using the UCR definition to 50 per 1000. Still this rate is between 10 and 15 times larger than the 1985 NCS estimates for women aged 16–19 years (4.3/1000) and 20–24 years (3.4/1000; BJS, 1987). Adjustment lowered the estimate of rape incidence among adult women to 19 per 1000, a rate that is 15 times larger than NCS estimates for the year 1986, which were 1.2 per 1000 for women collapsed across all ages (BJS, 1988). Unfortunately, NCS victimization rates according to level of education, income, and area of residence are not disaggregated for women and men, thereby precluding more definitive comparisons.

Kilpatrick and colleagues (Kilpatrick & Best, 1990; D. G. Kilpatrick, personal communication November 13, 1990) screened for rape in a national sample of 3213 women identified by random digit dialing. The participation rate was 84% of eligible respondents. The study included multiple waves of interviews,

and the incidence data were obtained at the second contact, where the women recalled their experiences since the first interview held a year previously. Therefore, incidence rates can be estimated from the data without adjustment for telescoping. The definition of completed rape included vaginal intercourse and oral or anal penetration by objects or the penis when accomplished by force or threat of bodily harm (attempted rape and rape when incapacitated were excluded). Four screening items identified rape experiences, including the following item: "Has a man or boy ever made you have sex by using force or threatening to harm you or someone close to you? Just so there is no mistake, by sex we mean putting a penis in your vagina." These screening items appeared in the context of a survey that screened for other violent crimes. However, a special introduction was used to try to separate the rape items from the remaining content of the survey. This introduction emphasized that interviewers were interested in unwanted sexual advances even if they were not reported to the police or discussed with family or friends, and even if they involved friends, boyfriends, or even family members. The 12-month incidence of completed rape was 7.2 per 1000. Data from adolescents were not reflected in this rate as only women 18 and older were included in the sample. Nor were data on attempted rape included as is true in NCS data, where attempts represent 66% of the rapes detected. Even with these significant omissions, the incidence rate is 6 times larger than NCS estimates for the same time period (1.3/1000; BJS, 1989).

Is There a Rape Epidemic?

The word *epidemic* means a condition occurring suddenly in numbers clearly in excess of normal expectancy (Taylor, 1988, p. 566). Using this definition, the question "Is there a rape epidemic?" asks whether the levels of rape that are currently observed are increasing over the previous levels. Forcible rape rates have increased 21% since 1979 (FBI, 1989). In the first six months of 1990, the number of rapes reported increased 5% to 16% (depending on city size) over the same period in 1989 (FBI, 1990). These data seem to suggest that the prevalence of rape is increasing dramatically. However, NCS rates have not increased over the corresponding years. Compared to a 10% increase in the UCR rape rate since 1984 (FBI, 1989), NCS rape victimization rates have been virtually unchanged (1.3/1000 in 1985, 1.2/100 in 1986, 1.3/1000 in 1987, and 1.2/1000 in 1989; BJS, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1991a). Considering the inadequacies of the NCS measurement of rape that were discussed earlier, it is interesting to note the absence of increases in the measured phenomena.

The UCR data that reveal dramatically increasing rates of rape are open to several alternate explanations. First, increases in population can account for growth in numbers of reported crimes. However, the use of crime rates that place the yearly crimes in a common metric of 1000 persons rules out this explanation.

Second, the increases could be influenced by victims' greater willingness in recent years to report rape to authorities, not to underlying increases in the rates of rape. The data source that tracks reporting practices is again the NCS, which reveals no systematic variation in the percentage of rapes reported to the police over a long period. Between 1973 and 1984, the percentages of rapes reported to police were estimated to be 51%, 47%, 44%, 47%, 42%, 49%, 48%, 57%, 42%, 45%, 52%, and 44%, respectively (Flanagan & McGarrell, 1986). A final alternative is that the label "rape epidemic" is too narrow, and that what is in fact occurring is a "violence epidemic." In UCR data for the first six months of 1990, the increases in rape rates (10%) were nearly identical to the increases in aggravated assault (10%), murder (8%), and the total violent crime index (10%; FBI, 1990). However, these data are not fully revealing. Reported rapes underrepresent acquaintance crimes, which could be growing at a rate faster than violent crime in general, yet fail to be reflected in federal statistics.

Changes in the NCS Rape Questions

Will the re-revisions in the NCS move us closer to a data set that will adequately capture a nationwide picture of the scope of rape? The recent revisions involve only the content of the questions; the other aspects of procedure that were critiqued above will remain the same. Among the new screening questions in the revision are four directly targeted at rape detection.

The first screening item reads, "Has anyone attacked or threatened you in any of these ways—(a) with any weapon, for instance, a gun or knife, (b) with anything like a baseball bat, frying pan, scissors, or stick, (c) by something thrown, such as a rock or bottle, (d) include any grabbing, punching, or choking, (e) any rape, attempted rape or other type of sexual attack, (f) any face to face threats, OR (g) any attack or threat or use of force by anyone at all. Please mention it even if you are not certain it was a crime" (BJS, 1991b, p. 11). This item's validity rests on the twin assumptions that victims know the definition of rape and use this term to describe their experience. These assumptions are inconsistent with empirical data (e.g., Koss, 1988), which suggest that rape victims frequently fail to realize that their victimization qualifies as a crime and often avoid choosing the label "rape" to conceptualize their experience. The content also leaves undefined the terms "rape," "attempted rape," and "sexual attack." This is inappropriate because the terms "rape" and "attempted rape" have specific legal definitions of which the public is unlikely to be aware. Lumping these two terms together with the term "sexual attack" leaves the compilers of the BJS unable to determine from the responses to the screening item alone whether or not an offense consistent with the FBI definition has occurred. Further undesirable elements of this item are the violent crime schemas it activates and the much greater degree of specificity accorded to physical

assaults as compared to rape. This discrepancy suggests a hesitancy on the part of those responsible for the NCS to incorporate any sexually explicit language; otherwise it would flow naturally here. Finally, the use of the “attacked or threatened” wording to uncover sexual assault is indirect; it requires the respondent to perceive that one of the real foci of inquiry is unwanted sexual experiences.

Question 2 focuses on intimate crimes. It reads, “People often don’t think of incidents committed by someone they know . . . did you have something stolen from you OR were you attacked or threatened by (a) someone at work or school, (b) a neighbor or friend, (c) a relative or family member, (d) any other person you’ve met or known?” (BJS, 1991b, p. 5). A positive feature of this item is its attempt to dispel notions that the interviewers are only interested in incidents perpetrated by strangers. However, the strength of the item is diluted by inclusion of the “attacked or threatened” wording that was criticized above.

Question 3 zeros in on respondents who do not use the term “rape” for their experience. Its text is, “Incidents involving forced or unwanted sexual acts are often difficult to talk about . . . have you been forced or coerced to engage in unwanted sexual activity by (a) someone you didn’t know before, (b) a casual acquaintance, or (c) someone you know well?” (BJS, 1991b, p. 5). This item has several virtues, which include directly specifying that unwanted sexual behavior is the target of the question and minimizing the street-violence context within the item. It might be strengthened by informing the respondents to report incidents whether or not they thought they were crimes, as is done in the first question. The primary flaw of the item is that the term “unwanted sexual activity” covers a broad range of acts, many of which do not satisfy the FBI definition of rape. Thus, the compilers will be unable to determine if a report qualifies as rape from the response to the screening item alone.

Positive response to any of these screening questions trigger administration of a revised incident report, which now includes eight queries relevant to rape (BJS, 1991c). Among them is the following item: “Did the offender hit you, knock you down, or actually attack you in any way?” (BJS, 1991c, p. 4). An affirmative response initiates the query, “How were you attacked?” (BJS, 1991c, p. 5). Among the possible responses the interviewer can mark (but that are not read to the respondent) are “raped, tried to rape, and sexual assault other than rape or attempted rape.” If the respondent says rape occurred, the interviewer is instructed to say, “Do you mean forced sexual intercourse?” and if the respondent says attempted rape occurred, the interviewer says, “Do you mean attempted forced sexual intercourse?” (BJS, 1991c, p. 5). The interviewer continues, “What were the injuries you suffered if any?” (BJS, 1991c, p. 5). Again among the choices that the interviewer can check are “raped, attempted rape, or sexual assault other than rape or attempted rape.” As before, if the respondent says rape occurred, the interviewer follows up to determine if he or she means attempted or completed forced sexual intercourse.

These queries allow the compilers to determine that the incidents meet the FBI definition of rape that they have adopted, provided that one is willing to accept the assumption that there is a generally shared definition of the term "sexual intercourse" among respondents. The lack of specification about the kinds of penetration covered by the term "intercourse" seems undesirable to this reviewer. It is unknown whether women who have had forms of unwanted penetration other than vaginal, and whether men who have been sodomized, will respond to this wording. There are other queries with response categories relevant to rape such as "Did the offender TRY to attack you?" and "Did the offender THREATEN you with harm in any way?" (caps in original, BJS, 1991c, p. 4). Because these items do not trigger the inquiry about the occurrence of forced sexual intercourse, they will not result in the information necessary to determine that an incident qualifies for inclusion in the estimated rape victimization rate.

Conclusions

U.S. women are raped far more often than is reflected in federal statistics, and rape is far more likely to involve victims and offenders who are acquaintances than previously believed. An accumulation of independent data sources suggests that rape incidence may be 6–10 times higher than current NCS estimates and that women are up to 4 times more likely to be raped by someone they know than by a stranger.

Independent findings on rape incidence lend substance to criticisms of the NCS approach to rape measurement as deficient and below the state-of-the-art evidenced in the detection of other crimes. In March of 1985, then-director of the Bureau of Justice Statistics Steven R. Schlesinger stated, "Rape is a brutal and terrifying crime. It is especially important that our understanding of this crime is based on reliable information" (BJS, 1985, p. 1). Although other aspects of the NCS procedure that undermine rape detection still remain unchanged, the extensive revisions in the content of questioning about rape are concrete steps in the right direction. They suggest that those responsible for the survey have accorded a higher priority to the measurement of rape than has been evident in the past. Still of concern is the fact that NCS interviews will continue to be conducted under suboptimal levels of rapport and confidentiality. It is hoped that the changes now undertaken will be extended so that the incidence of rape is more truly described by future NCS data.

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