



Measuring Sexual Violence: Methods, Misconceptions, and a New (Revised) Measure

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“How often does rape happen?” This question is frequently asked, yet deceptively complicated to answer. In other words: How many people are sexually assaulted? How many people perpetrate at least one sexual assault? These are among my favorite questions, because they provide the opportunity to explain how common sexual violence is and to begin a dialogue about the larger cultural factors that play a role in perpetuating male violence against women.

These questions are also valuable because they allow us to address some of the other “big” questions in our field, like: “What is rape?” By describing what types of incidents are included in a research study, we can explore common misconceptions about what sexual assault actually looks like in the real world. For example, we have the opportunity to explain that sexual assaults include both acts that are committed with force, threat, or fear -- as well as those committed against someone who is unable to consent (e.g., because they are unconscious, incapacitated, or severely disabled).

For many professionals, however, answering this type of question can be tricky. Because the answer requires discussing findings from social science research, it's easy to get tripped up if one isn't familiar with the methodology that was used. Our credibility is then seriously undermined when we try to present statistics without understanding where they came from. If we can't answer a question or challenge, it's all too easy for others to dismiss both the messenger (us) and the message (that sexual assault is a very common event).

We also frequently find ourselves challenged with the criticism that social science data is meaningless because researchers “can make statistics say anything they want.” The answer to this challenge is both a “yes” and “no.” On the one hand, it is possible to design a research study to skew the results one way or the other. Yet a critical analysis of the study will reveal this type of bias. Therefore, by understanding the methodology that was used to produce any social scientific data we can place the findings in context and understand what factors might have influenced the results. In other words, this particular challenge may be a fair one, but it is not a reason to throw up our hands and conclude that statistics are meaningless. Rather, this challenge can be seen as a call to make sure we understand any statistics that we use.

This article is designed to provide readers with the information needed to present statistics on sexual assault prevalence with competence -- and the confidence that inevitably results. It will begin by describing the three main sources of data on sexual assault prevalence and exploring the strengths and limitations of each. It will then conclude by reviewing a new (actually revised) measure that represents the “gold standard” in this field. In 2007, a team of nine prominent researchers published a



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revised version of the Sexual Experiences Survey that can be used by anyone seeking to measure sexual assault perpetration or victimization. This article will conclude with an appeal for researchers and practitioners to use this measure more widely, to standardize this type of measurement and to incorporate this tool into our evaluation work.

Uniform Crime Reports (UCR)

First, the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) program is often cited as a source of information for how often sexual assault happens, but it really only provides an estimate for how many are reported to police. As background, the UCR program was originally conceived in 1929 by the International Association of Chiefs of Police as a way to meet the need for reliable, uniform crime statistics. Then in 1930, the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) took over collecting, publishing, and archiving those statistics.

Today, over 17,000 city, county, and state law enforcement agencies participate in the UCR program by voluntarily reporting data on crimes that are reported to them. Information is also provided regarding how the cases were cleared. For UCR purposes, cases can be cleared in one of three ways: (1) "clearance by arrest," (2) "exceptional clearance," and (3) "unfounding." A detailed explanation of these clearance categories is beyond the scope of this article. However, for the present purposes it is sufficient to note that cases can be cleared by an arrest if at least one suspect is arrested and charged, and the case is referred for prosecution. A case can be exceptionally cleared when some element beyond law enforcement control precludes issuing formal charges against the offender. For example, the suspect may either be dead or arrested and prosecuted in another jurisdiction. A case can also be cleared by exception if the suspect has been identified but the victim is unable to actively participate in the investigation. Finally, a case can be unfounded when the report is determined to be false or baseless.

Unfortunately, there is a great deal of misunderstanding surrounding all of these terms, and the criteria for clearing a case using each of the three UCR categories are especially confusing. To make matters worse, many supervisors do not carefully review the reports that are submitted, thus providing poor quality control and allowing for inaccuracies and inconsistencies in the clearance of sexual assault cases and the resulting UCR data. (For more information on the UCR definitions and criteria for clearing sexual assault cases, a training module is available in the On-Line Training Institute hosted by EAWW International at www.evawintl.org.)

Agencies participating in the UCR submit data to the FBI, which compiles the information and publishes reports through the Bureau of Justice Statistics. These reports are available both from the FBI (www.fbi.gov/crimestats.htm) and the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (www.ncjrs.org). In fact, several annual statistical publications are produced on the basis of UCR data, and they are widely disseminated and cited for information about crime in the United States. More information on the UCR program is available at www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm.

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Strengths of the UCR

The primary strength of the UCR as a statistical measure is that the FBI is viewed by many people as a credible source for information on cases reported to local law enforcement. Therefore, as long as one understands what is included and excluded with the definition for each type of crime, these statistics can be used to provide a reasonable estimate of how many cases are reported to law enforcement each year and how they are cleared.

Limitations of the UCR

The primary limitation of the UCR is the narrow and confusing definition that is used for sexual assault. For UCR purposes, data is only collected for the crime of “forcible rape,” which is defined as: “carnal knowledge of a female, forcibly and against her will.” Both completed and attempted acts of “forcible rape” are included in UCR data. However, it is clear from this definition that UCR data on “forcible rape” does not include any of the following sexual assault crimes:

- sexual assaults facilitated with drugs and/or alcohol
- sexual assaults of unconscious victims
- sexual assaults involving male victims
- sexual assaults involving victims with severe disabilities (when the disability precludes the individual from legally being able to give consent)
- sexual assaults of children under the age of 12 (crimes that are generally reported by law enforcement to the UCR program as child sexual abuse), and
- all other forms of sexual assault such as anal penetration, oral copulation, penetration with a finger or foreign object, and sexual battery

Because of these many exclusions, crimes meeting the definition of “forcible rape” actually represent only a minority of the sexual assault reports that law enforcement agencies typically receive. This is obviously a very serious limitation of UCR data. To illustrate, Joanne Archambault was Sergeant in the Sex Crimes Unit of the San Diego Police Department for many years, and she stated that only about 35-40% of their felony sexual assault cases met the FBI’s narrow definition of “forcible rape” and were reported to the UCR program each year (Archambault, 2008, personal communication). The remaining 60-65% of all crimes reported to the Sex Crimes Unit would not appear in UCR data.

In other words, most of the sexual assault cases that are reported to law enforcement are not actually included in UCR data. This might be fine if everyone understood that UCR data only includes such a small sub-sample of the sex crimes that are perpetrated in our communities. However, this is not typically understood, so UCR data is routinely cited as an estimate of the actual number of reported rapes. This problem is then

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exacerbated by the fact that the type of sexual assaults that are excluded from the UCR definition are the same ones that are particularly likely to be under-reported. Research clearly suggests that the “classic” rapes that are included in UCR data (i.e., forcible penile-vaginal penetration) are more likely than other types of sexual assaults to be reported to police (for a review, see Ménard, 2005). Other types of sexual assault thus remain invisible in official statistics, both because they are typically unreported but also because they are excluded from the definition of forcible rape used for the UCR program.

There are also a number of organizational factors that limit the quality of information captured in UCR statistics. For example, many law enforcement agencies do not separate out the various types of sexual assaults (e.g., penile-vaginal penetration versus other types of penetration). This further complicates data collection and analysis. In addition, UCR participation is voluntary for law enforcement agencies, so many simply fail to submit any data at all. This is often due to political factors and/or limited resources, particularly in small or rural law enforcement agencies.

An additional problem is that law enforcement officers and investigators typically receive no training at all in the proper use of UCR data definitions and methodologies. As a result, two detectives sitting at desks directly next to each other may be following different criteria for clearing their cases and recording UCR data.

The Alternative: NIBRS

Because of these problems with the UCR definition of “forcible rape,” many have called for changes to expand and improve it. Yet the FBI has already created an alternative data collection effort that was designed to replace the UCR program. This program is called the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS), and the FBI began its implementation in 1989. NIBRS was designed to collect data on reported crimes within 22 specific categories. One of these categories is: “Sex Offenses, Forcible - Forcible Rape, Forcible Sodomy, Sexual Assault With An Object, Forcible Fondling.” Another is “Sex Offenses, Nonforcible - Incest, Statutory Rape.” Obviously, NIBRS uses a much broader definition of sexual assault than the UCR does. It is therefore likely to capture more comprehensive data on the range of sexual assault crimes that are actually reported to law enforcement each year.

For NIBRS purposes, information is collected for each offense, including characteristics of the incident, victim(s), property, suspect(s), and arrestee(s). The Bureau of Justice Statistics then publishes analyses of this data, such as the 2000 report written by Dr. Howard Snyder entitled: “Sexual Assault of Young Children as Reported to Law Enforcement: Victim, Incident, and Offender Characteristics” (NCJ #182990, available at <http://www.ncjrs.gov>). Unfortunately, very few articles have been published so far based on an analysis of NIBRS data on sexual assault. Therefore, we have not yet benefited significantly from the knowledge that could potentially be gained through NIBRS.

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There is also a concern that most law enforcement agencies do not participate in NIBRS. Because of the level of detail required for NIBRS reporting, it is frankly difficult for many law enforcement agencies to participate. In addition, agencies have to be certified to participate, so it is not surprising that the NIBRS program has not been widely adopted. The FBI website states that only 26 state programs have been certified so far for NIBRS participation, although others are in various stages of implementation and testing. As of 2004, NIBRS data thus represents only 20% of the U.S. population and 16% of the crime statistics collected by the UCR program (<http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/faqs.htm>). Clearly, the NIBRS program has a number of advantages but has not yet successfully replaced the UCR, so many law enforcement agencies continue to contribute data through the UCR but not NIBRS. For more information on the NIBRS program, please see <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm#nibrs>.

National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)

Another commonly cited source of information on sexual assault is the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), which is conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice through the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS). The NCVS was introduced in 1972 and originally designed to complement the information on reported crimes compiled by the FBI in the UCR program. The NCVS is based on interviews, conducted both on the telephone and in person, with more than 100,000 individuals from a national sample of 50,000 households. It involves asking respondents aged 12 and older about any crimes they may have experienced, and inquiring whether or not the crime was reported to a law enforcement agency.

Prior to 1993, the NCVS did not specifically address sexual assault. Thus, any estimates for sexual assault prevalence or incidence were based only on those crimes that were described by respondents without any prompting on the part of the interviewer. Obviously, this is a totally unsatisfactory method for measuring sexual assault victimization, and NCVS statistics prior to 1993 should not be used for this purpose – even though the BJS states that “the data before 1993 are adjusted to make them comparable with data collected since the redesign” (<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/glance/rape.htm>). These adjustment methods are reportedly described in a document available at: http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/abstract/cv73_95.htm.

Since 1993, the NCVS has used revised wording that does specifically address both rape and sexual assault, and the estimates regarding prevalence are now about four times higher than they were before the redesign. NCVS data is reported in several publications that are available at the NCJRS website: <http://www.ncjrs.gov>.

Definition of Rape

To understand the methods used for screening NCVS participants for sexual assault victimization, information is drawn from the Interviewing Manual for Field Representatives published by the U.S. Census Bureau (2003). First, to determine

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whether someone has been raped, NCVS respondents are asked this primary screening question: “Has anyone attacked or threatened you in any of these ways?” A number of crimes are then listed, including “any rape, attempted rape, or other type of sexual attack” (p. B2-48). If the respondent asks what is meant by any of these terms, the following definitions are provided: “forced sexual intercourse, including both psychological coercion as well as physical force. Forced sexual intercourse means vaginal, anal or oral penetration by the offender” (p. B3-71-72).

Unlike the UCR, this definition used for the NCVS includes sexual assaults perpetrated against both male and female victims, as well as those committed by perpetrators of the same sex, and those involving various forms of penetration. However, it is important to keep in mind that this definition is only provided if the respondent explicitly asks what is meant by the terms “rape,” “attempted rape,” or “sexual attack.”

If the respondent indicates that they were raped by answering “yes” to the screening question, respondents are then asked: “Do you mean forced or coerced sexual intercourse?” According to the Interviewing Manual, this question is included to ensure that the respondent’s definition of rape matches the NCVS definition” (p. B3-75). If the respondent says “yes,” they are coded as having been raped. If they say “no,” the interviewer is prompted to ask, “What do you mean?” Interviewers are then instructed to record as much information as possible about the event and evaluate whether another type of sexual assault other than rape is being described (p. B3-75).

Finally, NCVS respondents are provided with the following prompt at a later point in the interview:

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:

- someone you didn’t know before?
- a casual acquaintance?
- someone you know well?

This prompt is reportedly “designed to remind each respondent of incidents in which he/she was forced or coerced to engage in unwanted sexual activity, regardless of whether the respondent did or did not know the offender” (p. B2-50). This detailed information about the actual questions asked during the NCVS is important because it allows readers to use their own common sense in identifying the strengths and limitations of the research methodology.

Strengths of the NCVS

The strengths of the NCVS include the extremely large sample, and its representativeness of the national population. The combination of interviews conducted

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on the telephone and in-person also contributes to the strength of the study because they allow confidence in the quality of information gathered from participants. The fact that prevalence is estimated from victims rather than the criminal justice system is also a strength of the NCVS, because it includes both reported and unreported incidents. Finally, the fact that the NCVS is conducted by the federal government lends it credibility and the appearance of objectivity in the eyes of many people.

Limitations of the NCVS

The primary limitation of the NCVS is the language used to ask about victimization. First, the definitions utilized in the NCVS are not consistent with legal definitions in state penal codes – or with definitions that represent standard methodology for research on the incidence or prevalence of sexual assault. These definitions are in fact poorly conceptualized and poorly worded. No additional explanation or clarification is offered beyond the definitions that are provided above.

A second concern is that the definitions are only read to participants who ask the interviewer what is meant by the terms “rape” or “sexual attack.” This is critically important because it means that participant responses are dependent on whether or not they personally label their experience as a “rape” or a “sexual attack.” Other research clearly demonstrates that the vast majority of women who have experienced behaviors that meet the legal definition of sexual assault will in fact say “no” when asked if they have been raped (Koss, 1985, 1988). For men, it is perhaps even more likely that they would say “no” when asked if they have been raped, although they may have experienced behaviors that meet the legal definition of sexual assault.

These are very serious limitations that artificially reduce the NCVS estimates for prevalence and incidence. In fact, one study was conducted with two different samples of college women, to estimate how different the figures are when the NCVS methodology is compared with a more standard social scientific methodology. This comparative study found that incidence and prevalence estimates were 11 times higher when obtained using standard social scientific methods rather than the NCVS methodology (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000). Clearly, the NCVS dramatically underestimates the number of sexual assaults that occur on a national level.

These and other criticisms of the NCVS methodology are discussed in publications by Dr. Mary Koss (1992, 1993, 1996), Dr. Dean Kilpatrick (2004), and other researchers. However, many people in the field are not aware of these limitations, because NCVS statistics on sexual assault are regularly cited without any such context or critical analysis. Personally, I don't believe that NCVS statistics should be used, given what we know about the serious flaws in methodology and their impact on dramatically underestimating prevalence. But if they are going to be used, they must be interpreted in the context of these methodological flaws and compared to findings from other research using a more rigorous social scientific methodology.

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National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS)

Given these limitations of UCR and NCVS statistics, I typically respond to any question about sexual assault prevalence by providing information based on the National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS). While the NVAWS is a bit old and limited in some important ways, it still represents the most up-to-date, large-scale national study available. As background, the NVAWS was conducted in 1995-1996 and co-sponsored by the National Institute of Justice and the Centers for Disease Control (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). It was conducted using a telephone survey with random digit dialing of households in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. A total of 8,000 women and 8,000 men over age 18 were surveyed, with questions used to determine the incidence and prevalence of sexual assault, as well as its characteristics.

In the NVAWS, survey respondents were asked a number of questions to determine whether or not they have ever been sexually assaulted. One sample question is the following:

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.

Other questions with a similar format were asked about oral penetration, anal penetration, digital penetration, and penetration with a foreign object. An additional question addressed attempted sexual assaults of any kind.

Strengths of the NVAWS Methodology

As evident in this sample question, survey respondents were not asked whether they had ever been “raped” or “sexually assaulted.” Instead, they were asked whether or not they had experienced certain specific behaviors that meet the legal definition of sexual assault. The strength of this methodology is that it can determine whether respondents have been sexually assaulted, regardless of whether or not they label it as such. Other strengths of the NVAWS methodology include the size and representativeness of the sample, as well as the methodology that was used for contacting participants, collecting the information, and analyzing the data.

How Many Americans are Sexually Assaulted?

The most obvious question that can be answered with this type of research is how often sexual assault is committed. According to the NVAWS, approximately 302,100 women in the U.S. (0.3% of the female population) experience a completed or attempted sexual assault each year (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). This is an annual rate, estimating the percentage of people who are sexually assaulted in a particular year. The NVAWS also provides an estimate for the lifetime prevalence of sexual assault in the U.S. A prevalence figure will always be considerably higher than an incidence figure because it provides an estimate for the number of people who have experienced a sexual assault

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at some point throughout their lives (or since a specified age) – not just during a single year or other period of time. Figures from the NVAWS therefore suggest that as many as 1 out of 6 American women (18%) will be the victim of a completed or attempted sexual assault at some point during their lives (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006).

The NVAWS also reported an estimate that as many as 92,700 men in the U.S. (0.1% of the male population) will experience a completed or attempted sexual assault each year (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). Again, this is an annual incidence estimate. For men, the NVAWS prevalence estimate suggests that approximately 1 in 33 American men (3%) will be the victims of completed or attempted sexual assault at some point during their lives (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). Clearly, such research indicates that sexual assault is a frighteningly common occurrence in our society, with a large number of American men and women victimized each year.

Limitations of the NVAWS

Like any research study, the NVAWS has some important limitations. Because it was conducted using a telephone survey, the study obviously did not include anyone without access to a phone. This methodology thus excludes many individuals with limited financial resources, lack of housing, severe disabilities, and “marginal” immigration status (Rebecca Campbell, 2008, personal communication). These individuals are likely to be particularly vulnerable to victimization of all kinds, so this limitation may have led the NVAWS to underestimate the true prevalence and incidence of sexual assault in this country.

A telephone survey is also not the ideal means for collecting information about such a sensitive topic as sexual assault victimization. Even people who know they were sexually assaulted may not feel able to discuss it when interviewed because of time constraints, discomfort with the subject, concern regarding others who may hear the discussion, or fear of psychological distress as a result of discussing their victimization (Joan Zorza, 2008, personal communication).

Of course, there are other studies of sexual assault prevalence, particularly in the health field. However, many of these are less than optimal because the researchers typically allocate only one or two questions to measuring sexual assault victimization. They also frequently use overly narrow definitions and do not consult earlier literature, so the questions are written with terms and formats that we know do not work well. As a result, these studies may or may not result in low rates of disclosure for sexual assault victimization (Koss, 2008, personal communication).

Conclusions Regarding the NVAWS

For non-researchers, it is therefore realistic to rely on the results of the NVAWS for estimates of incidence, prevalence, and other basic characteristics of sexual assault. The methodology was sufficiently well-designed to justify a reasonable degree of confidence in the findings. The study also has perceived credibility because it was

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jointly sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and the U.S. Department of Justice (through the National Institute of Justice). As previously noted, some people argue that the information is old (because the data was collected in 1995-1996) and that there were additional methodological improvements that could have been made. These criticisms are fair. However, conducting a study of that size is extremely expensive, and I do not anticipate that another one will be done in the near future. Therefore, I recommend becoming familiar with the methodology of the NVAWS to explain the findings in context.

Revised Sexual Experiences Survey (SES)

Before concluding this discussion, I want to highlight a relatively new instrument that can be used to measure sexual assault perpetration and victimization. In 2007, a team of nine prominent researchers in the field published the revised Sexual Experiences Survey (SES). Led by Dr. Mary Koss, this team (referred to as the SES Collaboration) sought to update the SES that was originally published in 1985 and is now the most widely used tool for this purpose. In fact, the previously described NVAWS used a methodology that was based on the SES.

As described by the SES Collaboration authors, the original SES has a number of features that now represent accepted standards. These include: (a) avoiding the use of the term “rape” or “sexual assault” and (b) asking about specific behaviors that a person might have experienced (Koss et al., 2007). Yet over time a number of limitations of the SES have been identified, and researchers and practitioners have often responded by adapting it for their own use and purposes. In the 2007 version of the SES, revisions were made to address many of these limitations.

As a result of these efforts, the group produced four revised versions of the SES: (1) the SES Long Form for assessing perpetration (SES-LFP); (2) the SES Long Form Victimization (SES-LFV), (3) SES Short Form Perpetration (SES-SFP), and; (4) SES Short Form Victimization (SES-SFV). All four versions are available, along with scoring instructions, from Dr. Mary Koss at the University of Arizona. (Contact information is provided in the final section of the article entitled: “For More Information.”)

These measures were designed to build on the strengths of the SES, but also to clarify and update its wording. For example, the phrase “sexual intercourse” was dropped from the recent revision and replaced with language that more specifically describes the behaviors that are involved. Language was also revised so that it is now gender neutral; the prior SES only asked women about sexual acts that were committed by a man and only asked men about sexual acts that were committed against a woman. Particular care was taken to separate out behaviors that meet standard legal definitions of sexual assault from those that do not constitute criminal offenses but are nonetheless coercive and experienced as distressing. Other revisions in the format and wording of the SES are discussed in the article by the SES Collaboration (Koss et al., 2007).

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One of the most significant revisions, however, deals with sexual assault that is committed against a victim who is unable to consent because of alcohol or drug use. In the prior version of the SES, this type of sexual assault was measured with the following question: “Have you had sexual intercourse with a man when you didn’t want to because a man gave you alcohol or drugs?” On the new Long Form, there are 10 items designed to assess various circumstances involving drug and alcohol use. However, on the Short Form, only one question asks about: “taking advantage of me when I was too drunk or out of it to stop what was happening” (Koss et al., 2007). The authors note that future work will be needed to evaluate whether or not this single item will adequately capture this type of sexual assault victimization or perpetration.

Sample Wording to Assess Victimization

To provide a sense of what the revised SES instruments look like, the short version of the victimization form lists four specific behaviors and asks respondents how many times they have experienced each “in the past 12 months” as well as “since age 14.” These behaviors are:

- Someone fondled, kissed, or rubbed up against the private areas of my body (lips, breast/chest, crotch or butt) or removed some of my clothes without my consent (but did not attempt sexual penetration).
- Someone had oral sex with me or made me have oral sex with them without my consent.
- (For women) A man put his penis into my vagina, or someone inserted fingers or objects without my consent.
- A man put his penis into my butt, or someone inserted fingers or objects without my consent.

The first behavior constitutes sexual contact, and the remaining items assess acts of sexual penetration. Separate questions then ask about attempts to commit each of these acts.

Following each of the behaviors (and attempts), the respondent is then asked to indicate how many times they were committed using five specific tactics. These tactics are:

- Telling lies, threatening to end the relationship, threatening to spread rumors about me, making promises I knew were untrue, or continually verbally pressuring me after I said I didn’t want to
- Showing displeasure, criticizing my sexuality or attractiveness, getting angry but not using physical force, after I said I didn’t want to
- Taking advantage of me when I was too drunk or out of it to stop what was happening

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- Threatening to physically harm me or someone close to me
- Using force, for example holding me down with their body weight, pinning my arms, or having a weapon

The first two tactics constitute non-criminal sexual coercion. If a respondent has experienced any act of sexual penetration committed by someone using the last three tactics, however, he/she would be characterized as a victim of sexual assault using the SES.

Recommendations for Future Use

The primary purpose for the SES is to screen for experiences of perpetration or victimization. This type of screening is needed for any study focusing on the prevalence, characteristics, or impact of sexual assault victimization or perpetration. An example is the NVAWS that has been discussed at length in this article, which used a methodology based on the SES format.

The SES can also be used in research like that conducted by Dr. David Lisak and his colleagues, identifying men who have committed acts of sexual assault and then following up with interviews so these men can provide detailed narrative accounts of their motivations, tactics, and interpretations of the experience (e.g., Lisak & Miller, 2002). The revised SES can also be used as an evaluation tool for rape prevention programs, to determine whether the intervention has the desired effect of reducing sexual assault victimization or perpetration. For example, Dr. Chris Gidycz and her colleagues have often used versions of the SES to measure sexual assault victimization both before and after women participate in a risk reduction program (e.g., Orchowski, Gidycz, & Raffle, 2008).

When using the SES for research purposes, however, it is important to address serious issues regarding ethics, safety, and the psychological well-being of participants (Koss, 2008, personal communication). For example, administration of the SES must be in a private setting; if it is administered in a group format, care must be taken to prevent people from seeing each other's responses. Responses to the SES should ideally be anonymous, but at a minimum they must remain confidential. Because research is now commonly conducted over the internet, this raises a new set of privacy and safety concerns that are beyond the scope of this article.

To make sure these issues are addressed appropriately, anyone seeking to administer the SES should first consult with an Institutional Review Board (IRB) to obtain clearance to conduct the research. This will likely require collaboration with a social science researcher, because most institutions of higher education have an IRB. (There are also private IRBs, but they obviously charge money to review a proposal.) A researcher can help to address these ethical and safety issues, as well as navigating the IRB procedures. Even students using the SES for a class project should check with an IRB first, although this may simply require a telephone consultation. Because the SES asks about personal experiences with sexual victimization and perpetration, an IRB review is

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critically important to ensure compliance with regulations governing human research (Koss, 2008, personal communication).

Yet another purpose of reviewing the SES in this article is to clarify what behaviors meet the definition of sexual assault and other forms of non-criminal sexual coercion. For example, respondents are identified as sexual assault victims if they have experienced an act of sexual penetration using physical force or threats, or when they were “too drunk or out of it to stop what was happening.” On the other hand, the same behavior would constitute non-criminal sexual coercion if it was committed by “telling lies, threatening to end the relationship, threatening to spread rumors about me, making promises I knew were untrue, or continually verbally pressuring me after I said I didn’t want to.”

Recommendations

All too often, I see professionals in the field presenting statistics or providing a “fact sheet” on sexual assault that includes numerous citations to research studies without any other explanation.

Unfortunately, this strategy is likely to backfire if the person presenting the statistics is unable to explain the methodology that was used to collect the data. A more effective strategy may be to use statistics sparingly, only presenting findings from a small number of studies and being familiar enough with their methodologies to be able explain where the numbers came from.

In fact, it is unfortunate that so many professionals do not do this, because they are daunted by the prospect of reviewing original research. The task need not be daunting; in fact, common sense is often the only tool that is needed to critically evaluate the methodology of a social scientific study. By finding out who was contacted to participate in a survey, what they were asked, and how their responses were scored, most professionals can reach their own conclusions regarding whether or not the methods appear to be reasonable and the conclusions defensible.

Alternatively, there are many situations where we can simply avoid statistics altogether and make claims that we know are well supported both by research and from our own professional experience. For example, we can often be quite effective in our presentations by simply making statements such as: “Many more women are sexually assaulted than we would like to believe,” or “Most sexual assaults are committed by someone who is known to the victim.” By not presenting any statistics, we may be able to avoid derailing our discussion to research methodology and remaining focused on the points we are trying to make. All too often these challenges to the statistics are actually challenges to the facts and the reality of sexual assault.

Finally, I would encourage professionals to at least briefly review the revised version of the SES, because it encourages us to think carefully about the actual behaviors that constitute a sexual assault and other forms of sexual coercion that can be upsetting but

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are not criminal acts. As previously mentioned, the instrument can also be used whenever we want to screen individuals for sexual assault perpetration and victimization experiences. While we might think of this type of screening as a difficult task requiring social scientific expertise, a review of the revised SES will hopefully demonstrate that it is relatively easy to use, with clear instructions for administration, scoring, and interpretation. Of course, any research or evaluation study should be conducted in consultation with a social science expert. However, by providing the actual text of some SES items I hope to demystify the instrument and demonstrate that it is a practical tool that can be used for many purposes by practitioners. I would therefore like to conclude by thanking the SES Collaboration for their important work in advancing the field of sexual violence research: Mary P. Koss, Antonia Abbey, Rebecca Campbell, Sarah Cook, Jeanette Norris, Maria Testa, Sarah Ullman, Carolyn West, and Jacquelyn White.

For More Information

For a more detailed discussion of the issues involved in a critical analysis of the UCR, NCVS, and NVAWS, an article by Dean Kilpatrick (2004) entitled "Making sense of rape in America: Where do the numbers come from and what do they mean?" is available from VAWnet at:

<http://www.vawnet.org/SexualViolence/PublicPolicy/MakingSenseofRape.pdf>.

The article presenting the revised Sexual Experiences Survey was published in 2007 in *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, Volume 31, p. 357-370. More information on the journal is available at: <http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/journal.asp?ref=0361-6843&site=1>.

As stated in the article, copies of the four recently revised versions of the SES are available from Mary P. Koss, Ph.D., Regents' Professor, Public Health, University of Arizona: mpk@email.arizona.edu.

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