

Note: This is a response to “How the CDC is Overstating Sexual Violence in the U.S.” by Christina Hoff Sommers published in the January 27, 2012, edition of The Washington Post.

“I wish it were true that sexual violence is being overstated”

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently released the *National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS)* which illuminates the alarming scope of sexual violence in the United States. The number of adults who have endured some type of sexual violence during their lifetime is shocking and should cause us all to stop and take note and to ask questions.

I do not, however, agree with the premise of Christina Hoff Sommers who accused the CDC, in her January 27 editorial in *The Washington Post*, of overstating sexual violence and of having some other agenda. I work with the CDC and find them to be rigorous and neutral in their research. Of course, every research study has limitations and deserves scrutiny, but I believe the CDC exercised due diligence to provide a current picture of the scope of sexual violence victimization in this country.

Those of us who work to prevent sexual violence know that it is a difficult and sometimes confusing topic to understand. There are several reasons why the *NISVS* research reports a higher prevalence of sexual violence in the United States than does the FBI’s *Uniform Crime Report (UCR)* and other studies:

- *NISVS* asked about many types of sexual violence, which is an umbrella term. Rape is one type, but there are many other types of unwanted sexual behaviors that cause people to feel violated or unsafe. The FBI’s *UCR* statistics only measure rape. Furthermore, until quite recently the definition of rape used by the FBI was quite narrow and left out many instances that will be counted in the future.
- FBI statistics only measure *reported* rape. Since 1929, crime data, such as reported rapes, has been submitted voluntarily by police departments. The data becomes a part of the federal report known as the *Uniform Crime Report (UCR)*. Through the *UCR*, the FBI issues guidelines and definitions related to processing sexual assault cases, but not all police departments follow these guidelines.

- Rape is the most underreported crime in the U.S. for several reasons (fear, shame, embarrassment, worries about being disbelieved or further traumatized, etc.). The majority of sexual assaults, an estimated 63 percent, are never reported to the police (Rennison, 2002).
- *NISVS* asked not only about incidences that had occurred in the past year but also about victimization that occurred any time in the participant's lifetime. This, of course, includes child sexual abuse, which is quite prevalent. About one in three girls and one in seven boys will be sexually abused before the age of 17 (Briere & Elliott, 2003).

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The editorial by Ms. Sommers criticized the research for using behaviorally-specific questions, rather than asking participants to define their own experiences as rape, stalking, or some other category. Rather than being a weakness of the study, this is actually one of its strengths that makes the data more reliable. Not everyone agrees on what label to give a particular experience, but by breaking it down into specifically-described behaviors, the researchers can be more confident that they are accurately comparing similar types of victimization. In this regard, *NISVS* data is much more accurate than the previous *National Crime Victimization Survey* which simply asked women if they had been raped; and also only looked at the prior year.

The results of the *NISVS* victimization survey differ from other reports for another very fundamental reason. The CDC is not examining the problem of sexual violence from a criminal justice viewpoint, but rather from a public health perspective. This is a broader approach, looking at not only the prevalence of victimization, but also the impact and health consequences over time. This non-criminal framework may increase participant's comfort level in talking about their experiences.

Both men and women are victims of sexual violence; and men and women both perpetrate sexual violence; but studies continue to show that the majority of perpetrators are male and the majority of victims are females and/or children. The fact that there is a relationship between gender and sexual violence cannot be denied. But regardless of one's gender, philosophy, or political views, I think we all want to live in a community that is safe and that treats everyone with dignity and respect. No matter which study you choose, it's clear that we have a problem with sexual violence in this country and we need to figure out how to turn that around. I really wish that Christina Hoff Sommers' assessment was correct and that the problem is not really that big; unfortunately the facts don't seem to be pointing in that direction. The sooner we get our heads out of the sand and accept that reality, the sooner we can begin working together to find effective solutions.

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Citations

Briere, J., & Elliott, D. M. (2003). Prevalence and psychological sequelae of self-reported childhood physical and sexual abuse in general population. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 27, 1205-1222.
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