

# NATIONAL RESEARCH ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE: A LOOK TO THE FUTURE

## An overview for advocates and prevention educators

*The goal of this overview is to equip advocates with information about key studies on sexual violence, including the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), as a way to help inform their sexual violence prevention and intervention efforts. This overview includes a brief discussion of the research studies currently available on sexual violence as well as information about NISVS.*

### About national studies

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Several groundbreaking national studies over the past two decades have brought the issues of interpersonal violence to light. While knowledge about interpersonal violence, including sexual violence, has grown significantly during this time, gaps persist.

Gathering information about the magnitude and breadth of interpersonal violence poses challenges due to multiple factors. Sexual violence victimization is often cloaked in secrecy and barriers continue to prevent victims and survivors from coming forward. Additionally, varied research definitions and methods can make it difficult to compare data across studies. The lack of current and consistent information presents challenges to advocates and practitioners in developing sexual violence prevention and intervention strategies. It can be a barrier to educating and

engaging lawmakers, media, and the general public. Prevention efforts, support for victims, and public understanding suffer.

### About The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS)

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The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) was designed to gather information on intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and stalking throughout the United States. NISVS was developed by the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in collaboration with the Department of Justice and the Department of Defense. NISVS was designed to screen for interpersonal violence more comprehensively than previous national studies.

NISVS began in 2010 and includes annual interviews with both English- and Spanish-



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speaking adults, using uniform definitions and survey methods. Researchers expect NISVS data to provide information about the impact and context of violence. For example, NISVS asks questions about the circumstances and people involved in the sexual violence incident(s). It also includes questions about the need, use, and availability of services and disclosure and reporting of incidents by victims. For the first time, both national and state level data for all states will be available simultaneously. NISVS will also further the understanding of violence on special populations.

## Criminal justice-based data

The U.S. Department of Justice collects data on sexual violence through two sources: Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) published by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) conducted by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS).

- **Uniform Crime Reports (UCR)**

The UCR began in 1929 and collects information about all crimes reported to law enforcement. Each month, law enforcement agencies are requested on a volunteer basis to submit their reports to the FBI detailing the number of crimes, including forcible rapes that were committed and reported in the previous month. Because UCR relies on law enforcement submitting their reports on a voluntary basis, the data are limited.

- **National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)**

The NCVS collects information on nonfatal crimes against persons age 12 or older from a nationally representative sample of U.S. households. NCVS includes non-fatal crimes that may or may not have been reported to the police. NCVS combines interviews conducted both by telephone and in-person. Twice per year, data are obtained from roughly 49,000 households comprising about 100,000 persons on the frequency and characteristics of all criminal victimization in the United States.

NCVS is often considered a primary source of information on the characteristics of criminal victimization including the number and types of crimes both reported and not reported to law enforcement.

## Incidence and prevalence

**Incidence refers to the number of new rapes that occur in a given time frame.**

**Prevalence is an estimate of how common a condition is within a population over a certain period of time.**

**What these reports measure:** Researchers have identified fundamental limitations with both of these reporting methods when they are used to represent the national incidence and prevalence of sexual violence.

Objections include the following:

1. UCR data include only reported forcible rapes, which does not capture a sizable population of people who don't report their crimes to law enforcement;
2. UCR only captures forcible rape, which involves vaginal penetration but omits other types of sexual assault.
3. NCVS data include both reported and unreported assaults, but are limited by the definitions and the language used to ask about behaviors. For example, interviewers ask about "rape" and "sexual assault" without providing the definitions of those words unless asked by the respondent.

Both of these data sources provide a specific piece of information about crimes of sexual violence. Because of the limitations of each, they cannot represent the full scope of sexual violence.

## Behaviorally-based studies

Large-scale national population studies that ask behaviorally-based questions provide a more accurate and comprehensive set of data. For example, asking participants if they have experienced "rape" may limit responses because the word "rape" carries stigma and can mean different things to different people. Asking participants if they have experienced specific behaviors can produce more accurate data about sexual violence and can capture a range of behaviors that may not rise to criminal offense standards but are controlling, coercive, and harmful.

The groundbreaking work in exposing sexual

## Empirical data

**Empirical data is information that comes directly from the study and is not data based on theory.**

violence and violence against women as a whole first came from two national studies designed to measure forcible rape against women and subsequently interpersonal violence in its many forms.

- **1989-91 National Women's Study (NWS)**

The National Women's Study (NWS) provided the first nationally-representative empirical data about forcible rape. The study, conducted over the course of three years (1989-1991), was the basis for the report *Rape In America: A Report to the Nation*. This report provided startling information about the breadth of women's experiences of rape. The finding that a majority of rape cases were occurring during childhood and adolescence led the study's authors to note ". . . rape in America is a tragedy of youth . . ." (Kilpatrick, Edmunds, & Seymour, 1992, p. 3).

**What the study measured:** This study was a random digit dial telephone survey limited to adult English-speaking women ages 18 and older. It was conducted in three waves beginning in 1989 with 4,008 women, a one-year follow-up in 1990, and a second-year follow-up in 1991. It did not measure attempted rape or alcohol or drug facilitated sexual assault.

## AN OVERVIEW FOR ADVOCATES & PREVENTION EDUCATORS

- **1995-96: National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS)**

The NWS was followed by the National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS) conducted in 1995-96. The study was co-sponsored by the CDC and the National Institute of Justice. NVAWS broadened the scope of inquiry to include physical violence, sexual assault, and stalking among intimate partners. Advocates and practitioners will recognize the seminal work, *Extent, Nature and Consequences of Intimate Partner Violence: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey* (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), the ensuing report that is still referenced and widely used today.

**What the study measured:** NVAWS included a nationally-representative sample of both men and women, (F=8,000 and M=8,000) ages 18 and over. It was a random digit dial telephone-based survey conducted in both English and Spanish. It did not include assessments for alcohol or drug facilitated sexual assault.

- **2005: The National Women's Study (NWS-R)**

The National Women's Study was replicated in 2005 to address specific gaps in data, most notably assessing for drug and alcohol-facilitated sexual assault (commonly known as DFSA) and incapacitated sexual assault (victims and survivors who were incapacitated due to drug/alcohol ingestion). As with the initial study, women were asked behaviorally-specific questions about rape experiences, with additional screening questions for DFSA and incapacitated rape. The results of this study produced the publication *Drug-*

*Facilitated, Incapacitated and Forcible Rape: A National Study* (Kilpatrick, Resnick, Ruggiero, Conoscenti, & McCauley, 2007).

**What the study measured:** Respondents included 3,000 adult women ages 18 and older. The study consisted of a random digit dial phone-based interview.

There have been other important large-scale studies that have assessed sexual violence in the lives of specific groups of people. For example, there have been several large studies measuring sexual assault on college campuses, including *The Sexual Victimization of College Women Survey* (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000) in 1997 and *The Campus Sexual Assault (CSA) Study* (Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2007) in 2006. Additionally, the *Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System* (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009) is a national school-based survey sponsored by the CDC that monitors various adolescent and teenage behaviors. The survey is conducted every other year. Large-scale population studies are by nature of the design, expensive and time-consuming.

- **2010 and Beyond: The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS)**

NISVS will provide the most comprehensive platform of data to date on intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and stalking, with trends in these public health problems to be analyzed over time. The CDC approaches interpersonal violence within a public health framework, which differs from the criminal framework used in NCVS. When using a public

health approach to violence prevention, the focus is on primary prevention—stopping violence before it occurs. Therefore, NISVS, a form of public health research, seeks to understand the risk and protective factors that influence violence and its prevention.

- **The 2010 NISVS Study**

In 2010, researchers interviewed 18,600 men and women, ages 18 and older. The respondents were reached using both landlines and cell phones through a random digit dial process. Interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish. During the first year of data collection, a random sample of female active-duty military members and female spouses of married male service members was also interviewed.

The NISVS survey began with questions regarding physical health, education, race/ethnicity, age, and income. During the course of the approximately 30-minute interview, respondents were asked about intimate partner violence across the lifespan, including dating violence victimization and victimization of elders. These questions included lifetime experiences of physical and sexual violence, psychological aggression, coercive control, and stalking.

Respondents were also asked about lifetime and 12-month experiences of sexual violence by any perpetrator. The sexual violence questions included rape, sexual coercion, unwanted sexual touch, and non-contact forms of sexual violence. Specific questions regarding drug and alcohol facilitated sexual assault and

## **Non-contact forms of sexual violence**

**Non-contact forms of sexual violence are those unwanted experiences that do not involve any touching or penetration, including someone exposing their sexual body parts, flashing, or masturbating in front of the victim, someone making a victim show his or her body parts, someone making a victim look at or participate in sexual photos or movies, or someone harassing the victim in a public place in a way that made the victim feel unsafe (Basile & Smith, 2011).**

sexual assaults against individuals who were incapacitated were also included. Respondents were also asked questions about experiences with stalking behaviors by any perpetrator.

While the subject matter of violence can be highly personal for respondents, measures were established within NISVS to ensure safety for participants throughout the process. These measures included screening questions to obtain informed consent, options for participants to end the interview at any time, periodic check-ins by interviewers throughout the interview, information about availability of community-based resources, and steps to protect the privacy of participants.

# AN OVERVIEW FOR ADVOCATES & PREVENTION EDUCATORS

## Comparison of national data collections

A comparison of the types of data and information gathered by previous national studies and NISVS.

	National Women's Study	National Violence Against Women	National Women's Study (Replicated)	National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey
Year	1989-91	1995-96	2006	2010
Women (age)	18 & older	18 & older	18 & older	18 & older
Men (age)	None	18 & older	None	18 & older
English/Spanish	English	Both	English	Both
Reported/Unreported	Both	Both	Both	Both
Drug-facilitated*	No	No	Yes	Yes
Incapacitated	No	No	Yes	Yes
Lifetime prevalence	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Past-year prevalence	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Spec. pop. consideration**	No	No	No	Yes
Ongoing/yearly basis	No	No	No	Yes
State-specific data	No	No	No	Yes

\*Alcohol/drug-facilitated sexual assault occurs when a perpetrator engages in sexual behavior with a person who is unable to provide consent due to being intoxicated or incapacitated because of the effects of alcohol or drugs. This type of sexual assault can occur whether the victim's consumption of alcohol or drugs is voluntary or involuntary (Basile & Smith, 2011). \*\*Special populations consideration

Adapted from Understanding National Rape Statistics by D. Kilpatrick and J. McCauley, 2009. Retrieved from [http://www.vawnet.org/Assoc\\_Files\\_VAWnet/AR\\_RapeStatistics.pdf](http://www.vawnet.org/Assoc_Files_VAWnet/AR_RapeStatistics.pdf).

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## How impact of violence was measured

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One of the most important aspects of NISVS is the ability to link all behaviors committed by an individual perpetrator. Such behaviors include physical violence, expressive aggression, coercive control, sexual violence, and stalking. The impact and consequences of violence committed by a specific perpetrator were measured using the following questions:

- being fearful
- being concerned for safety
- experiencing post traumatic stress disorder symptoms
- having nightmares
- trying hard not to think about incident or avoiding being reminded of incident
- feeling constantly on guard, watchful, or easily startled
- feeling numb or detached from others, activities, or surroundings
- being injured
- needing health care as a result of the violence experienced
- needing housing services
- needing victim's advocate services
- needing legal services
- contacting a crisis hotline
- missing days of work or school because of the violence experienced
- for those reporting sexual violence - sustaining physical injury, contracting a sexually transmitted infection, or becoming pregnant

This provides important information regarding the patterns of violence and the context in which the violence occurs.

## Special populations included in NISVS

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As data emerge, NISVS will provide information on special populations that are often overlooked or may experience intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and/or stalking at higher rates than other groups. For example, researchers used a sampling technique to ensure a large-enough sample size of Native American and Alaskan Native respondents. Individuals in later life (age 70 and older) were asked about victimization from non-intimate partners. Individuals with disabilities were included in the research. Researchers also asked about violence within opposite sex relationships and same sex relationships.

## Limitations of NISVS

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As with any study, NISVS has limitations. First and most obvious, NISVS does not capture information from people who are not in private residences and who do not have access to a telephone. This would include multiple groups that, according to some research, may suffer higher than average rates of sexual violence or experience particular risks for sexual violence: people in later life who are living in nursing homes or other facilities; people with disabilities who are living in residential facilities; people struggling with addiction who are residing in treatment programs; people who are incarcerated; and people who are homeless or living in shelters.

# AN OVERVIEW FOR ADVOCATES & PREVENTION EDUCATORS

NISVS researchers do not interview anyone under 18. Therefore, child sexual abuse is examined retrospectively; interviewees are given the opportunity to disclose information about being victimized as children. Recalling victimization experience from childhood might include some recall bias. However, adults often have greater distance, perspective, and language to process and disclose earlier victimization. This provides valuable data that informs child sexual abuse prevention and intervention.

## Conclusion

NISVS builds upon the national research on interpersonal violence. NISVS will begin to provide a constant and reliable measurement of intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and stalking, shedding light on violence against special populations often overlooked in research. In addition, NISVS could provide a better understanding of the meaning and context of violence, which will inform new prevention strategies at local, state, and national levels. Expanding relationships and collaborations between individuals and organizations working in violence prevention can only strengthen a collective national response.

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