



WCSAP
Washington Coalition of
Sexual Assault Programs

THE ADVOCACY STATION

Using Statistics to Support Your Work

Statistics can help people who are not familiar with an issue to understand it better. In the case of statistics about sexual violence, they can help community members, allied professional partners, and funders understand (1) how big the problem is, (2) how sexual violence impacts society as a whole rather than just individuals and families, (3) and why sexual assault advocates are necessary. It is important to use statistics correctly and consistently.

Community members may ask advocates, “How often does rape really happen?” It can be difficult for someone who doesn’t work with survivors every day to comprehend just how many women, men, and children experience sexual violence in their lifetime. Naturally, advocates want these community members to understand the gravity of the problem, and a good way to start the conversation is by citing a prevalence statistic. This leads many advocates to cite the largest sexual violence prevalence statistic they have heard in order to make the biggest impression.

There are a few issues with this approach. First, the advocate may not have a citation for the statistic that identifies its specific source or the statistic may not be based on reliable research. It is vital to our movement’s success that we only use statistics that are based on reliable research and can be backed up with a citation. Second, the statistic may not address the question the community member asked. It is important for advocates to be precise about what each statistic measures, so that they can respond to specific questions accurately. Considering these best practices when selecting statistics enhances the credibility of your organization and allows advocates to speak convincingly about their work with survivors.

So, what does “being precise” mean in this context? There are a number of pitfalls that advocates may face when reading, interpreting, and using statistics about sexual violence. The purpose of this paper is to provide a few pointers for avoiding the most common challenges, using examples from reliable research studies about sexual violence, so that advocates are better informed and able to use statistics accurately and consistently.

Pointers

1. Make sure to know what each statistic measures.

People often accidentally use "sexual assault" and "rape" interchangeably. Take the 2001 study, [*Sexual Assault Experiences and Perceptions of Community Response to Sexual Assault: A Survey of Washington Women*](#), as an example. Table 6 (see appendix), Lifetime Prevalence of Sexual Violence, reports lifetime prevalence findings regarding six types of sexual violence and then reports that more than one in three (38%) Washington women have experienced sexual violence victimization during their lifetime (Berliner, L., 2001, p. 12). A correct use of this statistic could be, "More than one in three Washington women have been sexually assaulted during their lifetime." On the other hand, it would be incorrect to say that more than one in three Washington women have been raped in their lifetime. Please refer to Table 6 for prevalence statistics on rape and other specific forms of sexual violence.

Another related pitfall is comparing a statistic from one study with a statistic from another study without addressing how sexual assault is defined in each study. For example, the [*National Violence Against Women Survey*](#) measures only rape, while the [*National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey*](#) (NISVS), discussed in depth below, measures rape in addition to measuring other forms sexual assault, sexual coercion, and non-contact sexual victimization. So, it would not be appropriate to compare data on the prevalence of sexual violence in general from these two studies. If rape is defined the same way in each study, those numbers could be compared.

2. Always pay attention to the fine print.

Many studies ask survivors to report multiple incidents of sexual assault over their lifetime. For instance, look at Table 2.5 (see appendix) in the [*National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey 2010 Summary Report*](#), which tells us whether the survivors interviewed knew their perpetrator(s) (Black et al., 2010, p. 22). The percentages of non-stranger rapes total more than 100%. The first footnote under this table tells us that this is because some victims had multiple perpetrators. Another example of this is paying attention to details such as whether a statistic refers to "x number of victims" or "x number of incidents of sexual assault."

3. Only use a statistic about a specific population to refer to sexual violence against that population.

In a recent training for WCSAP, Claudia Bayliff, an attorney with the National Judicial Education Project, discussed this issue. She explained that it would be

incorrect to use a statistic about sexual assault of college women, for example, as representative of sexual assault of all women.

In addition to being better informed about how to use statistics accurately, we want advocates to be better informed about current sexual violence statistics themselves.

National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS)

The Centers for Disease Control's (CDC) National Center for Injury Prevention and Control launched the *National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey* (NISVS) in 2010. The first year's results were published in December 2011. NISVS is an ongoing, nationally representative survey that assesses adult men and women's sexual violence, stalking, and intimate partner violence experiences (Black et al., 2010, p. 7). NISVS surveyed English- and Spanish-speaking, noninstitutionalized men and women over the age of 18, using a random digit dial telephone method that included both landline and cell phones (Black et al., 2010, p. 9).

Prior to the release of the NISVS data, the most recent national survey that provided statistics on sexual violence prevalence was the National Violence Against Women Survey, conducted by the National Institute of Justice and the CDC in 1995 and 1996. In Washington, we are fortunate to also have Washington-specific data from the 2001 study, *Sexual Assault Experiences and Perceptions of Community Response to Sexual Assault: A Survey of Washington Women*. In addition to being the most recent data on sexual violence victimization, NISVS also includes statistics on types of sexual violence that were not included in previous national surveys.

In order to understand the NISVS data, it is first important to know how NISVS defines acts of sexual violence.

- Rape is defined as, "any completed or attempted unwanted vaginal, oral, or anal penetration through the use of physical force or threats of physical harm and includes times when the victim was drunk, high, or passed out and unable to consent."
- Sexual coercion is defined as, "unwanted sexual penetration that occurs after a person is pressured in a nonphysical way."
- Unwanted sexual contact is defined as, "unwanted sexual experiences involving touch but not sexual penetration."
- Non-contact unwanted sexual experiences are defined as those that "do not involve any touching or penetration."

An example of a non-contact sexual violence experience would be if someone flashed the victim, made the victim show her or his body parts, made the victim

participate in sexual photos, or harassed the victim in a public place (Black et al., 2010, all definitions p. 17).

In order to be included in the sexual violence lifetime prevalence statistics, a survivor must have experienced the behavior at least once during her or his lifetime. Survivors who had experienced multiple victimizations in a particular category of violence (ie. sexual violence other than rape) were only included in the summary estimate for that category of violence once. Thus, survivors “could have experienced each type of violence more than once so prevalence statistics should be interpreted as the percentage of the population who experienced each type of violence *at least once*” (emphasis added) (Black et al., 2010, p. 12).

The NISVS data is different than other statistics commonly used in the anti-sexual violence field. For example, NISVS found that 1 in 5 women in the United States have been raped in their lifetime. We often hear the statistics 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men are sexually assaulted in their lifetime. The 1 in 4 women statistic comes from two different studies and does not refer to the general population of women. The [Adverse Childhood Experiences Study](#) (ACES) found that 1 in 4 girls are sexually abused. The [Sexual Victimization of College Women](#) study estimated that 1 in 5 to 1 in 4 college women will be the victim of rape or attempted rape during their college careers. The 1 in 6 men statistic is also from the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACES), which found that 1 in 6 boys are sexually abused. It does not refer to adult men. As noted above, NISVS only surveyed adult men and women. The survey respondents may have reported sexual violence that they experienced as children, but no children were surveyed and there are no child-specific prevalence statistics in the report.

A fact sheet containing some of the key NISVS findings about rape and other forms of sexual violence against women and men can be found on page five of this document. Some suggested uses for this sexual violence fact sheet are: as a handout during outreach events to community members, in trainings, as part of new advocate training or board orientation, and in funding applications.

Sexual Violence Fact Sheet

National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey

Sexual Violence Against Women

- Nearly 1 in 5 women in the United States have been raped in their lifetime (2010 Summary Report, p.18).
- Nearly 1 in 2 women have experienced sexual violence other than rape in their lifetime (p.19).

Sexual Violence Against Men

- Approximately 1 in 71 men in the United States have been raped in their lifetime (2010 Summary Report, p.18).
- 1 in 5 men have experienced sexual violence other than rape in their lifetime (p.19).

Sexual Violence Against Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Individuals

- Approximately 1 in 8 lesbians and nearly half of bisexual women (46.1%) have been raped in their lifetime (2010 Findings on Victimization by Sexual Orientation, p.10).
- Nearly half of lesbian women (46.4%) and approximately 3 in 4 bisexual women (74.9%) experienced sexual violence other than rape in their lifetime (p.10).
- Nearly half of bisexual men (47.4%) and 4 in 10 gay men experienced sexual violence other than rape in their lifetime (p. 11).

Sexual Violence Against Particular Racial/Ethnic Populations

- More than 1 in 4 women (26.9%) who identified as American Indian or Alaska Native and 1 in 3 multiracial women (33.5%) have been raped in their lifetime (2010 Summary Report, p. 20).
- More than half (58%) of multiracial non-Hispanic women experienced sexual violence other than rape in their lifetime (p. 20).
- Nearly one-third (31.6%) of multiracial non-Hispanic men experienced sexual violence other than rape in their lifetime (p. 21).

Age of Victimization¹

- Most female victims of rape (79.6%) experienced their first rape before age 25; approximately 42% before age 18 (2010 Summary Report, p. 25).
- More than 1 in 4 male victims of rape experienced their first rape when 10 years old or younger (p. 25).

Perpetrators of Sexual Violence

- The majority of male (93.3%) and female rape victims (98.1%) reported that their perpetrators were male (2010 Summary Report, p. 24).
- The majority of male and female rape victims knew their perpetrator (p. 21).
- More than half of female victims of rape (51.1%) reported that at least one perpetrator was a current or former intimate partner (p. 22).
- More than half of male victims of rape (52.4%) reported being raped by an acquaintance (p. 22).

References

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¹ Note: NISVS only surveyed adult men and women. The survey respondents may have reported sexual violence that they experienced as children, but no children were surveyed and there are no child-specific prevalence statistics in the report.

Recommended Reading and Additional Resources

There is a wide array of information available on this topic. Here is a short list of recommended materials and tools.

Reading, Resources & Tools

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has developed a [Communications Toolkit](#) for NISVS that contains practical tools and strategies for communicating the findings effectively.
- [CounterQuo](#), an initiative of the [Victim Rights Law Center](#) and the [Voices and Faces Project](#), put out a white paper on national rape statistics in 2011. The paper, [The Prevalence of Rape in the United States](#), addresses data from NISVS in addition to numerous other national studies.
- National Sexual Violence Resource Center has published a 30-minute online course, [Understanding National Rape Statistics](#), adapted from the [Applied Research Paper](#) of the same name by Dean Kilpatrick and Jenna McCauley. The course teaches participants how to evaluate the information provided by national studies and apply it to their work.
- In a white paper written in 2008 and revised in 2011, Jody Raphael and T.K. Logan take an in-depth look at [The Use \(And Misuse\) of Data on Rape: Restoring Sexual Assault to the National Agenda](#).

References

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- Tjaden, P. & Thoennes, N. (2000). *Full Report of the Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence Against Women: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/183781.pdf>
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APPENDIX

- **Table 6:** Lifetime Prevalence of Sexual Victimization, Sexual Assault Experience and Perceptions of Community Response: A Survey of Washington Women (p. 12)
- **Table 2.5:** Lifetime Reports of Sexual Violence Among Female Victims by Type of Perpetrator, National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (p. 22)

Table 5 Marital Status of Respondents			
Marital Status	OCVA Survey		WA State Population
	Number	Percentage	
Single, Never Married	180	14%	22%
Married	886	67%	60%
Divorced/Separated	139	11%	12%
Widowed	115	9%	6%

PREVALENCE AND PAST YEAR INCIDENCE OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

More than one-third of Washington State women have been sexually assaulted during their lifetime. These experiences reflect a range of types of sexual victimization that generally correspond with Washington State laws.

Table 6 Lifetime Prevalence of Sexual Victimization		
Sexual Assault Type	N	Percent
Rape	306	23%
Attempted Rape	152	12%
Indecent Liberties	196	15%
Unable to Consent (Alcohol/Drugs)	115	9%
Child Rape	88	7%
Child Molestation	231	18%
Total Sexual Victimization	502*	38%

*numbers do not total because of multiple victimization experiences

Rape = forced sexual penetration (vaginal, oral, anal, digital, object)
Attempted rape = uncompleted attempt at forced penetration
Indecent Liberties = forced sexual contact (with breasts, buttock, genital area)
Nonconsenting Sex = unwanted sex while under the influence of alcohol or drugs and when unable to give or withhold consent
Child Rape = non-forced sexual penetration when less than 16 years with a person more than five years older
Child Molestation = non-forced sexual touching (of breasts, buttocks, or genital area) when less than 16 years by a person more than five years older

Rates of sexual assault experiences were examined by where women lived in Washington State, although the study did not ascertain where the sexual assault occurred.

Table 2.5**Lifetime Reports of Sexual Violence Among Female Victims by Type of Perpetrator¹ — NISVS 2010**

	Current or Former Intimate Partner	Family Member ²	Person of Authority ³	Acquaintance ⁴	Stranger
	Weighted %	Weighted %	Weighted %	Weighted %	Weighted %
Rape	51.1	12.5	2.5	40.8	13.8
Attempted or completed forced penetration	52.5	14.8	2.4	33.0	14.1
Alcohol/drug-facilitated penetration	43.0	6.6	*	50.4	9.6
Other sexual violence	35.7	16.1	7.9	42.1	44.8
Made to penetrate	*	*	*	*	*
Sexual coercion	75.4	6.1	5.7	21.8	*
Unwanted sexual contact	23.5	19.9	8.3	45.9	24.9
Non-contact unwanted sexual experiences	23.1	14.8	4.3	31.2	50.5

¹Relationship is based on respondents' reports of their relationship at the time the perpetrator first committed any violence against them. Due to the possibility of multiple perpetrators, combined row percents may exceed 100%.

²Includes immediate and extended family members.

³Includes, for example: boss, supervisor, superior in command, teacher, professor, coach, clergy, doctor, therapist, and caregiver.

⁴Includes friends, neighbors, family friends, first date, someone briefly known, and people not known well.

*Estimate is not reported; relative standard error >30% or cell size ≤ 20.

More than half of the male victims of rape (52.4%) were raped by an acquaintance, and 1 in 7 male victims (15.1%) was raped by a stranger (Table 2.6). The estimates for male victims raped by other types of perpetrators were based upon numbers too small to calculate a reliable estimate and therefore are not reported.

Sexual Violence Other than Rape

For both women and men, the type of perpetrator varied by the form of sexual violence experienced. The majority of female victims of sexual coercion and unwanted sexual contact reported known perpetrators. Three-quarters of female victims (75.4%) of sexual coercion reported perpetration

by an intimate partner, and nearly 1 in 2 female victims (45.9%) of unwanted sexual contact reported perpetration by an acquaintance. Strangers were the most commonly reported perpetrators of non-contact unwanted sexual experiences against women, reported by 1 in 2 female victims (50.5%) (Table 2.5).