

# Crunching Numbers: *Crime and Incarceration at the End of the Millennium*

by Jan M. Chaiken

*This article is based on a presentation made by Dr. Chaiken on July 20, 1999, at the Office of Justice Programs' Annual Conference on Criminal Justice Research and Evaluation in Washington, D.C.*

**A**s we approach January 2000, the impulse to think about the future is nearly irresistible. At the Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), we compulsive statisticians know that the year 2000 is still part of the twentieth century, so we are more relaxed than most people about the arrival of a new millennium.

Our attitude toward the future may also be shaped by the fact that we statisticians are more oriented to the past: We know that the only data available are data from the past. This article, therefore, explores some of the complex trends in property crime, rape, and violence among intimates, all of which raise important questions for new research. It also highlights some of the implications of the high rates of incarceration, which are attracting researchers' attention.<sup>1</sup> Conclusions are left for the reader to draw.

## Decline in Property Crime—Does the U.S. Stand Alone?

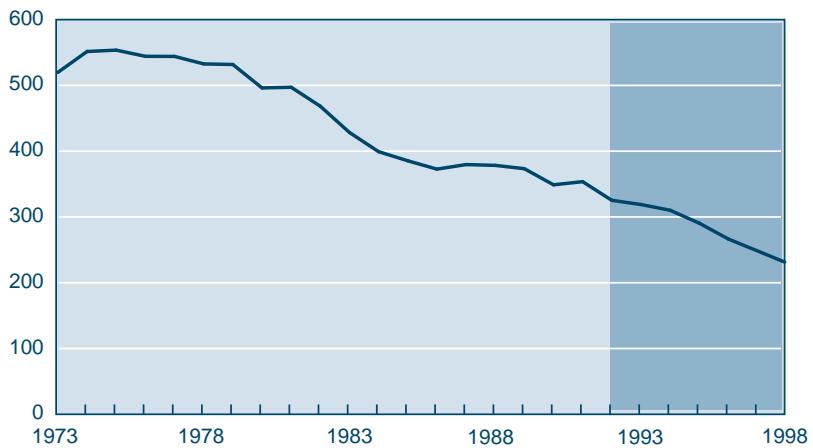
As measured by the BJS National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), property crime has been

### about the author

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Figure 1: Property Crime Rates,  
United States, 1973–98

*Adjusted victimization rate per 1,000 households\**



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey

Note: The property crimes included are burglary, theft, and motor vehicle theft.

\* The National Crime Victimization Survey redesign was implemented in 1993; the area with the lighter shading is before the redesign and the darker area after the redesign. The data before 1993 are adjusted to make them comparable with data collected since the redesign.

declining in this country for at least 25 years<sup>2</sup> (see figure 1). This type of crime, which includes larceny, burglary, theft in general, and motor vehicle theft, has fallen 58 percent since 1975. Burglary rates closely resemble property crime rates overall in their steep decline (see figure 2, next page).

This pattern has *not* been duplicated in other countries. In Canada, for example, although property crime has declined steadily since 1992, the decline is not nearly as steep as in the United States, and the longer term pattern in Canada is essentially flat—or has not changed.<sup>4</sup>

England and Wales use a victimization survey quite similar to the NCVS, which facilitates comparison of crime data with the United States. Not only has property crime been increasing in England and Wales, but the rates—once much lower than in the United States—now exceed ours.<sup>5</sup> For most of the period since 1981, burglary in England and Wales has been increasing, not declining, with a turnaround starting in 1992 or 1993 (see figure 3), a situation approximately the same as in Canada. In rates of motor vehicle theft, the patterns in the United States much more closely resemble those of England and Wales (see figure 4, next page).

What is going on here? First, it is important to note that national trends are an aggregate of State and local trends, which may be moving in entirely different directions in some parts of the country than the overall numbers. So it is possible that in a particular State or community the trends are quite a bit different from the national trend. But on a nationwide basis, the differences among countries are palpable. In London, burglaries are a high-priority focus of the police and are frequent topics of newspaper articles and even announcements on public transit.

The downward shift in burglary and theft in the United States has attracted very little attention from researchers—especially compared to that given to trends in violent crime. To be sure, the reason for the downturn is difficult to understand if we accept the idea that it is not possible to find a valid explanation by pointing to something that happened in the United States but also happened in other countries.

What comes to mind as possible explanations? On the side of potential victims: More window and door alarms and more secure windows

**Figure 2: Burglary Rates, United States, 1973–98**

Adjusted victimization rate per 1,000 households\*

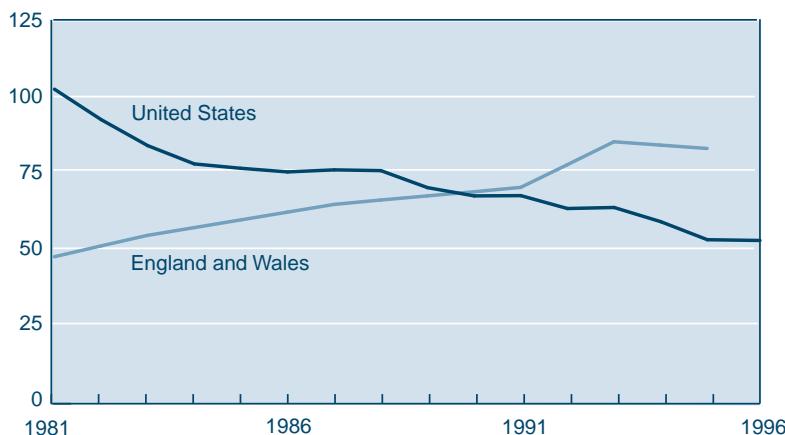


Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey

\* The National Crime Victimization Survey redesign was implemented in 1993; the area with the lighter shading is before the redesign and the darker area after the redesign. The data before 1993 are adjusted to make them comparable with data collected since the redesign.

**Figure 3: Burglary Rates, United States and England/Wales, 1981–96**

Victimization rate per 1,000 population



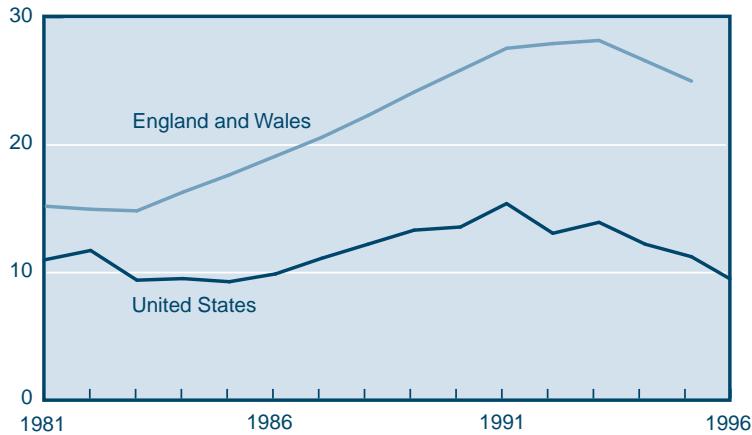
Source: Langan, Patrick A. and David P. Farrington, *Crime and Justice in the United States and in England and Wales, 1981–96*, Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, October 1998 (NCJ 169284).

Note: U.S. surveys interview people age 12 or older; English surveys, age 16 or older. The U.S. surveys have been conducted annually since 1973. English surveys were conducted in 1981, 1983, 1987, 1991, 1993, and 1995. Burglary was defined in both countries' surveys as residential burglary.

and doors; better illumination in yards and driveways and inside

homes when no one is present; more private security and gated

**Figure 4: Motor Vehicle Theft Rates, United States and England/Wales, 1981–96**  
Adjusted victimization rate per 1,000 households



Source: Langan, Patrick A. and David P. Farrington, *Crime and Justice in the United States and in England and Wales, 1981–96*, Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, October 1998 (NCJ 169284).

Note: U.S. surveys interview people age 12 or older; English surveys, age 16 or older. The U.S. surveys have been conducted annually since 1973. English surveys were conducted in 1981, 1983, 1987, 1991, 1993, and 1995.

**Figure 5: Rape Rates, United States, 1973–98**

Adjusted victimization rate per 1,000 people age 12 and older\*



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey

Note: Includes both attempted and completed rape.

\* The National Crime Victimization Survey redesign was implemented in 1993; the area with the lighter shading is before the redesign and the darker area after the redesign. The data before 1993 are adjusted to make them comparable with data collected since the redesign.

communities; less cash being carried because of greater use of credit cards and ATM cards for financial transactions. On the side of potential perpetrators: More drug dealers

in prison; more criminals turning to robbery and lucrative Internet crime instead of burglary. And, of course, better research and evaluation!

When *U.S. News and World Report* examined these patterns, it favored this explanation for the drop in crime: People are more likely now than in the past to be home watching cable TV and videotapes, rather than being out on the town, so the nighttime burglar has fewer opportunities.<sup>6</sup>

## Rape: Is It Really Declining?

People generally have two different reactions when they see the data on rape trends. Some say, when they see the decline reported by the NCVS (see figure 5), obviously our policies concerning violence against women are working—women are learning how to handle threatening situations or are aware of the alternatives for avoiding them.

Others disagree, believing that the downward trend is illusory, that it means only that women are becoming less willing to report rape and even more reluctant to mention it to the NCVS interviewers. The NCVS data are based on interviews, not police reports, and the respondents also are asked if they reported the crime to the police. We know that rape continues to be the crime reported least often, especially among women in their teens and early twenties, as well as college students.

BJS, the National Institute of Justice, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) sponsor research to examine whether other methods of inquiring about sexual assault and rape yield better estimates of the true extent of victimization.<sup>7</sup> Whenever BJS compares the results of its NCVS surveys with those of the more explicit and reassuring methods used in surveys conducted by NIJ, CDC, and in other BJS research, it becomes clear that many of these crimes remain uncounted by the NCVS.

This is particularly true of rape by intimates, which women may mention to an interviewer in the context of fights with their partners or spouses but are less likely to mention in the NCVS context of crime. That may be either because they may not think it is a crime or because they may not want to contemplate the implications of their partner's behavior amounting to a violent crime.

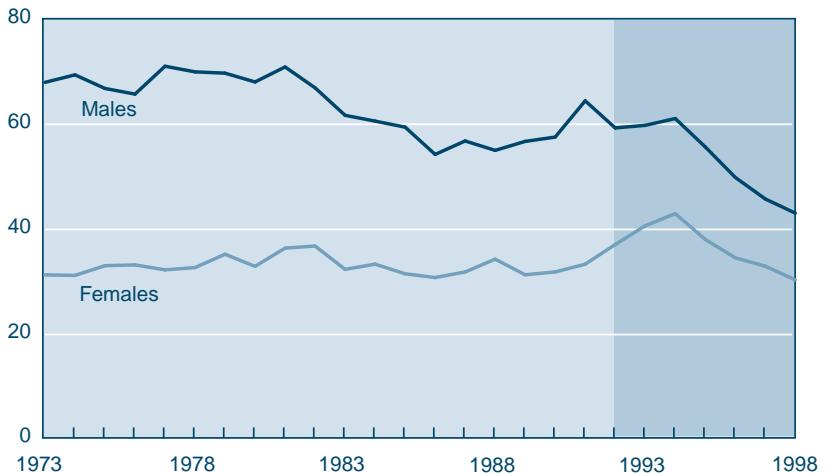
BJS is working closely with NIJ, CDC, and the National Center for Health Statistics to better understand the incidence of domestic violence, including sexual assault, and to develop better ways to measure the extent of violence against women.<sup>8</sup> Particularly because sexual assault, unlike property crime, may not actually be dwindling, it requires continued research and intervention—and improved measurement systems!

## Declining Violence Among Intimates—The Gender Gap

The story of trends in violence among intimates is a remarkable one. The past decade has seen a real change in perceptions of the seriousness of violence against women, especially by a husband or partner. Legislation has been enacted at the State and Federal levels, the Violence Against Women Office was established in the U.S. Department of Justice, and funding has flowed to all the States for programs intended to reduce the occurrence of violence against women and assist victims. Although we are beginning to see numerous indications of the effectiveness of these programs in a broad sense, the trends in serious violence are not at all what might be expected given the recent strong emphasis on violence against women.

**Figure 6: Violent Crime Rates, by Gender of Victim, United States, 1973–98**

*Adjusted victimization rate per 1,000 people age 12 and over\**



Sources: Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey; and FBI Uniform Crime Reports

Note: The violent crimes included are rape, robbery, aggravated and simple assault, and homicide.

\* The National Crime Victimization Survey redesign was implemented in 1993; the area with the lighter shading is before the redesign and the darker area after the redesign. The data before 1993 are adjusted to make them comparable with data collected since the redesign.

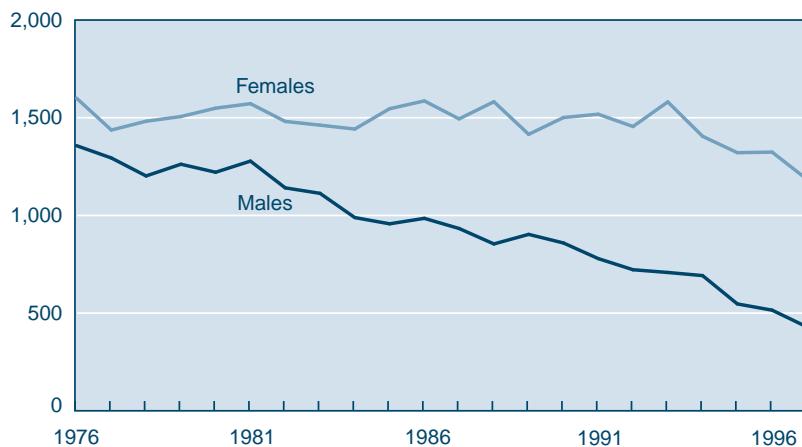
The overall decrease in serious, violent crime (by about 31 percent since 1994) has benefited men much more than women (see figure 6). For women, the victimization rate declined less than 15 percent in this period and overall is still slightly above the levels of the 1970's. When we examine particular population subgroups, we find some categories of women who are more likely than men to be victims of crime. Women college students, for example, are at greater risk of victimization than women of the same age who are not in college.<sup>9</sup> On the whole, the victimization of college women by crimes other than sexual assault is approximately the same as that for men, but women are in addition the primary victims of sexual assault. This is a form of gender equity that no one was hoping for.

When we examine homicide committed by intimates, we detect the possibility that a downward trend for women victims began around 1994. However, the long-term downward shift in the number of men killed by their intimate partners is much steeper (see figure 7, next page). A reasonable interpretation of this disparity is that women who find themselves in situations so devastating that they might consider killing their partners increasingly have options such as shelters, protection orders, and police arrest policies that allow them, at the moment they feel compelled to kill, to resist that compulsion.<sup>10</sup> Men, on the other hand, continue to kill their intimate partners at about the same rate as a quarter of a century ago.

**Figure 7: Homicides by Intimates, by Gender**

**United States, 1976–97**

*Number of homicide victims killed by an intimate*



Source: FBI Uniform Crime Reports, Supplemental Homicide Reports, as presented in Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Homicide Trends in the United States*, at <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/intimate.htm>, and *Homicide Trends in the United States*, by James Alan Fox and Marianne Zawitz, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, January 1999 (NCJ 173956).

Looking in more detail at the circumstances in which this steep reduction in the number of men killed by intimates has occurred, we see a long-term downtrend in the use of guns. Then, in the past few years, the use of other kinds of weapons also has declined (see figure 8, next page). It should be noted that not all the men killed by intimates are killed by a woman. The data also include male intimates who kill men.

### High Incarceration Rate—Problem or Solution?

Another major trend for researchers' consideration is the literally incredible increase in incarceration rates in the United States since 1975. Like the decrease in violent crime, this fact is fairly well known, although the details and the implications may not be. Not only has the incarcera-

tion rate more than quadrupled—after holding more or less steady for decades—but it has disproportionately affected minority racial and ethnic groups (see figure 9, next page). This is so much the case in some communities that incarceration is becoming almost a normative life experience.

Such a high level of incarceration has grave implications for the body politic. For one thing, it fosters disrespect for legitimate authority among people who begin to feel that everyone they know is being put in prison. For another, because felons typically are not eligible to vote, they are likely to have no interest or role in elections and thus may be alienated from the political process. We are disenfranchising a group of people who currently are minorities, but—if current demographic trends continue—will become a majority of the population.

The latest figures, for 1996, show that on any given day, approximately 30 percent of black men ages 20 to 29 were under correctional supervision—either in jail or prison or on probation or parole in the community (see tables 1 and 2, page 16). Examining the numbers for State and Federal prisoners only (that is, omitting people who are on probation and parole), we find that 8.3 percent of black men ages 25 to 29 were in prison at the end of 1996. This figure is more than three times higher than the 2.6 percent of Hispanic men who are in prison and more than 10 times higher than the rate for white men.

BJS has developed a statistical model that predicts the lifetime chances of going to prison if current patterns of imprisonment continue at the same levels. The model indicates that a young black man age 16 in 1996 had a 28.5 percent chance of spending time in prison during his life (see table 3, page 16). This figure does *not* include being arrested and spending a night or so in jail. It reflects actual prison sentences, which ordinarily are for at least a year and follow a conviction for a felony.

This does not seem to be the kind of trend that can be sustained very long, both because of its monetary costs and because of its corrosive effects on heavily affected communities. On the other side of the equation, however, there are those who believe that the dramatic decrease in violent crime that this country has experienced in the recent past can be attributed to the very fact that large numbers of people are behind bars. They see the investment as paying off in lower crime.

## A Window of Opportunity

This unanticipated period of rapidly declining crime may be unique in our Nation's history. Indeed, there are those who warn that it surely must be a passing phenomenon. Whether or not that is the case, it would seem opportune for criminal justice researchers to seize the moment and learn as much as they can about the underlying causes of the decline. For the purpose of developing public policy, we are most interested in uncovering strong evidence about what has been done at the State, city, county, and Federal levels that helped make the decline happen. It also would be of interest to shed light on pockets where the overall national data are not borne out. Such efforts on the part of researchers may turn out to be vital in sustaining the decline of crime in the United States. At the same time, we know that even effective policies for crime reduction that unfairly affect any segment of the population should not be tolerated.

NCJ 180078

## Notes

1. See, for example, Todd Clear and Dina R. Rose, *When Neighbors Go to Jail: Impact on Attitudes About Formal and Informal Social Control*, Research Preview, Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, July 1999.
2. The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) is the Nation's primary source of information about criminal victimization. Information is obtained annually from a nationally representative sample of roughly 43,000 households comprising more than 80,000 people who are asked about the frequency, characteristics, and

**Figure 8: Homicide of Male Intimates, by Weapon Type, United States, 1976-97**

Number of male homicide victims killed by an intimate



Source: FBI, Uniform Crime Reports, Supplemental Homicide Reports, as presented in Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Homicide Trends in the United States*, at <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/intimate.htm>, and *Homicide Trends in the United States*, by James Alan Fox and Marianne Zawitz, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, January 1999 (NCJ 173956).

**Figure 9: Incarceration Rates, United States, 1925-97**

Number of inmates sentenced under State and Federal jurisdictions per 100,000 residents



Sources: Data for 1925-84—*State and Federal Prisoners*, 1925-85 by S. Minor-Harper, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1986 (NCJ 102494); data for 1985-95—*Correctional Populations in the United States*, 1995, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, June 1997 (NCJ 163916); data for 1996-97—*Prisoners in 1997*, by Darrell K. Gilliard and Allen J. Beck, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, August 1998 (NCJ 170014).

consequences of their victimization by crime. The survey reports the extent of victimization from rape, sexual assault,

robbery, assault, theft, household burglary, and motor vehicle theft for the population as a whole and for subpopulations such as

**Table 1: Percentage of Men Under Correctional Supervision, by Race and Age, United States, 1996**

White age	Percent of white men in age category	Black age	Percent of black men in age category
18–19	4.4	18–19	16.2
20–24	8.0	20–24	29.4
25–29	7.1	25–29	28.9
30–34	5.8	30–34	24.4
34–39	4.4	35–39	17.2
40 or older	1.3	40 or older	6.1

Source: Beck, Allen J., "Trends in U.S. Correctional Populations," in *The Dilemmas of Corrections: Contemporary Readings, Fourth Edition*, ed. by K.C. Haas and G.P. Alpert, Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1999.

**Table 2: Incarceration Rates, by Race, Ethnicity, and Gender, United States, 1996**

Number of sentenced prisoners per 100,000 residents of each group			
All ages		Men Ages 25–29	
Men		Blacks	8,319
Blacks	3,098	Hispanics	2,609
Hispanics	1,278	Whites	829
Whites	370		
Women			
Blacks	188		
Hispanics	78		
Whites	23		

Source: Gilliard, Darrell K., and Allen J. Beck, *Prisoners in 1997*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, August 1998 (NCJ 170014).

**Table 3: Lifetime Likelihood of Going to Prison, United States, 1991**

Lifetime chance	
All people	5.1%
White men	4.4
Black men	28.5

Source: Bonczar, Thomas P., and Allen J. Beck, *Lifetime Likelihood of Going to State or Federal Prison*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, March 1997 (NCJ 160092).

women, the elderly, members of various racial groups, and city dwellers. NCVS data collection began in 1973; data from the redesigned survey were reported beginning in 1993.

3. This figure and the others accompanying this article are drawn from charts on the BJS Web site (<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs>). The data presented in

the figures are also on the Web site and are updated from time to time.

4. Tremblay, Sylvain, *Crime Statistics in Canada, 1998*, Ottawa, Ontario: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1999.
5. Langan, Patrick A., and David P. Farrington, *Crime and Justice*

## Acknowledgments

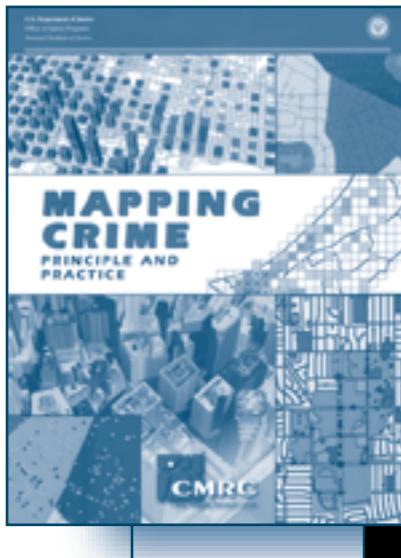
Dr. Chaiken would like to thank the staff of the BJS victimization statistics office, under the direction of Michael Rand; the staff of the corrections statistics office, under the direction of Allen Beck; and Patrick Langan and visiting fellow David Farrington for their assistance in preparing this presentation. He also wishes to thank Marianne Zawitz and visiting fellow James A. Fox for their work in preparing data from the BJS Web site's subsite on homicide trends. Marianne Zawitz also prepared the charts, reproduced here, that were part of the author's original presentation.

*in the United States and in England and Wales, 1981–96*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, October 1998 (NCJ 169284).

6. Witkin, Gordon, "The Crime Bust," *U.S. News and World Report*, May 25, 1998: 28–40.
7. NIJ and CDC sponsored the research conducted for the National Violence Against Women Survey. Among the publications based on findings from that survey is *Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence Against Women: Findings From the National Violence Against Women Survey*, by Patricia Tjaden and Nancy Thoennes, Research in Brief, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, November 1998 (NCJ 172837). NIJ and BJS sponsored research on the sexual victimization of college women, conducted by Bonnie S. Fisher, Francis T. Cullen, and Michael G. Turner. The final report of the study, "The Sexual Victimization of

- College Women: Findings From Two National Level Surveys," submitted December 1999 (NIJ grant 95-WT-NX-001 and BJS grant 97-MU-MU-001), will be made available by NIJ.
8. NIJ, CDC, and BJS addressed the issue of building data systems for monitoring and responding
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  - to violence against women in a jointly sponsored workshop. The proceedings and papers of the October 1998 workshop will be published by CDC.
  9. Noted in Fisher, Cullen, and Turner, "The Sexual Victimization of College Women."
  10. Dugan, Laura, Daniel S. Nagin, and Richard Rosenfeld, "Explaining the Decline in Intimate Partner Homicide," *Homicide Studies* 3, 3 (August 1999):187-214.

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