

How Much Violence Against Women Is There?

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The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) examines violence against women from a somewhat different perspective than other studies discussed at the conference. NCVS measures the extent and characteristics of crimes occurring in the United States. Other surveys, such as the National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS) and the National College Women Sexual Victimization Study (NCWSV), estimate violence experienced by women whether or not the victims regarded such violence as criminal. Such contextual differences, as well as other methodological differences among the surveys, contribute to differences in estimates of the incidence of violence against women. However, comparisons of the characteristics of violence against women across surveys also yield many similarities.

NCVS is one of two key ongoing national measures of the amount and type of crime occurring in the United States that are maintained by the U.S. Department of Justice. Although the other measure, the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program, is based on crimes reported to law enforcement agencies, NCVS is a survey of the Nation's residents that measures crimes not reported to police as well as those reported.

Survey Methods

About NCVS

Ongoing since 1972, NCVS is conducted for the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) by the U.S. Census Bureau. The survey's sample is address based and drawn from the decennial census. Households remain in a sample for 3 years and are interviewed seven times at 6-month intervals. All persons age 12 and older are interviewed about their experiences; proxy respondents are allowable only in a restricted set of circumstances. In 1999, about 160,000 people in 86,000 households were interviewed for NCVS.

NCVS measures the numbers and characteristics of seven major types of crime: rape/sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, simple assault, household burglary, motor vehicle theft, and theft. The survey obtains a broad array of information about victims, crime incidents, offenders, and consequences of crime.

NCVS incorporates a number of methodological features that enhance its ability to produce estimates of crime victimization. First, its large sample enables robust estimates of events that are relatively rare and difficult to measure. It uses a short reference period of 6 months and a bounding procedure to encourage accurate reporting and eliminate problems related to such faults of memory as telescoping (incorrectly remembering events as occurring more recently than they actually did). Bounding ensures that crime incidents reported in one interview are not duplicated in a later interview with the respondent.

Differences Between NCVS and Other Violence Against Women Surveys

Many of the methodological differences between NCVS and other surveys that measure violence against women, especially differences in the crime-screening questions, have been well documented. The impact of contextual differences among NCVS and NVAWS and NCWSV has not been as well examined. NCVS focuses on crime and events that victims of violence perceive to be crimes. In contrast, NVAWS is presented to respondents as a personal safety survey, and NCWSV gauges “unwanted sexual experiences.”

The crime context of NCVS is made very clear to survey respondents and is pervasive throughout the NCVS interview:

- , It is part of the survey title: National Crime Victimization Survey.
- , Preliminary questions include the phrase: “Before we get to the crime questions ...”
- , Some screening questions focus specifically on perceived crime: “Did anything happen to you that you thought was a crime ...”
- , Interviewers fill out a Crime Incident Report for every incident elicited by the crime-screening questions.

The crime focus is an integral part of the survey and not accidental. Providing a more complete picture of crime victimization in our Nation than could be obtained from the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports was one of the survey’s primary goals when it was introduced in 1972. When the survey began, the Nation’s big crime problem was believed to be “street crime” typified by stranger robbery or mugging.

“Victimization,” for NCVS, means “criminal victimization.” Victimitizations reported to NCVS are by design those that respondents judged to have been criminal in nature. Incidents that respondents did not think of as criminal are less likely to be reported to NCVS than they are to other surveys that lack a strong crime focus.

Another key difference between NCVS and recent violence against women surveys is that NCVS is an ongoing rather than a one-time survey. It can track trends in overall violence and violence against women.

The following section presents some trend data as well as descriptive findings about violence against women from NCVS, much of which is quite similar to data derived from the NVAWS and NCWSV.¹ Also included, for completeness, are data on homicides drawn from the UCR.

Findings

Intimate Partner Violence, 1998

In 1998, about 1 million violent crimes were committed against persons by their current or former spouses, boyfriends, or girlfriends.² Such crimes, termed *intimate partner violence*, are committed primarily against women. About 85 percent of nonfatal victimizations by intimate partners in 1998 (about 876,340) were against women. About 157,330 violent crimes committed by an intimate partner during 1998 were perpetrated against men.

Women were victims of nonfatal intimate partner violence at a rate about five times that of men (767 versus 146 per 100,000 persons). Among all victims of violence, women were more likely to be victimized by a nonstranger (e.g., a friend, family member, or intimate partner), while men were more likely to be victimized by a stranger. Sixty-five percent of intimate partner violence against women and 68 percent of intimate partner violence against men involved a simple assault.

In 1998, intimate partner homicides accounted for about 11 percent of all murders nationwide. They constituted about 33 percent of murders of women but only 4 percent of murders of men. Female murder victims were substantially more likely than male murder victims to have been killed by an intimate partner; of the 1,830 persons murdered by intimates in 1998, 72 percent (1,320) were women.

Trends in Violence Against Intimate Partners, 1993–98

Women experienced a 21-percent lower rate of intimate partner violence in 1998 than in 1993. From 1993 to 1997 the rate of intimate partner violence fell from 9.8 to 7.5 victimizations per 1,000 women. (See exhibit 1.) The 1998 rate was virtually unchanged from that in 1997 (7.7 per 1,000 women).

Men experienced intimate partner violence at similar rates in 1993 and 1998 (1.6 and 1.5 per 1,000 men, respectively), despite some fluctuation during intervening years. In 1997, for example, the male victimization rate dipped slightly to 1.0 per 1,000 men.

Homicide by Intimate Partners, 1976–98

By 1998, murders attributable to intimate partners (1,830) had declined substantially from 3,000 murders in 1976. In general, the number of women killed by an intimate partner remained stable between 1976 and 1993 and then declined 23 percent between 1993 and 1997. Between 1997 and 1998, the rate increased 8 percent. In contrast, the number of men murdered by an intimate partner fell 60 percent from 1976 to 1998. (See exhibit 2).

Most victims of intimate partner homicide were killed by their spouses, although less frequently in recent years. In 1998, murders by spouses represented 53 percent of all intimate partner homicides, down from 75 percent in 1976.

Exhibit 1. Rate per 1,000 of Intimate Partner Violence, by Victim's Gender

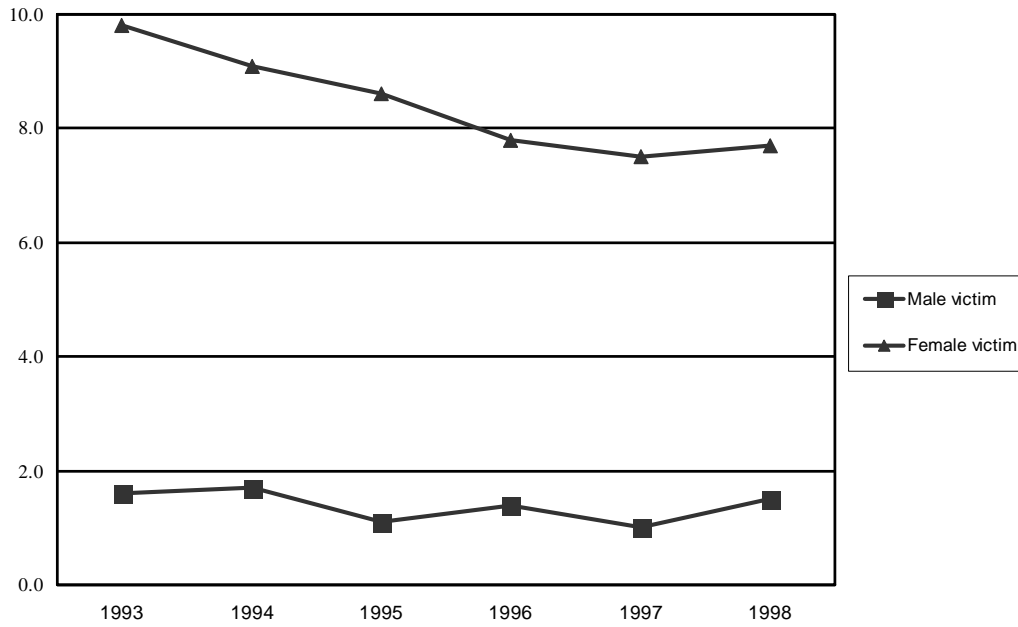
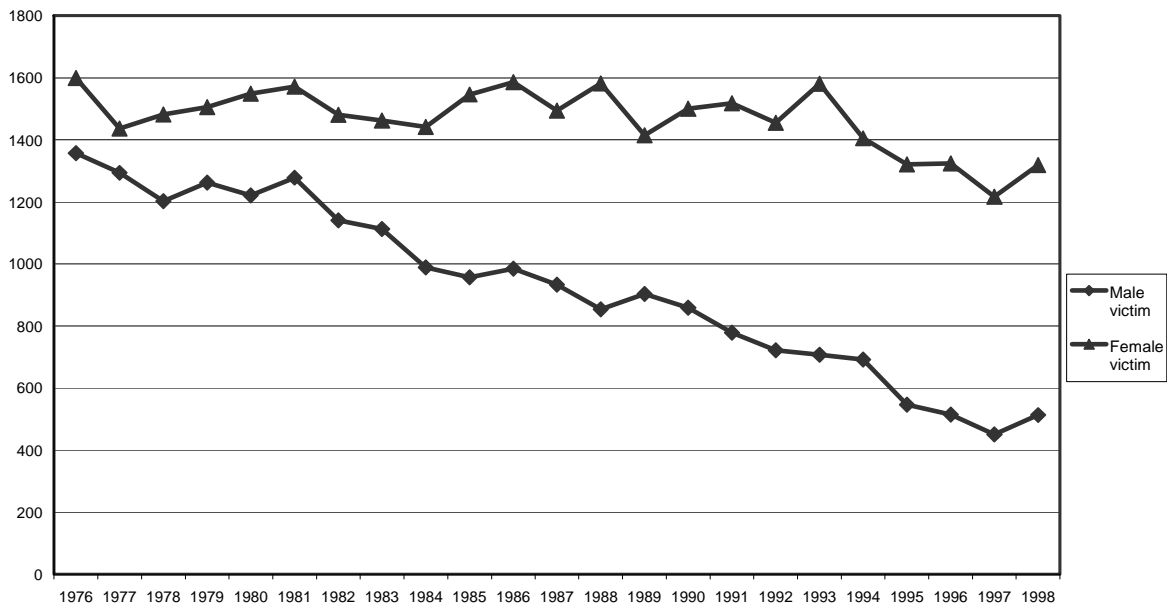


Exhibit 2. Number of Intimate Partner Homicide Victims, by Victim's Gender



White females represent the only racial category of victims for whom intimate partner homicide has not decreased substantially since 1976. The number of intimate partner homicides for all other racial and gender groups declined during the period. The number of black females killed by intimates dropped 45 percent; black males, 74 percent; and white males, 44 percent. But between 1997 and 1998, the number of white females killed by an intimate partner increased 15 percent.

Characteristics of Nonfatal Intimate Partner Violence Victims, 1993–98

Women experienced intimate partner violence at higher rates than men across all demographic categories between 1993 and 1998. Although intimate partner violence can occur in any social class, some demographic groups experienced it at higher rates than others. Among women, being black, young, divorced or separated, earning a lower income, living in rental housing, or living in an urban area were all associated with higher rates of intimate partner victimization between 1993 and 1998. Men who were young, black, divorced or separated, or living in rental housing had significantly higher rates of intimate partner violence than other men.

Race and Hispanic Origin

Overall, blacks were victimized by intimate partners at significantly higher rates than persons of any other race between 1993 and 1998. Black women experienced intimate partner violence at a rate 35 percent higher than white women, and about 2.5 times the rate of women of other races. Black men experienced intimate partner violence at a rate about 62 percent higher than that of white men and about 2.5 times the rate of men of other races.

No difference was seen in intimate partner victimization rates between Hispanic and non-Hispanic persons, regardless of the victim's gender.

Age

For both women and men younger than age 16 or older than age 50, the rate of violence by an intimate partner was less than 3 victimizations per 1,000 persons. Women ages 20 to 24 were victimized by an intimate partner at the highest rate (21 victimizations per 1,000 women). This rate was about eight times the peak rate for men (3 victimizations per 1,000 men ages 25 to 34).

Household Income

Women living in households with relatively lower annual incomes experienced intimate partner violence at significantly higher rates than women in households with higher annual incomes. Intimate partners victimized women living in households with the lowest annual household income at a rate nearly seven times that of women living in households with the highest annual income (20 victimizations compared with 3 victimizations per 1,000 females). No discernible relationship emerged between male victims of intimate partner violence and average annual household income.

Marital Status

For both men and women, divorced or separated persons were subjected to the highest rates of intimate partner victimization, followed by never-married persons. Because NCVS reflects a respondent's marital status at the time of the interview, it is not possible to determine whether a person was separated or divorced at the time of the victimization or whether separation or divorce followed the violence.

Home Ownership

Intimate partner victimization rates were significantly higher for both men and women living in rental housing. Women living in rental housing were victimized by intimate partner violence at more than three times the rate of women living in owner-occupied housing, and men living in rental housing were victimized by an intimate partner at more than twice the rate of men living in owner-occupied housing.

Urban, Suburban, and Rural Households

Women in urban areas were victims of intimate partner violence at significantly higher rates than suburban women and at somewhat higher rates than rural women. Between 1993 and 1998, urban women were victims of intimate partner violence at higher rates (10 victimizations per 1,000) than suburban and rural women (8 victimizations per 1,000).

Urban males were victimized by intimate partner violence at about the same rate as suburban males, but they experienced violence at a slightly higher rate than men in rural areas. No significant difference in rates between suburban and rural men emerged.

The Nature of Intimate Partner Victimization

Location and Time

Between 1993 and 1998, almost two-thirds of intimate partner violence against women and about half of all intimate partner violence against men occurred in the victim's home. Intimate partner violence occurred most often between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m., accounting for about 6 in 10 victimizations of both women and men by intimate partners (60 percent and 59 percent).

Children Younger Than 12 Present in the Household

Between 1993 and 1998, children under age 12 resided in 43 percent of the households where intimate partner violence occurred. Population estimates suggest that in general, 27 percent of households in the United States were home to children under age 12. Although suggestive, this analysis is not able to determine the extent to which these young children witnessed intimate partner violence.

Injuries and Treatment

Between 1993 and 1998, about two-thirds of the male and female victims of intimate partner violence were physically attacked. The remaining one-third were victims of threats or attempted violence.

Although percentages of males and females who were attacked were similar, the outcome of these attacks differed. Fifty percent of female victims of intimate partner violence were injured by an intimate partner compared with 32 percent of male victims.

Among those injured, similar percentages of men and women suffered serious injuries (4 percent and 5 percent, respectively). A significantly higher percentage of women than men sustained minor injuries (more than 4 in 10 women and fewer than 3 in 10 men). Most victims injured by an intimate partner did not obtain professional medical treatment for their injuries. About 6 in 10 female and male victims of intimate partner violence were injured but not treated. In general, injuries involved cuts and bruises, and most of those who were injured and who received treatment received care at home or at the scene of the victimization (17 percent of women and 24 percent of men).

Reporting to Police

About half of all intimate partner victimizations that occurred between 1993 and 1998 were reported to law enforcement authorities (53 percent of victimizations against women and 46 percent of victimizations against men). The percentage of victimizations reported to police differed by race and ethnicity of the victim. Violence against black women was reported to police at significantly higher percentages (67 percent) than that against black men (48 percent), white men (45 percent), and white women (50 percent). Intimate partner violence against Hispanic females was reported to the police at higher percentages than was violence against non-Hispanic females (65 percent compared with 52 percent).

The percentage of intimate violence against women reported to the police was greater in 1998 (59 percent) than in 1993 (48 percent). There was no significant difference in the percentage of reporting by male victims of intimate partner violence between 1993 and 1998.

In 1997 and 1998, a significantly higher percentage of intimate partner violence against females was reported to the police than in earlier years, when the percentage not reported was similar to the percentage reported.

With the exception of 1997, during the 1993–1998 period, approximately half of victimizations against males were not reported to the police; that year, the percentage unreported was slightly more than half. Half of male victims and a third of female victims state as their reasons for not reporting violence to the police their belief that it was a “private or personal matter.” Although this reason was the most frequently stated by both male and female victims, it was cited by male victims at a significantly higher percentage.

Fear of reprisal by the perpetrator accounted for 19 percent of the reasons women gave for not reporting their victimization to police. About 1 in 10 male victims and fewer than 1 in 10 female victims said they did not report the crime to police because they did not want to get the offender in trouble with the law.

Discussion

Although not included in this paper, a comparison of the NCVS estimates presented above with estimates from the NVAWS and NCWSV would show many similarities, but also many differences, especially in estimates of rates or magnitude of violence against women. How does one reconcile the differences across the various estimates of violence against women? As discussed above, several methodological differences among the surveys can explain some portion of the differences in estimates of the magnitude of the problem. The estimates from NVAWS and NCWSV may be higher than those from NCVS, in part because the two focused studies include a larger universe of events than NCVS. For example—

Among women who were categorized by NCWSV as victims of a completed rape based on the characteristics of the incidents, almost half did not consider themselves to be the victims of rape.

As shown in exhibit 3, the percentage of NVAWS and NCWSV victims of violence who reported the crime to the police was extremely low, much lower than NCVS.

Exhibit 3. Percent of Victims of Violence Against Women Who Say They Reported to Police

	NCVS	NVAWS	NCWSV
Rape	28	17	4
Assault	40	—	27

Note: — no estimate available

These differences are indications of the effect of NCVS's crime focus. Violent acts or threats that victims do not believe are criminal are not as likely to be reported to police as are those acts that victims believe to have been crimes. There are many reasons victims do not report violent acts to police. They may be afraid or unable to report the violence, or they may believe that the police will not improve their situation. The NCVS estimates of the percentage of intimate violence reported are much higher than those of the other two surveys, which indicates substantive differences between the types of behaviors estimated by the various surveys.

Although many factors contribute to the differences between NCVS and other violence against women surveys, the impact of contextual differences has not received the attention it warrants. The NCVS focus on crime acts as a filter in that some victims of violence may not report the incident to the survey because they did not perceive what happened to them as a crime. The other surveys do not have a crime focus and may include some violence that victims did not consider criminal. This is neither bad or good, nor does it indicate a flaw in NCVS. The survey's purpose is to measure the kinds of events likely to come to the attention of the criminal justice system, and it does so.

Implications for Practitioners

The disparity among the three surveys' findings suggests that a great deal of violence suffered by women is not viewed by victims as criminal. Thus we are challenged to continue to press the message to men and women that violence is a crime, and that using force to have sex is a crime.

It is possible that the recent downward trends in intimate partner violence are indications that attitudes are changing. As the data presented at the workshop show, intimate partner violence rates have not declined as steeply as overall crime rates during the past several years. The downward trend may indicate an actual leveling off, but it could also be an indication of a change in attitude by some victims about what they have experienced. That is, victims may have become more likely to report these incidents to surveys like NCVS.

Implications for Future Research

It is imperative that researchers not get lost in issues about whether one study is right and another wrong and which study presents the “truth.” The truth is that the issues are exceedingly complex and the extent of violence against women extremely difficult to measure. It requires gathering information in a variety of ways to fully capture the nature and extent of a variety of acts subsumed under the heading “violence against women.” Only by approaching this problem using all tools available and from many different angles can we hope to further our knowledge. By understanding the differences between estimates from different studies, we take full advantage of the opportunities for enhancing our understanding of the problem.

Notes

1. Many of the findings presented below were drawn from Callie Rennison and Sarah Welchans, *Intimate Partner Violence*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000, NCJ 178247.
2. As defined in this paper, intimate relationships involve current or former spouses, boyfriends, or girlfriends. These individuals may be of the same gender. Violent acts examined include murder, rape, sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault.