

# Special Report: Measuring Sexual Violence

## Measuring Sexual Violence: Methods, Misconceptions, and a New (Revised) Measure

by Kimberly A. Lonsway, with contributions from Joanne Archambault, Mary Koss, Joan Zorza, and Rebecca Campbell

"How often does rape happen?" This question is frequently asked yet deceptively complicated to answer. In other words: How many people are sexually assaulted? How many people perpetrate at least one sexual assault? These are among my favorite questions, because they provide the opportunity to explain how common sexual violence is and to begin a dialogue about the larger cultural factors that play a role in perpetuating male violence against women.

These questions are also valuable because they allow us to address some of the other "big" questions in our field, such as "What is rape?" By describing the types of incidents included in a research study, we can explore common misconceptions about what sexual assault actually looks like in the real world. For example, we have the opportunity to explain that sexual assaults include acts that are committed with force, threat, or fear—as well as those committed against someone who is unable to consent (e.g., because he or she is unconscious, incapacitated, or severely disabled).

For many professionals, however, answering this type of question can be tricky. Because the answer requires discussing findings from social science research, it's easy to get tripped up if one isn't familiar with the methodology that was used. Our credibility is then seriously undermined when we try to present statistics without understanding where they came from. If we can't answer a question or challenge, it's all too easy for others to dismiss both the messenger (us) and the message (that sexual assault is a very common event).

We also frequently find ourselves challenged with the criticism that social science data are meaningless because researchers "can make statistics say anything they want." The answer to this challenge is both a "yes" and "no." On the one hand, it is possible to design a research study to skew the results one way or the other. Yet a critical analysis of the study will reveal this type of bias. Therefore, by understanding the methodology that was used to produce any social scientific data we can place the findings in context and understand what factors might have influenced the results. In other words, this particular

*Kimberly A. Lonsway, Ph.D., is Director of Research, EVAW (End Violence Against Women) International, and is co-editor of Sexual Assault Report.*

challenge may be a fair one, but it is not a reason to throw up our hands and conclude that statistics are meaningless. Rather, this challenge can be seen as a call to make sure we understand any statistics that we use.

This article is designed to provide readers with the information needed to present statistics on sexual assault prevalence with competence, and the confidence that inevitably results. It begins by describing the three main sources of data on sexual assault prevalence and exploring the strengths and limitations of each. It then concludes by reviewing a new (actually revised) measure that represents the "gold standard" in this field. In 2007, a team of nine prominent researchers published a revised version of the Sexual Experiences Survey that can be used by anyone seeking to measure sexual assault perpetration or victimization. This article concludes with an appeal for researchers and practitioners to use this measure more widely, to standardize this type of measurement, and to incorporate this tool into our evaluation work.

### Uniform Crime Reports (UCR)

The Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) program is often cited as a source of information for how often sexual assault happens, but it really only provides an estimate for how many are reported to police. As background, the UCR program was originally conceived in 1929 by the International Association of Chiefs of Police as a way to meet the need for reliable, uniform crime statistics. Then in 1930, the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) took over collecting, publishing, and archiving those statistics.

Today, over 17,000 city, county, and state law enforcement agencies participate in the UCR program by voluntarily reporting data on crimes that are reported to them. Information is also provided regarding how the cases were cleared. For UCR purposes, cases can be cleared in one of three ways: (1) "clearance by arrest," (2) "exceptional clearance," and (3) "unfounding." A detailed explanation of these clearance categories is beyond the scope of this article. However, for present purposes it is sufficient to note that cases can be cleared by an arrest if at least one suspect is arrested and charged and the case is referred for prosecution. A case can be exceptionally cleared when some element beyond law enforcement control precludes issuing formal charges against the offender. For example, the suspect may either be dead or arrested and prosecuted in another jurisdiction. A case can also be cleared by exception if the suspect has been identified but the victim is unable to actively participate in the investigation. Finally, a case can be unfounded when the report is determined to be false or baseless.

*See MEASURING SEXUAL VIOLENCE, next page*

## Criminal Justice Research Review™

**Founding Editor:**  
Henry G. Sontheimer, Ph.D.

**Managing Editor:**  
Lori Jacobs

**Editorial Director:**  
Deborah J. Launer

**Publisher:**  
Mark E. Peel

*Criminal Justice Research Review* (ISSN 1526-9507) is published bimonthly by Civic Research Institute, Inc., 4478 U.S. Route 27, P. O. Box 585, Kingston, NJ 08528. Periodicals postage paid at Kingston, NJ and at additional mailing office (USPS #016-795). Subscriptions: \$165 per year in the United States and Canada. \$30 additional per year elsewhere.

Vol. 10, No. 2, November/December 2008. Copyright © 2008 by Civic Research Institute, Inc. All rights reserved. Unauthorized copying expressly prohibited. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Civic Research Institute, Inc., P. O. Box 585, Kingston, NJ 08528. *Criminal Justice Research Reports* is a registered trademark owned by Civic Research Institute, Inc., and may not be used without express permission.

The information in this publication is not intended to replace the services of a trained legal or health professional. Neither the editor, nor the contributors, nor Civic Research Institute, Inc. is engaged in rendering legal, psychological, health or other professional services. The editors, the contributors and Civic Research Institute, Inc. specifically disclaim any liability, loss or risk, personal or otherwise, which is incurred as a consequence, directly or indirectly, of the use and application of any of the contents of this publication.

*MEASURING SEXUAL VIOLENCE, from page 22*

Unfortunately, there is a great deal of misunderstanding surrounding all of these terms, and the criteria for clearing a case using each of the three UCR categories are especially confusing. To make matters worse, many supervisors do not carefully review the reports that are submitted, thus providing poor quality control and allowing for inaccuracies and inconsistencies in the clearance of sexual assault cases and the resulting UCR data. (For more information on the UCR definitions and criteria for clearing sexual assault cases, a training module is available in the On-Line Training Institute hosted by EVAW International at [www.evawintl.org](http://www.evawintl.org))

Agencies participating in the UCR submit data to the FBI, which compiles the information and publishes reports through the Bureau of Justice Statistics. These reports are available both from the FBI ([www.fbi.gov/crimstats.htm](http://www.fbi.gov/crimstats.htm)) and the National Criminal Justice Reference Service ([www.ncjrs.org](http://www.ncjrs.org)). In fact, several annual statistical publications are produced on the basis of UCR data, and they are widely disseminated and cited for information about crime in the United States. More information on the UCR program is available at [www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm](http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm)

**Strengths of the UCR.** The primary strength of the UCR as a statistical measure is that the FBI is viewed by many people as a credible source for information on cases reported to local law enforcement. Therefore, as long as one understands what is included and excluded with the definition for each type of crime, these statistics can be used to provide a reasonable estimate of how many cases are reported to law enforcement each year and how they are cleared.

**Limitations of the UCR.** The primary limitation of the UCR is the narrow and confusing definition that is used for sexual assault. For UCR purposes, data are only collected for the crime of "forcible rape," which is defined as "carnal knowledge of a female, forcibly and against her will." Both completed and attempted acts of "forcible rape" are included in UCR data. However, it is clear from this definition that UCR data on "forcible rape" do not include any of the following sexual assault crimes:

- Sexual assaults facilitated with drugs and/or alcohol;
- Sexual assaults of unconscious victims;
- Sexual assaults involving male victims;
- Sexual assaults involving victims with severe disabilities (when the disability precludes the individual from legally being able to give consent);
- Sexual assaults of children under the age of 12 (crimes that are generally reported by law enforcement to the UCR program as child sexual abuse); and
- All other forms of sexual assault such as anal penetration, oral copulation, penetration with a finger or foreign object, and sexual battery.

Because of these many exclusions, crimes meeting the definition of "forcible rape" actually represent only a minority of the sexual assault reports that law enforcement agencies typically receive. This is obviously a very serious limitation of UCR data. To illustrate, Joanne Archambault was Sergeant in the Sex Crimes Unit of the San Diego Police Department for many years, and she stated that only about 35–40% of their felony sexual assault cases met the FBI's narrow definition of "forcible rape" and were reported to the UCR program each year (Archambault, 2008, personal communication). The remaining 60–65% of all crimes reported to the Sex Crimes Unit would not appear in UCR data.

In other words, most of the sexual assault cases that are reported to law enforcement are not actually included in UCR data. This might be fine if everyone understood that UCR data only include such a small subsample of the sex crimes that are perpetrated in our communities. However, this is not typically understood, so UCR data are routinely cited as an estimate of the actual number of reported rapes. This problem is then exacerbated by the fact that the types of sexual assaults that are excluded from the UCR definition are the same ones that are particularly likely to be underreported. Research clearly suggests that the "classic" rapes that are included in UCR data (i.e., forcible penile–vaginal penetration) are more likely than other types of sexual assaults to be reported to police (for a review, see Ménard, 2005). Other types of sexual assault thus remain invisible in official statistics, both because they are typically unreported but also because they are excluded from the definition of forcible rape used for the UCR program.

There are also a number of organizational factors that limit the quality of information captured in UCR statistics. For example, many law enforcement agencies do not separate the various types of sexual assaults (e.g., penile–vaginal penetration vs. other types of penetration). This further complicates data collection and analysis. In addition, UCR participation is voluntary for law enforcement agencies, so many simply fail to submit *any* data. This is often due to political factors and/or limited resources, particularly in small or rural law enforcement agencies.

An additional problem is that law enforcement officers and investigators typically receive no training at all in the proper use of UCR data definitions and methodologies. As a result, two detectives sitting at desks directly next to each other may be following different criteria for clearing their cases and recording UCR data.

### The Alternative: NIBRS

Because of these problems with the UCR definition of "forcible rape," many have called for changes to expand and improve it. Yet the FBI has already created an alternative data collection effort that was designed to replace the UCR program. The FBI implemented the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) in 1989. NIBRS was designed to collect data on reported crimes within 22 specific categories. One of these categories is "Sex Offenses, Forcible—Forcible Rape, Forcible Sodomy, Sexual Assault With An Object, Forcible Fondling." Another is "Sex Offenses, Nonforcible—Incest, Statutory Rape." Obviously, NIBRS uses a much broader definition of sexual assault than the UCR does. It is therefore likely to capture more comprehensive data on the range of sexual assault crimes that are actually reported to law enforcement each year.

For NIBRS purposes, information is collected for each offense, including characteristics of the incident, victim(s), property, suspect(s), and arrestee(s). The Bureau of Justice Statistics then publishes analyses of this data, such as the 2000 report written by Dr. Howard Snyder entitled "Sexual Assault of Young Children as Reported to Law Enforcement: Victim, Incident, and Offender Characteristics" (NCJ No. 182990, available at [www.ncjrs.gov](http://www.ncjrs.gov)). Unfortunately, few articles have been published so far based on an analysis of NIBRS data on sexual assault. Therefore, we have not yet benefited significantly from the knowledge that could potentially be gained through NIBRS.

There is also a concern that most law enforcement agencies do not participate in NIBRS. Because of the level of detail required for NIBRS reporting, it is frankly difficult for many law enforcement agencies to participate. In addition, agencies have to be certified to par-

*See MEASURING SEXUAL VIOLENCE, next page*

*MEASURING SEXUAL VIOLENCE, from page 25*

National Institute of Justice) As previously noted, some people argue that the information is old (because the data were collected in 1995–1996) and that there were additional methodological improvements that could have been made. These criticisms are fair. However, conducting a study of that size is extremely expensive, and I do not anticipate that another one will be done in the near future. Therefore, I recommend becoming familiar with the methodology of the NVAWS to explain the findings in context.

**Revised Sexual Experiences Survey**

Before concluding this discussion, I want to highlight a relatively new instrument that can be used to measure sexual assault perpetration and victimization. In 2007, a team of nine prominent researchers in the field published the revised Sexual Experiences Survey (SES). Led by Dr. Mary Koss, this team (referred to as the SES Collaboration) sought to update the SES that was originally published in 1985 and is now the most widely used tool for this purpose. In fact, the NVAWS described a moment ago used a methodology that was based on the SES.

As described by the SES Collaboration authors, the original SES has a number of features that now represent accepted standards. These include (1) avoiding the use of the term “rape” or “sexual assault” and (2) asking about specific behaviors that a person might have experienced (Koss et al., 2007). Yet over time a number of limitations of the SES have been identified, and researchers and practitioners have often responded by adapting it for their own use and purposes. In the 2007 version of the SES, revisions were made to address many of these limitations.

As a result of these efforts, the group produced four revised versions of the SES: (1) the SES Long Form for assessing perpetration (SES-LFP); (2) the SES Long Form Victimization (SES-LFV), (3) SES Short Form Perpetration (SES-SFP), and; (4) SES Short Form Victimization (SES-SFV). All four versions are available, along with scoring instructions, from Dr. Mary Koss at the University of Arizona. (Contact information is provided in the final section of the article entitled: “For More Information.”)

These measures were designed to build on the strengths of the SES, but also to clarify and update its wording. For example, the phrase “sexual intercourse” was dropped from the recent revision and replaced with language that more specifically describes the behaviors that are involved. Language was also revised so that it is now gender neutral; the prior SES only asked women about sexual acts that were committed by a man and only asked men about sexual acts that were committed against a woman. Particular care was taken to separate out behaviors that meet standard legal definitions of sexual assault from those that do not constitute criminal offenses but are nonetheless coercive and experienced as distressing. Other revisions in the format and wording of the SES are discussed in the article by the SES Collaboration (Koss et al., 2007).

One of the most significant revisions, however, deals with sexual assault that is committed against a victim who is unable to consent because of alcohol or drug use. In the prior version of the SES, this type of sexual assault was measured with the following question: “Have you had sexual intercourse with a man when you didn’t want to because a man gave you alcohol or drugs?” On the new Long Form, there are 10 items designed to assess various circumstances involving drug and alcohol use. However, on the Short Form, only one question asks about: “taking advantage of me when I was too drunk or out of it to stop what was happening” (Koss et al., 2007). The authors

note that future work will be needed to evaluate whether or not this single item will adequately capture this type of sexual assault victimization or perpetration.

**Sample Wording to Assess Victimization.** To provide a sense of what the revised SES instruments look like, the short version of the victimization form lists four specific behaviors and asks respondents how many times they have experienced each “in the past 12 months” as well as “since age 14.” These behaviors are:

- Someone fondled, kissed, or rubbed up against the private areas of my body (lips, breast/chest, crotch, or butt) or removed some of my clothes without my consent (but did not attempt sexual penetration)
- Someone had oral sex with me or made me have oral sex with them without my consent
- (For women) A man put his penis into my vagina, or someone inserted fingers or objects without my consent
- A man put his penis into my butt, or someone inserted fingers or objects without my consent

The first behavior constitutes sexual contact, and the remaining items assess acts of sexual penetration. Separate questions then ask about attempts to commit each of these acts.

Following each of the behaviors (and attempts), the respondent is then asked to indicate how many times he or she was committed using five specific tactics. These tactics are:

- Telling lies, threatening to end the relationship, threatening to spread rumors about me, making promises I knew were untrue, or continually verbally pressuring me after I said I didn’t want to
- Showing displeasure, criticizing my sexuality or attractiveness, and getting angry but not using physical force, after I said I didn’t want to
- Taking advantage of me when I was too drunk or out of it to stop what was happening
- Threatening to physically harm me or someone close to me.
- Using force, for example, holding me down with his body weight, pinning my arms, or having a weapon

The first two tactics constitute noncriminal sexual coercion. If a respondent has experienced any act of sexual penetration committed by someone using the last three tactics, however, he or she would be characterized as a victim of sexual assault using the SES.

**Recommendations for Future Use.** The primary purpose for the SES is to screen for experiences of perpetration or victimization. This type of screening is needed for any study focusing on the prevalence, characteristics, or impact of sexual assault victimization or perpetration. An example is the NVAWS, discussed at length in this article, which used a methodology based on the SES format.

The SES can also be used in research like that conducted by Dr. David Lisak and his colleagues, identifying men who have committed acts of sexual assault and then following up with interviews so these men can provide detailed narrative accounts of their motivations, tactics, and interpretations of the experience (e.g., Lisak & Miller, 2002). The revised SES can also be used as an evaluation tool for rape prevention programs, to determine whether the intervention has the desired effect of reducing sexual assault victimization or perpetration. For example, Dr. Chris Gidycz and her colleagues have often used versions of the SES to measure sexual assault victimiza-

See *MEASURING SEXUAL VIOLENCE*, next page

*MEASURING SEXUAL VIOLENCE, from page 26*

tion both before and after women participate in a risk reduction program (e.g., Orchowski, Gidycz, & Raffle, 2008)

When using the SES for research purposes, however, it is important to address serious issues regarding ethics, safety, and the psychological well-being of participants (Koss, 2008, personal communication). For example, administration of the SES must be in a private setting; if it is administered in a group format, care must be taken to prevent people from seeing each other's responses. Responses to the SES should ideally be anonymous, but at a minimum they must remain confidential. Because research is now commonly conducted over the Internet, this raises a new set of privacy and safety concerns that are beyond the scope of this article.

To make sure these issues are addressed appropriately, anyone seeking to administer the SES should first consult with an Institutional Review Board (IRB) to obtain clearance to conduct the research. This will likely require collaboration with a social science researcher, because most institutions of higher education have an IRB. (There are also private IRBs, but they obviously charge money to review a proposal.) A researcher can help to address these ethical and safety issues, as well as navigating the IRB procedures. Even students using the SES for a class project should check with an IRB first, even if it is simply a telephone consultation. Because the SES asks about personal experiences with sexual victimization and perpetration, an IRB review is critically important to ensure compliance with regulations governing human research (Koss, 2008, personal communication).

Yet another purpose of reviewing the SES in this article is to clarify what behaviors meet the definition of sexual assault and other forms of noncriminal sexual coercion. For example, respondents are identified as sexual assault victims if they have experienced an act of sexual penetration using physical force or threats, or when they were "too drunk or out of it to stop what was happening." On the other hand, the same behavior would constitute noncriminal sexual coercion if it was committed by "telling lies, threatening to end the relationship, threatening to spread rumors about me, making promises I knew were untrue, or continually verbally pressuring me after I said I didn't want to."

### Recommendations

All too often, I see professionals in the field presenting statistics or providing a "fact sheet" on sexual assault that includes numerous citations to research studies without any other explanation. Unfortunately, this strategy is likely to backfire if the person presenting the statistics is unable to explain the methodology that was used to collect the data. A more effective strategy may be to use statistics sparingly, only presenting findings from a small number of studies and being familiar enough with their methodologies to be able to explain where the numbers came from.

In fact, it is unfortunate that so many professionals do not do this, because they are daunted by the prospect of reviewing original research. The task need not be daunting; in fact, common sense is often the only tool needed to critically evaluate the methodology of a social scientific study. By finding out who was contacted to participate in a survey, what they were asked, and how their responses were scored, most professionals can reach their own conclusions regarding whether or not the methods appear to be reasonable and the conclusions defensible.

Alternatively, there are many situations in which we can simply avoid statistics altogether and make claims that we know are well supported both by research and from our own professional experience. For example, we can often be quite effective in our presenta-

tions by simply making statements such as: "Many more women are sexually assaulted than we would like to believe," or "Most sexual assaults are committed by someone who is known to the victim." By not presenting any statistics, we may be able to avoid derailing our discussion to research methodology and remaining focused on the points we are trying to make. All too often these challenges to the statistics are actually challenges to the facts and the reality of sexual assault.

Finally, I would encourage professionals to at least briefly review the revised version of the SES, because it encourages us to think carefully about the actual behaviors that constitute a sexual assault and other forms of sexual coercion that can be upsetting but are not criminal acts. As previously mentioned, the instrument can also be used whenever we want to screen individuals for sexual assault perpetration and victimization experiences. While we might think of this type of screening as a difficult task requiring social scientific expertise, a review of the revised SES will it is hoped demonstrate that it is relatively easy to use, with clear instructions for administration, scoring, and interpretation. Of course, any research or evaluation study should be conducted in consultation with a social science expert. However, by providing the actual text of some SES items I hope to demystify the instrument and demonstrate that it is a practical tool that can be used for many purposes by practitioners. I would therefore like to conclude by thanking the SES Collaboration for their important work in advancing the field of sexual violence research: Mary P. Koss, Antonia Abbey, Rebecca Campbell, Sarah Cook, Jeanette Norris, Maria Testa, Sarah Ullman, Carolyn West, and Jacquelyn White.

*For more information:* For a more detailed discussion of the issues involved in a critical analysis of the UCR, NCYS, and NVAWS, an article by Dean Kilpatrick (2004) entitled "Making sense of rape in America: Where do the numbers come from and what do they mean?" is available from VAWnet at <http://www.vawnet.org/SexualViolence/PublicPolicy/MakingSenseofRape.pdf>

The article presenting the revised *Sexual Experiences Survey* was published in 2007 in *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, Volume 31, pp. 357-370. More information on the journal is available at [www.blackwellpublishing.com/journal.asp?ref=0361-6843&site=1](http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/journal.asp?ref=0361-6843&site=1).

Copies of the four recently revised versions of the SES are available from Mary P. Koss, Ph.D., Regents' Professor, Public Health, University of Arizona. [mpk@email.arizona.edu](mailto:mpk@email.arizona.edu)

### References

- Fisher, B. S., Cullen, F. T., & Turner, M. G. (2000). *The sexual victimization of college women* (NCJ 182369). Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs. Available at [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/pubs-sum/182369.htm](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/pubs-sum/182369.htm)
- Kilpatrick, D. G. (2004). *Making sense of rape in America: Where do the numbers come from and what do they mean?* National Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center, Medical University of South Carolina. Document developed for VAWnet and available at <http://www.vawnet.org/SexualViolence/PublicPolicy/MakingSenseofRape.pdf>
- Koss, M. P. (1985). *The hidden rape victim: Personality, attitudinal, and situational characteristics*. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 9, 193-212.
- Koss, M. P. (1988). *Hidden rape: Incidence, prevalence, and descriptive characteristics of sexual aggression reported by a national sample of postsecondary students*. In A. W. Burgess (Ed.), *Rape and sexual assault* (Vol. 2). Garland Publishing Co., New York (pp. 3-25).
- Koss, M. P. (1992). *The underdetection of rape: Methodological choices that influence incidence estimates*. *Journal of Social Issues*, 48, 61-75.
- Koss, M. P. (1993). *The scope of rape: A review of prevalence research methods*. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 8, 198-222.

See *MEASURING SEXUAL VIOLENCE*, next page

**MEASURING SEXUAL VIOLENCE, from page 27**

Koss, M.P. (1996). *The measurement of rape victimization in crime surveys*. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 23 (1), 55-69

Koss, M.P., Abbey, A., Campbell, R., Cook, C., Norris, J., Testa, M., Ullman, S., West, C., & White, J. (2007). *Revising the SES: A collaborative process to improve assessment of sexual aggression and victimization*. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 31, 357-370

Lisak, D. & Miller, P.M. (2002). *Repeat rape and multiple offending among undetected rapists*. *Violence and Victims*, 17, 73-84

Ménard, K.S. (2005). *Reporting sexual assault: A social ecology perspective*. New York: LFP Scholarly Publishing

Orchowski, L.M., Gidycz, C.A., & Raffle, H. (2008). *Evaluation of a sexual assault risk reduction and self-defense programs: A prospective analysis of a revised protocol*. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 32, 204-218

Tjaden, P. & Thoennes, N. (2006). *Extent, Nature, and Consequences of Rape Victimization: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey (NCJ 210346)*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Available at <http://www.ncjrs.gov>

U.S. Census Bureau (2003). *National Crime Victimization Survey Interviewing Manual for Field Representatives*. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau. Available at <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/manual.pdf>

# Criminological and Antisocial Behavior

*Report From Girls Study Group Finds No Crisis in Female Violent Offending*

## Violence by Teenage Girls: Trends and Context

Margaret A. Zahn, et al.

*Published by Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, D.C. (May 2008)*

Reviewed by Robert E. Shepherd, Jr., Contributing Editor, *Juvenile Justice Update*

Official crime data based on police arrest reports show that girls' involvement in delinquency increased more (or decreased less) compared to boys during the 1990s. However, some criminologists question whether these data indicate an increased propensity for female crime or changes in our society's responses to certain behaviors, such as family disputes. This report from the Girls Study Group analyzes trend data from a range of sources to better understand recent trends in male and female offending. The primary research question is: "Do the increases in arrests indicate real changes in girls' behaviors, or are the increases a product of recent changes in public sentiment and enforcement policies that have elevated the visibility and reporting of girls' delinquency and violence?"

The Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) system compiles data on crimes reported to police and persons arrested by police across multiple categories of crime. In 2005, girls accounted for 29% of all juvenile arrests, including 34% of arrests for property index crimes and 18% of arrests for violent index crimes. Girls accounted for 33% of arrests for the non-index offense of simple assault, which is the most common offense for which juveniles were arrested. Over the period from 1996 to 2005, juvenile arrests declined twice as much among boys (down 29%) than among girls (down 14%). Considering only offenses for violent index crimes, arrest rates fell by 29% among boys compared to a 10% decline among girls. For simple assault, arrests of boys declined by 4% while arrests of girls actually increased by 24%.

## Domestic Violence Arrest Policies May Explain Increase in Female Arrests

An analysis of UCR arrest rates from 1980 to 2003 indicates that the female arrest rate for aggravated assault almost doubled over the period (from 45 to 88 girls per 100,000), while male arrest rates increased by only 12.5%. The female arrest rate for simple assault also increased much more dramatically than the male arrest rate. Looking at arrests for violent index crimes, the male arrest rate was lower in 2003 than in 1980, while the female arrest rate was 46% higher in 2003 compared to 1980. So while males' arrest rates declined sharply during the latter half of the 1990s, female arrest rates declined less or actually increased for some crimes such as simple assault.

One hypothesis to explain the increase in female arrests for simple assault is the widespread use of mandatory arrest policies in domestic violence incidents. Incidents involving girls and their parents which formerly were treated as ungovernable behavior may now be classified as domestic violence, requiring an arrest whenever probable cause exists. In contrast to boys, girls are much more likely to fight with family members than with strangers. Another theory is that school zero-tolerance policies may lead to official police reports of incidents that were formerly handled by in-school sanctions.

## Self-Report Data Show No Narrowing of Gender Gap in Violent Offending

To provide a different view of female offending, researchers have analyzed self-report data from the Monitoring the Future Study. One study based on the period from 1980 to 2003 found similar trends among boys and girls over time in terms of their involvement in assault. Another study using self-report data from the National Crime Victimization Survey also found little change in the ratio of female to male violent offending and assaultive behavior in particular over the same period. So, contrary to the trends in official arrest data, studies based on self-report data show no narrowing of the gender gap in violent offending. According to the Girls Study Group report: "This telling difference between the two data sources supports the conclusion that policy shifts and changes in enforcement may have had a

*See VIOLENCE BY TEENAGE GIRLS, next page*