

Measuring Violence Against Women: Recommendations From an Interagency Workshop

Scholars have had difficulty measuring the levels and types of violence against women. The difficulty arises from differences in defining rape, sexual assault, and intimate partner violence; counting the incidence; and interpreting the numbers. The result is varying estimates of the nature and extent of these important social problems over the years.

Now the Departments of Justice (DOJ) and Health and Human Services (DHHS) are cooperating with both practitioners and researchers to build more uniform ways to collect, analyze, and interpret information on violence against adolescent and adult women. The goal is for research to better contribute to the development and implementation of effective programs and policies that monitor and respond to this public health and criminal justice issue.

Staff from DOJ and DHHS, researchers, and practitioners from the public health and criminal justice fields have been examining the opportunities and challenges of the many current measurement strategies associated with understanding violence against women, which encompasses many behaviors and different relationships. A series of meetings and conversations has been held to sort through the issues associated with acts of violence against women that involve intimate partner violence and sexual violence by any perpetrator.

Starting the process. A 1998 research and statistical briefing for Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala and Attorney General Janet Reno focused on the nature and extent of violence against women and highlighted both current knowledge and gaps needing to be addressed.

As a result of that briefing, a steering committee was formed and a workshop scheduled to begin a long-term effort to advance the measurement of violence against women and the conduct of sound research.¹ (See “Lead Steering Committee Members.”)

General goals of the workshop were:

- To share information on the current state of data collection on and measurement of violence against women, especially intimate partner violence and sexual violence.
- To identify the gaps in and limitations of existing data systems for collecting information about these types of violence against women.
- To make recommendations about data collection and measurement that would assist researchers in better describing and tracking violence against women in order to better prevent and respond to it.

Background papers commissioned on several key issues, including definitional and methodological issues and the collection of national, State, and local data that reflect both public health and criminal justice perspectives, formed the basis for the workshop discussions.

Jacquelyn Campbell, Ph.D., Associate Dean, Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing, gave the opening plenary presentation. The commissioned papers were then presented and discussed by participants in a large workshop and in four smaller workgroups. The final plenary session was spent reviewing and discussing the recommendations developed within the workgroups.

Lead Steering Committee Members

Planning for the Workshop on Building Data Systems for Monitoring and Responding to Violence Against Women was led by four steering committee members:

Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control

- National Center for Injury Prevention and Control: Linda Saltzman, 770-488-4280, les1@cdc.gov.
- National Center for Health Statistics: Lois A. Fingerhut, 301-458-4213, laf4@cdc.gov.

Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs

- National Institute of Justice: Christy Visher (who is no longer with NIJ). Contact Bernie Auchter, 202-307-0154, auchter@ojp.usdoj.gov.
- Bureau of Justice Statistics: Michael Rand, 202-616-3494, randm@ojp.usdoj.gov.

The general recommendations about five complex issues were as follows:

Defining violence. Violence is a term that encompasses a broad range of maltreatment against women, which can be divided into five major components: physical violence, sexual violence, threats of physical and/or sexual violence, stalking, and psychological/emotional abuse. Participants suggested that in future writings the phrase “violence and abuse against women” be used to refer to the combination of all five components, whereas the first three components alone should be called “violence against women.”

Estimating the size of the problem. Participants concluded that violence against women is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be captured by a single number or statistic. No single survey, measurement system, or approach adequately provides all the detailed information needed to understand these problems and improve the many criminal justice, health care, and social service policies and programs aimed at combating violence against women.

Although no single or existing measurement tool is sufficient to gauge and track all dimensions of violence against women, the workshop participants concluded that personal interview surveys (conducted at the national, State, or local levels) are a better tool for measuring the extent of violence against women than systematic reviews of records (such as medical, crime, or service delivery records). This conclusion also recognizes the fact that surveys provide different types of information. Therefore, the specific strengths of various surveys should be analyzed to clearly identify what contributions they make to understanding the different dimensions of the problem.

For More Information

- The commissioned papers for the workshop form the basis for two special issues of the journal, *Violence Against Women*, published in July and August 2000 (volume 6, numbers 7 and 8), available from Sage Publications, <http://www.sagepub.com>.
- A full summary of the workshop recommendations will be published in the Recommendations and Reports series of the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* vol. 49, no. RR-11 (Oct. 27, 2000), available at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Web site (http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/mmwr_rr.html).

Interpreting data. More emphasis is needed on methodological studies that explore the implications of using different data sources and data collection methods for deepening our understanding of violence against women. The format and wording of questions clearly affects the types of responses researchers receive. In addition, the context in which such questions about violence against women are asked also affects the responses. For example, responses to questions posed on a health-related survey may differ from responses to similar questions included as part of a crime victimization survey. It is necessary to understand more systematically the implications of data gathered for different purposes in different contexts in order to provide useful interpretations of the data.

Ensuring confidentiality and safety. More effort is needed to develop data collection strategies that ensure that the information provided by victims remains confidential and to enhance research strategies that do not jeopardize victim safety.

Continuing scientific collaboration. Participants strongly agreed on the value of this joint DHHS/DOJ effort and recommended that the two departments continue to foster communication and collaboration on these critical scientific issues.

Violence against women—including both intimate partner violence and sexual violence—is a major public concern that needs to be better understood by researchers so they can contribute more effectively to the work of policymakers, practitioners, and advocates in both the health and criminal justice sectors.

Participants in all four workgroups emphasized that their discussions and recommendations reflect the beginning of a process to develop greater uniformity across the many research and statistical sectors and intellectual disciplines contributing to our knowledge about violence against women. The discussions were a critical phase in a long-term, cross-department, cross-disciplinary effort to improve our ability to monitor violence against women and to develop programs and policies that effectively respond to and prevent it.

Notes

1. The workshop was funded by the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control and the National Center for Health Statistics at the Centers for Disease Control, DHHS, and the Bureau of Justice Statistics and the National Institute of Justice at the Office of Justice Programs, DOJ.

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