

Sexual Violence Research Roundtable

September 2011 • Arlington, VA

Executive Summary

Background

The Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) and the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), both components of the United States Department of Justice, convened a roundtable discussion on research on sexual violence on September 8 and 9, 2011, in Arlington, Virginia. The roundtable brought together experts on sexual violence, representing fields including research and academia, victim advocacy, law enforcement, prosecution, the judiciary, and health care; as well as several survivors of sexual violence whose voices kept victims' experiences at the center of the discussion. Over the course of the meeting, participants identified new and emerging priorities for research on the criminal justice system's response to sexual assault and generated ideas for bridging the gap between research and practice.

This roundtable built on two previous discussions, hosted by NIJ and OVW, respectively:

- On June 23 and 24, 2008, NIJ convened a Sexual Violence Research Workshop to take stock of current research on the criminal justice system response to sexual violence and to discuss ways to further develop research and disseminate findings to practitioners and policymakers. Among the topics that participants discussed were the application of forensic science to the investigation and prosecution of sexual assault and the multidisciplinary response to sexual assault. The discussion yielded valuable information that has informed NIJ's and other federal agencies' efforts to improve knowledge and practice related to the criminal justice system's handling of sexual assault cases.
- On October 27 and 28, 2010, OVW, in partnership with the White House Council on Women and Girls and Lynn Rosenthal, White House Advisor on Violence Against Women, convened a roundtable to discuss barriers to advancing the issue of sexual violence and to explore ways to overcome those barriers. A priority that emerged from the discussion is the need for more relevant, practitioner-informed research on sexual violence related to topics including but not limited to: incidence, prevalence, and reporting rates; victim recovery; law enforcement response; and prosecution and adjudication of sex crimes. OVW has since been working collaboratively with NIJ, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), and the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) to bring this call from the field to fruition.

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At the September 2011 roundtable, OVW Director, the Honorable Susan Carbon, and NIJ Director Dr. John Laub described their respective agencies' past and current efforts to address the issues raised at the earlier meetings. Director Carbon highlighted OVW's enhanced focus on addressing sexual assault through a new demonstration initiative that will augment and transform sexual assault services in six communities, ongoing work with college and university presidents to address sexual assault on campuses, and a new grant program designed to engage men and boys in preventing violence against women. She explained that as new professionals and volunteers enter the field and technology gives way to new forms of abuse, we need to ensure that all who respond to sexual violence have access to best practices and effective training.

Director Laub discussed NIJ's commitment to the concept of "translational criminology—preventing and reducing crime in our communities by translating scientific research into policy and practice." He stated that "our goal is to figure out what kind of research is necessary to encourage sexual violence victims to participate with the criminal justice system and maintain confidence that the system will indeed address their needs." Kristina Rose, Deputy Director of NIJ, also noted that NIJ recently instituted an Office of Research Partnerships to ensure that research information is widely disseminated and that research dollars go farther.

Lynn Rosenthal, White House Advisor on Violence Against Women, joined the roundtable on day two to voice the Obama Administration's commitment to ending sexual violence, noting the importance of research conducted by roundtable participants to understanding and addressing the problem of sexual violence.

Overview of National Data Collection and Research Activities

Before opening the discussion, representatives of several federal agencies gave presentations on their agencies' research and data collection efforts.

Dr. James P. Lynch, Director of the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), and Shannan Catalano, BJS Statistician, presented trends over time in the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), which is an annual survey on criminal victimization in the United States. Director Lynch showed how the number of rapes involving "intimates" doubled over a 16-year period, indicating that assaults committed by an offender known to the victim are more likely now than in the past to be reported to law enforcement. He also noted the disturbing finding that arrest rates have remained flat in recent years.

Dr. Howard Snyder, Deputy Director of BJS, presented on the National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS), an incident-based crime reporting system that collects information on each crime occurrence and related arrest. Emphasizing the utility of NIBRS data for developing policy and practice, Dr. Snyder described how common (but not necessarily predictable) characteristics of child sexual assaults—such as the times of day that assaults occur and the fact

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that a residence is most often the location of an assault—have implications for how and when child welfare case workers visit families.

Dr. Kathleen Basile, Lead Behavioral Scientist at the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), discussed her agency’s historic role in sexual violence prevention and its current priorities, which include a focus on surveillance methods for victimization and perpetration of sexual violence and the role of disparities, among other issues. She described the scope of the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), first launched in 2010 to collect data on past-year experiences of violence as well as lifetime experiences of violence. (Note: *The [findings](#) of the first ever NISVS, which will be used as a baseline to measure national trends over time, were subsequently made available by the CDC in December 2011.*)

Finally, Bethany Backes, Social Scientist at NIJ, provided an overview of NIJ’s [portfolio](#) of research on sexual violence and explained how NIJ develops its research agenda. She highlighted several recent projects, including a study of the efficacy of Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) and Sexual Assault Response Team (SART) programs, the development of a practitioner toolkit for evaluating SANE programs, and a current project looking at strategies for reducing backlogs of untested sexual assault kits in law enforcement custody.

Discussion of Barriers to Improving Research and Research Gaps

Following the presentations by federal government representatives, participants started with a discussion of existing statistics on sexual violence and the challenges to collecting detailed, reliable, and accurate data. They then discussed research trends and gaps at each stage of the criminal justice process—reporting, law enforcement response and investigation, SANE/SART response, prosecution, adjudication, and sentencing. The roundtable culminated in a conversation about dissemination of research and translating research into practice.

Much of the conversation on the first day of the roundtable focused on barriers to improving research on sexual violence and applying research to policy and practice. Some barriers identified were:

- Definitions of sexual violence vary tremendously. Studies looking at “sexual violence,” “sexual coercion,” and “sexual predators,” for example, often fail to define those terms and sufficiently explain the methodologies used. As a result, researchers do not have clear or consistent measures, and findings may not be clear.
- Sexual violence data and research rarely account for the context of violence. Respondents may be asked about lifetime experience of rape or if they were sexually assaulted just within the previous year. Questions may only ask for a yes or no response. These methodologies do not capture a lot of valuable information about sexual violence that could only be obtained through more detailed questions.

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- Methods of data collection are not applicable to some marginalized communities, for instance, speakers of languages in which there is no word for “rape”.
- Researchers have traditionally looked at sexual violence in silos, through the limited perspectives of their disciplines, e.g., sociology, criminology, psychology, etc. A more holistic approach to conducting research and disseminating findings would broaden the impact of their work.
- Practitioners and researchers constantly try to correct misrepresentations of sexual violence in the media. Journalists and others report on these crimes in ways that perpetuate victim-blaming attitudes and erroneous assumptions about rape, reinforce stereotypes, and encourage race and gender biases. Research and data are not always portrayed correctly by the media. One participant suggested that, as one small part of the effort to correct media distortions of sexual violence, NIBRS data (which are richer and more detailed than Uniform Crime Report (UCR) counts) could be given to news outlets in short, easy-to-comprehend formats.
- The current UCR definition of rape is outdated and does not count the majority of sexual assaults. The utility of UCR counts is further compromised by some law enforcement agencies’ case classification and reporting methods. (Note: *In October 2011 the FBI stated plans to update the definition of rape that it has been using since the 1920s. The new definition, announced in January 2012 by United States Attorney General Eric Holder, is: “the penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim.” The new definition includes any gender of victim and perpetrator, and recognizes that rape with an object is in fact rape. This definition also accounts for rapes in which the victim is unable to give consent because of temporary or permanent mental or physical incapacity.*)
- Qualitative and mixed-method approaches to studying sexual violence are undervalued but desperately needed, and researchers using these approaches may get less support and consideration from funders, college/university administrations, and journal publishers. Since quantitative data in isolation is insufficient for understanding the scope and impact of sexual violence, there needs to be more support for other methods that yield detailed, contextual information, even when these methods require more time and resources.

In addition to discussing barriers, participants identified topics on which further research is needed. Those topics included:

- Elements of the first stages of investigation, including how victims convey what happened to them, and what impact these elements have on case outcomes;
- Prosecutorial discretion and gate-keeping;

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- Case attrition through the criminal justice process;
- The neurobiology of trauma, and the vast range of “normal” victim behaviors;
- Offender behavior and serial offenders;
- What makes victims’ lives better after a sexual assault; and
- Efficacy of advocacy strategies.

Accurately Presenting Sexual Violence and Victimization in Research

Dr. Courtney Ahrens (California State University—Long Beach) gave a presentation on quantitative and qualitative analysis, demonstrating that both are needed to derive rich and useful information on sexual assault. Elements of a survivor’s story are critical to the decision whether to report the assault, and then case outcomes. Furthermore, survivors’ stories provide context for statistics. She then introduced Anne K. Ream, founder and creative director of the Voices and Faces Project, and Karen D. Carroll, Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) and associate director of the Bronx Sexual Assault Response Team (SART).

Both Ms. Ream and Ms. Carroll are rape survivors who shared their stories with participants. “During all of the fear and agony is when I wanted to live most,” Ms. Ream said. “In a moment of terror, you are transformed outside of yourself.” Ms. Carroll and Ms. Ream described the aftermath of their assaults, including responses from law enforcement, hospital personnel, prosecutors, and family and friends, and discussed what effect these responses had on their lives. Ms. Carroll, herself an emergency room nurse at the time, recounted how the doctor who performed her medical forensic exam “opened up the rape kit and began to read the instructions.” Her experience in receiving poor medical forensic care, she explained, led to her decision to pursue forensic nursing.

Ms. Ream explained that “the need for effective storytelling is what drives me in helping other victims tell their stories. How to marry the trauma with the stories about rebuilding our lives is paramount.” Ms. Ream said that her Voices and Faces Project website features the stories of 300 women and men who have provided detailed responses to questions about rape and its impact. “We want these stories to help rebuild lives,” she said.

Participants’ Recommendations for Further Research

Participants were grouped into practitioner-researcher teams and were asked to identify the most pressing research questions or topics and describe how research could be useful for policy and practice. Ideas and recommendations included the following:

- Conduct a study of perceptions of sexual violence among the general population. Use the results of the study to develop a targeted messaging campaign to be delivered through various media.

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- Addend the NCVS sections on rape and sexual assault to include more detailed measurements in five metropolitan areas to get a more comprehensive picture of sexual violence and the criminal justice response in large cities.
- Study the advantages and disadvantages—for both the victim and the criminal justice system—of the medical forensic exam. With so many kits remaining untested and investigations stalled, closed, or never conducted in the first place, it is important to weigh the advantages of having a medical forensic exam against the added trauma the exam causes for victims. Additionally, participants recommended further studying which practices, techniques, and technologies are most effective for collecting evidence during the exam.
- Further study what components make an effective first response to sexual assault, and what might lead to more victims seeking services.
- Examine if and how pornography—and the increase of pornographic images in mainstream media—affect attitudes about sexual violence.
- Conduct a study to determine an acceptable caseload for sex crimes detectives, since police cannot handle more sexual assault reports under increasingly limited time and staffing constraints. Due to the reality of large caseloads, some departments must “triage” cases because they do not have the resources to handle them all. Participants also suggested that the efficacy of special victims units be studied, since these units are often the first to be trimmed during budget cuts. Sergeant Jim Markey of the Phoenix, Arizona Police Department said, to the amusement of the group: “Your research is the donut of law enforcement...please continue to feed us more and more.”
- Support research on effective direct advocacy strategies for addressing multiple needs and multiple victimizations. The field needs more information on what promotes healing and improves quality of life for survivors, particularly those who do not report their victimization to law enforcement.

In closing the roundtable, Kristina Rose of NIJ thanked participants for attending and stated that the discussions have made an effective footprint for future collaboration and leveraging of information. Director Carbon thanked Anne Ream and Karen Carroll for sharing their stories with the group. “You are the face and voices of what we do,” she told them. Director Carbon and Ms. Rose explained that the information from this roundtable would be shared widely and used as guidance for strengthening partnerships within government to improve research on sexual violence.

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