



## Incidence Rates of Violence Against Women: A Comparison of the Redesigned National Crime Victimization Survey and the 1985 National Family Violence Survey

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For many reasons, including the historical stigma attached to rape and intimate-perpetrated violence, fear of retaliation from their perpetrators, and other safety concerns, estimating incidence rates of these victimizations has always been a difficult task. Research employing diverse methodologies and definitions of these victimizations has yielded different estimates. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the methodological differences which may account for the differences in results between two of the largest survey attempts to measure this violence against women: the redesigned National Crime Victimization Survey and National Family Violence Survey. Before comparing and contrasting the rate differentials estimated by each survey, an outline of their unique methodologies will be provided.

### The 1985 National Family Violence Survey

The National Family Violence Survey, conducted in 1976 and in 1985 was sponsored by the National Institute of Mental Health. For simplicity of presentation, this survey will be referred to as the "Family Violence Survey" in this essay. The primary investigators for this study were Murray Straus, from the University of New Hampshire, and Richard Gelles, from the University of Rhode Island. The most recent 1985 survey was done by telephone with a nationally representative sample of 6,002 persons age 18 and over who were married or cohabiting with a person of the opposite sex.

Violence, as defined by Gelles & Straus (1990), is an act carried out with the intention or perceived intention of physically hurting another person. This hurt can range from the slight pain caused by a slap

or spanking, to harm that results in severe injury or even death. To obtain incidents of violence from respondents, the survey utilized what is known as the **Conflict Tactics Scale** (CTS) (Gelles & Straus, 1990). The introduction to the CTS asks respondents to think of situations in the past year when they had a disagreement or were angry with a specified family member and to indicate how often they engaged in each of the acts included in the CTS. The list of acts covered in the CTS spans many tactics, including reasoning, verbal aggression, and physical aggression or violence. Physical violence by the CTS index is often subdivided into two categories: 1) minor violence, and 2) severe violence. These categories consist of the following acts: *Minor Violence*: a) Threw something, b) Pushed, grabbed, or shoved and c) Slapped; *Severe Violence*: a) Kicked, bit, or hit with a fist, b) Hit or tried to hit with something, c) Beat up, d) Choked, e) Threatened with a knife or gun, and f) Used a knife or fired a gun. Annual incidence rates for violence perpetrated by both men and women against their partners obtained from the 1985 Family Violence Survey are indicated in Table 1 (see page 2).

As Table 1 indicates, the rate of 116 per 1,000 couples shows that almost 1 out of 8 husbands carried out 1 or more violent acts during the year of this study. Further, the rate of severe violence perpetrated by husbands indicates that about 1.8 million women were beaten by their partner that year.

Notice that rates of violence perpetrated by wives against husbands are very similar to rates of violence perpetrated by husbands against wives.

**Table 1. Percent of Women and Men who had experienced violence perpetrated by a partner as operationalized by the CTS. Any violence includes both minor and severe items while Severe violence includes only those items specified as severe, National Family Violence Survey, 1985.**

**Acts of Violence Committed Annually**

	<b>Percent of Couples</b>	<b>Annual Rate per 1,000</b>	<b>Number Assaulted*</b>
<b>Any Violence Perpetrated by Husband</b>	11%	116	6,250,000
<b>Severe Violence Perpetrated by Husband</b>	3%	34%	1,800,000
<b>Any Violence Perpetrated by Wife</b>	12%	124	6,800,000
<b>Severe Violence Perpetrated by Wife</b>	4%	48	2,600,000

Note: Adapted from Straus & Gelles (1990), Table 6.1, p.97. These violence rates were computed by reclassifying the violence subscales into violent and nonviolent categories, scored 0 and 1. As such, any act of minor violence by the husband would result in the “Any Violence” scale to be coded as 1. Similarly, any act of severe violence by the husband would result in the “Severe Violence” scale to be coded as 1.

\* The number assaulted was computed by multiplying the rates in this table by the 1984 population figures as given by the 1986 Statistical Abstract of the United States. The population figure (rounded to millions) was 54 million couples.

Herein lies one of the most frequent criticisms of the CTS methodology, that it measures acts of violence in isolation from the circumstances under which the acts were committed. As critics point out, the CTS ignores who initiates the violence, the relative size and strength of the persons involved, and the nature of the participant’s relationship (Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, & Daly, 1992; Saunders, 1986). Straus and Gelles (1990) themselves, however, are quick to point out that the meaning behind these estimates are often misunderstood. They acknowledge that, “To understand the high rate of intrafamily violence by women, it is also important to realize that many of the assaults by women against their husbands are acts of retaliation or self-defense. One of the most fundamental reasons why women are violent within the family (but rarely outside the family) is that for a typical American women, her home is the location where there is the most serious risk of assault (p.98).” This, of course, remains only conjecture since the CTS does not account for the sequence of events which precipitate an act of violence. (For a more detailed discussion of the CTS methodology

and corresponding criticisms see the VAWnet essay written by Walter DeKeseredy and Martin Schwartz).

**The Redesigned National Crime Victimization Survey**

Before reviewing the rates of intimate-perpetrated assault obtained by the National Crime Victimization Survey, a brief description of the survey’s methodology will first be provided. Again, for ease of interpretation, this survey will be referred to as the “Victimization Survey.” Sponsored by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), the Victimization Survey is the second largest ongoing survey sponsored by the U.S. Government. In the sample design used for the survey, housing units (e.g., addresses) are selected from a stratified, multistage cluster sample. When a sample unit is selected for the survey, all current residents of that unit are interviewed by an interviewer from the U.S. Bureau of the Census. Those eligible for inclusion in the sample include individuals 12 years of age or older living in

the United States, including persons living in group quarters such as dormitories, rooming houses, and religious dwellings, but excluding correctional quarters such as prisons. The current sample consists of approximately 50,000 housing units and 101,000 persons. These households are interviewed every six months for three years; the first and fifth interviews are conducted in person, and the remainder are held by telephone whenever possible. The Victimization Survey obtains an average annual response rate of over 96 percent.

Since its inception in 1972, the Victimization Survey has collected information about the following types of crimes including attempts: rape, robbery, assault, larceny, burglary, and motor vehicle theft. Detailed information about each victimization is recorded; so are the characteristics of the offender, insofar as the victim can report them. Beginning in 1979, BJS began an extensive 10-year redesign project of the Victimization Survey. An important goal of the redesign was to estimate more accurately the incidents of rape and violence perpetrated by intimates and other family members. The new survey screening instrument began a phase-in process in 1989 and was incorporated into the entire Victimization Survey sample by 1993.

Before the redesign, no specific questions asked respondents directly about attacks that were perpetrated by relatives or offenders known to them. If a respondent revealed, however, that he or she had been attacked or otherwise victimized by someone who was known, the incident was recorded as such. The relationship of the victim to the offender then would have been placed in one of the following categories: known by sight only, casual acquaintance, spouse at time of incident, ex-spouse at time of incident, parent or stepparent, own child or stepchild, brother/sister, other relative, boy/girlfriend, ex-boy/girlfriend, friend or ex-friend, roommate or boarder, schoolmate, neighbor, someone at work, or other nonrelative.

After extensive deliberations, it was decided that although it would not be feasible to change the focus of the Victimization Survey to include a section on tactics of conflict resolution between spouses or

partners, the current instrument could incorporate questions that would estimate more accurately the incidents of violence by relatives and intimates.

Accordingly, after the general questions about acts of violence or theft, the screener instrument for uncovering victimizations now includes the following questions:

*1) Other than any incidents already mentioned, has anyone attacked or threatened you in any of these ways:*

- a. With any weapon, for instance, a gun or knife --*
- b. With anything like a baseball bat, frying pan, scissors, or a stick --*
- c. By something thrown, such as a rock or bottle --*
- d. Include any grabbing, punching, or choking--*
- e. Any rape, attempted rape or other type of sexual attack --*
- f. Any face to face threats --*

*OR*

- g. Any attack or threat or use of force by anyone at all?*

***Please mention it even if you are not certain it was a crime.***

*2) Incidents involving forced or unwanted sexual acts are often difficult to talk about. Have you been forced or coerced to engage in unwanted sexual activity by --*

- a. Someone you didn't know before --*
- b. A casual acquaintance OR --*
- c. Someone you know well --*

If respondents reply affirmatively to one of these questions, interviewers next ask “*Do you mean forced or coerced sexual intercourse?*” to determine whether the incident should be recorded as rape or as another type of sexual attack. The definition from the Victimization Survey interviewer’s manual for rape is as follows: “Rape is forced sexual intercourse and includes both psychological coercion as well as physical force. Forced

sexual intercourse means vaginal, anal, or oral penetration by the offender(s). This category also includes incidents where the penetration is from a foreign object such as a bottle.”

To further cue respondents about incidents of victimization which are not committed by strangers, they are then asked:

3) *People often don't think of incidents committed by someone they know. Did you have something stolen from you OR were you attacked or threatened by --*

- a. *Someone at work or school --*
- b. *A neighbor or friend --*
- c. *A relative or family member --*
- d. *Any other person you've met or known?*

Not surprisingly, estimates of violence against women using this new screening instrument almost doubled the rates of intimate-perpetrated violence (by husband, ex-husband, boyfriend or ex-boyfriend) against women estimated by the Victimization Survey. Using the redesigned Survey screening instrument, estimates reveal that nearly 5 million violent victimizations are experienced by females over the age of 12 every year. Of those victimizations involving lone-offenders, the Victimization Survey estimates that 29% are perpetrated by

intimates, 9% are perpetrated by other relatives such as siblings, parents, and children, 40% are committed by other known offenders, and only 23% are perpetrated by strangers. The rates of lone-offender victimization per 1,000 females aged 12 and over are listed below in Table 2.

**Comparing the Victimization and Family Violence Surveys**

From this table, it can be seen that rates of intimate-perpetrated violence estimated using the Victimization Survey are lower than those obtained from the Family Violence Survey. Also notice, however, that unlike estimates from the Family Violence Survey, the Victimization Survey indicates that women are much more likely to experience an act of intimate-perpetrated violence than are men (9.3 per 1,000 versus 1.4 per 1,000).

In addition, unlike the Family Violence Survey, the sample for the Victimization Survey includes all persons, regardless of their marital or living status. Thus, the Victimization Survey can also estimate rates of intimate-perpetrated violence for single, divorced, and never married women. This is important because rates of intimate-perpetrated violence for these women have been found to be significantly higher than those for married women. For example, rates of intimate-perpetrated violence for separated

**Table 2: Average annual rate and number of violent victimizations committed by lone offenders by sex of victim and victim/offender relationship, National Crime Victimization Survey 1992-94.**

	<b>Intimate</b>	<b>Other Relative</b>	<b>Acquaintance / Friend</b>	<b>Stranger</b>
<b>Female Victim</b>				
Average annual rate per 1,000 females age 12 or older	9.3	2.8	12.9	7.4
Average annual number of victimizations against females	1,008,000	304,500	1,402,500	802,300
<b>Male Victims</b>				
Average annual rate per 1,000 males age 12 or older	1.4	1.2	17.2	19.0
Average annual number of victimizations against males	143,400	122,000	1,754,000	1,933,100

women are over 8 times higher than rates for married women: a rate of 2.7 per 1,000 married women versus a rate of 82.2 per 1,000 separated women (Bachman & Saltzman, 1995).

### **Why Are the Incidence Estimates So Different?**

The most obvious explanation for the rate differentials across surveys pertains to the manner in which information about these victimizations was solicited. The Family Violence Survey is guised as a survey interested in a number of family-related issues including tactics used in “conflict resolution.” The National Crime Victimization Survey, as the name clearly conveys, is a survey interested in obtaining information about “crimes.” Unfortunately, some survey participants still may not view assaults by intimates and other family members as criminal acts. Even though many of the behaviors conveyed in the screening instruments (e.g. kicking, punching, etc.) are the same for both surveys, the context in which these questions are asked must inevitably play a role in the extent of disclosure respondents are willing to provide.

Related to the issue of disclosure is the fact that, for the Victimization Survey, all respondents within a selected household are interviewed. Thus, all family members are asked the same set of screening questions regarding their victimization experiences with both known and unknown offenders. Even though respondents are instructed that they can reschedule a telephone or personal interview for a more “convenient” time (e.g. when the respondent can be interviewed when others are not present, etc.), this situation may nevertheless prevent some respondents from disclosing incidents of violence to interviewers, particularly those incidents perpetrated by intimate partners within the same household.

Another difference has to do with the universe from which the samples of each survey are taken. The Family Violence Survey, as stated earlier, interviewed married or cohabiting heterosexual couples over the age of 18 only. The Victimization Survey includes *all* individuals age 12 and over in its

sample. Since rates of intimate-perpetrated violence are highest for those between the ages of 19-29 (Bachman & Saltzman, 1995), the inclusion of those aged 12-18 in the Victimization Survey sample may serve to deflate overall rates of violence generated by this survey relative to the Family Violence Survey. In addition, widowed women who are typically over the age of 65 are also included in the Victimization Survey sample. These women are the least likely to experience intimate-perpetrated violence, yet because they are also included in the sample, this also serves to deflate the overall rates of intimate-perpetrated violence produced by the Victimization Survey compared to the Family Violence Survey.

A more fundamental reason why estimates may vary, which is rarely acknowledged, has to do with the way in which incidents of violence are counted by the Victimization Survey. This issue is related to “bounding,” that is, placing the incident within a particular time frame, and is best explained through example. During each interview, respondents are asked about any victimization they may have experienced within the last six months. Interviews then focus on the specific period in which the incident occurred. Incidents reported in that interview are compared with incidents reported in a previous interview. When a report appears to be a duplicate of an earlier reported incident, respondents are reminded of the earlier report and are asked whether the new report represents the incident mentioned previously or a different incident. The sole purpose of the first interview, then, is to set an initial time reference (bounding). Data collected at the first interview are not included in Victimization Survey estimates. Since respondents in the Family Violence Survey sample were interviewed only once, incidents were not bounded. Because tests have found unbounded interviews to produce significantly higher victimization rates than bounded interviews (Bachman & Taylor, 1994), this is another likely reason why Family Violence Survey estimates are higher compared to Victimization Survey estimates.

**Men’s and Women’s Use of Violence**

A more perplexing issue concerning rate differentials between the Family Violence Survey and the Victimization Survey has to do with the extent of gender “symmetry” in male-to-female violence versus female-to-male violence as indicated by estimates from the Family Violence Survey. That is, rates of victimization from the Family Violence Survey indicate that women use violence against men as much as men use violence against women. Since this issue comes up again and again in critiques among advocates and researchers, the methodological foundations for this perplexing finding are worth reiterating. Recall that the basic methodology of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) used in the Family Violence Survey is to simply count the raw number of violent acts committed by individuals. It does not provide us with any information on why these acts of violence took place. For example, it does not tell us how many of these acts took place because a woman was using physical violence in self-defense against her attacker. In general, research demonstrates that estimates using the CTS methodology

will usually find gender symmetry, that is, men and women engaging in similar rates of violence. Because the context of the violence is not taken into account, however, this symmetry is somewhat erroneous primarily because women commonly use violence to defend themselves. Research employing the CTS, *but* including qualifying questions after each act (e.g. “What percentage of these times do you estimate that in doing these actions you were primarily motivated by acting in self-defense, that is, protecting yourself from immediate physical harm?”) has shown that a substantial number of women reported that their violence was in self-defense or fighting back (DeKeseredy et al., 1997, Saunders, 1986).

In contrast to this gender-symmetry, the Victimization Survey clearly demonstrates that women are more often the victims of intimate-perpetrated violence compared to men. In fact, the Victimization Survey estimates that rates of intimate violence against women perpetrated by men are almost 8 times higher than rates of intimate violence against men perpetrated by women. These differential patterns of intimate-perpetration are also found

**Table 3: Factors that may contribute to different incidence rates of violence against women**

Methodology	National Family Violence Survey	National Crime Victimization Survey
Sample population	Including married or cohabiting heterosexual couples over age 18 may result in higher estimates	Including all individuals over age 12 in sample may result in lower estimates because of decreased violence against women between 12-18 and over 65 years
Number of times interviewed	Inviewed respondents once, which may produce higher victimization rates	Interviewed respondents multiple times to eliminate duplicate reports
Context of the survey	Violence is considered "marital conflict"	Violence is considered a crime; some respondents may not view assaults by intimates a crime
Number of household members interviewed	Interviewed one member of the married or cohabiting couple	Interviewed all family members; may prevent some respondents from disclosing incidents of violence
Context of violence	Does not distinguish acts of self-defense	Asks questions to distinguish acts of self-defense

when homicide statistics from the Supplementary Homicide Reports compiled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation are analyzed. From homicide data, for example, we know that women are significantly more likely to be killed by intimates such as husbands and boyfriends compared to men (Bachman & Saltzman, 1995). Thus, other data and research findings lend no support for the gender symmetry thesis.

## Conclusion

In sum, it will probably always remain difficult to estimate incidence rates of violence against women that occurs “behind closed doors” at the hands of an intimate. Different research designs and samples will continue to produce disparate findings. In fact, the field is currently awaiting findings from another nationally representative survey investigating violence against women and men which was funded by the National Institute of Justice and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1996). This survey, which was conducted in 1994 through 1995, utilized somewhat different questioning techniques to estimate rates of violence perpetrated by both known and unknown offenders.

Unfortunately, many factors inhibit women from reporting their victimizations not only to police, but to researchers as well, including the private nature of the event, the perceived stigma associated with one’s victimization, the belief that no purpose may be served in reporting it, and even fear of retaliation from the offender. Obviously, increased efforts should be directed at eradicating stereotypical notions and antiquated myths regarding these acts of violence which linger in our society. Our understanding of the nature and magnitude of this violence and our ultimate attempts to prevent it depend, in part, on such enlightened awareness.

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