Key Issues When Collecting and Publishing General Population Estimates of Rape and Sexual Assault

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What are the main issues related to measuring rape and sexual assault on a survey?

• Validation
  – Highly sensitive, difficult to measure
  – What criteria can be used to address major concerns with error?

• Privacy, confidentiality and mitigating risk
  – What can be done to relieve concerns about privacy and confidentiality?
  – What about potential emotional harm to respondents?

• Publication of results
  – What should be expected?
  – What can be done to maintain a clear message?
Discussion is based on experiences from two projects measuring rape and sexual assault

- **Rape and Sexual Assault Pilot Study (RSA Pilot)**
  - Co-operative agreement with BJS to compare two methods of collecting RSA data: ACASI vs. Telephone
  - Collected data in five metropolitan areas
  - Report will be published in the next several months

- **Association of American Universities Survey of Sexual Assault and Misconduct (AAU Survey)**
  - Survey across 27 colleges and universities who are members of the Association of American Universities
  - Published report in September of 2015
Validation - Why not police records?

• An important purpose of the survey is to capture incidents that are not reported to the police
  – NCVS: 65% of rape and sexual assault incidents are not reported to the police (Langton, et al., 2012)
  – AAU survey (and similar design) - 90% are not reported to authorities (Cantor, et al., 2015; Krebs, et al., 2016)
• Incidents reported to police are more ‘serious’
  – More injuries and need hospital care
  – More likely to involve weapons
• Significant problems with matching survey reports to official records (Miller and Groves, 1985)
Validation - What type of error is of the highest concern?

• For many years, under-reporting has been the major concern because of the sensitivity of the topic
  – RSA is difficult to talk about - shame, denial
  – Can be dangerous if revealed to others

• However, critique in last 20 years is that underreports are due to comprehension
  – Use of colloquial terms, such as ‘rape’ or ‘crime’ lead to excluding many RSA events
  – Surveys that use behavior specific terminology produce much higher rates of RSA (Lynch, 1996; Fisher and Cullen, 2000)
Estimates of Rape using NCVS screening items versus Behavior Specific screening items (per 1,000 undergraduate females)

Primary criticism of new measures is over-reporting

- Academic (Gilbert, 1997) and press commentary (Yoffe, 2015; Taylor, 2015; Freyd, 2015) criticize measures as too expansive
  - A minority of respondents (e.g., 27% - Koss, 1988) identify the event as rape or sexual assault
  - Definition includes inability to consent

The other major problem with this [AAU Survey] and all others is the expansion of the definition of "sexual assault" to include everything from a stolen kiss to forcible rape (Washington Examiner, 2015).
Approach to Validation - Two Stage Design

• Many of the prior studies have used the screening questions to measure prevalence
  – Questions are complex and it is easy to not consider all conditions (Steiger and Cantor, 2014)
  – Respondents may report an event at a later question
• Two-stage approach - Initially screen for eligible events (as in prior surveys). Follow-up by asking details, including the definitional elements of the event
  – Behavior (penetration, sexual touching, kissing)
  – Tactic (physical force, inability to consent)
Approach to Validation - Collect a narrative

- One critique of two-stage design is that it is also subject to measurement error (Cook, et al., 2011)
- Collect narrative of incidents
  - Does the incident conform to the intended definition?
  - Provides larger contextual circumstances related to the event
- This was used on a smaller scale, with select samples of volunteers when first developing the method (Koss and Gidiz, 1985; Testa, et al., 2004)
- NCVS uses this approach when measuring all types of victimizations
  - 15% of incidents in NCVS need to be re-classified after reviewing the narrative
Privacy, Confidentiality and Mitigating Harm

• Reporting Rape and Sexual Assault is sensitive
  – Socially difficult to talk about because do not want to think about it or embarrassment
  – Fear of consequences if someone else finds out
• Reporting can lead to emotional harm
  – Bring up feelings by re-living the event
  – Questions can be perceived as blaming the victim
• This is also highly related to measurement error; sensitive behaviors tend to be under-reported
Solutions - Confidentiality

• Masking topic from others in the household
  – Sample one person in the household
  – Mask the topic of the survey (two-stage consent)

• Mode of contact matters
  – In-person contact
    ▪ Physically isolate respondent
    ▪ Self-administer the consent to prevent anyone overhearing the goals and purpose of the study
  – Telephone contact
    ▪ Ask questions with yes/no answers when possible
    ▪ Use numbers to represent questions with >2 responses
Percent of interviews with someone else in the room, time spent in room and threats to confidentiality (RSA Pilot)
Solutions - Mitigating Harm

• Tell respondent they can stop any time they feel uncomfortable
• Carefully train interviewers to recognize signs of distress
  – Emphasize respondent welfare over survey data
  – Have plans on how to handle extreme distress situations
  – Emphasize the voluntary nature of participation
  – Let respondents decide if they want to continue. Don’t ask interviewers to make a judgement (except extreme cases)
• Provide resources to respondents
  – Hotline numbers
  – Organizations where help can be obtained
• Measure how you are doing with a debriefing interview
Measuring Respondent Reactions

**Negative Reactions Scale**

- You experienced intense emotions while completing the survey.
- The research made you think about things you didn’t want to think about.
- The research raised unpleasant emotional issues for you that you had NOT expected.

*Cronbach Alpha = .80*

**Positive Reactions Scale**

- You believe you have been able to help others by participating in this study.
- You were glad to have had the opportunity to participate.
- You feel you gained something positive from participating.

*Cronbach Alpha = .77*

**(No) Regret**

Now that you know what the survey is about, you would have made the same choice to participate.
General Respondent Reactions (RSA Pilot)

- Experienced intense emotions
- Thought about things didn't want to think about
- Raised unpleasant & unexpected emotions
- Believe you have been able to help others
- Glad to have had opportunity to participate
- Gained something positive
- Would have made same choice to participate
Percent of respondents experiencing some distress, by method of identification and mode (RSA Pilot)
Mitigating Harm - To Interviewers

• Interviewers can become distressed by listening to reports by victims
  – This is most apparent for interviewer administered surveys
  – But it does crop up with self-administered surveys when an interviewer is present (e.g., ACASI for a household surveys)

• Train interviewers on what to expect and how to work through the issues
  – Re-emphasize why the study is important and that respondents also believe it is important
  – Have regular check-ins with each supervisor
Publication of Results

• Rates published are of keen interest to the public
• Release of a report on the AAU campus survey led to hundreds of articles, editorials, and op-eds in major and minor news outlets
  – Wide range of reactions, both positive and negative
  – Very intense opinions on all sides of the spectrum

• There is a good change the results will be mis-interpreted.
Anticipating reactions

• Make sure the data are protected from Freedom Of Information Act (FOIA) or other requests
  – AAU survey was at a very local level and it was anticipated that press would request information on specific respondents; a Certificate of Confidentiality from HHS was obtained to prevent that
  – RSA Pilot is protected through federal legislation as a collection by BJS

• Emphasize methodology on prior research as much as possible
  – RSA pilot drew from prior research by CDC, NIJ and BJS (among other sources)
  – AAU was based on prior research, including the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault report (Not Alone, 2014)
Anticipating reactions (continued)

• Ask for external review by other experts
  – BJS commissioned the National Academy of Sciences to review methodologies related to collecting data on rape and sexual assault
  – AAU methods were done in collaboration with a committee from representatives of different universities

• Be as transparent as possible
  – Fully document methodology, warts and all (e.g., response rates)
Thanks
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