



2018 Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology

• March 7, 2018

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

David Cantor, Westat

Darby Steiger, Westat

John Hartge, Westat

Shannan Catalano, Bureau of Justice Statistics

# 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

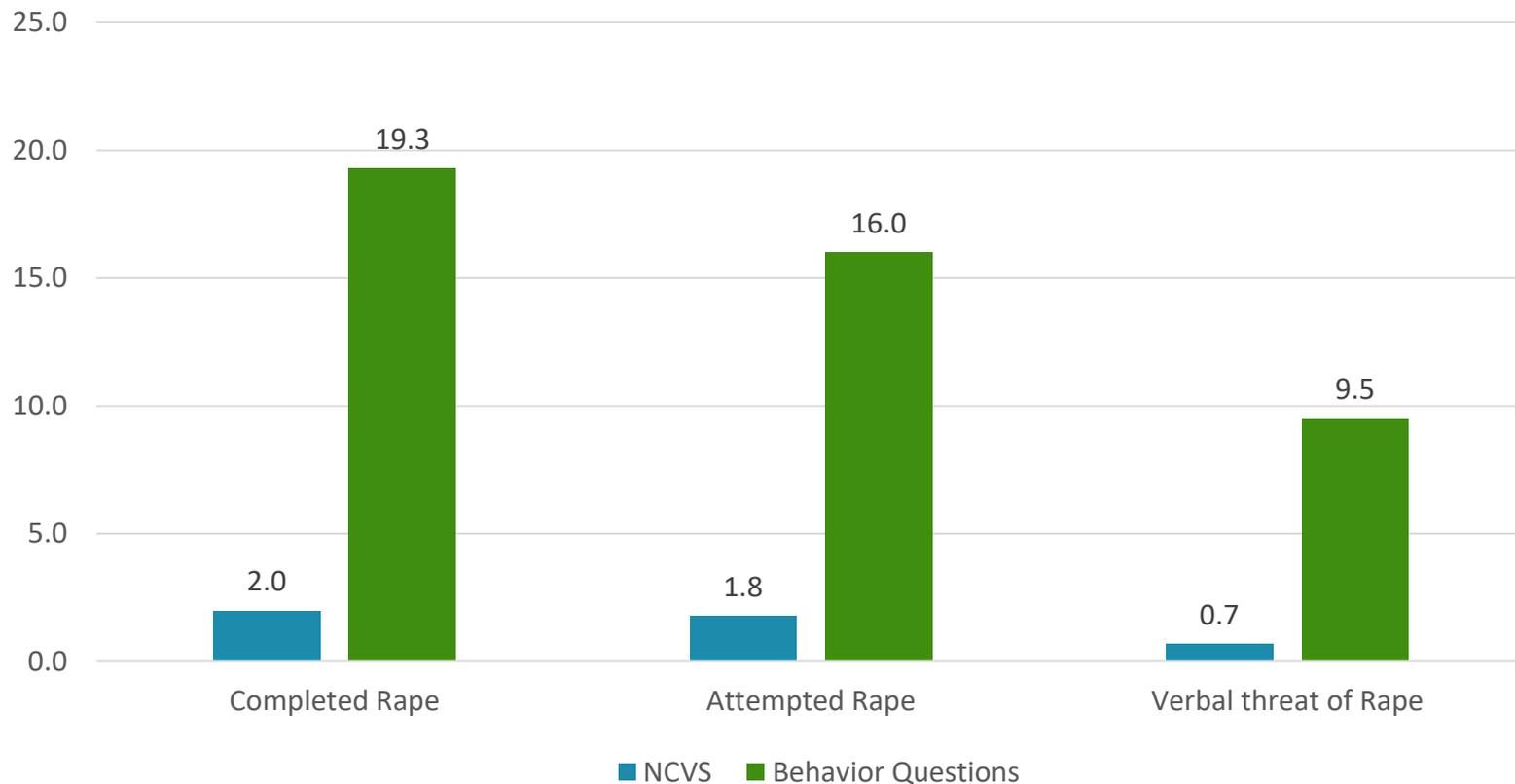
# Validation - Why not police records?

- 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)



Fisher, B. (2009). The effects of survey question wording on rape estimates: Evidence from a quasi-experimental design. *Violence Against Women 15: 133-147.*

# 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

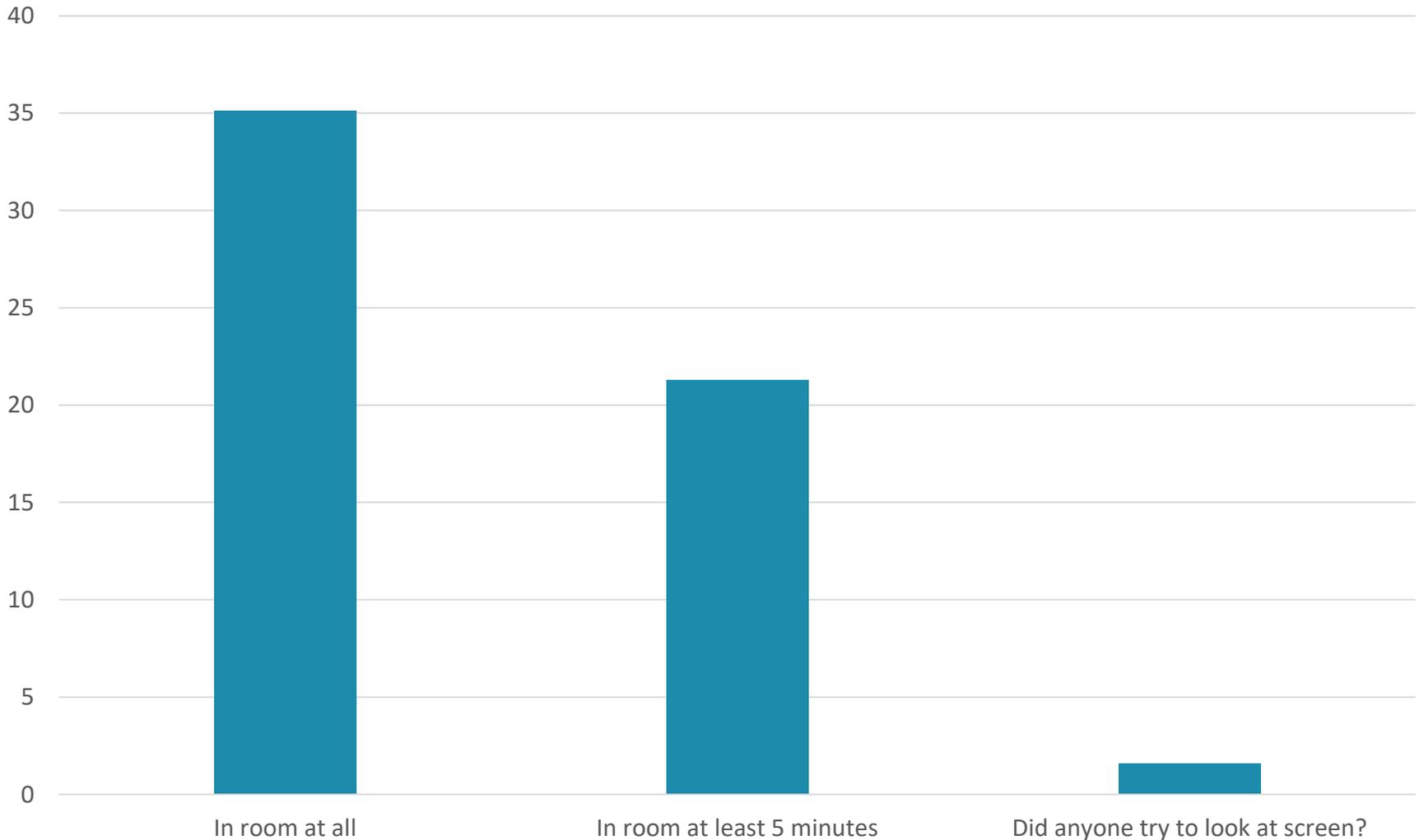
# Privacy, Confidentiality and Mitigating Harm

- 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

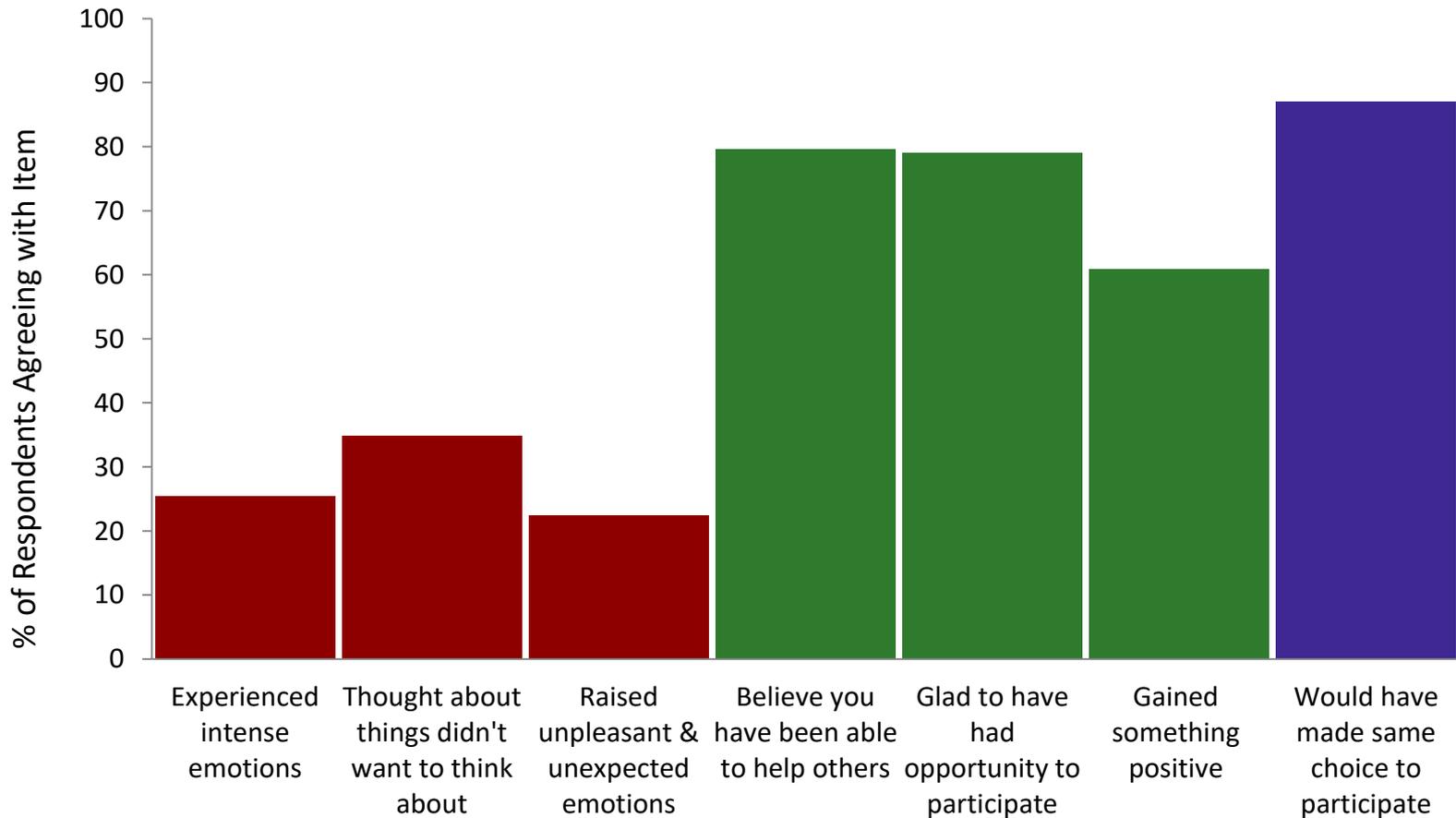
- You believe you have been able to help others by participating in this study.
- You were glad to have had the opportunity to participate.
- You feel you gained something positive from participating.

Cronbach Alpha = .77

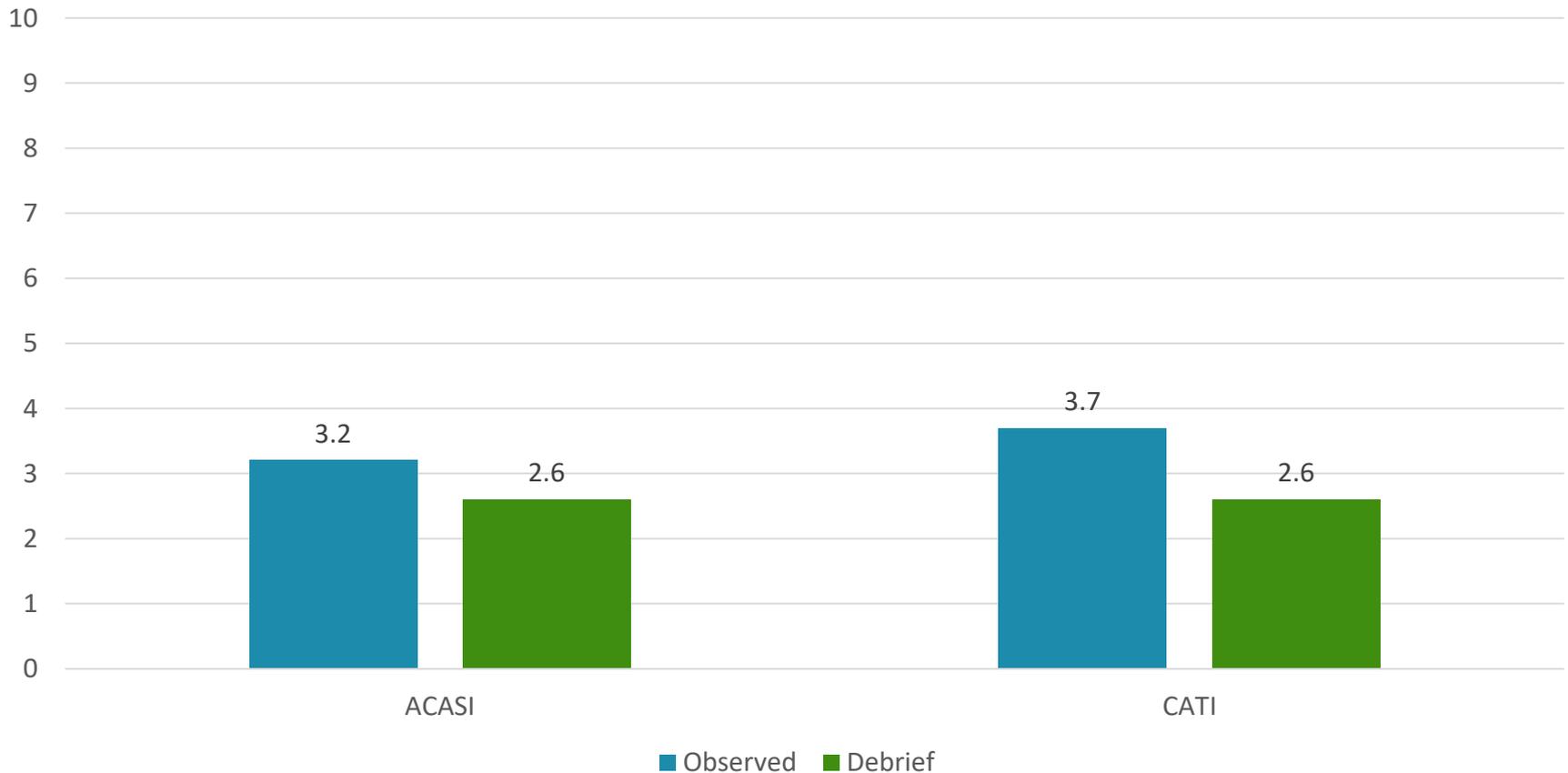
## (No) Regret

Now that you know what the survey is about, you would have made the same choice to participate.

# General Respondent Reactions (RSA Pilot)



# 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 chance the results will be misinterpreted.

# 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)



2018 Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology

• March 7, 2018

# Thanks

# Contact: [davidcantor@westat.com](mailto:davidcantor@westat.com)