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## Statistics Show Drop In U.S. Rape Cases – Many Say Crime Is Still Often Unreported

By David A. Fahrenthold, Washington Post Staff Writer

The number of rapes per capita in the United States has plunged by more than 85 percent since the 1970s, and reported rape fell last year even while other violent offenses increased, according to federal crime data.

This seemingly stunning reduction in sexual violence has been so consistent over the past two decades that some experts say they have started to believe it is accurate, even if they cannot fully explain why it is occurring.

In 1979, according to a Justice Department estimate based on a wide-ranging public survey, there were 2.8 rapes for every 1,000 people. In 2004, the same survey found that the rate had decreased to 0.4 per thousand.

Many criminologists and victims' advocates say that these numbers could be a statistical mirage, because rape is still underreported and poorly understood. But others say they have been convinced that there is real improvement and that a devastating crime has been receding from American life.

"Overall, there has clearly been a decline over the last 10 to 20 years," said Kim Gandy, president of the National Organization for Women. "It's very liberating for women, in terms of now being able to be more free and more safe."

By all accounts, rape is still one of the most underreported crimes. Several decades after the establishment of rape crisis hotlines, greater sensitivity toward rape victims by police and prosecutors, adoption of policies by news organizations to not identify victims and limitations on how much a victim's sexual history can be placed in evidence during trial, the Justice Department estimates that 61 percent of rapes and sexual assaults are still not reported. But that is down from 69 percent in 1996, and experts say the trend remains downward.

Not everyone is convinced that things are getting that much better. Many who work with rape victims say they do not believe there has been a widespread decline in the number of attacks. Instead – despite the years of attempted outreach to rape victims – they say the crime may be as hidden now as ever.

“If there’s been a change, it’s been a very small change,” said Dean Kilpatrick, director of the National Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center in Charleston, S.C. He said that recent high-profile rape cases such as those involving Duke University lacrosse players and basketball star Kobe Bryant may have persuaded rape victims to stay silent because of public scrutiny of the accusers’ private lives and sexual history.

Some experts say that the dispute over numbers has made rape an especially difficult crime to study or try to fix.

“When the conversation gets bogged down around, ‘How prevalent is this problem?’ you can’t even get to the next steps, of ‘Now, what are we going to do about it?’” said Jennifer Pollitt Hill, executive director of the Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault, an Arnold-based umbrella group for victims’ assistance groups statewide.

Now, though, some experts are saying they have been won over by decades of data showing the same encouraging thing: Rape in America is receding, and rapidly.

One measure is the Justice Department’s National Crime Victimization Survey, which asks thousands of respondents 12 and older about crimes that have happened to them. This survey, which is meant to capture offenses that weren’t reported to police, is the one that depicted the 85 percent decline in the per-capita rape rate since 1979.

Another way to track rape’s apparent decline is through the nation’s police reports, which are aggregated every year by the FBI. Their reports, dating to the mid-1980s, show that rape reached a peak in about 1992, with 0.4 rapes reported to police per 1,000 people.

Since then, reported rape declined about 25 percent by 2004, the most recent year for which data were available. In that year, the rate was about 0.3 reported rapes per 1,000. Besides the fact that not all rapes were being reported, the two studies’ differ because the FBI reports define rape more narrowly, excluding instances involving male victims. Both classify attempted rapes as “rape.”

Last week, the FBI released its preliminary crime data for 2005, which showed that reports of rape had again fallen slightly – even as other violent crimes such as murder and robbery ticked worrisomely upward.

“The decline has been steady and consistent, which gives us a lot of confidence that it’s a real occurrence, not a statistical anomaly,” said Scott Berkowitz, president of the Washington-based Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network.

One school of thought holds that rape has declined for the same reasons that other violent offenses have: a reduction in the lawlessness associated with crack cocaine, a shrinking population of young people and an increased number of criminals in jail.

Rapists “tend to commit other crimes,” said Richard Felson, a professor at Pennsylvania State University. “The way we say it in criminology is that offenders tend to be versatile.” By this

logic, locking up robbers, killers and drug dealers reduces the pool of potential rapists out on the street.

Another, more hopeful, explanation is that Americans have actually changed the way they think about sexual assault: Women have been taught to avoid unsafe situations, and both boys and girls have been drilled to understand the rules of consent.

“They’re far more aware that ‘no’ means no,” than previous generations, Berkowitz said.

In the Washington area last week, local officials said they had seen little evidence of a vast decline in rape. Last year, the District’s total rapes fell 24 percent; at the same time, reports of rape increased in several suburban jurisdictions.

Because the recent federal report on crime statistics counts only cities, statistics on other local jurisdictions were not included.

“I think we’re steady in Prince George’s County,” said State’s Attorney Glenn F. Ivey. He said county authorities have seen new and disturbing trends in sexual assault, including a spate of attacks by juveniles and a few assaults committed at school-day “skip parties.” Ivey recalled one recent skip party at which a girl was allegedly surprised and attacked by eight or nine men as a kind of gang initiation.

“I just don’t recall seeing things like that 10 or 15 years ago,” Ivey said.

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