

WOMEN'S eNews

Statistics Suggest More Rape Victims Speak Up

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By Asjlynn Loder, WeNews correspondent

More women are reporting rapes and trusting that law-enforcement will take their charges seriously. That is the good news that advocates of sex-assault victims are reading in governmental statistics about rape in 2002.



Jamie Zuieback

(WOMENSENEWS) – Rape jumped 4 percent in 2002, according to FBI statistics. But that may be good news.

Women, according to a new survey by the Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics, are coming forward in record numbers to report rape and sexual assault.

This increase in reporting – rather than an increase in the number of actual rapes – may have pushed up the FBI numbers, say victim advocates, since the bureau measures only those crimes reported to law enforcement. And that, they said, shows that more victims trust law enforcers to respond seriously to the charge.

“In the past, the reason people didn't report was that they feared nothing would be done, or that they wouldn't be believed, or that it was too personal a crime,” said Jamie Zuieback, spokesperson for the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network in Washington, D.C., in a telephone interview. “People are starting to realize that it will be taken seriously,” she said.

More than half of all sexual-assault victims are coming forward for the first time since the statistics bureau began collecting data 30 years ago, capping an upward trend that began in 1999. From 1993 to 1995, only 30.8 percent of rape-and-sexual-assault victims reported their attacks, according to the bureau's annual National Crime Victimization Survey, released on August 24. Last year, more than 53 percent came forward.

Scott Berkowitz, president and founder of Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network, the largest anti-sex-assault organization in the country, credited the increase in reporting to tough-on-crime policies, greater public awareness and a generation of women that has grown up on “no means no.”

The year-to-date average of monthly calls to RAINN’s National Sexual Assault Hotline was up 27 percent for 2003, suggesting that more women are speaking up about sexual assault. The FBI’s increase in rape reports also appears to confirm the findings of the Justice Department’s statistics bureau.

Statistical Uncertainties

When taken together with FBI figures and the increase in hotline calls, the numbers in the annual victimization survey could be cause for celebration, but statisticians caution that this year’s figure could be an anomaly.

“Could it spike this year and go down next year? Absolutely,” said Patsy Klaus, senior statistician with the Victimization Statistics Branch of the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in a recent telephone interview. “If you are looking for a trend, you don’t usually talk about it unless you’re going in the same direction for a long time.”

The uncertainty highlights the ongoing problems faced by those trying to measure a highly stigmatized and chronically underreported crime.

The National Crime Victimization Survey interviews a representative sample of the population – asking what crimes they suffered and how many of them they reported – and extrapolates those figures to the total national population.

The percentage of rapes reported flat-lined near 30 percent from 1993 through 1999, spiking above the 45 percent mark in 2000 and dipping slightly in 2001 to about 40 percent.

Reporting for other types of violent crime also increased since 1993. For example, 71 percent of robberies were reported in 2002, versus 60 percent in 1993. Overall, reporting of all types of violent crime increased 6 percentage points since 1993, from 43 percent to 49 percent.

But the increase in rape reports outstripped the general trend. From 1993 to 2002, for instance, the reporting of rape rose more than 20 percentage points, while reported robberies rose by a much smaller 8 percentage points.

Largest Survey of Its Kind

The National Crime Victimization Survey, begun in 1972, is the single largest survey of its kind and costs approximately \$15 million each year. Between 60,000 and 70,000 households are surveyed every six months. Family members over the age of 12 are interviewed about the types of

personal and property crime they have experienced. Families remain in the survey for three years.

Between 1993 and last year, the statistics bureau has measured a 55.6 percent drop in the number of rapes. An estimated 247,730 rapes and sexual assaults – one every two minutes – took place in 2002. More than 87 percent of the victims were women.

Along with the FBI's annual crime report, the victimization survey is the most influential indicator of crime trends. The report shapes law enforcement strategies and public policy, determining where tax dollars are spent on victims' services and policing.

“Although we have some clues about specific issues that lead women to make reports to authorities, we still have much to learn,” said Benjamin E. Saunders from the National Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center in Charleston, S.C., where he is director of the Family and Child Program. “It is important to continue to understand those factors that will encourage women to come forward and get the services they need,” he added in a telephone interview.

Rape goes unreported for several reasons. Victims are less likely to report a crime that is considered “a private or personal matter,” according to the statistics bureau, and less likely to report a crime committed against them by someone they know. Most rape and sexual assault victims – 69 percent – know their attackers.

No Accounting for Children

The survey has crucial flaws that may make it less likely to detect sexual assault. One is the survey's practice of only including family members over the age of 12.

Government estimates indicate that children under 12 are the victims of more than 30 percent of all sexual assaults. Also, the survey methods do not guarantee the privacy of the interviewee, hindering the detection of a crime that is often committed by family members and intimate partners of the victim.

“It's frankly not that likely that you're going to detect all or even most of these sensitive types of crimes,” Saunders said.

He expressed skepticism over the sudden surge in reporting. “I don't believe it's 50 percent,” he says, suggesting the actual figure was as low as 25 percent. Nonetheless, he said an increase in victims' services, police-sensitivity training and greater public awareness were all factors that make a woman more likely to report an assault today than she would have been 30 years ago.

Public-awareness and education campaigns on college campuses as well as prominent cases, such as the Air Force academy rape allegations, sexual-abuse scandals in the clergy and the high-profile kidnappings of young girls, have brought public consciousness of rape and sexual assault to an all-time high.

“It reaffirms that it is a serious and violent crime, and that it is not the victim's fault,” said

Zuieback from the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network.

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For more information:

National Sexual Assault Hotline 1-800-656-HOPE

Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network:

<http://www.rainn.org>

U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics--
National Crime Victimization Survey 2002

(Adobe PDF format):

<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/cv02.pdf>

Women's eNews--"Surge in NYC Rape Reports May Point to Real Change":

<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/865/>

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