

What lies behind the hidden figure of sexual assault?

Issues of prevalence and disclosure

Alexandra Neame and Melanie Heenan

The real extent to which women, children and men experience sexual assault remains difficult to estimate at a national level. While crime victimisation studies have helped to provide better estimates of the prevalence of certain crimes across population groups, including incidents that are unreported to police, the methods they adopt considerably reduce the visibility of particular groups of victims. For example, the National Crime and Safety Survey in Australia relies on written questionnaires that are restricted to people living in private residences, who are registered voters, who are English-speaking, and who are 15 years of age and over (ABS 2002).¹

While the methodology used for the Women's Safety Survey (ABS 1996) was sensitively designed to prompt greater participation from women who had experienced sexual violence (using trained interviewers to survey women face-to-face), participation depended upon women being at least 18 years of age and living in a private residence. Some attempt was made by the researchers to provide interpreters for women from certain language groups. However, participants identified as non-English-speaking were interviewed by telephone only. Given the sensitivity of the issues being discussed, the likelihood of these women participating may well have been considerably reduced.

More targeted research, and approaches that place greater emphasis on understanding the nature and extent of the experiences of victim/survivors,² have tended to increase the likelihood of disclosure and contributed to a broader understanding of how supplemental "measures" for estimating the prevalence of sexual assault must be considered (Russell 1986). It is within the contexts of these studies that more accurate estimates of the extent of rape in marriage, date-rape, and rape in families, in war, and within church communities, have been produced.

This briefing paper draws on these more targeted approaches to highlight some key issues when considering the prevalence of sexual violence against victim/survivors within a number of specific communities or contexts. The focus of this paper has been partially directed by other new publications that give particular attention to the issues of non-reporting and the hidden recording of sexual assault. For example, it is acknowledged that the experiences of Indigenous victim/survivors are, at worst, systematically ignored or, at best, simply "added on" to issues raised by non-Indigenous women. However, a new



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies

Australian Centre for the
Study of Sexual Assault

The Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault aims to improve access to current information on sexual assault in order to assist policy makers and others interested in this area to develop evidence-based strategies to prevent, respond to, and ultimately reduce the incidence of sexual assault.

The Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault is funded by the Office of the Status of Women, through the National Initiative to Combat Sexual Assault. The Centre is hosted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Contents

Adult survivors of childhood sexual assault	2
Women from non-English-speaking backgrounds	5
Violence and sexual assault against sex industry workers	7
Sexual assault and homelessness among young people	9
Conclusion	11

The authors

Alexandra Neame is a Research Officer with the Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Melanie Heenan is the Coordinator of the Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

© Australian Institute of Family Studies – Commonwealth of Australia 2003.

Views expressed in the Centre's publications are those of individual authors and may not necessarily reflect ACSSA or Institute policy.

ACSSA Coordinator: *Melanie Heenan*

Australian Institute of Family Studies
300 Queen Street, Melbourne 3000 Australia
Phone: (03) 9214 7888 Fax: (03) 9214 7839
Internet: www.aifs.gov.au/

ISBN 0 642 39504 7

ISSN 1448-8132 (Print)

ISSN 1448-8159 (Online)

Designed by Double Jay Graphic Design

Printed by Impact Printing

report (Lievore, in press), prepared by the Australian Institute of Criminology for the Australian Government's Office of the Status of Women (OSW), provides a detailed literature review on the prevalence of sexual assault. It uses both Australian and international sources, and gives particular emphasis to the issues for Indigenous victim/survivors, to rural women, and to the experiences of women in prison.

The following analysis is designed to provide a useful complement to the Australian Institute of Criminology publication. It assesses what is currently known of the "hidden" prevalence of sexual assault experienced by adult survivors as a child or in the past, women from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, sex workers and homeless young people. It considers some of the barriers that continue to act as disincentives to disclosure and reporting, as well as the problems faced by victim/survivors when they attempt to access a criminal justice response.

In focusing on issues relevant to these groups, the experiences of others who are also rendered less visible through the design of the more formal survey measures may be neglected. For example, although acknowledging the need to highlight the prevalence of sexual assault against people with disabilities and older or elderly victims of sexual victimisation, these populations are beyond the scope of this paper. Future publications by the Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault will attempt to address the victimisation of these groups.

Adult survivors of childhood sexual assault

As community awareness surrounding the realities of sexual assault has improved, victim/survivors have appeared to gather more confidence in speaking out about their experiences. This has particularly been the case for survivors of childhood and/or previous (adult) sexual assault. In 1992, a national survey was undertaken with the intention of better understanding the hidden incidence of sexual assault across Australia (Easteal 1992). The research effectively challenged what had been a dominant perception, that the majority of rapes and sexual assaults were single lifetime events, perpetrated by unknown offenders, with prompt reports being made to police, and convictions readily secured.