
Understanding Violence Against Women Using the NCVS: What We Know and Where We Need to Go

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Women accounted for 44% of simple assault, 34% of aggravated assault, 33% of robbery victimizations, and the vast majority of rapes and sexual assaults in 2004 (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2006). Efforts to study violence against women have increased over the past couple of decades, yet research on the issue still lags behind research on male violence. Indeed, research on violence against women often remains segregated within both academic and policy circles, treated more as a “special interest topic” than an issue of core importance for any discussion of violence in the United States (see Kruttschnitt, McLaughlin and Petrie 2004).

The National Crime Victimization Survey offers a resource for moving the topic of violence against women to center stage in research and policy discussions of crime. The NCVS produces information on patterns of female victimization nationally and allows us to view these against the backdrop of male victimization. It includes a wide array of variables over time and a large sample size. These attributes afford possibilities for rigorous research on the shape and causes of violence against women.

Yet, research on violence against women using the NCVS has not reached its potential. There have been sustained efforts by the Bureau of Justice Statistics and some academic researchers to assess the levels of violence against women and describe distributions of victimization across subgroups of women over time. This descriptive research is a necessary first step. Although important questions remain to be answered in this first step, the major gap in research using the NCVS is in “explanatory” research. That is, research using rigorous analytic techniques to tease apart the complex patterns of individual characteristics and social contexts associated with violence against women. The accumulation of explanatory research and the development of theoretical perspectives that may ensue are necessary for building sound policies to address violence against women (see Crowell and Burgess 1996; Kruttschnitt et al. 2004).

The purpose of this paper is to assess the role of the NCVS in furthering our knowledge about violence against women—to assess where we have been and suggest where we might go. I therefore focus primarily on studies of women's victimization using the NCVS and give limited attention to research based on other large surveys (although that research is at a

similar point in development). I do not discuss the excellent qualitative research that exists on violence against women (e.g. Richie 1996; Miller, 2008). I also do not address the literature on police response to domestic, intimate partner, and sexual violence, some of which uses the NCVS. These tasks are beyond the scope of the present paper. Rather, I focus on what the NCVS has offered to the study of female victimization and how we might work within the parameters of the survey to move forward.

The paper first sketches the outlines of our current knowledge of patterns of women's victimization produced by the NCVS and identifies remaining issues to be addressed. The paper then discusses recent research (using the NCVS) that has begun to explore the complex interplay between individual, social context, and situational factors that might explain violence against women. I argue that we have only begun to scratch the surface with recent explanatory research and that this is the area in greatest need of intensified efforts. The paper then offers a brief discussion of the major critiques of the NCVS for studying violence against women. The paper closes by offering some suggestions for future research using the NCVS to better understand violence against women.

The Distribution of Violence Against Women

The National Crime Victimization Survey provides an essential source of data on rates of nonlethal violent victimization among women.¹ At this time, we have a reasonably good understanding of many patterns of violence against women. Of course, questions remain to be answered. Describing distributions of violence against women—across crime types, victim-offender relationships, race/ethnicity, over time, and across geographical space—are especially key to our understanding of women's victimization. Indeed, studying these distributions constitutes the essential first step for research. The following review highlights some of the most basic and important findings regarding these patterns,

¹It is important to examine carefully distributions of nonlethal violence against women, as well homicides of women because there may be important variation in the patterning of lethal and nonlethal violence (Lauritsen and Heimer 2008).

and identifies some of the important questions remaining.

Distributions Across Gender and Violent Crime Type

Data from the NCVS show that males have had higher victimization rates than females since the survey began, and that this holds for all violent crime types except for rape (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2006). However, the gender gap in violent victimizations has narrowed in recent years. The most recent figures show that in 2006, men experienced a rate of 26.5 violent victimizations per 1000 males, while women experienced about 23 violent victimizations per 1000 females (Rand and Catalano 2008). Disaggregation of the 2005 NCVS data by gender and crime type shows that female victimization rates were lower than male rates for aggravated assault (3.1 as compared to 5.6 per 1000, respectively), simple assault (11.2 as compared to 15.9 per 1000) and robbery (1.4 as compared to 3.8 per 1000) (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2006). Yet, despite the consistent finding that males are more likely to be victims of violence, it is striking that the gender differences are so small given the large differences between male and female violent offending; indeed, female and male rates have become fairly similar for some types of violent victimizations (see discussion of trends over time, below).

An important gender difference, of course, occurs in rape victimization. In 2005, women experienced 1.4 rapes and sexual assaults per 1000, while men experienced 0.1 per 1000. Clearly, rape and sexual assault are primarily crimes against women and constitute an important part of the story of violence against women. There has been some criticism of the NCVS measurement of rape and sexual assault, with charges that reported rates are underestimated. These issues will be addressed briefly toward the end of this paper. For now, the point is that women account for a substantial portion of all violent victimizations, with female rates of overall violent victimization being almost 87% of male rates (23 and 25.6 per 1000, respectively, as noted above). Discussions of violent crime in the United States clearly should address violent victimizations of women as well as men.

This raises an important point about research on patterns of violence against women. It is essential that research be comparative across gender, and not focus only on women's victimization (see Kruttschnitt, McLaughlin and Petrie 2004). Indeed, patterns in one group are not meaningful in the absence of information about the other group. This becomes even more evident in the discussion of trends in violence, which follows.

Patterning by Victim-Offender Relationship

Violence by intimate partners (IPV) has received more research attention than any other aspect of women's victimization. The Bureau of Justice Statistics regularly produces reports on intimate partner violence, with the

most recent appearing last February (Catalano 2007). This report shows that from 2001 through 2005, 22% of nonfatal violence against women was committed by intimate partners (4.2 per 1000) while only about 4% of nonfatal violence against men was by intimate partners (0.9 per 1000).² Women's victimization clearly is more likely than men's victimization to be at the hands of intimate partners. The ability of the NCVS to provide information on this form of violence—which is so often hidden from officials and other outsiders—has been an important contribution of the survey since the redesign was completed. Knowledge of the incidence and patterning of IPV is of great significance in research on violence against women, as well as in the development of programs and policies aimed at reducing violence.

Data from the NCVS also reveal that women's risk of being victimized by strangers and friends or acquaintances is greater than their risk of being victimized by an intimate partner. Violence by strangers accounted for 33% and violence by friends or acquaintances accounted for 36% of all violence against women between 2001 and 2005 (Catalano 2007). This makes clear that although violence against women by intimate partners is significant, it is less pervasive than violence by strangers and nonstrangers other than intimate partners. Researchers and policy makers, however, often focus rather exclusively on violence by intimates, thereby ignoring other very significant sources of violence in women's lives (Lauritsen and Heimer 2008). A complete understanding of violence against women will require consideration of victimization by intimates, other nonstrangers, and strangers.

Comparison with males highlights another key point: While men also are more likely to be victimized by strangers and friends or acquaintances (57% and 34% of all male victimizations respectively) than intimate partners (4% of all male victimizations), the discrepancy in rates between intimate partner and other victimizations is much more pronounced among men than women (figures from Catalano 2007). Thus, more fully understanding violence against women requires that researchers continue to study intimate partner violence, but also step up efforts to understand violence against women by other nonstrangers as well as strangers.

Variation across Race and Ethnicity

Data from the NCVS reveal significant differences across race in both women's and men's violent victimization. Blacks and Native Americans in particular have higher rates of violence than other race groups. In 2005, the rate of violence against black females was almost 50% higher than the rate of violence against white females, and the rate of black male victimization was about 30% higher than the rate for white males (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2006). Greenfield and

²This general pattern occurs in homicides as well, with 30% of female and 5% of male homicides being perpetrated by intimate partners (Catalano 2007).

Smith (1999) examine NCVS data from 1992 to 1996 and report that Native Americans experience the highest rates of violent victimization, and this holds among females as well as males. Indeed, their report shows that the rate of violence against Native American women is 50% higher than the rate for black men. Dugan and Apel (2003), using NCVS data for 1992 to 2000, also report that Native American women suffer higher rates of violent victimization than any other race/ethnic group.

There also is a striking race difference in intimate partner violence against women. Native American women's rates of nonfatal intimate partner victimization are more than twice as high from 2001 to 2005 (averaging 11.1 per 1000) as black and white women's rates (Catalano 2007). Interestingly, black and white women experienced similar rates of nonfatal IPV during this period (5 per 1000 and 4 per 1000, respectively) (Catalano 2007). The high rate of IPV among Native American women emphasizes the strength of a large sample survey that allows for the reliable estimation of rates in small subgroups of the population. Smaller scale non-stratified surveys, which contain more sampling error may not be able to generate reliable estimates of nonfatal IPV rates among Native American women, which would preclude statistical comparisons. Clearly, identifying such patterns is important for appropriately determining resources and policies to reduce intimate partner violence.

Data from the NCVS also reveal that in 2005, Latino males and females were more likely than their non-Latino counterparts to be victims of violent crime (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2006). However, rates of intimate partner violence show little difference between Latino and non-Latino women, or between Latino and non-Latino men (Rennison and Welchans 2000; Rand and Rennison 2004; Catalano 2007). This suggests a potentially interesting interaction between ethnicity and type of victim-offender relationship. However, these reports do not disaggregate rates by ethnicity, race, and gender simultaneously. Recent research has shown that comparing white and black non-Latino rates with Latino rates within gender is important and can produce very different conclusions and policy implications (see Lauritsen and Heimer 2007).

Thus, future work on the distribution of violence against women must go beyond the black-white race dichotomy. We need more information on gendered patterns of victimization among Native Americans, Latinos, non-Latino whites and non-Latino blacks, as well as Asian Americans. Adequately assessing patterns across race and ethnic subgroups, however, would greatly benefit from either increasing sample sizes or oversampling minorities.

Trends over Time

One of the original goals and great strengths of the NCVS is the measurement of crime trends that are unaffected by shifts in criminal justice system policies and practices. The Bureau of Justice Statistics regularly reports on trends in

intimate partner violence and the victimization of women as compared to men. Studying these trends is important because patterns that occur in any given snapshot of time may or may not emerge at other times. In addition, it is important to know how violence against women is changing to facilitate our explanations of causes and to inform policy. The NCVS is the only data source that provides information on national trends in women's and men's victimization.

Reports comparing shifts in women's and men's violent victimization have focused on the period since the redesign of the NCVS, from 1993 onward. Little is known about longer-term trends in gendered victimization, which is identified as a major issue in need of research by the National Research Council's most recent report on violence against women (Kruttschnitt, et al. 2004). Indeed, most researchers would agree that examining long-term trends is essential for contextualizing shorter-term spikes and drops in victimization rates and for understanding trends within historical context.

Kruttschnitt et al. (2004) maintain that the gap in our knowledge about trends in women's victimization is due to the difficulty of finding measures of violent victimization that are reasonably valid and reliable over time. Estimates of women's and men's victimization are available from 1973 through 1992 in the National Crime Survey (NCS) and from 1992 onward in the redesigned National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). But treating the data as a single series requires specific computational procedures (see Lynch 2002).

Lauritsen and Heimer (2008) use these procedures to generate long-term trends in violent victimization for women and men, from 1973 to 2004. The focus of this work is the change in the gender gap in violent victimization over time.³ The paper shows that (1) female rates of violent victimization have approached male rates for some crime categories, including aggravated assaults by strangers as well as nonstrangers; (2) men benefited more than women from the "great crime decline" of the 1990s; and (3) the gender gap in nonlethal intimate partner violence closed somewhat because male rates were stable whereas female rates increased between 1979 and 1993 and then declined substantially after the early 1990s, around the same time that male criminal offending declined and domestic violence intervention programs became more readily available.⁴

These trend analyses can be extended to examine long-term trends in violence against subgroups of women and men, as well. For example, Lauritsen and Heimer (2007) construct serious violent victimization rates for Latinas/os,

³These patterns differ substantially from homicide victimization, which offered the major long-term data on gendered victimization. Lauritsen and Heimer conclude that this underscores the need to examine the more common, nonlethal forms of violence for understanding trends in violence against women.

⁴Despite the recent decline in intimate partner violence against women this form of women's victimization may have decreased a bit less than violence by strangers and by non-strangers.

non-Latina/o blacks and non-Latina/o white females and males for the period 1973 to 2005, using data smoothed over 3-year periods.⁵ (This study was unable to assess trends in Native American victimization because of the very small number of cases in each year.) These trends over time reveal some very interesting patterns that are not apparent in victimization trends since 1993. First, whereas Latina and non-Latina white victimization has been at similar levels since the mid-1990s, the long term trends show Latina victimization was about halfway between the victimization of whites and blacks. Moreover, during the well-known periods of crime increases (e.g., the late 1970s and the late 1980s-early 1990s), non-Latina black and Latina women were affected much more dramatically. During these periods, minority women were more affected by upswings in crime than were non-Latina white women. A similar pattern emerges for males.

Together these findings illustrate the importance of viewing victimization in a long-term perspective, moving beyond black-white comparisons in trend analysis, and comparing trends in female and male victimization. It is possible to use the combined NCS-NCVS to examine long term trends in gendered victimization, and the insights gained may be important for understanding violent crime trends more generally, violence against women more specifically, and the impact of large-scale policy interventions.⁶ Research is needed on gendered trends in victimization across other subgroups—such as subgroups of rural/urban/suburban, age, age-by-race, marital status, and so on.

Variation across Sub-National Geographic Units

Social scientists are increasingly concerned with sub-national analyses—with variation in social phenomena across and within geographic units such as states, cities, and metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs). The NCVS has been used mainly to address national patterns of violent victimization. However, some research sponsored by the Bureau of Justice Statistics has examined trends in victimization in the largest MSAs, namely Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York (Lauritsen and Schaum 2005). Although non-existent to date, research could employ the NCVS to investigate patterns of violence against women across the large MSAs and within MSAs over time. These patterns could be assessed vis-a-vis demographic characteristics of the MSAs. Moreover, they could be used to assess the impact over time of policy interventions occurring in certain MSAs but not others.

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⁶Dugan, Nagin and Rosenfeld (1999, 2003) have taken this approach and assessed the impact of changing domestic violence policies on intimate partner homicides.

Explanatory Research on Violence Against Women: Individual Characteristics and Social Contexts

Research has identified both individual characteristics and features of social context that may be important for understanding violence against women. To date, most of this research has examined marginal relationships (like those described earlier), assessing variations in patterns of women's violent victimization across characteristics and social contexts. Research has revealed variation in the distributions of violence against women across individual characteristics such as race, ethnicity, and age; it also has revealed variation in women's victimization across dimensions of social context, including household economic status, family composition, urban/suburban/rural residence, alcohol or drug use at the time of the offense, and the kinds of places in which victimization occurs (see Bureau of Justice Statistics 2006; Tjaden and Thoennes 2000, 2006).

It certainly is useful to know how violence is distributed across individual characteristics and social contexts—to know the bivariate relationships. However, it also is important that research move to the next stage, to study how sets of individual characteristics and social contexts combine to explain the likelihood of violent victimization. It may be that the association between certain factors (e.g. race, ethnicity) and violence can change dramatically when other factors are taken into account (e.g. income). Indeed, this is precisely what researchers find when they adopt multivariate approaches and consider the combined and unique contributions of a variety of factors. This approach takes us one step closer to causal explanations.

A good example of this occurs in recent studies of race differences in violence against women. Black women experience higher rates of victimization than white women, whether perpetrated by strangers, nonstrangers or intimate partners (Lauritsen and Rennison 2006; Catalano 2006; Lauritsen and Heimer 2007). Yet, research shows that once income (Rennison and Planty 2003) and other factors such as family composition and community disadvantage are considered, differences in nonlethal violent victimizations between blacks, whites and Latinas disappear (Lauritsen and Schuam 2004). This study concludes that inequalities and structural factors explain differential risks for violence across race and ethnic groups. Another question that can be asked is whether structural inequalities have the same impact across different race-ethnic groups of women. This, in effect, asks whether there is a statistical difference in the magnitude of effects across race-ethnic groups (i.e. an interaction effect). One study that examines this question (Lauritsen and Rennison 2006) finds that while there are some differences in effects of social context variables across race, on balance the effects are more similar than different. (For another analysis, see Dugan and Apel 2003.) For example, the protective effects of being married as compared to living alone were similar among blacks, whites and Latinas (Lauritsen and Rennison 2006: 316).

Another important issue is whether community characteristics, an important part of social context, shape violent victimization above and beyond the effects of individual characteristics and more proximal social context variables. Some researchers have made use of the area-identified NCVS (for 1995) to assess the role of community-level variables, including neighborhood poverty, race and ethnic composition, and concentration of female-headed households. These studies have considered whether such community context variables combine with individual-level characteristics and other social context factors to explain violent victimization [rates? Trends? Patterns?]. Lauritsen and White (2001), for example, show that community and individual characteristics together account for the difference in black and white females' violent victimization. They suggest that intervention resources should be targeted at communities with high levels of poverty and female-headed families. In another study, Lauritsen and Schaum (2004) show that women's violent victimization is most strongly associated with family structure (female-headed households with children) and the proportion of female-headed households in the neighborhood (although age and residential mobility are also significantly associated with the outcome), while factors such as race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status are relatively unimportant in and of themselves. These patterns hold for stranger, nonstranger, and intimate partner violence, and may be strongest for intimate partner violence ([Lauritsen and Schaum 2004?], p. 349). Studies using the area-identified NCVS thus demonstrate the importance of community context as well as more immediate social context (eg. family structure) and individual characteristics (e.g. age).

Numerous studies using a variety of sources of data have reported that marriage is a protective factor for women. This may be particularly true in cases of intimate partner violence, with victimization risk being higher in cohabiting or unmarried couples than in married couples or unmarried individuals (see Tjaden and Thoennes 2000: 34). However, the Lauritsen and Schaum (2004) findings reported above suggest that the presence of children in the household increases victimization risks for unmarried women. There is a clear need for further research assessing the contributions of marital status and household composition in the context of other factors. Moreover, understanding the association between cohabitation and violence against women is key at present and may become even more important over time. This may be particularly relevant for understanding differences across race/ethnic groups who differ in rates of cohabitation versus marriage. The NCVS currently does not ask respondents if they are cohabiting with an intimate partner; the addition of such a measure is necessary.

Another important aspect of social context, of course, is the place in which the victimization occurred. Analyses of the NCVS demonstrate that intimate partner violence against both women and men most often occurs at home and next most often at a friend or neighbor's home (Catalano 2007).

It may be that violent victimization of women by strangers and nonstrangers (besides intimate partners) is more likely in other settings, such as parking areas, commercial places, schools, or on the street. Some research has begun to explore violent victimization by non-intimates in the workplace (Tjaden and Thoennes 2001; Fisher and Gunnison 2001). However, multivariate research has not considered how place may combine with or condition the effects of other factors, such as age, race/ethnicity, or household composition.

Alcohol use is another dimension of social context that requires further analysis. Tjaden and Thoennes (2006) document an association between the presence of alcohol and drugs and victimization of women, particularly rape, using data from the National Violence Against Women Survey. They find that 67% of women who reported that they had been raped as an adult said that the rapist had used alcohol or drugs at the time of the event (2006: 27). This bivariate association between drug/alcohol use and victimization outcomes is certainly important for informing policy interventions. But it is also important to know whether this important social context factor is associated with victimization outcomes once individual characteristics and other aspects of social context are taken into account. Martin and Bachman (1998) use data from the 1992 to 1994 NCVS to show that alcohol use is associated with rape completion and injury even after other variables, like income, victim's race, presence of a weapon, place, and physical resistance are controlled, although the association is quite small and not statistically significant at conventional levels. Substance use seems to have some association with seriousness of outcomes even after other individual characteristics and aspects of social context are taken into account. Yet, given the small number of studies of this effect, more research is necessary. In addition, it would be important to make distinctions between alcohol use by offenders and by victims, although this is not possible with NCVS data at present.

Finally, Clay-Warner (2002, 2003) has used the NCVS to examine how self-protective behaviors by victims may influence the outcomes of sexual violence. She reports that women's use of physically protective actions—such as fighting and trying to flee—is associated with lower chances that the rape will be completed (2002). Certain aspects of social context, including the occurrence of the attack at nighttime, the presence of a weapon, and attack by an intimate partner, reduce the chances that women will fight back (2003). In addition to having clear policy implications, this research raises other important dimensions of social context that can be assessed in research seeking to better understand how individual and social context variables combine to explain violence against women.

In short, recent research has begun to explore the complex associations between individual characteristics and social contexts. But these studies are too few in number. The picture painted, therefore, is far from clear. Typically, this type of research is the domain of scholars in academia.

Yet the NCVS data have been underused by academic researchers interested in violence against women. This is puzzling, if not troubling, given the strengths of the data—consistent measurement of most constructs over time, wide array of individual and contextual variables, possibilities for linking data to Census tract information, and a large sample size that affords good statistical power for detecting effects in multivariate models. An important goal would be to encourage researchers—through a variety of mechanisms—to conduct rigorous studies of the interplay between women’s violent victimization outcomes and the many individual and social context variables available in the NCVS.

What is needed is healthy competition among researchers using appropriate statistical methods to identify a standard array of important individual and social context variables that researchers agree should be included routinely in all analyses. The existing explanatory studies include different sets of variables, making it difficult to compare findings across studies, which is necessary for building a solid knowledge base. For example, some studies include as covariates age, race, income, marital status, and alcohol use, while others include age, race, and household composition. Because the variables in the two analyses differ, the partial effects of the covariates—indeed the general patterns of findings—are not directly comparable. Reaching consensus over a standard set of important variables to be included in analyses would be a very important step forward.

Beyond this, it would be useful to add new measures of some features of social contexts. Some information could be added with minimal cost; for example, cohabitation should be included in the information on household composition, as indicated above. It also would be useful to have data on household composition and/or marital status at the time of each incident.⁷ There are other aspects of social context and situations of violence that could be tapped by the NCVS, as well, particularly if the survey were to move toward including annual supplements that target particular issues (Groves and Cork 2008). For example, relationship conflict, partner dynamics, and other family process variables may be key for explaining intimate partner violence. (See for examples, Felson and Messner 2000; Benson et al. 2003; Van Wyk, et al. 2003). Similarly, mutually supportive relationships in women’s neighborhoods or communities (i.e. collective efficacy) may be important in protecting women from violence and/or encouraging them to seek help (Browning 2002; Van Wyk et al. 2003).

In short, encouraging additional scholarly research—which would likely lead to some consensus over core variables to include in analyses—and augmenting the array of social context information in the NCVS would boost our empirical knowledge of women’s violent victimization. This increased knowledge, in turn, could foster the development of innovative theoretical perspectives on violence against

⁷This is important given that there is nontrivial change in marital status between the victimization incident and the interview (Rennison 2001).

women. And, importantly, boosting our empirical knowledge is critical for developing appropriate policies and programs targeting the correct subgroups.

Methodology for Measuring Violence Against Women

These studies of distributions and explanations of violence occur against a backdrop of methodological issues concerning the measurement of violence against women. The National Crime Survey (NCS), which began in 1973, was criticized for inadequate measurement of women’s victimization, particularly sexual and intimate partner violence. NCS respondents were not asked direct questions about intimate partner, family or victimization by others known to them. The redesign of the survey as the NCVS, completed in 1993, added screen questions to cue respondents for information [on crimes?] committed in different locations by different offenders, including by relatives and intimates; it also asked more explicitly about rape, attempted rape, forced or unwanted sexual acts (see discussions in Bachman and Taylor 1994; Bachman 2000; Fisher and Cullen 2000). In the NCVS, the screen questions are asked first, and then the interviewer administers an incident report for each event mentioned during the screening. The NCVS uses the incident report to count events, and the screen questions as memory cues. This two step process allows for the incident to be validated, which is an important strength of the survey (see Fisher and Cullen 2000).

However, some scholars have argued that the content of the screen questions is critical; the NCVS does not give enough behavioral and graphic detail, and thus misses potential victimizations (see Tjaden and Thoennes 1998a; also discussed in Fisher and Cullen 2000).⁸ Tjaden and Thoennes (1998a, 2000, 2006) address this issue in the National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS), a cross-sectional survey of 8000 women and 8000 men, by including detailed and graphically worded questions about sexual victimization (Tjaden and Thoennes 1998a). The estimates of sexual victimization from this survey are quite a bit higher than the estimates from the NCVS. Fisher, Cullen and Turner’s (2000) National College Women Victimization Survey (NCWVS) compared the methodology used in the NCVS with a similar methodology using more behavioral and graphic screening questions, and found that the use of these screening questions produced higher estimates of sexual victimization.

This issue is not yet fully resolved. Rand and Rennison (2005) recently published a comparison of NVAWS and NCVS estimates in the *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, which recomputed rates from the NCVS using counting procedures

⁸Some also maintain that the NCVS produces lower estimates of intimate partner and sexual violence because its focus on “crime” rather than experiences with personal safety or other topics leads to underreporting (see Tjaden and Thoennes 1998b).

more similar to those used in the reports from the NVAWS. The differences included restricting the NCVS estimates to persons 18 and older and counting series victimizations as multiple offenses rather than as one series, as is typically done in reporting from the NCVS.⁹ Using these procedures (and adjusting for sampling error), Rand and Rennison show that the estimates of rape, assault, intimate partner rape, and intimate partner assault are not statistically different across the two surveys. However, they also argue that the procedure of counting serial victimizations as multiple events is inadvisable and introduces error in the estimates. The higher estimates in the NVAWS appear to be largely due to very high estimates by very few respondents. They conclude that, at present, more reliable estimates are generated by continuing to treat series victimizations as single incidents; however, more research is clearly needed on the question of how to count repeated victimization over a short period (p. 288-289). In addition, questions regarding the optimal screening procedures still linger.

Nevertheless, the NCVS appears to offer reasonable estimates of violence against women. The survey also includes many other variables that can be examined to move toward explanations of the social contexts that may underlie observed patterns of women's victimization.

Summary of Suggestions for Moving Forward

This paper has examined research on violence against women in an attempt to develop suggestions for future work. These are summarized here. This discussion is not intended to be either exhaustive or definitive, but simply to stimulate discussion of how research on women's victimization using the NCVS might proceed.

General suggestions.

More researchers must be encouraged to use the NCVS to study violence against women. There clearly are many important empirical questions that can be assessed using these data. The issue is how best to encourage the necessary research activity by a wider range of investigators. Two suggestions are:

- Make the NCVS data files more accessible to researchers with knowledge of advanced statistical methods but little knowledge of the specifics of structuring NCVS data files for analysis.
- Develop funding competitions and workshops explicitly targeting research using the NCVS to study violence against women, using state-of-the-art statistical methods and addressing core questions regarding violence against women.

⁹Note that the NCVS uses a bounding procedure to avoid problems of memory such as telescoping (recalling that a victimization incident occurred more recently than it did in reality). The NVAWS does not include such a procedure. This is a clear advantage of the NCVS methodology.

Increase our substantive knowledge and inform social policy with descriptive research on the distribution of violence against women

As indicated in this paper, there are unanswered questions about the distributions of violence across various subgroups of victims over time and across geographical locations. Indeed, differential distributions of violence against women are important for showing which groups are most disadvantaged in terms of violence and how this may have changed over time as well as how it may vary across region or even MSA. This substantive knowledge certainly would be useful in considerations of where to allocate resources for prevention, intervention, and response. Moreover, if an intervention based on this substantive knowledge were enacted broadly in a particular MSA, for example, researchers could evaluate the impact of the intervention by examining change over time in comparison with change in other large MSAs that did not have the policy/program. Similarly, multivariate research targeting the explanatory processes underlying differences in violence against women across subgroups and over time would be important for increasing our understanding of mechanisms, which in turn would inform policy and program development.

This paper has suggested some specific issues in need of further study. These include the following:

- Continue to assess intimate partner violence, but do not overlook violence against women by strangers and nonstrangers other than intimates.
- Produce more information on distributions of violent victimization across race, ethnic, and gender groups. We need more detailed analyses of violence against Native American women. We also need to disaggregate race and ethnicity within gender because overall white rates are very different than white non-Latino rates. In short, future work on the distribution of violence against women must go beyond the black-white race dichotomy.
- Research long-term trends of gendered violence, including long-term trends across subgroups such as subgroups of rural/urban/suburban, age, age-by-race, marital status, and others.
- Research sub-national variation in violence against women—such as variation across MSAs—to assess how characteristics of geographical areas and policies and programs implemented in certain areas are associated with women's victimization rates.

Explaining Differences in Distributions of Violence Against Women

We must foster high quality research using appropriate statistical methods to assess the importance of the combined and unique contributions of individual characteristics and social contexts. Research needs to move beyond studying marginal distributions and bivariate relationships, to understand the underlying sources of differential risk.

Funding such research could be made a priority, through contracts or grants to researchers outside of federal government and by working with select federal agencies to develop funding initiatives targeting this type of research. The value of success in developing this body of research would be a substantial increase in our empirical knowledge about how individual characteristics and social contexts combine to explain women's violent victimization. This increased knowledge, in turn, is critical for developing effective policies and programs.

Perhaps the most critical task of this research will be the identification of a standard set of variables that researchers agree (through healthy debate) should be included routinely in analyses of violence against women. At present, studies include different sets of explanatory variables, making comparisons of effects across studies very difficult. Moving ahead will require concerted effort among researchers to achieve consensus through careful and sustained empirical research. And the NCVS offers the best available source of data for accomplishing this effort because of its sample size, content, rigorous methodology, and longitudinal design.

The groundwork for this task has been laid by previous research using the NCVS, which identifies a large set of potentially important variables, including race, ethnicity, age, marital status, victim-offender relationships, community-level characteristics (e.g. proportion of female headed households, average income), alcohol and substance use, characteristics of the places in which victimizations of women occur, and the use of self-protective behaviors (e.g. fighting back), to name a few. This paper suggests that the collection of additional information also be considered. Some of this information could be gathered at low cost (e.g. cohabitation, marital status at the time of the incident). Collecting other information (e.g. measures of relationship conflict, partner dynamics, family process, social ties to others outside the home) may well require the addition of a supplement to the NCVS in select years. The pay-off of such an endeavor may well be worth the cost.

Addressing Methodological Issues

Although the survey methodology of the NCVS is rigorous, there are some issues of particular relevance to violence against women that should be addressed. There should be further study of the screening issue, especially with regard to sexual violence. Thorough research needs to assess whether a change is necessary and, if so, how the change could be implemented without disrupting our ability to examine trends over time.

- The issue of how to treat series victimizations requires further study, as discussed in Rand and Rennison (2006), especially with regard to intimate partner and sexual violence.
- The use of sampling strategies designed to increase the sample size of groups at high risk for victimization would make it possible to study gender and victimization in subgroups that heretofore have received too little attention due to restricted sample sizes (e.g. Native Americans). There should be an attempt to make sub-national data from the NCVS available to researchers. For example, the area-identified NCVS could be made available, in a user-friendly format, to more researchers under strict guidelines for use. Making more years of area-identified data available also would foster research on the neighborhood contexts of violence against women.

In sum, the NCVS offers great promise for moving forward in the study of violence against women. We must decide whether to invest the resources necessary to realize this promise.

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Dr. Heimer’s paper assesses use of the NCVS to further knowledge about violence against women. Women account for a substantial portion of all violent victimizations, with female rates of overall violent victimization being almost 87% of male rates (23 and 25.6 per 1000, respectively) and the gender gap closing. The NCVS collects information that can be used to reveal patterns of female victimization nationally. Dr. Heimer suggests that the NCVS’ wide array of variables over time and large sample size afford possibilities for more rigorous research on the shape and causes of violence against women. For instance, Dr. Heimer describes “explanatory” research that could help researchers glean the complex patterns of individual characteristics and social contexts associated with violence against women—across crime types, victim-offender relationships, race/ethnicity, over time, and across geographical location.

Dr. Heimer discusses the increased understanding of victimization at the hands of intimate partners—which is so often hidden from officials and other outsiders—as an important contribution of the NCVS. However, she advises stepping up efforts to understand violence against women by non-strangers and strangers, as well. She also suggests that increasing sample sizes or over-sampling minorities would be beneficial to help adequately assess patterns across race and ethnic subgroups. She also notes the importance of studying trends in women’s victimization as knowledge about how violence against women is changing will help us explain causes and will help to inform policy. She concludes her paper with specific suggestions for improving the NCVS and the way researchers use it.