

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-546](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Concerns have grown about sexual violence—in general, unwanted sexual acts—in the United States, particularly involving certain populations such as college students, incarcerated individuals, and military personnel. Data on the occurrence of sexual violence are critical to preventing, addressing, and understanding the consequences of these types of crimes. GAO was asked to identify and compare federal efforts to collect data on sexual violence.

This report addresses two questions: (1) What are the federal efforts underway to collect data on sexual violence, and how, if at all, do these efforts differ? (2) How do any differences across the data collection efforts affect the understanding of sexual violence, and to what extent are federal agencies addressing any challenges posed by the differences? GAO reviewed agency documentation and academic literature, and interviewed agency officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that Education, HHS, and DOJ make information that is included in their measurements of sexual violence publicly available. GAO also recommends that OMB establish a federal interagency forum on sexual violence data. Education, HHS, and DOJ agreed with the recommendation. OMB stated that convening a forum may not be the most effective use of resources at this time, in part because the data collection efforts are not far enough along in their research. However, OMB said it will consider convening or sharing information across agencies in the future.

View [GAO-16-546](#). For more information, contact Gretta L. Goodwin at (202) 512-8777 or goodwin@gao.gov.

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SEXUAL VIOLENCE DATA

Actions Needed to Improve Clarity and Address Differences Across Federal Data Collection Efforts

What GAO Found

Four federal agencies—the Departments of Defense, Education, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Justice (DOJ)—manage at least 10 efforts to collect data on sexual violence, which differ in target population, terminology, measurements, and methodology. Some of these data collection efforts focus on a specific population that the agency serves—for example, the incarcerated population—while others include information from the general population. These data collection efforts use 23 different terms to describe sexual violence. Data collection efforts also differ in how they categorize particular acts of sexual violence. For example, the same act of sexual violence could be categorized by one data collection effort as “rape,” whereas it could be categorized by other efforts as “assault-sexual” or “nonconsensual sexual acts,” among other terms. In addition, five data collection efforts—overseen by Education, HHS, and DOJ—reflect inconsistencies between their measurements and definitions of sexual violence. Further, these data collection efforts do not have publicly-available descriptions of what is included in their respective measurements to allow persons using the data to understand the differences, which may lead to confusion for data users. Publicly-available measurement information could enhance the clarity and transparency of sexual violence data. Data collection efforts also differ in terms of the context in which data are collected, data sources, units of measurement, and time frames.

Differences in data collection efforts may hinder the understanding of the occurrence of sexual violence, and agencies’ efforts to explain and lessen differences have been fragmented and limited in scope. Differences across the data collection efforts may address specific agency interests, but collectively, the differences lead to varying estimates of sexual violence. For example, in 2011 (the most recent year of available data), estimates ranged from 244,190 rape or sexual assault victimizations to 1,929,000 victims of rape or attempted rape. These differences can lead to confusion for the public. Officials from federal agencies and entities GAO spoke with who use federal data on sexual violence emphasized that the differences across the data collection efforts are such that the results are not comparable, and entities reported using data that best suited their needs. Agencies have taken some steps to clarify the differences between the data collection efforts. For example, two DOJ entities coauthored a statement that describes the differences between their two efforts. In addition, agencies have taken some steps to harmonize the data collection efforts—that is, coordinate practices to achieve a shared goal. However, actions to increase harmonization have been fragmented, generally only involving 2 of the 10 data collection efforts at a time, and limited in scope. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) through its authority to coordinate federal statistics has previously convened interagency working groups, such as the Interagency Working Group for Research on Race and Ethnicity, to improve federal statistics. OMB has no plans to convene a working group on sexual violence data. Additional collaboration, facilitated by OMB, between agencies that manage data collection efforts about which differences help or hinder the overall understanding of sexual violence could help to clarify the scope of the problem of sexual violence in the United States.