



Violence Against Women : These Numbers Require Action

The release of the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) this week showing huge increases in the incidence of domestic violence, rape, and sexual assault barely made the news. For those who closely follow sexual violence statistics in the US, though, the numbers were alarming.

The reported incidents of domestic violence increased by 42 percent and sexual violence by 25 percent over the figures two years earlier. These high rates of violence against women should serve as a wake-up call that more must be done to address the problem of sexual violence in the US.

It turns out that sexual violence is a bigger problem in the US than previously understood. According to the NCVS at least 248,300 individuals were raped or sexually assaulted in 2007, up from the figure of 190,600 in the report covering 2005, the last year the survey was conducted. Among all violent crimes, domestic violence, rape, and sexual assault showed the largest increases. The projected number of violent crimes committed by intimate partners against women increased from 389,100 in 2005 to 554,260 in the 2007 report. By comparison, the projected number of violent crimes against men by intimate partners went down. Except for simple assault, which increased by 3 percent, the incidence of every other crime surveyed decreased.

The new numbers suggest that previously, the government significantly underestimated the number of individuals affected by domestic and sexual violence in this country, and it should urgently take corrective action. Due to criticism from experts in the subject, the survey's methodology was adjusted in 2007 to capture more accurately the incidence of gender-based violence.

The authors say in the report that the higher numbers may reflect the new, more accurate methodology rather than an actual increase in the number of violent incidents. But whether the higher figures are the result of increased crime or improved methodology, policymakers should urgently adjust public policies, law enforcement, and provision of support services based on the startling conclusions about the prevalence of domestic and sexual violence.

The NCVS numbers out this week demonstrate that the problem of sexual violence is serious and widespread in the US and will require immediate attention from lawmakers and the Obama administration. One action the administration should take in its first 100 days in office is to appoint a special adviser to the White House on violence against women.

In the first year, the administration should work with Congress to ratify the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which would provide stronger protections against and redress for sexual violence, and amend the Debbie Smith Act, a grant program meant to aid states in testing rape kits (the col-



Violence Against Women : These Numbers Require Action

lection of DNA from a victim after a rape) but is often used to test evidence in non-rape cases.

Prevention of and protection against all forms of domestic and sexual violence must be a top priority for policymakers. The lack of news coverage this week of the rise in sexual and domestic violence is of a piece with the dynamics of sexual violence in this country. Sexual and domestic violence is often a hidden crime, but the NCVS numbers are a stark reminder that the human suffering it causes is all too real.

Sarah Tofte is a researcher for the United States Program with Human Rights Watch.