

EMPLOYING RESEARCH TO UNDERSTAND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

BY **RIANNA P. STARHEIM**

Fifty years ago, violence against women, and domestic violence in particular, was not considered a criminal justice concern in this country. It was largely viewed as a personal matter, best dealt with privately within families.

With a sweeping reinvestment in criminal justice reform in the 1960s, the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and efforts in the late 1980s and 1990s that led to passage of the Violence Against Women Act in 1994, violence against women entered the public consciousness in the United States. It began to be recognized as a serious public health and public safety problem that warranted criminal justice system intervention.

Over the past 50 years, NIJ has established and expanded a strong program that addresses violence against women. Its portfolio has funded more than \$130 million in research on intimate partner violence, sexual violence, stalking, teen dating violence, and other related topics. NIJ-funded initiatives have also helped finance the testing of previously unsubmitted sexual assault kits and establish best practices in testing these kits.

Kristina Rose, a former NIJ acting director who worked on violence against women issues throughout her 19 years with the U.S. Department of Justice, summed up NIJ's influence: "When it comes to violence against women, NIJ has been brave and pioneering across the spectrum of issues to help people understand what we know about violence against women, including what the criminal justice response should look like."

Minneapolis Domestic Violence Experiment

In the wake of national attention surrounding violence against women in the 1970s and early 1980s, NIJ funded a randomized controlled trial experiment in Minneapolis that examined various law enforcement responses



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to domestic violence.¹ In 1984, the results of the Minneapolis Domestic Violence Experiment indicated that spending a night in jail significantly reduced the risk that a perpetrator would commit a future act of domestic violence. As a result, many police departments across the country implemented pro-arrest or mandatory arrest policies in domestic violence situations.

Given the findings and the implications for law enforcement, NIJ funded six replication studies, beginning in 1986. These studies showed contradictory results, which underscored the importance of replicating research studies. Replication ensures that results are valid, reliable, and generalizable.

Although replications found mixed results, the Minneapolis Domestic Violence Experiment marked a significant change in how law enforcement approached intimate partner violence.

“This was the first time there was a shift in how the criminal justice system thought about and responded to domestic violence,” says Angela Moore, senior science advisor and social scientist at NIJ.

Nearly 40 years later, the Minneapolis Domestic Violence Experiment is still frequently cited as a pivotal study.

The Violence Against Women Act

The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) of 1994 was landmark legislation that created legal protections for victims of domestic and sexual violence and established funding streams for responding to these crimes. Filling critical resource gaps in every state, VAWA grant programs support law enforcement agencies, prosecutors’ offices, courts, domestic violence shelters, and rape crisis centers in serving victims and holding offenders accountable. VAWA also expanded the scope and scale of U.S. research on violence against women and led to a significant expansion of NIJ’s major research and evaluation efforts in the field.

“VAWA was an impetus,” says Moore. “We did some work on violence against women before the Act, but the funding NIJ received as a result of VAWA helped us spring forward and gave rise to the program we have today.”

VAWA was reauthorized in 2000, 2005, and 2013, and separate legislation in 2002 established the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW), a Department of Justice agency responsible for leading the implementation of VAWA grant programs.

“Thanks to funding administered by OVW, communities have developed coordinated responses to crimes of violence against women,” says Katharine Sullivan, former acting director of OVW and current principal deputy assistant attorney general of the Office of Justice Programs. “Justice system professionals, victim services providers, and other community partners have used these grants to work together to ensure that victims get the help they need and that dangerous perpetrators are stopped from committing more crimes. These coordinated community responses have transformed how domestic violence is treated in the criminal and civil justice systems and sparked innovative prevention efforts like Maryland’s Lethality Assessment Program to reduce domestic violence homicides.”

In 1998, NIJ began receiving designated VAWA funds for research on violence against women. Funding

allocations varied by year — ranging from \$7 million in 1998 to \$1.88 million in 2008 and 2009 — with a current allocation of \$3 million to \$5 million each fiscal year. This steady stream of funds from OVW has helped NIJ study the nature and scope of violence against women and the effectiveness of strategies for combating these crimes. Knowledge generated through NIJ's Violence Against Women program informs efforts within the Department of Justice and in communities across the nation to protect victims and bring offenders to justice.

Collecting Representative Data

Despite the considerable number of studies on violence against women that were conducted in the 1980s and 1990s, there remained a critical need to understand the magnitude and nature of intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and stalking in a way that would provide accurate and reliable data. Surveys that frame questions within the context of crime do not necessarily provide representative data on respondents' experiences with violence against women, in part because people do not always self-identify as victims of crime.

To address this research gap, in 2000 NIJ partnered with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on the National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS).² The survey revealed that more than half of the surveyed women reported being physically assaulted at some point in their lives, and nearly two-thirds of women who reported being raped, physically assaulted, or stalked were victimized by intimate partners.

For two reasons, this survey has been consistently cited as a more reliable representation of rates of violence against women than surveys that frame victimization within the context of crime. First, NVAWS did not rely solely on reported offenses because the vast majority of crimes go unreported. Second, the survey was designed to ask detailed, behavior-specific questions about respondents' victimization experiences. By asking questions that avoid legal terms (for example, "rape") and instead asking about a perpetrator's specific behaviors (for example,

"slapped," "pushed," and "shoved"), the survey avoided attributing blame or labeling respondents as victims.

NVAWS was one of many NIJ-CDC collaborations to address violence against women. As a result, NIJ was able to bring a public health perspective to its work, alongside its inherent focus on public safety. NIJ again collaborated with the CDC, as well as the U.S. Department of Defense Family Advocacy Program, to develop the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS); the first survey report was produced in 2011.³ The CDC continues to administer NISVS to capture data about violence against women and men, and the survey has become one of the most frequently cited data sets in the National Archive of Criminal Justice Data.

Research After VAWA

VAWA mandated that the Department of Justice work in partnership with the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) to develop a research agenda for violence against women. The 1996 NAS report *Understanding Violence Against Women* was instrumental in shaping the direction of NIJ's violence against women research portfolio. Subsequent NAS reports, along with strategic planning workshops and other input, have also informed program goals and direction.

Intimate Partner Violence

Through grants, cooperative agreements, and contracts supported by VAWA funding, NIJ has supported more than 200 studies on intimate partner violence — accounting for nearly half of the agency's total funding allocations for violence against women research since 1993. Over this period, rates of intimate partner homicides have dropped nearly 30% as public awareness of intimate partner violence and policy responses have grown.⁴ In 2016, NIJ hosted a meeting with prominent researchers and criminal justice practitioners to inform the Institute's research agenda moving forward.

NIJ-funded studies on intimate partner violence have focused on definition and measurement, victims and perpetrators, impacts on children, contexts and

consequences, civil and criminal justice interventions, and processes used to respond to these crimes. This research has found links between intimate partner violence and early parenthood, severe poverty, and unemployment and has shown that understanding the demographic differences among victims and abusers helps predict which interventions will be successful in specific groups.

Violence Against Women in Special Populations

Violence against women is a multifaceted issue that affects populations on many levels. NIJ's broad name for its violence against women program — the Violence Against Women and Family Violence Research and Evaluation Program⁵ — helped make it possible for NIJ to fund research on a wide range of topics related to violence against women, including trauma and the impact on children exposed to violence. This work also gave rise to a focus on teen dating violence and the maltreatment of elderly adults.

“There's a lot of research that talks about the intergenerational aspects of violence against women,” says Moore. “It's important to study these other facets of violence because they can have a tremendous impact within families, communities, and society as a whole.”

Building on a long history of research in the area of intimate partner violence, NIJ's teen dating violence research portfolio grew out of a recognition that the field needed to explore how to prevent dating violence in populations younger than adults. NIJ has funded nearly three dozen studies on teen dating violence since the portfolio was established in 2005. NIJ also sponsored an interagency working group on teen dating violence in 2006.⁶

VAWA reauthorizations in 2005 and 2013 called for NIJ, in consultation with OVW, to conduct analyses and research on violence against American Indian and Alaska Native women in Indian Country. NIJ focused subsequent research on dating violence, domestic violence, sexual assault, sex trafficking, stalking, and murder in these communities. NIJ-funded research also evaluated the effectiveness of federal, state, tribal, and local responses to violence

against American Indian and Alaska Native women. As part of the NIJ-CDC partnership, NIJ funded an oversampling of American Indian and Alaska Native women and men in 2010. The data revealed that four out of five American Indian and Alaska Native women in the United States have experienced violence in their lifetimes, and that these women find it much more difficult than other populations to access victim services.⁷

NIJ has funded dozens of additional studies to examine violence against women in specific populations, including disabled, elderly, and homeless persons; recipients of welfare; immigrants; incarcerated individuals; and various racial, cultural, and ethnic groups.

Sexual Violence

NIJ supported its first sexual violence research project in 1973, but the agency's research on sexual violence dramatically expanded in the 1990s after the passage of VAWA. The first solicitation that focused exclusively on sexual violence was issued in 2002, when NIJ-funded research provided the first comprehensive national look at rape and sexual assault on college campuses.

NIJ has also done groundbreaking work to assist in the processing of sexual assault evidence nationally. In 2011, NIJ funded action-research projects in Houston, Texas, and Wayne County, Michigan, to help understand the nature and scope of untested sexual assault kits and to identify effective, sustainable, victim-centric responses to sexual assault. Additionally, through an NIJ-FBI partnership, the FBI laboratory in Quantico, Virginia, tested thousands of previously untested sexual assault kits from across the country, and NIJ convened the NIJ Sexual Assault Forensic Evidence Reporting (SAFER) working group. Information gleaned from these efforts contributed to the creation of the publication *National Best Practices for Sexual Assault Kits: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, which NIJ released in 2017.⁸

NIJ is also evaluating the Bureau of Justice Assistance's Sexual Assault Kit Initiative (SAKI). The action-research projects in Houston, Wayne County,

and other jurisdictions helped inform and establish the multidisciplinary nature of SAKI and underscored the need for collaboration between multiple components of the criminal justice system on sexual assault kit testing.

Stalking

NIJ's preliminary research in this area examined the stalking of members of Congress and celebrities in the 1980s. In 1993, NIJ was directed to develop a model anti-stalking code. NIJ has funded five projects on stalking, but this remains the least funded research topic in NIJ's violence against women program, in part because of the difficulty of measuring and capturing reliable data on the subject.

Disseminating Results

NIJ-funded researchers have published scholarly articles related to violence against women in more than 50 different journals. The *NIJ Journal* has been an additional platform to disseminate research results, and a special issue of the *Violence Against Women* journal in 2013 highlighted NIJ's programs.⁹ NIJ's *Compendium of Research on Violence Against Women* spans nearly 300 pages and includes summary information on all research related to violence against women from 1993 to the present, with links to study reports and manuscripts.¹⁰

NIJ releases an annual solicitation and has more than 50 active research projects on violence against women.

"All of NIJ's work aims to respond to the needs and questions of the criminal justice field," says Moore. "NIJ has funded work that has transformed the evidence base around what we know in regard to violence against women. We have come a long way since the Minneapolis Domestic Violence Experiment and the early days of our violence against women work. What hasn't changed over the past 50 years is our commitment to funding research to better understand violence against women and how best to combat it moving forward."

About the Author

Rianna P. Starheim is a writer and former contractor with Leidos.

Notes

1. In this article, the terms "domestic violence" and "intimate partner violence" can be considered synonyms. NIJ now uses the more inclusive term "intimate partner violence," which does not imply that this violence occurs exclusively within a domestic setting.
2. National Institute of Justice, *Full Report of the Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence Against Women: Findings From the National Violence Against Women Survey*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, November 2000, NCJ 183781, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/183781.pdf>.
3. "The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS)," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, updated September 19, 2018, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/nisvs/index.html>.
4. See nij.ojp.gov, keyword: intimate partner violence interventions.
5. See nij.ojp.gov, keyword: violence against women and family violence program.
6. For more information on the NIJ teen dating violence research portfolio, see nij.ojp.gov, keyword: teen dating violence.
7. André B. Rosay, *Violence Against American Indian and Alaska Native Women and Men: 2010 Findings From the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, May 2016, NCJ 249736, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/249736.pdf>.
8. National Institute of Justice, *National Best Practices for Sexual Assault Kits: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 2017, NCJ 250384, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/250384.pdf>.
9. Bernard Auchter, ed., "The Violence Against Women Research and Evaluation Program at the National Institute of Justice," special issue, *Violence Against Women* 19 no. 6 (2013).

10. National Institute of Justice, *Violence and Victimization Research Division's Compendium of Research on Violence Against Women, 1993-2016*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, August 2017, NCJ 223572, <https://www.nij.gov/publications/pages/publication-detail.aspx?ncjnumber=223572>.

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