Director's Charge to CNSTAT
Committee on Measuring Rape and Sexual Assault in Bureau of Justice Statistics Household Surveys

Self-report surveys of criminal victimization were a breakthrough in crime statistics and are acknowledged as an important part of any national statistical system on crime and criminal justice. It is essential that the police and the criminal justice system not be the only source of data on crime and responses to crime. Surveys give citizens a direct voice in the definition of the crime problem. This is particularly important in measuring rape and sexual assault, since there is good evidence that the majority of these offenses are not reported to the police. Rape and sexual assault offenses remain the darkest of the "dark figure" of crime.

Greater acceptance of the self-report method has resulted in a variety of surveys employing a wide range of methodologies. The increasing number of self-report surveys has led to recognition that the methods employed in asking about victimization can have a substantial impact on the volume and nature of the behavior reported in the survey. However, while having a variety of methods provides important information on crime, varying results have raised questions about the suitability of specific surveys and the self-report method in general.

Self-report surveys measuring estimates of rape and sexual assault have resulted in two schools of thought with somewhat different goals and very different methodologies. One group emphasizes the criminal justice perspective and the other takes a public health approach. The criminal justice school emphasizes crime as a point-in-time event and employs legal definitions (but plain language descriptions) of the target behavior. As a result, the survey methods used emphasize placing an event in time, collecting an extensive amount of information about the event, and using this information to determine if the event reported satisfies the legal definitions of victimization. The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) is the icon of this approach and has introduced specific procedures that have become identified with the criminal justice school.

The public health approach emphasizes victimization as a condition that endures over time and requires treatment to restore the victim. Consequently, there is less concern with identifying point-in-time events that may comprise the condition, and legal definitions are of less concern than commonly understood definitions of the behavior. Issues of coercion, consent, and complicity that are so central to the definition of a criminal act are not asked about in the public health tradition. The survey methods employed reflect this orientation. Explicit and extensive cues are

used to prompt mention of the conditions of interest. Little attention is paid to situating events in time or collecting extensive information on the event to determine if it satisfies the condition for inclusion. More attention is given to the consequences of the victimization, its duration, and its social context. There are a number of surveys that have taken this approach in varying degrees, including the National Women's Study (NWS), National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS) and, more recently, the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS).

While these two schools of thought have different goals and methods, there is considerable overlap and potential complementarity between them. The public health tradition, for example, has led the way in strategies for stimulating the recall and reporting of rape and sexual assault. The criminal justice tradition has pioneered methods for situating events in time and filtering out ineligible events. The discourse between the two groups, however, has been largely defensive, resulting in little progress in resolving the problem of measuring rape and sexual assault. Our hope in sponsoring this panel is that a group of substantive and methodological experts can take a fresh look at the problem, drawing from what the criminal justice and public health schools have done, but without being held captive by these traditions. The principal goal of the panel is to consider a wide range of alternative self-report survey designs that measure the incidence and prevalence of the crimes of rape and sexual assault and to recommend an optimum design.

A second charge to the panel is to recommend whether this optimum design can be incorporated into the on-going NCVS program and, if so, how. The optimum design may only be able to be implemented as a free standing survey that would be administered at fixed intervals and used to adjust annual estimates from the core NCVS. Alternatively, the design may be able to be fielded as a supplement to the core NCVS or even as part of the core survey.

The evaluation of different designs should take into account of the mission of the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS). The panel should be mindful that BJS is responsible for providing estimates of the incidence and prevalence of crime, and any design recommended must be optimum relative to measuring behavior defined by the law as criminal. In screening for the target behavior, however, broader definitions may be used in the screening process, but ultimately criminal behavior must be identifiable. The principal population of interest is the non-institutionalized, residential population of the United States. The panel may consider age limits on the target population as survey procedures dictate. Other populations may be accommodated in the optimum design as long as their inclusion does not adversely affect estimates for this principal population or have

a large impact on cost. The most important estimates to be obtained from the survey are national level estimates and change estimates for a specified unit of time. These estimates are designed to be interpreted as risk rates. Annual estimates are typical but other reference and reporting periods can be considered if appropriate. Change estimates need not be based on consecutive years. The survey should also provide detailed information on the victimization incident, the sequelae of victimization, and the criminal justice and treatment responses.

Finally, the panel is asked to work closely with Westat, Inc. in field testing the recommended design. Ideally, the panel's deliberations would be both complete and vetted before a field test would be undertaken, but due to uncertainty regarding funding, the panel's work and the field test must proceed almost simultaneously. We ask the panel to share their recommendations with BJS and Westat as soon as prudence and the requirements of the deliberation process allow. Westat will proceed with work on the companion design as the panel deliberates. BJS and Westat will incorporate the guidance of the panel into the implementation of the optimum design as the recommendations emerge.