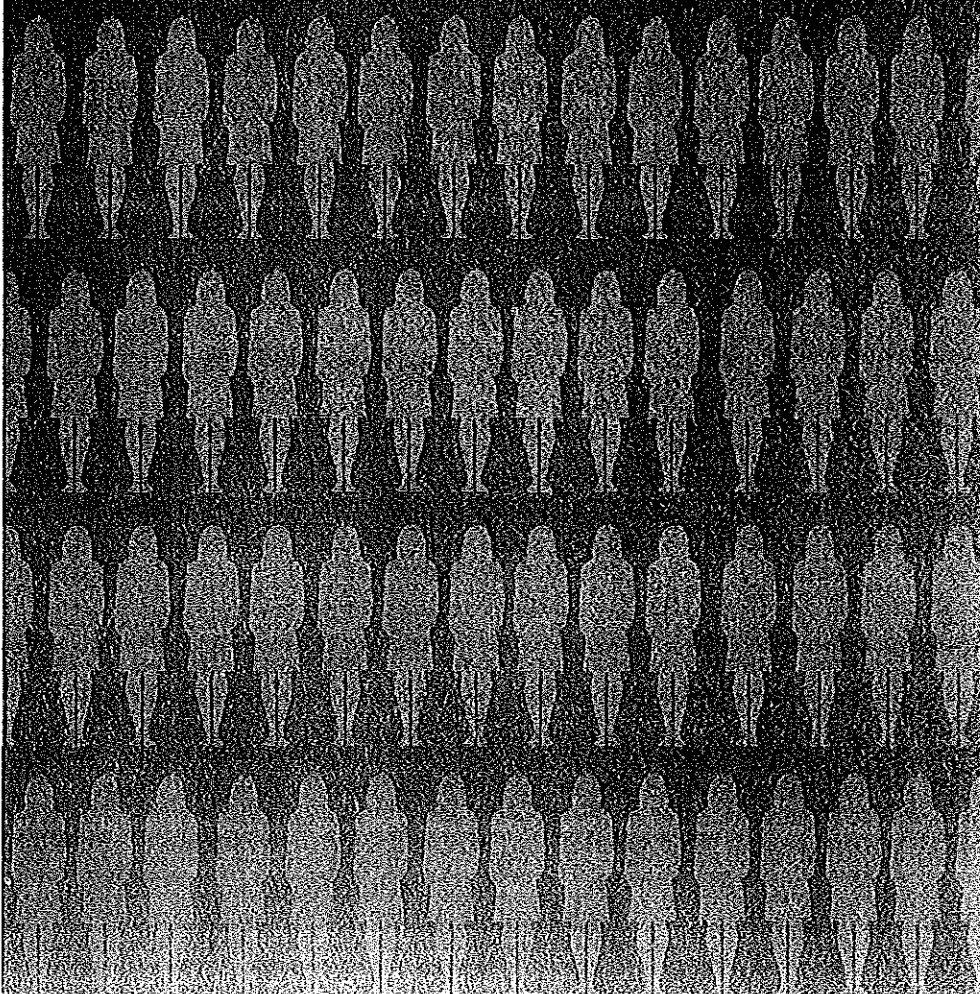




# RAPE NUMBERS DON'T ADD UP



**Study says differences in how sexual assaults are counted lead to confusion, lack of help for victims**



**S**exual assault incidents are badly underreported and poorly counted, according to an exhaustive national study published Tuesday, which found that law enforcement and support service agencies are often unable to give survivors the help they need.

The study by the National Research Council recommends ways the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics can improve its surveying of sexual assault cases. It also examines how a half-dozen other methods of counting sexual assaults compare.

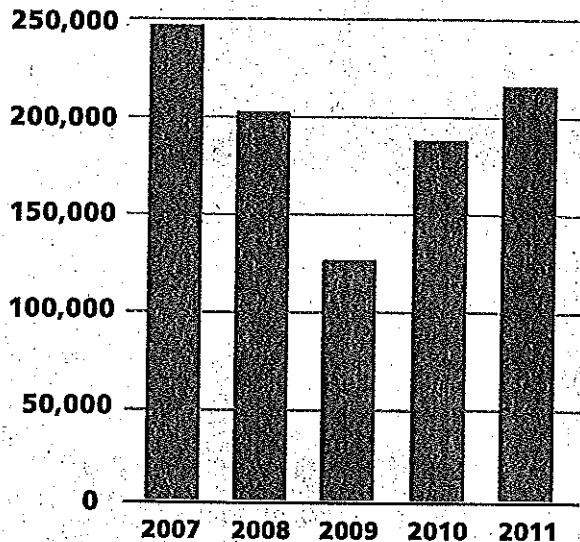
"The end result is that they provide different estimates of the extent of rape and sexual assault. This in turn creates confusion for the public, for law enforcement, for policy-makers, for researchers and for victim advocacy groups," researchers wrote in the 265-page report.

The research council, noting that some 80 percent of sexual assaults go unreported to law enforcement, recommends the National Crime Victimization Survey adopt new approaches to interviews, including changing the wording of questions.

The survey method, which includes interviews in households, is cited as a major reason for numbers that may be off. In part, the council wants sexual assault described in health terms, not just criminal terms.

» ASSAULTS, 3B

The National Crime Victimization Survey estimates rates of crime across the nation, and has found hundreds of thousands of rape and sexual assault cases in recent years. However, a new report by the National Research Council finds sexual assaults are underreported.



SOURCE: Bureau of Justice Statistics

# Study says sexual assaults greatly underreported

## » ASSAULTS FROM 1B

The report says that while the survey is generally considered the best source of information on crime, it likely has undercounted sexual assaults for years and falls short of capturing statistics that can be compared from year to year.

In the past two years, some experts have seen an increase in attention on sexual assault, which may affect the number of incidents reported.

The Nashville Sexual Assault Center, for example, reported an increase in the number of people stepping forward to re-

port sexual abuse, attributed in part to intense coverage of former Pennsylvania State University football coach Jerry Sandusky, convicted of 45 counts of child sex abuse involving 10 boys.

### Misplaced blame

Amber Stevenson, clinical supervisor and therapist at the sexual assault center, said one reason above others was responsibility for stopping victims from coming forward.

"As long as we as a community continue to make victim-blaming statements, such as, 'She put herself in this situation,' ... 'She didn't fight

back, she must have wanted it,' we will continue to see rapes go unreported," Stevenson said. "We have to stop blaming the victim. The conversation needs to shift to the person who chose to rape."

In counseling assault survivors, Stevenson meets some who have gone to police and others who haven't.

"In most cases there's not physical evidence, so the response from law enforcement may not be positive," she said. "There's a perception that if in any way the victim can be responsible for the assault, there seems to be a different response from

law enforcement."

This summer, the rape of a student at Vanderbilt University and subsequent arrests of former football players ignited more local attention on the subject, including questions about how universities respond to and report assaults. A group of current and former female Vanderbilt students filed a federal complaint last week charging mishandling of victims and reports.

Stevenson said media attention tends to encourage others to come forward to begin a healing process that can benefit some victims by talking

about what happened.

She said the center's program of connecting volunteers to accompany victims to the hospital is another method of increasing reports.

"Our goal is not that they report, but to empower them to whatever choice is for them," she said.

### States' laws differ

Researchers found that states' sex-crime laws vary in how they address force and consent, and that some don't account for incapacitated victims who cannot consent. Tennessee is among states in which the mere

threat of force can elevate an act to a sex crime.

Law enforcement in some states is geared toward an outdated perception of rape involving strangers, the report found. That perception doesn't reflect that most sexual assaults take place between people who know each other, that most do not involve physical force or weapons, and that most do not result in serious injuries other than the rape itself.

Reach Tony Gonzalez at 615-259-8089 or [tgonzalez@tennessean.com](mailto:tgonzalez@tennessean.com). Ask him a question on Twitter @tgonzalez.