



HIGHLIGHTS

- The study of sexual assault or abuse is complicated by many factors, including characteristics of the crime and changes in how reports of the crime are handled.
- Forcible rapes dropped dramatically between 1970 and 1990, then showed year-to-year volatility.
- The Sixth and Seventh Police Districts accounted for a disproportionate number of sex abuse reports in D.C.

Brief

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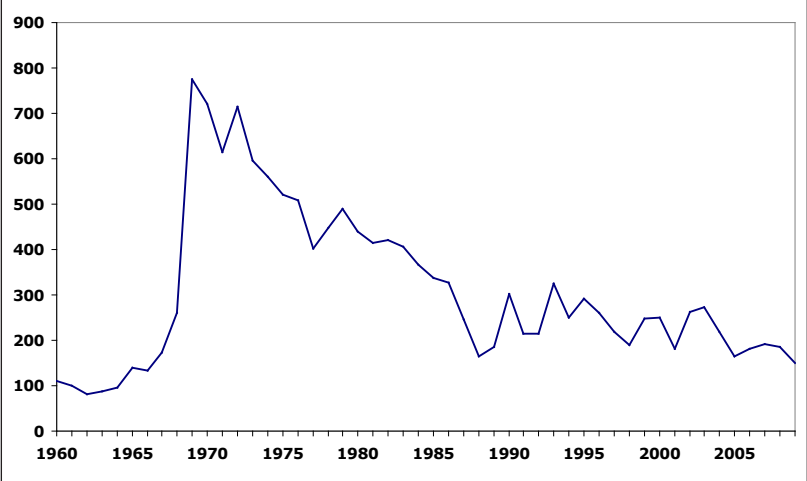
Sex Abuse in the District of Columbia Patterns and Trends, 2000-2009

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This brief is the fourth in a series describing the changes in crime patterns in the District of Columbia over the last decade. This series will report on statistics for all major categories of crime. The nonpartisan Urban Institute publishes studies, reports, and books on timely topics worthy of public consideration. The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders.

Researchers face many challenges in studying sexual assault. Prior research finds sexual assault is commonly underreported. Thus, official sexual assault statistics likely undercount the number of assaults. Trends in reporting may be influenced by victim outreach efforts, the availability of support resources for victims, changing statutes of limitations, or changes in the ways that police collect and record information about sexual assaults. This challenge is evidenced by the historical sexual assault data. The sharp increase in sexual assaults in the late 1960s (figure 1) is likely due mainly to a change in the way sexual assault reports were handled by police, rather than a crime wave.

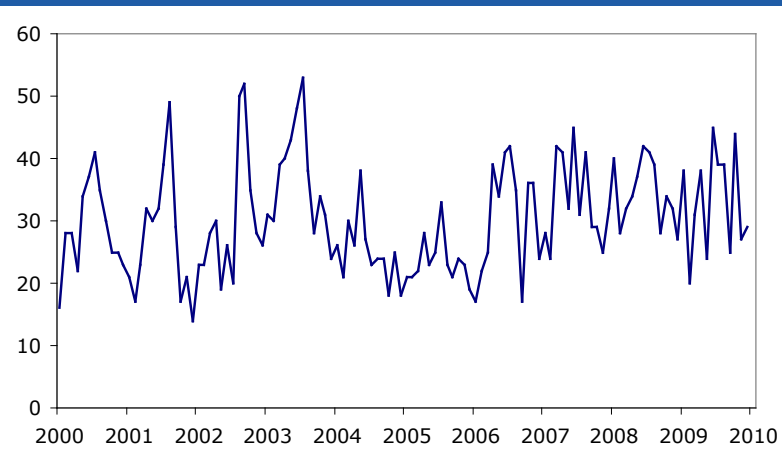
Figure 1. Number of Forcible Rapes in D.C., 1960–2009



Classifying Sexual Offenses

Classification and reporting of sexual abuse or assaults varies widely from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, with some police departments separating forcible rapes from other types of sexual assault, such as fondling or inappropriate contact. In Washington, DC, the crime category for these types of offenses is termed “sex abuse” and includes a wide range of offenses, including forcible rape and other forms of sexual contact. Thus, we use the term sex abuse when referring specifically to sexual assault as reported by Washington, DC authorities, and forcible rape when discussing FBI statistics.¹

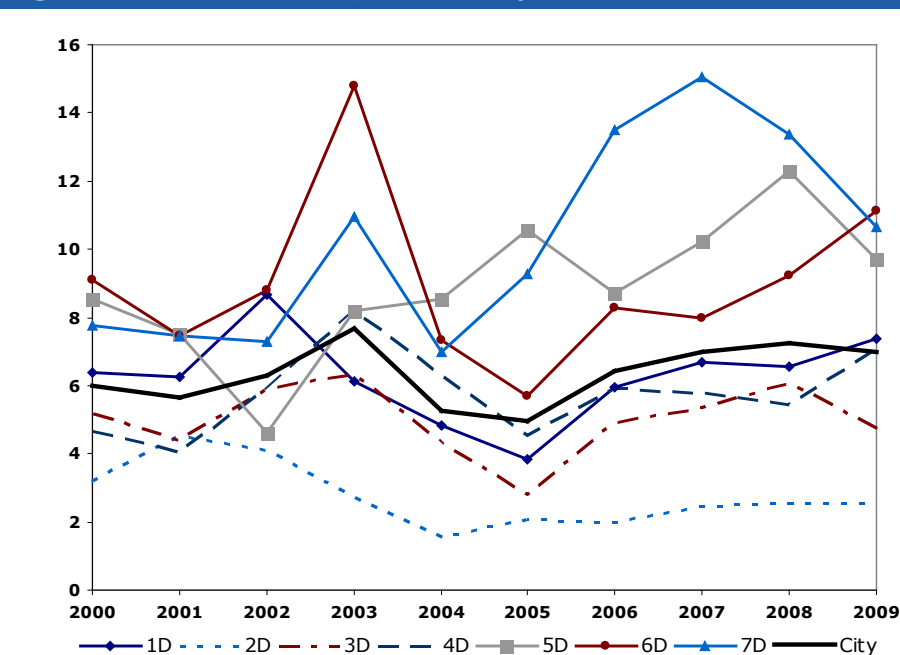
Figure 2. Monthly Counts of Sex Abuse, 2000–2009



Sexual assaults are also relatively rare compared with other violent offenses, such as robbery or aggravated assault. Thus, there is substantial volatility in sexual assault statistics, and it is difficult to discern real patterns.

Finally, unlike other violent crimes, police presence has relatively little influence on the number of crimes because these crimes have very different characteristics than other violent crimes, like robbery or homicide. Victims and offenders often know each other, victims are overwhelmingly female, and attacks occur more frequently in or near residences as opposed to in public places. As a result, sexual assault tends to cluster in residential areas with dense populations, out of reach of those who seek to protect victims.

Figure 3. Sex Abuse Rates per 10,000 by police district, 2000–2009



	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
1D	6.39	6.25	8.67	6.11	4.83	3.84	5.97	6.68	6.53	7.39
2D	3.17	4.53	4.08	2.72	1.54	2.08	1.99	2.45	2.54	2.54
3D	5.19	4.40	5.89	6.33	4.31	2.81	4.92	5.36	6.07	4.75
4D	4.66	4.03	5.93	8.20	6.30	4.54	5.93	5.80	5.42	7.06
5D	8.53	7.50	4.60	8.19	8.53	10.57	8.70	10.23	12.28	9.72
6D	9.08	7.45	8.81	14.77	7.32	5.69	8.27	8.00	9.22	11.11
7D	7.75	7.44	7.29	10.94	6.99	9.27	13.52	15.04	13.37	10.63
City	6.01	5.66	6.29	7.67	5.24	4.95	6.43	6.97	7.24	6.97

Historic Trends in Rape

According to Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) statistics collected by the FBI, forcible rapes in Washington, DC peaked in 1969. In 1966, there were 134 forcible rape cases, but there were 776 just four years later, an increase of nearly 500 percent.

Following that peak, forcible rape counts declined steadily for the next 20 years. Between 1969 and 1988, forcible rape counts declined 16 out of 20 years. In the next 15 years, forcible rape counts showed substantial year to year volatility, even as increased attention was paid to violence against women, particularly after passage of the 1994 Violence Against Women Act. After 2005, forcible rape counts stabilized at slightly below 200 per year.

Sex Abuse over the Previous Decade

Figure 2 describes the monthly counts of sex abuse reports in Washington, DC over the 10-year period between 2000 and 2009. Early in the period (2000–2003) the number of sex abuse reports was very volatile, and sex abuse reports followed strong seasonal patterns. Rapes jumped dramatically in the summers and dropped in the winters. After 2003, however, change from month

to month was smaller. Additional analyses (not shown) indicated that there was a small but significant decrease (12 percent) in reported sex abuse between 2000 and 2004, and a significant increase (33 percent) between 2004 and 2009. The change over the entire period (2000–2009) was not significant.²

Sex Abuse by Police District

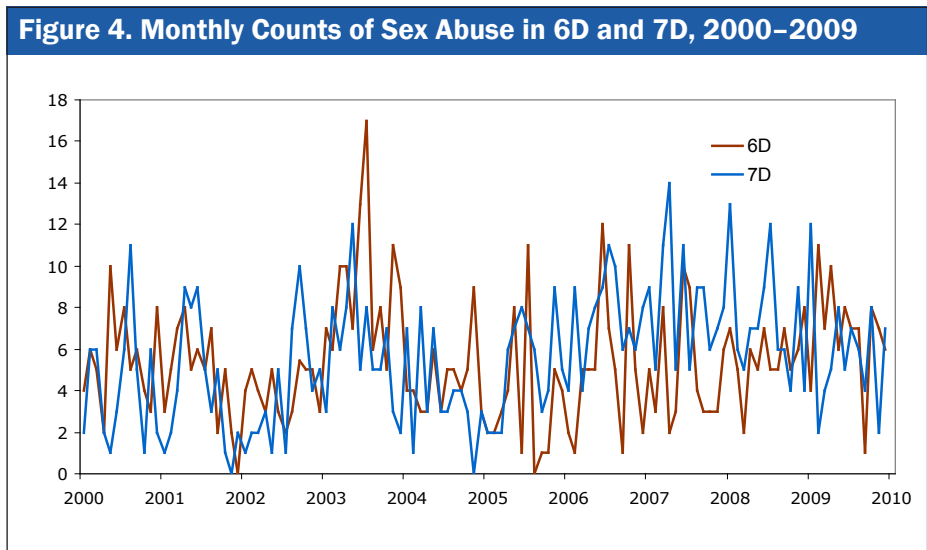
To further explore trends in sex abuse reports, we looked at rates of sex abuse per 10,000 District of Columbia residents for each police district.³ We found that the Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Police Districts (5D, 6D, and 7D) not only had the highest counts of sex abuse reports over the study period but also had the highest rates of sex abuse. In fact, 6D and 7D accounted for nearly 37 percent of the sex abuse reports in the city as a whole for the decade under study.

Sex abuse reports in these two districts (6D and 7D) showed the same amount of volatility (figure 4) as the citywide trend (figure 2). The two districts also followed very similar month-to-month patterns. The district-specific counts,

however, had more apparent trends upward in the second half than did the city. The rates of sex abuse in 6D and 7D showed what may be the beginning of a decline in sex abuse beginning in 2009, but it is too soon to determine whether that change was a result of normal volatility in the data or a true downward trend.

Summary

Despite the difficulty in using official statistics to understand the true size of the sex abuse problem in Washington, DC, the data reveal some patterns in the amount of sex abuse cases. We find a long-term downward trend in reports of forcible rape that has stabilized in recent years. We identify a high degree of volatility over time, and no clear pattern of increase or decline in the last decade in sex abuse. Police districts 6D and 7D accounted for a disproportionate share of the city’s sex abuse reports, a pattern that may have begun to change at the very end of the series, at least in 7D.



¹To examine historic trends in sexual assaults in Washington, DC over the previous 50 years, we used data collected under the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports program. These historic data reported forcible rapes only, so the data presented in figure 1 cover a smaller subset of offenses than those analyzed for the period 2000–2009. The more recent data come directly from the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD), which includes forcible rape as part of a larger category termed “sex abuse” and defined in the text of the brief.

²All statistical analyses are available from DCPI upon request.

³One caution should be noted: these rates were calculated using population figures for 2000; they do not reflect changing populations in each police district over time. Population estimates for years after 2000 are available for the District of Columbia. Those estimates revealed that the population of the city grew by less than 5 percent, and sex abuse rates calculated using those estimates were very close to those based on the 2000 population. To be consistent with the District-level data, we report city level rates using 2000 population data only.