

BJS Statistician Accepts Prestigious AAPOR Award

Congress unanimously passed the Prison Rape Elimination Act of 2003 (PREA), which established a zero-tolerance for the incidence of sexual victimization in federal, state, and local confinement facilities nationwide. The law required the Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) to measure sexual victimization in confinement facilities and publish rankings of facilities with the highest and lowest rates of sexual victimization. At that time there was no infrastructure for such a data collection and there was little agreement on the methodology that would generate accurate estimates.

Last month BJS received recognition for its groundbreaking work in measuring sexual victimization in confinement facilities as required by PREA. Allen J. Beck, BJS's Senior Statistical Advisor, accepted the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) 2014 Policy Impact Award on May 17 on behalf of the BJS and its data collection agents at the annual AAPOR conference in Anaheim, Calif. RTI International, Westat, NORC at the University of Chicago and the U.S. Census Bureau all assisted in the data collection.

"It was an honor for the Bureau of Justice Statistics and our contractors to be selected for this prestigious award," said William Sabol, BJS Acting Director. "We faced a lot of unique challenges in ensuring that we developed credible and reliable reports of sexual assault in confinement facilities – and our research findings have contributed to and influenced reforms at federal, state and local confinement facilities."

"The findings, and their extensive publicity, have triggered special investigations by governors and state legislatures and immediate changes in policies and plans of action," according to the award citation. "Findings from the project are now cited extensively in training for correctional administrators on how to prevent and respond to prison rape. Without these data, national standards for best practices to eliminate rape and other related violence among prisoners could not have been promulgated."

"We contributed to knowledge that we simply just didn't have," said Beck, emphasizing that when the PREA Act was initially passed, there were little to no data on the prevalence or circumstances related to sexual victimization in confinement facilities. But all that was about to change.

Beck, who was then the Chief of Corrections for BJS, was responsible for ensuring all of PREA's statistical requirements were met, while also maintaining his duties as correctional chief. "It was a very challenging set of requirements that went beyond anything we had ever done before with relation to the scale and complexity of what was required under PREA," Beck said. BJS and its data collection agents have worked together to meet the PREA requirements since 2003.

The BJS statisticians reached out to stakeholders and developed survey protocols, measurement strategies and reporting criteria. They also established definitions of sexual victimization that would hold true for each survey and facility. They addressed complex human subject research issues, including ensuring the confidentiality of inmate reports, minimizing the risk of re-traumatizing victims, protecting respondents from retaliation by other inmates or facility staff, and following state laws mandating reporting of abuse and neglect of juveniles. Moreover, they developed statistical standards for identifying high- and low-rate facilities as required under the Act.

PREA mandated that BJS conduct and produce an annual data collection and analysis of not fewer than 10 percent of the nation's prisons, jails, military, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Indian country, and juvenile facilities. BJS conducted surveys involving current as well as former inmates, to provide data at the facility level, and to rank facilities by their rates of sexual victimization. BJS provided these rankings to a Prison Rape Review Panel established by the Department of Justice.

"We had to develop a complex statistical infrastructure that would enable us to measure a very sensitive issue that was far more nuanced than we knew," said Beck. "The prison rape data collection represents a 10-year effort to build a program for accurately measuring the prevalence of sexual victimization in the nation's more than 7,600 confinement facilities covered under PREA."

In the years since the passage of PREA, BJS has produced 14 PREA reports, based on four separate data collections: the *Survey on Sexual Violence*, the *National Inmate Survey*, the *National Survey of Youth in Custody*, and the *National Former Prisoner Survey*. These surveys combined reached a level of data collection not seen previously, by assessing the incidence of sexual victimization in confinement facilities through victim self-reporting, surveying facilities' administrative records, reaching out to ex-offenders now living in the community and surveying youth held in juvenile and adult facilities.

But what did America learn from these data?

"We learned a lot," Beck said. "One of the things we learned is that sexual victimization is not all the same. It is not always rape. There are all forms of unwanted or unwilling sexual acts that involve coercion. Coercion can be relatively low level in nature, such as walking by and grabbing, touching or groping or being talked into it, bribed or offered special favors. The coercion may take on other forms including unwanted penetration or rape."

This intense undertaking and the information and insight gained has changed the way people view prison rape. More than 10 years ago, confinement facilities almost uniformly denied that prison rape was an issue – but the research has helped to change this impression, according to the AAPOR award write up. Now, there are standards in place to curtail prison rape.

"What we did contributed to change," Beck said. "A change in correctional operations throughout the country."