

Administrative data systems versus prevalence surveys: Are they equally suited to give us data on the prevalence of violence against women?

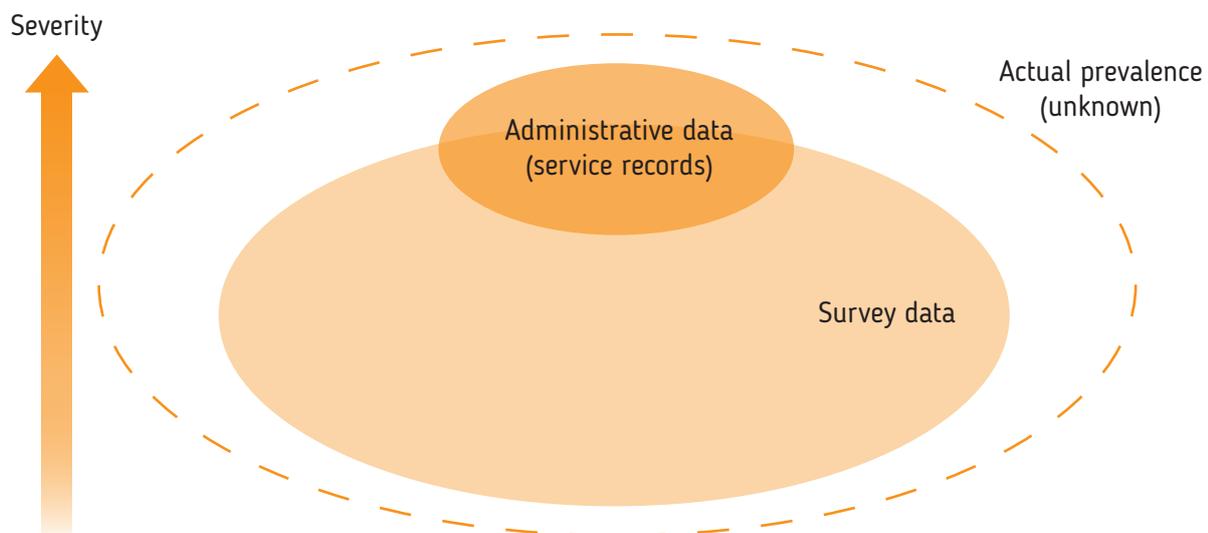
Information and statistics on violence against women (VAW) are potentially available from a variety of sources. Two of the most common 'groups' of sources of quantitative data are: (1) administrative data, including, but not limited to records kept by health and social services, hotlines, shelters, legal aid services, courts and police; and (2) population-based surveys, a term that is used for surveys that collect data through rigorous methods in a subset of the population – a representative sample – to find out what is happening in the entire population.

As this leaflet sets out to show, administrative data, while having their utility as a source of information on violence against women, **cannot** provide an estimate of the prevalence of violence against women taking place within a population.¹

The '**prevalence**' of violence against women refers to the proportion of women who have experienced violence as part of the total population of women 'at risk.' For example, prevalence estimates of intimate partner violence (IPV) are usually presented as the percentage of ever-partnered women who have experienced violence, among all ever-partnered women in the same age group. In many surveys, this is measured over the following two time periods:

- 1 During the previous 12 months, also sometimes called 'prevalence rate of current violence' or 'current prevalence'; and
- 2 At any time in their life, also known as 'prevalence rate of lifetime violence' or 'lifetime prevalence.'

ADMINISTRATIVE DATA VS. POPULATION-BASED SURVEY DATA ON EXPERIENCE OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: HOW WELL DO THEY REPRESENT PREVALENCE IN A POPULATION?



¹ For more details on various survey methodologies, refer to the leaflet 'Survey Methodologies' at asiapacific.unfpa.org/knowvawdata.

Graphic above: Dr Henriette Jansen

1. ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

Administrative data are a valuable source of statistics on VAW. Public data systems and administrative records provide data that can be analyzed, such as from health management information systems (HMIS), police, social services, hotlines and court files. Prevalence studies in many countries show that, among women who ever experienced violence by an intimate partner, often only between 1 and 10 percent seek help from these support services. Due to stigma, shame, economic and emotional dependence, fear and social barriers, the majority of women who experience violence do not seek help at all or only seek it when their situation becomes unbearable. Therefore, the data from these administrative sources – even if properly collected, presented and interpreted – only represent the very tip of the iceberg. Moreover, administrative data generally tend to capture incidents of the most severe forms of violence, as reported by those who endure violence over extended periods of time, women who have been injured, who are in shelters or institutions, or even those who have been murdered by their intimate partners. Most of such data cannot be captured in household prevalence surveys.

It is vitally important to interpret data collected through administrative systems properly, and especially to understand their limitations for measuring the magnitude of the problem. While administrative data collection systems can help to monitor and inform agency practice, they are not designed to measure VAW in the general population. They cannot provide data to estimate the prevalence of violence.

While administrative data cannot help to measure the extent and patterns of violence **in a population**, they do reveal the number of cases or incidents identified by a specific service, the response and treatment provided, and – in some cases – the effectiveness of resources allocated or the referral mechanisms put in place.

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2. PREVALENCE SURVEYS

Prevalence surveys on violence against women involve interviewing a representative sample of women using a well-designed questionnaire and specially trained interviewers. The randomly selected survey respondents may or may not have experienced violence; survey interviewers do not know this in advance. These 'population-based' surveys are the only way to achieve reliable and comprehensive statistics that represent the magnitude of the problem in the general population, provided they are properly conducted and that they fully address ethical and safety issues.

Specialized interviewer training is needed for safety and data quality because rather than measuring the actual number of women who have been abused, violence against women surveys only measure those who are willing and able to disclose abuse. A further limitation of prevalence surveys is that the most severe cases will never be counted: the women who are locked up or too afraid to open doors, who have fled their homes because of the violence, who are institutionalized or those who have been killed.

A well designed and conducted survey can collect the best data possible on prevalence and patterns of violence in the populations studied, which can be used to directly inform policy, service provision and prevention strategies.

The methodology developed for the WHO Multi-country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence is an example of a dedicated survey instrument that not only obtains prevalence data on different types of VAW, but also on:

- The consequences for women, their children and families;
- Women's help-seeking behaviours e.g., which services women use and why some women do not use services for VAW; and
- Underlying factors that increase the risk of violence and those that protect women from violence.

Another example of a survey instrument for the collection of prevalence data on VAW is the Domestic Violence module in the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS).

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CONCLUSION:

- Administrative records are not suitable for determining prevalence rates.
- A well conducted, dedicated population-based survey is required to collect data on the prevalence of VAW.
- Data from both sources are relevant for different purposes; it is important to understand what the data from each source can and cannot tell us.