

The cost of rape: Applying an economic burden estimate to advance prevention

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The findings and conclusions in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Sexual violence exacts a high toll on survivors, their loved ones—and, ultimately, on all of us. Although decades of research demonstrate the harmful, and costly, impacts of sexual violence on the physical, psychological, social, and economic well-being of survivors, few studies have attempted to quantify the total lifetime economic burden of sexual violence on the United States (US) economy.

CDC's study estimating the economic burden of rape

In 2017, CDC published a study, “[Lifetime Economic Burden of Rape Among U.S. Adults](#),” in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* to address this gap in our knowledge (Peterson, DeGue, Florence, & Lokey, 2017). This study uses mathematical modeling to estimate the lifetime per-victim and total population economic burden of rape among adult men and women in the US. Data sources include previous sexual violence research, administrative data systems (e.g., health care, criminal justice), and surveillance data from CDC’s 2011 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS). Due to limitations of the available research literature and data, the estimate is limited to the costs associated with rape, specifically, and does not include other forms of sexual violence.

This study has two key advantages over prior estimates of the economic burden of rape. First, the costs included are more comprehensive. While prior research was often limited to criminal justice-related expenditures, CDC’s estimate includes costs for 14 categories of health conditions (e.g., injuries, depression, PTSD, substance abuse, cervical cancer, rape-related pregnancy) linked to rape victimization based on a systematic review of the sexual violence research literature. In addition, costs

associated with criminal justice response (i.e., investigation, adjudication, incarceration), victim and perpetrator lost work productivity, and property loss/damage during the offense are included for a more complete estimate of the impact on the economy. Second, while prior studies often based the total burden estimate on the number of rapes reported to law enforcement, CDC's estimate uses national surveillance data from NISVS, identifying many more individuals as victims – based on self-report – than past research using official reports. Details of the study's methods and limitations are available in the published article.

The per-victim cost and total lifetime economic burden of rape in the US

Using these methods, CDC estimates that the per-victim lifetime cost of rape is \$122,461. We can also interpret this estimate as the costs averted for each potential victim who does not experience rape. When this per-victim cost is multiplied by the estimated 25 million reported adult victims of rape in the US, we find that rape will cost the economy approximately \$3.1 trillion dollars over the lifetimes of those 25 million victims. Of this total, government sources pay an estimated one-third (\$1.1 trillion) of the lifetime economic burden.

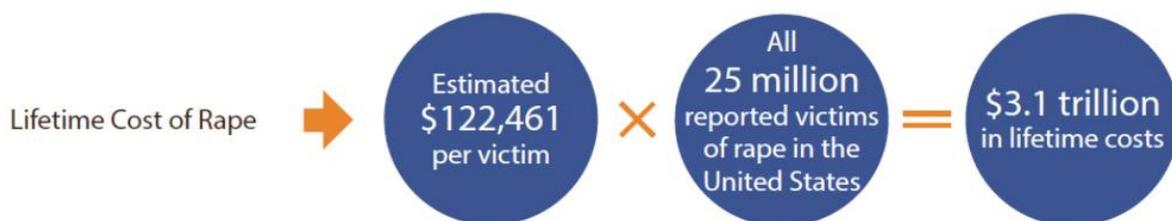


Image source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (.n.d.) *The Economic Burden of Rape*.

Applying CDC's estimate to advance sexual violence prevention

Understanding and quantifying the cost of rape can inform and advance our efforts to prevent sexual violence by helping communities convey the importance of the

problem, educating partners and decision-makers on the need for prevention, and conducting cost-benefit analyses to identify the best use of prevention resources.

Communicating the importance of the problem to the public and others

The public and other stakeholders may not always recognize the scope and impact of sexual violence as a public health problem. Communicating the high economic burden of rape may provide another avenue for expressing these impacts in ways that resonate with different audiences.

Below are some example key messages communities could use to convey the importance of sexual violence as a public health problem, using findings from CDC's economic burden estimate of rape:

Example messages:

- Sexual violence is a serious and costly public health problem in the US.
- Rape results in more than \$122,000 in costs per victim and nearly \$3.1 trillion to the economy over the lifetimes of all 25 million victims in the US population.
- With about 25 million rape survivors in the US right now, we can expect to spend more than \$3 trillion over their lifetimes on health care, criminal justice response, lost productivity, and other costs.
- The impacts and costs of sexual violence extend well beyond the direct effects on victims and perpetrators. Sexual violence hurts us all, and it can be prevented.

Educating partners and decision-makers about the importance of investing in prevention

Communicating the need for prevention – and investments in prevention – is often a critical aspect of work in communities to engage potential partners and gain support for prevention efforts from various decision-makers. Knowing the economic costs of rape to survivors, and to society as a whole, can help prevention partners and decisionmakers understand, in economic terms, both the costs of rape and the benefits of preventing it. These estimates can help communities make informed

decisions about their allocation of resources, particularly to effective prevention strategies.

Below are some example key messages communities could use to convey the potential costs and savings associated with effective comprehensive sexual violence prevention:

Example messages:

- Not preventing sexual violence results in substantial costs to the economy, in addition to the direct short- and long-term harms to individuals.
- For every rape prevented, more than \$122,000 in lifetime costs are averted.
- About one-third of the costs of rape are paid by government sources, including the health care, social services, and criminal justice systems.
- Investing in prevention may ultimately save money and, more importantly, can improve health and lives.



Conducting cost-benefit analyses to guide prevention decision-making

Cost analyses can help communities make the best decisions about allocating resources to programs that work and are cost-effective. Cost-effectiveness here refers to the cost of an intervention for preventing rape compared to the cost of consequences of rape. Knowing the cost-effectiveness of an intervention can help communities advocate for investment in prevention and invest resources wisely.

Prevention is not always cost-saving; as a society, we can expect to pay for interventions that keep us healthier, safer, and happier. Understanding the cost of rape is one more way we can understand what those costs are and ensure they are invested in prevention strategies that work.

Peterson, C., DeGue, S., Florence, C., & Lokey, C. N. (2017). Lifetime economic burden of rape among U.S. adults. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 52, 691-701. Retrieved from [https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797\(16\)30615-8/pdf](https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797(16)30615-8/pdf)

For further reading...

Read [“Lifetime Economic Burden of Rape Among U.S. Adults”](#)

Find [NSVRC’s talking points on this study](#)

Download an [infographic with the study data](#)

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