

# Hurricanes Katrina/Rita and Sexual Violence

## Report on Database of Sexual Violence Prevalence and Incidence Related to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita

**H**urricanes Katrina and Rita caused immense devastation along the Gulf Coast region in late summer 2005. In the weeks immediately following these disasters, a group of professionals from the fields of rape victim advocacy, law enforcement, emergency medicine, and prosecution began work on developing an anonymous database to measure the extent of sexual violence committed in the aftermath of these hurricanes.\* Now, six months after the development of this national database, the group offers a report on preliminary findings.

Developed as an internet survey, using the *Survey Monkey* program, the intent of this initiative was to obtain an estimate of the incidence and prevalence of sexual violence that occurred during or following the hurricanes, and to collect some anecdotal information, when offered. The procedure involved the following steps: A link to the survey was disseminated, via email, to various advocacy, criminal justice, and medical organizations and coalitions throughout the US. Information regarding victimization was entered into the database by the professionals who had been in direct contact with victims/survivors, or by those supporting their efforts, e.g. state sexual assault coalition staff. In order to protect the integrity of the data, the public did not have access to the database.

The database does not include any identifying information about victims/survivors, however gathered sufficient information so as not to duplicate reports of one incident. Individuals entering data were asked to enter their agency contact information so that they could be reached in order to verify the entered information. A California Public Health Department Quality Assurance Specialist developed the survey and verified the information. A summary of the data is sent to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center on a monthly basis.

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\* American Prosecutors Research Institute; End Violence Against Women International; Gulf States Regional Policing Institute; International Association of Chiefs of Police; Joanne Archambault (Sergeant Ret.) Sexual Assault Training and Investigations; Louisiana Foundation Against Sexual Assault; National Center for Women and Policing; National Crime Victim Law Institute & Center for Law and Public Policy on Sexual Violence; National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence; National Sexual Assault Coalition Resource Sharing Project; National Sexual Violence Resource Center; State Sexual Assault Coalitions; Wendy Murphy, Esq., Victim Advocacy and Research Group.

To date, 47 cases have been entered in the database.  
The following information offers a sketch of the data.

## **Demographics of Victims/Survivors**

**93.2 percent of victims were female, 6.7 % male**

### **Victim/Survivor status**

Disaster victims	95.0 %
Member of host family household	2.5 %
Unspecified	2.5 %

### **Age of victim**

13.6 % were age 14 or less
36.4 % were between the ages of 15 and 24
29.5 % were between the ages of 25 and 44
20.4 % were age 45 or older

### **Race and Ethnicity of Victim/Survivor (self-identified)**

44.4 % Caucasian/White
33.3 % African American/Black
6.7 % Native American
15.6 % did not specify

## **State and Site of Assaults**

### **Location of sexual assaults and survey respondents**

83.3 % of documented sexual assaults occurred in Louisiana
70.0 % of the reporting agencies were located in Louisiana

### **Location of the sexual assaults**

Evacuation sites or other shelter	30.8 %
Victim's home	10.3 %
Host Home	12.8 %
Street/Open area	12.8 %
Public Building (not a shelter)	10.3 %
Other (hotel, perpetrator's home, car)	23.1 %

## Perpetrator Information

**93.3 % of perpetrators were male and the remainder were unspecified**

### Perpetrators (type or relationship)

Strangers to the victims/survivors	38.6 %
Family members	9.1 %
Current or former intimate partners	9.1 %
Acquaintance	25.0 %
Unspecified/Other	29.6 %

## Additional Facts

- 26.8 % of victims had contact with a Rape Crisis/Victim Service Agency within 24 hours of the assault
- 54.8 % of the sexual assault were reported to law enforcement agencies
- 40 % of victims/survivors received a medical-forensic exam
- Survey respondents (agencies) were most often rape crisis centers (40.4 %) or state sexual assault coalitions. (51.1 %)

## Consideration of Overall Prevalence of Sexual Violence

The 47 reported cases in this database can be viewed as a remarkably high rate of prevalence, especially given the fact that sexual violence is such a highly underreported crime, even during more optimal conditions for reporting. During a time of disaster, however, when many hardships impact the population, even the most basic needs for food shelter and family safety would likely diminish opportunities for reporting and the psychological ability to cope with multiple traumas. Furthermore, the magnitude of these data are underscored when you account for the extraordinary circumstances and burdens confronted by advocates and first responders.

Finally, these 47 records reflect a small percentage of the anecdotal reports and accounts reported informally by advocates in Texas, a major evacuee location. These advocates reported additional disclosures from evacuees who were sexually assaulted in Louisiana or after they arrived in Texas.

*Note that the survey is still active and accessible via the internet. If you are working with a victim/survivor who was sexually assaulted as a result of the devastation of Hurricanes Katrina or Rita, and you would like to add that information to the survey, please contact Cathy Nardo, at 877-739-3895 ext. 103, for the link to the database.*