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New FBI definition increases Alaska's already high rape rate

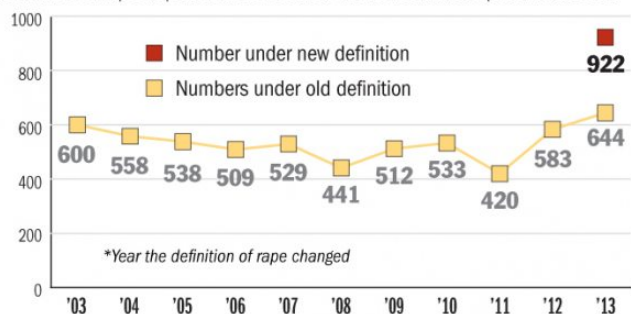
Jerzy Shedlock | November 12, 2014

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Number of rapes in Alaska, 2003 - 2013*

Pamela Dunlap-Shohl illustration

In 2013, the FBI expanded the definition of rape used in its crime reporting statistics to include different types of penetration and both male and female victims. As a result, the number of rapes reported in 2013 under the new definition spiked from 2012.



Source: FBI Uniform Crime Reports 2003 - 2013

The FBI has released its 2013 crime statistics, and a revised definition of rape has increased the rape rate in Alaska and nationwide.

Last year, the federal agency’s [Uniform Crime Reporting](#) program started collecting rape data under the new definition. The new definition reflects an expanded interpretation of what types of penetration constitute rape and includes male and female victims.

The old definition of rape included only female victims and was narrowly defined as “The carnal knowledge of a female forcibly and against her will.”

The new definition is broader and is defined as, “Penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim.”

The revised definition expands rape to cover victims of both genders, said Kevin Donovan, assistant special agent with the Alaska FBI. It also reflects the various forms of sexual penetration understood to be rape, especially nonconsensual acts of sodomy and sex assaults with objects, he said.

According to the 2013 report, the number of rapes -- under the revised definition -- known to police in Alaska totaled 922. If the old definition was applied, that total would be 644. The increase caused a bump in the state’s rape rate, from 87.6 rapes per 100,000 residents to 125.4 rapes.

Reported rapes are more common here than in any other state, according to the FBI. Alaska's rape rate is nearly [three times the national average](#). And [state officials recently said that nothing short of a holistic approach](#) with adequate resources will reverse the trend.

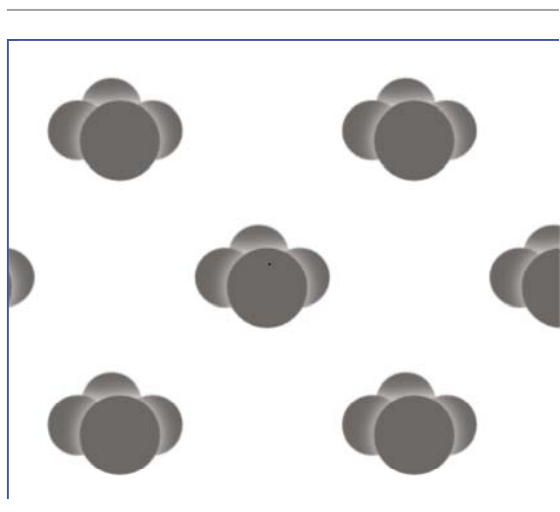
Donovan said the new definition is more inclusive and provides the FBI with a more accurate understanding of the scope and number of rapes in Alaska and other states.

"The changes broaden the scope of the previously narrow definitions by capturing data without regard to gender and including offenses in which physical force is not involved," he said. "For example, instances in which offenders use drugs or alcohol or incidents in which offenders and victims are of the same gender are now counted as rape for statistical purposes."

Since the FBI started collecting the data using the new definition of rape, a rise in the number of reports was expected, Donovan added.

Lisa Purinton, a program coordinator who oversees UCR data collection for state agencies such as the Alaska State Troopers, as well as for municipal police departments, said the state applied the revised definition on Jan. 1, 2013.

She said the revision did not affect how data was collected, but it expanded the state's focus. The stats are collected by examining instances of rape and applying the government's definition, then submitting those findings.



"It's no longer the narrow focus it previously was," Purinton said. "With that expansion, of course, the numbers were going to go up substantially."

Anchorage experienced the most rapes among the state's reporting metropolitan areas. In 2013, there were 408 rapes known to police, the highest total in the past 10 years. However, according to the police department's 2013 statistical report, the number of forcible rapes under the old definition was 312.

In 2012, there were 303 rapes reported in Anchorage. In 2011 and 2010, the totals were 283 and 263, respectively. The 10-year average of rapes in Anchorage from 2002 to 2012 is approximately 289.

The city with the second-most rapes in 2013 was Fairbanks, population 32,204, reporting a total of 34.

Kotzebue had the third largest number of reported rapes in 2013, totaling 24. The Northwest community is home to 3,202 Alaskans.

Kotzebue's Chief of Police Eric Swisher said he expects his department will be reporting more sex assaults under the broader definition. However, the small rural town experienced a decrease in the total number of rapes for 2013 over previous years, he said.

Swisher said Kotzebue had a total of 34 rapes last year. He pulled the data from the Alaska Department of Public Safety's finalized yearly crime stats. In 2012, there were 43 rapes, he said.

"As far as why that is, it's many different factors, from predators being in jail to victims being in a better environment," Swisher said.

Donovan said as a result of the change, the FBI is confident the number of victims of rape will be more accurately reflected in crime statistics.

“People should not assume increases in rape numbers are due to an increase of violence or sexual assaults,” Donovan said. “The increase may just be a reflection of the more inclusive definition.”

Among the other Alaska findings in the 2013 Uniform Crime Report:

- There were 4,708 violent crimes in 2013. Most of those crimes were aggravated assaults, totaling 3,128. In 2012, there were 4,412 violent crimes.
- Law enforcement agencies reported 34 murders and non-negligent manslaughters.
- There were 624 robberies, 2,916 burglaries and 21,210 property crimes statewide.

Update: This story was updated on Thursday, Nov. 13 to add information provided by the Anchorage Police Department.

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