

ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL POLICY AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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Nearly one in five (19%) women in the U.S. has experienced rape or attempted rape, and 45% have experienced other sexual assault. While researchers have documented a range of psychological and physical consequences of this sexual violence, few researchers have examined the economic impact of this violence for survivors. Yet it is reasonable to ask whether the myriad known consequences of sexual violence, such as post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression, together with costs such as counseling bills and missed work, affect survivors' economic wellbeing. This study was conceived to investigate and characterize the economic dimension of this very common form of violence. The questions guiding this research are: 1) Does sexual violence create economic consequences for survivors, and if so, how can these consequences be characterized? 2) How do the economic impacts of sexual violence differ by race, class, and immigration status? 3) To what extent does access to financial and social assets affect survivors' economic and overall recovery and wellbeing? 4) What policies and services contribute to survivors' economic recovery?

The primary theories informing this research include trauma theory and asset theory. Trauma theory offers a framework for understanding the range of psychological, physical, and social consequences of a traumatic experience such as sexual violence. Asset theory, which suggests financial and social capital can help buffer economic shocks and serve as protective factors, is applied to the problem of sexual violence risk and recovery. In this study, both theories are applied in a novel manner, by considering how trauma theory might extend to include an economic dimension and by applying asset theory to the costs and economic shocks created by sexual violence. Intersectionality—viewing race, gender, class, and other oppressions as intersecting and inseparable—provides a valuable lens that adds dimension to both of these theories in this analysis.

This study was conducted using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The methods included both qualitative interviews and quantitative analysis of nationally representative data. The interviews were conducted with survivors of sexual violence (rape or sexual assault) that was not part of a pattern abuse. Because there is already awareness of the economic impact of intimate partner violence (IPV), this study focused on non-IPV sexual violence to distill its particular effects on survivors' economic wellbeing. The analysis was conducted using a grounded theory approach, including coding and analysis of interview transcripts. The quantitative analysis included an examination the Collaborative Psychiatric Epidemiology Surveys (CPES) data. Analyses included ordinary least squares and logistic regression models for the effects of rape on income and low-income status, including differences by race/ethnicity.

The qualitative findings offer evidence of a range of financial costs and economic consequences associated with non-IPV sexual violence, including direct financial costs, such as medical bills, and mental health issues, which have their own economic implications. In this

study, rape frequently triggered changes in educational attainment, occupation, and earnings, which negatively affected survivors' short- and long-term economic stability. These financial concerns further impacted wellbeing in other areas of life. Consequences differed by race, ethnicity, immigration status, and class. Survivors of color, low-income survivors, and immigrants faced numerous additional burdens and barriers in the pathway to recovery.

The quantitative findings suggest survivors of rape also had lower household income, even when controlling for a range of other variables. The data suggest rape may act on income through mental health symptoms, specifically PTSD. The income effect differed by race/ethnicity in unexpected ways. Non-Hispanic white survivors had significant, negative income effects, while women of color did not show a similar effect. Black and Latina women had significantly lower income than white participants, regardless of their victimization status.

In terms of recovery, financial assets served as a crucial bridge to economic and overall recovery for those with access, by covering unexpected expenses, standing in for lost wages, and increasing flexibility. Those without access to financial assets relied on social welfare policies, such as cash assistance, SNAP, and public housing, for economic survival. These findings suggest social welfare policies, while offering crucial supports, do not adequately assess or address the needs of sexual assault survivors.

This study's findings, as well as the shortcomings of existing policies, suggest the need for both policy reform and new policies to address the economic needs of survivors. Policies such as victim compensation, safety net programs, public housing, and Title IX, can be improved to protect survivors of sexual violence from dire economic consequences. Additionally, these findings can guide in the creation of new policies and services that will address the economic needs of survivors. Also urgently needed are efforts to raise awareness of the problem of sexual violence and its consequences, with the dual goals of preventing future violence and de-stigmatizing victimization in order to facilitate access to existing policies and services.

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