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Considering What Counts: Claims about Nearly-Ubiquitous Social Problems

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Considering What Counts: Claims about Nearly-Ubiquitous Social Problems

Abstract

Press coverage of a recent survey suggests that sexual harassment is nearly ubiquitous in the UK. Thinking critically about claims of nearly-ubiquitous social problems requires: (1) asking how the statistic was produced; (2) considering questions of measurement; and (3) recognizing that the the most severe forms that social problems take tend to be much less common than less serious forms

Keywords

statistics, sexual harassment

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Cover Page Footnote

Joel Best is a professor of sociology and criminal justice at the University of Delaware. His books include *Damn Lies and Statistics* (University of California Press, 2001), *More Damned Lies and Statistics* (University of California Press, 2004), *Flavor of the Month: Why Smart People Fall for Fads* (University of California Press, 2006), *Stat-Spotting: A Field Guide to Identifying Dubious Data* (University of California Press, 2008), *The Stupidity Epidemic: Worrying about Students, Schools and America's Future* (Routledge, 2011), *American Nightmares: Social Problems in an Anxious World* (University of California Press, 2018), and *Is That True? Critical Thinking for Sociologists* (University of California Press, 2021). His papers in Numeracy include a perspective ("Birds—Dead and Deadly: Why Numeracy Needs to Address Social Construction") in the journal's first issue (Jan. 2008).

Considering What Counts

A Column by Joel Best

Just as literacy involves more than simply deciphering sequences of letters, numeracy requires more than just understanding mathematical operations. Both skill sets require that we be able to think critically—about what we read, but also about the numbers we encounter. Numbers are produced by people and we need to strive to understand how and why they have appeared.

Claims about Nearly-Ubiquitous Social Problems

Media in both Britain and the U.S. covered a recently-released UN Women United Kingdom (2021) survey by highlighting what they considered its most dramatic finding: that 97 percent of young UK women reported having been sexually harassed (Gander 2021; Thompson 2021; Topping 2021). This figure actually distorts what the report finds: while it does state that “just 3% of 18–24 year-olds specified that they had never experienced any of the listed forms of sexual harassment,” it adds that “a further 11%” did not respond “that they had or had not” (UN Women United Kingdom 2021, 10). So, a careful reading reveals that 84 percent of young women reported sexual harassment.

Nonetheless, it was the 97 percent figure that received coverage; and it is not difficult to find similar claims about other social problems being nearly ubiquitous. How should we evaluate such claims? Let me suggest three things to consider.

1. *Ask how the statistic was produced.* The 97 percent figure derives from a report by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for UN Women—a working group established by members of Parliament to support the efforts of UN Women (an agency of the United Nations). That sounds pretty reasonable. But things soon get murkier. The report says “UN Women UK commissioned a UK-wide survey on sexual harassment, reaching more than 1,000 respondents” (UN Women United Kingdom 2021, 5). That seems to be the report’s methods section. We aren’t told anything about the survey’s sample or how the data were collected. Was the sample representative, or was it located using less reliable means (such as soliciting respondents via social media)? Until we know the answers to such questions, it is hard to assess numbers derived from the study.

2. *Consider measurement.* In this case, how is sexual harassment being defined and measured? The report features a section entitled “The Challenge of Defining Sexual Harassment” that notes: “UN Women defines sexual harassment as the **continuum of violent practices against women and girls** [emphasis in original]. It can take the form of various acts including rape, other aggressive touching, forced

viewing of pornography, taking and circulating sexual photographs, as well as verbal sexual conduct. In effect, sexual harassment is unwelcome sexual conduct” (UN Women United Kingdom 2021, 9). It continues: “Most definitions necessarily refer to the subjective experience of the individual concerned, e.g., was the individual made to feel unsafe, humiliated, or intimidated.” This establishes a very broad definition, ranging from rape to “anything that makes you feel uncomfortable” (UN Women United Kingdom 2021, 9).

But the survey did not exactly measure discomfort. Rather, it asked “Which, if any, of the following have you EVER personally experienced in a public space?” and gave a list that included: being cat-called or wolf-whistled; being stared at; unwelcome touching, body rubbing, or groping; in-person comments or jokes; unwelcome sexual advances or requests for sexual favors, being physically followed; indecent exposure; online comments or jokes; sharing of suggestive or indecent content online or in-person; being forced into participating in sexual behavior; and had images taken and/or shared without your consent (UN Women United Kingdom 2021, 13). (These categories are listed in a table in the report that ordered them from most to least often reported and noted that although 20% of respondents answered “none of these,” “there may be some who had experienced some other form of sexual harassment in a public space” [UN Women United Kingdom 2021, 13].) Affirming that one of these things had happened, then, is counted as an experience of sexual harassment. As we might expect, the items at the start of this list were reported more often than those at the end; something like 70 percent of women aged 18 to 24 reported having experienced cat-calls or staring. Add the responses together and—voilà!—we find the basis for that reported 97 percent statistic.

Whenever we encounter a statistic about a social problem, we need to ask how the problem was measured. A headline that 97 percent of young women have been sexually harassed invites us to be shocked and disturbed, particularly if the example of sexual harassment that comes to mind is a boss demanding sexual favors from a subordinate. Realizing that the domain of sexual harassment also includes feeling stared at may make the statistic less shocking. Broad definitions support big numbers.

3. Remember the wedding-cake effect. Wedding cakes and pyramids have tiers: there is a broad base, topped by a series of ever smaller layers. Statistics about almost all social problems have that structure. There are, for instance, many traffic accidents (including all manner of fender-benders); of those, a much smaller number cause injuries, and of course only a fraction of those involve fatalities. It is very common for people who want to draw attention to some social problem to couple the most extreme examples (the top layer of the wedding cake, if you will) with statistics that define the problem broadly (the size of the base). Any time we encounter a dramatic statistic—97%!—we ought to ask just what is being counted.

Coming to terms with social problems like sexual harassment requires careful study. The effects of sexual harassment in all its forms are meaningful. However, the multifaceted nature of sexual harassment (as socially constructed in the UN report and elsewhere) suggests that understanding the issue and creating policy responses requires nuanced reading of data; successful policies designed to reduce rape, for example, would likely differ from those aimed at curtailing cat-calling. The results of careful research intended to inform such responses can rarely be reduced to a single statistic—particularly one that implies that the problem is ubiquitous.

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