



Sexual Violence in the ACLED Dataset

[With the release of its new sub-event type categorization](#) ACLED now includes a 'Sexual violence' sub-event type under the larger 'Violence against civilians' event type. This sub-event type includes all political/public violence of a sexual nature. Sexual violence events captured within the ACLED dataset include "sexual violence in conflict" or "conflict-related sexual violence", such as war-time rape in addition to other sexual crimes perpetrated by an armed, organized actor. Events are recorded during 'war time' or in periods of political instability more broadly, where the use of sexual violence as a strategy to reinforce power structures is not unusual. The category includes events targeting women, men, and children.

It does not include sexual violence stemming from domestic, interpersonal, or intimate partner violence occurring outside of the political/public sphere; these events are outside of ACLED's mandate and such violence (sexual or not) is not captured within the ACLED dataset.

ACLED is an event-based dataset, meaning that each entry in the dataset is an 'event'; events are denoted by the involvement of designated actors, occurring in a specific named location and on a specific day (for further information regarding ACLED's unit of observation, see [the ACLED codebook](#)). When recording sexual violence, an event can involve one to many victims: one person sexually assaulted by a soldier in a specific town on a certain day would be coded as a single event. An episode of mass rape by an armed militia reported in a specific town on a certain day would be recorded in the same way. The number of sexual violence *events* should therefore not be conflated with the number of sexual violence *victims* – in the same way that the number of violent events in the ACLED dataset should not be conflated with the number of fatalities.

Collecting accurate data on violence events is difficult due to a lack of detailed, verified reporting during active violence. Further, the count of victims of violent events – whether counting fatalities or casualties, or the number of sexual violence victims specifically – is often the most biased and poorly reported component of data around political violence. These numbers can vary widely, especially as there can be incentive to overstate or underreport these numbers by both those engaged in the violence.

Counting sexual violence by number of victims alone results in making areas where this type of violence is more readily reported – as a result of structural or social restrictions – appear more susceptible to sexual violence, with areas with fewer victims reporting such violence appearing less dangerous. Coding such violence by event as opposed to by the number of victims is therefore a step towards minimizing this implication. Those reporting also have intended and unintended biases to inflate numbers so as to misrepresent the size of groups, to illicit support and move international bodies to action, to minimize international backlash, etc. When the number of victims is noted in reporting, this



information is noted in the 'Notes' section of the event within the ACLED dataset; users can choose to use this information if they wish while understanding the caveats above.

In the context of sexual violence specifically, underreporting by victims is common due to backlash or normative concerns. Events involving a single victim who does not report sexual violence they experience would not appear in the dataset at all as a sexual violence event. Given the nature of such events, events with a single victim are more likely to go underreported than events with mass victims. Coverage within the ACLED dataset, *as in all datasets*, is limited to what has been reported in some capacity. ACLED tries to capture an accurate picture of political violence through the use of various sources of reporting: traditional media,¹ new media,² reports by international organizations, or information gathered by local partners. However, sexual violence specifically, perhaps even more so than other forms of violence, can suffer from underreporting as a result of, though not limited to: fear of repercussions, legal restrictions, and psychological trauma. This should be considered when drawing conclusions from the data.

¹ ACLED researchers review thousands of traditional media sources in over 20 languages ranging from national newspapers to local radio.

² New media refers specifically to sources such as trusted Twitter accounts (such as those of journalists) and vetted Telegram channels.