

Questions and Answers about the Redesign

The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) is one of two Justice Department measures of crime in the United States. A pioneering effort when it was begun in 1972, the survey was intended to complement what is known about crime from the FBI's annual compilation of information reported to law enforcement agencies. The survey provides a detailed picture of crime incidents, victims, and trends from the victim's perspective. This year the survey results will reflect major improvements in the methods used to measure victimization. These changes are the product of:

- a decade-long technical review and testing of the survey's design
- consultation with criminal justice experts and victim advocacy groups on the survey's content and procedures.

Among the most important changes to the questionnaire were:

- additional cues to help survey participants recall incidents
- questions encouraging respondents to report victimizations that they themselves may not define as crimes
- more direct questions on rape, sexual assault, and other sexual crimes
- new material to measure victimizations by non-strangers, including domestic violence.

These improvements result in more complete reporting of the number and nature of victimizations, particularly for the crimes of simple assault, rape, and other sexual assault. At the same time, annual data collected with the redesigned questionnaire indicate that year-to-year trends continue relatively unchanged: little change in violent crime and a slight decline in property crime.

Major redesign changes

All crimes

A new screening questionnaire (to determine whether the respondent has been the victim of any crime within the scope of the survey) uses

extensive, detailed cues to help respondents recall and report incidents. These new questions and cues jog memories of the respondents and let them know that the survey is interested in a broad spectrum of incidents, not just those involving weapons, severe violence, or strangers. Because of these changes, substantial increases occur in the extent to which victims tell the interviewers about simple assault (defined as assault without a weapon, resulting in minor injury) and sexual crimes.

Domestic violence

Multiple questions and cues on crimes committed by family members, intimates, and acquaintances have been added. The survey also encourages respondents to report incidents even if they are not sure whether a crime has been committed. The survey staff review these reported incidents using standardized definitions of crimes. Thus, within the categories of violent crime measured by the NCVS, the redesign will produce fuller reporting of those incidents that involved intimates or other family members. An upcoming BJS Special Report will highlight these new domestic violence data.

Sexual crimes

The new NCVS broadens the scope of covered sexual incidents beyond the categories of rape and attempted rape. These include:

- sexual assault (other than rape)
- verbal threats of rape or sexual assault
- unwanted sexual contact without force but involving threats or other harm to the victim.

These new categories, broadened coverage, and more extensive questions on sexual victimizations have elicited information on about 3 to 4 times as many sexual crime victimizations as in the past.

Following are questions and answers on the characteristics of the National Crime Victimization Survey and on why and how it was redesigned.

Background

How does the Federal Government measure crime?

The U.S. Department of Justice administers two national-level data series:

- the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), begun in 1929 and administered by the Federal Bureau of Investigation
- the National Crime Victimization Survey, administered by the Bureau of Justice Statistics. NCVS data were first published in 1973.

These data series gather crime data from different sources. The UCR is based on crimes reported to State and local law enforcement agencies. The NCVS is based on a household survey of individuals' experiences with crime victimization, whether or not the incidents were reported to police. The NCVS consistently shows victimization levels higher than the those of the UCR. Besides that missing information, the NCVS provides more detail from the victim's perspective, as a complement to UCR information. The UCR program is being expanded through the National Incident-Based Reporting System, which collects more detail about arrestees and police responses than does the NCVS.

What is the National Crime Victimization Survey?

The NCVS is the Nation's second-largest ongoing household survey. It collects victimization data from a nationally representative sample of about 100,000 individuals living in about 50,000 households.

The survey categorizes crimes as personal or property —

Personal

- rape and sexual assault
- robbery
- simple and aggravated assault
- purse snatching/pocket picking

Property

- burglary
- theft
- motor vehicle theft.

In addition to estimating the number of victimizations, the NCVS gathers details on each incident. These include:

- the month, time, and location of the crime
- the relationship between victim and offender
- characteristics of the offender
- self-protective actions taken by the victim during an incident and results of those actions
- consequences of the victimization, including any injury or property loss
- whether the crime was reported to police and reasons for reporting or not reporting
- offender use of weapons, drugs, and alcohol.

Whom does the NCVS interview?

The survey collects its data from a nationally representative sample of individuals age 12 or older living in U. S. households. Basic demographic information, such as age, race, sex, and income, is collected to enable analysis of victimizations of various subpopulations. Interviews are translated for non-English speaking respondents. The NCVS does not cover individuals living in institutions.

How are survey participants selected?

Each month the U.S. Bureau of the Census selects respondents for the NCVS using a "rotating panel" design. Households are randomly selected, and all age-eligible individuals in a selected household become part of the panel. Once in the sample, respondents are interviewed every 6 months for a total of seven interviews over a 3-year period. The first and fifth interviews are face-to-face; the rest are by telephone when possible. After the seventh interview the household leaves the panel and a new household is rotated into the sample. The interview takes about 1/2 hour. The NCVS has consistently obtained a response rate of about 95%.

How do you get people to participate in a survey about such private matters?

Over 95% of the selected households participate. Respondents, both victims and nonvictims, generally understand how their information is important for knowledge about crime victimization.

How does the questionnaire work?

The NCVS questionnaire does more than simply ask participants if they have been victimized by crime. A screening section provides respondents with a series of detailed questions and cues on victimizations and the situations within which crimes may take place. If any screening question elicits a positive response to a crime within the scope of the survey, interviewers collect details about the victimization in an incident report. The screening section describes crimes in simple language, avoiding technical and legal terms such as *aggravated assault*. Attempting to elicit an accurate account, interviewers provide respondents with detailed features that may characterize a criminal incident, such as offender behavior, crime location, and whether the offender was a stranger, acquaintance or relative. If a feature produces a positive response, details on the incident are gathered.

When is an incident actually counted as a crime?

When NCVS data are processed, incident report data are classified by elements necessary to define the incident as a crime. If an incident does not satisfy these criteria, it is not counted as a crime.

How are NCVS data used?

NCVS data have informed a wide audience concerned with crime and crime prevention. Researchers at academic, government, private, and nonprofit research institutions use NCVS data to prepare reports, policy recommendations, scholarly publications, testimony before Congress, and documentation for use in courts. Community groups and Government agencies use the data to develop neighborhood watch and victim assistance and compensation programs. Law enforcement agencies use NCVS findings for training. The data appear in public service announcements on crime prevention and crime documentaries. Finally, print and broadcast media regularly cite NCVS findings when reporting on a host of crime-related topics.

How are NCVS data made available to the public?

Annual data on victimization levels and rates are normally published in a preliminary report in the spring, a Bulletin with final data in the fall, and a full report of comprehensive findings the following spring. The first Bulletin using redesigned data is Criminal Victimization, 1993, published in May, 1995, NCJ-157657. *Crime and the Nation's Households*, also published annually, is a report on the proportion of U.S. households in which members have been victimized. Special Reports, Crime Data Briefs, and Bulletins on topical crime issues are published throughout the year. Subjects include school crime, violence against women, crimes against the elderly, handgun violence, and carjacking. NCVS reports are available from the BJS Clearinghouse. Data files are prepared for public use and are made available on computer tapes and CD-ROM. In 1994 no spring report was issued, since the redesigned survey data were being processed for the first time.

The redesign

Why was the NCVS changed at this time?

In the mid-1970's the National Academy of Sciences evaluated the NCVS for accuracy and usefulness. While the survey was found to be an effective instrument for measuring crime, reviewers identified aspects of the methodology and scope of the NCVS that could be improved. They proposed research to investigate the following:

- an enhanced screening section that would better stimulate respondents' recall of victimizations
- screening questions that would sharpen the concepts of criminal victimization and diminish the effects of subjective interpretations of the survey questions
- additional questions on the nature and consequences of victimizations that would yield useful data for analysis
- enhanced questions and inquiries about domestic violence, rape, and sexual attack to get better estimates of these hard-to-measure victimizations.

Who was consulted in planning and executing the redesign?

A consortium of experts in criminology, survey design, and statistics conducted a detailed study and testing of the survey during 1979-85 to design an improved NCVS. This work received guidance from an advisory panel that included criminal justice practitioners, policymakers, and representatives from victims' groups. In addition, a panel of experts in problems of sexual assault and domestic violence recommended ways to improve NCVS measures for these crimes that are inherently difficult to detect.

What were the objectives of the redesign?

The overall objectives of the redesign were to increase reporting of crime victimization and to provide additional details on individual crime incidents. Specific objectives were:

- to develop improved screening questions, thereby stimulating recall of incidents
- to sharpen concepts of victimization for survey respondents by providing a more thorough description of criminal incidents, thus diminishing effects of cognitive and subcultural differences among respondents

- to improve data collection techniques by adopting computer-assisted telephone interviewing for some segments of survey participants
- to improve measures of rape and sexual attack by asking respondents directly about these crimes
- to provide better measures of domestic violence.

What changes were made to improve the coverage of crime?

Screening questions were changed to provide a more complete, structured description of criminal incidents within the scope of the survey. The screening section was also enhanced with short cues — examples of specific places, people, objects, and actions that may have been associated with a victimization — to trigger recall of incidents. Cues on routine activities such as work, school, shopping, entertainment, and transportation were added to the beginning of the survey to encourage respondents to think of these typical settings when responding to questions on whether a victimization had occurred. Finally, questions were added to encourage respondents to report incidents even if the perpetrators were people they knew, like friends, relatives, and coworkers.

What was changed to improve measurement of rape and sexual assault?

At the inception of the NCVS in the early 1970's, it was deemed inappropriate for a government-sponsored survey to ask respondents directly about rape. Reports of rape and attempted rape were obtained only if the respondent volunteered this information in response to questions about assault and attacks. The new survey asks directly about rape and attempted rape. It also distinguishes among sex crimes by asking directly about sexual attack, coerced and unwanted sexual activity (with and without force), and verbal threats of rape or sexual attack. These new questions elicit more reports of rape and attempted rape, and the new questionnaire yields estimates for related sexual crimes not previously measured.

Questions about the improved measurement

If a victim does not herself define an incident as rape (for example, if the rape is committed by her husband, and she does not consider this a rape), does the NCVS still detect and measure this as a rape?

It is not necessary for the respondent to use the word *rape* for the NCVS to count it. Items in the questionnaire use descriptive language that allows the victim and the interviewer to clarify what happened. This detail is later reviewed and classified appropriately by computer or by trained coders.

Why is sexual violence undercounted and how does the NCVS attempt to reduce the undercount?

Sensitive material by definition is difficult to talk about, and no voluntary study can claim that all eligible participants have provided full information. However, the NCVS was redesigned to make reporting of this kind of information easier for victims. Five of seven NCVS interviews are generally conducted over the phone. Many NCVS items can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." These two features make it difficult for anyone overhearing a phone interview to follow what is being described, thereby giving the respondent a measure of privacy. Respondents are allowed to break off and reschedule, if their privacy is violated during an interview. The questionnaire has also been redesigned to allow multiple opportunities for reluctant respondents to report sensitive information.

Does the survey provide information on stalking?

Some of these incidents may be detected, but only if there has been harm or a threat of harm to the victim. The new crime screener provides additional encouragement for victims to report threats and attacks by people they know.

How has the measurement of domestic violence been improved?

Respondents may be reluctant to report acts of domestic violence as crimes, particularly if the offender is present during the interview. In addition, victims may not perceive domestic violence as discrete criminal acts but as a pattern of abuse. Though these issues still pose measurement problems, the redesigned screening section includes explicit questions about incidents involving family members, friends, and acquaintances. Screening questions also include multiple references to acts of domestic violence to encourage respondents to report such incidents even if they do not define these acts as crimes. Finally, several new questions on series crimes (see below) gather information on the perpetrator and location of the incidents, similarity of incidents to each other, and persistence of the problem.

What new information will the redesign provide?

The revised NCVS will provide greatly enhanced data on the criminal incident itself. The new survey includes detail on:

- interaction between victim and offender
- victim's crime deterrence efforts
- perceived effectiveness of crime deterrence efforts
- bystander behavior
- perceived alcohol and drug use by the offender;
- suspected gang involvement by the offender.

To broaden the scope of crimes covered by the NCVS, vandalism has been added as a new type of property crime. Finally, supplements on topical issues like school crime will be a regular feature of the new NCVS.

Has the redesign produced any changes in crime definitions?

Theft

Previously theft was defined as either a personal or household crime, based on location of the incident. If an object was stolen from the grounds of a home, it was considered a household theft; if the same object was stolen from someplace away from the home, it was considered a personal theft. Using location to distinguish between personal and household theft came to be regarded as potentially misleading. The NCVS now classifies all thefts as property crimes, unless there was contact between victim and offender. Thefts that involved personal contact are classified as purse snatching and pocket-picking.

Series crimes

In the original NCVS, a series crime was defined as three or more similar incidents occurring over the past 6 months, for which the victim could not recall dates and details well enough to report them as discrete incidents. Counting and describing incidents in the series are difficult, since respondents are usually uncertain how many times the incident occurred, and often the details are insufficient to classify the incident in the appropriate crime category.

Testing on series crimes has shown that the threshold of three incidents may be too low — that with an improved questionnaire respondents could often recall details of up to five similar incidents. The new NCVS methodology raises the series crime threshold to six incidents. This revision makes it possible to count and categorize more incidents accurately, even if multiple incidents bear a resemblance to each other.

How is the NCVS being automated?

Originally field interviewers around the country conducted face-to-face and telephone interviews, recording responses in pencil on a printed questionnaire. With computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI), interviewers in centralized telephone facilities read questions from a computer screen and enter responses directly into a computer. Under the redesign about 30% of NCVS interviews are completed with CATI.

How has automated data collection improved quality?

In CATI, the computer automatically presents the interviewer with the appropriate next question. The computer allows for automated internal consistency checks and fewer transcribing errors. CATI's centralization also improves data quality because interviewers can be monitored, fostering adherence to standardized techniques.

What is the effect of these changes on the extent of reporting by crime victims?

For most types of crime, the new methods elicit more reports of victimizations. The NCVS sample of households was divided into two halves for an 18-month period in 1992-93, and each half was administered the original or the redesigned version of the questionnaire. Comparisons of data indicate that the redesign elicits more reports of crime for most categories. However, the effect is not uniform across all types of crime and sub-populations. For example, some crime categories, such as assault, are affected more by the redesign than others. In-depth study of these overlap data will guide interpretation of the effect of the redesign on special populations and types of crime. Other effects of the redesign include improved estimates of certain hard to enumerate crimes such as domestic violence, rape, and sexual attack.

Will it be possible to compare old and new estimates?

Statisticians who are experts on this particular survey will be able to compare victimization trends under the old and new methods. Techniques to extend historical trends with estimates from the new methods will be developed. Technical reports analyzing effects of the new methods on subpopulations will be published in the future.

Where can I go for more information?

All Bureau of Justice Statistics reports, including Technical and Special Reports relevant to the redesign, can be obtained through the BJS Clearinghouse, P.O. Box 179, Dept. BJS, Annapolis Junction, MD 20701-0179. For telephone requests call 800-732-3277. Data tapes are available through the National Archive of Criminal Justice Data, Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), P.O. Box 1248, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1248. Phone numbers for the archive are 800-999-0960 or 313-763-5011.

Who contributed to the redesign effort?

Individuals who contributed to the research and implementation of the NCVS redesign are too numerous to list. The Bureau of Social Science Research served as the lead agency on the redesign and coordinated efforts of staff members and consultants from the following organizations:

- Bureau of the Census
- Bureau of Justice Statistics
- Carnegie-Mellon University
- National Crime Survey Redesign Advisory Panel
- National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago
- Northwestern University
- Research Triangle Institute, North Carolina
- Rutgers University
- Survey Research Center, University of Michigan
- Westat, Inc.
- Yale University.

Sources

Bachman, Ronet, and Bruce Taylor, "The Measurement of Rape and Family Violence by the Redesigned National Crime Victimization Survey," *Justice Quarterly*, 1994.

Cahoon, Lawrence, and Gregory Russell, "Effects of Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing on Estimates From Demographic Surveys Conducted by the Bureau of the Census," *Joint Census Advisory Committee Meeting*, Alexandria, VA, 1991.

Dodge, Richard W., *Series Crimes: Report of a Field Test*, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1987.

Hubble, David L., "National Crime Survey New Questionnaire Phase-In Research: Preliminary Results," *International Conference on Measurement Errors in Surveys*, Tucson, AZ, 1990.

Taylor, Bruce, *Redesign of the National Crime Survey*, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1989.

Taylor, Bruce, *New Directions for the National Crime Survey*, Bureau of Justice Statistics Technical Report, 1989.