



Bureau of Justice Statistics

Criminal Victimization in the United States, 1995

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A National Crime Victimization Survey Report

U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
Bureau of Justice Statistics



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Introduction

NCVS-measured crimes

The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) is one of two Justice Department measures of crime in the United States. Data are collected every year from a sample of approximately 45,000 households with about 94,000 individuals age 12 or older.

Victimization is categorized as personal or property crime. Personal crimes, including attempts, involve direct contact between the victim and offender and include the crimes of rape, sexual assault, robbery, assault, pocket picking, and purse snatching. Property crimes do not involve personal confrontation and include household burglary, theft, and motor vehicle theft.

Because crime victims are asked directly about crime, crimes are measured whether or not they were reported to the police. No attempt is made to validate reported crimes by checking them against other sources of criminal data, such as police records.

Crimes not measured by the NCVS

The NCVS does not measure murder, kidnaping, or crimes against commercial establishments such as commercial burglary and robbery. (Murder is not measured by the NCVS because of the inability to question the victim.) Crimes such as public drunkenness, drug abuse, prostitution, illegal gambling, con games, and blackmail are also excluded.

Sometimes people are not aware they have been victims of a crime, making such crimes difficult to measure accurately. Buying stolen property and embezzlement are examples of this type of crime. In addition, many attempted crimes of all types are probably underreported because victims were not aware of their occurrence.

Survey redesign

This report presents data from the redesigned National Crime Victimization Survey. The redesigned methodology, introduced in 1994, presented a new crime screening procedure and incorporated other improvements into the survey. More information concerning the redesign and its effect on the estimation of victimization can be found in the 1993 and 1994 volumes of this series (NCJ 151657 and NCJ 162126 respectively).

Changes to data collection

The estimates presented in this report will correspond with 1995 estimates presented in the BJS Bulletin *Criminal Victimization 1995: Changes 1994-95 with Trends 1993-95*. Beginning with the 1996 Bulletin, all NCVS reports will be based on data collected in interviews conducted during the calendar year being estimated. Previous reports presented estimates based on crimes occurring during a given calendar year. This change was implemented to enable more timely publication of the initial release of NCVS data. Because of the retrospective nature of the survey, (respondents recall and report incidents occurring during the previous 6 months), the two methods will produce slightly different estimates. This change is discussed in detail in *Appendix II*.

Selection of survey participants

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 victimization of various subpopulations. Interviews are translated for non-English speaking respondents.

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 ½ hour. The NCVS has consistently obtained a response rate of about 95%.

The NCVS questionnaire

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 victimization 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 or 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 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.

Uses of NCVS data

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.