

Reading

The Nature and Extent of Criminal Victimization

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This material was developed under a cooperative agreement with The U.S. Department of Justice, Office for Victims of Crime (OVC). OVC funded The University of Massachusetts Lowell, Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology, along with partners from the University of Massachusetts Boston, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, and University of Massachusetts Medical School to develop innovative, multidisciplinary education models that address victimization issues and responses to crime victims.

Introduction

There are literally hundreds of criminal offenses on the statute books to which people can fall victim. In this section we are focusing on the direct victims, the people who are directly harmed by criminal activity: the convenience store clerk who is murdered, the college student who is sexually assaulted, the retired engineer who is hit and seriously injured by someone who was driving while under the influence of alcohol, the suburban couple whose house is broken into, the salesman whose car is stolen.

We are not focusing on those offenses where there is no clear victim, except, as some would argue, the person who actually commits the offense. Crimes such as illegal possession of narcotics and gambling can be considered crimes without any direct victims.

One way in which we have traditionally divided crimes with direct victims is to consider them either *crimes of violence* or *property crimes*. Murder, rape, robbery, and assault are examples of crimes of violence. Burglary and theft are examples of property crimes. Theft can take many forms, including theft of items such as jewelry and computer equipment, theft of an automobile, and identity theft.

Data Sources

In our quest to obtain a picture of both the extent and nature of criminal victimization in the USA, we are dependent, unless we are going to collect our own data, on the data sources that exist and the information those sources contain. We have two types of data sources that provide us national information about crime and criminal victimization on a yearly basis. (1) Police based data that give us information about offenses reported to the police; and, (2) Victimization estimates based on surveys of a representative sample of the population.

1. Police Data Sources

The Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) provides information on crimes reported to the police. It has tracked data on seven crimes since

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1930: homicide, robbery, rape, aggravated assault, burglary, theft and motor vehicle theft. In 1979, the UCR started reporting on arson.

Due to the differences in individual state statutes throughout the United States, for purposes of reporting crime via the UCR, a definition for each crime was established to ensure uniformity. Today, nearly 17,000 law enforcement agencies report UCR data to the FBI.

The UCR is typically not considered an accurate gauge of the nature and extent of criminal victimization in the USA due to a number of limitations. The UCR:

- Only cover eight categories of offense. While, for example, the UCR provide data on the number of aggravated assaults reported to the police, they do not provide similar information for simple assaults.
- Do not provide any information on offenses that have not been reported to the police (and we know that reporting rates are less than 50 percent of all victimizations).
- Only cover the most serious crime when multiple crimes are committed against an individual. For example if someone is raped and then murdered this will count as a murder. No rape will be recorded. Known as the hierarchy rule.
- Do not provide specific information on each incident. In particular, the UCR do not provide information about the characteristics of the victim and offender and the injuries they received.

In response to law enforcement's need for more flexible, in-depth data, the Uniform Crime Reporting Program formulated the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS).

NIBRS enhances the UCR data because it provides details about 46 types of criminal activity. Police departments report specific information about each incident, including unique descriptions of victims and offenders, a description of each crime that occurred at the scene (not simply the one counted as the highest ranking), and whether an arrest was made. Unfortunately, while participation is increasing, only a small proportion of departments in the United States currently report to NIBRS, so it is not yet a reliable source for estimating the nature and extent of criminal victimization.

2. Victimization Data

Victimization data have been collected each year since 1972 by the National Crime Victim Survey (NCVS), which was designed to complement the UCR but looks only at crimes committed against persons 12 years of age and older. The survey was redesigned in 1993 to update survey methods, improve the screen questions designed to uncover crime, and broaden the scope of crimes measured.

Each year, the U.S. Bureau Census personnel obtain data from a nationally representative sample of roughly 45,000 households comprising between 75,000 and 95,000 persons

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aged twelve and over on the frequency, characteristics, and consequences of criminal victimization in the United States.

The interviews are used to determine the frequency, characteristics and consequences of criminal victimization in U.S.

The survey presents data on the likelihood of victimization for rape, sexual assault, robbery, assault, theft, household burglary, and motor vehicle theft for the population as a whole as well as for segments of the population such as women, the elderly, members of various racial groups, city dwellers, and other groups.

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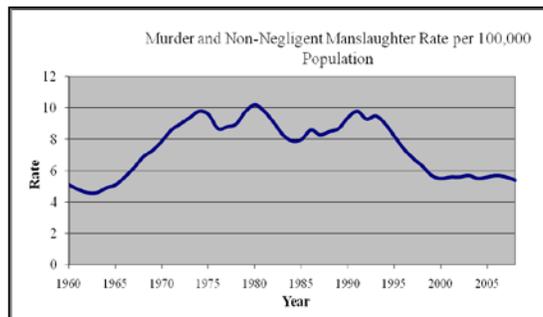
While the number of people who fall victim to crime each year is large, and we should strive to lower that number, the encouraging news is that one is more likely to be the victim of what most consider to be a minor crime than the victim of a serious crime. Thus, you are more likely to have something stolen from you than to be assaulted and you are more likely to be the victim of a misdemeanor assault than a felonious assault. Serious crimes, such as murder and rape are, however, far more likely to be covered by the news media than are minor property crimes and assaults. Thus, it is easy to develop an inaccurate picture of the extent to which different types of crime occur.

1. Criminal Homicide

This is the one crime for which we can use UCR and NIBRS data for an accounting of victimization. This is because:

- Nearly all homicides come to the attention of the police (although this may be less true for child abuse fatalities).
- The UCR has a supplementary homicide report that provides detailed information about the incident and the victim and offender.
- Of course, victimization surveys cannot be used to provide data on homicide as there is no victim to interview.

An examination of UCR data shows that the criminal homicide rate rose steadily to a peak of 10.2 homicides per 100,000 population in 1980 and has been declining somewhat steadily since then. Since 1998 the rate has been under 6.0. The UCR include murder and non-negligent homicide as criminal homicide.



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In 2008:

- 16,272 people were the victims of murder and non-negligent manslaughter, a rate of 5.4 homicides per 100,000 population, down considerably from the peak rate of 10.2 in 1980.
- 78.2 percent of the victims were male. 90 percent of the offenders were male
- 49.0 percent of the victims were white, 48.6 percent were black, and 2.3 percent were from other races.
- 51.5 percent of the offenders were black, 46.2 percent were white, and 2.4 percent were from other races.
- 23.3 percent of victims were slain by family members, 22.0 percent were murdered by strangers, and 54.7 percent were killed by acquaintances (neighbor, friend, boyfriend, etc.).
- 71.9 percent of the homicides involved the use of firearms. Of the identified firearms used, handguns comprised 88.3 percent.¹

The above data for 2008, which are similar to other years, indicate that the typical victim of criminal homicide is a male who is killed through use of a firearm by another male whom he knows. While females are underrepresented among homicide victims as a whole, they are more likely than males to be the victims of murders committed by an intimate partner.² Young adults aged 18 to 24 experience the highest homicide rates.³ Given their far lower representation in the general population (about 12%). Blacks are highly overrepresented among homicide victims.

Other Crimes of Violence

Unlike homicide, many rapes and other offenses are not brought to the attention of the police. Thus for information on these offenses we rely on the NCVS victimization surveys. The annual data from these surveys cover victimizations of rape and sexual assault, robbery and assault, both simple and aggravated. The data do not, however, cover victims who are less than 12 years old.

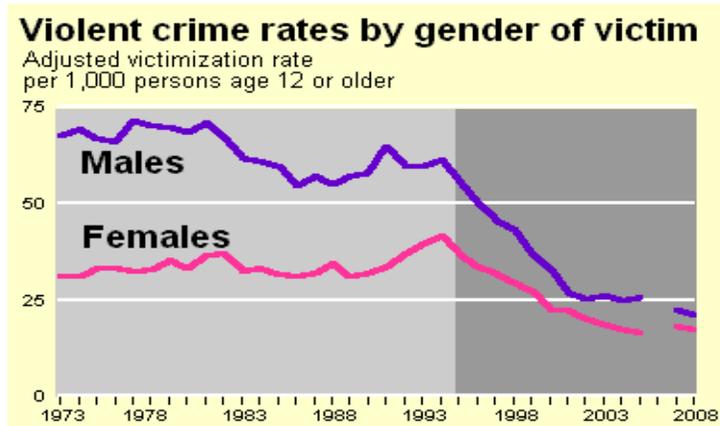
Like homicide, all categories of other violent offenses show a national decline from the 1980s. This has occurred for both male and female victims. Unfortunately, a nationwide decline does not mean that all jurisdictions experience such a decline in all years.

¹ FBI 2008 crime in the United States: expanded homicide data. Available at: http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2008/offenses/expanded_information/homicide.html

² Bureau of Justice Statistics. U.S. homicide trends: intimate partner violence. Available at: <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/homicide/intimates.cfm#intimates>

³ Bureau of Justice Statistics. Key facts at a glance. Available at: <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/glance/homage.cfm>

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In 2008, over five million people were the victims of these nonlethal crimes of violence. A little over three million were the victims of simple assault. The NCVS data also show that in 2008:

- Males experienced higher victimization rates than females for all types of violent crime except rape and sexual assault.
- Blacks experienced higher victimization rates than other races for all types of violent crime except simple assault.
- Victimization rates decreased with age. Generally, for every crime measured by the NCVS, people aged 12 to 24 had the highest rates of victimization. People aged 50 or older had the lowest rates.
- Male victims knew the offenders in half of all aggravated and simple assaults against them. Female victims knew the offenders in approximately 70 percent of assaults against them.
- Robbery was the crime most likely to be committed by a stranger. Strangers committed 61 percent of robberies against men and 45 percent of robberies against women.
- Divorced or separated persons and never married persons experienced similar rates of overall violence. Their rates were higher than those married or widowed.
- A gun, knife, or other object was used as a weapon in an estimated 20 percent of all incidents of violent crime.⁴

⁴ Rand, M.R. (2009). *Bureau of Justice Statistics bulletin: criminal victimization 2008*. Bureau of Justice Statistics: Washington, D.C. Available at: <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/cv08.pdf>

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Other analyses of the NCVS data have revealed that:

- While in general males are more likely than females to be the victims of violent crime, females are more likely than males to be victimized by family violence. Between 1998 and 2002 females constituted 73.4 percent of the nation's victims of family violence.⁵ Intimate partners were responsible for 3 percent of all violence against males and 23 percent of all violence against females in 2008.⁶
- Workplace violence accounted for 18 percent of all violent crime between 1993 and 1999.
- Police officers, correctional officers, taxicab drivers, private security workers, and bartenders had the highest rates of victimizations of the occupations examined.⁷
- About a third (32%) of public and private school students ages 12-18 reported in 2007 that they had been bullied at school within the past six months.⁸
- Age-adjusted rates of nonfatal violent crimes against persons with disabilities are 1.5 times higher than the rates for persons without disabilities.⁹
- In 2008 victims of violent crimes perceived their assailants to be gang members in 5 percent of crimes that occurred.¹⁰

2. Property crimes

The annual data from the NVCS surveys cover the crimes of household burglary, theft, and motor vehicle theft. Like all other offenses, property crimes show a decline from the 1980s. However, in 2008 there were still over 16 million people who were the victims of property crimes. Theft constituted about 75 percent of these victimizations.

⁵ Durose, M.R., Wolf Harlow, C., Langan, P. A., Motivans, M., Rantala, R.R., & Schmitt, E.L. (2005). *Family violence statistics: including statistics on strangers and acquaintances*. Bureau of Justice Statistics: Washington, D.C. Available at: <http://bjsdata.ojp.usdoj.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=828>

⁶ Bureau of Justice Statistics. *Victims and offenders*. Available at: <http://bjsdata.ojp.usdoj.gov/index.cfm?ty=tp&tid=94>

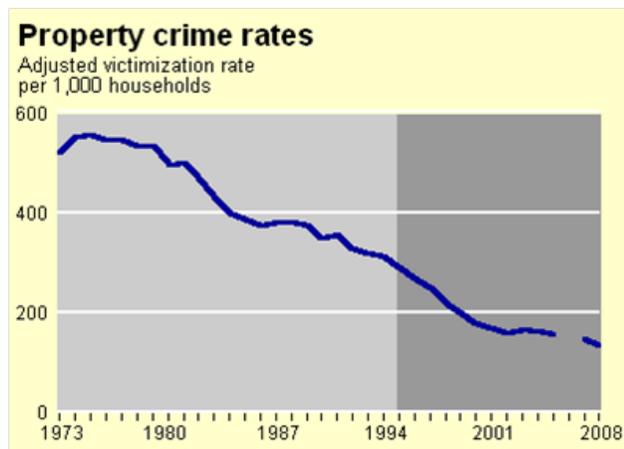
⁷ Bureau of Justice Statistics. *Location*. Available at: <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/index.cfm?ty=tp&tid=44>.

⁸ Bureau of Justice Statistics. *Location*. Available at: <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/index.cfm?ty=tp&tid=44>.

⁹ Harrell, E., & Rand, M.R. (2009). *Crimes against people with disabilities, 2007*. Bureau of Justice Statistics: Washington, D.C. Available at: <http://bjsdata.ojp.usdoj.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=2022>

¹⁰ Bureau of Justice Statistics. *Victims and offenders*. Available at: <http://bjsdata.ojp.usdoj.gov/index.cfm?ty=tp&tid=94>

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The NCVS data also show us that in 2008:

- In general, there was an inverse relationship between property crime rates and annual household income. Lower income households had higher rates of property crime.
- Differences between the property crime rates for households in the lowest and highest income groups were smaller for theft than for burglary.
- In general, property crime rates were directly related to number of people in the household. For the most part, larger households experienced higher rates of property crime than smaller households.¹¹

Other analyses of NCVS data have revealed that:

- Those in the highest income bracket (\$75,000 or more) are the most likely to experience identity theft.¹²

Though the NCVS does capture crimes that have not been reported to the police, it does have its own limitations. Most importantly, the NCVS does not give a full accounting of the nature and extent of victimization because it:

- Does not include children under age 12.
- Only includes cases reported to interviewers.

More specific concerns relating to the way the data are obtained, and the extent to which we can rely on the findings, include the facts that the NCVS:

¹¹ Rand, M.R. (2009). *Bureau of Justice Statistics bulletin: criminal victimization 2008*. Bureau of Justice Statistics: Washington, D.C. *Key facts at a glance*. Available at: <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/cv08.pdf>

¹² Baum, K. (2007). *Identity theft 2005*. Bureau of Justice Statistics: Washington, D.C. Available at: <http://bjsdata.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/it05.pdf>; Baum, K. (2006). *Identity theft 2004*. Bureau of Justice Statistics: Washington, D.C. Available at: <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/it04.pdf>.

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- Does not have third party assessment of facts as in police reports.
- Has screening questions that are not always ‘state of the art,’ especially where behaviorally specific questions or a series of questions might have increased respondent understanding of the types of behaviors of interest and enhance victim comfort with reporting victimizations.
- Does not assure privacy for respondents as others may be present in the home at the time of the interview.
- Is a survey of addresses, not of persons or families. People who live in high crime areas move frequently and may be missed by surveys.

Fear of Crime

Fear of crime does not always mesh with the realities of victimization. Research shows, for example, that women tend to be more fearful than men of becoming the victims of crime, though men have higher rates of victimization for all offenses except for rape and sexual assault.¹³

However, it is this fear of rape and sexual assault that tends to promote women’s greater level of fear of victimization. Likewise, the majority of studies indicate that despite the fact that they have the least risk of victimization it is the elderly who fear criminal victimization the most.¹⁴

Paradoxically youth (including college students) who are less fearful of crime are more vulnerable to victimization. People generally fear outcomes more than they take into account the probability of victimization. Thus elderly persons’ fear of victimization may come from concerns about physical injuries that could result in hospitalization or even death, and that such fears may lead the elderly to curtail their activities and, perhaps, in so doing lower their risk of victimization.

Finally, despite the fact that we have seen that the crime rates have been declining since the 1980s, nearly every year a majority of those asked whether there is "more crime in the U.S. than there was a year ago" has answered “yes.”¹⁵

¹³ See e.g. Ferraro, K.F. (1996). Women’s fear of victimization: Shadow of sexual assault. *Social Forces*, 75, 667-690; May, C.D., Rader, N.E. & Goodrum, S. (2010). A gendered assessment of the “threat of victimization”: Examining gender differences in fear of crime, perceived risk, avoidance and defensive behaviors. *Criminal Justice Review*, 35(2), 159-183; Schafer, J.A., Huebner, B.M., & Bynum, T.S. Fear of crime and criminal victimization: Gender-based contrasts. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 34 (3), 285-301, 2006.

¹⁴ See the studies cited in Ziegler, R., & Mitchell, D.B. (2003). Aging and fear of crime: An experimental approach to an apparent paradox. *Experimental Aging Research*, 29, 173-187.

¹⁵ The Gallup Organization. “Attitudes toward level of crime in the United States.” *Sourcebook of criminal justice statistics Online*. Available at www.albany.edu/sourcebook/pdf/t2332009.pdf

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This erroneous image of rising crime rates may well result from the fact that most people obtain their information about crime from the news media, which by focusing on serious criminal activity may give the impression that the crime situation is continually becoming worse. In their competition for viewers and readers the news media tend to focus on the most eye-catching of crimes, those perhaps with the most disturbing or grotesque elements.

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For an update of the victimization statistics go to the Bureau of Justice Statistics Web site. Thus, for example, the 2001 through 2010 statistics are available in the publication *Criminal victimization 2010* at: www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cv10.pdf.

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