

U.S. Department of Justice
Bureau of Justice Statistics



Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin

Victims of Crime

Traditionally, both public attention and the criminal justice system have focused on criminal offenders. Criminal justice resources have been used to pursue, apprehend, judge, and imprison offenders and have paid little attention to their victims. Recently, however, public attention has turned to the victims of crime as well. This new concern is reflected in legislation proposed or enacted at both State and National levels, in various service programs to aid victims and/or compensate them for financial losses, and in a greater sensitivity within the criminal justice system to the treatment of victims (either as victims or as witnesses). Within the academic community, too, the study of the victims of crime is emerging as a new field.

In the past, our knowledge of the extent of crime came solely from persons who chose to report victimizations to the police. In the 1970's, the technique of victimization surveying was developed to learn about the impact of crime on victims through interviews with both victims and nonvictims in the general population. The Department of Justice began conducting a national victimization survey in 1973. This ongoing survey, known as the National Crime Survey, is sponsored by the Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics.¹ The survey consists of interviews with a national sample of 60,000 households in which all members of the household are interviewed twice a year to determine whether they have been victims of crime. Crime victims are asked about the details of their victimization. Victimization surveys have also been conducted in a number of other countries throughout the world. By focusing

¹For a description of the National Crime Survey and how it operates, see *Measuring Crime*, Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin, NCJ-75710, February 1981.

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This is the third Bureau of Justice Statistics bulletin to present findings from the National Crime Survey. Although the information contained in this report has appeared in other Bureau publications, it is brought together here to provide a consolidated portrait of victims and the circumstances of their victimization. The rising concern with the victim and his plight on the part of legislatures, criminal justice professionals, and local community programs is a healthy development. We are pleased that the information gathered in the victimization studies of the Bureau has contributed to a new empathy in American society for the victims of criminal acts.

Benjamin H. Renshaw III
Acting Director

on the victim, these surveys have given impetus to the establishment of programs to ease the trauma of victimization.

Who is a victim of crime?

The answer to "Who is a victim of crime?" may seem obvious. But it often isn't as easy to describe victims as one might suppose. For some crimes, such as rape or murder, of course, it is quite clear who has been victimized. But for other crimes, such as welfare or insurance fraud, embezzlement, public corruption, or vagrancy, the victim is less clearly defined. A crime in which corporate funds are taken may ultimately be paid for by shareholders. Welfare fraud is absorbed by taxpayers. Public corruption may affect the trust of the general public

toward officeholders. For the crime of arson, the only official victim may be the owner of the building—for whom destruction may even be financially advantageous. If only the building is destroyed, perhaps the real victim is the insurance company that covers the loss (and ultimately all the policyholders whose premiums provided the funds). But in other cases, the lives or property of the building's tenants may be lost. For crimes of property, in general, the economic loss involved may be absorbed by the crime victim or may be covered partially or entirely by insurance. Defining the victims of crime can be more difficult than one might assume.

We have little or no data about the victims of some of the types of crime just described. The National Crime Survey, however, measures victimization for those crimes in which the victim can be clearly defined. The specific crimes covered in the survey are rape, robbery, assault, personal and household larceny, burglary, and motor vehicle theft.² When a victimization is reported to the interviewer, whether of an individual (age 12 and over) or of a household, the survey obtains extensive information about the characteristics of the victimization.³ From this information we are learning more about the victims of crime than has ever been known before.

²Homicide is not measured by NCS because the victim cannot be interviewed and because homicides are especially well reported to the police and are included in the Uniform Crime Reports.

³According to NCS classification, both individuals and households may be victims. The crimes of rape, robbery, assault, and personal larceny are regarded as personal crimes affecting the individual victim. Burglary, motor vehicle theft, and household larceny are classified as household crimes that affect the entire household. Of course, other household members, as well as friends and relatives, may be affected by the victimization of an individual from a personal crime.

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How many people are victims?

In 1979, there were about 41 million victimizations in the United States from the crimes measured in the National Crime Survey (NCS). The number of these victimizations exceeds the number of individual victims since some people are victimized more than once.⁴ But if each of these victimizations had occurred to a different person, the number from all NCS-measured crimes would be more than the combined populations of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.

A new indicator that measures the prevalence of crime among households has recently been developed. For 1980, it showed that more than 24 million households—almost a third of the households in the Nation—had at least one member victimized by some type of crime.⁵ A similar proportion of households has been victimized by crime in each of the 6 years, 1975-80, for which the measure has been calculated.

What crimes claim the most victims?

Being the victim of any type of crime is serious and may be very disturbing to the victim and to the victim's family, friends, and neighbors. Considering the magnitude of total crime occurring each year, however, it is of some comfort that the relatively less serious crimes occur most often. The most frequently occurring crime measured by the NCS is the crime of theft against either a household or an individual. These personal and household larcenies (thefts) accounted for 66 percent of all victimizations in 1979. The other nonviolent crimes, burglary and motor vehicle theft, accounted for 16 percent and 3 percent, respectively. Taken together, these nonviolent crimes occur over five times more frequently than crimes of violence. In 1979, violent crime—rape, robbery, and assault—made up only about 15 percent of all victimizations measured by the NCS.

Of the three violent crimes, assault is the most common. It made up 12 percent of all crime in 1979 and almost 80 percent of all violent crime, with aggravated assault accounting for about 30 percent and simple assault for 50 percent. Rape accounted for less than 1 percent of all NCS-measured crime in 1979; robbery, for 3 percent. None-

⁴Approximately 1 in every 5 persons victimized by a violent crime during a 6-month interval experienced more than a single incident of personal violence.

⁵Data for 1980 used in this report are provisional.

theless, a large number of individuals are victimized by even the less frequently occurring crimes. For example, in 1979 there were more than 1.1 million robbery victimizations, a number that is as large as the population of Maine.

What groups are victims? When and how?

We are learning from the National Crime Survey that there are some remarkably consistent patterns from year to year in the population groups that are most frequently victimized and in the circumstances of their victimization.

Gender. Of the personal crimes measured by the survey, men are more often victimized than women for every crime except rape.⁶ The rape rate for women is about 2 women per 1,000. It is negligible for men.⁷ Both men and women are more likely to be victims of simple assault than of any other violent crime. In 1979, men were victims of violent crime at the rate of about 45 per 1,000. Women were victimized at

⁶For household crimes of burglary, motor vehicle theft, and household larceny, the gender of the victim is not a very useful concept since since all households members are, in a sense, victims.

⁷Rape of male victims is probably more prevalent in jails and prisons than in the general population, but populations of correctional institutions are not covered in the National Crime Survey.

NCS-measured crimes (percent distribution)

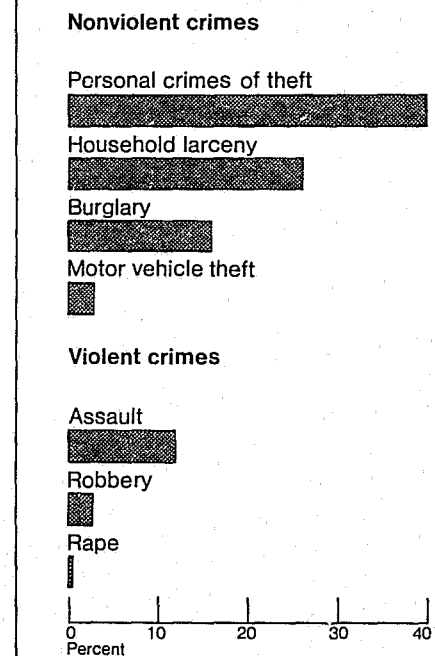


Figure 1

the rate of about 25 per 1,000. The rates for personal crimes of theft were 99 per 1,000 for men vs. 85 per 1,000 for women.

Age. In every category of crime, with one exception, the elderly have substantially lower victimization rates than do younger people. (For the exception, purse snatching and pocket picking, the rates for the elderly are about the same as for the rest of the population.) The victimization rate for crimes of violence for people over 65 is about 8 per 1,000 versus 37 per 1,000 for those under 65. For the crime of personal theft, the rate is 23 per 1,000 for the elderly versus 104 per 1,000 for persons under 65.⁸ These findings contradict a common belief that the elderly are particularly prone to criminal victimization. Findings from attitude surveys conducted during the mid-seventies show, however, that the elderly are much more afraid of crime than younger people. It is sometimes suggested that the elderly consider the consequences of victimization to be much more serious for them and that they accordingly restrict their activities to a much greater degree, which reduces their rates of victimization.⁹

Marital status. Persons who are divorced or have never been married are more likely to be victims of personal crime than the married or the widowed. In 1979, the rates for personal crimes of violence per 1,000 were as follows: divorced (75), never married (62), married (18), and widowed (9). For crimes of personal theft, the rates were never married (142), divorced (123), married (69), and widowed (33). These findings result from the different ages but perhaps also from the different lifestyles associated with different marital statuses.

Race and ethnicity. Blacks are relatively more frequently victims of violence than whites. In 1979, blacks were victimized by violent crime at the rate of 42 per 1,000 versus 34 per 1,000 for whites. They were also burglarized at a higher rate (114 per 1,000 households versus 80 per 1,000 households for whites). For crimes of theft, however, rates for blacks are generally the same or lower than those for whites. In 1979, rates for household larceny for both blacks and whites were 133 per 1,000.

⁸These data, for the period of 1973-80, are taken from a forthcoming BJS report on crime and the elderly.

⁹Goldsmith, J. and S. Goldsmith, eds. (1976). *Crime and the Elderly: Challenge and Response*. Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books.

Personal larceny rates were 93 for whites versus 87 for blacks.

Hispanics generally have higher rates than non-Hispanics for household crimes and for most crimes of violence. In 1979, the violent crime rates were 42 per 1,000 persons for Hispanics and 34 per 1,000 for non-Hispanics. The household larceny rate was 161 per 1,000 households for Hispanics compared with 132 for non-Hispanics. Rates are lower among Hispanics, however, for crimes of personal theft. Personal larceny in 1979 occurred at the rate of 83 persons per 1,000 for Hispanics versus 92 per 1,000 for non-Hispanics.

Time and place. A majority of all violent crimes occur at night, but a substantial minority of violent crimes occur during daylight hours. In 1979, about one-third of all rapes, two-fifths of robberies, and almost half of all assaults occurred between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. Since incidents involving theft of personal or household property often occur when the owner is away, the time of occurrence is not known in a large proportion of no-contact thefts.

Crimes of violence are more apt to occur away from the home—on the street, in a park, field, playground, school ground, or parking lot—than at any other type of location. In 1979, about 40 percent occurred in these locations. An exception to this pattern occurs for crimes of violence involving family members. These events most often occur in or near the home.

Household burglary and larceny, by definition, occur at or near the victim's home (except for the few cases that occur at a vacation residence). Purse snatchings and pocket pickings most often occur in nonresidential buildings such as stores, restaurants, or gas stations, or on public vehicles such as buses or trains. In 1979, about 46 percent of these types of crime occurred in these locations. Motor vehicle theft occurs somewhat more often when the vehicle is parked away from the victim's home than when it is parked near the home. In 1979 about 57 percent of all motor vehicles were stolen while parked away from home.

What is the impact of crime on victims?

Injury. By definition, if an encounter between an offender and victim results in an injury, the crime will be classified as violent. Most violent crimes do not put the victim in the hospital. Fewer

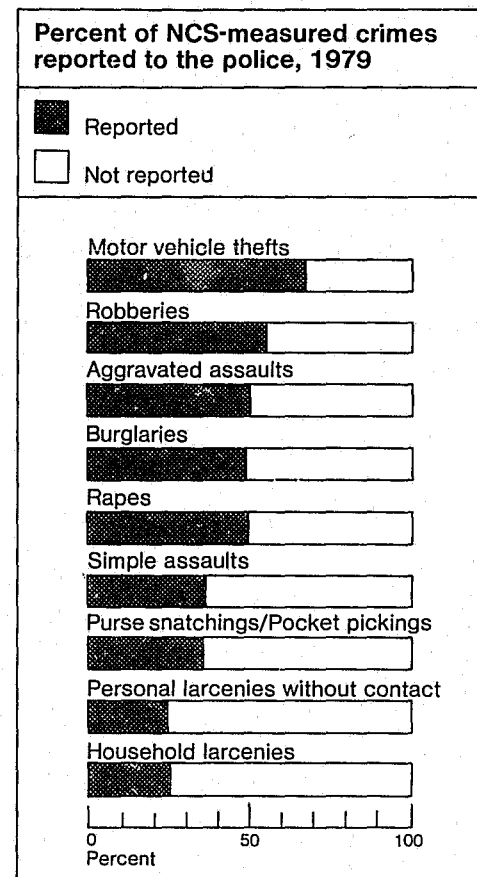


Figure 2

than 1 out of 10 victims needs any hospitalization and, in the vast majority of these cases, emergency room treatment is all that is required. In any violent encounter, however, the potential exists for serious injury. Furthermore, the NCS does not measure the fear and psychological damage to the victim that may have occurred even if there was no physical injury.

Injury is more likely to occur when the offender is known to the victim than when the offender is a stranger. The reasons for this are uncertain. People may be reluctant to report to survey interviewers violent events committed by family members or friends unless the events are relatively serious. Or it could be that these encounters genuinely are more violent and more likely to lead to injury. It may also be that family members and friends are less afraid of each other than they would be of a violent stranger and therefore behave differently when the threat of violence occurs.

Economic loss. Most economic loss results from property rather than violent crime. However, the possibility of economic loss from crimes of violence exists, either through the direct theft of money or property in the

course of a robbery or a rape or from financial costs incurred as a result of injury, including loss of earnings. In 1979, it was estimated that about \$8.8 billion was lost from the direct costs involved in criminal victimizations.¹⁰ It should be noted that these figures do not include the larger cost to society of the criminal justice expenses involved in maintaining police, courts, and prison and parole systems to apprehend and deal with offenders. These costs amounted to \$26 billion in 1979.

Reporting to police. The National Crime Survey measures both crimes that are reported to police and those that are not reported. In 1979, only about 30 percent of all personal crimes and 36 percent of all household crimes were reported to police. There were enormous differences among various crime categories in the extent of reporting. The more serious crimes are better reported. The extent of reporting ranged from 13 percent for household larcenies of less than \$50 to 86 percent of completed motor vehicle thefts. About 50 percent of all rapes were reported.

Fear of crime. People do not have to be actual victims of crime to be affected by it. Many people are quite afraid of crime, perhaps because friends, relatives, or neighbors have been crime victims or as a result of having read or seen media accounts of crime.

In the mid-seventies, attitude questions were included in NCS surveys conducted in 26 American cities.¹¹ These surveys found that, in general, people believe that crime affects other people more than it affects them personally. The fear of crime was not a major factor in decisions about daily activities such as shopping or going out for entertainment or in decisions to change neighborhoods.

The groups least at risk of criminal victimization (as indicated by the victim survey) were often the most afraid of crime. Women and older persons had relatively high fear levels, although they do not have the highest victimization rates. Whether or not one had been a victim of crime during the past year did not appear to have a

¹⁰The figure includes an estimate from the Uniform Crime Reports on commercial crimes, which are not measured by NCS. It covers costs to the victim such as loss from unrecovered property, damage to property, and unreimbursed medical costs.

¹¹More recent attitude surveys conducted by various organizations, although they did not ask exactly the same questions, substantiate many of these earlier findings.

major effect on fear levels. However, the effect of criminal victimization in general on fear levels is difficult to measure. A person who has never been personally victimized, but who has had family members or neighbors victimized, can be as frightened as the actual crime victim.

What are the chances of being a victim?

Information obtained from the National Crime Survey is used to calculate victimization rates for each crime category and for each demographic group. This rate cannot provide precise information on the odds of a single individual's becoming a victim of a particular crime, but it can provide an approximation.¹²

The risks of victimization are lowest for the crimes of rape, robbery, and purse snatching or pocket picking. NCS data indicate that about 2 women per 1,000 were victims of rape in 1979. About 3 persons per 1,000 had their purses snatched or pockets picked, and about 6 persons per 1,000 were robbed. In general, about 34 persons per 1,000 were victims of some type of violent crime (usually assault).

The risks of being victimized by property crimes were greater than that for violent crimes. About 84 out of every 1,000 households were burglarized, and 134 per 1,000 had an item

stolen by someone with a right to be in the house, such as a maid or repairman. Of the property crimes, motor vehicle theft was the least frequent, affecting about 17 households per 1,000.

Information still needed

We know considerably more today about victims of crime than was known before the inception of NCS. Public attention traditionally has been focused on the offender; it is now focusing on the victim as well. Yet the study of the victim and of criminal victimization is a new field in which the accumulation of knowledge is just beginning.

Much about criminal victimization still needs to be explored. We need methods for measuring crimes that are still not reported, either to the police or to a survey interviewer—perhaps because the victim is afraid to talk to anyone. We need to learn more about the kinds of experiences victims have after they enter the criminal justice system, so that the system can better serve the victim. We need more information on people who are repeatedly

Bureau of Justice Statistics bulletins are prepared principally by the staff of the Bureau. Carol B. Kalish, chief of policy analysis, edits the Bulletins. Marilyn Marbrook, head of the Bureau publications unit, administers their publication, assisted by Julie A. Ferguson. The principal author of this edition is Patsy Klaus.

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victimized to determine what accounts for their disproportionate victimization. By learning about crime from the perspective of the victim, we can develop a new and better understanding of the nature of crime in the United States and its consequences.

For further reading

Criminal Victimization in the United States, 1979. NCJ-76710, NCS-N-19, Bureau of Justice Statistics, December 1981.

Myths and Realities About Crime. NCJ-46249, U.S. Department of Justice, 1978.

Public Opinion About Crime: The Attitudes of Victims and Non-Victims in Selected Cities. NCJ-41336, SD-VAD-1, U.S. Department of Justice, 1977.

Rape Victimization in 26 American Cities. NCJ-55878, SD-VAD-6, U.S. Department of Justice, 1979.

The Cost of Negligence: Losses from Preventable Household Burglaries. NCJ-62319, SD-NCS-N-11, U.S. Department of Justice, 1979.

Intimate Victims: A Study of Violence Among Friends and Relatives. NCJ-62319, SD-NCS-N-14, Bureau of Justice Statistics, January 1980.

Restitution to Victims of Personal and Household Crimes. NCJ-72770, VAD-9, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1981.

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