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## Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report

# Reporting Crimes to the Police

by Caroline Wolf Harlow, Ph.D.  
BJS Statistician

Of the 37,115,000 crimes that took place in 1983, as estimated from the National Crime Survey, 35%, or 12,880,000, were reported to police. These include:

- 48% of the violent crimes of rape, robbery, and assault;
- 26% of personal thefts (purse snatching, pocket picking, and larceny without contact away from home); and
- 37% of the household crimes of burglary, household larceny (theft in or near the home) and motor vehicle theft.<sup>1</sup>

The specific crimes most likely to be reported were motor vehicle theft (69%) and aggravated assault (58%). The specific crimes least likely to be reported were household larceny (25%), personal larceny without contact (26%), and pocket picking (29%).

These findings are based on interviews conducted twice a year with approximately 128,000 persons ages 12 and older in 60,000 households, conducted as part of the ongoing National Crime Survey (NCS). Other key findings on the reporting of crimes to the police include:

- Completed crimes are more likely to be reported than attempted crimes. This difference is especially pronounced

<sup>1</sup>The total number of crimes analyzed in this report is somewhat greater than the number presented in other Bureau of Justice Statistics publications because it includes attempted assaults of individuals that occur at the same time as commercial crimes. Commercial crimes are excluded from the crimes measured by the National Crime Survey.

The National Crime Survey (NCS) was initiated at the beginning of the last decade to provide a reliable measure of crimes in the United States, whether or not the crimes are reported to the police. The survey has shown that each year about two-thirds of personal and household crimes are not reported to the police.

This special report examines in detail the reporting levels in 1983 for different kinds of crimes, the connection between the likelihood that a crime will be reported and its seriousness, whether different kinds

of motor vehicle theft (88% vs. 33%) and robbery (63% vs. 35%).

- When the victim sustains an injury the crime is more likely to be reported to police than when the victim is not injured. Moreover, the reporting rate is higher for crimes resulting in serious injuries than for those resulting in minor injuries.

- The proportion of crimes reported to police increases as the value of property theft or damage goes up. This is true of virtually all crimes, violent and nonviolent. Overall, crimes are about twice as likely to be reported to police if the cash or property loss is \$250 or more than if there is no loss.

- Generally, demographic characteristics of victims make less difference to reporting rates than does the type of crime. Nonetheless, the proportions of crimes reported to police are somewhat

of victims are more or less likely than others to report crimes, what proportion of crimes are reported by someone other than the victim, and the reasons victims give for reporting and for not reporting crimes.

The findings of this report highlight the essential role played by citizens in the fight against crime and provide valuable information to policymakers and practitioners interested in increasing reporting levels.

Steven R. Schlesinger  
Director

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lower when teenagers or those with less than a high school education are victimized. Considering only crimes of violence, the proportions of crimes reported are higher when the victims are females rather than males, or blacks rather than whites.

- Three percent of reported personal crimes are discovered by police. Sixty percent are reported by the victim, 13% by another household member, and 22% by someone else.

- Two percent of reported household crimes are detected by police. Eighty-eight percent are reported by a member of the household and 10% by someone else.

- The particular reason most frequently mentioned for not reporting a crime was that it was not important enough (30%). For violent crimes the reason most often given for not reporting was

that it was a private or personal matter (28%).

• Among reasons mentioned for reporting crimes to police, victims of violent crimes most often said to keep it from happening again (31%); whereas victims of personal theft and of household crimes most often cited a desire to recover property (43% and 35% respectively).

• When the crime resulted in no economic loss, reasons expressing a sense of obligation were by far the most frequently given for reporting for every crime studied. When the loss was \$250 or more, economic incentives (to collect insurance or recover property) dominated for completed crimes of theft and completed household crimes.

### The citizen's role

One role which citizens play within the criminal justice system is a preventive one of reducing the circumstances and situations in which crimes are likely to be committed. In recent years, for example, citizens have banded together in programs like "neighborhood watch" through which participants combat crime by marking property to make it more secure, increasing surveillance of public areas, and promoting behavior to increase citizen safety (for example, avoiding walking alone after dark).

Essential to the effectiveness of these crime prevention measures is enhanced willingness on the part of citizens to call the police about suspicious criminal activity. Even when police take no action other than answering a citizen observation of suspicious behavior, police presence can serve as a warning that citizens and police are vigilant to the possibility of crime and are willing to take additional steps, if necessary.

Another role which citizens play is after the fact: reporting actual crimes to the police. In calling the police, victims and others introduce crimes to the criminal justice system. Contacting the police activates the process through which society seeks to apprehend and punish wrongdoers and thereby to promote a peaceful and orderly existence for its members. If criminal incidents are not made known to the police, they are likely to remain outside of, or hidden from, the system which has been established to deter wrongdoing.

In presenting a statistical analysis of patterns of reporting crimes to police, this report provides information

Type of crime	Total number of victimizations	Percent of victimizations			Total
		Reported to police	Not reported to police	Don't know/not ascertained	
All crimes	37,115,000	35%	64%	1%	100%
Crimes of violence	6,015,000	48%	51%	1%	100%
Rape	154,000	47	52	—	100
Robbery	1,133,000	52	47	1	100
Aggravated assault	1,588,000	58	40	2	100
Simple assault	3,141,000	41	58	1	100
Crimes of theft	14,657,000	26%	72%	2%	100%
Purse snatching	177,000	51	48	—	100
Pocket picking	386,000	29	70	—	100
Larceny without contact	14,095,000	26	72	2	100
Household crimes	16,442,000	37%	62%	1%	100%
Burglary	6,065,000	49	50	1	100
Household larceny	9,114,000	25	74	1	100
Motor vehicle theft	1,264,000	69	31	—	100

Note: Crime categories include attempted crimes. Figures may not add to total because of rounding. —Too few cases to obtain statistically reliable data.

necessary to understand this essential dimension of citizen involvement in the criminal justice system.

### Characteristics of the crime

The likelihood that a crime will be reported to the police is strongly related to the seriousness of the crime. In the aggregate, violent crimes are more likely to be reported (48%) than household crimes (37%) or crimes of personal theft (26%) (table 1). Other measures of seriousness show the same pattern: attempted vs. completed crimes, existence and degree of injury, amount of loss, and personal confrontation with the offender.

### Attempted vs. completed crimes

When crimes of violence, crimes of personal theft, and household crimes are completed, they are more likely to be reported to police than attempted crimes. This is particularly true for robbery, burglary, and motor vehicle theft (table 2). In the National Crime Survey, assaults are defined as completed if the victim is injured and attempted if the victim is not injured. Attempted aggravated assault, in which the victim is either threatened or attacked with a weapon but not injured, is the most likely to be reported of all attempted crimes.

### Degree of injury

By definition, violent crimes are those in which the victim is threatened or attacked, and sometimes injured. Robberies and assaults are more likely to be reported when the victim is injured (table 3). In addition, the reporting rate is higher when injuries are serious rather than minor: not lower than 69%.

Type of crime	Percent reported to police	
	Attempted	Completed
Crimes of violence <sup>a</sup>	42%	58%
Robbery	35	63
Assault		
Aggravated	56	63
Simple	38	50
Crimes of theft	16%	27%
Household crimes	31%	38%
Burglary	34	54
Household larceny	22	26
Motor vehicle theft	33	88

<sup>a</sup>Includes rape, which is not displayed as a separate entry because of the small number in the sample.  
<sup>b</sup>Completed assaults are defined as assaults with injury; attempted assaults are ones in which the victim is not injured.

Crimes of violence	Percent reported to police		
	No injury	Injury <sup>a</sup>	
		Minor	Serious
Robbery	46%	61%	77%
Completed	58	70	80
Attempted	28	45	70
Assault <sup>b</sup>	43	52	69
Aggravated	56	59	69
Simple	38	49	—

<sup>a</sup>Serious injury includes knife wounds, gun shot or bullet wounds, broken bones and teeth, internal injuries, being knocked unconscious or undetermined injuries that require at least 2 days hospitalization. Minor injury includes bruises, cuts and other minor injury or undetermined injury requiring less than 2 days hospitalization.  
<sup>b</sup>Assaults with serious injury are defined as aggravated; assaults with no injury or minor injury are defined as an aggravated assault if the offender displays a weapon and simple assault if no weapon is displayed.

**Economic loss**  
In both violent and property offenses victims may sustain economic loss either through actual theft or through damage to property or possessions. For example, even an unsuccessful burglary attempt may result in damage to such property as doors, windows, or alarm systems.

For virtually all crimes—violent and nonviolent—the likelihood of reporting to police goes up as the value of property theft or damage increases. Overall, crimes are about twice as likely to be reported if the economic loss is \$250 or more than if there is no loss.

Larceny without contact, household larceny, and pocket picking involve loss of property without any threat to the physical well-being of the victim. In all proportions (10% or less for personal and household larceny) of these crimes are reported to police when these thefts involve objects of little value; the proportion rises as the economic value of the theft and damage increases (table 4). Attempted larcenies with no economic loss were reported at about the same proportion as completed larcenies with a loss of \$10 to \$49. Moreover, if damage was considerable, attempted larcenies were reported in approximately the same proportions as completed larcenies.

The proportion of burglaries reported to police also increases with the value of the property stolen or damaged. When there is a very small loss (less than \$10), burglaries that involve unforced but still unlawful entry into a home are less likely to be reported than burglaries involving forcible entries, whether attempted or completed. When the loss is great (\$250 or more), this difference in reporting rates for these different types of burglaries is much less.

Overall, motor vehicle theft is the property crime with the highest probability of being reported to police (table 1). As with other property crimes the reporting rate is strongly related to the value of the loss. When the loss is \$250 or more, the proportion of motor vehicle thefts reported to police (88%) is comparable to the proportion of burglaries reported (83%) but higher than some property crimes such as pocket picking (43%) and household larceny (61%) (table 4).

In the case of robbery, the existence of either an economic loss or an injury makes the incident more likely to be reported to police:

Type of crime	Percent reported to police					
	Value of theft/damage <sup>a</sup>					
	No theft or damage	Less than \$10	\$10-\$49	\$50-\$249	\$250 or more	Value unknown
All crimes	37%	13%	17%	38%	73%	32%
Crimes of violence <sup>b</sup>	42%	50%	55%	73%	79%	67%
Robbery	30	43	47	73	75	71
Completed	39	46	74	75	77	—
With injury	—	60	85	76	—	—
Without injury	—	35	39	69	74	73
Attempted	30	—	—	—	—	—
Assault	44	53	61	75	87	67
Aggravated assault	55	59	78	79	89	70
With injury	59	58	75	73	92	73
Attempted with weapon	53	61	84	89	85	68
Simple assault	38	49	52	72	84	63
With injury	47	54	53	66	—	—
Attempted without weapon	36	43	52	76	84	—
Crimes of theft	12%	7%	13%	35%	66%	18%
Purse snatching	—	—	57	73	70	—
Pocket picking	—	—	25	34	43	—
Personal larceny without contact	12	7	12	34	67	18
Completed	—	6	12	35	67	19
Attempted	12	—	—	27	71	—
Household crimes	30%	15%	17%	39%	77%	32%
Burglary	34	26	29	47	83	39
Completed burglary	41	24	25	47	83	41
Forcible entry	49	47	55	68	90	55
Unlawful entry	37	11	15	36	73	23
Attempted forcible entry	29	29	40	47	77	38
Household larceny	18	10	14	34	61	20
Completed	—	9	13	34	61	21
Attempted	18	—	—	—	—	—
Motor vehicle theft	26	—	30	48	88	44
Completed	—	—	—	—	89	82
Attempted	26	—	—	44	62	—

—Too few cases to obtain statistically reliable data.  
<sup>a</sup>The value of theft/damage is the sum of the value of cash and property stolen and the cost to repair or replace damaged property.  
<sup>b</sup>Includes rape, which is not displayed as a separate entry because of the small number in the sample.

	No loss	Loss
No injury	24%	58%
Injury	48	72

The presence of both factors increases the reporting more than either factor alone. However, when losses are \$250 or more, injury no longer increases the reporting rate (table 4). (By definition robberies with no loss are attempted crimes.)

### Confrontation with offender

Like most other crimes, confrontational crimes of theft such as robbery and purse snatching are more likely to be reported to police as the amount of economic loss increases. Moreover, these confrontational crimes are more likely to be reported than nonconfrontational thefts with losses of equivalent value (personal larcenies without contact and household larcenies).

Another crime in which the victim is confronted by an offender or offenders is assault. In the National Crime Survey assaults are classified as either aggravated or simple, depending on the severity of the injury, if any, and/or the presence of a weapon. If a weapon was used or the injury was serious, the assault is classified as aggravated. If no weapon was used and any injury sustained is not serious, the assault is classified as simple.

The use of a weapon in assaults has a marked impact on reporting rates, even when there is no injury. For most values of economic loss, an assault with a weapon with no injury to the victim (classified under NCS definitions as an attempted aggravated assault with weapon) is more likely to be reported to police than an assault without a weapon that results in minor injuries (classified as a simple assault with injury). Most assaults do not involve direct economic loss; nonetheless, when property is damaged, reporting increases as the amount of loss goes up whether or not



**Table 5. Percent of crimes reported to police by victim characteristics, 1983**

Victim characteristics <sup>a</sup>	Percent reported to police										
	All crimes	Crimes of violence					Crimes of theft	Household crimes			
		Total <sup>b</sup>	Robbery	Aggravated assault	Simple assault	Total		Burglary	Household larceny	Motor vehicle theft	
<b>Sex</b>											
Male	35%	45%	45%	55%	38%	26%	38%	49%	27%	69%	
Female	34	53	65	66	45	27	37	49	23	67	
<b>Race</b>											
White	34	47	50	57	41	27	37	48	26	68	
Black	37	54	58	63	41	26	39	52	22	70	
<b>Age</b>											
12-19	22	38	41	48	32	13	26	33	18	40	
20-39	36	51	54	60	44	29	36	48	23	68	
40-64	40	57	58	73	50	33	41	51	29	72	
65 and above	38	49	73	—	—	36	37	48	25	65	
<b>Family income</b>											
Less than \$10,000	33	48	50	60	41	26	32	41	20	62	
\$10,000-\$19,999	35	48	48	59	41	26	37	49	25	67	
\$20,000-\$29,999	36	50	53	65	41	25	41	54	29	77	
\$30,000 and above	35	45	56	49	40	27	42	57	29	68	
<b>Level of education</b>											
Elementary	26	36	40	51	28	14	35	45	24	68	
Some high school	31	47	54	56	38	19	34	45	22	69	
High school graduate	37	51	56	59	46	29	38	48	26	71	
Some college	37	53	56	67	46	30	37	49	25	66	
College graduate	38	46	51	53	41	34	41	54	28	67	

<sup>a</sup>Characteristics are those of respondent for crimes of violence and crimes of theft

<sup>b</sup>Too few cases to obtain statistically reliable data.

and of head of household for household crimes. Income is that of the family for all types of crime. Education is years completed for crimes of violence and crimes of theft and years attended for household crimes. Includes rape, which is not displayed as a separate entry because of the small number in the sample.

the injury is serious, a weapon is present, or the assault is completed.

**Characteristics of victims**

Whether a crime is reported to police can also be examined in terms of the characteristics of the victims. (For household crimes the characteristics analyzed are those of the household head.) Generally, the demographic characteristics of victims make much less difference to reporting rates than does the type of crime (table 5). This analysis indicates that crimes experienced by such social groups as blacks and the elderly are not seriously over- or under-represented among all crimes reported to the police.

**Sex**

When women are victims of violent crimes, the police are more likely to be contacted than when men are the victims. This is particularly true for robbery and aggravated assault. For personal thefts and household crimes, sex makes no difference to the proportion of crimes reported. Attempted household burglaries, however, are somewhat more likely to be reported if the household head is female (39%) than male (32%).

**Race**

Overall, the race of the victim makes little difference in whether

**Table 6. Distribution of who reports personal crimes to police, 1983**

Type of crime	Percent of reported crimes reported by					Total
	Victim	Other household member	Police	Someone else	Some other way	
All personal crimes	60%	13%	3%	22%	2%	100%
<b>Crimes of violence</b>	54%	11%	6%	25%	4%	100%
Rape	54	—	—	27	—	100
Robbery	64	10	3	21	—	100
Assault	51	12	7	26	4	100
Aggravated	48	11	4	32	5	100
Simple	54	12	8	23	3	100
<b>Crimes of theft</b>	64%	15%	2%	19%	1%	100%
Purse snatching	69	—	—	22	—	100
Pocket picking	87	—	—	—	—	100
Larceny without contact	63	15	2	19	1	100
Completed	64	15	2	19	1	100
Attempted	51	—	—	32	—	100

Note: Figures may not add to total because of rounding. —Too few cases to obtain statistically reliable data.

police are informed of a crime. For violent crimes, however, a higher proportion of incidents are reported when the victim is black. The same pattern holds for completed burglaries.

**Age**

When teenagers are victimized by a crime of violence or personal theft, the crime is less likely to be reported to police than for every other age group. Only 13% of crimes of personal theft against teenagers are reported to police. Household crimes are somewhat more likely to be reported to police when the heads of households are between the ages of 40 and 64.

**Family income**

Overall, family income makes little difference to the proportion of crimes reported to the police. Nonetheless, the proportion of robberies and household crimes reported increases somewhat as family income goes up. For aggravated assaults, on the other hand, a slightly lower proportion are reported to police when the victim has a family income of at least \$30,000. For personal thefts there is no difference based on income.

**Education**

Violent crime victims with little

education have a lower proportion of their crimes reported to police than those with more education. For personal crimes of theft and for burglaries, reporting increases as educational attainment goes up. There appears to be no relationship between education and the reporting rate for household larcenies or motor vehicle theft.

**Who reports crimes**

Whether or not crimes are reported to the police is not simply the result of the decisionmaking process of victims, for a substantial fraction of all crimes reported to the police are reported by someone other than the victim. Specifically, about two-fifths of all personal crimes reported to police are reported by someone other than the victim (table 6). For violent crimes this proportion is almost half (46%); for crimes of personal theft it is just over one-third (37%). Of all the personal crimes made known to the police, pocket picking is the one with the highest proportion reported by the victim (87%).

The vast majority of household crimes are reported by a household member. Nonetheless, about 1 in 8 are brought to the attention of the police in another way (table 7). The police themselves discover relatively few crimes: 3% of all personal crimes and 2% of household crimes. However, they discover about 7% of assaults and 6% of motor vehicle thefts.

When victims are injured in violent crimes the proportion reported by someone other than the victim rises from 43% to 51% (table 8). In some cases the victim may not be able to call the police (if unconscious, for example) or may deem medical treatment for injuries a more immediate need than calling the police. In other cases the victim may not think the matter serious enough to report to police.

Just over one-fifth of all reported personal crimes and about one-tenth of all reported household crimes are brought to the attention of the police by someone other than the victim, another household member, or by the police themselves.<sup>2</sup> The person reporting may be another victim, a witness to the event, a person who becomes involved in the effects or aftermath of the incident, or someone who is told of the crime or has it

<sup>2</sup>The NCS does not collect information on the identity or characteristics of persons who report crimes other than the respondent, except determining whether the crime was reported by another household member or by someone else.

**Table 7. Distribution of who reports household crimes to police, 1983**

Type of crime	Percent of reported crimes reported by				
	Household members	Police	Someone else	Some other way	Total
All household crimes	88%	2%	10%	1%	100%
Completed	88%	2%	9%	1%	100%
Attempted	84	2	13	—	100
Burglary	85%	1%	13%	1%	100%
Household larceny	92	1	6	—	100
Motor vehicle theft	85	6	9	—	100

Note: Figures may not add to total because of rounding. —Too few cases to obtain statistically reliable data.

**Table 8. Who reported violent crimes to police by existence of injury, 1983**

Type of crime	Percent reported by				
	Victim	Other household member	Police	Someone else	Some other way
No injury	59%	9%	6%	21%	4%
Injury	50	9	5	33	3

Note: Incidents reported by proxy respondents are excluded.

**Table 9. Who reports personal crimes to police by value of loss, 1982-83**

Type of crime by value of loss	Percent of personal crimes reported by			
	Victim	Other household member	Other	Total
<b>All personal crimes<sup>a</sup></b>				
No loss <sup>b</sup>	54%	9%	37%	100%
Loss less than \$250	63	12	25	100
Loss of \$250 or more	68	14	17	100
<b>All violent crimes</b>				
No loss	55%	9%	36%	100%
Loss less than \$250	56	10	34	100
Loss of \$250 or more	69	8	23	100
<b>Robbery</b>				
No loss	55	10	35	100
Loss less than \$250	63	10	28	100
Loss of \$250 or more	69	10	21	100
<b>Aggravated assault</b>				
No loss	50	9	41	100
Loss less than \$250	47	9	43	100
Loss of \$250 or more	61	5	34	100
<b>Simple assault</b>				
No loss	58	10	32	100
Loss less than \$250	51	10	39	100
Loss of \$250 or more	72	—	—	100
<b>Crimes of theft</b>				
No loss	37%	2%	61%	100%
Loss less than \$250	65	12	23	100
Loss of \$250 or more	68	15	17	100
<b>Completed crimes of theft</b>				
No loss	65	12	23	100
Loss less than \$250	68	15	17	100
<b>Attempted crimes of theft</b>				
No loss	37	2	61	100
Loss less than \$250	59	15	26	100
Loss of \$250 or more	70	13	17	100

Note: Incidents reported by proxy respondents are excluded from this table. Figures may not add to total because of rounding. —Too few cases to obtain statistically reliable data. <sup>a</sup>Includes rape, which is not displayed as a separate entry because of the small number in the sample. <sup>b</sup>The loss is the sum of the value of cash and property stolen and the cost to repair or replace damaged property.

reported to him or her. Neighbors, bystanders, or proprietors may observe a crime. Health professionals or school principals may be called after an incident. A person in any of these roles

may be the one who contacts the police in a specific incident.

In each of these cases the person reporting the crime needs to perceive



Most important reason	All crimes	Crimes of violence			Crimes of theft			Household crimes						
		Total	Robbery	Aggravated assault	Simple assault	Total	Completed	Attempted	Total	Completed	Attempted	Burglary	Household larceny	Motor vehicle theft
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Not serious														
Object recovered or offender unsuccessful	5	5	14	4	3	4	2	33	5	2	21	8	3	22
Did not think it important enough	30	22	15	20	26	30	30	24	32	34	22	21	38	13
Nothing could be done														
Didn't realize crime happened until later	7	1	—	—	—	7	7	5	8	9	8	11	7	9
Property hard to recover due to lack of identification number	4	—	—	—	—	5	5	—	5	6	—	3	7	—
Lack of proof, no way to find/identify offender	16	8	16	9	5	17	17	14	16	16	16	17	16	18
Police wouldn't do anything														
Police wouldn't think it was important enough—wouldn't want to be bothered	7	5	5	4	5	6	6	5	8	8	7	7	8	8
Police would be inefficient, insensitive	4	5	9	5	3	2	2	3	5	5	5	6	4	8
Reported to someone else	11	11	8	9	13	18	19	6	4	3	6	7	2	—
Private/personal matter or took care of it myself	9	28	13	33	30	4	4	3	8	8	4	8	7	10
Did not want to take time, too inconvenient	2	2	—	3	1	2	2	—	2	2	2	2	2	—
Afraid of reprisal by offender or his family or friends	1	4	5	4	4	0	0	—	1	1	—	1	0	—
Other	7	11	11	9	10	6	7	5	7	7	7	9	6	6

Note: Figures may not add to total because of rounding.  
—Too few cases to obtain statistically reliable data.

what as his or her family income increases. This relationship holds for robbery and simple assault. Income makes no difference in who calls the police for aggravated assault. The proportion of reported personal thefts reported by the victim also decreases as family income goes up. Income does not appear to have any effect on the proportions of any type of reported

household crimes reported by a household member.

#### Level of education

As the level of a victim's education increases, the likelihood that the victim him or herself will report a violent crime, especially a robbery or aggravated assault, goes up, while the likeli-

hood that the crime will be reported by another household member goes down. The proportion of reported crimes of theft reported by the victim increases with higher levels of education.

The level of education of the head of the household makes little difference in the proportion of reported crimes reported by a household member.

Most important reason	All crimes	Crimes of violence			Crimes of theft			Household crimes						
		Total	Robbery	Aggravated assault	Simple assault	Total	Completed	Attempted	Total	Completed	Attempted	Burglary	Household larceny	Motor vehicle theft
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Economic														
In order to collect insurance	8	—	—	—	12	12	—	7	8	4	6	9	9	
Desire to recover property	32	6	21	—	43	44	—	35	40	—	26	37	63	
Obligation														
Because it was a crime	8	7	9	4	7	8	—	9	8	12	12	7	6	
Because you felt it was your duty	7	8	7	11	8	7	6	23	7	6	7	7	4	
To keep it from happening again	20	31	22	33	35	14	14	24	19	17	32	23	19	
To stop or prevent this incident from happening	9	18	15	17	19	4	4	—	9	7	24	12	8	
To punish offender	7	14	11	16	12	4	4	—	7	6	9	8	6	
There was evidence or proof	1	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	1	1	—	—	1	
Need for help after incident due to injury	1	3	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	
Other	8	14	10	11	18	8	7	—	6	6	10	7	7	

Note: Figures may not add to total because of rounding.  
—Too few cases to obtain statistically reliable data.

#### Reasons for not reporting crimes to the police

Victims of unreported crimes were asked to give the reasons why the police were not notified and to indicate the most important reason. About 34% gave most important reasons indicating that the incident was not serious enough to report to police, with 30% saying it was not important enough and 5% indicating that the object was recovered or the attempt was unsuccessful (table 13). Another 27% indicated that nothing could be done, either because the victim did not realize a crime was committed until later, the property was difficult to recover, or they lacked proof or some means to locate or identify the offender. Lack of proof or inability to identify or locate the offender was mentioned proportionately more often for crimes of theft and household crimes than for crimes of violence.

In 11% of the cases victims said they did not notify the police because they had reported the incident to someone else. About 10% of victims said the police wouldn't think the incident important enough or would be inefficient, ineffective, or insensitive. About 9% indicated that it was a personal or private matter. This reason, however, was the most important one in 28% of the violent crimes not reported to the police. Infrequently mentioned as the most important reason for not reporting a crime were unwillingness to take the time or fear of reprisal.

Reasons varied by both the type of crime and whether the crime was completed or not. That the incident was not serious was more frequently mentioned for a personal theft or household crime that was attempted rather than completed. Together, the reasons that a crime was not serious or that nothing could be done were given for at least 60% of personal thefts and of household crimes: not reported to police. For violent crimes, particularly aggravated and simple assault, the most frequently mentioned reasons were that it was a personal or private matter or that it was not serious.

#### Reasons for reporting

When victims who reported their crimes were asked their most important reason for calling the police, 40% gave economic reasons, either to recover property or to collect insurance (table 14). Economic reasons were more likely to be given by victims of personal theft and of household crimes than by victims of violent crime. Reasons relating to personal obligation—that it

Type of crime	Economic	Obligation	Stop/prevent	Punish offender	Other	Total
No theft or damage						
All crimes	1%	47%	19%	17%	16%	100%
Crimes of violence*	—	45	19	18	16	100
Robbery	—	48	21	18	12	100
Assault	1	45	19	17	17	100
Aggravated	3	44	18	19	16	100
Simple	—	46	20	16	17	100
Crimes of theft	—	44%	—	21%	—	100%
Completed	—	44	—	21	—	100
Attempted	—	44	—	21	—	100
Household crimes	2%	51%	20%	13%	14%	100%
Completed	—	48	20	13	17	100
Attempted	—	54	21	13	12	100
Burglary	—	51	20	12	15	100
Household larceny	—	51	22	16	11	100
Motor vehicle theft	—	58	—	—	—	100
Theft or damage less than \$250						
All crimes	32%	37%	9%	12%	10%	100%
Crimes of violence*	14	37	14	21	15	100
Robbery	23	35	11	20	11	100
Assault	—	40	17	21	21	100
Aggravated	—	39	15	21	23	100
Simple	—	40	19	20	20	100
Crimes of theft	42%	32%	6%	10%	9%	100%
Completed	42	32	6	10	9	100
Attempted	20	53	—	—	—	100
Household crimes	28%	41%	11%	12%	9%	100%
Completed	31	40	9	11	8	100
Attempted	7	49	20	14	10	100
Burglary	22	43	13	13	9	100
Household larceny	33	39	9	11	8	100
Motor vehicle theft	17	49	10	14	10	100
Theft or damage of \$250 or more						
All crimes	45%	28%	6%	13%	8%	100%
Crimes of violence*	27	29	11	17	16	100
Robbery	30	31	10	16	13	100
Assault	16	23	13	22	26	100
Aggravated	22	17	12	22	28	100
Simple	10	29	14	23	24	100
Crimes of theft	49%	27%	5%	12%	7%	100%
Completed	49	26	5	12	7	100
Attempted	27	49	—	—	—	100
Household crimes	45%	28%	6%	13%	8%	100%
Completed	45	28	6	13	8	100
Attempted	22	39	16	17	—	100
Burglary	41	30	7	14	9	100
Household larceny	45	29	6	13	7	100
Motor vehicle theft	55	22	6	12	6	100

Note: Figures may not add to total because of rounding.  
—Too few cases to obtain statistically reliable data.

\*Includes rape, which is not displayed as a separate entry because of the small number in the sample.

was a crime, it was their duty, or to keep it from happening again or to others—were cited as most important by 35% of victims who reported their crimes, including more than half of those victimized by attempted theft and about half of those who suffered an assault or an attempted household crime. Retribution, that is, punishing the offender, was the most important reason for 7%. Both obligation and retribution were given more often by victims of violent crimes.

Considering all the reasons cited by victims for calling the police and

grouping these according to the degree of economic loss in the crimes gives further insight into the reasons victims report crimes (table 15).

When there was no loss or damage, reasons relating to personal obligation were given most often. This was true for each crime examined.

As the value of financial loss rose, so did the frequency of economic reasons (to collect insurance or recover property) for reporting crimes to police. The sense of obligation was mentioned less frequently, although it was

still an important factor. When the loss was \$250 or more, economic reasons dominated for completed crimes of theft and completed household crimes. For the attempted property crimes, reasons of obligation were most often mentioned.

#### Methodological note

The data for this report are taken from the National Crime Survey, which twice yearly asks 128,000 members of a probability sample of 60,000 households if they have been victimized by crime within the past 6 months. When a criminal incident is mentioned by a respondent, NCS interviewers collect information about the event, including whether it was reported to police and the reasons for reporting or not reporting. In this study, reporting to police is defined as an affirmative response to the question, "Were the police informed or did they find out about this incident in any way?"

In conducting the NCS, information about victimizations of 12- and 13-year-old household members is usually given by a proxy respondent, most often a parent. In a limited number of other situations interviewers can use a proxy respondent, for example, if a respondent will be away from home during the entire data gathering period or cannot give an interview because of mental or physical incapacity. In table 6, the estimates for the categories of "victim" and "other household member" were adjusted for those victimizations in which proxy interviews were given. The adjustments were needed because in a proxy interview NCS interviewers are instructed to code the "respondent" as having reported to police if the person giving the interview contacted the police. They code "other household member" as having reported if the victim reported the crime.

In all proxy interviews "respondent" was recoded as "other household member," because normally proxy interviews are given by someone else in the household. Proportions of the "other household member" category were allocated to the "respondent" category according to the following rules:

- If the proxy was given because the victim was physically or mentally incapable of giving an interview, it was assumed that the victim was incapable of reporting to the police and no part of the number of crimes reported by other household members was allocated to the "victim" number.

- If the proxy interview was given because the victim was temporarily

absent, the number of crimes reported by other household members allocated to the "victim" column was equal to:

$$A(B/C)$$

where A is the number of crimes reported by other household members in proxy interviews when the victim was temporarily absent; B is the number of crimes reported by victims in nonproxy interviews; and C is the number of crimes reported by all members of the household ("respondent" plus "other household members") in nonproxy interviews. This calculation was done for each type of crime.

- In the case of those under 14 for whom proxy interviews were given, the same formula was used, grouping crimes in the categories of violent crimes and crimes of theft and using data on 14-year-olds to estimate reporting rates for 12- and 13-year-olds. These adjustments were made to 1.5% of weighted incidents reported to police.

All relationships described in this report are significant at the 95% confidence level unless the findings are qualified by language such as "somewhat," indicating significance at the 90% confidence level.

Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Reports are prepared principally by BJS staff under the direction of Joseph M. Bessette, deputy director for data analysis. This report was written by Caroline Wolf Harlow and edited by Mr. Bessette. Marilyn Marbrook, publications unit chief, administered report production, assisted by Millie Baldea, Tina Dorsey, Kim Nwala, and Joyce Stanford. Gertrude Thomas provided statistical assistance.

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(revised December 1985)  
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