

**THE NATIONAL CRIME VICTIMIZATION SURVEY;  
32 years of measuring crime in the United States**

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# **THE NATIONAL CRIME VICTIMIZATION SURVEY; 32 years of measuring crime in the United States**

## **Abstract**

The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) is the primary source of information on the frequency, characteristics, and consequences of criminal victimization in the United States. The NCVS was initiated in 1972 because official sources of crime statistics were deemed inadequate to measure the extent and nature of the Nation's crime problem as it existed at the time. Since its inception, the survey has undergone almost constant change, including an extensive redesign implemented in 1992. This paper reviews the history and methodology of the NCVS, and discusses the changes made to the survey and their impact upon survey estimates.

## **THE NATIONAL CRIME VICTIMIZATION SURVEY; 32 years of measuring crime in the United States**

The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) has provided detailed information on the nature and extent of victimization of households and people age 12 and older in the United States for more than thirty years. It was, when first implemented in 1972, the first household survey designed to produce national estimates of the levels and rates of crimes of violence and theft, including crime not reported to police departments. It has served as a model for other nations in developing crime victimization surveys; a starting place assuring that no other nation would have to begin from scratch.

When first implemented, the NCVS<sup>1</sup> incorporated a number of state of the art methodological attributes, including a two part interview separating crime screening from attribute reporting, bounding of data to ensure accurate reporting of offense dating, and interviewing all household members for themselves. The original survey design was developed over a number of years of methodological research. The survey has benefited from improvements throughout its history. A comprehensive research program resulted in an extensive survey redesign implemented in 1992. However, the basic methodological attributes cited above remain core parts of the NCVS today.

### **The National Crime Victimization Survey today**

The NCVS is sponsored by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), an agency within the U.S. Department of Justice. Data collection and processing are conducted for BJS by the U.S. Census Bureau. The survey produces estimates of threatened, attempted and completed rape, sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, simple assault, personal theft, burglary, property theft and motor vehicle theft<sup>2</sup> committed against people age 12

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<sup>1</sup> Then called the NCS or National Crime Survey; the name was changed in the 1992 survey redesign.

<sup>2</sup> The NCVS definitions of violent crimes are as follows:

**Rape/sexual assault:** Forced sexual intercourse including psychological coercion as well as physical force. Forced sexual intercourse means vaginal, anal or oral penetration by the offender(s). It also includes incidents where the penetration is from a foreign object. It includes attempted rapes, male as well as female victims and both heterosexual and homosexual rape. Attempted rape includes verbal threats of rape. Sexual assault is also included in this category which includes a wide range of victimizations, separate from rape or attempted rape. These crimes include attacks or attempted attacks generally involving unwanted sexual contact between victim and offender. Sexual assaults may or may not involve force and include such things as grabbing or fondling. Sexual assault also includes verbal threats.

**Robbery:** Completed or attempted theft, directly from a person, of property or cash by force or threat of force, with or without a weapon, and with or without injury.

**Aggravated assault:** Attack or attempted attack with a weapon, regardless of whether or not an injury occurred and attack without a weapon when serious injury results.

**Simple assault:** Attack without a weapon resulting either no injury, minor injury (for example, bruises, black eyes, cuts, scratches or swelling) or in undetermined injury requiring less than 2 days of hospitalization.

and older and their households. Self-report interviews are conducted at a stratified national sample of addresses drawn subsequent to each decennial census. Addresses remain in sample for 3 years, and residents in sample households age 12 or older are interviewed at 6 month intervals for a total of seven interviews.

The interview is conducted using two primary instruments: a screener and an incident report. The screening questionnaire contains a number of questions designed to ascertain whether the respondent was a victim of a measured offense during the previous six months. For every incident uncovered by the screening questionnaire, an incident report form is filled. The incident form gathers information on a broad range of subjects such as the circumstances of the incident, the victim, the offender and consequences of the victimization. Currently<sup>3</sup>, interviews are conducted with about 76,000 residents of 42,000 households every six months. Each household member is asked questions to determine whether they were victims of any of the measured crimes during the survey's six month reference period. If so, an incident report is filled to obtain details of the incident in order to produce annual estimates of the amount and characteristics of criminal victimization in the United States.

### **Sample Design and Size**

The NCVS is conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau at a sample of housing units and group quarters in the United States and the District of Columbia. The NCVS sample is comprised of about 46,000 sample housing units selected using a stratified, multi-stage cluster design. (Interviews are completed in about 42,000 of these households.) The sample excludes persons who are crews of vessels, in institutions, members of the armed forces living in military barracks, and the homeless. This sample design offers many benefits, most importantly, efficiency and cost reduction. Data collection in a large stratified sample is less expensive than in a similarly sized simple random sample because the sample cases are concentrated in fewer geographic areas. Therefore, fewer interviewers are required to conduct interviewing. Because the NCVS incorporates in person interviews, travel costs are also reduced. The consequences of this economy are larger sample design effects and differential chances for selection of sampling units.<sup>4</sup>

Households included in sample are selected by sampling from Primary Sampling Units (PSUs) across the United States. NCVS PSUs are comprised of counties, groups of counties, or large metropolitan areas in the United States. NCVS PSUs are grouped into strata from which a sample of PSUs is obtained. Large PSUs are included in the sample automatically and each is assigned its own stratum. These PSUs are called self-representing (SR) since all are selected into the sample. The remaining PSUs are non-self-representing (NSR) and only a subset of these is selected. NSR PSUs are grouped into strata based on similar geographic and demographic characteristics as determined by the most recent decennial Census. From the sampled PSUs a sample of households is obtained in two stages. These stages were designed to ensure that prior to any weighting adjustments each sample housing unit had the same overall probability of being selected.

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout this paper, references to "current" survey design refer to the design as of December, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Larger design effects must be accounted for during data analysis. Accounting for different chances of selection of sample units may be accomplished by weighting the data using weights provided in the public-use data files.

The first stage consists of selecting a sample of Enumeration Districts (EDs) from the selected PSUs. EDs are created for each decennial Census and are geographic areas ranging in size from a city block to several hundred square miles, usually encompassing a population ranging from 750 to 1,500 persons. EDs are systematically selected proportionate to their population size. In the second stage each selected ED is divided into clusters of about four housing units. These clusters are formed from the list of addresses compiled during the most recent Census. Procedures allow for the inclusion of housing constructed after each decennial Census enumeration.<sup>5</sup>

Once a sample address is selected, it remains in-sample for 3 years and is interviewed a total of 7 times at 6 month intervals.<sup>6</sup> Following enumeration 7, a new sample household is rotated into sample. To accomplish this rotating panel design, the sample of addresses is divided into six rotation groups, each containing six panels of sample units. The panels and rotation groups are constituted so that in any given month, one sixth of the sample is being interviewed for the first time, one sixth for the second time, etc.

## **Data Collection**

### *NCVS Instruments*

The NCVS utilizes a two stage process to determine whether survey respondents have been victims of crime during the reference period and to collect information about the victimization uncovered during the screening process.

A Basic Screen Questionnaire<sup>7</sup> is used to screen for crime victimizations committed against the household or against an individual household member during the 6-month reference period. Screening is accomplished using a varied strategy to trigger respondents to remember victimizations they have experienced.

Some questions focus on different types of offenses, while others focus on different circumstances in which people may become a victim of crime. One question asks about victimizations by people known to or related to the victim, and an additional question asks specifically about rape and sexual assault. Finally, two catch-all questions ask about anything that the victim may have experienced, even if they did not believe it was a crime. This varying focus format was instituted as part of the survey redesign because research found that people vary in how they recall events. The language used in screening questions avoids legal terms and is used solely to screen for offenses. For each

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<sup>5</sup> Addresses included in the sampling frame include those obtained via the most recent Decennial Census, addresses for new construction based upon building permits, and addresses obtained from Census canvasses of selected areas to identify all housing units.

<sup>6</sup> Sample units remain in sample during the 3 years of the interviews, regardless of changes in the composition of persons living at that residence during that time. The composition of some of the households may change through relocation, marriage, divorce, death, and/or changes in roommates, etc. Regardless of individual level changes in household composition, all persons living in the household who are age 12 or greater are interviewed at each enumeration. At times, entire families move away and are replaced by new households during the interview period. In these instances, interviewing continues exactly as if the original householders were there.

<sup>7</sup> The NCVS Screen Questionnaire - the NCVS 1 - is available on the web at: [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/ncvs1/pdf](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/ncvs1/pdf). A Spanish version of the NCVS 1 is available at: [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/ncvs1sp/pdf](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/ncvs1sp/pdf).

crime uncovered in the Screener, the respondent is asked how many times they were victimized during the reference period. A crime incident report is filled for each time the respondent was victimized. The screen questionnaire is used solely to identify offenses experienced. The process of crime classification is accomplished in the Crime Incident Report, described below.

Respondents are asked only about their own personal experiences. Under rare conditions, an exception to this self-respondent method is allowed and a Proxy respondent is utilized. Proxy respondents answer questions on behalf of another household member and may be used in only three situations. A proxy is allowed to gather information on 12 and 13 year old respondents when a parent or guardian does not allow them to be interviewed directly. A proxy interview is allowed for persons too incapacitated to respond for them self, and a proxy interview is permitted for individuals absent from the household during the entire interviewing period. In very unusual situations non-household members may serve as a proxy respondent.

One person in the household, designated the “household respondent,” in addition to the questions discussed above, is asked screen questions about offenses against the household itself, such as burglary and motor vehicle theft.<sup>8</sup> The household respondent is a household member at least 18 years of age who is likely to give accurate answers regarding to the household questions. This person is always the first person interviewed in the household during each enumeration. The individual designated as the household respondent may differ across enumerations.<sup>9</sup>

For each event disclosed in the Screen Questionnaire, a Crime Incident Report is completed to gather detailed information regarding each event.<sup>10</sup> For example, if a respondent said that he had property taken by force once and was later beaten up twice, three Crime Incident Reports are filled- one for each incident. The Incident Report obtains a broad range of information about the victimization itself, including time and place of occurrence; the offender, including relationship to the victim; the consequences to the victim, including injury and loss of and damage to property; and whether or not the incident was reported to police.

The detailed incident information collected on the incident report is used to determine whether or not the incident described by the respondent was an offense

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<sup>8</sup> Individual respondents (that is, someone other than the household respondent) may on occasion volunteer reports of household incidents – property crimes - not mentioned by the household respondent or a victimization of another household member which the victim failed to mention. In such cases the field representative is instructed to fill out an incident report for this property crime.

<sup>9</sup> The household respondent is not necessarily the same person who is designated the head of household, the reference person or the principal person. The reference person is the person identified by the household respondent as the person - age 18 or older - owning, buying or renting the living quarters. The reference person is synonymous with the head of household. This term is used as a reference point to determine the relationship of all other household members. Also, this person’s demographics (age, sex, race of head of household) those associated with property crimes. The principal person in a husband/wife situation is the wife. The principal person’s demographic characteristics are used in assigning a household weight.

<sup>10</sup> Information includes whether the victim was attacked, injured, type of injuries sustained, presence of weapon, property stolen, whether the event was reported to the police, etc.

measured by the survey. If the incident was a crime, these details determine the type of crime.<sup>11</sup>

The determination of whether a crime occurred, and the type of crime that occurred are not made by the field representative or the respondent. Rather, these determinations are made during computer data processing at the Census Bureau based on the entries on the Incident Report. Specific combinations of entries on the questionnaire cause the incident to be classified into appropriate crime type categories based on the incident attributes. If the incident does not meet any of the criteria for any crime measured by the NCVS, it is not included in survey estimates of crime victimization. The crime classification scheme is hierarchical, meaning that an incident is classified into the most serious crime category in which it fits. The crime hierarchy used by the NCVS is:

- rape/sexual assault,
- robbery,
- aggravated assault,
- simple assault,
- personal larceny,
- burglary,
- motor vehicle theft,
- property theft.

The survey utilizes a special protocol for victims of repeated victimizations to address difficulties respondents may have in remembering details of each separate incident and to minimize the burden of filling large numbers of incident reports. The protocol, called “series victimization,” allows filling one incident report for all of the multiple victimizations if certain criteria are met; the respondent was victimized at least six times during the reference period, all the incidents are similar in nature, and the respondent cannot remember the details of each of the victimizations. For series victimizations, the details of only the most recent incident in the series of incidents are recorded in the Incident Report along with the number of times the person was victimized.

### *Survey Mode*

The National Crime Victimization Survey uses both Paper and Pencil Interviewing (PAPI) and Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) to collect data. PAPI refers to a data collection mode in which the field representative interviews a respondent and fills in their responses on a paper instrument. PAPI interviews are conducted both in-person or by telephone. CATI data collection involves telephone interviewing from a centralized facility using a computerized survey instrument. NCVS telephone interviews are conducted by CATI facilities in Hagerstown, Maryland and Tucson, Arizona. Responses are entered directly into the computer by the field representative. The computerized instrument directs the field representative through the

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<sup>11</sup> The NCVS Incident Report - the NCVS 2 - is available on the web at: [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/ncvs2.pdf](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/ncvs2.pdf). A Spanish version of the NCVS 2 is located at: [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/ncvs2sp.pdf](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/ncvs2sp.pdf).

interview based on responses entered. The CATI instrument is designed to replicate the PAPI instrument exactly.

In the NCVS, the first contact with all sample households is made in person using PAPI. At this visit, the household respondent and all other persons present are interviewed. (Interviews are conducted separately with each household member.) At the time of the initial enumeration, the household respondent is asked whether future interviews may be conducted over the phone. If so, the following six interviews are conducted by telephone using either PAPI or CATI. If during any subsequent interview the residents in the sampled household cannot be reached by telephone, the field representative returns to the household and conducts the interview in person. Non-English speaking households (except Spanish-speaking households) are exempt from CATI. Each month, about 40% of all sample cases are designated for CATI; of these, about 10% are recycled to the field for completion because the household could not be contacted by phone.

## **Survey protocols**

### *Bounding*

The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) utilizes a six month reference period. That is, respondents are asked about criminal victimizations that they or their households may have experienced during the six months prior to the interview. The six month reference period was selected because research demonstrated that longer recall periods present greater problems for respondents in recalling events they have experienced, while shorter recall periods require additional costly interviews. The six month recall period, therefore provided the best tradeoff between accuracy and economy.

Respondents not only often have difficulty remembering salient events, but often have difficulty remembering exactly when they occurred. “Telescoping” refers to the tendency of respondents to incorrectly identify the timing of past events into the more or less recent past. For example, when asked if s/he had been the victim of an assault in the last 6 months, a respondent might describe an incident that actually occurred 14 months before.

In an effort to minimize the effect of telescoping, the NCVS employs a methodological procedure known as “bounding”. Bounding is a technique in which the information gathered from each interview is used during all later interviews to ensure that earlier reported victimizations are not double counted. If a field representative notes a possible duplication of events, the respondent is questioned to determine if it is in fact a new victimization, or the same victimization. If it is the same incident, a new report is not filled.

Bounding has special relevance for the first enumeration of an NCVS sample unit. Because the first interview is by definition not bounded, the information gathered from respondents during the initial interview serves only to establish a boundary for subsequent interviews. Data from initial enumerations of sample units are not used in the computation of victimization estimates. Nor are data from the first enumeration available on public-use data files.

Bounding is one of the great advantages offered by the NCVS, however, even using this methodology, there are some instances when some NCVS data are not bounded. They include:

- When a person “ages into” the sample. That is, during initial enumerations, a household member was under the age of 12, but turns 12 later. If for example a respondent turns 12 during the 3rd enumeration, data from their first interview is unbounded.
- When a family moves away from a selected household and is replaced by a new family. Information from the new family is unbounded.
- When an individual is not interviewed at one enumeration for some reason but is interviewed at the following enumeration.
- It may be that interviews following proxy interviews are not bounded. If the proxy interview was 100% complete and accurate, the data are bounded. If not, then the data are not bounded.

### *Non-Interviews*

At times, the field representative is unable to obtain an interview with a household or with an individual in a sample household. Such households or persons are noninterviews. The NCVS classifies various types of noninterviews. Since the sample is a sample of addresses and not the people that live at the addresses, some addresses may not be eligible for interview. For example, it may be vacant, or occupied by persons who have usual residences elsewhere, or be temporarily or permanently converted to a business. Such addresses are removed from sample; either until the next enumeration period in six months (if the situation is temporary), or permanently if the address cannot revert to eligibility in the future.

Other noninterviews occur when eligible households occupy an address but an interview cannot be completed, or when an interview cannot be completed with an eligible member of an otherwise interviewed household. Such noninterviews occur for a variety of reasons: no one home during the three week interview period; or the household or persons in the household refuse to be interviewed; or the household is not reachable, for example, due to impassable roads. .

Typically, the response to the NCVS is quite positive among respondents. The noninterview rate is very low. Keeping noninterviews at a minimum is a priority for the NCVS. Currently, NCVS response rates are 92% of eligible households, and 89% of eligible individuals. NCVS weighting procedures adjust for non-interviews.

## **The NCVS over Time**

The previous section describes the contemporary NCVS. It is important to realize that the survey has undergone revision and redesign since its inception in 1972 to incorporate improvements in survey methodology and changing emphases on crimes of interest. The following section examines the origins and history of the NCVS.

## NCVS Origins

The idea of an ongoing national crime survey was in the making for many years before the initial fielding of the National Crime Survey (NCS) in 1972.<sup>12</sup> In 1965, responding to rising crime, President Lyndon Johnson convened the President's Commission on Crime and the Administration of Justice to examine the causes and characteristics of crime in the United States and recommend policies and programs to address this crime.<sup>13</sup> At the time, the only national measure of crime in the United States was the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) sponsored by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The UCR Index of crime was (and still is) compiled from data provided by law enforcement agencies throughout the nation. The Commission recognized that UCR data reflected only crimes reported to and recorded by law enforcement agencies, and collected little data on the costs and characteristics of crime. It also "found it very difficult to make accurate measurements of crime trends by relying on official figures..."<sup>14</sup> The Commission therefore undertook pilot studies to explore the viability of using sample surveys to obtain data on crime, including that not reported to police. Ultimately, it found "these initial experiments produced useful results that justify more intensive efforts to gather such information on a regular basis."<sup>15</sup>

From these early studies, it was recommended that a permanent victimization data collection effort commence. It was argued that the victimization data could provide:<sup>16</sup>

- an independent calibration for the Uniform Crime Reports,
- an ongoing measure of victim risk,
- an indicator of the crime problem independent from those generated by police activity, and
- an indicator of society's definitions of crimes.

It was also suggested that a victimization survey would serve:

- to shift the focus of the criminal justice system to the victim and away from the offender.
- as an index of changes in reporting to the police behavior,
- as a basis for the study of granting of compensation to crime victims
- to determine involvement by the victim, and
- as a measure of public confidence in police efficiency.

Given these needs and improvements in survey methodology, it was proposed that a national victimization survey be implemented. But first, a number of key methodological issues had to be resolved. In general, there existed a tension between

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<sup>12</sup> The National Crime Survey was renamed the National Crime Victimization Survey following the 1992 redesign.

<sup>13</sup> President's Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice. *The Challenge of Crime in A Free Society*. 1967.

<sup>14</sup> President's Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice, Task Force Report: *Crime and Its Impact-An Assessment*. 1967 p. 40.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid* p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, "Report on Nation Needs for Criminal Justice Statistics" (Washington, D.C: USGPO, 1968), p. 53.

keeping costs minimized while maximizing data accuracy. Solutions reached based on the many early pilot studies were beneficial to general field of survey methodology, and continue to characterize the contemporary NCVS. Features include using an incident and screener instrument, 6-month reference period, rotating panel design, bounding, series victimization protocol, the utilization of a household respondent, and proxy interviewing.

The Department of Justice, which also oversees the UCR, decided that the new victimization survey would mirror, as closely as possible, the UCR Index crimes of rape, robbery, assault, theft, burglary and motor vehicle theft. It was recognized that there clearly were some differences. As a self report survey, the NCS could not measure homicide, nor could definitions coincide exactly. For example, a core component of the UCR definition of burglary is offender intent to steal property or commit a crime. Since victims could not reliably inform on offender intent, a substitute definition was developed focusing on whether the offender had a right to be present in the housing unit.

### **Changes to the survey**

When first fielded, the NCS consisted of three components—a national household survey, a household survey of major cities and a survey of businesses. The national survey is the only component to survive after 1977.

The Commercial Victimization Survey was first fielded to 15,000 businesses in July of 1972 to collect data on robbery and burglary victimization of commercial establishments. The data collection ended in September of 1977 because the sample was too small to produce usable estimates, and because the survey was not gathering information distinct from that known to the police.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the results were weakened because of issues related to the age and accuracy of the sampling frame from which businesses were selected.

The City Surveys that began in 1972 were designed to evaluate the impact of the federal crime fighting programs in 26 major U.S. cities. Surveys were conducted in 12,000 households and 12,000 commercial establishments in each city. These cross-sectional surveys incorporated a 12-month reference period and by definition generated unbounded data. Eight “impact” cities, receiving funding from the Department of Justice, were surveyed in 1972 and 1975.<sup>18</sup> The five largest cities were surveyed in 1973 and 1975.<sup>19</sup> And one-time surveys were fielded in thirteen additional cities during 1974.<sup>20</sup> The City Surveys were abandoned after 1975 due to their expense.

The national household survey; the NCS<sup>21</sup>, was designed to provide annual estimates of the extent and characteristics of personal and household crimes as well as

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<sup>17</sup> Surveying Crime, Bettye K. Eidson Penick, ed. (Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Sciences, 1976).

<sup>18</sup> Atlanta, Baltimore, Cleveland, Dallas, Denver, Newark, Portland, and St. Louis

<sup>19</sup> Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, New York and Philadelphia

<sup>20</sup> Boston, Buffalo, Cincinnati, Houston, Miami, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, New Orleans, Oakland, Pittsburgh, San Diego, San Francisco, and Washington D.C.

<sup>21</sup> Initially, the term National Crime Survey referred to the entirety of the three components. The national household component was called the National Crime Panel. However, with the demise of the Cities Survey and Commercial Survey, the national household component was commonly called the National Crime Survey.

estimates of year to year changes in crime rates. When launched in July of 1972, it comprised of a national sample of 72,000 households, and utilized the methodology developed in pretests conducted over the previous 5 years: a 6-month reference period, a rotating panel design, and interviews at each household seven times over a 3 year period.

Between 1972 and 1992, when the survey was redesigned and renamed the National Crime Victimization Survey, the NCS grew and developed. Changes, however, were restricted to those thought to be “non-rate effecting”, meaning that they would not significantly impact the amount or types of crime measured by the survey. Most of the changes were made to the Crime Incident Report which has grown from 4 pages and about 20 questions (with subparts) to more than 24 pages and 173 questions (with subparts) as additional questions were added to enrich the information collected about the characteristics and consequences of crime victimization. Additional changes and refinements were made as data were analyzed and evaluated, and many changes have been implemented to contain costs.

One such change has been the increasing reliance on telephone interviews. At the beginning, initial contacts with each sample household for each of the seven times they were interviewed were conducted by personal visit, with telephone interviews allowable for subsequent contacts to complete interviewing at a household. In February 1980, to reduce survey costs, initial contacts with households were done by telephone for households being interviewed for the second, fourth, and sixth times (if acceptable by the household.) Beginning in March 1986, personal visits were reduced further. Telephone interviews were conducted for all interview periods except for the first and fifth. A final change was made in July of 1996; since then only the first interview is required to be in-person.

Over the years, the NCS/NCVS has also undergone sample cuts in order to reduce costs. The sample was cut in June 1984 from its original size of 72,000 households to 59,000 households in sample per 6-month period. Additional sample cuts were instituted in 1992 (10%), 1996 (12%) and 2002 (4%). Today, the NCVS household sample is comprised of 46,000 eligible households. Interviews are obtained in 42,000 (about 92%) of these households.

A number of changes to the Crime Incident Report were instituted in 1986 to improve the survey’s ability to explore such topics as victim/offender relationship, victim actions during the incident and victim interaction with the criminal justice system. For other questions response categories were expanded or revised to obtain additional data on the characteristics of crime incidents. Another change made in 1986 dealt with the use of proxy interviews. Originally information about victimizations of persons age 12 or 13 were gathered via proxy interviews only. Beginning July, 1986, 12 and 13 year-olds were interviewed directly, unless the parent disallowed it.

### *The 1992 Redesign*

Shortly after the survey’s inception, the National Academy of Sciences (NAS)<sup>22</sup> was asked to evaluate the survey. In 1976 NAS published recommendations for improvement of the survey, including the following:<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The National Academy of Sciences is a private society of scholars mandated by the U.S. Congress to advise federal agencies on scientific and technical matters.

- An extensive improvement of the NCS screener to increase its effectiveness in prodding respondents' memories and to minimize its complexity.
- Questions need to be added to allow measurement of independent variables important for understanding the dynamics of crime victimization. These would include questions dealing with ecological factors, victim characteristic, lifestyle, and protective or preventive measures.
- A major methodological effort on optimum field and survey design for the NCS should be undertaken.
- Discontinue the Commercial Victimization Survey

Following the academy's report, the Bureau of Justice Statistics predecessor agency developed a 5-year research plan to redesign the NCV. A consortium of researchers began what would be a decade long period of survey research. The consortium examined and conducted studies in a number of areas including crime screening techniques, reference period research, cognitive processes, alternative methodologies, scope of crimes covered, longitudinal utility and a variety of other issues.

Some of the changes described above, such as interviewing 12 and 13 year olds for themselves were implemented during the 10 year redesign period. Changes believed to impact victimization rates were implemented in 1992, and constituted a break in series for the survey. The survey name was changed from the National Crime Survey to the National Crime Victimization Survey to denote the break.

The major changes implemented in 1992 were:

- The crime screener was changed to adopt a "short-cues" design.
- The threshold for defining "series" crime increased from three to six incidents
- CATI interviewing was implemented for a proportion of sample cases
- Screen questions were added to focus on crimes by relatives and intimate partners
- Screen questions were added to better screen for rape
- Sexual assault was added as a crime measured by the survey
- Questions were added to obtain estimates of vandalism.

As a result of this redesign, the survey greatly improved its ability to measure victimization in general, and certain difficult-to-measure crimes, such as rape, sexual assault, and domestic violence, in particular. The redesign was implemented in 1992 using a split sample design. In order to evaluate the impact of the redesigned methodology, for 18 months half the sample received the old design, while the other half received the new design. The redesigned survey was therefore fully implemented beginning in July, 1993.

The most important change was a new crime screening strategy. The old NCS crime screener included 13 questions, each of which asked whether the respondent had experienced a different type of offense during the reference period. For example, screen questions related to violence asked: "Did anyone beat you up, attack you or hit you with something, such as a rock or bottle? (other than any incidents already mentioned)," and "Were you knifed, shot at, or attacked with some other weapon by anyone at all" (other

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<sup>23</sup> Surveying Crime, Bettye K. Eidson Penick, ed. (Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Sciences, 1976).

than any incidents already mentioned).” Household respondents were asked an additional 6 questions about the household crimes of burglary, motor vehicle theft and theft.

The redesigned screener incorporated additional cues designed to assist respondents’ recall of incidents by focusing on places and circumstances in which people may be victimized. This screen question focuses on victim/offender relationship:

- “People often don’t think of incidents committed by someone they know. (Other than any incidents already mentioned,) did you have something stolen from you OR were you attacked or threatened by:
- a. Someone at work or school-
  - b. A neighbor or friend-
  - c. A relative or family member-
  - d. Any other person you’ve met or known?”

Additionally, at the time the NCS was developed in 1972, it was not deemed appropriate for the Federal Government to ask directly such a question as, “Were you raped at any time during the past \_\_\_ months?” An early Department of Justice report stated, “An inquiry phrased in such indelicate terms would likely promote public charges of the unbridled insensitivity of government snoopers as well as congressional outrage.”<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, the NCS did not screen directly for rape, but obtained information of these offenses in screens focusing on attacks and attempted attacks. By 1992, such direct questions were no longer deemed too sensitive to ask on a government survey and the redesigned survey included questions asking about rapes, as well as sexual assault, a crime not measured in the old survey. The redesigned questionnaire also screened for offenses committed by persons known to or related to the victim.

The change to the “series” protocol reduced the undercount that the old procedure contributed to NCS estimates. Prior to the redesign, the series protocol could be invoked if the victim experience at least 3 incidents which they could not differentiate enough to fill an NCVS 2. Based on research demonstrating that victims could remember the details of more individual incidents, the threshold for implementing the series protocol was raised to 6 or more similar victimizations. As before, the series protocol is used as a last resort, only if the respondent is unable to remember details of all the incidents. If a series incident report is made, the questions apply to the most recent incident within the series. Series victimizations are still excluded from annual estimates but the change in protocol decreases their number.

The survey redesign also included implementation of CATI. Because it required interviewers to read every question and eliminated difficulties in following sometimes complex questionnaire skip patterns, CATI was believed to produce more accurate estimates. With the redesign, 30% of all NCVS interviews were being completed using CATI.

Other changes included the addition of new questions on the crime incident report. Some addressed predictors of crimes such as offender’s perceived drug and alcohol use and gang membership. Others explored bystander behavior and interaction between victim and offender. Risk-related questions were added to the crime screening

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<sup>24</sup> San Jose Methods Test of Known Crime Victims. Anthony G. Turner. Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, Washington D.C. 1972. p2.

questionnaire (e.g., riding public transportation and whether homes had alarms installed to deter intruders).

In general, the redesign had the anticipated result of increasing the number of crimes counted by the survey. But increases were not uniform across types of crime. The redesigned screener increased estimates of difficult to measure offenses such as rape and domestic violence. Figure 1 provides survey estimates of violent crime trends both before and after the redesign. Comparing the NCS estimate for 1992 with the NCVS for the same year, the NCVS methodology increased the violent crime rate by about fifty percent. The redesign had the greatest impact on rape, the rate for which more than doubled. Simple assault, the least serious violent crime, almost doubled.

(Insert figure 1 here)

The redesign also increased estimates of crimes *not* reported to the police to a greater extent than it did crimes reported to the police. One reason for this occurrence is that improved cues for certain questions caused respondents to recall more of the less serious crimes -- those that are also less likely to be reported to law enforcement officials. As a result, the percentage of crimes reported to police based on the redesigned survey is lower than the percentage calculated based on data collected with the previous survey design. This effect was largest for simple assault, which does not involve the presence of weapons or serious injury.

Because the estimates from the redesigned survey are collected using a different screening strategy, post redesign data are not comparable to that collected prior to 1992. BJS has published adjusted NCS estimates to extend the time series back to 1973, but this is only practicable at the most aggregated crime levels because such adjustments are based only on one year's data and may not be stable if extended to detailed victim/offender/circumstance data.

Some methodological aspects to the survey were studied during the redesign period, but not changed. The survey maintains its six month reference period, and the use of bounding interviews. It remains primarily a cross sectional survey although it has some longitudinal capabilities.

### **Recent developments**

Since the redesign, the NCVS has continued to evolve, although the changes have been confined to those believed to be non-rate affecting. Questions were added to address the issue of hate crime, that is, crime committed because of a victim's race, ethnicity, religion or disability, gender or sexual orientation. Questions are being developed to measure crimes committed against people with disabilities. Additionally, last year questions were added to measure identity theft.

The NCVS has also become the platform for supplemental studies to obtain information from classes of people or about specific types of crime. These include the School Crime Supplement, conducted every two years to examine crime and safety issues among school age juveniles 12-18 years old; the Police-Public Contact supplement to obtain information on interactions the public has with police; and the Workplace Risk supplement to explore safety issues related to work environments. Currently we are working on a supplement to examine the extent of stalking, to be implemented in 2006.

We have also embarked on the full automation of the survey. Beginning in July 2006, we will eliminate all paper questionnaires and all interviews will be conducted on laptop computers. This will eventually enable us to implement a more flexible, less burdensome incident report, and focus additional questions on more salient, more serious offenses, while reducing the number of questions asked about less serious offenses.

## **Conclusion**

The NCVS today remains a work in progress. The survey has changed greatly since it was begun more than 30 years ago. Even so, the NCS roots are still visible within the NCVS. It has maintained core methodologies that have been demonstrated to produce robust estimates of crime. The survey has greatly expanded the knowledge of the extent and nature of crime in the United States. The information it has provided has nurtured the growth of the victim's advocacy movement and the violence against women movement and has informed policy related to a number of issues, including gun control, violence against women.

Changes the survey has undergone have been made for four kinds: changes in survey methodology; changes in the information collected on the characteristics of victims or crime incidents; expansion of the scope of the survey or changes to reduce the survey's costs. The methodological changes, most of which were made during the survey redesign, were made after extensive study or review of the survey data.

Early on it was recognized that the survey was a valuable tool for learning about the nature of crime and its impact upon victims. For this reason questions have continually been revised and added to the survey

The scope of the survey has changed somewhat over the years to reflect changes in the perceived nature of the crime problem in the United States. In 1967, when the President's commission issued its report advocating a national victimization survey, the crime problem it most addressed was street crime. People feared crimes by strangers. The Nation experienced a number of urban riots during that period. Crime rates (as represented by the UCR Index of crimes reported to police) were rising to new all time highs. The new survey was designed to inform the nation on these problems.

Today we perceive a very different portrait of the crime problem in the U.S., both in terms of the amount and nature of crime. Crime rates have fallen for the previous decade, and remain at or near their lowest levels since the survey was begun. Intimate partner violence and crimes by acquaintances or relatives is known to make up a significant proportion of all crime. Crime is no longer seen to be among the top few problems our nation faces. New crimes, such as carjacking, identity theft and stalking have arisen as national problems since the survey was begun. Some of the changes were made to the survey to address the changes we have seen in society, to address new issues and newly identified offenses.

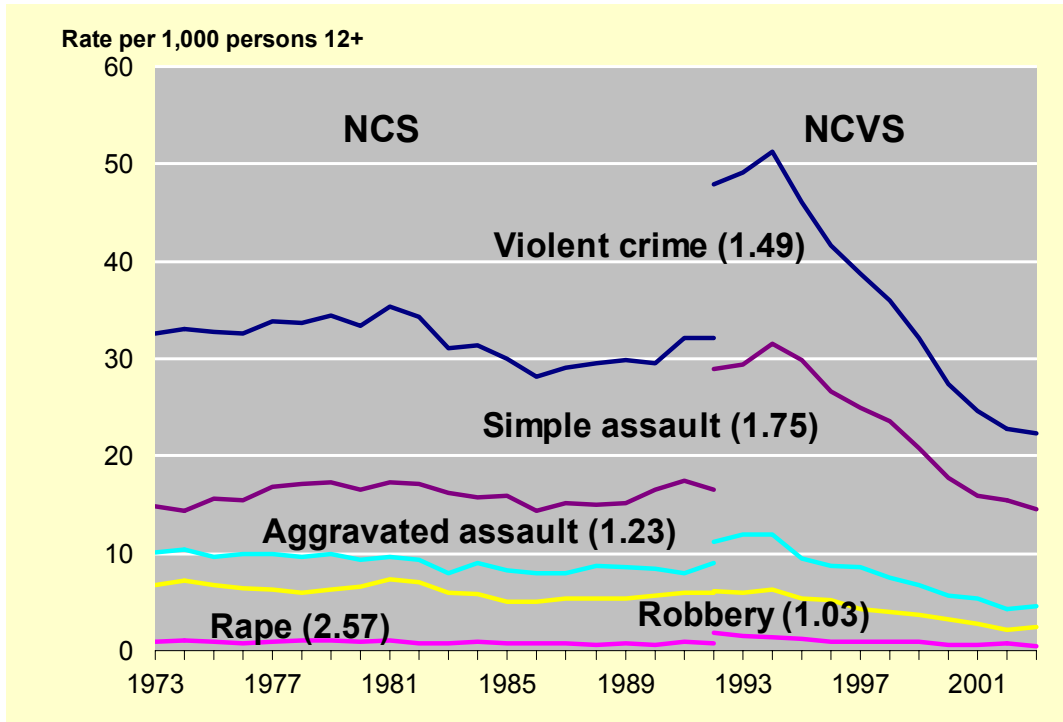
Finally, some of the changes have been necessitated by a need to reduce the cost of implementing the National Crime Victimization Survey. In addition to the increased use of telephone interviews and reductions in sample discussed above, other changes have been made to the survey to keep costs in check and/or reduce them. Some quality

control measures, such as reinterviews of households, and clerical edits have been reduced or eliminated to avoid further sample cuts.

But at the same time we are working to reduce costs, we are working to create, through the survey automation to be shortly introduced, a new survey with additional resources that will enhance our ability to focus on the ever changing nature of crime and continue to inform the American people about the extent and nature of crimes that they experience.

The challenge over the next decade will be continue maintain the survey during the period of fiscal austerity we have entered. It is likely that the survey will remain a work in progress for the foreseeable future. The work we are doing now to automate the survey will, inevitably lead to other changes that will, it is hoped continue to enhance our ability to measure the extent and nature of crime in the United States.

## Violent crime rates, 1973-2003 & NCVS/NCS ratio



Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate the ratio between NCVS (post redesign) and NCS (pre-redesign) estimates of offense rates.  
figure 1