

National Crime Victimization Survey Description and summary of proposed changes

As designed, the NCVS provides national data on personal and household victimization to complement statistics on crimes reported to law enforcement published by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Each year, data are obtained from a nationally representative sample of roughly 43,000 households comprising more than 80,000 persons on the frequency, characteristics and consequences of criminal victimization in the United States. The crimes measured by the survey include rape, sexual assault, robbery, aggravated and simple assault, household burglary, theft and motor vehicle theft. At each household the Bureau of the Census interviews for the NCVS, an interviewer asks a series of screen questions designed to uncover any crime incidents that the household or household member might have experienced during the survey reference period. For each crime incident uncovered, the interviewer then completes a crime incident report, obtaining detailed information about the nature of the incident, the characteristics of offenders, and the consequences of the victimization.

For most of the over quarter century life of the NCVS, the methods employed for estimating the extent and characteristics of crime in the U.S. have remained largely unchanged, relying upon rotating panels of scientifically sampled households, conducting interviews with all household member age 12 and older at 6 month intervals, maintaining panel membership for 3 years, and optimizing the accuracy of victim recall through a bounding procedure.

The NCVS underwent an extensive redesign process that culminated in 1992 with the introduction of a new crime screening procedure, the addition of new question to accommodate heightened interest in certain types of victimizations, and the incorporation of improvements to survey methodology.

Over the past 10 years, the capability of BJS to maintain the NCVS at the same level of precision and with a sufficiently large national sample to be able to detect low base-rate crimes, such as rape, has been reduced due to a full decade of flat-budgeting for BJS statistical programs. While resources have been diminishing, demands and expectations for new data from the survey have been growing. To assist in finding ways to improve the completeness and reliability of the survey while lowering costs, BJS convened a workshop on July 14, 1998. The discussion and review at this workshop has been invaluable in helping BJS develop a plan of action for the survey. This plan to revise the NCVS has a number of proposed elements including:

- Instituting a modular questionnaire design
- Eliminating questions to reduce respondent burden
- Eliminating the seventh interview and making appropriate adjustments to estimates
- Modifying procedures to enhance measurement of domestic violence

These proposed methodological revisions are discussed below. It should be noted that for some of the changes to be instituted, it will be necessary to implement computer-assisted interviewing across the entire NCVS sample. Currently, about 30% of interviews are now conducted using computer-assisted interviewing technology. BJS is working with the Census Bureau to convert to 100% computer-assisted interviewing, a process that will take some years to complete.

Instituting a modular questionnaire design

Some questions must be asked of every respondent, either because the information is required to classify the event into a type of crime, or because the number of potential respondents is small and therefore vital to producing reliable estimates. For other questions, however, it is possible to obtain sufficient information by asking the questions either from a subsample of respondents or by rotating batteries of questions through the survey over time. BJS is exploring a number of different modular questionnaire designs, including core and supplement, subsampling among classes of respondents and rotating panels of questions. These are described below.

Core and supplement

In this design, a core set of questions is asked of all crime victims each enumeration, and supplemental questions are asked on a rotating basis to obtain additional information. Supplements can be either more detailed questions on topics of special interest focused on a small sample of crime victims or respondents, (i.e. rape victims), or topics for which information is required only intermittently because the data are stable over time and there are enough cases to analyze (i.e. value of theft loss).

A number of supplements to the NCVS have been fielded to date: the National Survey of Crime Severity in 1977 to examine public perceptions of the severity of crime, the Victim Risk Supplement in 1984 to assess crime prevention measures that people take; the School Crime Supplement (in 1989, 1995, 1999 and planned again for 2001) to examine victimization and school safety issues; and the Police and Public Contact in 2000, to explore the nature of such contacts.

If the core and supplement design is adopted, it is expected that the number of supplements to the NCVS would increase and broaden in scope.

Subsampling among classes of respondents

In this design, sampling of respondents is done by the computer according to a preset algorithm. The purpose of such a procedure is to reduce costs and respondent burden. During the interview, using responses to survey questions, the computer would either direct the interview through or not through specified batteries of questions. For example, if reasons for not reporting crime are important to obtain for violent crime, but less important for property crime, it would be possible to ask the questions of all violent crime victims (using the responses to previous questions to filter the cases). The computer would select a subsample of property crime victims to be administered the battery of questions.

This kind of procedure requires full computer assisted interviewing technology, but has great potential for targeting questions to specific groups of respondents or for specific types of victimizations.

Eliminating questions to reduce respondent burden

As a first step in reducing cost and respondent burden, BJS is planning to eliminate NCVS questions deemed to be either of lesser analytical interest or peripheral to the overall goals of the survey. Some of the questions planned to be eliminated might be reinstated as supplements or as question modules once 100% computer interviewing technology is introduced. Question reduction is being instituted in two phases. In the first phase, questions will be removed from the NCVS-1 crime screening questionnaire beginning in July 2000. In the second phase, questions will be eliminated from the NCVS-2 Crime Incident Report. Because of the complex skip patterns used on this questionnaire, and associated reprogramming requirements, as well as the review needed to insure that no essential questions are dropped, the timing for this second phase has not been determined as yet.

The lists of questions to be removed during phase one, and being considered for removal under phase two are listed below:

Phase 1: NCVS-1 questions to be eliminated in July, 2000

Items 30-32: Lifestyle questions

Items 49-50: Crime Prevention/ neighborhood watch

Phase 2: NCVS-2 questions considering to be eliminated

Item 6: time of occurrence

Item 7: city/town of occurrence (keep outside US part)

Item 8: county/state of occurrence

Item 9: same county?

Item 17c: open or restricted area?

Item 18: indoors/outdoors

Item 19: how far from home

Item 30: threaten before attack?

Item 32: nongun weapon injuries

Item 33: which injuries

Item 38: insurance coverage

Item 43b: self protection help

Item 44: how help

Item 45: self protection hurt

Item 46: how hurt

Item 48: others help

Item 49: how help

Item 50: others hurt
Item 51: how hurt
Item 55: who first use force
Item 56: learn about offender
Item 57: how sure
Item 58: how learn
Item 51: know about offender
Item 69: tell police about offender
Item 72: other offenses
Item 83: tell police about offenders
Item 87: other offenses
Item 105: how value property
Item 108: value of recovered property
Item 109: reported to insurance
Item 110: property damage
Item 111: repair/replace
Item 112: repair cost
Item 113: repair cost
Item 114: who pay for repair
Item 117: why not reported
Item 118: most important reason
Item 119: why reported
Item 120: most important reason
Item 124: later contact with police
Item 125: who initiated contact
Item 126: how contacted
Item 127 police follow up
Item 128: complaint to police
Item 129: arrest
Item 130: victim aid
Item 131: private/government agency
Item 132: contact w/ criminal justice system
Item 133: which part
Item 134: expectation of action
Item 143: time lost from work
Item 144: how much time lost
Item 145: lost pay
Item 146: how much pay lost
Item 147: other time from work lost
Item 148: how much time
Item 149: lost pay
Item 150: how much pay lost
Item 151: other household member lost pay
Item 152: how much pay lost

Eliminating the seventh interview and possibly including the first interview, and making appropriate adjustments to estimates

Currently and historically, households in sample for the NCVS remain in sample for 7 visits over 3 years. The first visit is used strictly to bound subsequent interviews to ensure that incidents reported actually occurred during the 6 month reference period. One proposal to reduce survey costs was to include the bounding interview for production of estimates and eliminate the seventh interview, which experience has shown to be less productive. There are many issues to consider in deciding whether to implement this change. For example, adjustments would be required to account for changes in victimization rates caused by the change in methodology. Additionally, the impact of including the bounding interview would have to be examined.

BJS is soliciting your comments concerning the impact of these proposals upon

Modifying procedures to enhance measurement of domestic violence

All household members age 12 and older residing in sample households are interviewed for the NCVS each 6 months. This procedure, which has been in place since the survey's inception in 1972, may have negative impacts upon the willingness of some crime victims to report victimization by family members since they know that the offender will be asked the same questions. One modification being studied by BJS and the Census Bureau would entail dropping households from the sample after the first report of domestic violence.