



Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report

Family Violence

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Family violence has been receiving increasing attention from citizens, policymakers, the media, and the criminal justice system. This report looks at the difficulties in estimating the extent of family violence in the United States and the findings about family violence from one of the Nation's statistical series on crime, the National Crime Survey (NCS). NCS does not measure all family violence, but it is striking to discover that a number of victims do describe their experiences with family violence to survey interviewers in response to questions not specifically designed to explore this subject.

Estimating the extent of family violence

Family violence can be approached from a number of different perspectives: criminal justice, psychology, sociology, and economics, as well as statistics. In reviewing the literature generated by these approaches, however, it quickly becomes apparent that we know relatively little from a statistical perspective about the extent and nature of violence within the family.

One basic difficulty in developing accurate statistical information on family violence is defining what is to be measured. There is little disagreement about extreme cases when a family member is killed or seriously injured by another family member. There is disagreement, however, about the kinds of behaviors that are regarded as acceptable for disciplining children and resolving conflicts among or between family members. For example, when does spanking change from an act of discipline to an act of child abuse? And at what point does a person's abusive

Family violence is a serious problem about which little is known with any certainty. That is changing, however, in no small part because of the efforts of the Attorney General's Task Force on Family Violence. The Bureau of Justice Statistics has sought to assist the work of the Task Force by bringing together available criminal justice data on family violence.

There are two methods of measuring the extent of crime in the United States: the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), which use police statistics, and BJS's National Crime Survey (NCS), which involves a national survey of 60,000 households. Neither of these two methods is particularly well-suited to estimating the incidence of family violence, so the figures presented here cannot and, in fact, should not be used to estimate directly the extent of family violence in the United States.

It is striking, though, that the National Crime Survey uncovers about 450,000 cases of family violence each year through a technique originally designed to measure such

crimes as burglary, robbery, larceny and aggravated assault. Undoubtedly, many more cases are unreported to either police or survey interviewers because victims do not perceive the abuse as criminal, they feel too much shame to report it, or they feel hopeless about the possibility of stopping the abuse.

The estimates in this report, derived from the National Crime Survey, are not intended to be used as estimates of the level of family violence that exists in the United States. Rather, they are estimates of the amount of family violence that people considered to be criminal in nature and that the victims chose to and were able to relate to survey interviewers.

We hope this report will encourage open discussion of a problem that has been handled with secrecy in the past. Only when more victims are willing to talk about their experiences will we be able to develop accurate measures of this problem and begin as a society to develop effective solutions.

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behavior toward family members cross the line between an undesirable action and a criminal action?

Various studies have produced widely varying estimates of the magnitude of the problem of family violence. A major reason for the divergence of such estimates, aside from any methodological issues, is the perspective from which the problem is examined. Family violence is a criminal justice issue as well as a social, moral, and psychological issue. An estimate of the number

of persons who have suffered psychological as well as physical abuse will be larger than an estimate of persons who have been criminally abused as long as some forms of abuse are thought to be outside the scope of the criminal justice system.

Measuring family violence

Various methods have been considered for estimating the extent of family violence. Neither of the two national statistical series that measure

the incidence of crime, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reports or the BJS National Crime Survey, can provide complete estimates on the overall incidence of family violence. The number of incidents of family violence reported here cannot be considered as a measure of the true extent of the problem; rather, it highlights the seriousness of the problem of family violence if about 450,000 family violence victimizations are reported annually to a survey neither specifically designed for that purpose nor entirely adequate to that task.

Research findings

Some data are available from professionals who work with victims of family violence at the local level. However, little of this information has been compiled at the national level (although some estimates of child abuse are available from such organizations as the American Humane Society). The difficulty with developing national estimates on the extent of family violence from such administrative statistics is that there is great variation among cities and States as to whether separate records are kept, who keeps them, and what they include. Administrative statistics on both child abuse and violence among other family members are strongly affected by the extent to which programs are available to deal with these problems, the number of professional workers assigned to work on them, the extent of attention given to developing careful statistical records, and the ways in which various abusive behaviors are classified. Therefore, it is often the case that those jurisdictions recording the highest incidence of family violence are the ones addressing these problems to the greatest extent.

Attempts have been made to develop statistical estimates of family violence from national surveys. But these estimates typically derive from larger research projects designed to study family violence only incidentally, as just one of the various methods a family may use for resolving conflict;¹

¹For example, Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, in a study entitled *Behind Closed Doors: Violence in the Family*, interviewed more than 2,000 couples about how they deal with conflict. The authors estimated that between 1.8 and 5.7 million couples annually experience violence, ranging from any at all to severe violence. Their statistics vary depending upon which questionnaire items are included in an overall violence index. Also, various studies have been performed at the State and local level. For example, a telephone study of 1,793 Kentucky women estimated that more than 169,000 Kentucky women had experienced at least one incident of spouse violence at some time in their marriage. A number of characteristics of this abuse were determined; it was theorized that the experiences of these women are similar to that of women in other States.

further, these studies define family violence very broadly.

Another method sometimes considered for obtaining information on the sensitive subject of child abuse or family violence is "network sampling." With this method, survey respondents indicate whether they know personally of any families in which there is child abuse or family violence. Respondents may report events in their own family in this way, without revealing that they are self-reporting, as well as reporting known events in their neighborhood. These techniques produce incidence estimates but without a means to verify the reliability or validity of information obtained. There is an obvious problem of multiple counting—the same case of abuse might be known to a number of families who are respondents in the survey. Also, the kinds of behaviors or the time frame involved remain unknown when people state that they know of a case of abuse.

Uniform Crime Reports

Crimes reported to the police are compiled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR). Police departments report crime data to the FBI, including serious offenses and arrests. Offense data reported to the FBI and included in the FBI Crime Index are limited to eight crimes: homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft, and arson. Offense data on crimes that may be family violence, such as non-aggravated assault, are not reported to the FBI. The UCR is also limited by the fact that not all crime is reported to the police; in 1982, only about a third of all crime was reported. Also, if a crime is reported to the police, they may not classify it as one of the serious crimes that are included as offenses reported to the FBI. Data about the relationship between the victim and the offender, including familial relationships, are collected only for the crime of homicide. As shown in table 1, the UCR showed that almost 17% of the 21,012 homicides reported in 1982 were committed by family members of the victim, compared to almost 30% by acquaintances and 17% by strangers. In 28% of the homicides reported to the FBI in 1982, the relationship between the victim and offender was unknown. Thus, it is not possible to use national statistics from police departments to develop complete family violence estimates.

The National Crime Survey

The National Crime Survey (NCS), sponsored by the Bureau of Justice

Statistics, annually collects information on criminal victimization, whether or not the event was reported to the police, as a part of its overall objective of measuring the incidence of crime in the United States. The survey thus offers the potential for providing statistical information about various aspects of family violence, but only for those events that a victim is willing to report to a crime survey.

NCS interviews are conducted in 60,000 households throughout the United States. Each person in the household (a total of about 132,000 individuals) is asked a series of screening questions about whether he or she has been a victim within the past 6 months of any of the measured crimes. If a person answers affirmatively to any of the screening questions, a detailed incident questionnaire is administered for each incident. Households in the sample are interviewed every 6 months for a period of 3 years, allowing the survey to track serial victimizations.

The survey findings indicate, though, that family violence may be significantly underreported, both for survey methodological reasons and because of the sensitive nature of the subject. Among the many possible reasons for the apparent underreporting are the following:

- Many victims of family violence do not perceive their experiences as crimes.
- Although interviewers are encouraged to interview each respondent privately if possible, there may be other family members present during the survey interview. If the offender is present, the chances diminish that the victim would feel free to describe the event.
- Many victims of family violence are reluctant to speak of their experiences

Table 1. Percent of homicides reported to UCR, by victim's relationship to offender, 1982

Victim's relationship to offender	Percent
Husband	3.4%
Wife	4.8
Mother	0.6
Father	0.7
Daughter	1.0
Son	1.7
Brother	1.1
Sister	0.2
Other family	3.3
Acquaintances	29.7
Friend	3.4
Boyfriend	1.4
Girlfriend	1.9
Neighbor	1.6
Stranger	16.9
Unknown relationship	28.1
Total	100.0

Note: Because of rounding, percentages may not add to total.

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Crime Reports, 1982.

because of the shame and revulsion they feel about the matter.

The National Crime Survey asks a series of screening questions that are phrased in nontechnical language to determine whether the person has been a victim of rape, robbery, or assault. The survey respondent is expected to report all events, regardless of whether the offender is a stranger, acquaintance, friend, or relative. Since the survey includes crimes not reported to the police, it permits, but does not necessarily result in, measurement of family crimes in which the police were not involved.

The most difficult information to obtain from such survey methodology is information on child abuse. When the National Crime Survey methodology was developed, research was conducted to determine whether accurate statistical data could be obtained from children using self-report techniques. A proxy method of questioning the parent or other adult for children aged 12 and 13 was developed; information was not obtained at all from children under age 12; thus we have no data on child abuse for these children from NCS.

Additional research is currently being performed to determine whether newer survey methodology can be used to acquire information from younger children. However, there are a number of problems in interviewing young children about their experiences as victims of any type of crime. Professionals working with abused children have found that a high level of trust is necessary for the child to feel free to describe what has happened to him or her. A survey interviewer who spends only a few minutes in the home or on the telephone asking general screening questions is unlikely to be able to establish the required trust in the brief time that is available. These problems are compounded further when the offender is a parent or other relative. The offender may be present during the interview, making it even more unlikely that the child would describe abusive experiences.

Since the National Crime Survey screening questions are designed to measure behaviors that people regard as crimes, estimates of family violence from the survey reflect only those forms of abuse that victims are willing to label as criminal and report to interviewers. Despite its limitations, the

²Crimes of burglary, motor vehicle theft and larceny are also measured, but these events are not relevant to a consideration of family violence. Homicide is not measured by the NCS, but data on homicide by family relationship is available through the Uniform Crime Reports. See table 1.

survey is useful in describing statistically the general characteristics of such family violence.

The National Crime Survey collects and maintains information about crime involving family members, other relatives, acquaintances and strangers. Findings for all relatives are included in this analysis, with the relationship of the people involved indicated where appropriate. In the survey, the offenders related to the victim are coded into the following categories: spouse or ex-spouse, parents, children, siblings, and "other," the last for persons that the victim reported as being related in other ways.³

The estimates in this report, derived from the National Crime Survey, should not be used as estimates of the level of family violence in the United States. Rather, they are estimates of the amount of family violence that people considered to be criminal and that victims chose to and were able to relate to survey interviewers.

A relative of the victim was identified as the offender in 7% of all violent victimizations measured by NCS during 1973-81. This translates to 4.1 million violent victimizations by relatives during the 9-year period (table 2).

Victimization rates by relationship of victim to offender

Relationship	Rate per 1,000 victims age 12+
Relative	3
Acquaintance	12
Stranger	21

National Crime Survey findings about the nature of family violence

As stated above, the characteristics of family violence and its victims described in this report represent only those victims who considered the events to be criminal and chose to report them to NCS survey interviewers. We do not know whether these characteristics represent all family violence as it exists in the United States. Overall, the National Crime Survey shows:

- Crimes by spouses or ex-spouses make up the majority—57%—of all crimes committed by relatives measured by the survey (table 3). The NCS questionnaire does not separate spouse and ex-spouse offenders, so these categories must remain combined in this analysis.

³When the category "other" is addressed in the analysis, it will be enclosed in quotation marks—i.e., "other" relatives, to distinguish it from different uses of the term.

Table 2. Estimated family violence reported to NCS, by relationship of offender to victim

Relationship	1973-81 total	Yearly average
Total by all relatives	4,108,000	456,000
Spouses or ex-spouses	2,333,000	259,000
Parents	263,000	29,000
Children	173,000	19,000
Brothers or sisters	351,000	39,000
Other relatives	988,000	110,000

All estimates rounded to nearest thousand.

- Of the crimes committed by relatives measured by the NCS, 88% were assaults, 10% were robberies, and 2% were rapes. Of the assaults, about a third were aggravated, indicating use of a weapon and/or a serious injury. The remaining two-thirds were simple assaults, indicating either a minor injury or a threat of harm.

- About a quarter of the victims of attack by their spouses or ex-spouses reported that they had been the victim of a series of similar crimes (at least three) within the previous 6 months. Such serial victimization occurs at the hands of parents, siblings, or "other" relatives to a somewhat lesser degree (15%, 13% and 11%, respectively). By contrast, persons violently victimized by nonrelatives (i.e., acquaintances or strangers) were victims of a series of similar crimes in only 9 percent of all victimizations.

Reporting family violence to police

- Of those responding to the NCS, victims of violent crime by relatives stated that they reported the crimes to the police at a higher rate than did the victims of crimes by nonrelatives (56% vs. 45%). This finding is contrary to the expectation that victims of violent

Table 3. Relationship of victim and offender in NCS crimes of violence, 1973-1981

Relationship	Percent of all violent crimes	Percent of violent crimes by relatives
Total	100.0%	
Total by relative	7.2	100.0%
Spouse/ex-spouse	4.1	56.8
Parent	0.5	6.4
Child	0.3	4.2
Brother/sister	0.6	8.5
Other relatives	1.7	24.1
Acquaintance	32.7	-
Stranger	58.2	-
Don't know relationship	1.9	-

Note: In victimizations in which there was more than one offender (7% of all victimizations by related persons), the victimization was classified as committed by the closest relative involved, with spouse or ex-spouse being the closest, followed by parent, child, brother or sister, other relatives, and nonrelatives. Any group of offenders that included at least one related person was included in the analysis. For example, if three people assaulted the victim (e.g., a brother, a cousin, and an unrelated person), the relationship to the victim was classified under the "brother or sister" category.

crimes by nonrelatives are more likely to report to police. However, we know that many victims of family violence report their victimization to neither the police nor NCS. A theory that could explain the higher than expected reporting rate of family violence is that victims who report family violence to the NCS are more likely to have reported these events previously to the police because they have already defined such violence as criminal and thus are willing to report it to interviewers as well as to the police.

- Those victims of family crime that did not report the crimes to the police but did report it on the survey were, nonetheless, highly sensitive about their victimization. The most common reason (59%) for not reporting the crime to the police was the belief that the crime was "a private or personal matter." The next most common reason, fear of reprisal, was indicated by 13% of those not reporting to the police.

- As table 4 shows, victims of violent crime by relatives and victims of violent crime by nonrelatives differed greatly in their reasons for not reporting crimes to the police. Victims of family violence report that the matter was a private or personal matter much more often than other victims.

Characteristics of victims of family violence

- NCS data show that women were victims of family violence at a rate three times that of men. In fact, violent crimes between siblings was the only category for which males and females were victimized about equally. Interestingly, while males appear to attack "other" male relatives about as often as they do females, females attack "other" female relatives about three times as often as they do other male relatives.

- Of all spousal violent crimes reported to NCS, 91% were victimizations of women by their husbands or ex-husbands, who acted alone while committing the offense. Five percent were victimizations by wives or ex-wives alone; the remainder were primarily victimizations by a spouse or ex-spouse in concert with another offender.

- Judging from incidents reported to interviewers, lower income persons and those in the 20-34 age range were more likely than other age or income groups to be victims of family violence. No difference was detected in the victimization rates of blacks and whites for violent crimes by spouses or ex-spouses (table 5); however, blacks reported violence by relatives other than spouses to a higher degree than did whites.

Table 4. Percent of violent victimizations not reported to the police, by reasons for not reporting

Reasons for nonreporting	Related offenders	Unrelated offenders
Private or personal matter	59%	23%
Fear of reprisal	13	5
Nothing could be done, lack of proof	8	19
Police would not want to be bothered	8	8
Not important enough	7	28
Reported to someone else	5	15
Did not want to get involved	1	3
Too inconvenient or time-consuming	1	3
Other reasons	18	21

Note: Because some respondents gave more than one answer, the totals are greater than 100%.

- Although divorced and separated people make up only 7% of the population age 12 and over, about 75% of the spousal violence reported in the survey involved persons who were divorced or separated. Because limitations in the data make it impossible to determine whether the incidents occurred before or after a marital separation, this finding is open to several interpretations. It is possible that women who were still married at the time of the interview were either much more reluctant than divorced or separated women to report violence committed by their spouses or else less likely to consider such violence a criminal act. A related theory is that divorced or separated women feel more free than married women living with their spouses to discuss violence by their ex-spouses that preceded their separation or divorce. Alternatively, it may be that after a separation or divorce, men commit

Table 5. Family violence by spouse or ex-spouse, by victim characteristics, 1973-81

Characteristic	1973-81 total	Average yearly rate per 1,000 population
Total	2,333,000	1.5
Sex		
Male	155,000	0.2
Female	2,177,000	2.7
Income		
Less than \$7,500	988,000	2.6
\$7,500-14,999	650,000	1.4
\$15,000-24,999	335,000	0.9
\$25,000 or more	155,000	0.7
Age		
Under 16	*	*
16-19	165,000	1.1
20-34	1,528,000	3.2
35-49	496,000	1.6
50-64	110,000	0.4
65 and over	28,000	0.1
Marital status		
Married	554,000	0.6
Widowed	*	*
Divorced /separated	1,746,000	16.8
Race		
White	2,030,000	1.5
Black	277,000	1.6
Other	26,000	1.1

Note: Detail does not add to total shown because of rounding and/or missing data. Estimates are rounded to nearest thousand.
*Estimate based on about 10 or fewer sample cases, too few cases to obtain statistically reliable data.

more violence against their ex-spouses than they did while still married. Another possibility is that divorced or separated women perceive actions to be criminal that they did not view in that way while living with their husbands.

Characteristics of family violent crime

- Crimes by spouses and ex-spouses are almost always committed by the offender acting alone; however, crimes by siblings and by "other" relatives are committed by two or more offenders a significant part of the time (18% and 15%, respectively).

- About 57% of the spousal assaults reported to the NCS were actual attacks; the rest were attempted attacks or threats of violence. In contrast, only about 38% of all other victimizations by relatives were completed assaults.

- Reports to survey interviewers indicate that weapons were used in about 30% of all violent crimes by relatives (table 6). Weapon use was

Table 6. Percent of reported family violence victimizations, by weapons used

Type of weapon	All family violence	Spousal violence
Weapon	31%	26%
Gun	11	9
Knife	9	8
Other	10	8
Not known	3	2
No weapon or don't know	69	74

Note: In 1% of victimizations, offenders had more than one type of weapon.

slightly lower in crimes between spouses or ex-spouses; the offending spouse used a weapon in about 25% of all such crimes. In those incidents in which the offending spouse used a weapon, it was about equally likely to be a gun, or a knife or some other object used as a weapon.

- About half of the victims of family violence (49%) reported being injured in the attack (table 7), though 80% of the injured said that they suffered no worse than cuts and bruises. Persons victimized by all other related (nonspouse) persons or unrelated persons suffered

Table 7. Percent of family violence victimizations in which victims were injured, by type of injury

Type of injury	All family violence	Spousal violence
Any injury	49%	58%
Knife or gunshot wounds	2	1
Broken bones or teeth knocked out	3	4
Internal injuries, knocked unconscious	3	4
Bruise, black eye, cuts, scratches, swelling	43	52
Other	8	9

Note: Detail adds to more than total because many victims reported more than one type of injury.

injury in a lesser percentage of victimizations (38% and 27%, respectively). In 20% of all spousal violent crime, the victim needed or obtained medical attention: 8% from a doctor, 9% from a hospital emergency room, and 3% from overnight hospital care.

● Victims resisted about 75% of attacks by their relatives, but this resistance usually took a passive form, such as trying to reason with the offender or trying to get away or obtain help (table 8). Victims of attacks by relatives offered active resistance (using or trying to use physical force or a weapon) about half as often as passive resistance.

Conclusion

In spite of the obstacles a victim faces in acknowledging family violence, a significant amount of domestic violence is reported to NCS interviewers. Considering that during a 9-year period 4.1 million victimizations committed by relatives have been reported to a government agency (either the police, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, or both), and that a substantial number of these occurred at least three times during a 6-month period, it is apparent that family violence is a significant

Table 8. Percent distribution of self-protective measures employed by victims of family violence, by type of measure

Type of measure	All family violence	Spousal violence
Some resistance	73%	75%
Active	23	22
Passive	46	49
Other	4	4
No resistance	27	25

problem of large, and currently ill-understood, proportions.

Much work remains to be done before the problem of family violence is thoroughly understood. Historically, the problem is one that has been surrounded by secrecy and shame; many victims never talk about it to anyone. Knowledge of the incidence of family violence, like other crimes about which individuals are silent, may never be complete.

As more public attention is focused on the problem and as more programs are offered to deal with it, however, victims may become more willing to talk about it, and increasingly accurate measures of the true extent of family violence will be possible. BJS will continue efforts to improve the National Crime Survey as a means of increasing knowledge about family violence.

In many respects, there are similarities between the development of information about family violence and about rape. Until recently, rape was a subject that was rarely discussed. Many victims were afraid to report it to the police or to mention it to anyone. As public attention has focused on the problem and programs were developed to help rape victims, many victims became more willing to talk about it. Thus, it became possible to develop more accurate statistical measures. As family violence comes to be discussed and dealt with more openly, it should lead to similar improvement in the ability to measure and understand this serious problem.

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Public-use tapes of BJS data sets and other criminal justice data are available from the Criminal Justice Archive and Information Network, P.O. Box 1248, Ann Arbor, Mich. 48106, (313/764-5199).

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