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Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin

The Prevalence of Crime

The effect of crime is not limited to its immediate victims. The families of the victims suffer along with them, sharing their pain, hardship, sense of violation, and the aftermath of fear that crime can cause. This report explores a new way of looking at persons affected by crime, a measure of how many Americans—victims and the people who live with them—are touched each year by crime.

More than 24 million households—almost a third of the households in the Nation—were touched by crime in 1980. A similar proportion of households has been victimized by crime in each of the 6 years, 1975-80, for which the measure has been calculated. The percent of households touched by crime has remained basically stable over the past 6 years, not only for crime as a whole but for individual types of crime as well. In fact, there was a slight decrease—from 32.0 to 30.0 percent—between 1975 and 1980 in the overall percentage (figure 1). This decrease

March 1981, NCJ-75905
Households touched by crime is a new statistical indicator measuring the pervasiveness of crime. It was developed from preliminary estimates from the National Crime Survey (NCS). **Measuring Crime**, February 1981, describes the NCS and the crimes on which the indicator is based: rape, robbery, assault, personal and household larceny, burglary, and motor vehicle theft. Copies are available from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, Washington, D.C. 20531.
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Acting Director

new "households-touched-by-crime" indicator is one of pervasiveness and consistency. A large minority of American households experiences crime each year, although most of them experience it in a nonviolent form. There is great stability in the patterns from year to year, while the trend for the period as a whole seems to be downward. Race appears to have less to do with exposure to crime than does income or place of residence. A rural residence does appear to afford some protection against both crimes of violence and crimes of theft, but it is clear that all Americans are at risk to an extent previously unknown.

does not mean there were fewer crimes. Crime measured by the National Crime Survey (NCS) has risen every year since the survey started, but the proportion of American households that experienced this crime has remained about the same.

The pattern that emerges from an examination of 6 years of data for the

Detailed findings

Most households touched by crime are victims of larceny (theft). NCS classifies larcenies into two types: household and personal. A household theft occurs when something is taken from the home or immediate vicinity by someone with the right to be there, such as a babysitter or domestic. A personal larceny may be pocket picking

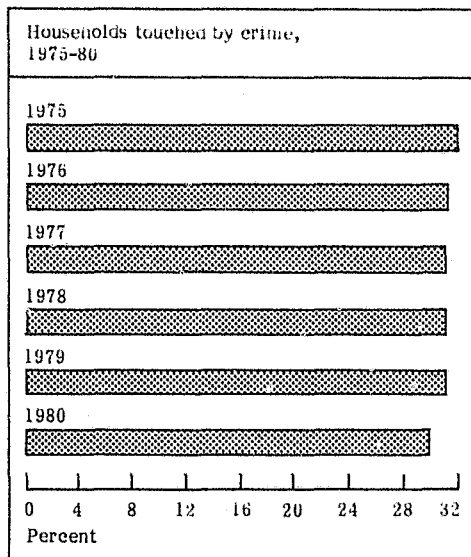


Figure 1

	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980
Percent of households touched by:						
All crimes	32.0	31.5	31.3	31.3	31.3	30.0
Rape	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2
Robbery	1.4	1.2	1.2	1.1	1.2	1.2
Assault	4.5	4.4	4.7	4.6	4.8	4.4
Personal larceny	16.4	16.2	16.3	16.2	15.4	14.2
Burglary	7.7	7.4	7.2	7.2	7.1	7.0
Household larceny	10.2	10.3	10.2	9.9	10.8	10.4
Motor vehicle theft	1.8	1.6	1.5	1.7	1.6	1.6
Households touched by crime (thousands)*	23,377	23,504	23,741	24,277	24,730	24,222
Households in U.S. (thousands)	73,123	74,528	75,904	77,578	78,964	80,822

NOTE: Detail does not add to total because of overlap in households touched by different crimes (see text). *These figures may not compute to percents shown because of rounding.

Percent of households touched by crime, by type of crime, 1975-80

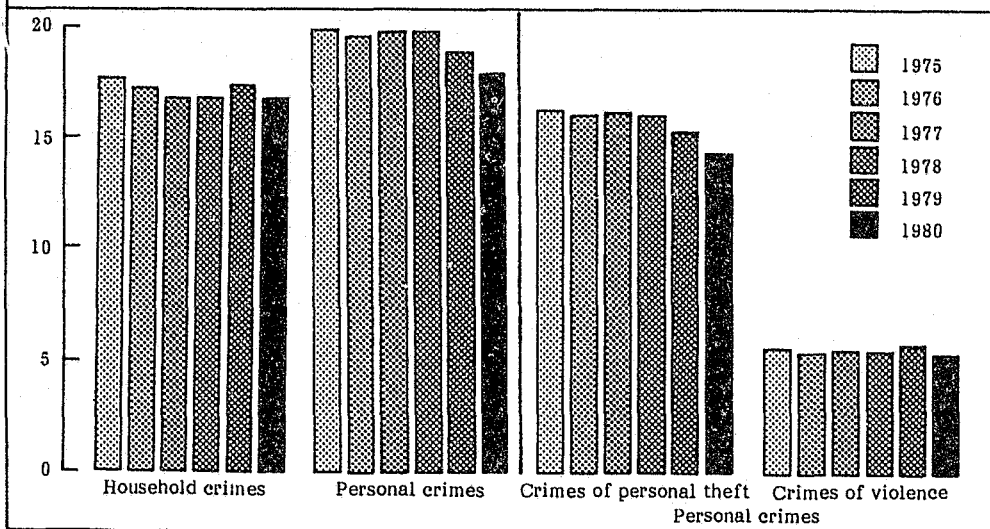


Figure 2

or purse snatching (personal larceny with contact) or the theft of a personal object from the office or some other place away from home (personal larceny without contact). In 1980, 14 percent of all households had an individual member victimized by a crime of theft (figure 2); 10 percent of all households were victimized by household theft.

In almost all households touched by personal theft, the theft was personal larceny without contact. In each year from 1975 through 1980, pocket picking and purse snatching touched less than 1 percent of American households. The only crime less prevalent than pocket picking and purse snatching was rape, which affected 2 out of each 1,000 households (0.2 percent) each year. Robbery struck just about 1 percent of American families annually in the 1975-80 period, while a household member was the victim of assault in less than 5 percent of all households during these years. Further, there was very little overlap among these crimes. An average of only 3 out of 1,000 households (0.3 percent) was touched by more than one of the three violent crimes (rape, robbery, or assault).

Among household crimes, burglary was not as prevalent as household theft, while motor vehicle theft was not as prevalent as burglary. Around 10 percent of American households were touched by household theft in each of the 6 years, 7 percent by burglary, but less than 2 percent by auto theft.

There was some indication that relatively more black households than white were victimized by crime during the 6-year period, but the differences were very small (figures 3 and 4). In general,

the percentages for both groups hovered around 30 throughout 1975-80. Black households were slightly more likely to have been burglarized or to have had a member victimized by violent crime. White households, on the other hand, were slightly more likely to have had a member who had been a victim of personal larceny without contact. On the whole, however, black and white patterns were remarkably similar. This also held true for the small number of households composed of other racial groups.

Income of households appears to have very little to do with the likelihood of their experiencing violent crime or burglary. However, the higher the income, the more likely households are to experience other crimes of theft. This is

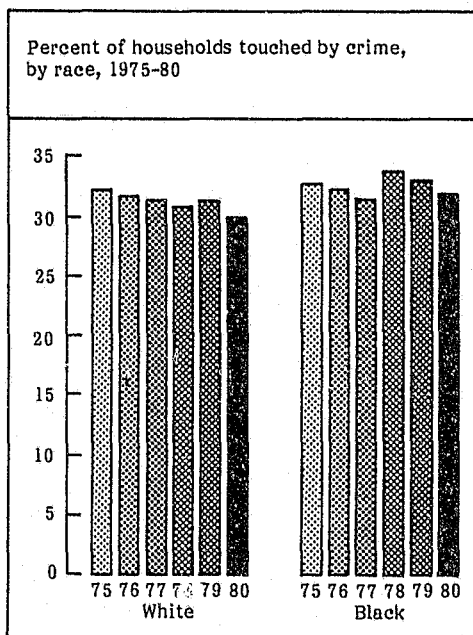


Figure 3

especially true for personal theft without contact, which touched only 9 percent of households with incomes below \$7,500, but 21 percent of households where family income is over \$25,000.

Households in standard metropolitan statistical areas (SMSA's) are more likely to be touched by crime than those in small towns and rural areas.¹ Whether located in the central city or in the suburbs, 1 out of every 3 metropolitan households is likely to be touched by crime during the year, compared to 1 out of 4 households in small towns or rural areas. This pattern holds for all types of crimes.

There is some indication that central-city households are more subject to the household crimes—burglary, household larceny, and motor vehicle theft—than their suburban counterparts. In terms of personal crimes, whether violent crime or theft, suburban dwellers lose their advantage and are touched by crime as often as their urban counterparts. One likely explanation for this is that the geographic range of the daily activities of urban and suburban individuals may overlap considerably even though their homes are at some distance from one another.

The indicator

The Bureau of Justice Statistics developed the indicator, households touched by crime, in an attempt to answer the question "What proportion of the American people is affected by crime?" This indicator measures the impact of crime throughout the Nation by estimating the number (and percent) of households that were victims of burglary or theft, or in which individual household members were victims of a crime of violence or theft during the year. The household was chosen as the unit of analysis because the entire household is affected when an individual is the victim of a crime: by the injury, the economic loss, the inconvenience, and the feeling of vulnerability.

Other measures of crime are in the form of volume or rates. Statistics on the volume of crime have limited usefulness, unless the size of the population base is taken into account. Rates—expressed in the National Crime Survey as crimes per 1,000 households or crimes per 1,000 persons—automatically correct for different population sizes

¹An SMSA generally is made up of a core city or cities with a combined population of 50,000 or more inhabitants and the surrounding county or counties that share certain metropolitan characteristics.

but they do not show whether a given level of crime within a given population is widely spread or highly concentrated.

A comparable situation exists in health statistics. Neither the number of colds in a single year (volume) nor the number of colds per 1,000 persons (rate) tells us anything about the number of persons who had colds, since we don't know how many people had several colds or how many people went through the year with no colds at all. To carry the analogy a little further, one household may go through the year with all of its members in the best of health. In another household, one person may have had a couple of colds; another, the flu; and still another, the measles. If we were measuring households experiencing illness, the second household would be counted once, even though several of its members were ill and one was ill more than once. If we were measuring separately all households experiencing colds, all households experiencing the flu, and all households experiencing the measles, the second household would be counted once in each group.

So it is with the measurement of households experiencing crime. For

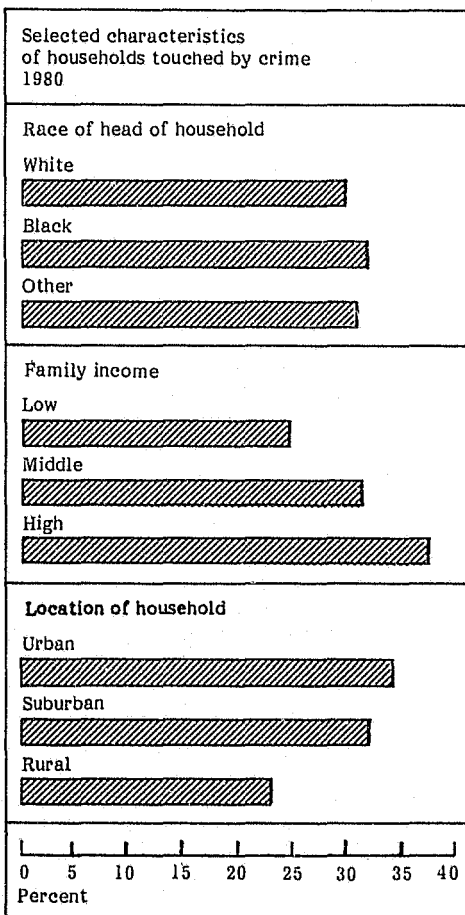


Figure 4

each type of crime examined, a household is counted only once regardless of how many times that household was victimized. For example, if a household was burglarized twice and one of its members was robbed once during the year, it is counted once for households touched by burglary even though it was victimized twice by burglary. It is also counted once for households touched by robbery. Finally, it is counted once in the overall measure, households touched by crime. For instance, the households-touched-by-crime estimate for 1980 (30%) is less than the sum of the estimate for households touched by personal crimes (18%) and the estimate for households touched by household crimes (17%), because 5 percent of the households in the U.S. were victimized by both personal and household crimes (figure 5). Similarly, because almost 2 percent of U.S. households were touched both by personal crimes of theft and by crimes of violence, the sum of households touched by crimes of theft (14%) and households touched by crimes of violence (6%) exceeds the estimate of households touched by personal crime (18%) (figure 6).

Further refinements of the indicator will allow examination of the number of households subjected to a crime of violence or theft more than once in a single year, as well as the number of households touched more than once by the same crime in the same year. We will also be able to measure exposure to crime by family size and for single-person households.

Eventually we may be able to learn how often a household is touched by crime during a longer period of time. For example, how many of the households among the 30 percent touched by crime in 1980 were also among those touched by crime in 1979 and in previous years? Is a household touched by a crime of violence more than once in a single year likely to have several members who were victims or one member who was victimized several times? The answers to these and other questions about the prevalence of crime should do much to tell us how crime is distributed among its victims.

The methodology

All data in *The Prevalence of Crime* are from the National Crime Survey. The Bureau of Justice Statistics contracts with the U.S. Bureau of the Census to collect and compile the survey data. The estimates are preliminary because final data for 1980 were not available when this report was

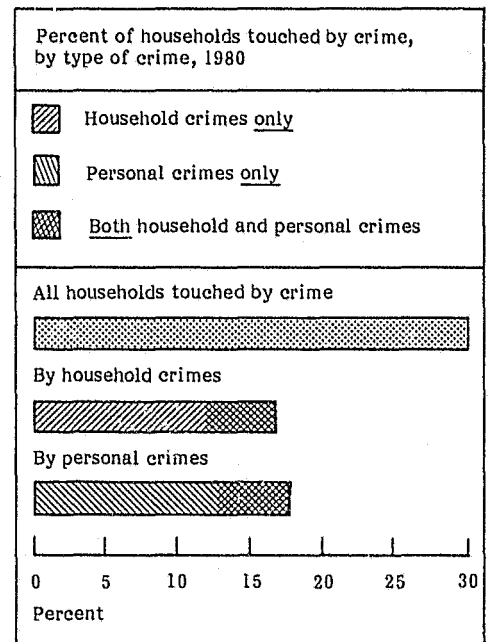


Figure 5

prepared. Past experience with victimization data indicates that the procedure used for calculating preliminary estimates introduces relatively little error into the estimation process. However, based on our experience, preliminary estimates will tend to understate any unusual changes in the incidence of crime that take place late in the year.

As "households" is used throughout this bulletin, it is the technical equivalent of "residence" or "occupied living quarters" because no attempt was made to locate a household that moved during the course of an interview period. Instead, the household that replaced it at the same address was interviewed for

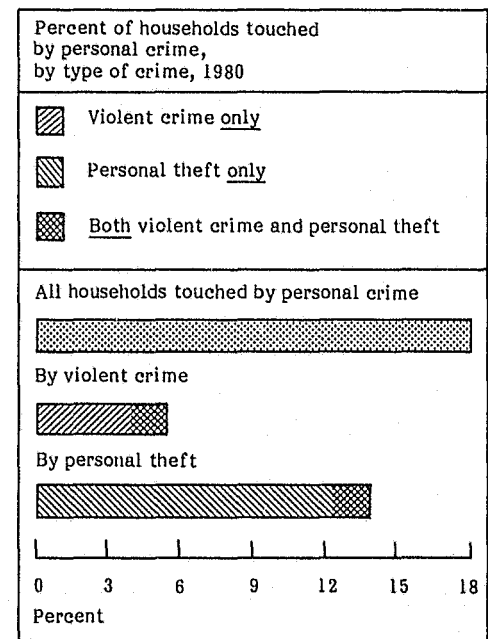


Figure 6

the remainder of the year. Biases produced by households moving during the year affect the estimates to a minor degree since only about 20 percent of all households move during a typical year. The term "family" has been used as synonymous with "household." Actually, 75 percent of all households are families, 22 percent are individuals living alone, and 3 percent are groups of unrelated individuals.

Because the estimates in The Prevalence of Crime are derived from sample survey data, they are subject to sampling variation.² The special techniques

²Details of the NCS sample design, the customary estimation procedure for victimization rates and counts, and standard error computation may be found in appendix III of the report Criminal Victimization in the United States, 1978, available from BJS.

used to derive these estimates produce standard errors about 8 percent higher than those for a victimization estimate with the same base and rate. Estimates of households touched by crime are also subject to respondent errors. Examples are crimes that are forgotten or withheld from the interviewer and therefore cannot contribute to the estimates of residences touched by crime. In general, respondent errors tend to understate the actual number of households touched by crime.³

The Bureau of Justice Statistics plans to publish households-touched-by-crime

³A more detailed description of the procedures used to estimate households touched by crime appears in an unpublished memorandum prepared by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, which collects and compiles the NCS data. The memorandum is available on request from BJS.

statistics on a regular basis. This indicator, in combination with the traditional measures of volume and rate, should enhance the ability of both policy-makers and the public to assess the dangers crime poses to our society.

Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletins are prepared and written by the staff of the Bureau. The idea was originated by Carol B. Kalish, who maintains editorial oversight. Marilyn Marbrook, head of the Bureau publications unit, administers production. Although several staff members made substantial contributions to The Prevalence of Crime, Michael R. Rand is the principal author. Special tabulations were prepared at the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE : 1981 O - 344-894 : QL 3

U.S. Department of Justice
Bureau of Justice Statistics

Official Business
Penalty for Private Use \$300

Postage and Fees Paid
U.S. Department of Justice
Jus 436



Washington, D.C. 20531

Bulletin