

# SAMPLE SURVEYS OF THE VICTIMS OF CRIME\*

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## ABSTRACT

*The Bureau of the Census is currently conducting sample surveys to measure the incidence of crime. Using a rotating panel design, the residents of 10,000 households are interviewed each month, in order to generate quarterly and yearly estimates of the victimization rate for rape, robbery, assault, burglary, larceny, and auto theft. In addition, a panel of commercial establishments is contacted each month, in order to probe the robbery and burglary experiences of such organizations. Parallel studies have been conducted in each of twenty-six major cities. During 1972-1974, interviews were conducted with the residents of 10,000 households and representatives of 2,500 commercial establishments in order to produce jurisdiction-specific victimization estimates for each community. Attitude questionnaires were administered to subsamples of city residents as well. This article summarizes the data that are available, notes some of their conceptual and methodological limitations, and presents a compendium of documents which should be consulted by prospective users.*

## BIOGRAPHY

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In July 1972, the Census Bureau began one of the largest interview programs ever conducted: the crime victimization surveys of the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration. The national survey is designed to generate estimates of quarterly and yearly victimization rates for individuals, households, and commercial establishments. In addition, special surveys have been conducted in twenty-six communities, producing victimization rates and other crime data for many of the nation's major central cities. While the city surveys are "one shot" cross-sectional studies of the experiences of their citizens during a particular year, the national program is on-going; the residents of 10,000 households are interviewed each month in a rotating panel design, producing continuous reports of the crime experiences of ordinary citizens. The individual and household interview schedules are designed to elicit detailed accounts of six categories of offenses: rape, robbery, assault, burglary, larceny, and auto theft. The commercial survey instrument focuses upon only two crimes, burglary and robbery. In addition to the personal or organizational characteristics of the victims of these offenses, the data include self-reports of the value of stolen property, the extent of personal injuries, medical costs, insurance claims and collections, the restitution of lost property, the attributes of offenders, the reporting of incidents to the police, and self-defensive measures taken by victims. Attitude questionnaires were administered to one-half of the respondents over sixteen years of age in the city survey; these questionnaires probe perceptions of crime, the fear of crime, and the effect of crime upon personal mobility. Because these studies are intended to gather information about relatively rare events—serious crimes—the samples are very large. Tapes containing the data are now being prepared by the Bureau of the Census, and soon will enter the public domain.

This report describes these samples, and advances a few ideas about the data and their organization. It also summarizes key methodological problems about which users should be aware, and lists several publications which refer to the survey.

## THE NATIONAL HOUSEHOLD SAMPLE

The household sample focuses upon the victimization experiences of persons as individuals and as collective units. The households in the sample were chosen through a multi-stage stratified cluster procedure. In addition to standard dwelling units and mobile homes, the sample may include group quarters such as flop houses, communes, and dormitories. The households are divided into panels of approximately 10,000 units, one of which is interviewed each month. All household members twelve years of age and over are questioned about their experiences during the preceding six months. Reinterviews are conducted with each panel for up to three years, then the panel is dropped from the sample and replaced by a new group of respondents.

The heart of the interview schedule is the "incident screen," a list of questions probing the experiences of each respondent. Individuals are asked eleven questions, including:

(During the last six months) Did you have your pocket picked, or purse snatched?

Did anyone beat you up, attack you, or hit you with something such as a rock or a bottle?

In addition, a household informant is quizzed about burglaries, auto thefts, and other incidents which are treated as victimizations of the group as a whole. Each affirmative response to a screen item is followed up by a series of detailed questions which elicit reports about the incident, perceptions of the offender, and consequent financial losses and physical disabilities. The resulting information is used to catalogue the event: the data to be released by the Census Bureau are coded in one of thirty-six categories, which can be recombined to produce analytic typologies or to create classifications compatible with those employed by the F.B.I. in *Uniform Crime Report*.

## THE NATIONAL COMMERCIAL SAMPLE

The commercial study focuses upon burglary and robbery. The national sample was selected by a stratified, multi-stage cluster procedure conducted by the Business Division of the Bureau of the Census. The sample potentially includes a broad range of organizations. In addition to retail establishments, it may include wholesale suppliers, manufacturing establishments, museums and theatres, medical centers, coal mines. In principle, the 1972 break-in of the Democratic National Committee's headquarters could have been included in the data. However, these establishments were chosen from a sampling frame developed in 1948. Although it was somewhat updated in 1964 (primarily in large cities), the age of the sampling frame is a major weakness of this phase of the victim study.

The selection procedure yielded an initial sample of 14,000 interviewed commercial units. In each place, owners or managers are questioned about events which victimized the organization during the preceding six months; robberies of employees or customers are treated as individual rather than commercial crimes, although injuries to the former "in the line of duty" are recorded. The commercial respondents are divided into six panels, but unlike the household sample, the commercial group is not rotated.

## THE CITY HOUSEHOLD SAMPLES

In addition to the national household and commercial surveys, interviews were also conducted in twenty-six major cities. These communities were selected for a variety of reasons: some because they were the focus of special federal crime-reduction programs, some because they are large and have an extraordinary impact upon the crime rate of the nation as a whole, and others because they gave the collection a good geographical and demographic spread. A list of these cities and the dates during which interviews were conducted in them is presented in Table 1.

Households in each of the cities were selected from 1970 Census computer tapes which contained information about the units which entered the sample. They were chosen at random in predetermined proportions to fill 100 strata defined by the race and income of their heads, whether they owned or rented their quarters, and the size of

Table 1

Victim Survey Cities

Cities Interviewed July - September, 1972

Atlanta  
Baltimore  
Cleveland  
Dallas  
Denver  
Newark  
Portland, Oregon  
St. Louis

Cities Interviewed January - March, 1973

Chicago  
Detroit  
Los Angeles  
New York  
Philadelphia

Cities Interviewed January - March, 1974

Boston  
Buffalo  
Cincinnati  
Houston  
Miami  
Milwaukee  
Minneapolis  
New Orleans  
Oakland  
Pittsburgh  
San Diego  
San Francisco  
Washington, D.C.

the family group. This sample was updated by the inclusion of a randomly-selected group of units chosen from lists of building permits issued since the 1970 Census. Again, the range of households eligible for inclusion was wide, primarily excluding residents of jails and households already selected for the national survey. Response rates for the city samples were quite high, averaging about 95 percent of all households which could have been

questioned. Each city sample numbers about 10,000 interviewed households and 21,000 individual respondents. Each respondent was quizzed about his or her victimization experiences during the preceding twelve months. It is important to note that data from the city studies refer to the experiences of city residents, not to crimes which took place in those cities. Incidents reported in the surveys include many which took place elsewhere, while crimes which victimize commuters, tourists, and others who do not live within the boundaries of the central city are necessarily excluded by the nature of the sampling frame. Among other things, this makes it perilous to compare survey victimization figures with official police statistics.

### THE CITY COMMERCIAL SAMPLE

Commercial establishments were selected in each city using the Census of Business sampling frame that was employed in the national sample. Interviewers were sent to selected areas of each community to compile lists of all visible establishments. Samples of these units were chosen, taking care to avoid establishments which belonged to the national commercial sample. Areas which had been annexed to the central cities since 1948 were examined for commercial areas, which were also sampled. Interviews were conducted with owners or managers, gathering information about burglaries or robberies which had affected their operations during the previous twelve months. The refusal rate was low, averaging less than four percent. In the end, representatives of about 2,500 commercial establishments were interviewed in each of the twenty-six cities.

### DATA ORGANIZATION

There are several ways to organize data collected in the victim surveys, some of which are necessary for answering certain questions, but are inefficient for probing others. The largest files will contain information on all interviewed units, including those which were victimized and those which were not. Household files of this type will be hierarchical: each record will contain data describing the household and its head, which will be followed by descriptions of a varying number

of individuals in the household, each of whose attributes will in turn be followed by a varying number of data characters describing their victimization experiences, if any. Files of this sort may be utilized to examine differences between victims and non-victims of various offenses. Smaller and more efficient files may be constructed to explore the characteristics of victims or incidents only. For example, an Incident File would link the attributes of each incident with those of its victim; an individual or household would be in the file as often as they were the target of a crime, and there would be one record for each incident. Such a file could be used to explore the characteristics of incidents (Were they reported to the police, or not?) and the relationship between the attributes of incidents and the attributes of their victims (Were the victimizations of whites more likely to be reported than the victimizations of blacks?).

Incident Files as well as "full files" containing information on all respondents will be released by the Bureau of the Census. In every case the records will include weights which must be used to adjust them to their proper proportion in the population. The weights reflect the probability of a unit being selected and they provide estimates for similar units which were not interviewed. In addition, incidents are weighted by the inverse of the number of victims they involved. Because crimes with two victims, for example, are twice as likely to be uncovered in a random sample of the population as those with only one victim, it is necessary to adjust for their differential chance of appearing in the data. The weights calculated by the Bureau of the Census also will provide population estimates of the frequency of each incident or victimization.

Also crucial to the organization of any data set from the national crime survey is the *time frame* to which it refers. Two concepts are important: the "collection period" and the "reference period" for a set of data. Because the interviews gather retrospective reports, information collected at one point refers to some prior period of time, always six months in length in the national study. Data for a particular calendar reference period—say, 1974—would be gathered from persons interviewed between February 1974 and June 1975. Those reports may be organized in Incident Files containing information about events which occurred within the reference period of interest. Files organized around persons or households, on the other hand, may contain incidents from variously overlapping reference periods, for reports gathered from respondents in more than

one collection period will refer to different calendar months. Unless only respondents from a single monthly panel are used in an analysis, the incidents in the file will have occurred during different parts of a year. This has serious implications if crime patterns are highly seasonal, or if there is a strong secular trend in the data. Reports gathered in each city study, on the other hand, share virtually identical collection and reference periods.

## METHODOLOGICAL CAVEATS

Users of the crime survey data should be aware of two clusters of methodological problems which plague any survey effort of this type: non-recall and mis-recall. The focus of the crime surveys has been the incident, an event which is presumed to have a reality apart from its interpretation by its participants and the intrusion of interviewer and questionnaire upon its verbal reconstruction. Because the survey must use people to gather information about these events, several important social and psychological processes are in fact at work in this reconstruction effort.

The first difficulty is that the survey does not elicit self-reports of all the events which it purports to measure. There is evidence that it under-enumerates minor or unsuccessful offenses, incidents which have not occurred recently, events which were initiated by their eventual victim or in which the victim shares blame, and crimes of violence and theft which involve friends, neighbors, lovers, or family members. Some of this may be due to memory failure; people forget trivial or temporally distant events of all sorts. Some may be definitional; the targets of theft or violence within acquaintanceship circles may not think of themselves as "victims" or their antagonists as "criminals." Many events may be under-reported as well because people choose not to tell the interviewer about them. These phenomena were investigated in a series of "reverse record checks" in which victims of crime (as recorded in police files) were questioned in order to determine if the event would be recalled in the interview. Assaults within family and friendship networks often were not recalled, even though they previously had been brought to the attention of the police. In addition, analysis of reports of victimization during the 1973 reference period suggests that black respondents may be under-recalling less serious

offenses, especially those in the assault category. Data on interpersonal violence in the crime surveys must be interpreted with care.

In addition to the non-recall problem, errors are often encountered in the reports which are made to the interviewers. One major source of error is temporal telescoping, a phenomenon always encountered in survey studies which attempt to reconstruct past events. All survey studies of crime employ reference periods, spans of time for which respondents are asked to recall their experiences. There is a strong tendency on the part of many of those questioned to bring into the discussion events which occurred *outside* of the reference period—to “telescope forward” events which happened before it began, and to “telescope backward” those which took place after the cut-off point. The resulting figures then overestimate the crime rate for the period as a whole. *Within* the reference period, this leads us to overestimate the rate during the earliest and latest months as well. The only solution to the problem is to increase the saliency of the bounding points. In the national crime panel, this is accomplished by the use of a bounding interview. Data collected during the first visit of an interviewer to a household are not used for estimation purposes; rather, the data used in the subsequent interview to establish a benchmark for the reference period. During each successive reinterview of a panel, the interviewer inquires about events which have taken place since the last visit. This technique, accompanied by the scheduling of interviews immediately following the close of the reference period, generates much more accurate (and lower) estimates of the crime rate.

The difficulty is that the interviews in the city studies were unbounded. Respondents in each of the twenty-six cities were asked to recall their experiences for the preceding year, but that recall period had not been demarcated by the visit of an interviewer. Because the city studies were not designed as panel efforts, future interviews in the same cities will be unbounded as well. This serves to inflate estimates of the crime rate for these cities relative to those established by the national panels, and the two should not be compared. A related problem is that a portion of the interviews included in the national data were unbounded as well. The national panel is a sample of physical, not social, households. The persons interviewed are those who happen to inhabit those spaces, and when they move they usually are replaced in the sample by those who succeed them in the same dwelling. These new residents are treated as

replacements for those who lived there previously, and interviews with them are used in the crime-estimation process even though these interviews were unbounded. This will serve to inflate artificially the estimated crime rate. In addition, there is some evidence that *unbounded* interviews will be less accurate in their temporal placement of events within the reference period.

There are a number of other problems common to survey work which plague the crime survey data. The telephone has been used extensively to conduct interviews with hard-to-reach respondents, and there is no good evidence of the effect of this upon the quality and quantity of the data. Panel attrition is a serious problem, for in a highly mobile society a three-year rotation cycle is a long one. Despite the relatively large size of the samples covering a particular reference period, the number of incidents which were uncovered in many crime categories is often painfully small. For example, the survey turned up only 22 rapes in New York City and 54 in Detroit. While these produced city-wide estimates of 5,800 and 2,500 rapes respectively, the standard errors of population estimates based upon such sample *n*'s are very large, it is impossible to do any detailed analyses of the characteristics of events in these categories. Finally, many of the perceptual items and self-reports of behavior gathered in the survey are of unknown reliability and validity. Data on the attributes of offenders are particularly suspect, for the proportion of victims offering “don't know” responses to questions about the age and race of their assailants is very low.

For all of their difficulties, the victimization surveys represent a bold attempt to bypass traditional official sources of information about crime and to gather often experimental new data on the experiences of ordinary citizens. As the data are more fully analyzed, feedback about its strengths and weaknesses, and new ideas about problems which need to be explored and methodologies which are appropriate to the task, will help shape the future of the survey program.

## REFERENCES AND NOTES

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