

# Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin

## Households Touched by Crime 1981

September 1982

Close to 25 million households—30% of the Nation's total—were touched by a crime of violence or theft in 1981. The percentage was identical in 1980 and only 2 percentage points lower than in 1975, the first year for which this statistic was computed (figure 1). This indicator reveals that victimization by crime is one of the most common negative life events a family can experience. A family is more likely to have one of its members victimized by rape, robbery, or aggravated assault than to have its home catch fire.

The kinds of households that were the most vulnerable to crime in 1975—black households, higher income households, and households in central cities—remained so in 1981. In 1981, as in the past 6 years, larcenies were the most pervasive of the measured crimes: more than 20% of all U.S. households were victims of at least one larceny. In addition, 7% of all households were the target of at least one completed or attempted burglary, and members of 6% of the households were victims of violent crime, either by strangers or family members/acquaintances (figure 2). Eleven percent of all households were touched by crimes of "high concern"—household

This is the second year that the Bureau of Justice Statistics has presented a new national indicator of the extent of crime in the United States—specifically, the number of American households touched by crime. The data are drawn from our National Crime Survey (NCS) in which Bureau of the Census interviewers ask persons in more than 60,000 households about their individual victimization

experiences. The data have proved remarkably stable over the past year and in earlier years dating back to 1975: One out of eight of the Nation's households was a victim of violent crime (by strangers, family members, or acquaintances) or of household burglary.

Benjamin H. Renshaw III  
Acting Director

burglary and violent crime by strangers (rape, robbery, or assault).

The households-touched-by-crime indicator was introduced by the Bureau of Justice Statistics in 1981. It was developed to improve our understanding of the impact of crime on our society.<sup>1</sup> Measures of the amount of crime have existed for many years, but these measures have not shown how crimes were distributed among groups

<sup>1</sup>The Prevalence of Crime, Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin, NCJ-75905, March 1981.

within the U.S. population. The household was chosen as the unit of analysis because the effects of crime are not limited to the victim alone but are also felt by other members of his or her household.

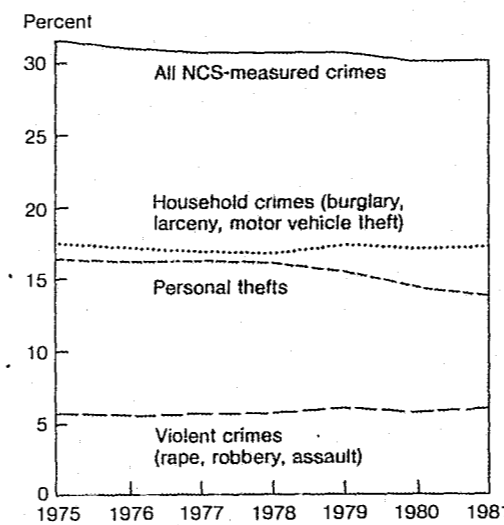
Households-touched-by-crime statistics are derived from National Crime Survey (NCS) data on rape, personal robbery, assault, household burglary, larceny, and motor vehicle theft.<sup>2</sup> Homicide data are not included in this analysis, but their exclusion does not noticeably affect the estimates presented here. If each of the approximately 22,000 homicides that occurred in 1981 had touched a different household and these households had been touched by no other crime (the largest possible effect), the result would not raise the overall percentage of households touched by crime (30%).<sup>3</sup>

Other crimes against citizens—such as fraud, confidence games, and kidnaping—were not included because no reliable measures are available for either the number of such crimes that occur or the number of households victimized by these crimes.

A household is counted as touched by a crime if it was the victim of that crime at least once during the year. For each type of crime examined, a household is counted only once. For example, if one household member was robbed once during the year and another was assaulted twice, the household would be counted as being touched once by robbery and once by assault. It would,

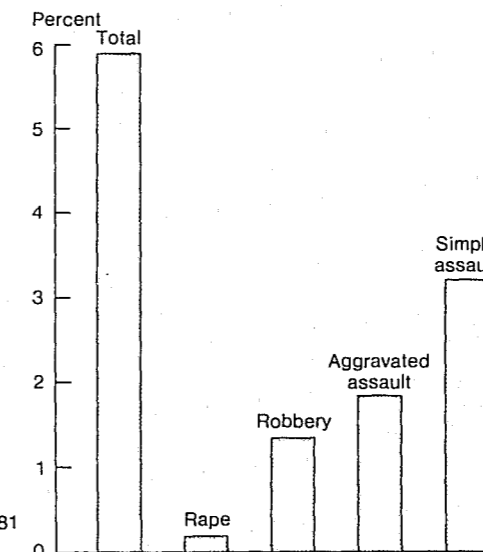
<sup>2</sup>These crimes are defined in *Measuring Crime*, BJS Bulletin, NCJ-75710, February 1981.

<sup>3</sup>Estimate derived from *Uniform Crime Report, 1981 Preliminary Annual Release*, FBI, April 1981.



Note: Types of crime add to more than total because of overlap in households touched by different crimes (see text).

Households touched by crime, 1975-81  
Figure 1



Percent of households touched by crimes of violence, 1981  
Figure 2

U.S. Department of Justice  
National Institute of Justice

84406

This document has been reproduced exactly as received from the person or organization originating it. Points of view or opinions stated in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the National Institute of Justice.

Permission to reproduce this copyrighted material has been granted by  
Public Domain/ Bureau of Justice  
Statistics/US Dept. of Justice

to the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS).

Further reproduction outside of the NCJRS system requires permission of the copyright owner.

however, be counted only once as touched by crimes of violence and only once in the overall measure of households touched by crime. Consequently, the estimate for "households touched by crimes of violence" and the overall measure, "households touched by crime," will be less than the sum of the component parts.<sup>4</sup>

If one considered the entire range of crimes committed in the United States, every citizen and household is touched by crime, at least economically. For example, crimes against businesses, such as shoplifting, employee theft, and embezzlement—all exact an economic cost from the Nation's households through increased prices in the marketplace and through taxes to pay for law enforcement and other criminal justice activities.

If every household in the Nation pays an economic price for crime, then that third of the Nation's households victimized by crimes of violence or theft bear an extra burden. However, not all Americans face the same risks of becoming a crime victim. In 1981, as in previous years, chances of crime victimization were related to family income and location of residence.

#### Detailed findings

The decline—from 32% to 30%—in the overall touched-by-crime estimates between 1975 and 1981 reflects a decline—from 15.9% to 13.4%—in the estimate for personal larceny without contact (crimes in which personal property was taken from a place away from home, such as a restaurant or workplace). By contrast, the percentages of U.S. households that were touched by crimes of violence, burglary, household larceny, and motor vehicle theft were almost identical in 1975 and in 1981.

Almost half the households touched by violent crime in 1981 were touched only by simple assault, the least serious violent crime (table 1). About 3% of all American house-

<sup>4</sup>For further explanation of this overlap, see *The Prevalence of Crime*, BJS Bulletin, March 1981.

	Number (millions)	Percent
U.S. households	82.8	100.0
Households touched by:		
All crimes	24.9	30.0
Rape	0.2	0.2
Robbery	1.1	1.3
Assault:		
Aggravated	1.5	1.8
Simple	2.7	3.2
Larceny	17.7	21.4
Personal	11.5	13.9
Household	8.5	10.2
Burglary	6.1	7.4
Motor vehicle theft	1.3	1.6

Note: Percent detail does not add to total because of overlap in households touched by various crimes.

holds had members who were victims of rape, robbery, or aggravated assault.

In 1981, of the crimes of violence and theft measured by the NCS, personal larceny without contact affected the most households (13.4%). Household larceny (thefts of property kept in or around the home such as radios, lawn furniture, bicycles, and garden equipment) affected almost as many households (10.2%). Seven percent of U.S. households suffered burglaries, and almost 2% were victims of motor vehicle thefts. Pocket picking and purse snatching (personal larceny with contact) affected the fewest households of any crime of theft (0.6%).

Recent polls show that Americans are becoming increasingly fearful of crime. Violent crime by strangers (or street crime) and burglary are major sources of this public concern. To see how these crimes affect American households, violent crime by strangers and burglary were lumped into a single category called crimes of "high concern." A household was counted as touched by a crime of high concern if during the year it was burglarized at least once or a household member was the victim of a rape, robbery, or assault by strangers.

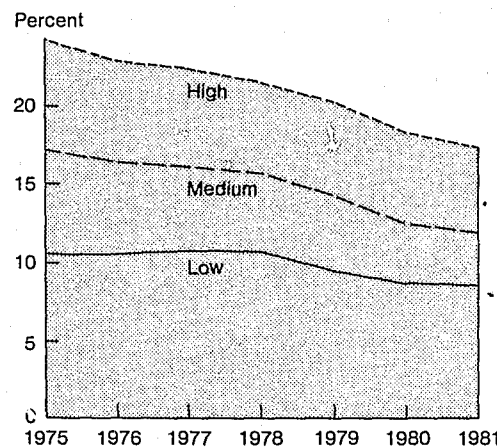
In 1981, more than 10% of all U.S. households were touched by a crime of high concern. Most of these victimized households were touched only by burglary (7%); about 4% of the households in the Nation had members that were victimized by crimes of violence by strangers. Less than 1% of U.S. households suffered both burglaries and violent crime by strangers. Crimes of high concern were more prevalent—

- among black than among white households,
- among urban than suburban or rural households, and
- among households with incomes under \$7,500 than over \$15,000.

Within Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas (SMSA's), households in central cities were more likely to be touched by crime than households in suburban parts of SMSA's, which were more likely to be touched by crime than households in rural areas.<sup>5</sup> Household larceny was more prevalent among households in central cities than among suburban or rural households, but personal larceny without contact was slightly more prevalent in suburban households than in urban households. Urban households were more likely than suburban households to have members who were victims of violent crime, in part because robbery was more than twice as prevalent among urban as among suburban households (2.5% vs. 1.1%). Residents of rural areas were less likely than residents of suburban areas to be victimized by any type of crime.

In 1981, personal larceny without contact continued to be the only type of crime for which there were large differences among income levels in the percentage of house-

<sup>5</sup>An SMSA is generally made up of a core city or cities with a combined population of 50,000 or more inhabitants (called the central city) and the surrounding counties that share certain metropolitan characteristics (called suburban areas). Areas outside SMSA's are termed rural for this bulletin.



Households touched by personal larceny without contact, by family income, 1975-81  
Figure 3

holds touched by crime. The percentage of households with incomes above \$25,000 that were touched by this crime type was more than double that of households with incomes below \$7,500 (20.0% vs. 8.6%) (figure 3). No substantial differences were uncovered among income levels for crimes of violence, but households with incomes below \$7,500 were more vulnerable to burglary and less vulnerable to household larceny than households with higher incomes.

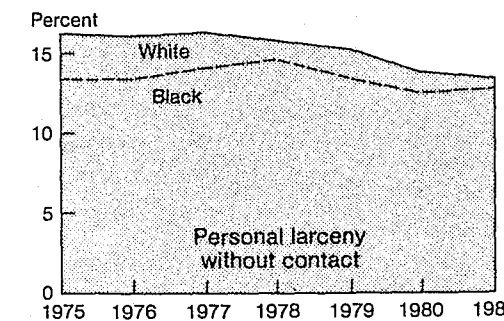
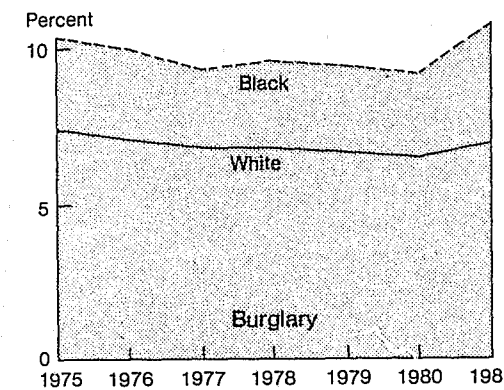
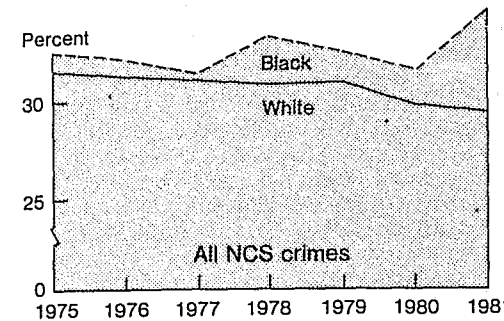
In 1981, a higher proportion of black than white households were touched by crime (34.8% vs. 29.4%), a change from 1980 when there was only a marginal difference between the two groups (figure 4).<sup>6</sup> Robbery and burglary were more likely to touch black than white households, but larceny was just as likely to strike white as black households (figure 5).

#### Relationships between crime incidence and households touched by crime

The households-touched-by-crime indicator shows the distribution of crime across the population, and crime volume data show how much crime is occurring. By

<sup>6</sup>The seeming increase in the percent of black households touched by crime between 1980 and 1981 (31.8 vs. 34.8) did not prove to be statistically significant.

	Incidents (millions)	Households touched (millions)	Ratio
All crimes	37.7	24.2	1.6:1
Violent	5.1	4.5	1.1:1
Rape	0.2	0.2	1.0:1
Robbery	1.0	1.0	1.1:1
Assault	3.9	3.6	1.1:1
Larceny:			
Personal	14.2	11.4	1.2:1
Household	10.2	8.4	1.2:1
Burglary	6.8	5.6	1.2:1
Motor vehicle theft	1.4	1.3	1.1:1

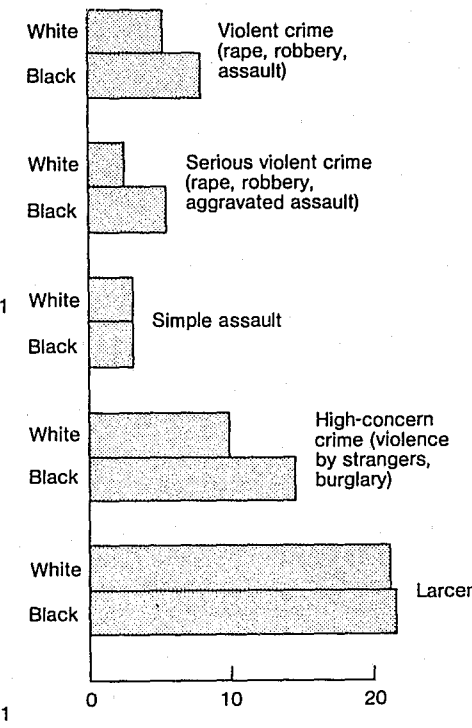


Households touched by selected crimes, by race of household head, 1975-81  
Figure 4

combining these measures and computing a ratio of the number of incidents to the households touched by those incidents, we gain insight into the extent of multiple victimization of households. A ratio of 1:1 would mean that every household victimized was victimized only once in a single year. Ratios greater than 1:1 reflect the degree to which the average household touched by crime is victimized more than once in a single year.

In 1980, the composite incident-to-households-touched ratio for all crimes was 1:1.6; that is, the average touched household experienced 1.6 incidents (table 2).<sup>7</sup> The ratios for individual types of crime were much lower, ranging from 1:1.0 to 1:1.2. The low ratios for the individual crime types, in conjunction with the higher ratio for all crimes, indicate that relatively few households were multiple victims of the same type of crime in 1980 but that a great many households were victims of at least two different crimes during that year.

<sup>7</sup>NCS incident data were not yet available for 1981, so 1980 incident and households-touched data were used for this aspect of the analysis.



Percent of households touched by crime, by race of household head, 1981  
Figure 5

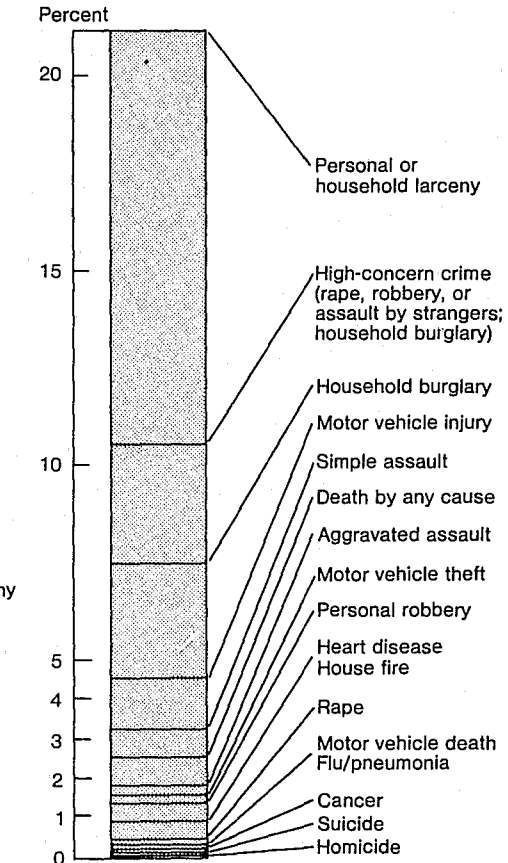
#### Comparison to other life events

How does the risk of becoming a crime victim compare to other common risks? At present, victimization is one of the few adverse life experiences for which a household-based measure is available. Most other experiences are measured as incidents or events. While there are measures of motor vehicle and other accidents and of diseases contracted, there are no estimates of the number of American households in which members were injured in accidents or contracted a disease. Using the existing incident-based data, rough approximations of households touched by accident, disease, and death were produced in order to put crime victimization in a perspective that allows risk comparisons.<sup>8</sup> (These estimates, in fact, overstate the numbers of households touched by each life event, since no means exist for identifying those households that experience multiple incidence of that event in a given year.) Crime victimization is relatively common compared to a number of other negative life events American households experience (figure 6).<sup>9</sup>

Households are more prone to victimization by the crimes of high concern

<sup>8</sup>The approximations of households touched by various life events were made using estimates from the *Statistical Abstracts of the United States, 1979 and 1980*. For each event measured, a households-touched percentage was calculated by dividing the estimate by the number of U.S. households, producing the largest possible estimate of households touched by the event.

<sup>9</sup>It should be kept in mind when examining the chart that the noncrime items in the chart were computed solely to compare them with the crime risks and are only rough estimates of the levels of households touched by accident or disease.



Percent of households touched by crime and other negative life events in a year  
Figure 6

(burglary and violent crime by strangers) than to have a member injured in motor vehicle accidents, and are more likely to have a member victimized by a robbery than they are to have a member fall victim to cancer or heart disease.

#### Longer-term crime risks

What are the risks of victimization for periods longer than 1 year? At present, estimates of households touched by crime for periods longer than 1 year are not available. Using the data for 1980 and 1981, however, it is possible to produce a range that includes the percentage of households touched by crime at least once in the 2-year period. Since 30% of American households were touched in each year, the estimate of households touched in the 2-year period lies within a range of 30 to 60%, depending on the number of households that were touched in both years.

If we assume a 50% overlap between years, that is, half of the households victimized in 1980 were victimized again in 1981, then 45% of the households in the United States would have been touched by crime during the 2-year period.

Because the exact degree of overlap is unknown, the range of possibilities is large; however, examining some of these possibilities allows us to begin to understand the implications for the longer-term patterns of crime victimization. If the overlap between

years is small, that is, relatively few households touched in a year are again victimized in the next year, then close to half or even more of the Nation's households will have been touched by crime within 2 years. If the overlap is large and a great many households victimized in a given year are again victimized in the next year, then a sizeable fraction of people in the Nation bear the burden of crime.

#### Further reading

To be added to the bulletin mailing list or obtain copies of BJS reports referenced in this bulletin, write to the National Criminal Justice Reference Service, Box 6000, Rockville, Md. 20850.

#### Methodology

All data in Households Touched by Crime 1981 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.

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 an interview

Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletins are prepared principally by the staff of the bureau. Carol B. Kalish, chief of policy analysis, edits the bulletins; Marilyn Marbrook, head of the bureau publications unit, administers their publication, assisted by Julie A. Ferguson and Carol K. Shapiro. The principal author of this bulletin is Michael R. Rand.

September 1982, NCJ-84406

period. Instead, the household that replaced it at the same address was interviewed for the remainder of the year. Biases produced by households moving during the year affect the estimates to a minor degree because only about 20% of all households move during a typical year. The term "family" has been used as synonymous with "household." Actually, 75% of all households are families, 22% are individuals living alone, and 3% are groups of unrelated individuals.

Because the estimates in Households Touched by Crime 1981 are derived from sample survey data, they are subject to

sampling variation.<sup>10</sup> The special techniques used to derive these estimates produce standard errors about 8% 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 be included in the estimates of residences touched by crime. In general, respondent errors tend to understate the actual number of households touched by crime.<sup>11</sup>

The scope of analysis for this bulletin was expanded to topics of interest not covered in the original bulletin The Prevalence of Crime. In future years, we expect to continue to widen the examination of the households-touched-by-crime indicator to enhance our understanding of the way crime affects American citizens.

<sup>10</sup>Details of the NCS sample design, the standard error computation, and the customary estimation procedure for victimization rates and counts may be found in appendix III of the BJS report Criminal Victimization in the United States, 1979, NCJ-76710.

<sup>11</sup>A 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 the author at BJS.

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

THIRD CLASS  
BULK RATE



Washington, D.C. 20531

Bulletin

END