

# Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin

# Households Touched by Crime, 1985

Twenty-five percent of the Nation's households were touched by a crime of violence or theft in 1985, compared to 26% in 1984 and 32% in 1975, the first year for which this measure is available. Most of the decrease between 1984 and 1985 was the result of a decline in the percentage of households touched by personal theft. The percentage of households touched by rape, robbery, assault, burglary, auto theft, or household theft did not change measurably over the year (table 1).

The term "household" as used in this report refers to a dwelling unit and the people who occupy it. A household is considered "touched by crime" if during the year it experienced a burglary, auto theft or household theft, or if a household member was raped, robbed, or assaulted, or a victim of personal theft, no matter where the crime occurred. These offenses, which include attempted as well as completed crimes, are measured by the National Crime Survey, the source of this report.

Five percent of the households in the Nation had a member who was the victim of a violent crime in 1985 and a similar proportion of households was burglarized at least once during the year. Eighteen percent of all households were victims of a completed or attempted theft during the year.

In 1985, households with high incomes and households in urban areas were more vulnerable to crime than others. There is some evidence that black households were somewhat more vulnerable than white households. During 1985, 26% of black households,

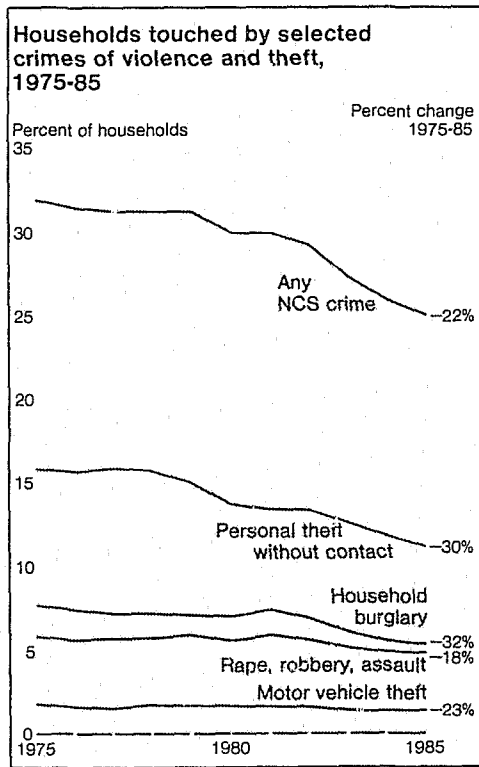


Figure 1

29% of households with incomes of \$25,000 or more, and 30% of urban households were touched by crime.

### Trends

The proportion of households touched by crime during 1985 (25%) was the lowest in the 11 years for which the indicator has been kept (figure 1). More than a million fewer households were touched by crime in 1985 than were touched by crime 11 years earlier,

June 1986

In 1985 crime touched 1 in every 4 American homes. More than 22 million households experienced a rape, robbery, assault, burglary, or theft. The encouraging news is that the proportion of American households touched by crime has dropped for 4 consecutive years.

In 1975, the first year for which this measure was available, nearly a third of American households were victimized by crime. By 1985 the actual number of households touched by crime had fallen more than a million, even though the number of households in the United States grew 16 million.

Clearly, crime remains a serious problem for our society. The evidence is that we are making progress, but much remains to be done.

Steven R. Schlesinger  
Director

despite an increase of about 16 million households in the Nation during that period (table 2).

During the same period the percentage of households touched by crime fell from 32% to 25%. The sharpest decreases came in the second half of the 11-year period, beginning in 1982, when 29% of all households were touched by crime. Suburban and rural households had greater relative decreases than urban ones over the 11-year period. The proportions of suburban and rural households touched by crime declined by 25% and 24% respectively between

**Table 1. Households touched by crime, 1985 and relative percent change since 1984**

| Households  | 1985                 |         | 1984                 |         | Relative percent change 1984-85 |
|---|----------------------|---------|----------------------|---------|---------------------------------|
|   | Number of households | Percent | Number of households | Percent |                                 |
| Total Touched by  | 88,852,000           | 100.0%  | 87,791,000           | 100.0%  |                                 |
| Any NCS crime   | 22,191,000           | 25.0    | 22,806,000           | 26.0    | -4%*                            |
| Violent crime   | 4,235,000            | 4.8     | 4,392,000            | 5.0     | -5                              |
| Rape  | 125,000              | .1      | 161,000              | .2      | -22                             |
| Robbery   | 842,000              | .9      | 914,000              | 1.0     | -9                              |
| Assault   | 3,488,000            | 3.9     | 3,566,000            | 4.1     | -3                              |
| Aggravated  | 1,246,000            | 1.4     | 1,308,000            | 1.5     | -6                              |
| Simple  | 2,459,000            | 2.8     | 2,542,000            | 2.9     | -5                              |
| Total theft   | 15,699,000           | 17.7    | 16,330,000           | 18.6    | -5*                             |
| Personal  | 10,233,000           | 11.5    | 10,776,000           | 12.3    | -6*                             |
| with contact  | 439,000              | .5      | 520,000              | .6      | -17**                           |
| without contact   | 9,910,000            | 11.2    | 10,353,000           | 11.8    | -5*                             |
| Household   | 7,240,000            | 8.1     | 7,467,000            | 8.5     | -4                              |
| Burglary  | 4,713,000            | 5.3     | 4,792,000            | 5.5     | -3                              |
| Motor vehicle theft   | 1,201,000            | 1.4     | 1,202,000            | 1.4     | -1                              |
| Crimes of high concern (a rape, robbery, or assault by a stranger, or a burglary) | 6,876,000            | 7.7     | 7,063,000            | 8.0     | -4                              |

Note: Detail does not add to total because of overlap in households touched by various crimes. Relative percent change is based on unrounded figures. Estimates for 1984 differ slightly from those published in Households Touched by Crime, 1984 to correct an error in rounding of weights.

\*Difference is statistically significant at the 95% level.  
\*\*Difference is statistically significant at the 90% level.

1975 and 1985, while the proportion for urban households fell by 17%.

**1984-85 changes**

The decrease in the percentage of households touched by any crime between 1984 and 1985 was largely caused by a decline in the percentage of households touched by personal theft (the theft of personal property from places away from the home). Apparent decreases for crimes of violence, burglary, household theft, and motor vehicle theft were not large enough to be statistically significant.

The decline in personal theft among black households was sufficient to reduce the overall percentage of black households touched by crime in 1985 (figure 2). A similar but smaller decline caused only a marginal decline in the percentage of white households touched by crime.

Households in urban and rural areas were relatively freer from crime in 1985 than in 1984 (figure 3). The change for rural households reflected the decrease in crimes of personal theft; the percentage of urban households touched by crime fell because relatively fewer were touched by "crimes of high concern" (violent crime—rape, robbery or assault—committed by strangers, or household burglary), although there was some indication that the percentage of urban households touched by theft (personal and household) decreased as well.

The proportion of suburban households touched by crime was unchanged in 1985, although there was some indication that relatively fewer suburban households were touched by crimes of personal theft.

Only households with incomes of \$15,000 or more experienced a reduction in the percentage touched by crime; this was due to a drop in the percentage touched by personal theft.

Single-person households were burglarized less frequently in 1985 than in 1984, and there is some indication that relatively fewer single-person households were victims of crimes of high concern in 1985 as well. The decrease in the percentage of two- to three-person households touched by a crime of theft was large enough to cause a marginal decrease in the overall percentage of these households touched by crime.

**Race of household**

Although in previous years a significantly higher percentage of black households than white households had been touched by crime, in 1985 the percentage of black households touched by crime was only marginally higher than the percentage of white households touched by crime (table 3).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>For this analysis, the race of the household is considered to be that of the household head.

**Households touched by selected crimes, by race of household head, 1975-85**

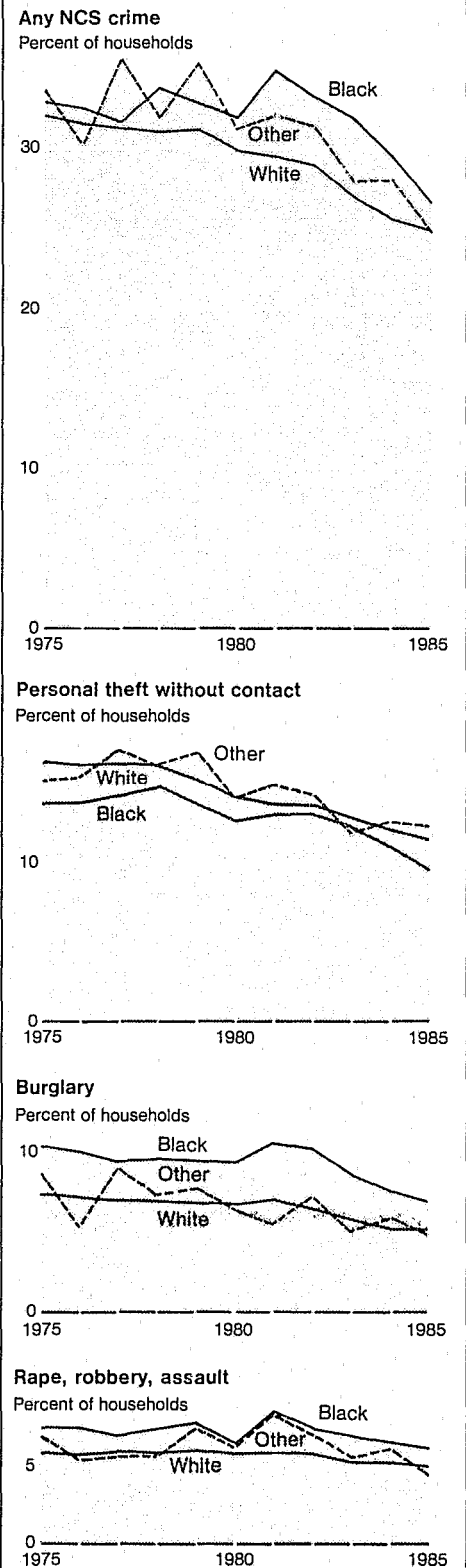


Figure 2

Black households continued to be more vulnerable than white households to violent crime (6% vs. 5%), burglary (7% vs. 5%), and household theft—theft occurring in or around the home (9% vs.

**Table 2. Number and percent distribution of households touched by crime, by type of crime, 1975-85**

| Percent of households touched by:         | 1975   | 1976   | 1977   | 1978   | 1979   | 1980   | 1981   | 1982   | 1983   | 1984   | 1985   |
|---|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Any NCS crime                             | 32.0%  | 31.5%  | 31.3%  | 31.3%  | 31.3%  | 30.0%  | 30.0%  | 29.3%  | 27.4%  | 26.0%  | 25.0%  |
| Violent crime                             | 5.8    | 5.6    | 5.7    | 5.7    | 5.9    | 5.5    | 5.9    | 5.6    | 5.1    | 5.0    | 4.8    |
| Rape                                      | .2     | .2     | .2     | .2     | .2     | .2     | .2     | .2     | .1     | .2     | .1     |
| Robbery                                   | 1.4    | 1.2    | 1.2    | 1.1    | 1.2    | 1.2    | 1.3    | 1.4    | 1.1    | 1.0    | .9     |
| Assault                                   | 4.5    | 4.4    | 4.7    | 4.6    | 4.8    | 4.4    | 4.7    | 4.5    | 4.2    | 4.1    | 3.9    |
| Personal theft                            | 16.4   | 16.2   | 16.3   | 16.2   | 15.4   | 14.2   | 13.9   | 13.9   | 13.0   | 12.3   | 11.5   |
| Household theft                           | 10.2   | 10.3   | 10.2   | 9.9    | 10.8   | 10.4   | 10.2   | 9.6    | 8.9    | 8.5    | 8.1    |
| Burglary                                  | 7.7    | 7.4    | 7.2    | 7.2    | 7.1    | 7.0    | 7.4    | 6.9    | 6.1    | 5.5    | 5.3    |
| Motor vehicle theft                       | 1.8    | 1.6    | 1.5    | 1.7    | 1.6    | 1.6    | 1.6    | 1.6    | 1.4    | 1.4    | 1.4    |
| Households touched by crime (in millions) | 23.377 | 23.504 | 23.741 | 24.277 | 24.730 | 24.222 | 24.863 | 24.989 | 23.621 | 22.806 | 22.191 |
| Households in U.S. (in millions)          | 73.123 | 74.528 | 75.904 | 77.578 | 78.964 | 80.622 | 82.797 | 85.178 | 86.146 | 87.791 | 88.852 |

Note: Detail does not add to total because of overlap in households touched by various crimes. Estimates for 1984 of the number of households differ slightly from previously published estimates to correct an error in rounding of weights.

**Table 3. Percent of households touched by crime by selected characteristics, 1985**

| Percent of households touched by:   | Race of household head |       |       | Annual family income |                  |                   |                  | Place of residence |          |       |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------|-------|-------|----------------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------|--------------------|----------|-------|
|                                     | White                  | Black | Other | Low                  | Medium           |                   | High             | Urban              | Suburban | Rural |
|                                     |                        |       |       | Under \$7,500        | \$7,500-\$14,999 | \$15,000-\$24,999 | \$25,000 or more |                    |          |       |
| Any NCS crime                       | 24.8%                  | 26.5% | 24.7% | 22.9%                | 24.2%            | 24.6%             | 29.1%            | 29.6%              | 25.8%    | 19.5% |
| Violent crime                       | 4.6                    | 5.8   | 4.2   | 5.9                  | 4.7              | 4.5               | 4.8              | 6.0                | 4.8      | 3.6   |
| Rape                                | .1                     | .2    | .2    | .3                   | .1               | .1                | .1               | .2                 | .1       | .1    |
| Robbery                             | .8                     | 2.0   | 1.2   | 1.2                  | 1.0              | .8                | .9               | 1.7                | .9       | .3    |
| Assault                             | 3.9                    | 4.0   | 3.0   | 4.9                  | 3.7              | 3.8               | 4.1              | 4.5                | 4.0      | 3.3   |
| Aggravated                          | 1.4                    | 1.8   | 1.1   | 2.1                  | 1.2              | 1.3               | 1.4              | 1.6                | 1.5      | 1.2   |
| Simple                              | 2.8                    | 2.5   | 2.1   | 3.4                  | 2.7              | 2.6               | 2.9              | 3.2                | 2.8      | 2.3   |
| Total theft                         | 17.7                   | 17.2  | 17.8  | 14.0                 | 16.9             | 17.8              | 21.8             | 20.2               | 18.9     | 13.6  |
| Personal theft                      | 11.7                   | 10.0  | 13.0  | 8.1                  | 10.3             | 11.3              | 15.5             | 12.9               | 12.7     | 8.6   |
| Household theft                     | 8.0                    | 9.4   | 6.6   | 8.1                  | 8.5              | 8.4               | 8.6              | 10.1               | 8.2      | 6.3   |
| Burglary                            | 5.1                    | 6.9   | 4.7   | 7.0                  | 5.5              | 4.8               | 5.1              | 6.8                | 4.9      | 4.4   |
| Motor vehicle theft                 | 1.3                    | 1.9   | 1.3   | 1.0                  | 1.1              | 1.4               | 1.7              | 1.9                | 1.4      | .7    |
| Serious violent crime <sup>a</sup>  | 2.2                    | 3.8   | 2.4   | 3.3                  | 2.3              | 2.1               | 2.3              | 3.3                | 2.4      | 1.5   |
| Crimes of high concern <sup>b</sup> | 7.5                    | 9.8   | 7.5   | 9.4                  | 7.7              | 7.3               | 7.9              | 10.1               | 7.5      | 5.9   |

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

<sup>a</sup>Rape, robbery, aggravated assault.  
<sup>b</sup>A rape, robbery, or assault by a stranger or a burglary.

**Households touched by selected crimes, by place of residence, 1975-85**

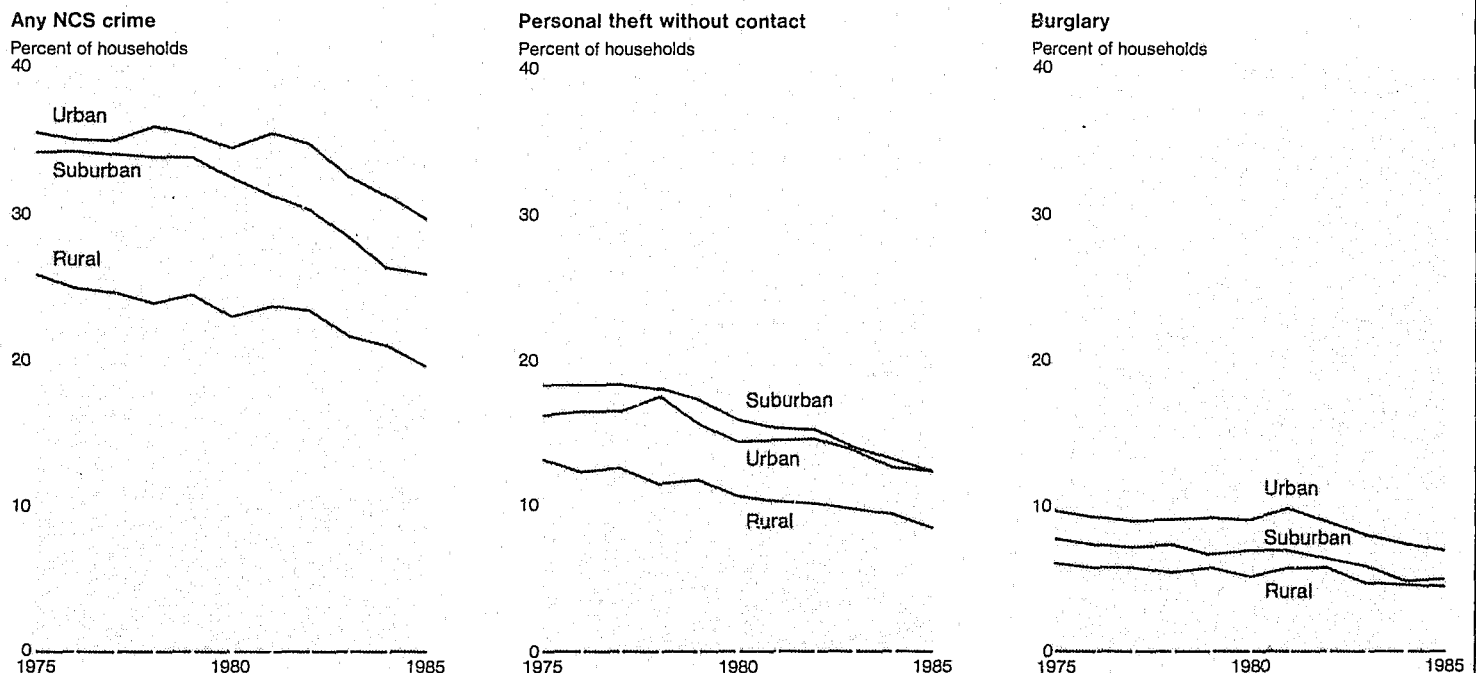


Figure 3

8%). White households were more susceptible than black households to personal theft (12% vs. 10%).

Twenty-five percent of households headed by members of minority races other than black (Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans) were touched by crime in 1985. Because of the small size of these minority populations the decrease from 28% in 1984 was not large enough to be statistically significant.

### Family income

Households with higher incomes had greater vulnerability to crime victimization than those with lower incomes, almost entirely because of their greater vulnerability to crimes of personal theft. The percentage of households with incomes of \$25,000 and over touched by personal theft was almost twice that of households with incomes under \$7,500. Despite differential risk for personal theft, households at all income levels appeared equally susceptible to household theft.

Households with incomes below \$7,500 experienced violent crimes and burglaries to a greater degree than did households in higher income categories.

### Place of residence

Households in urban areas were the most susceptible to criminal victimization; those in rural areas, the least susceptible. The percentage of suburban households touched by crime fell between urban and rural households for every type of crime measured except personal theft without contact. This crime touched urban and suburban households equally (12%).

One in 60 urban households had a member who was the victim of a robbery, compared to 1 in 112 suburban households and 1 in 295 rural households.

### Size of household

In general, the more people in a household, the greater is its vulnerability to crime (table 4). This tendency is more pronounced for personal crimes than for household crimes, because larger households have more members at risk for personal crimes; but each household, regardless of size, is at risk for household crimes.

Vulnerability to personal crime victimization generally does not increase at a rate proportional to increases in household size. For example, in 1985, the percentage of six-or-more-person

| Percent of households touched by: | Number of persons in household |       |       |       |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
|                                   | 1                              | 2-3   | 4-5   | 6+    |
| Any NCS crime                     | 17.6%                          | 24.1% | 32.9% | 38.6% |
| Violent crime                     | 3.0                            | 4.3   | 6.8   | 10.7  |
| Total theft                       | 11.2                           | 17.1  | 24.5  | 27.6  |
| Personal theft                    | 6.7                            | 11.1  | 16.7  | 18.6  |
| Household theft                   | 5.8                            | 7.9   | 10.6  | 13.0  |
| Burglary                          | 4.6                            | 5.1   | 6.2   | 7.0   |
| Motor vehicle theft               | .8                             | 1.4   | 1.8   | 1.6   |

households touched by personal theft was only about three times that of one-person households.

One reason why personal crime victimization is not simply proportional to household size is that many households with 2 or more members include children under 12 years of age. Crimes against such young children are not included in the measurement of households touched by crime.<sup>2</sup> In addition, differences in demographic characteristics and lifestyles among different size households will affect the degree to which they are touched by crime, because both are related to crime vulnerability.

The relationship between household size and vulnerability to crime shown in 1984 also held for 1985:

- Fewer than 1 in 5 single-person households were touched by crime in 1985, compared to almost 2 in 5 households with six or more people.
- Households with six or more members were more than three times more likely than single-person households to be touched by violent crime (11% vs. 3%), and 2½ times as likely to be touched by personal or household theft (28% vs. 11%).

As in previous years, the percentages of households of different sizes touched by crime varied least for burglary. In 1985, 5% of single-person households were burglarized one or more times, compared to 7% of households with six or more members.

### Crimes of high concern

In 1985, 1 in 13 households in the Nation was burglarized or had a member who was the victim of a violent crime (rape, robbery or assault) committed by a stranger. These crimes, which many people consider the most

threatening, have been designated "crimes of high concern" in this report.

In 1985 as in previous years, black, low-income, and urban households were the most likely to be victims of crimes of high concern.

From 1981, when 10.5% of all households were touched by a crime of high concern, to 1984 the percentage of households touched by such crimes has decreased steadily. It was unchanged between 1984 and 1985. The decrease was relatively greater for black households and urban households than for white households or households in suburban and rural areas (figure 4).

### Comparison to other life events

Crime vulnerability can be placed in perspective by comparing it with vulnerability to other adverse occurrences, such as motor vehicle accidents and residential fires. Crime victimization, accidents, and fires share a number of similarities in terms of their impact on households. They all occur without prior warning, they can affect a house-

Households touched by crimes of high concern, by race of household head and place of residence, 1981-85:

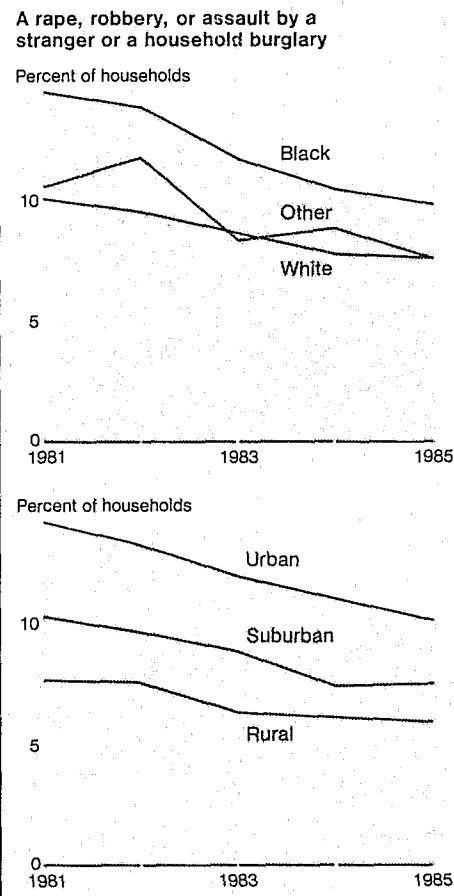


Figure 4

<sup>2</sup>Crimes against children under age 12 are excluded from the National Crime Survey because asking sensitive questions about victimization might be stressful to the child or the parents, possibly discouraging the adults' participation in the survey.

hold in ways ranging from trivial to tragic, and they can cause both physical and economic injury.

Criminal victimization is one of the few adverse life experiences for which a household-based measure is available.<sup>3</sup> Most other experiences are measured as counts of incidents or events without regard to the number of households affected.

To compare household vulnerability to criminal victimization with the risk of other negative occurrences, rough estimates of the greatest possible number of households that could have been touched by the life event were created by counting each incidence of an experience as if it happened to a different household.

Comparison of these estimates shows that crime victimization is among the most common negative life events that confront households (figure 5). At least as many households are touched by crime in a year as have members who are injured in an accident in the home.

Households with a member who was victimized during the year in a violent crime committed by a stranger are about as common as households with a member who was injured during the year in a motor vehicle accident. More households are burglarized each year than experience residential fires.<sup>4</sup>

#### Factors affecting trends

As discussed in previous reports, changes in American society can have an effect on the percentage of households touched by crime. How Americans live affect these estimates because they influence how crime is distributed across society.

American society is extremely mobile. People are constantly moving into and out of different households, creating new households, and merging existing households. For some time the population has been moving away from

<sup>3</sup>See *Households Touched by Crime, 1981*, Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin, NCJ-84406, September 1982.

<sup>4</sup>Data on accidents were drawn from National Health Interview Survey: United States, 1982, Series 10, No. 150, September 1985, National Center for Health Statistics, U.S. Public Health Service, Washington, D.C., table 52, p. 71. The source of fire incidence data was the 1984 Fire Almanac, National Fire Protection Association, Quincy, Mass., 1983. Estimates of households with members experiencing accidents include accidents to all household members. The estimates are somewhat higher than they would have been had the estimates been restricted to accidents to persons age 12 and older, as are victimization estimates.

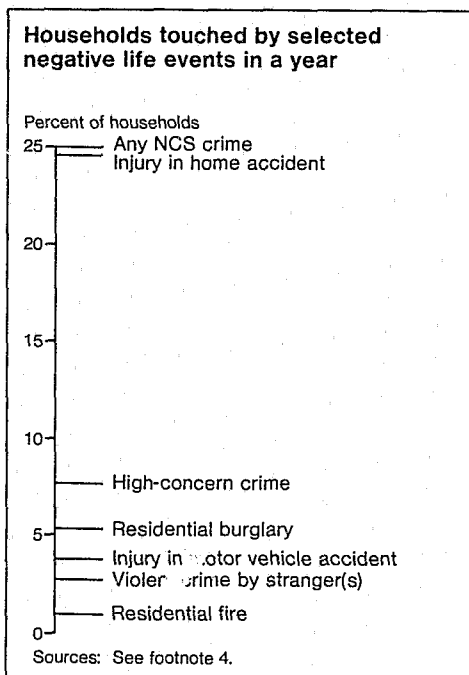


Figure 5

urban areas into suburban and rural areas. Between 1975 and 1985 the percentage of households located in urban areas fell from 32% to 29% of all households, while suburban and rural households increased from 68% to 71% of all American households.

During the 1975-85 period, the average American household decreased in size. One-person households represented 21% of all households in 1975, but 24% in 1985. The percent of households containing six or more people fell from 7% to 4% during this period.

These movements shift population from households more vulnerable to crime—larger ones and those in urban areas—to those less vulnerable—smaller ones and suburban or rural ones.

The percent of households touched by crime is probably lower than it would have been had these population shifts not occurred. For example, if the size distribution of American households were the same in 1985 as in 1975, then the percent of households touched by crime would have been 25.8% rather than 25.0%.<sup>5</sup> The adjusted estimate, however, is still significantly below the 1975 estimate of 32.0% of households touched by crime.

<sup>5</sup> For this analysis it was assumed that for each household size the percent of households touched by crime in 1985 would not have been affected had the size distribution for all households remained unchanged.

#### Methodology

The households-touched-by-crime indicator was developed by the Bureau of Justice Statistics in 1981 to improve our understanding of the impact of crime on our society.<sup>6</sup> The household was chosen as a unit of analysis because crimes such as burglary are crimes against an entire household and crimes against persons affect not only the victim but also members of the victim's household.

Households-touched-by-crime estimates are derived from National Crime Survey (NCS) statistics on rape, personal robbery, assault, household burglary, personal and household theft, and motor vehicle theft.<sup>7</sup> Because the NCS counts only crimes for which the victim can be interviewed, homicide is not counted. Its exclusion does not noticeably affect the estimates. If each of the homicides during 1985 had touched a different household and if these households had been touched by no other crime (the largest possible effect), then the inclusion of homicides in these findings would not have raised the overall percentage of households touched by crime (25.0%) by as much as 0.05%.<sup>8</sup>

Other crimes against persons or their households—such as fraud, confidence games, kidnaping, and arson—are not included in this analysis because they are not measured by the National Crime Survey.

Traditional measures of crime are in the form of volumes or rates. Data on the volume of crime have limited usefulness because the size of the population is not taken into account. Rates—expressed in the National Crime Survey as crimes per 1,000 households or per 1,000 persons—automatically correct for different population sizes, but they do not show whether a given amount of crime is widely spread or highly concentrated within a limited population.

For 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 robbed once during

<sup>6</sup>The *Prevalence of Crime*, Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin, NCJ-75905, March 1981.

<sup>7</sup>These crimes are defined in *Measuring Crime*, BJS Bulletin, NCJ-75710, February 1981. As used in this report the term "theft" is synonymous with the term "larceny" used in previous reports.

<sup>8</sup>Preliminary estimates for 1985 indicate that homicides increased by 1% from the 18,692 that occurred in 1984. (*Uniform Crime Reports, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1985*)

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.

Consequently, the households-touched-by-crime estimate for 1985 (25.0%) is less than the sum of the estimates for households touched by personal crimes (15.0%) and those touched by household crimes (13.6%), because 3.6% of U.S. households were victims of both personal and household crimes. Similarly, because about 1.3% of the U.S. households were touched by both personal theft and violence, the sum of households touched by personal theft (11.5%) and those touched by violence (4.8%) exceeds the estimate of those touched by personal crime (15.0%).

All data in this bulletin are from the National Crime Survey except those specifically attributed to other sources. The NCS is an ongoing survey conducted for the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Interviews are conducted at 6-month intervals with all occupants age 12 and over in about 49,000 housing units (101,000 persons). Because the NCS does not obtain information about crimes against persons under age 12, households experiencing only these crimes are not included in the estimate of households touched by crime.

The estimates in this bulletin are derived from sample survey data and they are subject to sampling variation.<sup>9</sup> Because the procedure used to produce estimates of households touched by crime differs from that for victimization rates, the households-touched data have standard errors about 8% higher than those for victimization rates with the same population bases even though they are derived from the same sample survey.

Comparisons presented in this report were determined to be statistically significant at the 95% confidence level, meaning that the estimated difference is greater than twice the standard error. Statements of comparison qualified by language such as "marginally," "some evidence," or "some indication" indicate statistical significance at the 90% level (1.6 standard errors).

<sup>9</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, 1984, NCJ-100435, May 1986.

The estimates are also subject to response errors, including crimes that are forgotten or withheld from the interviewer. Such response errors tend to cause understated counts of households touched by crime.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</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. The memorandum is available on request from the author at BJS.

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## National Crime Survey

### Criminal victimization in the U.S.:

- 1984 (final report), NCJ-100435, 5/86
- 1983 (final report), NCJ-96459, 10/85
- 1982 (final report), NCJ-92820, 11/84
- 1973-82 trends, NCJ-90541, 9/83
- 1980 (final report), NCJ-84015, 4/83
- 1979 (final report), NCJ-76710, 12/81

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- The use of weapons in committing crimes, NCJ-99643, 1/86
- Reporting crimes to the police, NCJ-99432, 12/85
- Locating city, suburban, and rural crime, NCJ-99535, 12/85
- The risk of violent crime, NCJ-97119, 5/85
- The economic cost of crime to victims, NCJ-93450, 4/84
- Family violence, NCJ-93449, 4/84

### BJS bulletins:

- Households touched by crime, 1985, NCJ-101685, 6/86
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