

Bureau of Justice Statistics
Technical Report

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ACQUISITIONS

New Directions for the National Crime Survey

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Eliciting responses, either in person or by phone, from a nationally representative sample of American citizens about their experiences as victims of crime is a very delicate exercise in data collection. Thus, the National Crime Survey (NCS), which asks nearly 100,000 Americans each year about the impact of crime on their lives, has been the subject of the most searching scrutiny in an assessment of the survey program sponsored by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) and its predecessor agency, the National Criminal Justice Information and Statistics Service. This redesign of the NCS has produced consequential improvements in the victimization survey following years of study by a consortium of national consulting organizations, university-based researchers, and cognizant Federal statisticians.

Every aspect of our national survey was examined:

(1) Which questions about the criminal incident should be asked, and in what order, from the questionnaire or survey instrument?

(2) What screening or lead-in questions are most effective in helping people remember and report criminal victimization?

(3) How long a reporting period should be covered by the interview?

(4) What is the best sample design for reaching potential victims in this country?

The National Crime Survey (NCS) of victimization in the United States, which began in 1973, is the second largest ongoing survey undertaken by the Federal Government and is the largest statistical operation supported by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS). Twice each year the Bureau of the Census, under contract to BJS, conducts interviews of approximately 100,000 persons in a nationally representative sample of roughly 50,000 American households. BJS conducts subsequent detailed data analysis and publishes numerous reports describing the level and nature of criminal victimization in the United States. Because the NCS provides a critical measure of the impact of crime on American citizens, BJS has an obligation to ensure the quality, accuracy, and timeliness of the data emanating from this survey.

This report provides an overview of an extensive project to evaluate and redesign the National Crime Survey. The project began in 1979 in response to an evaluation by the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) and an internal review by the

National Criminal Justice Information and Statistics Service (NCJISS), the predecessor of the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Subsequent work was conducted by a consortium of universities and private research firms together with staff at BJS and the Bureau of the Census. The fruits of the resulting research and development effort are already evident in changes in the survey introduced in 1986; more comprehensive changes will be implemented over the next several years. This report provides background data on the NCS, describes the roots and organization of the redesign project, discusses issues addressed by the redesign, and highlights the major design changes that have been or will be adopted.

BJS is pleased to announce the completion and implementation of plans for this extensive redesign effort. In particular we want to commend our colleagues at the Bureau of the Census both for their help in the redesign report and for their continuous day-to-day dedication to accuracy in the collection of victimization data.

Joseph M. Bessette
Acting Director

(5) What is the minimum age at which respondents can be expected to understand and answer questions accurately about harms they have experienced?

(6) How can computerized interviewing technology improve the accuracy and quality control of victimization survey data?

(7) How can survey information be improved on such questions as what victims should do to protect themselves, domestic violence, substance abuse by offenders, and victims' experience with the criminal justice system?

(8) How should crimes be measured and counted when respondents have been victimized so many times that they are unable to remember the specific details of each event?

This technical report chronicles our attempt to answer these questions for the survey that provides American citizens with one of the very few opportunities they have to record the personal and human aspects of being a victim of crime.

I. NCS background

Building on the experience and recommendations of both the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice in the mid-1960's and the criminal justice statistics conferences sponsored by the Bureau of the Census in 1967 and 1968, the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) Statistics Division began to plan to implement a National Victimization Survey (later renamed the National Crime Survey) in 1969.

The survey was conceived to satisfy two broad goals in providing information on the incidence of crime and its effect on victims. The first goal was to launch a time series tracing changes both in the incidence of crime and in the association of various descriptive attributes with criminal victimization. The second goal was to create a vehicle that would allow study of particular research questions related to criminal victimization, such as the relationship of victims to offenders, the cost of crime, and the vulnerability of various types of individuals and businesses to victimization. The NCS was intended to complement information available from the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) by collecting data on crimes not reported to the police and by providing more detailed information on victims and victimization incidents.

The Statistics Division of LEAA had to address a number of questions before the survey could begin collecting data. Among these issues were--

- strategies to maximize accurate reporting of victimization characteristics
- how to cope with erroneous recall of the date of a crime incident
- the optimum length of the reference period for respondent recall of victimization incidents
- the degree to which UCR definitions would be emulated in classifying crimes
- the sample size required to produce reliable victimization estimates
- the most appropriate mode of data collection--personal interviews vs. mail questionnaires
- the extent to which proxy interviewing would be used.

To reach decisions on these questions, the Census Bureau conducted a number of pilot studies in 1970 and 1971. The earliest of these, in Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Md., and San Jose, Calif., comprised "reverse record check studies," in which known victims (identified through police records) were interviewed to test the questionnaire. General population surveys were also conducted in San Jose and in Dayton, Ohio, at the same time as the San Jose reverse record check study. In addition to these local tests, four victimization supplements were added to the Quarterly Household Survey (QHS), which was administered nationally in January and July of 1971 and 1972.

The NCS was inaugurated in July 1972 and initially consisted of three distinct data collection programs--the National Crime Panel, the Commercial Victimization Survey, and a program of victimization surveys in selected major urban centers. The National Crime Panel is the only surviving data series from the original NCS program and is now known as the National Crime Survey. This data series provides national data on personal and household crimes and currently interviews members of approximately 49,000 households at 6-month intervals. A stratified area probability sample is used to select households for participation in the survey, and a rotating panel design is utilized, which requires seven successive interviews at a housing location before the housing location is retired from the sample. To provide an even workload, a sixth of the active sample is interviewed each month.

The survey currently collects data on the occurrence of violent crimes (rape, robbery, and simple and aggravated assault), personal crimes of theft (personal larceny with and without contact), and household crimes (household larceny, household burglary, and motor vehicle theft). In addition, information on incident attributes is collected and includes--

- whether the crime was completed or attempted
- whether it was reported to the police
- the number of offenders and their characteristics, including their relationship to the victim
- substance abuse by offenders
- use of weapons by offenders
- the time, place, and date of occurrence
- any injury or property loss suffered by the victim and any related consequences, such as hospitalization, time lost from work, insurance payments, and property recovery
- any actions taken by victims to protect themselves or property at the time of the incident.

Basic demographic information on the households of all respondents, such as family income, number of household members, and frequency of residential mobility, as well as personal data on each respondent (age, race, ethnicity, sex, marital status, relationship to other household members, education, and membership in the Armed Forces) are also collected.

Current BJS objectives for the NCS program are as follows:

- To provide trend data that will serve as a set of continuous and comparable national social indicators for the rate of victimization for selected crimes of violence and crimes of theft and for other factors related to crime and victimization in support of national criminal justice policy and decision-making and in support of informed public discussion.
- To provide policymakers at the national, State, and local levels as well as the research community with a data base that constitutes the best available empirical information concerning crime victims and victimization.
- To facilitate analytical research on issues of public concern and of consequence to the development of national, State, and local criminal justice policy.
- To provide empirical information relevant to understanding the differences between the rate of crimes reported to the police and the victimization rate.

- To provide empirical information concerning the characteristics of victims and consequences of the victimization that will be useful in designing, implementing, and maintaining victim assistance programs.

- To provide empirical information that assists individuals and households in avoiding victimization.

- To assist State and local governments in evaluating the feasibility and utility of local victimization surveys.

- To provide empirical information on perceived satisfaction with the criminal justice system.

- To gather information on a regular basis concerning attitudes toward crime, criminals, and crime control.

II. Genesis of the NCS redesign

The roots of the NCS redesign extend back a decade to an evaluation of the program by the National Academy of Sciences (NAS). The academy's recommendations concerning NCS redesign were published in 1976.¹ Among the NAS recommendations were the following:

- More NCS resources should be devoted to "delineation of product objectives, to managerial coordination, to data analysis and dissemination, and to a continuing program of methodological research and evaluation."

- The NCS should produce "not only nationwide and regional data, but, on the same timetable, estimates for separately identifiable Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas (SMSA's) and for at least the five largest central cities within them. . . ."

- The NCS screener, that is, that part of the questionnaire that ascertains whether the respondent has been a crime victim, needs to be drastically altered to increase its effectiveness in prodding respondents' memories and to minimize its complexity.

- Additional questions need to be added to allow measurement of independent variables important for understanding the dynamics of crime victimization. These would include questions dealing with ecological factors, victim characteristics, lifestyle, and protective or preventive measures.

- "A major methodological effort on optimum field and survey design for the NCS should be undertaken."

Following the academy's evaluation, an internal review of the NCS program was begun that ultimately indicated a need for intensive examination and subsequent redesign of the NCS. A project was subsequently approved that would comprise a comprehensive reexamination of all aspects of the NCS, including questionnaire design, sample, collection strategies, administration of the survey, error properties, analytic capabilities, dissemination of data and findings, and utilization of NCS data. In 1979, after a competitive procurement process, a contract was awarded to the Bureau of Social Science Research (BSSR) in Washington, D.C., to perform this work. BSSR headed a consortium of criminological, survey design, and statistical experts who contributed to various phases of the project. In addition, the project received guidance from an Advisory Panel drawn from the criminal justice, statistics, and social science communities.

The composition of this consortium varied over the life of the project, reflecting the changing nature of the work required during different phases of the redesign. The following organizations participated in the consortium over the course of the project: Carnegie-Mellon University, the National Opinion Research Center, the Research Triangle Institute, the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan, Westat, and Yale University. In addition, a number of consultants were hired for various short-term and intermittent tasks, which included statistical modeling and questionnaire construction.

III. Issues addressed by the NCS redesign

The research and development work undertaken for the NCS redesign focused on three broad concerns: The accuracy of data collected by the survey, the methodology used to collect data, and the enhancement of options for data analysis provided by the survey.

A. Accuracy

There are several sources of error in NCS data. Among these are respondent failure to report crime incidents, errors in dating the occurrence of victimizations, and inaccuracy in reporting incident details. The redesign project examined a number of NCS features in which changes might improve the accuracy of crime incident data.

1. Screening strategy

The NCS questionnaire is divided into two components—an initial screener given to all respondents and a crime incident form, which collects detailed information about each incident. The redesign project investigated a number of promising changes in screening strategy to increase the number of eligible incidents reported. A major question was whether the current approach—which involves asking respondents directly about several types of violent or theft-related events—adequately stimulates respondents' memories of crimes that they had experienced during the previous 6 months. A related concern was that certain classes of respondents, differentiated by education, income, and race, might react differently to the screening task, thereby producing biases related to these attributes.

The major proposed changes that were ultimately tested included asking respondents about victimizations that occurred in various life "domains" such as work and leisure, providing many short cues to help trigger memory of incidents in these life contexts, and attempting to evoke the sort of emotional states that might result from a crime incident (such as anger or fear) before administering the screening questions. The aim of these innovations was both to elicit increased reporting of crime incidents and to structure the recall task to a greater degree so that cognitive and subcultural differences among respondents would have a smaller impact on the reporting of crime incidents.

Tests of these proposed changes to the screener were conducted in 1981, 1983, 1984, and 1985. Refinements to the new screening strategy ultimately produced an overall improvement of 28% in victimization reporting when compared in a split ballot test to a procedure virtually identical to that currently in use. These results were very promising, and, as a result, the Census Bureau is conducting a national test of a screener based on these improvements with the goal of ultimately replacing the current NCS screener. This new screener adopts the short-cues approach used in earlier tests and incorporates questions evoking different life domains. However, it does not include questions designed to evoke emotional states, given the negligible effect of these items in earlier tests.

¹Surveying Crime, Bettye K. Eldson Penick, ed. (Washington: National Academy of Sciences, 1976).

The impact of NCS respondent rules on victimization reporting was also studied as part of the NCS redesign project. Currently, all respondents in a household are asked screening questions regarding crimes of violence and personal theft. However, for household crimes (household larceny, burglary, and motor vehicle theft), one knowledgeable household member is selected as a household respondent. Analysis of reporting rates revealed that household respondents are more likely to report personal incidents than are nonhousehold respondents. This effect may be partially attributed to NCS interviewing procedures that could be easily corrected. However, the effect may also be the result of the respondent having the added stimulation of hearing the household screening questions before the personal questionnaire items. To correct for this effect, and to encourage fuller reporting of household crime incidents, the NCS Redesign Consortium recommended that a uniform screening procedure be adopted in which all household members would be given both personal and household screening questions.

This was perhaps the most complex issue that the redesign project faced, and it is beyond the scope of this report to detail the tradeoffs that had to be evaluated.² However, after all available information on the current and uniform screening models had been weighed, it became apparent that there was no way to design a household screening procedure that was entirely free of error. In our opinion, the proposed remedies for the household respondent effect would have substituted other difficulties and biases in producing reliable household crime estimates. Further, the presence of other household members during an interview, which may have biasing effects for both the current and proposed uniform screening procedures, cannot be controlled by the interviewer and therefore introduces an additional source of error. Ultimately, BJS chose to retain the current procedure because its error properties are at least partly understood and because a superior alternative was not available, in spite of great effort to produce one.

²For a more complete treatment of this issue, see *Redesign of the National Crime Survey*, NCJ-111457, February 1989.

2. Bounding

Another source of NCS error is the inaccurate reporting of the dates or time periods during which victimizations occurred. Events may be reported to have taken place later than they actually occurred (forward telescoping) or earlier (backward telescoping). NCS data collection procedures are designed to minimize such error by "bounding" interviews with data collected during previous interviews. Incidents reported during the second through seventh interviews at a housing location are checked against data reported during the previous interview to ensure that the incident is indeed a new one and did not occur during the previous reference period. Because the first interview is unbounded, these data are not currently used for estimation and are used only to bound the subsequent interview. However, if a respondent is unavailable for one or more interviews while he or she is in sample and is then subsequently interviewed, data collected during this later interview are necessarily unbounded. Also, data will be unbounded for individuals who become household members after the initial interview of a household and for replacement households that enter the sample because the original household has moved. Unlike data collected during initial interviews, unbounded data collected in these cases are in fact used in estimation. The proposed strategy to reduce the amount of such unbounded data is the adoption of a longitudinal design for the NCS in which original sample persons would be retained in sample and followed if they moved from the original sample location.³

Although data collected during the first interview at a housing location are inherently unbounded, the redesign project investigated the feasibility of beginning to use these data in estimation. The proposed solution was to adjust these data for inflated victimization reporting due to lack of bounding, time-in-sample effects, and other design features. This strategy would allow either an increase in precision by effectively increasing the usable NCS sample size by a sixth or a major cost savings through a sample cut. BJS has approved this change in use of initial interview data, but a final decision on the date for implementing this revision awaits further development of the adjustment procedures by the Census Bureau.

³See the following section on longitudinal design for characteristics and other benefits of this approach.

3. Reference period issues

The reference period for a particular interview is defined as that segment of time during which crime victimizations are eligible to be reported. Since the inception of the NCS, the reference period has been the 6-month period ending on the last day of the month preceding the interview. In investigating the effect of reference period length on the volume of crimes reported, the NCS Redesign Consortium found that incidents are disproportionately reported to have occurred toward the end of the reference period. This finding may be due either to forward telescoping within the reference period or to disproportionate memory failure for incidents further from the date of interview. To reduce this type of reporting error, the consortium recommended shortening the reference period.

Adopting this option would increase the data collection budget of the NCS, however, because more interviews would be required over a given time period. With a fixed data collection budget, the alternative option would be to cut sample size, avoiding an increase in the number of interviews conducted. This option would result in increased sampling error for the NCS, making it more difficult to detect annual changes in NCS rates. Therefore, no option was superior on all relevant parameters. Considering the importance of reliable calculation of annual changes in NCS rates against the potential errors resulting from a longer reference period, BJS decided to retain the current 6-month reference period.

Although the 6-month reference period will be retained, BJS did decide to make other changes in practices for accepting incident reports for a particular interview. Currently, if a respondent reports an incident that occurred in the month of the interview, that is, after the reference period that the interview covers, he or she is asked to defer giving details on this crime until the next interview. This practice provides a temporal breakoff, which aids computing crime estimates but risks later inaccurate recall or even failure to report these incidents. To remedy this problem, BJS will implement an interview-to-interview recounting procedure that accepts reports of all incidents that have occurred since the previous interview. Data for all incidents that have occurred after the end of the reference period will be attached to the data record for the subsequent interview. This change in interviewing procedures will be phased in along with the new short-cues screening interview.

4. Series crimes

One class of crime that presents particular difficulties for estimation and for collecting detailed crime data is the series crime--that in which the respondent has been repeatedly victimized to the point that details blur in memory and cannot be disentangled into separate crime incident reports. (Some examples are repeated spouse abuse, frequent incidents of vandalism, and regular threats or actual assault at school.) A series incident is currently defined as a crime in which at least three similar incidents have occurred and for which the respondent cannot recall dates and details well enough to report them separately. At this time, crime incident data are collected only for the most recent series event.

Series incidents have been excluded from annual victimization estimates, and in recent years special NCS reports have counted them as only one victimization. In both cases, crime incidents are obviously undercounted, but BJS has been reluctant to weight these incidents up to the estimated number of recurrences. One reason for this practice is that several different types of crime may be bound together in a series. In such a case, the type of crime committed in the last incident in the series would be inflated above its actual level. Similar distortions may occur when respondents indicate that they have experienced a very large number of victimizations (for example, "This has happened to me hundreds of times."). Another problem is that multiple victimizations, such as continual spouse abuse, are not easily recalled as a discrete number of victimization incidents, and attempting to record this type of series victimization as an enumeration of incidents may not accurately reflect the nature of this type of victimization.

Recognizing the difficulty that series crimes pose, BJS has decided to raise the minimum threshold for accepting a series report from three to six incidents, implementing this revision with the new screener. The result will be that if a respondent reports three to five similar incidents to an interviewer, data on each incident will be collected. Under current procedures, the interviewer might record one series incident instead. We will continue to collect data on the characteristics of the last incident in a series but will also gather information on the aggregate character of incidents in a series.

B. Data collection

In addition to changes in the way crime incident data are elicited and organized, the NCS redesign also examined the techniques used to collect data, including sample design, data collection technologies, and respondent rules. This work provided a number of suggestions both for improving data quality and for reducing costs.

1. Sample design

A number of options for revising the NCS sample design were evaluated during the course of the redesign project. One alternative was a dual-frame, mixed-mode design that would use simultaneous samples of telephone numbers and addresses. Telephone interviews would be taken with those in the random-digit-dial (RDD) telephone sample, and a combination of telephone and personal visit interviews would be used for the area (address) frame cases. Although development costs would be larger than for a single-frame design, this option would result in reduced field costs and would provide better measurement of collection mode effects (telephone vs. personal interview) than the current design.

This option was rejected for two reasons: First, telephone interviews not preceded by an interview conducted in person produced disappointing response rates in NCS tests; second, there is little information available on cumulative response rates for RDD-based panel surveys, and time and funds were not adequate to conduct a multiwave test of RDD data collection. Given the effort and expense that would be required to develop an RDD sampling frame and the risk that use of this frame might be discontinued, BJS decided not to implement a random-digit-dial phone sample at this time.

Another design option was to terminate use of the present sampling frame based on decennial census address records and replace it with a frame listed by Census Bureau field personnel before selection of sample housing units. Such a design would increase costs at the sampling stage but free BJS to use the sample units for followup surveys that could be conducted by non-Census Bureau organizations. Title XIII statutory restrictions covering decennial census records prohibit such use with the current sample. This option was ultimately rejected because its potential utility did not justify the substantial costs required to implement and maintain the sampling frame.

Finally, alternate ways to stratify the NCS sample were studied in order to make it more accurate. One major change was to stratify by a composite crime index developed from the FBI's UCR data. This change was implemented in 1986 as part of a sample redesign based on the 1980 decennial census and should enable production of NCS estimates that are closer to population values.

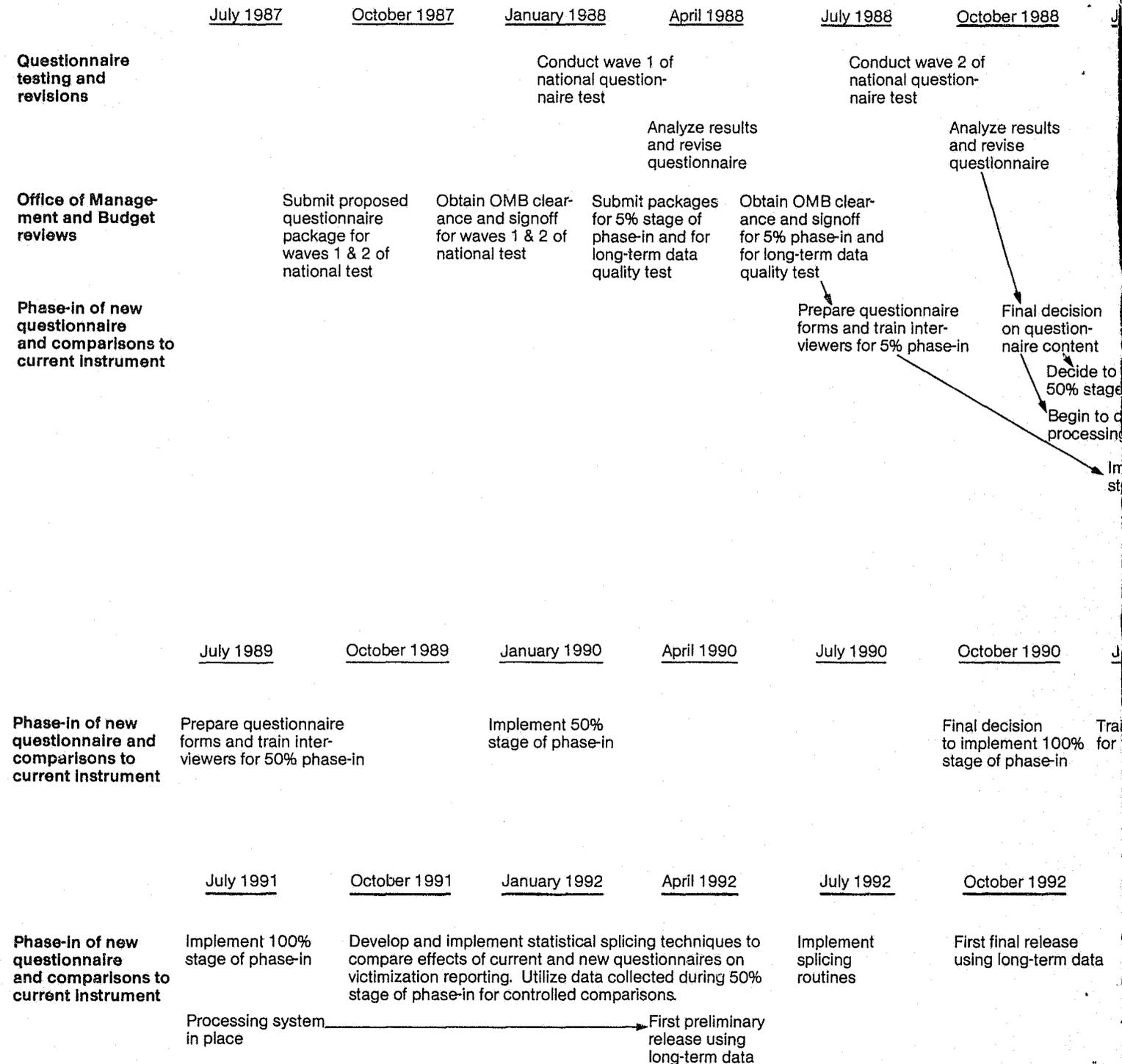
2. Longitudinal design

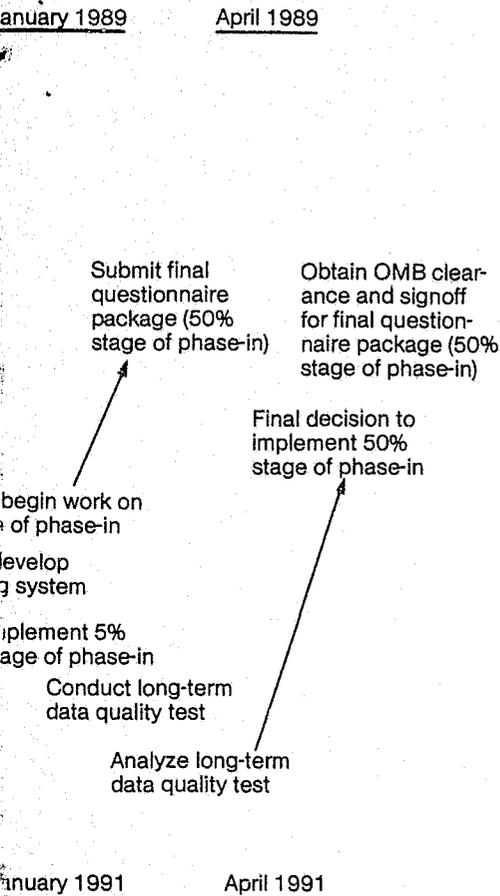
Throughout the project, the NCS Redesign Consortium considered proposals for substituting a true longitudinal design for the current cross-sectional data structure. This design change was evaluated in terms of its potential for enhanced accuracy, analytic options, feasibility, and cost. The NCS has had some features of a longitudinal survey since its inception, in that rotating panels of households are interviewed for seven successive interviews at 6-month intervals. However, no attempt is made to retain in sample those respondents who move, though attempts to link NCS records have been performed after the fact by independent researchers for special purposes. Retaining in sample those respondents who move and introducing a longitudinal processing system facilitating record linkage will allow use of more powerful statistical techniques for calculating annual change estimates and will enhance the long-term representativeness of a population-based NCS sample, thereby reducing error. In addition to its potential for reducing unbounded data, such a design will allow us to address a number of important analytic issues more fully:

- the long-term consequences of criminal victimization
- long-term contacts of victims with the criminal justice system
- the dynamics of repeated victimization
- time-related causal factors in victimization
- the role of crime victimization in geographic mobility.

BJS has endorsed the implementation of a full person-based longitudinal design. This design would follow persons interviewed in the first wave of a panel for a total of seven waves, regardless of where they moved within the United States. All age-eligible members of households in which any principal person resides would also be interviewed at each wave.

**National Crime Survey redesign long-term implementation schedule:
Questionnaire testing, processing system development, and instrument comparisons**





January 1991
 Interviewers
 100% phase-in

Implementing this design would likely cause a small increase in NCS variances and nonsampling error but a large increase in the costs of the survey. There are also major programming and design problems to be resolved before such a design could be implemented by the Census Bureau. Consequently, BJS does not yet have a schedule for this change. A final decision awaits review of the cost implications of adopting a full longitudinal design and the characteristics of the longitudinal processing system and file production procedures developed by the Census Bureau for the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), which has longitudinal characteristics similar to those required for the NCS.

As an interim measure, BJS plans to attach a longitudinal supplement to the current NCS design. This supplement will identify a subpopulation of interest—for example, victims of violent crime—and will ask a set of followup questions at the next interview regarding consequences and subsequent contact with the criminal justice system. Victims who have moved from the sample address will be followed to obtain these data.

3. Collection modes

As part of the NCS redesign, BJS evaluated a number of alternative data collection modes. In addition to personal and telephone interviewing in use at the time, alternatives included Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI), Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI), and self-administered questionnaires. Plans to revise NCS data-gathering techniques are described below:

a. CATI

This technology involves programming the questionnaire into a computer at a centralized telephone facility and, in place of a paper-and-pencil questionnaire, flashing questionnaire items onto a video monitor for the interviewer to read. Responses are entered at the interviewer's keyboard during the interview and become part of the data record for that respondent. This procedure reduces error in all phases of data production: interviewing, data entry, and processing. It improves interviewer performance by letting supervisors unobtrusively monitor and assist interviewers.

After several years of development work, the Census Bureau began rigorous testing in January 1987. The Bureau aimed to determine the impact of CATI

on data quality, reporting rates, costs, and work distribution among phone and field interviewers. Test cases were drawn from NCS sample households. Evaluation of CATI has been very positive, and this mode of data collection will be implemented for eligible respondents who are given the new NCS questionnaire in January 1990. CATI, however, will not be utilized in certain circumstances:

- All NCS interviews for the initial and fifth of the seven scheduled interviews for households in sample will be conducted in person to elevate response rates and to establish and maintain rapport with respondents. No household will receive its initial NCS contact from a CATI facility.

- Respondents without access to a telephone or who refuse during the first interview to receive subsequent interviews by telephone will continue to be interviewed in person.

- To minimize disruption of field-interviewer staffing and workloads and to avoid elimination of some single-interviewer Primary Sampling Units (PSU's), CATI will only be implemented in PSU's that are covered by more than one interviewer.

b. CAPI

CAPI uses technology similar to CATI, except that the questionnaire is programmed into a portable laptop computer, instead of a computer in a centralized telephone facility, and would be used by NCS field interviewers. Although this technology does not allow the unobtrusive monitoring capabilities provided by CATI, it offers many of the same error-reduction features for interviewing and data processing. While CAPI shows promise for NCS applications, development has not advanced to the point where BJS can make a firm commitment to adopt it.

c. Telephone interviewing

Evaluations of NCS data collected by telephone have revealed no discernible biases when compared to field interviews but have shown evidence of substantial cost savings. As a result, the agency has adopted a policy of collecting as much data as possible by telephone. When CATI is implemented in 1990, all households in multiple-interviewer PSU's scheduled for telephone interviews will be contacted by the CATI facility. Telephone-eligible households in remaining PSU's will be contacted by field interviewers from their own homes.

4. Respondent rules

In addition to the uniform screening strategy discussed above, BJS considered one other change in rules for selecting and interviewing respondents. When the survey was originally implemented, all household members age 14 and older were interviewed directly to determine whether they had experienced any violent or personal property crimes. Proxy interviews were obtained for the youngest eligible respondents, ages 12 and 13. However, studies of proxy data showed that proxy interviews produced less reliable data than personal interviews. Consequently, the redesign project advocated interviewing all respondents age 12 and older, a procedure that BJS adopted beginning in July 1986. Proxy interviews of 12- and 13-year-old respondents are now conducted only when a responsible adult in the household refuses to allow a personal interview.

C. Enhancement of analysis options

Although the NCS offers a rich source of data on the incidence and characteristics of personal and household victimization, a number of shortcomings have been identified as BJS and other users have gained experience with NCS data. Consequently, revisions are being made to improve the analytic utility of the data set. These changes include--

- altering the scope of crimes measured by the NCS
- adding questions to provide new independent variables
- revising questions dealing with the outcomes of crime
- including topical supplements to the NCS on a regular basis.

1. Altering the scope of NCS crimes

One of the goals of the NCS redesign project was to investigate ways in which the scope of measured crimes could be expanded. A number of the crimes studied did not appear to be promising for measurement using victim survey methods because of the rarity of the crime or concerns about the potential unreliability of victim reports. Vandalism, however, appeared to be a promising addition to the survey, and measurement of this crime will be introduced at the same time the new short-cues screener is implemented.

Several measurement difficulties had to be overcome before vandalism could be included as a regular NCS crime type. One problem was that personal and household vandalism had to be distinguished from other types of vandal-

ism not in scope for the survey, such as damage to common areas in apartment buildings or to neighborhood objects such as street signs. Other crimes, particularly attempted burglary, may be confused with vandalism because they have characteristics in common, such as damage to screens or windows. To minimize such problems, all vandalism screening and incident data collection will be performed after screening for all other NCS crimes and before incident reports for any of these other crimes are taken.

Although the NCS will soon gather new data on this type of crime, the scope of crimes covered will be narrowed in another way: Personal larceny without contact will be virtually eliminated as a discrete crime classification. All larcenies, except for personal larcenies with contact (for example, pocket picking and purse snatching) and those related to motor vehicles, will be recorded as household larcenies, regardless of which household member first reports the incident. This change will eliminate the analytic and conceptual difficulties caused by the current definitions of larceny, which classify some larcenies as personal or household solely on the basis of the location from which property was stolen. This new classification scheme will also not rely on distinctions regarding which household member(s) own stolen property, thus avoiding difficult decisions that affect larceny estimation and assignment of incidents to individual records in NCS data files.

2. New independent variables

a. **Victim behavior.** One problem with the original questionnaire was its failure to provide much useful information on the interaction between victims and offenders during a violent crime incident. To correct this deficiency, in 1986 detailed questions were added asking respondents what they did about the incident while it was in progress, whether they believed their actions helped or hurt their situation, and what the nature of the impact was. Questions were also added to determine the effect of actions by other individuals who were present and to examine whether the respondent, the offender, or someone else was the first to use, or threaten to use, physical force.

b. **Lifestyle variables.** The NCS has always collected detailed demographic information about respondents and households in the sample. While these data are useful for distinguishing the victimization experiences of special populations, they do little to illuminate

the circumstances under which victimization is more or less likely to occur. To remedy this, questions dealing with lifestyle were tested in a Victim Risk Supplement (VRS) to the NCS in 1984. As a result, items dealing with the frequency of several routine activities (shopping, evenings away from home, and use of public transportation) have been incorporated into the short-cues screener. In addition, in 1986 BJS added several new items to the NCS incident form to help assess vulnerability to victimization. These questions measure whether the incident occurred in an area open to the public, whether it occurred outdoors, and the distance of the place of victimization from the respondent's home. Finally, to measure lifestyle predictors of victimization in more detail, BJS plans to administer at least one additional supplement similar to the VRS. This supplement will be administered after phase-in of the new questionnaire has been completed.

c. **Other independent variables.** In addition to the information described above, other new or revised questionnaire items useful for illuminating the dynamics of criminal victimization were incorporated into the incident form in 1986. These include new questions dealing with perceived substance abuse by offenders and with multiple victimizations by the same offender. Expanded coding has also been implemented for the place of crime occurrence and for use of a weapon by offenders.

3. Outcome variables

Although the NCS has provided a large quantity of data on the consequences of victimization, a number of changes have been made to improve its analytic flexibility in this area. These alterations include clarification of the means used by offenders to cause injury, expanded coding for property loss, and new items detailing contacts with the criminal justice system.

4. Supplements

In addition to improving the analytic potential of the ongoing NCS, BJS plans to attach periodic supplements to the survey more frequently. Some supplements would include regularly scheduled sets of items to collect data that are not essential for ongoing administration. Others would be one-time supplements on crime-related topics of interest to policymaking officials.

Supplement planning is well under way. BJS and the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) have developed a jointly sponsored research program using the NCS to collect data on special topics relevant to both criminal justice policy and basic knowledge of criminal victimization. Through a competitive process, BJS and NIJ will select a research firm to coordinate development of the questionnaire for each one-time topical supplement. The organization selected will solicit expert assistance to develop questions and issues to be covered. These experts will also be asked to suggest strategies for analyzing the resulting data set. BJS and NIJ will fund analyses of supplement data.

Attaching supplements to the NCS must be guided by concern for the impact on responses to regular NCS questions and the potential for affecting NCS rates. Cost and the availability of Census Bureau staff will also place constraints on the supplement program. Two supplements have already been scheduled. One dealing with school crime was developed during fiscal 1988, with data collection in fiscal 1989. Secondly, after the new short-cues screener has been fully implemented in 1991, BJS will repeat a Victim Risk Supplement similar to the one carried out in February 1984.

IV. Transition to a revised NCS

BJS, Census Bureau staff, and the NCS Redesign Consortium recognized from the outset that the redesign might affect NCS rates. For instance, a revised NCS screener is likely to elevate rates solely because it is more effective in soliciting reports of crime. Planning discussions on implementing changes reached an early consensus that survey revisions should be made as quickly as possible so that analysis of important new questions could begin, but that revisions should be coordinated to minimize potential disruption to the NCS series. The strategy chosen to realize these goals was to divide proposed revisions into two groups—those that had potential for affecting NCS rates and those that had little likelihood of doing so. Proposed changes judged to be non-rate affecting were pretested by the Census Bureau and implemented in July 1986. Remaining revisions that show promise in further pretesting will be implemented beginning in 1989. As many rate-affecting changes as possible will be implemented simultaneously to provide a clean series break, thereby minimizing series disruption.

Various models have been discussed to calibrate data collected with new instruments against data collected with older ones. Current plans call for the Census Bureau to administer the old and new instruments concurrently at half-sample each for 18 months during phase-in of the new instrument. This plan should provide adequate data for testing and selecting an appropriate statistical splice for the two series. By controlling for rate-affecting changes introduced by the new questionnaire, this splice will allow comparisons of data collected before and after the rate-affecting changes for at least the major crime types.

BJS and the Census Bureau have agreed on a four-component comprehensive plan for the remaining implementation:

A. Testing

A three-wave national test of 1,000 cases will be used for final revisions of the short-cues questionnaire. Data for the first two waves were collected in February/March and August/September 1988, and the remaining wave will be administered in February/March 1989. Respondents are drawn from unused NCS sample cases. A control group of 1,000, having the same maturity in sample as the test group, was selected from the regular NCS sample to facilitate comparisons of current and proposed screening strategies. Experience with the revised questionnaire will allow refinement of questionnaire content and study of both cumulative response rates and multi-wave trends in victimization reporting.

B. Phase-in

A three-step, phased implementation of the new questionnaire will begin in January 1989, when an instrument reflecting experience from the first wave of the national test will be implemented for a random 5% of regular NCS cases. This first step of the phase-in will give Census Bureau field office personnel experience in using the new questionnaire and will allow us to identify and correct problems. Data collected with the new instrument during this step of the phase-in will not be used for estimation.

Final revisions to the questionnaire will be incorporated after all three pretests are completed. This revised instrument will be implemented for a random 50% of the NCS sample in January 1990. At the same time, CATI will also be fully implemented in sample households assigned to receive the new questionnaire. The final step of the phase-in calls for the new questionnaire and CATI to be implemented for the full sample in July 1991. In addition to providing adequate data for developing a statistical splice, this plan enables BJS to continue publishing annual and yearly change estimates during phase-in. It also provides adequate time to detect and correct problems before data collected with the new questionnaire must be relied on for official estimates.

C. Statistical splice

Work on this activity should begin in 1991. Statistical models will be developed to adjust for the effects of long-term changes (for example, differences in screener efficiency and data collection modes) on victimization reporting. Adjustment factors will be developed for major crime types and possibly for other important variables if reliable differences are found. Second-step phase-in data will be used for these analyses. This activity should be completed by July 1992.

D. Processing system

A new processing system must be written to prepare NCS data files and produce annual tabulations. This work may begin as soon as final questionnaire decisions are made and should be completed before the new questionnaire is implemented for the full sample in July 1991.

V. Conclusion

The Bureau of Justice Statistics has devoted more than a decade to evaluating all aspects of the National Crime Survey, beginning with the National Academy of Sciences report and extending through the NCS redesign project. The NCS is one of the largest surveys conducted by the Federal Government. Given its central role in providing data and statistics on the incidence of criminal victimization in the United States, it clearly merits the quality of scrutiny that this report describes.

The redesign project will not be complete until BJS has granted final approval for several planned revisions and implemented approved changes successfully. Phase-in of the new questionnaire is scheduled to begin in January 1989 and should be completed by July 1991, if earlier stages of implementation have revealed no major problems. The various decision points for questionnaire implementation are presented in the flowchart on pages 4 and 5. In addition to questionnaire changes, several other issues remain to be resolved before the project is completed. The most important of these is the implementation of a person-based longitudinal design.

The NCS Redesign Consortium was charged with recommending the best possible design for a survey to collect data on criminal victimization. BJS is satisfied that the high-quality research and development done for this project have provided the best available methodological information for improving the NCS.

In making final design decisions, BJS had to balance the consortium's recommendations against the organizational and budgetary constraints inherent in an ongoing survey program. Although we were not able to adopt all revisions suggested by the consortium, we believe that the redesigned survey is the best that can now realistically be achieved. We expect that the revised version of the National Crime Survey will provide a more reliable, flexible, and useful data series on household and personal victimization well into the next century.⁴

⁴For a more comprehensive description of the NCS redesign, see Redesign of the National Crime Survey, NCJ-111457, February 1989. BJS will continue to present results from the redesign project in a variety of formats, including Special Reports and Technical Reports that present data from the new questionnaire items and outline technical issues raised by analysis of new data.

The Assistant Attorney General, Office of Justice Programs, coordinates the activities of the following program offices and bureaus: the Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Institute of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

Bureau of Justice Statistics Technical Reports are written principally by BJS staff. This report was prepared by Bruce M. Taylor, who monitored the NCS redesign project under the supervision of Patsy A. Klaus and Charles R. Kindermann. BJS Deputy Director Benjamin H. Renshaw III edited the report and chaired the Implementation Task Force. Thomas Hester provided additional editorial assistance. Other NCS staff at BJS who provided assistance on the project were Michael R. Rand, Marshall DeBerry, Richard Dodge, Caroline Wolf Harlow, Kelly Shim, Catherine J. Whitaker, and Anita Timrots (formerly of BJS). Marilyn Marbrook administered publication, assisted by Tina Dorsey, Jeanne Harris, and Yvonne Shields.

The major research and development effort of the NCS redesign was done by a number of organizations, principally the Bureau of Social Science Research, the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan, and the Research Triangle Institute.

At the Bureau of the Census, invaluable assistance for NCS research and development was provided by James R. Wetzel (Chief, Center for Demographic Studies), Robert N. Tinari (Chief, Crime Surveys Branch), Lawrence S. McGinn (Deputy Chief and subsequent Chief, Crime Surveys Branch), and Charles H. Alexander (Chief, Victimization and Expenditure Survey Branch, Statistical Methods Division).

March 1989, NCJ-115571

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(revised January 1989)

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