



Bureau of Justice Statistics  
Bulletin

# The Severity of Crime

How serious is a murder? Or a rape? Or, for that matter, a petty theft? Do such questions have any meaning? Would their answers have any utility?

Implicit judgments about the severity of crime are imbedded in our social institutions. Requiring the death penalty for certain crimes designates them as the most serious that can occur in this society. Crimes labeled felonies are considered more serious than those labeled misdemeanors. Crimes that can incur life sentences are more serious than those that receive prison sentences of only a few years.

Still, the seriousness of a crime is by no means clear-cut or immutable. In 1976 the rape of an adult woman was changed from a capital to a noncapital offense. The penalty for an offense in one State may be substantially different from the penalty for the same offense in another State. Even within one jurisdiction, the disparity in the sentences meted out by different judges for the same offense has been repeatedly noted with concern by criminal justice scholars. Much of the impetus behind recent determinate and mandatory sentencing legislation has come from the wish to minimize sentencing disparity.

When we speak of crimes such as robbery or burglary, we are speaking of legal categories rather than specific crimes. Although all "robberies" possess the characteristics necessary to be legally classified as such, they can vary in their particulars to an extraordinary degree. These variations, in all their complexity, seldom find their way into the penal code. They may or may not be taken into consideration by the sentencing judge. This wide range of possibilities within each crime type further confounds the seriousness issue. Robbery, because it involves personal confrontation and force or threat of force, is generally considered more serious than burglary. Yet most people would probably see the loss of several

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This bulletin presents, for the first time, the seriousness scores for the full set of offenses measured in the National Survey of Crime Severity (NSCS), conducted in 1977 as a supplement to the National Crime Survey. The NSCS was designed, developed, and conducted by the Center for Studies in Criminology and Criminal Law, Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania. It was directed by Dr. Marvin E. Wolfgang with Dr. Robert M. Figlio.

A detailed report on the NSCS and its methodological underpinnings is now in preparation. It will be in two volumes and will be more than 1,200 pages in length. In addition, the bureau will publish a series of special reports highlighting the severity scores of various population groups.

The severity index represents an innovative way of looking at crimes. It points toward priorities and reaffirms basic values. Two areas of crime about which the public is clearly concerned, drug trafficking and white-collar crime, are major program thrusts of the U.S. Department of Justice. More developmental work is needed before a crime rate weighted by the seriousness of the crimes is possible, but the prospects are exciting. One day, perhaps, seriousness scores may be used routinely to investigate whether criminal career patterns involve crimes of an increasingly serious nature.

Steven R. Schlesinger  
Director

Criminologists and criminal justice researchers have been interested in methods of determining the seriousness of criminal events for many years. An accurate measure of the seriousness with which society views a broad range of criminal events would be helpful to lawmakers and policymakers. It could provide a measure of the appropriateness of sentencing practices and it could assist in the allocation of scarce criminal justice resources. It could even indicate more accurately than at present whether crime is increasing or decreasing and by how much.

The two basic sources of information on the national crime rate are the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) and BJS' National Crime Survey (NCS).<sup>\*</sup> In the Crime Index the UCR counts the total number of murders, rapes, robberies, aggravated assaults, burglaries, and thefts reported to the police during the year. Through a survey of households across

the Nation, the National Crime Survey collects information on the total number of rapes, robberies, assaults, burglaries, and thefts committed during the year. In computing crime rates and victimization rates from one year to the next, both the UCR and the NCS treat each type of crime as equally important. An increase of 100 pocket pickings affects the crime rate just as much as an increase of 100 murders, and 100 rapes affect the violent victimization rate as much as 100 simple assaults, which can be no more than a verbal threat of physical harm.

Intuition says that this is not completely right; 100 pocket pickings are not equal to 100 murders or 100 simple assaults or 100 rapes in the amount of injury they do or in the amount of anguish and fear they create. Clearly murders and rapes should count more, but how much more? Even within a single crime category, shouldn't certain events count more than others? For example, isn't a robbery

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To pursue answers to questions such as these, a survey of the seriousness of crime was conducted in 1977 as a supplement to the NCS. The survey, which included 60,000 persons 18 years of age or older, was the largest ever made of how the general public ranks the seriousness of a wide range of crimes.

Developing, conducting, and compiling the results of the severity study was a complex process using highly sophisticated mathematical techniques. For the respondents, though, the process was relatively simple. They were each given a description of a crime, "A person steals a bicycle parked on the street," and told that the seriousness of this crime was "10." They were then given a list of other crimes and told to compare them in seriousness to the bicycle theft. If a crime seemed to be twice as serious, they were to rate it at 20. If it were four times as serious, they were to rate it 40, and so on. Each person rated 25 crimes, but not everyone had the same 25. Overall, 204 items, each of which was illegal in at least one State, were rated.

Combining the ratings given by each of the 60,000 respondents, a single severity score was developed for each of the 204 items. These are shown in the table of severity scores. The scores range from 72.1 for "planting a bomb in a public building. The bomb explodes and 20 people are killed" to 0.2 for "A person under 16 years old plays hooky from school." The scores represent the relationship of one crime to another in terms of seriousness. A crime with a rating of 20 is considered by the general public to be twice as serious as a crime rated 10, which in turn is twice as serious as a crime rated 5.

Each of the items in the survey is quite specific as to the details of the crime and its consequences. These consequences strongly affect the ratings, a fact that is repeatedly apparent when similar crimes with different outcomes are examined. For example, the items scored 72.8, 43.9, 33.0, and 24.5 are all the same, planting a bomb that goes off in a public building. The outcomes range from 20 people killed to no one injured, and the scores descend in seriousness reflecting the differing outcomes. The crime scored 30.5 is an apparent inconsistency. More injury occurred in this incident (20 people hurt) than in the one scored 33.0 (one person hurt). A few other such apparently inconsistent ratings appear in the table. These may simply be due to the fact that no one saw all 204 items. Persons scoring the item where 20 people were injured may not have had the item where only one was injured with which to compare it.

When the outcome is not physical violence, but property loss, the same attention to detail is reflected among the scores. For example, in both item 21.0 and item 17.9, the victim was shot and (Continued on page 5)

## How do people rank the severity of crime?

### Severity score and offense

72.1—A person plants a bomb in a public building. The bomb explodes and 20 people are killed.

52.8—A man forcibly rapes a woman. As a result of physical injuries, she dies.

47.8—A parent beats his young child with his fists. As a result, the child dies.

43.9—A person plants a bomb in a public building. The bomb explodes and one person is killed.

43.2—A person robs a victim at gunpoint. The victim struggles and is shot to death.

39.2—A man stabs his wife. As a result, she dies.

39.1—A factory knowingly gets rid of its waste in a way that pollutes the water supply of a city. As a result, 20 people die.

35.7—A person stabs a victim to death.

35.6—A person intentionally injures a victim. As a result, the victim dies.

33.8—A person runs a narcotics ring.

33.0—A person plants a bomb in a public building. The bomb explodes and one person is injured but no medical treatment is required.

32.7—An armed person skyjacks an airplane and holds the crew and passengers hostage until a ransom is paid.

30.5—A person plants a bomb in a public building. The bomb explodes and 20 people are injured but no medical treatment is required.

30.0—A man forcibly rapes a woman. Her physical injuries require hospitalization.

27.9—A woman stabs her husband. As a result, he dies.

26.3—An armed person skyjacks an airplane and demands to be flown to another country.

25.8—A man forcibly rapes a woman. No other physical injury occurs.

25.2—A man tries to entice a minor into his car for immoral purposes.

24.9—A person intentionally sets fire to a building causing \$100,000 worth of damage.

24.8—A person intentionally shoots a victim with a gun. The victim requires hospitalization.

24.5—A person plants a bomb in a public building. The bomb explodes but no one is injured.

24.5—A person kidnaps a victim. A ransom of \$1,000 is paid and the victim is returned unharmed.

22.9—A parent beats his young child with his fists. The child requires hospitalization.

22.3—A person intentionally sets fire to a building causing \$500,000 worth of damage.

21.7—A person pays another person to commit a serious crime.

21.2—A person kidnaps a victim.

21.0—A person robs a victim of \$1,000 at gunpoint. The victim is wounded and requires hospitalization.

20.6—A person sells heroin to others for resale.

20.1—A man forcibly rapes a woman. Her physical injuries require treatment by a doctor but not hospitalization.

19.9—A factory knowingly gets rid of its waste in a way that pollutes the water supply of a city. As a result one person dies.

19.7—A factory knowingly gets rid of its waste in a way that pollutes the water supply of a city. As a result 20 people become ill but none require medical treatment.

19.5—A person smuggles heroin into the country.

19.5—A person kills a victim by recklessly driving an automobile.

19.5—A high school boy beats a middle-aged woman with his fists. She requires hospitalization.

19.0—A person intentionally shoots a victim with a gun. The victim requires treatment by a doctor but not hospitalization.

18.3—A man beats his wife with his fists. She requires hospitalization.

18.0—A person stabs a victim with a knife. The victim requires hospitalization.

17.9—A person robs a victim of \$10 at gunpoint. The victim is wounded and requires hospitalization.

17.8—Knowing that a shipment of cooking oil is bad, a store owner decides to sell it anyway. Only one bottle is sold and the purchaser dies.

17.8—A person intentionally shoots a victim with a gun. The victim is wounded slightly and does not require medical treatment.

17.7—A person, armed with a gun, robs a bank of \$100,000 during business hours. No one is physically hurt.

17.7—An employer orders one of his employees to commit a serious crime.

17.5—A high school boy beats an elderly woman with his fists. She requires hospitalization.

17.1—A person stabs a victim with a knife. The victim requires treatment by a doctor but not hospitalization.

16.9—A legislator takes a bribe of \$10,000 from a company to vote for a law favoring the company.

16.9—A man drags a woman into an alley, tears her clothes, but flees before she is physically harmed or sexually attacked.

16.8—A person, using force, robs a victim of \$1,000. The victim is hurt and requires hospitalization.

16.6—A person, using force, robs a victim of \$1,000. The victim is hurt and requires treatment by a doctor but not hospitalization.

16.5—A person robs a victim of \$1,000 at gunpoint. The victim is wounded and requires treatment by a doctor but not hospitalization.

16.4—A person attempts to kill a victim with a gun. The gun misfires and the victim escapes unharmed.

15.9—A teenage boy beats his mother with his fists. The mother requires hospitalization.

15.7—A county judge takes a bribe to give a light sentence in a criminal case.

15.7—A person robs a victim of \$10 at gunpoint. The victim is wounded and requires treatment by a doctor but not hospitalization.

15.6—A person, armed with a lead pipe, robs a victim of \$1,000. The victim is injured and requires hospitalization.

15.5—A person breaks into a bank at night and steals \$100,000.

14.6—A person, using force, robs a victim of \$10. The victim is hurt and requires hospitalization.

14.5—A company pays a bribe of \$100,000 to a legislator to vote for a law favoring the company.

14.1—A doctor cheats on claims he makes to a Federal health insurance plan for patient services.

13.9—A legislator takes a bribe from a company to vote for a law favoring the company.

13.7—A person, armed with a lead pipe, robs a victim of \$1,000. The victim is injured and requires treatment by a doctor but not hospitalization.

13.5—A doctor cheats on claims he makes to a Federal health insurance plan for patient services. He gains \$10,000.

13.4—An employer orders his employees to make false entries on documents that the court has requested for a criminal trial.

13.3—A person, armed with a lead pipe, robs a victim of \$10. The victim is injured and requires hospitalization.

13.0—A factory knowingly gets rid of its waste in a way that pollutes the water supply of a city.

12.7—A person intentionally sets fire to a building causing \$10,000 worth of damage.

12.2—A person pays a witness to give false testimony in a criminal trial.

12.0—A person gives the floor plans of a bank to a bank robber.

12.0—A police officer takes a bribe not to interfere with an illegal gambling operation.

11.9—A person intentionally injures a victim. The victim is treated by a doctor and hospitalized.

11.8—A person stabs a victim with a knife. No medical treatment is required.

11.8—A man beats a stranger with his fists. He requires hospitalization.

11.7—Ten high school boys beat a male classmate with their fists. He requires hospitalization.

11.4—A person knowingly lies under oath during a trial.

11.3—Three high school boys beat a male classmate with their fists. He requires hospitalization.

11.2—A company pays a bribe to a legislator to vote for a law favoring the company.

10.9—A person steals property worth \$10,000 from outside a building.

10.8—A person steals a locked car and sells it.

10.5—A person smuggles marijuana into the country for resale.

10.4—A person intentionally hits a victim with a lead pipe. The victim requires hospitalization.

10.3—A person illegally sells barbiturates, such as prescription sleeping pills, to others for resale.

10.3—A person operates a store where he knowingly sells stolen property.

10.3—A person threatens to harm a victim unless the victim gives him money. The victim gives him \$1,000 and is not harmed.

10.0—A government official intentionally hinders the investigation of a criminal offense.

9.7—A person breaks into a department store, forces open a safe, and steals \$1,000.

9.7—A person breaks into a school and steals equipment worth \$1,000.

9.7—A person robs a victim of \$1,000 at gunpoint. No physical harm occurs.

9.7—A person walks into a public museum and steals a painting worth \$1,000.

9.7—A person breaks into a display case in a store and steals \$1,000 worth of merchandise.

9.6—A person breaks into a home and steals \$1,000.

9.6—A police officer knowingly makes a false arrest.

9.4—A public official takes \$1,000 of public money for his own use.

9.4—A person robs a victim of \$10 at gunpoint. No physical harm occurs.

9.3—A person threatens to seriously injure a victim.

9.2—Several large companies illegally fix the retail prices of their products.

9.2—A person knowingly makes false entries on a document that the court has requested for a criminal trial.

9.0—A city official takes a bribe from a company for his help in getting a city building contract for the company.

9.0—A person, armed with a lead pipe, robs a victim of \$1,000. No physical harm occurs.

8.9—A person intentionally hits a victim with a lead pipe. The victim requires treatment by a doctor but not hospitalization.

8.6—A person performs an illegal abortion.

8.5—A person sells marijuana to others for resale.

8.5—A person intentionally injures a victim. The victim is treated by a doctor but is not hospitalized.

8.3—A person illegally gets monthly welfare checks of \$200.

8.2—Knowing that a shipment of cooking oil is bad, a store owner decides to sell it anyway. Only one bottle is sold and the purchaser is treated by a doctor but not hospitalized.

8.0—A person steals an unlocked car and sells it.

8.0—A person, using force, robs a victim of \$1,000. No physical harm occurs.

7.9—A person trespasses in a railroad and steals tools worth \$1,000.

7.9—A teenage boy beats his father with his fists. The father requires hospitalization.

7.9—A person intentionally hits a victim with a lead pipe. No medical treatment is required.

7.7—Knowing that a shipment of cooking oil is bad, a store owner decides to sell it anyway.

7.7—A person conceals the identity of someone that he knows has committed a serious crime.

7.6—A person steals \$1,000 worth of merchandise from the counter of a department store.

7.5—A person, armed with a lead pipe, robs a victim of \$10. No physical harm occurs.

7.4—A person illegally gets monthly welfare checks.

7.3—A person threatens a victim with a weapon unless the victim gives him money. The victim gives him \$10 and is not harmed.

7.3—A person beats a victim with his fists. The victim is hurt but does not require medical treatment.

7.3—A person breaks into a department store and steals merchandise worth \$1,000.

7.2—A person willingly hides out a bank robber.

7.2—A person signs someone else's name to a check and cashes it.

7.1—A person, armed with a lead pipe, robs a victim of \$10. The victim is injured and requires treatment by a doctor but not hospitalization.

6.9--A person beats a victim with his fists. The victim requires hospitalization.

6.9--A person breaks into a public recreation center, forces open a cash box, and steals \$1,000.

6.9--A factory knowingly gets rid of its waste in a way that pollutes the water supply of a city. As a result, one person becomes ill but does not require medical treatment.

6.9--A person steals property worth \$1,000 from outside a building.

6.8--Because of a victim's race, a person injures a victim to prevent him from enrolling in a public school. No medical treatment is required.

6.7--A person, using force, robs a victim of \$10. The victim is hurt and requires treatment by a doctor but not hospitalization.

6.6--A person does not have a weapon. He threatens to harm a victim unless the victim gives him money. The victim gives him \$10 and is not harmed.

6.6--A person steals \$1,000 worth of merchandise from an unlocked car.

6.5--A person uses heroin.

6.4--An employer refuses to hire a qualified person because of that person's race.

6.4--A person gets customers for a prostitute.

6.3--A person, free on bail for committing a serious crime, purposefully fails to appear in court on the day of his trial.

6.2--An employee embezzles \$1,000 from his employer.

6.2--A person beats a victim with his fists. The victim requires treatment by a doctor but not hospitalization.

6.1--A person runs a prostitution racket.

6.1--A person cheats on his Federal income tax return and avoids paying \$10,000 in taxes.

5.7--A theater owner knowingly shows pornographic movies to a minor.

5.5--A person runs a place where liquor is sold without a license.

5.4--A person has some heroin for his own use.

5.4--A real estate agent refuses to sell a house to a person because of that person's race.

5.4--A person threatens to harm a victim unless the victim gives him money. The victim gives him \$10 and is not harmed.

5.3--A person loans money at an illegally high interest rate.

5.1--A man runs his hands over the body of a female victim, then runs away.

5.1--A person, using force, robs a victim of \$10. No physical harm occurs.

5.0--A person knowingly buys stolen property from the person who stole it.

4.9--A person snatches a handbag containing \$10 from a victim on the street.

4.7--A man exposes himself in public.

4.6--A person carries a gun illegally.

4.5--A person cheats on his Federal income tax return.

4.4--A person steals an unlocked car and later abandons it undamaged.

4.4--A person picks a victim's pocket of \$100.

4.4--A person robs a victim. The victim is injured but not hospitalized.

4.3--A person breaks into a public recreation center, forces open a cash box, and steals \$10.

4.2--A person attempts to break into a home but runs away when a police car approaches.

3.8--A person turns in a false fire alarm.

3.7--A labor union official illegally threatens to organize a strike if an employer hires nonunion workers.

3.6--A person attempts to break into a parked car, but runs away when a police car approaches.

3.6--A person knowingly passes a bad check.

3.6--A person steals property worth \$100 from outside a building.

3.5--A person runs a place where he permits gambling to occur illegally.

3.3--A person breaks into a department store, forces open a cash register, and steals \$10.

3.3--A person picks a victim's pocket of \$10.

3.3--A person attempts to rob a victim but runs away when a police car approaches.

3.2--A person breaks into a building and steals property worth \$10.

3.2--An employer illegally threatens to fire employees if they join a labor union.

3.1--A person breaks into a home and steals \$100.

3.1--A person forces open a cash register in a department store and steals \$10.

3.1--A person breaks into a school and steals \$10 worth of supplies.

2.9--A person steals property worth \$50 from outside a building.

2.8--A person breaks into a department store and steals merchandise worth \$10.

2.4--A person knowingly carries an illegal knife.

2.2--A person trespasses in a city-owned storage lot and steals equipment worth \$10.

2.2--A person steals \$10 worth of merchandise from the counter of a department store.

2.1--A person is found firing a rifle for which he knows he has no permit.

2.1--A woman engages in prostitution.

1.9--A person makes an obscene phone call.

1.9--An employee embezzles \$10 from his employer.

1.9--A store owner knowingly puts "large" eggs into containers marked "extra-large."

1.7--A person under 16 years old is drunk in public.

1.7--A person is a customer in a place where he knows gambling occurs illegally.

1.7--A person steals property worth \$10 from outside a building.

1.6--A person is a customer in a house of prostitution.

1.6--A male, over 16 years of age, has sexual relations with a willing female under 16.

1.6--A person is a customer in a place where he knows liquor is sold without a license.

1.6--A person breaks into a parking meter and steals \$10 worth of nickels.

1.5--A person takes barbiturates, such as sleeping pills, without a legal prescription.

1.5--A person intentionally shoves or pushes a victim. No medical treatment is required.

1.4--A person has some barbiturates, such as sleeping pills, for his own use without a legal prescription.

1.4--A person smokes marijuana.

1.4--A person trespasses in a railroad yard and steals a lantern worth \$10.

1.3--A person has some marijuana for his own use.

1.3--Two persons willingly engage in a homosexual act.

1.1--A person disturbs the neighborhood with loud, noisy behavior.

1.1--A person takes bets on the numbers.

1.1--A group continues to hang around a corner after being told to break up by a police officer.

1.1--A person under 16 years old illegally has a bottle of wine.

0.9--A person under 16 years old is reported to police by his parents as an offender because they are unable to control him.

0.8--A person under 16 years old runs away from home.

0.8--A person knowingly trespasses in a railroad yard.

0.8--A person is drunk in public.

0.7--A person under 16 years old breaks a curfew law by being out on the street after the hour permitted by law.

0.6--A person trespasses in the backyard of a private home.

0.5--A person takes part in a dice game in an alley.

0.3--A person is a vagrant. That is, he has no home and no visible means of support.

0.2--A person under 18 years old plays hooky from school.

required hospitalization. The different scores reflect the amount of money the robber took, \$1,000 in the first case and \$10 in the second.

The relationship of the victim to the offender and the ability of the victims to defend themselves both seem to be taken into consideration in assigning scores. The death of a child at the hands of its parent (47.8) is more serious than a husband's fatally stabbing his wife (39.2), which in turn is more serious than a wife's killing her husband (27.9).

The overall pattern of severity scores indicates that people clearly regard violent crimes as more serious than property offenses. They also take white-collar crime and drug dealing quite seriously, rating two offenses of this type higher than some forms of homicide. One of the highest scores (39.1) is awarded to a factory that causes the death of 20 people by knowingly polluting the city water supply. Running a narcotics ring (33.8) is regarded more seriously than skyjacking (32.7) and selling heroin for resale (20.6) more serious than rape if the woman's injuries do not require hospitalization (20.1).

In general, people tend to agree about the severity of specific crimes. A few differences appear, however, when the

scores of different groups are examined. For example, blacks and members of other racial groups in general assign lower scores than whites. Older people found thefts of large amounts to be more serious than people in younger age brackets. Men and women, however, did not differ in any significant way in their overall scoring pattern. As might be expected, victims assign higher scores than nonvictims.

#### Methodology

The National Survey of Crime Severity was conducted as a supplement to the National Crime Survey over a 6-month period beginning in July 1977. A total of 60,000 persons participated in the survey, each rating the seriousness of 25 specific criminal events. Twelve different forms were used, each with a different set of items, so that the total of items scored was 204. Some items appeared on more than one form, and five items appeared on all of the forms:

- "A person steals a bicycle parked on the street."  
(assigned a score of 10 as a starting point)
- "A person robs a victim. The victim is injured but not hospitalized."
- "A person under 16 years old plays hooky from school."  
(received the lowest score)
- "A person stabs a victim to death."

—"A person plants a bomb in a public building. The bomb explodes and 20 people are killed."  
(received the highest severity score).

The persons interviewed were all 18 years of age or older and were members of households that composed half of the National Crime Survey (NCS) sample. The NCS conducts interviews in 60,000 households forming a stratified random sample representative of the entire Nation.

Detailed explanation of all procedures, techniques, and methodologies used in the National Survey of Crime Severity will be presented in a forthcoming publication.

Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletins are prepared by the staff of the bureau. Carol B. Kalish, chief of data analysis, edits the bulletins. Marilyn Marbrook, head of the bureau publications unit, administers their publication, assisted by Joyce M. Stanford. This bulletin was written by Patsy Klaus and Ms. Kalish.

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