

MAKING SENSE OF U.S. CRIME STATISTICS

By George F. Cole

Newspaper headlines tell the story: "Killings Soar in Big Cities Across U.S."; "Shop-owners Demand Foot Patrols"; "Drug Turf War Yields Violence"; "Neighbors Unite Against Crime"; "Prison Population Reaches New High." TV news programs depict urban neighborhoods ravaged by drugs and crime, and small towns where shoot-outs have occurred. But what is the reality of the American crime problem in the 1990s? Is crime really *increasing* as portrayed in the media, or are we in fact now having some success in curbing it? To a great extent the answer to these questions depends upon one's source of information about the levels of crime—the Uniform Crime Report or the National Crime Victimization Survey. They yield significantly different pictures.

The Uniform Crime Report Picture

One of America's seasonal rituals is the release every August of the FBI's report, *Crime in the United States*, which is based on the Uniform Crime Reporting Program. At a press conference, the FBI's Director usually points to data that depict a nation with ever-increasing levels of crime. A "crime clock" showed, for example, that during the past year, one murder was reported to the police every twenty-one minutes, and a forcible rape every five minutes. The FBI also reported last August that the incidence of violent crime per 100,000 inhabitants rose nearly 4% from 1990 to 1991, and by roughly 30% from 1981 to 1991. The property crime rate, in contrast, stayed flat during this 10-year span, with some crime, such as burglary, actually declining.

The FBI data on property crime and violent crime are shown in Figure 1 for four years over the past twenty, that together capture the overall pattern. According to the FBI data, both of these types of crime experienced sharp increases during the 1970s. As noted, property crime then leveled out for the next decade. Violent crime, in contrast, after plateauing in the first half of the 1980s, surged again in recent years (Figure 1).

The Crime Victimization Survey Picture

Less public attention is accorded the other crime statistics program, the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), administered by the Department of Justice. These data have shown a substantial decline in the number of victimizations since 1981.

Violent crime—measured in terms of reported victimization rates—is down by more than 10% over the last decade and, according to the latest survey, is even a bit lower than in 1973. During the same time-span, the FBI reports show violent crime increasing by about 80% (with both sets of data adjusted for population size).

According to the crime victimization surveys, "personal theft" crimes (various forms of larceny) have dropped sharply since 1973, especially over the past decade. The same is true for "household crimes," which include household burglary, household larceny, and motor vehicle theft. While the FBI data, then, indicate that property crime rates have leveled off over the last ten years, the victimization survey picture shows personal theft and household crimes declining by roughly 25% (Figure 2). What's going on? Why are there such large discrepancies?

How the Data are Collected

To have a better understanding of the current situation and crime trends, it is important that the strengths and weaknesses of the UCR and NCVS be understood. In 1929 Congress authorized the FBI to create a national and uniform system of compiling crime data. The Uniform Crime Reporting Program (UCR) is the product of a voluntary national network through which about 16,000 local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies, with jurisdictions representing 96% of the total U.S. population, transmit information to Washington concerning twenty-nine types of offenses reported to

the police. For eight major crimes—"index offenses" (murder, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, arson)—the collected data are fairly comprehensive, showing such factors as age, race, and number of reported crimes solved; while for the twenty-one other offense categories the data are not so complete.

Persons using the UCR must understand that only crimes *reported* to the police are included. The program is therefore unable to estimate the "dark figure of crime"—those events that are not brought to police attention. This is a significant problem. For example, it is estimated that about 45% of rape victims do not report the attack to the police. Furthermore, almost half of robbery victims, and 55% of those experiencing simple assault, don't report. The UCR data have been criticized for a number of other reasons: (1) no federal crimes are included; (2) submission of the data is voluntary (for many years the Chicago Police did not cooperate); (3) the reports are not truly uniform since events are defined according to differing criteria in various regions of the country; and (4) many white-collar crimes are not included. Finally, because of the shape of the graphs presented in the reports and the choice of baseline data, the untutored eye may not see the potential for distortion.

To deal with the problem of unreported crime, the Department of Justice since 1972 has sponsored the National Crime Victimization Survey. Carried out by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, these surveys are designed to generate estimates of quarterly and yearly victimization rates for all index offenses except homicide and arson. Information is collected through interviews with a national probability sample of 100,000 people representing 49,000 households. The same people are interviewed twice a year for three years about their experiences with crime in the previous six months. In addition, specialized surveys of twenty-

six communities produce rates for many of the nation's largest cities. Separate studies of businesses are also made. The results show that in 1991 for the crimes measured (rape, robbery, assault, burglary, theft, motor vehicle theft), 35 million victimizations affecting 23 million households (about 24% of all U.S. households) occurred—a level much higher than that indicated by the number of crimes reported to the police. But, though they continue to show much more crime than the FBI reports, they also show the rate declining over the last decade.

Each person interviewed in the national sample is asked a series of questions to determine whether he or she has been victimized: For instance, "did anyone beat you up, attack you, or hit you with something such as a rock or a bottle?" For each affirmative response to these "incident screen" questions, detailed questions then elicit specific facts about the event, characteristics of the offender, and resulting financial losses or physical disabilities. These data permit estimates to be made of national crime victimization rates, crime trends, offender characteristics, and emerging demographic patterns as they affect crime.

Data from victimization surveys have helped to validate some hypotheses about the nature of crime. For instance, the Justice Department has created a series of estimates of the chance of a given person over the age of twelve becoming a victim of violent crime (rape, robbery, assault). For any particular year, the victimization rate is about 36 per 1,000 for males and 24 per 1,000 for females. Over a lifetime, of course, the chance is much higher, and the figures do not include forms of victimization like murder, kidnapping, or injury from drunken drivers.

The surveys also shed light on the connections between sex, age, and race and the probability of victimization. With the exception of rape and personal robbery with contact (purse snatching), men are almost twice as likely as women to be victimized. An interesting finding is that a majority of the victimizations seem to occur within the lower age group of twelve to twenty-four years. Youths between twelve and fifteen are most likely to be the victims of such crimes as personal larceny without contact, robbery, and simple assault. Race is also an important factor, with African Americans and other minorities being more likely than whites to

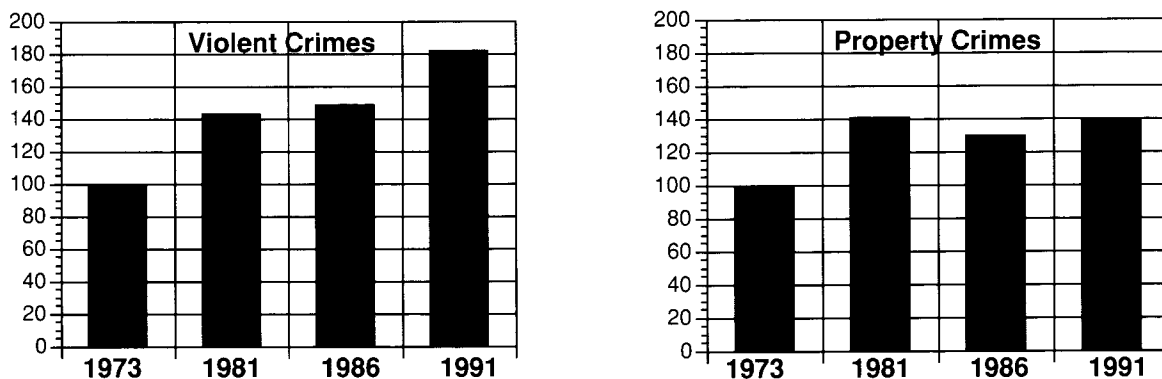
be raped, robbed, and assaulted. A notable finding is that the elderly are less likely than the young to be victimized. Clearly, availability, vulnerability, and desirability determine whether someone or something is a likely target. Randomness also contributes to the process. Being near an armed person who is intent on robbing, and who perceives an opportunity to do so, greatly increases the probability of victimization.

Deficiencies in the Survey Data

Although the victimization studies have added to our knowledge about crime, their data present a number of difficulties. For example, it is obvious that the surveys are unlikely to gather information about offenses in which the persons being interviewed participated. NCVS interviewers may be perceived as government officials, and thus the data tell us little about such crimes as gambling, drug trafficking, prostitution, or the purchase of stolen property. It must also be remembered that the surveys are organized to document the victim's *perception* of an incident. While the latter is perhaps important, it can be argued that laypersons do not have the legal background that would allow them

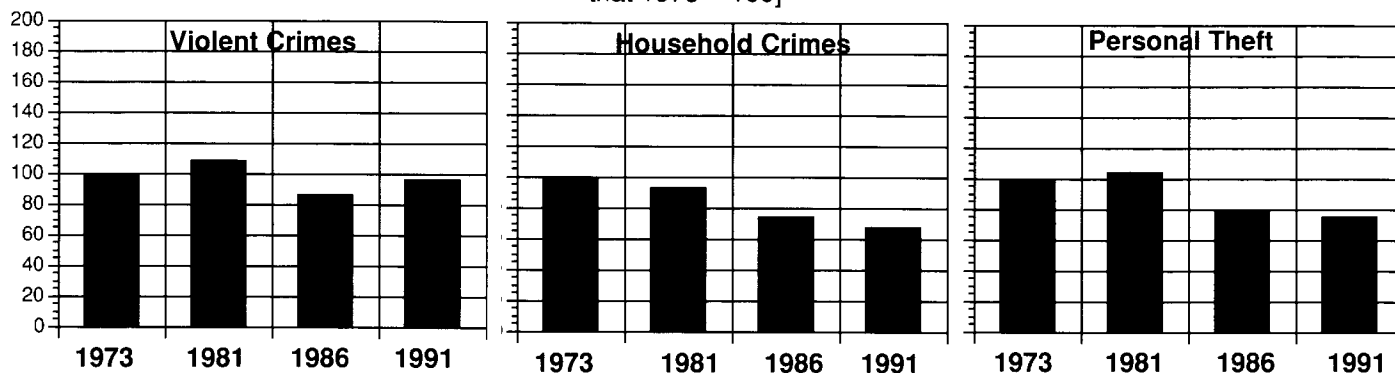
Figure 1
Changes in the Incidence of Violent Crime and Property Crime,
1973-1991: The FBI Story

[Indexes of crime per 100,000 population (all ages); adjusted so that 1973 = 100]



Source: *Uniform Crime Reports*. "Violent" crimes are criminal homicide, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. "Property" crimes are burglary, larceny and theft, and auto theft. Data are also gathered on arson, but not included in totals shown. Reports are based on police compilations, forwarded to the FBI.

Figure 2
Changes in the Incidence of Crime Victimization, 1973-1991: The NCVS Story
 [Indexes of crime per 1,000 persons, 12 years old and older, or for 1,000 households. Adjusted so that 1973 = 100]



Source: *National Crime Victimization Surveys*, conducted by the Bureau of the Census for the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Based on reports of personal experience on sample surveys, regardless of whether or not the crime was reported to the authorities. Crimes of violence (attempted or completed) include rape, robbery, assault—both simple and aggravated. Crimes of theft (again, attempted or completed) include personal larceny with or without contact. Household crimes include burglary, household larceny, and motor vehicle theft. A single criminal encounter counts only once—even if more than one person is affected.

in all cases to differentiate criminal from noncriminal behavior. The high number of incidents reported by the young, for example, is thought to be produced in part by defining schoolyard shakedowns or fights as criminal. Property thought to have been stolen may in fact have been lost. Memories may grow hazy on dates and carry last year's crime into this year's data. Given the recent patterns of stability in victimization rates, however, this latter deficiency should not overshadow the analytical value of the studies.

What IS the Crime Situation?

When we get down to the nitty-gritty, what Americans want to know is: Is crime being curbed? After a quarter-century of heavy funding by the federal government of state and local crime control efforts, have the dollars and multiple programs had an impact? Are the \$74 billion expended per year by federal, state, and local governments making a dent? These are tough questions about which criminal

justice researchers disagree. As noted, the National Crime Victimization Surveys suggest a general stability of victimization rates since the 1970s, when significant declines began to occur. The Uniform Crime Reports tell a different story: a dramatic rise in crime rates actually beginning in the mid 1960s, and continuing for most categories until 1980. Then, the rates began to stabilize—though not those involving violent crime, where there have been big jumps in recent years.

The differences in the trends indicated by the NCVS and UCR are explained in part by the different data sources and different population bases on which their computations of crime rates are based. As discussed earlier, the "dark figure of crime" is an ongoing criminal justice problem, and is a special problem for the FBI data. Over time, though, the gap between the FBI data and those collected through the NCVS has lessened. The Bureau of Justice Statistics found that in 1986, for the first time, more than half of all violent crimes were reported to the police. Sig-

nificant gains in reporting were found in other categories, too. This trend undoubtedly reflects an increase in citizen willingness to report criminal behavior. The introduction of "911" phone numbers, the augmented presence of police in many communities, and neighborhood watch programs have helped this effort. So, the FBI data are showing an increase in crime in part through a positive development—increased reporting.

The Department of Justice urges that users of the UCR and NCVS "who have a basic understanding of each program's objectives, methodology and coverage, use the output from each in a complementary manner to better assess crime occurrence, losses, law enforcement involvement, arrestee descriptive information, and victimization data." That's good advice. But "consumers" should know that the data source which has the fullest reporting—the National Crime Victimization Survey—is the one which shows the rate of crimes consistently in decline over the last decade.

George F. Cole is professor of political science, the University of Connecticut, and author, The American System of Criminal Justice, 6th edition (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1992) from which portions of this article were adapted.