



National Institute of Justice

Research Preview

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The Extent and Costs of Crime Victimization: A New Look

Crime exacts a heavy toll—on governments, on society at large, and especially on its victims. The cost of crime has two dimensions: a dollar amount calculated by adding up property losses, productivity losses, and medical bills, and an amount less easily quantifiable because it takes the forms of pain, emotional trauma, and risk of death from victimization. Just how much social resources are drained has been uncertain; previous studies have been able to estimate some of the short-term costs attendant on victimization, but long-term estimates have been incomplete. The research summarized here adds in the long-term costs and the intangibles of pain, suffering, and risk of death.

The researchers found that victimizations generate \$105 billion annually in property and productivity losses and outlays for medical expenses. This amounts to an annual “crime tax” of roughly \$425 per man, woman, and child in the United States. When the values of pain, long-term emotional trauma, disability, and risk of death are put in dollar terms, the costs rise to \$450 billion annually (or \$1,800 per person).

Number of victimizations

For counts of crime, the researchers used the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports and the National Criminal Victimization Survey (NCVS), supplemented by data from other nationally representative surveys. For the most part, only street crime and domestic crime were counted and their costs calculated. This study diverges from most other victimization figures by 1) including crimes against people under age 12; 2) using estimates of domestic violence and sexual assault from surveys that focus specifically on these topics and ask more explicitly about these crimes; 3) more fully accounting for repeat victimizations; and 4) including child abuse and drunk driving. Certain categories were excluded, among them crimes against business and government, personal fraud, white-collar crime, child neglect, and most “victimless” crime.

The new calculations produced an estimate of more than 49 million victimizations and attempted victimizations annually for the period 1987 to 1990. More specific categories are as follows:

- **Fatal crimes.** These crimes, which include criminal and vehicular homicide, arson, and child abuse, claimed some 31,000 lives in 1990.
- **Child abuse.** A conservative estimate of the number of children sexually, physically, or emotionally abused was 794,000 in 1990.
- **Rape.** The number of rape and sexual assault victims in 1992 was estimated at 1.1 million (figure based on data from a recent national survey). The definition of rape and sexual assault used here is slightly broader, and the age range is broader, than in the NCVS redesigned survey.
- **Assault.** The number of nonfatal assaults against children under 12 comes to about 450,000 annually (estimated from health care data). (To avoid double-counting, this figure excludes 194,000 child physical abuse incidents.) The study estimated the number of domestic assaults at 2 million, a figure reasonably consistent with data from the redesigned NCVS.
- **Drunk driving.** Tentative estimates put the number of physical injuries from drunk driving at about half a million, with another 2.4 million people estimated to be involved in sometimes psychologically devastating crashes.
- **Arson.** The study estimated 137,000 arson victimizations, including 15,000 that resulted in injuries.

Costs and other consequences

Both intangible and tangible costs were calculated. Although the study involved extensive data collection and cost imputations, the basic logic was straightforward: 1) count the number of crimes of various types; 2) estimate from a variety of sources the average costs of each type; and 3) multiply costs by crime incidence to obtain aggregate figures. Not all costs were included. This study

focused on victim-related costs, not costs to operate the criminal justice system.

The following examples of costs per victimization (for the period 1987–90) show that quality-of-life losses generally exceed all tangible losses *combined*:

Crime	Tangible Costs	Intangible Costs	TOTAL COSTS
Murder	\$1,030,000	\$1,910,000	\$2,940,000
Rape/Sexual Assault	5,100	81,400	86,500
Robbery/Attempt with Injury	5,200	13,800	19,000
Assault or Attempt	1,550	7,800	9,350
Burglary or Attempt	1,100	300	1,400

In the aggregate, tangible losses amounted to \$105 billion annually, but intangibles were much higher at \$345 billion. Overall, rape is the costliest crime: With annual victim costs at \$127 billion, it exacts a higher price than murder.

The calculations shed new light on domestic violence against adults, revealing the aggregate costs of crimes in this category to be \$67 billion per year. Losses due to violence against children, some 40 percent of which is domestic violence, exceed \$164 billion.

Applications/implications

The study findings make clear that when quality-of-life factors are included in calculating the cost of crime, the burden of the “crime tax” is higher than other measures suggest. Behind the dollar figures the researchers have assigned lies the reality of the social toll exacted by crime.

This social cost consists of the adverse emotional and psychological effects that can have far-reaching consequences for the victims. Translating them into dollar figures borrows from the approach of the civil law damage suit and helps illustrate just how profound these effects can be. By taking these factors into account in assessing the effects of crime, the study can serve as a starting point for recognizing the full consequences for victims. That in turn can affect public policy toward victims, including expansion of the concept of victim compensation.

The findings have the potential to affect programs and strategies aimed at reducing crime and criminal behavior. Analysts who evaluate the effectiveness of such programs and strategies may want to include a calculation of the social cost to victims. Early release programs are an example. When offenders are kept in prison, there is no cost to individual victims during the incapacitation period. By contrast, when an offender who is released early (to avoid the high cost of incarceration) commits a crime, the costs are shifted to the victim. The high cost the victim must pay highlights the importance of ensuring public safety in designing early release programs.

The information brought to light by the study might also be used as the basis of a standard that can be applied in calculating the effectiveness of prevention programs and the need for fuller victim compensation. But the value of the study may be greatest on another level: creating a fuller recognition of the burden that crime victims bear.

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