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Bureau of Justice Statistics Technical Report

Response to Screening Questions in the National Crime Survey

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The National Crime Survey is currently undergoing an extensive examination by a panel of experts in the field of criminology—the Crime Survey Research Consortium. A major charge to the Consortium is to devise appropriate questions to be asked of household members to elicit reports of the kinds of crimes covered by the Survey. Earlier experience has shown that some crime incidents are forgotten by respondents or deliberately not reported to interviewers. Therefore, any new questionnaire must attempt to elicit as many as possible of these likely-to-be-forgotten or sensitive crime incidents without, at the same time, inundating the Survey with reports of the same incidents by different household members. This technical report presents an analysis of the current National Crime Survey questionnaire from the perspective of how the task of eliciting crime incidents is performed within the context of the existing instrument.

The current screening questions

The National Crime Survey (NCS) questionnaire consists of two major elements: a series of screening questions¹ designed to determine whether a respondent was a victim of certain crimes and an incident form that obtains the details of each crime reported. The screening questions translate the essentials of the crimes measured by the NCS into everyday language. The information gathered on the incident form makes it possible to

Assuring the quality, accuracy and timeliness of its data series is the particular and primary hallmark of any statistical agency. Through its bulletins and special report series, inaugurated in early 1981 and 1983 respectively, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) has been analyzing data from our National Crime Survey, National Corrections Reporting Program, the Federal integrated data base, State transaction data bases, and various prosecutorial and adjudicatory programs and projects. Our expanded work in promoting the broadest possible dissemination and public use of the data we produce suggests that the full benefits of our program means multiple uses by multiple users. These users—Federal, State and local policymakers, criminal justice managers and practitioners, the academic research and consulting community—must rely on the bureau as the guarantor of the quality of the numbers. Thus the reduction of error associated with the statistical series we

sponsor is and must be a primary objective for this bureau.

To meet this objective we have begun a series of technical memoranda to address critical methodological questions and to explain our efforts to improve the reliability and validity of the data series we sponsor. Among the most important of these series is the National Crime Survey, undertaken for BJS by the Bureau of the Census, which seeks victimization data from 60,000 American households and more than 127,000 American citizens. Within the National Crime Survey are a set of questions intended to draw out whether the persons responding or someone in their household has been a victim of a violent or property crime. These "screening" questions are a vital element in eliciting victimization data; this technical report explains these questions and their effectiveness in generating data on victimization for major crime categories.

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classify the event as one of the crimes covered by the survey.

This analysis of NCS screen questions builds on work that used 1974, 1975, and 1976 data.² In these

²The report based on 1976 data is included in Robert G. Lehnen and Wesley G. Skogan (eds.) *The National Crime Survey: Working Papers, Volume 3: Methodological Studies*, U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, NCJ-90307, October 1984, pp. 65-66.

earlier studies, a comparison was made between the screening question that elicited the initial report of the crime and the final type of crime classification assigned to the event. These analyses concluded that, in most cases, the questions designed to elicit reports of specific crimes did in fact contribute the bulk of incidents in these categories. However, the interviewing procedures permitted interviewers to move responses on the screen from

¹A facsimile of the NCS screening questions appears as figure 1 on page 5.

where they were first reported to questions that more nearly reflected the nature of the incident. The degree to which this procedure contributed to the main conclusions drawn in the earlier studies is not known.

Since then, the interviewer's manual has been revised to require that victimizations are to be recorded only at the screen question where they are first mentioned; responses are not to be moved for any reason, no matter how unrelated the reported victimization may be to the content of the particular screen question.³ This instruction has subsequently been emphasized in interviewer training sessions and in home study exercises. This report is based on 1981 data and reflects the strengthening of interviewing procedures described above.

The percentage of incidents that each screening question contributed to the crimes measured in the survey and, for each crime, the proportion of incidents elicited by the key questions are shown for 1981 (table 1). The key questions are those that were designed to jog respondents' memories about particular crimes. As in the earlier studies, the questions designed to probe for particular crimes do provide the bulk of the incidents that are ultimately classified in these categories.

The exception is robbery, where the key questions produce only 49% of the incidents (total for questions 46 and 47). This is probably because robbery involves elements of both theft and violence so that there is a wider range of questions that could trigger reports of such incidents. When a comparison is made with the proportion of incidents elicited by the key questions in the earlier studies, the differences, with one exception, are in the expected direction; that is, the tightening of the rules about moving reports of incidents on the screening questions has resulted in lower proportions of incidents deriving from the key questions in the 1981 data as compared with the average of the 3 earlier years. These differences range from 1 to 10 percentage points. The exception is personal larceny with contact, where the 1981 figure is 10 points higher, with no apparent reason for this anomaly.

³For example, if a respondent mentions a physical attack in response to screen question 38, which is concerned with illegal entry of one's home, the entry is recorded in that question, rather than moved to question 48 which might characterize the incident more accurately. The details of the crime, which are obtained on an incident report form, enable the events to be properly classified. The lone exception to this rule occurs when a respondent remembers an incident after the screening questions have been completed. In this case the interviewer is instructed to mark an appropriate screen question.

The NCS screener is divided into two parts. The first part, the "Household Screen Questions," elicits reports of crimes directed against the household as a collectivity. It is assumed that these can be reported by one knowledgeable respondent, called the household respondent. The second part, the "Individual Screen Questions," elicits reports of crimes against individuals. The individual screen questions are asked for each household member 12 years old and older; a parent answers for those 12 and 13 years old.

Well over 90% of the incidents that are classified as crimes of personal contact (rape, robbery, assault, and personal larceny with contact) are elicited by the individual screen questions.⁴ For the household crimes, 85% of burglaries and 86% of motor vehicle thefts are produced from the household screen questions. The screening questions for these six crimes appear to function as intended, although this is not to suggest that different screening strategies might not produce more reports of these kinds of crime. The two

⁴For definitions of crimes measured by the National Crime Survey, see *Measuring Crime*, Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin, NCJ-75710, February, 1981.

remaining crimes, personal larceny without contact and household larceny, are not as clearly differentiated by the screening questions. About 34% of personal larcenies without contact are reported in response to the household screen questions, and 32% of the incidents eventually classified as household larcenies are first mentioned on the individual screen questions. This situation largely results from the fact that, unlike the other crimes measured by the NCS, the two noncontact larcenies have key questions that are split between those asked only of the household respondent and others that are asked of all eligible household members. Because the household screen questions are asked only once in a household, there is concern that an unknown number of incidents are not being reported because certain reminder cues are not heard by other household members. For example, only the household respondent is asked specifically about thefts of parts of cars and items taken from the yard, such as bicycles and lawn furniture. (The specific problems posed by larcenies are discussed below in a section focusing on thefts of parts of cars.)

The size of the household (the number of persons age 12 and older)

has an impact on the proportion of all incidents that are reported by the household respondent.⁵ As the size of the household increases, that share declines, most notably for crimes of violence (table 2). For the three household crimes, although the household respondent reports a somewhat smaller proportion of the incidents in the largest households (four or more persons), that share is about 73% for the household crimes as a group. In these same households, the household respondent reports only 17% of all crimes of violence and 29% of personal crimes of theft.

Although the bulk of the household crimes are reported on the household screen questions, other household members make important contributions to the total for each of the three crimes (table 3). Even the household respondent, who has already been asked the more specifically focused questions on burglary and motor vehicle theft, reports additional burglaries and

⁵There were 191 incidents (out of a total of 28,208 incidents) where reports elicited by the household screen questions were attributed to other household members. Since this is clearly impossible, it has been assumed, that in most cases, the situation resulted from interviewer error in recording the line number of the household respondent. In the analysis that follows, these cases have been added to the household respondent totals.

Question number	Total	Rape	Robbery	Assault	Personal larceny		Burglary	Household larceny	Motor vehicle theft
					with contact	without contact			
Total crimes	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
38	12.0	6.0	3.9	1.1	0.3	0.7	57.5*	3.7	1.2
39	3.9	0.9	0.0	0.7	0.0	0.2	19.2*	0.8	0.7
40	12.0	0.0	0.7	0.1	0.3	3.2*	4.4	38.3*	3.5
41	2.8	0.0	0.9	—	3.2	5.2	2.5	1.4	0.7*
43	3.6	0.9	1.9	—	0.0	1.4	0.3	1.2*	74.9
44	14.4	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	23.0*	0.7	22.9*	4.6
Total—household screen questions	48.7	7.8	8.4	2.0	3.7	34.1	84.6	88.2	85.6
45	3.5	3.5	15.1*	0.1	81.2*	4.7	0.3	0.4	0.3
46	1.4	5.2	33.0*	0.9	3.2	0.5	—	0.2	0.1
47	1.1	6.0	16.1*	2.6	2.5	0.4	0.2	—	0.0
48	3.6	17.2*	9.3	27.3*	0.0	—	0.0	0.0	0.0
49	0.9	1.7*	1.6	7.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
50	5.2	12.5*	8.5	41.1*	0.0	0.1	0.1	—	0.0
51	1.7	38.5*	2.8	12.0	0.3	—	0.1	0.1	0.2
52	7.9	0.0	0.7	0.2	0.3	15.2*	0.7	8.5	1.1
53	11.0	0.0	0.9	0.1	4.5	26.7*	2.8	2.7	1.4
54	10.4	0.9	1.6	—	3.0	14.1*	7.1	15.2*	2.9
55	2.7	0.0	1.3	0.1	1.0	3.2	2.7	3.1	6.3
56	1.0	1.7	0.6	4.1	0.0	0.5	0.7	0.7	1.5
57	0.7	4.3	0.3	1.9	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.8	0.4
Total—individual screen questions	51.1	92.2	91.5	97.9	96.3	65.8	15.2	31.8	14.3
Not ascertained	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.3	0.1	0.1
Percent from key questions	NA	70.7	49.1	88.0	81.2	87.4	76.7	88.0	74.9
Number of cases	28,208	116	897	3,304	404	10,178	5,159	7,161	989

Note: Detail may not add to total shown because of rounding.
— Less than .05.

* Indicates key questions, which were those designed to elicit reports of specific crimes.
NA Not applicable.

	Size of Household		
	Two persons	Three persons	Four or more persons
Crimes of violence	52.4%	28.6%	16.7%
Crimes of theft	68.7	40.1	29.4
Household crimes	88.2	80.0	72.5
Burglary	90.9	82.4	78.4
Household larceny	86.2	78.0	68.8
Motor vehicle theft	88.9	85.3	76.6

	Burglary	Household larceny	Motor vehicle theft
Total reported on individual screen questions	15.2%	31.8%	14.3%
Reported by:			
Household respondents	5.8	16.1	3.0
Other household members	9.4	15.7	11.2

Note: Detail may not add to total shown because of rounding.

motor vehicle thefts in response to the individual screen questions (6% and 3%, respectively). Household respondents and others each contribute about 16% of all household larcenies on the individual screen questions. The majority of these reports for all three crimes are elicited by the generally phrased catch-all questions on theft and attempted theft.

The kinds of household crimes reported on the individual screen questions tend to be the less serious forms of those crimes. For example, unlawful entries without force account for 38% of all burglaries reported on the household screen questions, but are 65% of those elicited by the individual screen questions; the comparable figures for attempted motor vehicle theft as a percent of total vehicle thefts are 35% and 59%, respectively. Although the difference for household larceny is not as striking, attempted larcenies constitute a greater share of all larcenies reported on the individual screen questions (9%) than they do of those elicited by the household screen (6%).

Larcenies of parts of cars—an example

For a number of reasons, the theft of parts of cars illuminates the problems associated with the present division between household and individual screen questions.⁶ Question 44, the last of the household screen battery, focuses specifically on this kind of larceny. Despite the fact that this question is asked only once in each household, in 1981 it elicited more incidents than any other screen question. Of all the incidents in which car parts were stolen or an attempt was made to do so, 97% were eventually classified as one of the two kinds of noncontact larceny—60% as personal larceny and

⁶Thefts of parts of cars include items attached to a car, such as a tape deck, tires, radio, battery, etc., but not items stored in the glove compartment or left on the seat.

	Personal larceny without contact			Household larceny		
	Total	Part of car	Other than part of car	Total	Part of car	Other than part of car
Total incidents	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Reported on household screen questions	34.2	82.3	17.9	68.2	87.0	62.9
Reported on individual screen questions:						
by household respondents	22.4	3.7	28.7	16.1	2.8	19.9
by other household members	43.4	13.9	53.4	15.7	10.3	17.2

Note: Detail may not add to total shown because of rounding.

37% as household.⁷ Under current NCS rules, the distinction between these larcenies is based on where the crime occurred. A household larceny is one that happens in the home or in its immediate vicinity (such as a garage or driveway) and does not contain any elements of burglary. All other noncontact larcenies are categorized as personal. In the case of personal larcenies reported on the household screen questions, the personal characteristics associated with these incidents are those of the household respondent, who may not necessarily be the owner of the property.

The importance of the car-parts cue question, and the household screen questions generally, in eliciting these kinds of larcenies is considerable (table 4). Eighty-seven percent of larcenies of car parts that were ultimately classified as household larceny were first reported on the household screen questions; for those incidents classified as personal larceny, the figure was 82%. All other kinds of noncontact larcenies as a group provide a sharp contrast, especially in the case of personal larcenies, where only 18% were first reported on the household screen. The most productive question on the individual screen for reporting thefts of auto parts was number 52, which asks about items taken from inside a motor vehicle.

Thus, the larceny of auto parts illustrates a general difficulty with the present NCS screening procedure of administering part of the screener to only one household member. A separate issue is the assignment of the characteristics of that individual to any personal crimes elicited at that stage of the screening process.

Discussion

The original rationale behind placing questions on the household portion of

⁷The remaining 3% were divided among burglary, motor vehicle theft, and robbery.

the screen was that those questions dealt with incidents that a knowledgeable household member could be presumed to recall and that asking them of everyone could produce an unacceptable level of duplicative reports that would be costly and time-consuming to sort out.

Originally, the NCS considered all noncontact larcenies as crimes against the household, with the victim characteristics assigned being those of the household head. Within the larceny category, there was a distinction made between those incidents occurring in or near the home and those occurring elsewhere. However, early in the survey's history it was decided to provide an alternative treatment of larcenies occurring away from home, i.e. to tabulate them as personal crimes (personal larcenies without contact) on the theory that such thefts would most likely be of personal property which would be reported by the victim. The data on thefts of parts of cars illustrates the problems associated with this approach. The evidence suggests that the household respondent is not always able to recall all incidents, even with such specifically phrased questions as those concerned with burglary and motor vehicle theft. About 9% of burglaries and 11% of motor vehicle thefts are reported by other household members who are not asked the more specifically targeted questions. In the case of larceny of motor vehicle parts, 14% of personal thefts and 10% of household thefts are reported by other household members. Given the substantial number of these kinds of larcenies, the obvious question is how many more of such thefts would be reported if other household members received the same cues as the household respondent.

One difficulty in assessing the extent of this problem is that there is little evidence concerning what takes place during an NCS interview. In how many instances are other household members present? How frequently do they participate in discussions that result from the administration of the screener to the household respondent? How many potential duplicate events never reach the stage of being recorded, but are eliminated by discussion between respondent and interviewer? A revised questionnaire, to be introduced in January 1986, will provide evidence on some of these points. The Victimization Risk Survey, conducted in place of the NCS in February 1984, to test new questions, indicated that someone else overheard all or part of the interview in about 60% of those that were conducted in person. In roughly a fourth of these situations

other persons contributed information during the interview, although the nature of their contribution is not known.

Knowing more about the dynamics of the NCS interview situation does not compensate for the fact that selective application of some of the screening questions probably results in substantial underreporting of theft incidents, although the evidence from this study suggests that the missed crime events are more likely to be less serious than those that are reported. Uniform screening of all household members will inevitably produce more reports of the same or apparently similar incidents. Strategies will have to be developed to unduplicate these reports, either at the time of interview or by subsequent weighting adjustments.

Another major difficulty revealed by this analysis is that to the extent that the household respondent reports noncontact larcenies occurring away from home, the victim characteristics associated with these incidents will be those of the household respondent, regardless of the ownership of the property. As was shown earlier, the great majority of thefts of car parts that occur away from home are reported by the household respondent. These persons tend, disproportionately, to be nonworking wives who are at home when the interviewer telephones or makes a personal visit. Their characteristics are therefore attached to these incidents without regard to the appropriateness of doing so. In the absence of knowledge about property ownership, it would appear to be more legitimate to characterize these crimes by attributes of the household as a collectivity, that is, by the characteristics of the household head. In the longer run the ascription of victim characteristics should be based on a more careful determination of the ownership of the stolen articles.

Conclusion

This report has described the way in which the current NCS screening questions operate to elicit crime incidents that can be classified into the kinds of crimes that the National Crime Survey seeks to measure. In general, the questions appear to perform in the manner intended, although problems have been identified, especially with larceny events, that stem from the procedure of asking the household screening questions only once in households with two or more eligible respondents. The distinction between household larceny (which takes place in or near the home) and noncontact personal larceny (which

occurs elsewhere) is also shown to cause problems in assigning victim characteristics.

This study did not and could not address the larger issue of whether the screening questions as now administered, even if they were all asked of everyone in the household, are sufficient to do the task in the most productive way. The Crime Survey Research Consortium is developing alternative ways of screening respondents and the ultimate decision as to the best approach will undoubtedly be heavily influenced by the maxim that "more is better"—that is, the best set of screening questions is that which elicits the greatest number of incidents. However, this approach runs the risk of producing duplicate reports of the same (or similar) incidents that will require some kind of sorting-out procedure. In the meantime, however, this technical report has documented the performance of the screening questions as now administered.

37a. (Other than the . . . business) does anyone in this household operate a business from this address? (116)		<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Yes - Ask b
b. What kind of business is that? _____ ▶ INTERVIEWER: Enter unrecognizable business only		<input type="checkbox"/> 2 No - SKIP to 38
HOUSEHOLD SCREEN QUESTIONS		
38. How I'd like to ask some questions about crime. They refer only to the last 6 months-- between _____, 19____ and _____, 19____. During the last 6 months, did anyone break into or somehow illegally get into your (apartment/home), garage, or another building on your property?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes - How many times? _____ <input type="checkbox"/> No _____	41. Did anyone take something belonging to you or to any member of this household, from a place where you or they were temporarily staying, such as a friend's or relative's home, a hotel or motel, or a vacation home? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes - How many times? _____ <input type="checkbox"/> No _____
39. (Other than the incident(s) just mentioned) Did you find a door jimmied, a lock forced, or any other signs of an ATTEMPTED break in?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes - How many times? _____ <input type="checkbox"/> No _____	42. How many DIFFERENT motor vehicles (cars, trucks, motorcycles, etc.) were owned by you or any other member of this household during the last 6 months? (117) <input type="checkbox"/> 0 None - SKIP to 45 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 or more
40. Was anything at all stolen that is kept outside your home, or happened to be left out, such as a bicycle, a garden hose, or lawn furniture? (other than any incidents already mentioned)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes - How many times? _____ <input type="checkbox"/> No _____	43. Did anyone steal, TRY to steal, or use (it/any of them) without permission? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes - How many times? _____ <input type="checkbox"/> No _____
INDIVIDUAL SCREEN QUESTIONS		
45. The following questions refer only to things that happened to YOU during the last 6 months - between _____, 19____ and _____, 19____. Did you have your (pocket picked/purse snatched)?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes - How many times? _____ <input type="checkbox"/> No _____	55. Did you find any evidence that someone ATTEMPTED to steal something that belonged to you? (other than any incidents already mentioned) <input type="checkbox"/> Yes - How many times? _____ <input type="checkbox"/> No _____
46. Did anyone take something (else) directly from you by using force, such as by a stickup, mugging or threat?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes - How many times? _____ <input type="checkbox"/> No _____	56. Did you call the police during the last 6 months to report something that happened to YOU which you thought was a crime? (Do not count any calls made to the police concerning the incidents you have just told me about.) <input type="checkbox"/> No - SKIP to 57 <input type="checkbox"/> Yes - What happened? _____ _____ _____ (118) <input type="checkbox"/> _____ <input type="checkbox"/> _____ <input type="checkbox"/> _____
47. Did anyone TRY to rob you by using force or threatening to harm you? (other than any incidents already mentioned)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes - How many times? _____ <input type="checkbox"/> No _____	
48. Did anyone beat you up, attack you or hit you with something, such as a rock or bottle? (other than any incidents already mentioned)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes - How many times? _____ <input type="checkbox"/> No _____	57. Did anything happen to YOU during the last 6 months which you thought was a crime, but did NOT report to the police? (other than any incidents already mentioned) <input type="checkbox"/> No - SKIP to Check Item F <input type="checkbox"/> Yes - What happened? _____ _____ _____ (119) <input type="checkbox"/> _____ <input type="checkbox"/> _____ <input type="checkbox"/> _____
49. Were you knifed, shot at, or attacked with some other weapon by anyone at all? (other than any incidents already mentioned)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes - How many times? _____ <input type="checkbox"/> No _____	
50. Did anyone THREATEN to beat you up or THREATEN you with a knife, gun, or some other weapon, NOT including telephone threats? (other than any incidents already mentioned)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes - How many times? _____ <input type="checkbox"/> No _____	CHECK ITEM D ▶ Look at 56. Was HHL D member (2+ attacked or threatened, or was something stolen or an attempt made to steal something that belonged to him/her? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes - How many times? _____ <input type="checkbox"/> No _____
51. Did anyone TRY to attack you in some other way? (other than any incidents already mentioned)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes - How many times? _____ <input type="checkbox"/> No _____	
52. During the last 6 months, did anyone steal things that belonged to you from inside ANY car or truck, such as packages or clothing?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes - How many times? _____ <input type="checkbox"/> No _____	CHECK ITEM E ▶ Look at 57. Was HHL D member (2+ attacked or threatened, or was something stolen or an attempt made to steal something that belonged to him/her? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes - How many times? _____ <input type="checkbox"/> No _____
53. Was anything stolen from you while you were away from home, for instance at work, in a theater or restaurant, or while traveling?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes - How many times? _____ <input type="checkbox"/> No _____	
54. (Other than any incidents you've already mentioned) was anything (else) at all stolen from you during the last 6 months?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes - How many times? _____ <input type="checkbox"/> No _____	CHECK ITEM F ▶ Do any of the screen questions contain any entries for "How many times?" <input type="checkbox"/> Yes - Fill Crime Incident Reports. <input type="checkbox"/> No - Interview next HHL D member End interview if last respondent.

Figure 1

END