Methodological Challenges Facing the U.S. National Crime Victimization Survey

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This paper presents an overview of current methodological research being conducted to improve the reliability and utility of the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). The NCVS is sponsored by the United States Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), and in its current form has been providing national estimates of the incidence and characteristics of criminal victimization in the United States since 1992. The NCVS uses a rotating panel design based on a nationally-representative area probability sample of households. Within selected households, persons aged 12 or older are interviewed about their personal and property victimizations over the past six months. Sampled households stay in the panel for three and a half years, reporting at six month intervals, for a total of seven interviews. Generally, the initial interview is conducted in-person and follow-up interviews are conducted either by telephone or in-person. Each interview consists of a basic screening questionnaire and, if applicable, a crime incident report. The screener is asked of all respondents whereas the detailed crime incident report is only asked of those who report one or more victimizations during the screening process.

Although there are many benefits to the current design, there are also some practical limitations. This paper will provide an overview of and key findings from the methodological work currently being conducted to address limitations related to the survey design and estimation process and the ability to produce subnational victimization estimates. Examples of ongoing research related to the survey design and estimation process include assessment of the best approach for accounting for recall bias in the first, 'unbounded' interview; the optimal number of interviews waves for the panel design; and how to accurately impute for item nonresponse. In the area of subnational estimation, ongoing methodological work is exploring options for generating direct state- and city- level estimates of crime by reweighting existing sample to known population totals and by strategically boosting the sample in certain areas of the country. Additionally, BJS is assessing the feasibility of producing model based small area estimates through the NCVS.

Keywords: improving survey estimation, subnational estimation, victimization survey.