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# Current Issues in Victimization Research and the NCVS's Ability to Study Them

Lynn A. Addington, J.D., Ph.D.  
Department of Justice, Law and Society  
American University

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## Introduction

Thirty-five years have passed since the fielding of the first National Crime Survey (NCS) and 15 years since its redesign and emergence as the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS).<sup>1</sup> This BJS Data Users Workshop presents a good, and much-needed, opportunity to examine how the survey has been (and could be) used in its present form as well as to consider possible ways the survey could be changed to explore new issues of concern to victimization researchers. This paper has two primary aims. The first is to provide an overview of the current trends and issues in victimization research. Trends include topics that have attracted research attention as well as those yet to be fully explored as available data can limit what can be studied and how victimization is conceptualized. The second aim is to consider how the NCVS can address these issues. Possible changes for the NCVS are suggested as a way of stimulating discussion at this workshop.

Before continuing, a few qualifications are necessary. First, this paper does not specifically address issues involving violence against women, as Dr. Karen Heimer's companion paper for this session is devoted to that topic. Second, the goal is not to present an exhaustive list of current victimization issues. Instead, the examples provided are meant to be illustrative of different areas of research and to provide a starting point for opening discussion regarding the ways in which the NCVS could be used. Third, a working familiarity with the crime survey is assumed. Due to space limitations, this paper cannot provide an extensive description or review of the attributes of the NCS and NCVS. Readers interested in an overview of the NCS and NCVS are directed to sources such as Cantor and Lynch (2000) and Rennison and Rand (2007).

Finally, in light of the charge for this workshop, this paper tends to focus on new possibilities for the NCVS, especially ways in which the survey could be improved, rather than tout the current functions it serves. This perspective could be interpreted as being negative or critical of the NCVS, but it is not the spirit in which this paper is written. The NCS

and NCVS have played an essential role in shaping what researchers know about victimization as well as providing the national measure of criminal victimization for the United States.<sup>2</sup> For the NCVS to continue in this crucial and central role, it should be capable of serving the needs of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. Continuing to meet the current needs of these various users of NCVS data may require changes to the survey.

## Current Trends and Open Issues in Victimization Research

Before examining specific issues, it is useful to place the current state of victimization research into a larger context. In general, limited attention has been given to research and theoretical development in the area of criminal victimization. Much less work has been devoted to studying victimization especially as compared to other areas of criminology such as the development and empirical testing of theories explaining criminal offending and delinquency. A perusal of a few leading criminology journals over the past 2 years illustrates the present situation. *Criminology* (the official academic journal of the American Society of Criminology) published two articles that concerned victimization issues. This number represents 3% of its articles over the past 2 years. During the same period, *Justice Quarterly* (the official academic journal of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences) published five victimization articles, which reflect 12% of its articles. A recent issue of *Criminology & Public Policy* was devoted to "tak[ing] stock of the state of affairs in criminology as a social science of policy" (Clear & Frost, 2007, p. 637). Of the 27 articles appearing in this November 2007

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<sup>1</sup>This paper purposefully uses the acronym "NCS" to refer to the crime survey before its redesign and "NCVS" to refer to it post-redesign.

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<sup>2</sup>Other sources of victimization data are available in the United States (e.g., National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health) and around the world (e.g., British Crime Survey, International Crime Victims Survey). These surveys benefited from having the NCS/NCVS as a guide. While information about victims now is conceptualized as taking the form of victimization surveys, police agencies also provide victim-level data. For decades, the Uniform Crime Reporting Program (UCR) has collected murder victim data in its Supplementary Homicide Report. Currently the UCR is in the process of changing its data collection method to the National Incident-Based Reporting System, which collects select victim characteristics (such as sex, age, and race).

special issue, not one examined victimization policy.<sup>3</sup> This lack of attention is not due to an absence of important, pressing victimization issues. Instead, this situation may be interpreted as highlighting a need for data that would permit studying these current victimization issues. It also underscores the importance of this workshop's examination of the ability of BJS data to address user needs.

This characterization of overall victimization issues within the larger context of criminological research should not be interpreted to mean that all victimization issues have been ignored. To the contrary, a few areas receive a great deal of research attention including violence against women (especially rape and domestic violence) and violence against children (especially child abuse and bullying).<sup>4</sup> This assessment of victimization research overall also does not mean that the NCVS data have gone untouched. A search of published articles located more than 150 publications that used the crime survey since its redesign. This work covers a wide range of issues, victims and crimes, but the most common use of NCVS data is to examine reporting to the police. To investigate how the NCVS could be used to explore current victimization issues and meet additional user needs, this paper tends to look beyond the topics previously examined using the crime survey.

The following summary of current research issues is organized into four general categories: "new" victims, "new" places where victimizations occur, "new" crimes, and explanations of victimization. The designation of "new" is not intended to indicate that the victims, places, and crimes themselves are new, but that the research attention given to them is new. Within each category, the capability of the NCVS to study the various topics is addressed.

### **"New Victims"**

One current trend in victimization research is a focus on particular victims, especially those who have received very little, if any, previous attention. When considering how well these new victims are captured by the NCVS, it is important to recall who is included in the survey. Currently only household members over the age of 12 are eligible for inclusion in the NCVS.<sup>5</sup> The NCVS sample of households

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<sup>3</sup>While not directly addressing victimization issues, Rosenfeld's (2007) article recommended re-examining the collection of official crime data from police as well as creating a more comprehensive national crime data collection system, within which the NCVS would play a role. The benefits of a national crime data collection system also have been discussed by Lynch and Addington (2007).

<sup>4</sup>Victimization research has become largely research on violence against women. *Violence and Victims* and the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* are two specialized academic journals that cover victimization issues. During the past 2 years, more than half of the articles in these two journals addressed violence against women. While violence against women is certainly an important topic, it is not the only form of victimization.

<sup>5</sup>The NCS originally comprised a series of separate victimization surveys, which included the household survey as well as a survey of businesses (Rennison & Rand, 2007).

excludes those living in military barracks or institutions such as nursing homes and prisons as well as the crews of vessels (BJS, 2004).

For purposes of this workshop, a relevant consideration is the ability of the NCVS to study these new victim groups. To facilitate such an examination, the summary below is divided into three categories: (1) victims captured by the NCVS, (2) victims not captured by the NCVS (but could be included in a household survey), and (3) victims not captured by the NCVS (and could not be included in a household survey).

## **Victims Captured by the NCVS**

### **The Elderly**

Victimization among the elderly (especially elder abuse) is garnering greater interest as more of the U.S. population is aging due to increased life expectancies and the graying of the Baby Boomer generation.<sup>6</sup> Prominent national agencies such as the National Institute on Aging, the National Institute of Justice, and the National Academy of Sciences recently have sponsored studies on elder abuse. Researchers are investigating various forms of victimization of the elderly as well as their concerns about being victimized (e.g., Chu & Kraus, 2004; Shields, King & Fulks, 2004; Lachs, Bachman & Williams, 2004).

Adults of all ages are included in the NCVS sample, therefore these data can be used to study victimization of the elderly and BJS has issued reports on this topic (e.g., Klaus, 2005). The NCVS data have a couple limitations with regard to studying elderly victims. One is the fact that the sample excludes those living in nursing homes and thereby misses a vulnerable segment of elderly adults.<sup>7</sup> A second issue concerns studying elders who are unable to respond to the survey questions due to physical or mental limitations. Typically in this situation, the NCVS uses a proxy respondent from the household. If the proxy respondent is the victimizer, this filter would affect the accuracy of the responses obtained. The NCVS also could be bolstered in a few ways to improve the elder victimization data collected. One way is to increase the sample of elderly respondents to permit comparisons of interest such as looking across types of living arrangements (such as those living in their own home, family/caretaker home, and assisted living home) or across age sub-categories. Another is the inclusion

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<sup>6</sup>Defining "elderly" itself is a rather new issue. Typically elderly is defined as age 65 and older. Today with more active older adults (and Baby Boomers approaching this demarcation), there has been some resistance to this bright-line definition. The Census Bureau uses additional age sub-categories including "older" (age 55 and above), "young-old" (ages 65-74), and "oldest-old" (age 85 and above) (He, Sengupta, Velkoff & DeBarros, 2005). Because the NCVS collects exact ages, these data can readily accommodate any definition of elderly.

<sup>7</sup>To reach this population, it may be possible to use an existing sample or sampling frame of nursing homes and residents such as that used by the National Center for Health Statistics' National Nursing Home Survey.

of crimes to which this population may be particularly susceptible such as fraud and neglect (Klaus, 2005). A third, and somewhat related, way is to assess whether current NCVS victimization screening questions cue (or trigger the respondent to recall) victimizations like abuse that occur because of dependency such as a caretaker withholding food or money.

### Repeat victims

Individuals who are repeatedly victimized comprise another population of interest to researchers. Repeat victims provide information about the risk of victimization that can inform theoretical explanations and policy (e.g., Planty & Strom, 2007; Farrell, Tseloni & Pease, 2005; Pease & Laycock, 1996; Lauritsen & Quinet, 1995). The NCVS identifies repeat victims through the collection of separate incident reports for each victimization reported during the interview period as well as its classification of series victimizations. Series victimizations are incidents that occurred six or more times during the recall period (the preceding 6 months), are similar to each other in detail, and whose details are indistinguishable to the respondent (Planty, 2007). Researchers also have used the NCVS as a longitudinal dataset to examine repeat victimizations across interview periods (Ybarra & Lohr, 2002; Dugan, 1999). A few limitations arise with these uses of the NCVS to study repeat victims. With regard to series victims, only a small amount of information is collected about series victimizations, which makes it difficult to ascertain the association between the incidents. Additional questions or a supplement could investigate the interdependence of these victimizations as well as the factors that may contribute to the persistence of the victimization (Cantor & Lynch, 2000). Using the NCVS longitudinally also has limits. One particular issue is the fact that the NCVS is a survey of households and does not follow individual respondents who move. Repeat victims may be more likely to move and fail to be included in subsequent interviews.

### Vicarious Victims

Victimization does not affect only the immediate victim but also those residing in the victim's household and community. Only a handful of researchers have explored the effect of crime on "vicarious victims" (e.g., Eitle & Turner, 2002; DuBow, McCabe & Kaplan, 1979). With regard to assessing the effects of victimization on other members of the household, the NCVS identifies these individuals, but currently does not ask them any vicarious victimization questions. New questions or a supplement could collect this information. A supplement, for example, could examine the effect of victimizations occurring to household members, neighbors and the larger community to allow comparisons of the repercussions to these various incidents.

### Immigrants

Recent news accounts suggest an increase in the victimization of immigrants, especially those perceived to be illegal immigrants (Londono, 2007). A few suggested explanations for this trend include animosity in many communities over immigration policy debates and a belief that those in the United States illegally will not report the victimization to police. The NCVS includes immigrants (legal and illegal) who reside in sampled households; however, these individuals are not identified since respondents are not asked citizenship status questions.<sup>8</sup> The addition of such a question would allow this population to be identified and studied. Potential problems could arise from asking this question in the NCVS. Traditionally the NCVS does not ask if the respondent engages in illegal activity. A related concern is whether immigration status, especially illegal immigration status, could be accurately measured in any government-sponsored study. Another potential problem is whether asking citizenship questions would offend respondents (both immigrants and non-immigrants) and make them less likely to participate in the survey.

### Victims Not Captured by the NCVS But Within the Scope of a Household Survey

#### Children under Age 12.

The victimization of children receives a great deal of research attention, especially with regard to child abuse, school violence, and bullying (both in and out of school). By design, the NCVS excludes children under age 12. Lowering the age for eligible respondents would permit the NCVS to gather information about these younger victims. Making such a change would require determining the youngest age at which asking direct questions would be appropriate and feasible as well as whether a modified or abbreviated form of the NCVS might facilitate reaching this age group. Other victimization surveys have directly questioned children as young as 10 (Finkelhor, Hamby & Ormrod, 2005).

### Victims Not Captured by the NCVS And Outside the Scope of a Household Survey

#### Highly Mobile Individuals.

Highly mobile individuals experience higher levels of victimization than those who do not move or move less frequently (Addington, 2005; Dugan, 1999). Victimization is related to mobility both as a cause of the move and an increased vulnerability after the move. This population attracts research attention, in part, due to this increased risk of victimization. In addition, studying highly mobile

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<sup>8</sup>Some information might be gleaned from hate crime questions that cover victimizations motivated by ethnic background or national origin. These data are limited since the incident initially would need to be identified as a hate crime. In addition, the ethnic background/national origin designation may be comparable to, but it is not the equivalent of, immigration status.

individuals allows researchers to parse out the effects of the person (or “hot victims”) from the effects of the place (or “hot spots”) (Pease & Laycock, 1996). Only limited attention has been devoted to studying this small, but highly victimized, group of individuals. A likely reason is a lack of data. While researchers have used the NCVS as a longitudinal dataset (Ybarra & Lohr, 2002; Dugan, 1999), the survey does not follow mobile respondents. As such, substantial changes to the current NCVS design would be required to study this group of victims. Creating a longitudinal crime survey is not a new idea. This possibility was considered as part of the NCS redesign (Biderman & Lynch, 1991). One alternative to completely changing to a longitudinal design is to follow a sample of individuals. Such a format would permit highly mobile individuals to be studied within a primarily household survey format. During the redesign discussions, BJS suggested the possibility of a supplement that would follow a subset of respondents (Biderman & Lynch, 1991). This supplement was never pursued.

### Individuals in Jail

Those serving jail sentences are another neglected, but important, subset of crime victims. These individuals are at a higher risk for victimization than the non-incarcerated population not only during the time they are in jail but also when they are out on the street (Dugan & Castro, 2006). A household-based survey like the NCVS, however, is not designed for collecting this information.<sup>9</sup>

A data collection effort that samples jails and interviews inmates would be the most effective vehicle for studying these victims (see Dugan & Castro, 2006, for a description of Baltimore Jail Study).

### Businesses

Most victimization research focuses on individuals. Non-individuals such as businesses also are victimized, and these victimizations can result in significant financial losses to the company as well as harm to the employees directly involved with a criminal incident targeting the business such as an armed robbery. The NCVS excludes non-individual victims such as businesses. The NCS originally included a separate survey of businesses, but it was discontinued due to criticisms over an inadequate sample size and the resulting limited utility of the data collected (Rennison & Rand,

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<sup>9</sup>Individuals in jail are at risk for victimization in two different areas. Both are important to study, but neither is captured very well by the NCVS or other BJS data. One area of interest is this population's victimization experiences when not incarcerated. The NCVS might capture some individuals who are in jail for only a short period of time and are otherwise residing in an eligible household. This group likely comprises a small number of NCVS respondents. The other area of interest is this population's victimization experiences in jail. This area is clearly beyond the NCVS's scope. Here BJS does conduct prisoner studies and collect data on inmate victimization (e.g., Beck & Harrison, 2007); however, the focus is on federal and state prisons rather than jails.

2007). Another reason supporting the discontinuation of these commercial surveys was that crimes against businesses were included in the police data collected by the UCR. A re-emerging research issue is whether these crimes are reported so that police data adequately capture victimization of businesses. If underreporting exists, a commercial victimization survey could provide a more comprehensive understanding of crime. Research from other countries suggests that business crime is underreported especially among smaller companies (Taylor, 2003). BJS has begun to examine ways of capturing particular types of business victimization. In 2001, BJS piloted the Computer Security Survey (Rantala, 2004). The goal of the CSS is to provide national statistics on cyber crimes against businesses such as embezzlement, fraud, theft of proprietary information, and vandalism (Rantala, 2004).

### “New” Places Where Victimitizations Occur

Another current trend in victimization research examines specific places where victimizations occur. For the following examples, the NCVS can be an effective tool to capture this information. Changes in the current crime survey would permit this information to be gathered more effectively.

### College Campuses

Victimization on college campuses has been a long-standing interest for criminologists (e.g., Fisher & Sloan, 1995; Hoffman, Schuh & Fenske, 1998). In the aftermath of the Virginia Tech shootings last April, violence and crime on college campuses have re-emerged as prominent issues. Since the NCVS collects information on the student status of its respondents, these data can be used to study campus crime (Baum & Klaus, 2005).<sup>10</sup> For more in-depth studies of campus violence, a concern is whether the NCVS sample size allows for the study of particular crimes, especially when analyzing multivariate models of relatively rare violent crimes like rape and robbery.

### Workplace Violence

Violence in the workplace is another perennial topic of interest for researchers and one that receives increased attention after well-publicized fatal incidents occur. Currently attention is being given to threats of violence and bullying in the workplace. These more common forms of victimization have negative consequences for the individual as well as the overall work environment and productivity (Kenny, 2005; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007). The NCVS collects information on workplace violence through questions in the main survey and periodic supplements. As

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<sup>10</sup>Official crime data are collected pursuant to the Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1092(f). The Clery Act requires colleges and universities to report to the U.S. Department of Education their annual crime statistics from campus and local police departments.

part of the regular incident information collected, the NCVS identifies whether the respondent was working or not at the time of the victimization incident. This information allows using the NCVS to study workplace violence (e.g., Duhart, 2001). While the NCVS collects occupational information from all respondents, it only codes and identifies certain jobs (such as police officers and teachers). This occupational information could be enhanced if the NCVS provided Industry and Occupation Codes as part of its data collection on employment. Since other federal agencies use these standardized codes, NCVS data could capitalize on information from other data sources (Census, 2008). For example, occupation-specific victimization rates could be estimated using NCVS data combined with information provided by Census and the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

### Sub-National Victimization Estimates

The availability of sub-national victimization estimates would improve the understanding of local crime problems and assist in the formation of effective, targeted policies. These sub-national data would permit comparisons across jurisdictions of the same size and characteristics (Lynch & Addington, 2007). Additional information at the local level also could help provide more comprehensive explanations for national crime trends. Given the utility of these data, the interest in obtaining sub-national victimization estimates is not new. The initial evaluation of the NCS recognized the importance of obtaining local victimization data to inform police, policymakers, and citizens and recommended developing a “survey kit” to provide local officials with the tools to collect this information (Penick & Owens, 1976, p. 57-58).

Although the NCVS relies on a very large sample to generate national estimates, it has a limited capacity for providing sub-national estimates. Presently sub-national estimates can only be generated for the largest cities (Lauritsen & Schram, 2005). Area-identified NCVS data link victimization data with tract-level Census information. These data might be capable of creating “generic areas” and estimates for these areas; however, no study has used the area-identified data in this manner (Lynch & Addington, 2007). In response to the NCVS limitations in this area, BJS has engaged in efforts to explore alternative ways of collecting local victimization data. In 1998, BJS conducted victimization surveys in 12 cities (the “12-Cities Survey”), which used NCVS survey questions as well as a series of supplemental attitudinal questions (Smith et al., 1999). Since 1999, BJS has distributed crime victimization software to communities to assist them in conducting their own local crime and attitudinal surveys. The Crime Victimization Survey questions are modeled on those in the NCVS, but do not comprise the full NCVS instrument (U.S. Department of Justice, 1999).

### “New” Crimes

To better understand using the NCVS to study new crimes, it is helpful to review the crimes about which the NCVS currently collects information. The NCS arose, in part, from the desire to better assess the accuracy of police data and to understand why victims did not report crimes to the police (Cantor & Lynch, 2000). As a result, the crimes included in the NCS and NCVS tend to parallel those collected by the UCR, which are primarily street crimes. The specific crimes collected by the NCVS are completed, attempted and threatened rape, sexual assault, aggravated assault, and simple assault as well as completed and threatened robbery, burglary, motor vehicle theft, property theft, and purse-snatching (BJS, 2004). The NCVS also collects information on vandalism and pick-pocketing.

Although the NCVS covers these particular crimes, the survey is well suited for gathering information about new types of crime. Three attributes in particular give the NCVS this flexibility. One quality is its collection of binary attributes from the victimization incident. Respondents are not asked direct victimization questions such as “were you robbed?”. Instead, they are asked a series of questions about the characteristics of the incident, and these attributes are combined using an algorithm into “Types of Crimes” that mirror the UCR crimes. These incident attributes also can be configured to collect information on previously unknown crimes like carjacking (e.g., Klaus, 2004; Rand, 1994). Another quality of the crime survey is its use of supplemental survey instruments. NCVS supplements are questions on particular topics that are asked in addition to the regular NCVS screener questions and incident report questions. Since its redesign, the NCVS has fielded supplements in the areas of school violence, stalking, public contact with the police, workplace violence, and identity theft (Rennison & Rand, 2007; personal communication with M. Rand). The third attribute is the crime survey’s ability to include additional questions. Recent examples of new questions include those that collect information about identity theft, hate crimes, and crimes against those with developmental disabilities (Rennison & Rand, 2007).

The list below provides examples of crimes that are of current concern to researchers but not captured by the NCVS. The examples illustrate crimes that could be included with the addition of new questions to the main NCVS survey instrument or in a periodic supplement.

### Cyber Crimes

Increased access to the Internet has produced a new mode for committing traditional forms of victimization such as intimidation and bullying, stalking, identity theft, and fraud. These cyber crimes are receiving attention from researchers and policymakers (e.g., Finn, 2004). In 2001, NCVS included questions for household respondent on computer crimes such as fraud, viruses, and on-line threats (BJS,

2001). These questions were removed and replaced with identity theft questions in 2004 (Rennison & Rand, 2007). Currently the NCVS does not collect information about whether a reported victimization occurred on-line. Recent supplements to the NCVS have addressed identity theft and stalking and have included some questions related to on-line activities.<sup>11</sup>

## Fraud

Fraud affects a large number of individuals each year as actual or attempted victims (Titus, Heinzlmann & Boyle, 1995) and a large percentage of these victims are repeatedly victimized (Titus & Gover, 2001). As suggested by the cybercrime summary above, an examination of fraud victimization should include incidents occurring both on- and off-line. One particular form of fraud is identity theft. The NCVS currently includes questions about identity theft for household respondents (Baum, 2007) and has fielded a supplement on identity theft. Additional questions could be included to capture information about other types of fraud.

## Bullying

Bullying has gained a tremendous amount of attention in the wake of well-publicized links between bullying and fatal school violence (U.S. Secret Service & U.S. Department of Education, 2002). In addition to this connection, bullying has received continued research attention because it affects a significant proportion of children and adolescents. More than a quarter of adolescents report being bullied each year (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). One study estimates that more than three-quarters of students have been bullied at some point in their school career (Arnette & Walsleben, 1998). Many of these victims suffer short- and long-term physical and psychological repercussions as a result (DeVoe & Kaffenberger, 2005; Arnette & Walsleben, 1998). The NCVS collects information about bullying as part of its School Crime Supplement (SCS). The SCS questions are asked of student-respondents age 12 to 18 every other year. These bullying questions include both physical and psychological bullying. Additional questions could cover cyberbullying, which is a growing problem due to the large number of adolescents who use the Internet for social networking purposes. The SCS examination of bullying misses students under the age of 12, who are ineligible for the NCVS in general. Information from younger children would allow comparisons of bullying between younger children and older adolescents.

Bullying also affects adults, especially in the workplace (e.g., Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007). Adult bullying victims appear to suffer negative repercussions similar to those experienced

by adolescent victims. Overall, though, little is known about these adult victims because most attention is given to bullying among juveniles. Related forms of victimization such as intimidation also have been largely ignored among the adult population. Additional questions or a supplement would permit exploration of these incidents in the NCVS.

## Explanations of Victimization

The preceding three sections have summarized particular “new” trends in victimization research. This section addresses a broader issue of current (and continued) concern for victimization researchers—the need to better understand victimization and explain why certain individuals are victimized. Gaining a more comprehensive understanding about victimization is essential both for academics to advance theoretical explanations of victimization, especially given the small number of victim-centered theories of crime (Cantor & Lynch, 2000), and for policymakers to target effective programs. The NCVS collects a tremendous amount of detail about the incident, but provides little explanatory context. This section focuses on how the NCVS could provide greater insight to understand and explain victimization. Much of this information could be collected within the existing structure of the NCVS through the addition of new questions or periodic supplements.

## Asking Why the Respondent Was Victimized

The NCVS does not specifically ask respondents why they were victimized. The failure to ask this natural follow-up question greatly limits developing a more complete understanding of victimization. Making such an inquiry requires some caution especially with regard to how this question might be perceived. An original concern of the NCVS was the reaction that might be generated from governmental representatives asking overly sensitive or personal questions (Rennison & Rand, 2007). Here, asking why the respondent was victimized might raise concerns that the question might be interpreted as blaming the victim or is continuing a stereotype that somehow the respondent “asked” to be victimized. Concerns about possible negative perceptions need to be weighed against the risk of these perceptions being generated as well as the gains in information about victimization.

A few observations suggest a low risk of creating these negative perceptions. First, the nature of society in general has changed. It is important to remember that the NCS did not specifically ask about rape because of concerns that such questions were too sensitive to be asked especially by a government official. During the redesign, it was determined that societal norms had changed enough to permit directly asking questions about rape and sexual assault (Rennison & Rand, 2007). A similar argument could be made that today it is now appropriate to ask respondents why they were victimized. Respondents, especially young adults

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<sup>11</sup>Some police data also identify computer-related offenses. For example, NIBRS collects information as to whether a computer was used to perpetrate the crime. NIBRS, though, does not provide national data and cannot inform about victimizations that are not reported to the police.

and adolescents, engage in a much more open lifestyle as evidenced through the popularity of websites like YouTube and social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace. A second reason is that studies indicate victims are willing to provide this information. A recent study examined the NCVS incident narratives and revealed that many victims volunteered information as to why they had been victimized to the interviewer (Addington, 2004). Finally the NCVS already asks respondents why they were victimized with regard to hate crime and developmental disability questions. With the hate crime questions, the NCVS probes the respondent even further and asks for any “evidence” to support the respondent’s assessment that the victimization was a hate crime.

### Responses to and Repercussion of Victimization

A comprehensive understanding of victimization requires studying what occurs after the incident. An original goal of the NCS was to obtain information about a particular response to victimization—whether the incident was reported to police (Penick & Owens, 1976). The NCS and NCVS have provided a great deal of insight as to police reporting. The NCVS could collect additional information from those who report by ascertaining the respondent’s satisfaction with police services. Studying immediate and long-term repercussions help provide an understanding about the consequences of victimization. The NCVS collects quite a bit of information with regard to the immediate repercussions of victimization including physical injuries, medical treatment and lost time at work. The NCVS, though, does not include psychological harm such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (Cantor & Lynch, 2000). The NCVS collects less information on repercussions that do not immediately follow the incident like repeat victimization, dropping out of school, and moving. Although these consequences would be best captured in a longitudinal design, the NCVS could collect some details through additional questions or supplements. A supplement, for example, could follow up on victimizations reported in the previous interview. A sample of victims could be identified and questioned as to long-term repercussions of the victimization.

### Fear of Victimization

Fear could be included as a repercussion of victimization. Here fear is discussed separately to highlight the importance of gathering information about fear from all respondents, both direct victims and those not directly victimized. For direct victims, information could be gathered regarding the fear (if any) generated by the victimization as well as responses to the reported fear such as changes in behavior. For those not directly victimized, questions could include the fear of being the victim of various types of crimes (ranging from street crimes to terrorism) as well as fear generated in response to learning about victimizations that occurred

to those in their household, neighborhood, or community. Inquiring as to various places where victimization might occur (i.e., home, work, public transportation) would provide a context for understanding fear. The NCVS does not ask about fear as part of its main survey questions. Currently the NCVS’s School Crime Supplement asks fear questions of primary and secondary school students.<sup>12</sup> Fear questions also were asked as part of the attitudinal supplements in the 12-Cities Surveys (Smith et al., 1999).<sup>13</sup>

### Alternatives to UCR Crime Classifications

To better understand victimization, it may be useful to look beyond the NCVS’s traditional categorization of crimes. As mentioned above, the NCVS collects binary attributes of incidents. These attributes are placed into an algorithm that creates “Types of Crimes,” most of which parallel the UCR crime classification system (such as rape, robbery, assault, burglary, and theft). The UCR classification scheme does not have to be replicated. Victimization could be classified using other attributes such as incidents that involve strangers, occur in public places, or occur with additional crimes. These alternative classifications could suggest new ways to explain victimization (Addington & Rennison, 2008).

### Additional Independent or Explanatory Variables

While the NCVS can be used to study a variety of issues, its lack of adequate explanatory variables is a common complaint among researchers and may hinder the crime survey from reaching a larger audience of data users.<sup>14</sup> Providing additional variables does not necessarily require asking more questions of respondents. Linking the NCVS to other federal datasets could provide relevant information. As mentioned above, including Industry and Occupation codes would allow the NCVS to benefit from BLS and Census data. Links to tract-level Census data could provide neighborhood details (Baumer et al., 2003; Lauritsen, 2001). Currently confidentiality concerns have limited the number of researchers who have analyzed the area-identified data since these data are accessible in only a small number of designated, secure locations.

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<sup>12</sup>The SCS asks student-respondents how often they are afraid of being attacked at school, going to or from school, and away from school.

<sup>13</sup>The 12-Cities Surveys asked respondents about fear of crime in their neighborhood and city and whether this fear had changed over the past year.

<sup>14</sup>As discussed above, the NCVS traditionally has not collected much information that would help in developing and testing theories of victimization. For several years, the NCVS did ask certain lifestyle questions that researchers used to explore routine activity and opportunity theories of victimization. These questions were removed from the survey in 2000 (Lauritsen, 2005).

## Changes to Address the Needs of NCVS Users

The current trends and issues in victimization research summarized above suggest two groups of changes. One directly addresses the NCVS and the data provided. The other group covers more general changes to ensure that the NCVS continues to meet the needs of its users. These suggested changes are described in rather broad terms in order to stimulate discussion about how the NCVS can best address meet the current needs of its users.

## Changes to the Data Provided by the NCVS

### Add Questions or Topical Supplements to the NCVS

The discussion of victimization trends indicated many areas where the NCVS could collect data on particular types of victims or crimes with new questions. These new questions can take one of two forms. One is adding questions to the main NCVS survey instrument, which would be asked of respondents every six months. The other is through topical supplements. Supplements are particularly useful for collecting information that does not need to be obtained during every fielding of the survey or from every respondent. Adding questions to the main survey would be useful for studying areas such as vicarious victims, fraud, cyber crimes and asking why the respondent was victimized. Other information might be best collected in periodic supplements, such as following up with previous reports of victimization and inquiring about various types of fear.

At first glance, asking a few more questions on the NCVS appears to be a fairly simple change to implement. The addition of new questions either to the main survey or as part of a supplement, however, raises another set of issues. One such issue is determining what questions to remove. Additional questions are costly. Even if BJS had unlimited financial resources,<sup>15</sup> interviewers and respondents have finite amounts of time. Typically if one question is added to the survey, another needs to be removed (Lauritsen, 2005). A second issue is what information should be gathered and what specific questions should be asked. When studying victimization of the elderly, for example, should the concern be measuring how much victimization is occurring or obtaining an explanation of victimization among this population?

Adequately addressing these two issues requires a more comprehensive consideration about the survey and its overall role. Since the creation of the NCS, a basic question has been whether the survey should measure the amount of crime and victimization or should provide an explanation for what is occurring (Penick & Owens, 1976). As discussed above, the NCS and NCVS have tended to focus more on measuring victimization than explaining it. These two functions, though,

are not mutually exclusive. Striking a better balance between the two may be warranted now, especially in light of user needs for data that help explain victimization. The particular answer reached is not as important as the need to resolve the issue. A renewed and clearer understanding of the NCVS's current role would serve as a useful guide in determining the questions to add and remove, the information to collect, and the trends to explore.

### Make Narrative Data Available to Researchers

Combining information gathered from the NCVS's structured questions with additional incident details could help illuminate new areas for study, trends, and explanations for criminal victimization. The narrative data collected for each NCVS incident could provide such insights. The narratives are incident summaries collected at the end of the NCVS interview. Currently the narratives are used only for quality control purposes and are not archived in a public-use format.<sup>16</sup> Because of these restrictions, these data have been accessed by only a few researchers (Addington, 2004; Garofalo, Siegel & Laub, 1987). Their resulting studies indicate that the incident narratives provide details that can enhance the NCVS data and "capture some of the nuances of these events that highly structured surveys are not designed to expose" (Garofalo, Siegel & Laub, 1987, p. 337). For example, Addington (2004) found the narratives provide greater details about the weapons used as part of school victimizations and this information suggests a different context of school violence. Specifically the most common "other" weapons were weapons of convenience found at school such as sports equipment or shop tools rather than those imported from outside. It is important to emphasize that the narratives have their own set of limitations (see Addington, 2004), but researchers could determine for themselves the utility of these data for particular topics.

## Changes to Ensure the NCVS Continues to Meet User Needs

### Institute Periodic Reassessments

What is known about criminal victimization has changed a great deal, largely due to information provided by the NCS and NCVS. A mechanism for regular reassessment would help ensure that future gains in knowledge are identified and reinvested in a way to benefit the NCVS. Periodic reviews also would serve as an evaluation of whether the crime survey continues to address user needs. Topics for consideration could include macro considerations of new avenues of research and trends in the field as well as more specific examinations of the survey instrument such as the continued inclusion of particular questions.

<sup>15</sup>BJS's limited resources are a particularly relevant concern when discussing the NCVS. BJS has endured years of flat funding and budget cuts that have directly impacted the NCVS. To cut costs, tough decisions have been made such as reducing the NCVS's sample size (Lauritsen, 2005).

<sup>16</sup>With the increased use of computer-assisted interviewing (through personal interviews or "CAPI" and telephone interviews or "CATI"), archiving this data should become easier. Confidentiality concerns would still remain and need to be addressed so that personally identifying information is not disclosed in the narrative.



## Create a Partnership with Researchers

This workshop provides a unique opportunity for researchers to interact with BJS and make suggestions about the data they frequently use. Creating a more formal partnership with researchers would encourage a regular exchange of ideas as well as institute a mechanism for suggesting new areas of research interest and providing feedback on the NCVS. Both BJS and the research community could benefit from the synergy generated from such collaboration. A partnership

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- with the research community could take different forms and varying levels of involvement. One format is that of an ongoing relationship, for example involving several researchers in an advisory group. In addition to researchers, this group could include other NCVS data users such as policymakers and practitioners. Alternatively this partnership could be a more discrete interaction and involve researchers on particular issues such as providing ideas for NCVS supplement topics.
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