



The decision to report criminal victimizations to the police is an important determinant of the capacity of the criminal justice system to fulfill its mandate. This report analyzes the individual-level determinants of crime reporting, using data generated by the 1973 National Crime Survey conducted by the Bureau of the Census. It examines the impact of three characteristics of victimizations upon their reporting probability: the attributes of their victims, the nature of victim-offender relationships, and the seriousness of the offense. Only the latter appears to be of major significance, although youthful victims are substantially less likely than their elders to report their experiences to the police. The reasons that nonreporters give for their inaction appear to be quite rational, reflecting the probability that anything will come of their cooperation.

CITIZEN REPORTING OF CRIME

Some National Panel Data

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The decision of individuals to report criminal victimizations to the police has been the object of considerable interest. From the outset, survey studies of citizens' crime experiences and their reporting practices have identified patterns of massive nonreporting (Ennis, 1967). It is clear that large amounts of often serious crime do not come to the attention of the authorities, are not registered in our indicators of social health, and do not lead to arrests or other official deterrent action.

This nonreporting has several consequences. First, it determines the volume and distribution of the "dark figure" of officially unknown crime. Any fluctuation in the official rate of crime (including the much-heralded "decrease in the

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rate of increase" registered in 1972) may simply reflect changes in citizen reporting practices and the size of this pool of unknown events. Reporting decisions determine the volume of cases facing the police and the courts and the nature of their activity. As Albert Reiss (1971) has suggested, these highly discretionary activities are perhaps the most important in the entire crime-and-justice system. Changes in citizen reporting could overload existing facilities for receiving information about crime and doing something in response. Differential nonreporting also shapes the character of the police mandate. Increases in the reporting of disputes between acquaintances, assaults within families, and the "theft" of property by people's estranged spouses, would lead the police even further into the kinds of crisis intervention roles they appear to abhor.

This report summarizes the most recent data on nonreporting produced by the National Crime Panel Study conducted by the Bureau of the Census. It examines the impact of several hypothesized determinants of reporting rates, many of which previously have been investigated only in isolated, city-specific studies. Many of those studies also conceptualized nonreporting as a social pathology, something to be explored as a problem in individual failure. This analysis indicates that nonreporting is a social process which is patterned in consistent ways, and that it reflects the experiential world of crime victims in direct and realistic fashion. People report or not for good reason.

THE PROBLEM AND THE DATA

It is useful to think about the determinants of crime reporting in three ways. First, we can examine the extent to which behavior is a function of the characteristics of individuals. Blacks, for example, may be less willing than whites to mobilize the police, based upon their own or

friends' experiences or upon accumulated group lore. Youths often face similar calculations: will their complaints be taken seriously, will they face uncomfortable demeanor problems, is it wise to become known to the police regardless of the circumstances? This mode of analysis requires that we match the attributes of individuals to their behavior vis-à-vis formal authority.

Second, we can examine the extent to which this action is a function of the relationship between the victim and the offender. It is clear from previous surveys and intensive studies of particular crimes that criminals and their victims do not come together in random fashion. Crime is an interactional process which often reflects enduring rather than discontinuous social contact. It also is often precipitated by the eventual victim's careless or aggressive behavior (Curtis, 1974). The decision to report such events is simply one of a number of alternatives open to the "losers" in such encounters.

Finally, it is important to consider the effects of the nature of the incident itself. Crimes differ greatly in their severity: the extent to which they violate the person, property, or propriety of the victim or standers-by. They also vary in the probability that any concrete return is likely to accrue to the victim in response to his mobilization of the police. Where the likelihood of the recovery of property or the arrest of an offender is slight, there is little practical incentive for shouldering the additional burden of reliving one's experiences for the police.

The data used to probe these relationships were pooled from six monthly random samples of the American population. Each month from July through December of 1973, every resident over eleven years of age in a sample of 10,000 households was interviewed by Bureau of the Census personnel and asked to recall victimization experiences during the past six months. This recall period was "bounded" by an earlier visit of an interviewer, and the interview schedule

itself has been subjected in an extensive series of methodological and validity checks (see San Jose Methods Test . . . , 1972; Crimes and Victims, 1974). The respondents and the incidents have been weighted to reflect their true distribution in the population. Given the size and extent of the sample (it was drawn from 376 different primary sampling units scattered throughout the country), these population estimates have very low standard errors, and with this data it is possible to talk confidently about the distribution of relatively uncommon events (such as robbery) even within detailed subgroups of the population.

The tables which follow test a number of specific hypotheses about citizen reporting and the characteristics of victims, of victim-offender relationships, and characteristics of the incidents themselves. In each case an appropriate measure of association will be presented describing the strength of the relationship. The tables also will report national population estimates of the incidence of events and the distribution of victim characteristics for the year 1973.

NONREPORTING: THE EFFECTS OF VICTIM CHARACTERISTICS

Much of the discussion about nonreporting has focused upon victim characteristics—the social types whose crime experiences do not come to the attention of the authorities. Presumably they enjoy fewer of the ameliorative activities of the state and those who prey upon them are less likely to suffer the deterrent sting of official action in response.

One major social cleavage which has been thought to reflect this differential burden is race. Blacks have historically suffered poor relations with the police, and bad experiences continue to characterize police-community relations in the ghetto. It is commonly argued that fear of the police is so

TABLE 1
Reporting and Victim Characteristics*

All Crimes Against Persons: Rape, Assaultive Robbery, Assault, Personal Theft (Non-Assaultive Robbery, Purse Snatching, Pocket Picked)

<u>Race</u>	<u>Percent Report</u>	<u>Percent No Report</u>	<u>Victimizations U.S. Pop. Est.</u>
White	44.2	55.8 (100%)	5,024,220
Black	45.1	54.9 (100%)	920,850

C = .006

All Crimes Against Persons

<u>Age</u>	<u>Percent Report</u>	<u>Percent No Report</u>	<u>Victimizations U.S. Pop. Est.</u>
12-19	31.5	68.5 (100%)	2,161,940
20-34	49.2	50.8 (100%)	2,304,350
35-49	56.6	43.5 (100%)	797,490
50-64	53.0	47.0 (100%)	494,250
65 plus	53.6	46.4 (100%)	247,300

B = .21

*A small number of "don't knows" have been excluded from the calculation of these percentages, although they have been included in the estimates of the frequency of the independent variables in the population.

high among racial minorities that it inhibits the reporting of their crime experiences.

The data presented in Table 1 indicate that race is in fact unrelated to citizen reporting practices. In many important subcategories, blacks are if anything slightly more likely than whites to report their experiences to the police. Grouping all crimes against persons (defined in Table 1), we observe no

important racial differences in reporting; the difference is 3% among crimes involving assaultive violence and 2% among personal thefts. Given the importance of racial differences in a host of other social processes, these differences are trivial.

Sex differences in reporting practices are more consistent. Across all categories, women appear to be about 5% more likely than men to report victimizations to the authorities. Both groups fail to report the majority of most crimes, however. These differences are in accord with research on the socialization of individuals to legal norms: in general, women are more compliant and deferential to legal authority.

The effect of age differences upon reporting practices reported in Table 1 may reflect the same phenomenon. Data there make it clear that youths are largely responsible for the minority status of reported crime. Due to (1) their large numbers and high rates of victimization, and (2) their low likelihood of relaying information about them to the police, youths between the ages of 12 and 19 account for a substantial proportion of all officially unrecorded crime. Persons in this age category suffered 35% of all personal victimizations in 1973, and reported only 31% of them. This occurred despite the fact that young people suffer disproportionately from assaultive violence, which in general is highly reported. This helped keep the group's reporting rate as high as it was; the 12-19 age group reported only 22% of the nonassaultive robberies, purse snatchings, and picked pockets they suffered. The high reporting rate among oldsters probably reflects the ease of their relationship with the police and their confidence that they will not be penalized by it, for they tend to suffer fewer violent personal assaults.

Reporting rates do not vary in any consistent fashion across income levels, although members of extremely high income families (\$25,000 plus per year) tend to differ from others, reporting fewer of their violent personal victimizations (only 25%) but more of their personal property losses (43%). This may be explained by differential patterns of

victimization. Although patterns in the middle of the income distribution are not clear, victims at the upper end of the spectrum appear to be attacked less violently (or else they give up their money more easily) than those at the bottom: 28% of the victims of robbery making above \$25,000 a year in 1973 were also physically assaulted, while 42% of those making less than \$3,000 were beaten as well as robbed. Also, high income victims lost more money or goods of greater value than poor victims. As we shall see, such variations in the seriousness of a victimization greatly affect their probability of being reported to the police.

REPORTING AND VICTIM-OFFENDER RELATIONSHIPS

Victims and their offenders have a great deal in common. Studies of interpersonal crimes have revealed that they are usually of the same race, that much crime takes place between residents of the same neighborhood, and that often people in similar positions in the occupational structure prey upon one another (Schafer, 1968). One of the major interests of victimologists has been the social relationship between victims and offenders—the bonds of friendship and kinship that usually forestall violent or pecunious aggression, but which occasionally break down. Studies of crimes of violence recorded in police files have suggested that homicides (Wolfgang, 1958), rapes (Amir, 1971), and assaults (Pittman and Handy, 1964) are common among neighbors, lovers, and family members.

It has been assumed that these social bonds also inhibit the initial contacting of the police, leading official files still to greatly underrepresent such cases. Criminal acts between the members of a social network often reflect the dynamics of continuing interpersonal relationships, and the decision to report such events to the police may require a much more complex calculus than anonymous violence or theft. Deciding

TABLE 2
Reporting and Victim-Offender Relationships

Crime	Percent Incidents by Strangers	Strangers Percent Reported	Not Strangers Percent Reported	Incidents U.S. Pop. Est.
All crimes against persons	67.4	42.4	38.6	5,105,440
All assaultive violence	61.2	44.8	38.9	4,016,710
(Rape	75.4	47.8	30.9)	153,050
Assaultive violence with theft	83.1	64.0	48.7	359,400
Assaultive violence--no theft	59.1	41.8	38.6	3,657,310
(Assault	59.8	41.4	38.8	3,517,990
Personal theft--no assault	90.1	36.9	34.8	1,088,730

ship upon patterns of reporting for assault are minor. It has long been assumed that intrafamilial beatings and altercations among friends and neighbors come to the attention of the police only under very special circumstances. These data indicate that they are actually just about as likely to be reported as attacks by strangers; the difference in reporting rates is only about 2%.

The limited effect of victim-offender relationships upon reporting behavior apparent in much of this data casts some

doubt upon many common assertions about crime which does not come to the attention of the authorities—that much of it reflects disputes which are resolved privately, or that the social relationship between victim and offender keeps it from being defined as “criminal” by the immediate parties. Only under limited circumstances (and, as Table 3 indicates, only among relatively infrequent crimes), does the decision to report appear to be particularly complex.

REPORTING AND THE CHARACTERISTICS OF CRIMINAL INCIDENTS

Other than the general assertion that incidents which are “serious” are more likely to be reported, little systematic attention has been focused upon the effects of the characteristics of criminal incidents themselves on the probability of their coming to the attention of the authorities (but see Richardson et al., 1972). More emphasis has been placed upon the social attributes of victims and offenders, most of which prove to be unimportant. This is curious, for while most characteristics of individuals have weak to nonexistent relationships with reporting, incident characteristics are strongly and consistently related to this action, and the process appears to reflect rational and reasonable citizen conduct.

It is important to clarify, first, the dimensions of seriousness. There appear to be at least four which accrue to the incident itself, as opposed to circumstantial contingencies such as the availability of medical care or the possession of insurance: the value of stolen or damaged property, the extent of personal injury, the use of a weapon which threatens death, and the extent to which the crime intrudes into the secure lifespace of the victim. The greater loss, harm, threat, or insecurity generated by an incident, the more likely it is to be reported to the police.

TABLE 3
Reporting and the Characteristics of Incidents

Personal Incidents: Robbery

	<u>Percent Reported to the Police</u>	<u>Incidents U.S. Pop. Est.</u>
22.6	unsuccessful, no assault, no weapon	157,440
35.0	unsuccessful, no assault, with weapon	109,410
37.7	successful, no assault, no weapon	152,840
51.0	successful, minor assault, no weapon	153,160
61.6	successful, no assault, with weapon	185,410
75.0	successful, major assault, no weapon	29,680
71.6	successful, major assault, with weapon	162,830

Non-Personal Property Crimes: Burglary, Larceny, Auto Theft

<u>Location</u>	<u>Percent Reported</u>	<u>Percent Not Reported</u>	<u>Incidents U.S. Pop. Est.</u>
In or around the home	35.0	65.0 (100%)	74,196,520
Elsewhere	20.3	79.7 (100%)	19,032,600

C = .16

Non-Personal Property Crime: Larceny Only

<u>Value of Item</u>	<u>Percent Reported</u>	<u>Percent Not Reported</u>	<u>Incidents U.S. Pop. Est.</u>
\$1 - 9	6.6	93.4 (100%)	7,230,810
\$10 - 24	13.4	86.6 (100%)	4,247,430
\$25 - 49	26.4	73.6 (100%)	3,013,400
\$50 - 99	44.2	55.8 (100%)	2,471,850
\$100 - 249	58.7	41.3 (100%)	1,846,900
\$250 - 999	66.8	33.2 (100%)	665,640
\$1,000 plus	72.8	27.2 (100%)	118,880

G = .46

Data testing these hypotheses are reported in Table 3. First it summarizes the effect of three of the dimensions of seriousness upon reporting rates for a particularly important personal crime, robbery. Financial loss is collapsed into two categories: was the robbery attempt successful or not? Injury is classified as major, minor, or none at all. Whether or not the offender deployed a gun, knife, or other dangerous weapon (a broken bottle, ball bat, or the like) is indicated as well. The effect of each element appears to be additive—as incidents increase in seriousness, moving from unsuccessful, nonassaultive, less threatening events to more serious ones, reporting rates mount steadily. At the bottom, only 23% of the least serious robberies were reported; at the top, 72% were taken to the police. The only exception is a minor reversal at the top of the scale, which may reflect the low incidence (and large sampling error) of major assaults (leading to hospitalization) without a weapon. The cumulative effect of these dimensions of seriousness for personal crimes is clear; they are powerful predictors of the decision by victims to report their experiences to the police.

Table 3 also presents a test of the strength of the final aspect of event seriousness, the extent to which it intrudes into the private life-space of the victim. The phrase "a man's home is his castle" reflects one of the functions which property boundaries and the walls of one's domicile perform—they provide security. Events which breach that security and threaten loss or harm within people's most personal territory should be threatening indeed, and this threat should be reflected in their willingness to mobilize the police in response.

Table 3 examines this hypothesis using national survey data on the incidence of nonpersonal property crimes: burglary, larceny, and auto theft. It compares the reporting rates of incidents which occurred on the immediate grounds or within the home of the survey respondent who recalled it with reporting rates for incidents which occurred away from

home (at work, while shopping, and so on). Although the financial loss involved in most of these crimes is minor, leading to low overall reporting rates for such events, incidents which occurred in or around the home were 15% more likely to be reported to the police. The unease or insecurity generated by the occurrence of crimes in private space appears to be an important dimension of seriousness and a useful predictor of reporting rates.

Table 3 also uses data on simple larceny theft to present a more detailed breakdown of the other major dimension of seriousness for nonpersonal property crimes: the value of the loss. Larceny involves no forcible entry, no threatened victims, no personal injury; the primary consequences of larceny can be measured by the dollar value of the goods or cash stolen. As Table 3 indicates, this loss is clearly and positively related to the tendency of victims to inform the police about their experiences. Losses of small value are virtually never reported (7% of those worth less than ten dollars), while those at the top of the scale are reported almost three-fourths of the time.

REPORTING AND RATIONALITY

This essay has summarized national survey data on the correlates of one of the major discretionary acts which shape American criminal justice—the decision to report a victimization to the police. Reporting appears to be related only weakly to the characteristics of individual crime victims. The very young are less likely than everyone else to report their experiences, and persons with extremely high incomes (a numerically small group) are more likely than others to report property offenses but are less willing to call the police in response to personal victimizations. Women report more victimizations to the police than men, but the differences are small. Racial differences do not explain this form of

police-community contact at all. The effects of victim-offender relationships upon reporting were strong for certain subclasses of relatively infrequent crimes, but in the main the "dark figure" of unreported crime does not differ much from that which is officially known on this dimension.

Characteristics of victims' experiences, on the other hand, were highly related to their evocation of the police. Crimes which threatened their person, violated their personal space, inflicted injury, or cost them money were reported at relatively high rates. Attributes of their experiential world rather than social or symbolic forces appear to motivate the victims of crime, suggesting that the decision to report may be a highly cognitive, reality-testing process. Far from a pathology, it may reflect people's judgments about the use of their time, and the police's time as well.

This cognitive interpretation of victim behavior is supported by a final bit of evidence, responses to the probe "Why not?" given when victims told an interviewer that a crime was not reported to the police. They indicate that victims acted on the basis of what appeared to them to be reasonable assumptions about their crimes. One common option was that the incident "wasn't important enough." Choice of this response was clearly related to the seriousness of the event. For example, fully one-third of the nonreporting victims of larcenies under \$50 chose this reason; only 13% of those losing more than \$50 did so.

Victims also appear to react to their own, and reasonably accurate, estimate of the chances that anything will come of their report. Table 4 relates the proportion of nonreporters who indicated that they failed to act because "nothing could be done" to the FBI's *clearance* rate for the same offenses (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1974). The latter is a rough measure of the solvability of an offense. In general, crimes which were solvable elicited few "nothing can be done" responses, while crimes with very low clearance rates—such as burglary—generated this reason almost one-half of the time.

TABLE 4

Crime	Percent Saying "Nothing Can Be Done"	F.B.I. Clearance Rate 1973
Assault	19%	63%
Rape	23	51
Robbery	41	27
Larceny	33	19
Burglary	48	18
Auto Theft	48	16

The simplest interpretation of Table 4 is that people do not report when they think nothing will happen as a result, and that they are often right.

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