

A MANAGERIAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE REDESIGN OF THE NATIONAL CRIME (VICTIMIZATION) SURVEY

Benjamin H. Renshaw, Director, Statistics Division, LEAA

Efforts to alleviate the trauma, injury, expense and inconvenience of being a victim of crime has been a major focus for the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) and its intergovernmental delivery system in the last five years. Programs to assist the victims such as crisis handling, social service referrals, special aid associated with particular classes of victims, and state victim compensation programs have all emerged. At the national level, Congress is considering national victim assistance and compensation legislation; as an example the Senate recently passed a bill to provide \$30 million dollars in aid to victims of spouse and child abuse.

It is interesting that this concern and resulting legislation appears to be more an effect than a cause of the National Crime Survey - which refers to the national survey of victimizations initiated in 1972 by LEAA and conducted by the Bureau of the Census to gain an understanding of the incidence and impact of crime. If a national statistical series has indeed focused concern on the plight of victims, this is a vitally important benefit of the enterprise.

Moreover it is important to understand that these service/assistance programs and the victimization series both have been undertaken under the statutory umbrella of a law intended to improve systems for the administration of justice at state and local levels. This fact has implications for the redesign and reform of the National Crime Survey and for the policy guidelines under which that redesign will proceed.

Assistance Sought In The Reexamination of The National Crime Survey

The issue or problem addressed by this paper is the management of a total reexamination of the National Crime Survey in the context of the policy issues, legislative interests, and program development needs of the Department of Justice. We are not seeking an "ideal" or "optimum" survey; as has been pointed out elsewhere, there is no theory for an optimum sampling design. We are seeking methods of acquiring victimization data that take cognizance of benefits and uses, sources of error, present and potential funding levels of the sponsoring agency, and staffing constraints. Thus, the focus of my discussion here will be on a major request for proposal (RFP) which LEAA will be releasing later this fall to obtain assistance in undertaking what should ultimately be a multi-year and multi-million dollar effort. Since we will be seeking this assistance from all elements of the statistical community, this meeting of the American Statistical Association seems an appropriate place for the first public discussion of this major procurement.

Expectations Concerning Responses

Let me begin with some observations concerning the NCS redesign work and some expectations about the form and substance which responses to our request for proposal should take.

First, we are seeking responses on two separate efforts or work tracks: one is the management and coordination of the reexamination of the full range of conceptual and methodological issues related to the redesign of victimization surveys as currently conducted; the other is an imaginative and wide ranging initial examination of alternative methods of obtaining data on the relatively rare events involving victimizations, particularly violent victimizations. As an example, the programs of assistance for victims mentioned earlier may evolve into important administrative sources of victimization data.

Second, we are strongly encouraging responses by consortia of non-profit research organizations, university-based research bureaus, and individuals and entities within each.

Third, within these consortia we are anxious for a mix of individuals and institutions familiar on the one hand with the NCS as it now operates, and on the other with those whose experience does not include NCS directly but does reach the range of conceptual and methodological issues confronting the victimization surveys, based on their experience with the research and development of other statistical programs and series.

Overall, we are seeking the direct assistance of an organization which will function as an extension of LEAA to decide the priority, sequence, and financial level of a research effort that will examine the widest possible set of options for survey and non-survey acquisition of policy relevant victimization data.

Materials to be Reviewed in Developing an Effective Response

An effective response will require an understanding of several important events and documents related to the National Crime Survey over the past several years. These include the following:

1. The National Academy of Sciences' Committee on National Statistics evaluated the NCS from 1974 to 1976, under LEAA funding, and produced the volume "Surveying Crime."
2. Hearing before the Subcommittee on Judiciary, House of Representatives Ninety-fifth Congress, First Session on Suspension of the National Crime Survey, October 13, 1977 - Serial No. 23 which dealt with the proposed suspension of victimization data collection by LEAA and contains a

major report on alternatives to then Deputy Attorney General Flaherty.

3. In December, 1977 an evaluation was undertaken at LEAA's direction of the uses and benefits of the National Crime Survey data. This evaluation employed an approach known as "benefit analysis" that is discussed in a National Academy of Sciences' volume entitled "Setting Statistical Priorities." A final version of this report is available.
4. A three day conference of victimization experts was convened in Leesburg, Va. in late February, 1978 to provide LEAA with guidance concerning research issues. A final report of that conference will be available later this fall from the Bureau of Social Science Research in Washington.

LEAA Policy Guidelines for the NCS Redesign

Earlier I suggested the NCS Redesign would have to be undertaken in the context of our current statute and to meet the statistical policy needs of the Department of Justice and the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration. My formulation of these policy guidelines follows; clearly these policy rules are subject to review and change within LEAA as the work on the major procurement proceeds.

1. Release and analysis of victimization data must be considered in conjunction with the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reports (UCR). It seems both possible and essential that aggregate statistics from these two series be presented as part of an overall national report on crime for a common time period.

2. Derivative from the above, victimization data derived from the national household sample will be reported and released for each calendar year within nine to ten months of the close of the year for which the report is being made. Data for time periods of less than a year, such as quarterly estimates, are not a requirement for policy based research and their collection demonstrably and sharply increases costs.

3. Any methods or instrument used for collection of victimization data must take into consideration what the National Academy of Sciences' report called the independent variable problem. Data on risks associated with victimization and life style issues must be dealt with if the enormous policy utility of the NCS data are to be extracted. Currently the victimization data tells us who is victimized but not why nor the efficacy of things people do to avoid and prevent victimization.

4. Work on reexamination of the NCS should proceed on the assumption that there will be no quantum or even major increases in the LEAA staff dedicated to the management of the victimization data collection, analysis, research, and local technical assistance efforts. Initial recommended

appropriation levels for the proposed Bureau of Justice Statistics suggests that these staffing constraints will hold well into the 1980's.

5. All policy, program and research objectives stipulated by LEAA as the sponsoring agency shall be met. If no single design, method, or alternative for acquiring such data can bear the burden of multiple objectives, then separate but coordinated alternatives must be developed. Consideration may have to be given to a cross sectional design for annual reporting and a longitudinal design to get data on the incidence and impact of victimizations.

6. Substantive objectives, in addition to those already mentioned, will include (a) annual reporting on a national basis of levels and changes for major crime types, data on the attributes of crime, and factors related to the victimization experience, and (b) subnational estimates of the same phenomena for a range of larger states, SMSAs and other subnational areas that may be identified.

7. Methodological "givens" include the following: (a) any survey design used shall be sufficiently flexible to permit the incorporation of short term policy and attitude questions on either a national or subnational basis; (b) all research and design work and products with relation to victimization alternatives shall be available for release by LEAA, through the National Criminal Justice Reference Service and other means, subject only to LEAA's privacy, security and confidentiality restrictions. The NCS redesign work does not permit of one definitive test of the data and it must be conducted in an open and iterative fashion; rapid release of the data is imperative to facilitate secondary analysis. LEAA, as an example, intends to enforce basic standards for preparation and release of data tapes.

Organizational Tensions in the Management of Statistical Enterprises

There are two critical tensions in the management of any statistical enterprise which have a bearing on the future of the National Crime Survey.

On one side there is the absolute need to maintain the objectivity and the integrity of the data series - but without isolating the statistical staff from the policy apparatus of the Department of Justice which plays a critical role in perpetuating the series.

The second tension is for the DOJ/LEAA staff concerned with the victimization series to be informed by the best available statistical talent without shifting the fundamental policy responsibility of elected and appointed officials for policy direction to that advisory body.

In conclusion, our intention is to acquire contractual assistance for the reexamination of NCS and alternative means of acquiring victimization data while clearly retaining policy responsibility for the direction of the effort.