

Richard W. Dodge and Harold R. Lentzner, U.S. Bureau of the Census

One of the major unresolved problems of the National Crime Survey (NCS) is how to treat crime incidents that occur in a series. These are events of such frequent occurrence that respondents are unable, even with interviewer probing, to provide details for each incident separately. The difficulty with series crimes is that they represent a significant proportion of all crimes, but at present they are not included with the regular crime figures. The number of series crimes in recent years has run between 4 and 5 percent of the regular crimes reported in the NCS. But this is clearly an understatement because the minimum number of incidents in each series is 3 and in some cases it is much more. There are several reasons why series incidents are kept separate. Foremost is the vagueness in the respondent's mind as to what exactly transpired in each incident. In addition, respondents have difficulty pinpointing when the incidents occurred, except in the most general sense, and in estimating the precise number of incidents involved. As a consequence, interviewers are instructed to obtain information about season of occurrence and assign the number of incidents to one of 3 categories, 3-4, 5-10 or 11 and above. Although details are collected about the most recent incident in the series, it is not clear how "representative" this incident is of the total, or whether substantial variation might not be revealed within the category of series crimes if additional questions were asked.

The existence of series crimes is not a new problem, but has been recognized since the beginning of victimization surveying. The National Academy of Sciences study of the National Crime Survey recommended both that existing data be examined for clues as to how series crimes might be combined with data for regular crimes, and also that new ways be explored for understanding changes in the reporting of series over time.¹ Extensive work on this latter point has already been undertaken by Albert Reiss and his colleagues at Yale.² By joining together records from different reporting periods, they were able to construct a longitudinal file and examine the pattern of crime incidents at sample addresses over time—for the 7 periods over a span of 3 years when addresses are eligible for a crime survey interview. Reiss and his associates discovered, among other things, that series incidents are of comparatively short duration—that is to say, there is relatively little reporting of series incidents in subsequent interviews; that roughly 3/4 of persons or households reporting series incidents in a given interview report no victimizations at all during the next interview; that multiple reporting of series events is less common than for regular crimes that are reported separately; and that the proportion of movers is greater among victims of series incidents than for other victims.

In an effort to investigate further the nature of series incidents, we have examined the basic survey documents for a sample of addresses that were in the NCS for the normal stay of 7 periods.³ These documents are the control cards for each household that lived at an address during the 3 years it was in the NCS sample and the questionnaires containing reports for crimes classified by the interviewer as

series incidents. The control cards provide a roster of the household members throughout the period, as well as a brief description of each incident that was reported to the interviewers. The questionnaires contain a narrative summary of the incident which often provides amplification of the events contained in the survey record.

The sample upon which this report is based was selected from 6 panel-rotations, those entering the NCS sample in the months of January, February, March, July, August, and September of 1974. Any household residing at a sample address that experienced a series incident at any one of the times that the address was eligible for an interview was selected for this study. A total of 664 addresses were identified as reporting 812 series incidents of all types.⁴ In this exploratory report, we have chosen to concentrate on the incidents involving the violent personal crimes of rape, robbery, and assault. There were 205 of these incidents, 3 cases of rape, 20 cases of robbery, and 182 of assault.⁵

The additional data on the control cards and questionnaires enabled us to classify these 205 incidents into categories that were more indicative of the kinds of events involved. We identified 4 groups—1) where the series of incidents apparently was directly related to the nature of the job the victim held; 2) cases of domestic violence, including both intrafamilial altercations and those between persons who were well acquainted but not related to one another, such as friends and neighbors; 3) a category of violence between children, usually occurring in school, on the school grounds or going to and from school;⁶ and 4) a miscellaneous category, which consisted of incidents involving adults which could not be assigned to either the job or domestic violence categories.

Series incidents relating to the victim's job

Each of the special categories of personal series incidents has characteristics that set it off from the other groups, which suggests that different ways may have to be developed to probe more fully into the surrounding circumstances. There were 52 victims of job related series incidents, of whom 23 were in the field of law enforcement. Other areas represented included persons working in institutional settings, such as social workers and parole officers; bartenders and managers of fast food restaurants; and bus drivers and railroad employees. The great majority of the offenders in these incidents were strangers to their victims. This was true in 62 of the 77 incidents that were classified as job related. Even though the relationship between victim and offender is based on the most recent incident, there is no reason to believe that this preponderance of stranger offenders would vary if each incident could be separately described. Exceptions to this relationship were more frequently found in institutional settings where social workers or parole officers might be at least casually acquainted with the offender.

The job related personal series victimizations had the greatest number of multiple series of the four groups under consideration—77 incidents for 52 respondents.⁷ A substantial number of nonseries or

regular incidents were also experienced by these 52 individuals, but these incidents were not evenly distributed. Seventeen persons reported no single incidents in addition to the personal series, although there was one instance of a series theft. Twenty respondents suffered a total of 50 incidents of violent crime, and all but a handful of these were job related. There were also 70 reports of thefts experienced by 29 persons. A substantial amount of overlap occurred in these 2 categories with 14 persons being victimized at least once by both theft and violence, including one individual who also reported 2 series thefts. The concentration of nonseries victimizations is illustrated by the fact that 6 persons accounted for 32 of the 50 violent crimes, and 7 persons reported themselves as victims in 37 of the 70 thefts.

With nearly half of the victims occupying jobs in the law enforcement area, one might expect more than an average of approximately 2 series incidents per respondent. There were cases where such respondents reported either series or nonseries offenses during each reporting period. The most notable example was a police officer in a small northeastern city who reported 6 series crimes and 10 related non-series crimes during his 7 times in sample. In contrast, there were police officers who reported series or related nonseries incidents on only a few of the total number of interviews in which they participated. For example, in one of the largest cities of the country, a patrolman reported no incidents in 2 of the 4 times his household was in the sample. Overall, the 23 law enforcement respondents were interviewed a total of 94 times and reported no violent crimes (series or nonseries) on 44 of these occasions.

Another job related case raises some interesting questions. This involved an employee of a private bus company who was in the sample 6 times. For 4 of these times his occupation was listed as bus driver. He reported no personal incidents related to his job until the last time he was interviewed when he was credited with one series incident and 5 related non-series assaults. What accounts for this explosion of crime reporting? Where his routes changed so that he was given a less desirable area? In this particular interview, he was described as a school bus driver; perhaps he drove charter buses previously. Or should this be ascribed to interviewer variance because the interviewer who conducted this particular interview had not been assigned to that household previously? These are necessarily conjectures which serve to underline the fact that we need to know considerably more than we do at present about the circumstances surrounding a report of a series of incidents.

Obtaining a more accurate understanding of the extent to which persons whose jobs place them in situations where they are more likely to experience multiple victimizations does not solve the problem of how to present such data. If a policeman or a bus driver is subjected to situations that meet the classification criteria for NCS crimes, but with such frequency that separate incident reports cannot be filled, how are these crimes to be treated in relation to the majority of crimes where separate reports are obtained? No matter how much we perfect the instrument to measure crime victimization, we will be left with a residue of incidents that cannot easily be amalgamated with nonseries crimes.

Series incidents involving domestic violence

Domestic series incidents are differentiated from other personal incidents primarily by the closeness of the relationship between victim and offender. A great majority of offenders in this sample (35 of 49) were actually related to their victims, while most of the remaining offenders had developed firm social relationships as neighbors or good friends.

Roughly half of all domestic series incidents and about four of every five violent series incidents occurring between relatives involved spouses or ex-spouses. In all of these cases the male was the offending partner and the female was the victim. While it was often difficult, if not impossible, to determine exact marital status at time of incident, it was frequently apparent by time of interview that the marriage had ended or was in the process of ending. At the time 17 of the 27 spouse abuse incidents were reported to NCS interviewers, the victims were separated or divorced and living apart from their husbands.

Regarding offender continuity in domestic series incidents, it should be obvious, given such a large proportion of spouse abuse cases, that the majority of incidents were committed by the same offender. There were, however, some exceptions; in several crimes where the offenders were identified as neighbors, there was evidence that different persons committed the individual acts. Hence, it may be concluded from this small sample that for most but not all domestic incidents, data on offender characteristics could easily be obtained for each victimization in the series.

One notable feature of this group of series incidents is the rarity of multiple series victimizations, either within a particular interview or across interview periods. Only two victims reported more than one domestic series; one respondent charged her ex-husband with 2 series incidents during the same 6-month period, while another reported being assaulted by her spouse in 2 consecutive periods.

Why were there so few multiple series incidents reported in the sample? Research in the field has shown that in certain domestic situations violence is a regularly occurring phenomenon. One possible explanation is that additional attacks occurred but were recorded as discrete events or as series theft. The record shows that in a number of situations this was the case. In most of these households there was one additional related incident, often reported during the same or the following interview. In other households, however, a number of related crimes were reported. To illustrate, one respondent accused her husband of committing 5 crimes over a 6-month period; a series of burglaries, a larceny, and an armed robbery in addition to 2 violent series incidents!

This situation was the exception and not the rule. Victims of series domestic violence usually experienced no other related incidents during their time in sample. As for their overall experience with non-series incidents, 17 victims of domestic violence experienced no additional crimes, whereas the remaining 30 were involved in 18 violent incidents and 51 thefts. Roughly one-third of the victims in the latter group reported at least one violent crime and one theft.

Another possible explanation, particularly relevant to intrafamilial violence, is that while there may be recurring acts of violence they go unreported because they take place before or after the household is in sample. The likelihood of this transpiring is enhanced by the fact that many households are not in sample the full 3 years. In fact, over half of those households reporting intrafamilial series violence were in the sample fewer than 4 times, and 13 households left immediately after the period in which the series incident was reported.

It should be pointed out, however, that longevity did not guarantee a more complete victimization history. There were a number of cases involving victims in households in sample 6 or 7 times who reported only one or two series or related nonseries crimes.

The case history of one of these victims is particularly revealing and suggests another possible explanation for the seemingly isolated nature of domestic series victimization. Only after the respondent had been interviewed 5 times did she report a series of violent beatings by her husband and acknowledge that the attacks had taken place on a regular basis for many years. Thus, through 2 years of interviewing the respondent had failed to report a steady stream of violent attacks committed by her spouse. It is entirely possible that many more incidents of domestic violence, series and nonseries, go unreported because of fear of reprisal, embarrassment, lack of interviewer-respondent rapport, or other reasons.

Finally, the uncommonness of multiple series victimization might, in part, result from the fact that many of those who publicly acknowledge the existence of domestic discord appear to take steps to prevent any further occurrence. As noted earlier, a number of victims of spouse abuse were separated or divorced at the time of interview, and were reporting on conditions which existed before the break-up of the marriage. Victims of other types of domestic series violence may have prevented further abuse by moving to another location or obtaining assistance from law enforcement authorities. Altogether, 10 victims of series abuse appeared to have acted in a positive manner to thwart any further attacks.

Perhaps the greatest problem we face with regard to further work in the area of domestic violence is the sensitivity of the subject matter. Many respondents, particularly those who continue to live under the threat of attack, are too embarrassed or frightened to talk about the problem in their own home. Even reporting an attack to an NCS interviewer, in some cases, is an act of personal courage. Further probing, either at the time the incident is reported or in subsequent interviews, may very well alienate or even endanger some respondents.

Series incidents between children

Another group of readily identifiable victims of personal series crimes are children. We have limited this group to those situations where the offenders were also children, although in 2 instances involving multiple offenders the oldest were above 20 years of age. There were 37 individual victims and 42 series incidents, with 5 persons suffering 2 personal series victimizations during their period in the sample. The great majority of incidents (30 of 42) either took place inside school, on the school grounds, or on the way to and from school. The ages of the victims tended

toward the lower end of the spectrum: 21 were 12 or 13 years old and thus their incidents were obtained from proxies, 11 were 14 and only 10 were 15 or older. The relationship between victims and offenders by age, sex, and race for each incident is shown in Table A. The age comparison is less precise than for

Table A. Relationship between victims and offenders in personal series crimes by selected characteristics

Relationship	Age	Sex	Race
Victim-offender characteristic is:			
Same	30	34	22
Different	¹ 8	5	² 17
Offender characteristic unknown			
	4	3	3

¹The victim was younger than the offender in 6 incidents and older in 2.

²Includes 4 cases where the offenders were of mixed races and 1 where the offenders were identified as all Mexican.

the other two characteristics because respondents were asked to assign offenders to age categories. Thus, if the respondent's age was included within any part of the range of the offender's ages, the age was considered to be the "same." With these qualifications, children involved in series crimes tended to be of the same age and sex, although the relationship by race was more evenly divided. The offenders in series crimes between juveniles were about evenly divided between those who were described as strangers and those considered to be casual acquaintances. In only 5 of the 40 incidents where this relationship was reported, did the respondent indicate that the offender was well known.

Multiple personal series victimization for this group was a relatively rare phenomenon, and 4 of the 5 instances occurred in consecutive reference periods. Verified cases of series involving the robbery of lunch money from school children were only reported twice. In one case the situation was resolved after police were notified; in the other, the household moved before the next interview. Both of these victims were 12 years old; if the bulk of such activity occurs to younger children, then the survey cannot measure it at present. Another possible reason for underreporting, if it does occur, is that 12 and 13 year olds may be ashamed or afraid to tell their parents, who function as proxy respondents for children of these ages.

There is very little evidence to explain the largely one-series phenomenon exhibited by these respondents. Aside from the lunch money problem that was resolved after police were notified, one child was transferred to a different school and another, after enduring a series of threats, turned on his assailant and administered a beating which presumably curtailed that particular line of activity. In a number of cases, the household moved away so that the subsequent history was not known; in many more cases it was known and very little, if anything, occurred. Part of the explanation might be that as a child grows

older, the concept of what constitutes a reportable offense is redefined in his mind. As noted earlier, most of these victims were 14 or under. Older children may be better able to cope with potentially threatening situations, either by avoiding them or, if confrontations occur, do not consider themselves to have been victims of violent crimes.

One issue that has bothered many is that of the triviality of some of the reported crimes in the NCS. This is more than an issue affecting series crimes, of course, but a number of these, as reported in interviewer summaries, underline the desirability of examining more closely the conceptual boundaries of crime. The fact that only 10 of the 42 series incidents were reported to the police (although many more were reported to school authorities) is worth noting in this context.

Victims of personal series crimes also report non-series crimes and series crimes involving theft. As was noted earlier for job related victimizations, these additional crimes tend to be concentrated rather than evenly distributed. Of the 37 young victims of personal series crimes, 12 reported no other incidents at all; 2 were victims of a series of thefts and no other incidents; 14 respondents were also victimized in 24 individual incidents of violence and 17 persons reported a total of 38 separate thefts. Among those reporting nonseries incidents, there were 8 persons who experienced at least one of each general type of crime, including one victim who also experienced a series of thefts. As with the personal series crimes, many of the nonseries crimes were school related--12 violent crimes reported by 8 persons and 23 theft crimes victimizing 14 youngsters. In addition, the 3 series thefts took place in school settings.

Miscellaneous series incidents

Of the series incidents making up the miscellaneous category, 15 were "street crimes," i.e., predatory robberies and assaults committed by strangers, 6 involved coworkers, and 5 were assaults or attempted assaults by acquaintances in a social setting, such as an encounter in a bar or on a playground. The 11 remaining incidents could not be classified.

Although these incidents were characterized by a variety of situational experiences, the victims tended to be alike. Specifically, 27 of the 34 victims were males and 20 were in their teens or twenties. Older victims were relatively uncommon; only 4 persons age 50 or older reported a miscellaneous series incident.

The relationship between victim and offender did not exhibit the degree of intimacy evident in domestic series incidents, but neither did it approach the anonymity of job related offenses. In approximately half of the crimes the offenders were either strangers or were known by sight only. As was true for these other categories, examples of multiple series incidents were quite rare. The 37 incidents were carried out against 34 victims, with 3 victims each suffering 2 crimes apiece.

Victims of miscellaneous series incidents reported a total of 70 discrete nonseries crimes; 25 personal acts of violence (13 respondents) and 45 thefts (20 respondents). Eight persons experienced at least one of each major type, whereas 9 others reported no individual incidents at all.

Conclusion

This exploratory examination of violent personal incidents occurring in a series has revealed a wide diversity of situations, but, at the same time, has suggested certain commonalities that may provide a basis for further scrutiny of such incidents. Three broad categories have been distinguished--cases relating to the victim's job, cases involving young children and those classified as domestic violence. Unfortunately, the residue consists of incidents that have much less in common. Nonetheless, we feel this exercise has provided insights, not available elsewhere, as to what additional kinds of information need to be obtained in order to understand better the nature of series incidents.

One of the most interesting aspects of the series issue is the general lack of repetitiveness of personal series crimes. Our study has made some tentative suggestions as to why this may be so, but definitive answers still elude us. For job-related crimes, although they have more repeat series than any other type, our intuition suggests that there is substantial undercounting. Much of this lack of duplication may have a reasonable explanation, but, if so, we need more probing inquiries to discover it.

Other problems with the series concept have been noted before, and these have been confirmed by this investigation. Interviewer variation, a problem in all surveys, appears to be evident in certain sequences when a change of interviewers brings forth a flood of crime reports where before there was apparent crime-free serenity or reveals the existence of domestic violence of long standing. It is also evident that some interviewers are not applying the series concept properly. This is supported by the narrative summaries where a series of incidents is said to have included events both with and without weapons, for example, or where the interviewer reports the most memorable incident, rather than the most recent. Indeed, in some cases with law enforcement respondents, separate reports are filled for especially noteworthy incidents and the rest lumped together as one series incident. Perhaps, under present conditions, this is not a bad approach. The incidents involving children, especially, raise the issue of what constitutes a crime in the NCS. If the minimum age is ever lowered, this problem of triviality will become more compelling. Contributing to response error are such other matters as respondents who learn that denying incidents contributes to shorter interviews, and the sensitive nature of domestic incidents which are undoubtedly grossly underreported but which may be improved upon with better questions and/or more thorough interviewer training. These are not exclusively problems of series crimes, of course, but their impact is perhaps greater in this area.

A slightly revised version of the NCS questionnaire is scheduled to be introduced in January of 1979. There will be changes in the questions which ask about the number of incidents and the seasons when they occurred. Interviewers will first ask for the number of incidents in the series and record the exact number of incidents or the respondent's best estimate. In well over half of the series questionnaires we have examined so far, the specific number appears either in the screening questions, on the control card, or in the interviewer summary or other note space on the

questionnaire. The second change will require that the number of incidents be allocated by the quarter of the year in which they occurred. The effect of these modifications will be to facilitate the incorporation of series data, as presently collected, with the regular NCS crimes.

In the longer run, it seems to us, special questionnaires need to be devised to probe more fully into each report of a series. This could be accomplished by providing interviewers with a special supplemental form (or forms) which would be administered whenever a series incident is reported. The design of such a questionnaire will not be easy because, as our investigation has implied, probing questions that are appropriate for some respondents will be inappropriate for others. Persons whose series incident is job related need to be queried more about their job and the circumstances surrounding it, whether the particular tasks they do have been altered, whether the location or time of day has undergone change, etc. These questions would obviously be irrelevant for young children where the main concerns are the relationship with their assailants, whether or not the offenders are always the same persons, and what, if anything, the victims do to avoid repetition of such events. (Outside of changing jobs, the former category of series victims has less ability to control these matters.) Where domestic violence is involved, the characteristics of the offender can be collected once and be applicable to all incidents, but the sensitive nature of the situation and the steps respondents take to reduce risk, and when they take these steps, become especially important considerations. One desirable outcome of such an in-depth inquiry might be to reduce further the number of series reports by enabling respondents to sort out the details of each incident so that individual incident reports can be filled. Or, where series crimes are too numerous for that, to improve the classification so that different types of crime are not commingled in one report.

We would also consider it desirable to investigate more thoroughly the reasons for the lack of continuity of series incidents from one reference period to the next. This could be restricted to households in the sample for the last interview. Interviewers would be provided with information about any series incidents in the previous interview, but would only utilize it if a series incident was not reported on the return visit. Because a significant proportion of series households move before the next interview, it would be necessary to attempt a followup of a subsample of movers in any such experiment.

This report has deliberately raised more questions about personal series incidents than provided answers. In the present state of our knowledge of series crimes, this is entirely appropriate and, in fact, a necessary prelude to further research into this problem. We have yet to examine the quantitatively larger area of series thefts, although the documents for this investigation are now available. Once this is done, we believe that the focus of activity should shift from a preoccupation with what has been collected in the past to the developing and testing of a new collection instrument.

¹Surveying Crime, Bettye K.E. Penick, Editor, Panel for the Evaluation of Crime Surveys, Committee on National Statistics, National Academy of Sciences, (Washington, D. C., 1976), p. 88ff.

²For example, Albert J. Reiss, Jr., Victim Reporting of Series and Nonseries Incidents over Time, Yale University Technical Report #3, December 1977.

³Exceptions occur when addresses in new construction segments are added to the sample, units are added or eliminated through conversion of existing units, units are demolished, etc.

⁴There were an estimated 19,034 nonseries incidents reported by these same households out of a total of about 70,000 interviewed households.

⁵Two hundred and eleven violent series incidents were identified, but 6 cases were eliminated because either the questionnaire and/or the control card was not located or the data were insufficient to classify the incident. We use the term personal series as equivalent to the total of these 3 violent crimes.

⁶Unfortunately, the present questionnaire does not identify incidents taking place on school grounds or between school and home, although this information is often supplied in the interviewer summaries.

⁷There were also 4 theft series victimizations reported by 3 of these respondents.