

How Prevalent Is Youth Violence?

Police reports. One of the most enduring sources of information on lethal violence in the United States is the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHR). Homicide victimization rates indicate that for those under the age of 24, vulnerability to murder increased dramatically during the mid-1980s through about 1994, when rates began a steady decline and have remained relatively stable since (Smith & Cooper, 2013).

Data measuring the prevalence of nonlethal forms of violence such as robbery and assaults are a bit more complicated. How do we know how many young people assault victims each year? People who report their victimizations to police represent one avenue for these calculations. The FBI compiles these numbers in its Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) system, which is slowly being replaced by the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS). Both of these data sources rely on state, county, and city law enforcement agencies across the United States to voluntarily participate in the reporting program. Can you imagine why relying on these data sources may be problematic for estimating prevalence rates of violent victimizations? If victimizations are never reported to police, they are not counted. This is especially problematic for victimizations between intimate partners and other offenses such as rape, in which only a fraction of incidents are ever reported to police.

Surveys. Instead of police reports, most social scientists believe the best way to determine the magnitude of violent victimization is through random sample surveys. While we will discuss survey methodology in greater detail in Chapter 7, this basically means randomly selecting individuals in the population of interest and asking them about their victimization experiences. The only ongoing annual survey to do this is the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), which is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS). Among other questions, the NCVS asks questions such as "Has anyone attacked or threatened you with a weapon (for instance, a gun or knife) or by something thrown (such as a rock or bottle)? Include any grabbing, punching, or choking." Estimates indicate that youth ages 12 to 24 have the highest rates of violent victimization. Despite the recent increases observed in homicide rates for this age group in some locations, their victimization trends have generally declined since the peak of the early 1990s mentioned earlier.

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) is another large research survey that estimates the magnitude of youth violence (along with other risk-taking behavior such as taking drugs and smoking) and has been conducted every two years in the United States since 1990. To measure the extent of youth violence, students are asked questions such as "During the past 12 months, how many times were you in a physical fight?" and "During the past 12 months, how many times were you in a physical fight in which you were injured and had to be seen by a doctor or nurse?"

Of course, another way to measure violence would be to ask respondents about their offending behaviors. Some surveys do this, including the National Youth Survey (NYS) and the Rochester Youth Development Study (RYDS). The RYDS sample consists of 1,000 students who were in the seventh and eighth grades in the Rochester, New York, public schools during the spring semester of the 1988 school year. This project has interviewed the original respondents at 12 different times, including the last interview that took place in 1997, when respondents were in their early twenties (Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, & Bushway, 2008). As you can imagine, respondents are typically more reluctant to reveal offending behavior compared with their victimization experiences. However, these surveys have proved to be very useful in examining the factors related to violent offending and other delinquency. We should also point out that although this discussion has been specific to violence, the measures we have discussed in this section, along with their strengths and weaknesses, apply to measuring all types of crime.
