

U.S. Department of Justice  
Bureau of Justice Statistics

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## Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report

# Violent Crime Trends

by  
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Data from the National Crime Survey (NCS) indicate that the rate at which Americans were victimized by violent crime increased during the 1970's but fell sharply in the 1980's. There were 36 violent victimizations per 1,000 residents age 12 and older in 1973, compared to 38 in 1981 and 32 in 1985.

In addition, violent crimes, particularly when committed by strangers, were no more violent in 1985 than in 1973, based on several characteristics that measure the severity of violence to the victim.

Major victimization trends include the following:

- Each year between 1973 and 1985, about 4 in every 10 violent crime victimizations by strangers involved an armed offender.
- Since 1976, the percent of violent crimes by strangers in which the offender was armed with a gun was between 13% and 14%, except for 1983 when it was 11%.
- About one-fourth of all victims of violent crimes by strangers were injured each year.
- The percentage of victims of violent crimes by strangers who were injured seriously or who required some medical care for their injuries changed little during the 1973-85 period.
- During the 1980's robbery victims who took no self-protective measures were somewhat less likely to be injured than similar robbery victims during the 1970's.
- The victimization rate for men has decreased more than that for women since 1981.

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This special report addresses recent trends in violent crime, based on 13 years of victimization data from the National Crime Survey. Violent crime in any form is unacceptable in a civilized society. This report, however, gives us some reasons for hope: Violent crimes in general are down, and the amount of violence inflicted upon victims, particularly victims of rapes, robberies, and assaults by strangers, does not appear to be increasing.

Along with other reports based on this rich data series, this report expands our knowledge of the impact of crime upon victims. It should be of use to policymakers, researchers, and others interested in reducing the risks from crime that innocent citizens face.

Steven R. Schlesinger  
Director

- The victimization rate for blacks increased from 1973 to 1981 but has fallen since then. The rate for whites showed little year-to-year change during most of the 13 years, but has fallen since 1982.
- People living in cities experienced greater decreases in violent crime rates since 1981 than did people living in suburban or rural areas, although urban areas still had the highest violent crime rates.
- While the violent crime rate rose during the 1970's for persons under age 35, persons 35 and older had rates that remained stable or fell.

### Introduction

This report examines trends in violent crime during the 1973-85 period for the violent crimes measured by the National Crime Survey--rape, robbery, and aggravated and simple assault. (See Methodology for crime definitions.) Estimates of these trends are useful indicators of where the Nation stands in the battle against crime, allowing us to place current annual victimization rates into the perspective of past experience.

This report also examines whether violent crime, particularly violent crime by strangers, has been increasing in severity in recent years. A widely held belief, often based on individual incidents of particularly cruel or vicious crimes, suggests that offenders may be more violent now than in the past.

Data from the NCS indicate that violent crime has not increased in severity over the 13-year period, 1973-85. Several measures of the level of violence inflicted upon victims were examined: offenders' use of weapons; the likelihood that victims will be injured, even those who have not resisted or provoked the offender; and the seriousness of the injuries received by victims.

Findings for the Nation as a whole, however, do not necessarily negate evidence concerning the level of violence in crime in particular places. Violent crime may have increased in severity in specific localities, while remaining unchanged at the national level.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>See also, Philip Cook, "Is Robbery Becoming More Violent? An Analysis of Robbery Murder Trends Since 1968," *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Summer 1985), pp. 480-89.

## Crime characteristics

When the characteristics of violent crimes committed by strangers are examined, it is evident that the nature of such crime changed very little between 1973 and 1985. There were few changes in the percentages of victims who suffered injury, were seriously injured or received medical treatment, or were confronted by armed offenders, including those wielding guns.

The examination of the characteristics of violent crime trends was restricted to crimes committed by strangers for two reasons. First, and most importantly, crimes by strangers are most often the type of crime the public generally has in mind when considering the question of whether crime is becoming more or less of a risk or problem.

Second, the study of recent trends in crimes by acquaintances and relatives of victims is made more difficult because our society in recent years has attempted to increase the reporting of such crimes through the use of victim assistance programs, family violence awareness campaigns, and similar programs. Perceived changes in rates of crime committed by acquaintances and relatives may actually be due, at least in part, to changes in the willingness of the public to report such crimes, both to the survey and to the police.

In fact, since 1973 violent crimes by relatives have followed a different trend than have crimes by acquaintances or strangers. The rate at which people were victimized by strangers declined between 1973 and 1980, rose in 1981, and fell between 1982 and 1985 to its lowest level in the period (figure 1).

In contrast, the victimization rate for violent crimes by acquaintances was at about the same level in 1985 as it had been 13 years earlier, after a rise in the mid-1970's followed by a decline after 1977. The rate for violent crimes by relatives was higher in 1985 than in 1973.

As a result of these differing trends, the percentage of violent crimes committed by relatives has increased since 1973. In 1973, 6% of all violent crime victimizations reported to the NCS were committed by relatives; in 1985, 9% were committed by relatives. It is not possible to determine the extent to which these differing trends are the result of changes in the nature of crime in the United States or changes in victims' willingness or ability to report the crimes to survey interviewers.

## Injury and medical care

In each of the 13 years from 1973-85, about 25% of all victims of violent crimes by strangers were injured; about 4-5% were seriously injured (table 1). On average about 6% of victims received emergency room hospital care and were released, and another 1% of victims were hospitalized at least overnight. Only in 2 years (1973 and 1977) did the percentage of victims receiving emergency room care differ significantly from the average for the entire period. In no year did the percentage of victims hospitalized differ significantly from the average for the entire period.

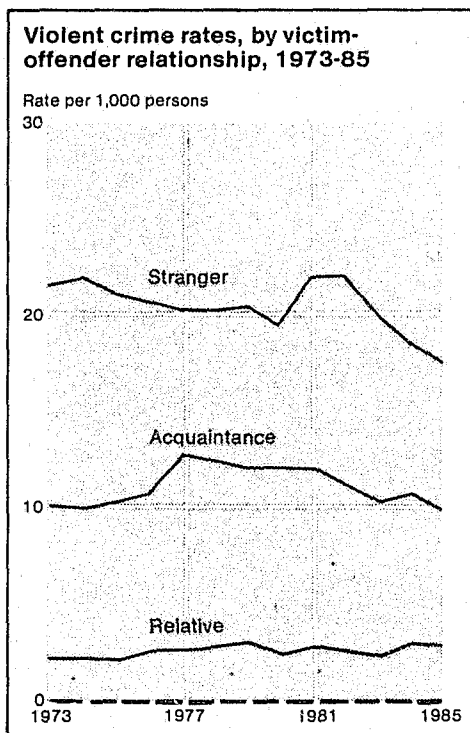


Figure 1

## Weapon use

There has been little change since 1973 in the percentage of violent crimes by strangers that involved weapons and in the percentages of crimes that involved guns and/or knives (table 2).

In 1973, 42% of all victims of violent crime by strangers said that the offender was armed during the incident. The equivalent percent for 1985 was 37%. There was little change during the period in offender possession of guns. Except for the years 1973-75, when between 15% and 16% of all violent crimes by strangers involved guns, and 1983, when 11% involved guns, the estimate has remained at between 13% and 14% each year.

Except for 1984 and 1985, when about 10% of offenders were armed with a knife, in each year since 1973 offenders have been armed with a knife in 11-13% of all violent crimes by strangers.

## Self-protection

A concern that is often expressed when violent crime is discussed is whether the amount of gratuitous violence is increasing. For the purposes of this report, gratuitous violence is defined as the use of violence by an offender in a crime despite a lack of resistance on the part of the victim.

Examining gratuitous violence is a complex problem. Offender threats and attacks and victim responses vary in sequence and intensity from victimization to victimization. Offenders may attack with or without provocation; victims may resist either from the outset or only after being attacked, or they may not resist at all. Available data, however, only focus upon the outcome of the victimization, not upon the

Table 1. Violent crime by strangers where victims were injured and required hospital care, 1973-85

Year	Percent of victims			
	Injured	Injured seriously	Received emergency room care	Hospitalized overnight
1973	26.6%	4.3%	4.5%	2.0%
1974	26.1	4.3	5.7	1.6
1975	26.9	4.8	6.0	1.9
1976	26.6	4.3	5.2	1.4
1977	25.8	4.3	4.6	1.4
1978	24.8	3.6	5.3	1.2
1979	25.2	4.3	5.5	1.5
1980	26.4	4.2	6.5	1.3
1981	26.3	4.7	6.4	1.2
1982	25.9	5.1	6.1	1.2
1983	25.3	4.2	6.0	1.1
1984	27.3	4.5	6.9	1.1
1985	24.1	3.8	6.1	0.9

Table 2. Violent crimes by strangers involving weapons, 1973-85

Year	Percent of violent crimes by strangers involving weapons		
	Any weapon	Guns	Knives
1973	42%	16%	13%
1974	44	16	13
1975	41	15	12
1976	40	13	12
1977	39	13	11
1978	40	14	12
1979	39	13	12
1980	38	14	12
1981	40	14	13
1982	39	14	13
1983	37	11	12
1984	39	14	10
1985	38	13	11

interaction between victims and offenders during the event.<sup>2</sup> Thus, examination of available data cannot determine definitively whether offenders resorted to violence despite a lack of resistance by the victim. Nevertheless, inferences can be drawn by examining the percentage of crimes in which the victim was injured but did not try to defend himself or herself or fight back.

Given this definition it appears that injuries due to gratuitous violence in crimes by strangers have decreased somewhat since the mid-1970's. Between 1973 and 1977 about 26-28% of the victims of violent crimes by strangers who reported to the survey that they did not defend themselves were injured (table 3). In most years since 1977 about 22% of victims who did not defend themselves were injured.

A better indication of gratuitous violence can be seen in relation to robbery. Presumably, the offender in this crime is not necessarily trying to injure the victim but is using force to coerce the victim's cooperation in giving up property. Gratuitous violence in robbery would exist in those cases in which the victim cooperated; that is, he or she did not resist or fight back but nonetheless was injured.

<sup>2</sup>Questions about crime sequence have recently been added to the NCS instrument and will enable future analyses to provide a better examination of problems such as this.

Table 3. Violent crimes by strangers where victims took no self-protective measures and were injured, 1973-85

Year	Percent of victims of:	
	Violent crime	Robbery
1973	26%	30%
1974	27	29
1975	26	27
1976	25	26
1977	28	30
1978	23	26
1979	22	23
1980	26	27
1981	20	16
1982	22	19
1983	18	16
1984	24	26
1985	22	19

There appears to be somewhat less injury in robberies in which the victim took no self-protective measures in the 1980's than in the 1970's. The percentage injured in robberies, however, fluctuated more than did the equivalent estimates for all violent crimes by strangers. Until 1978, between 26% and 30% of robbery victims who took no self-protective measures were injured. Beginning in 1979, with the exception of 1980 and 1984 when the percentage injured was as high as in the 1970's, between 15% and 22% of victims who did not resort to self-protective measures were injured.

## Victimization rates

Between 1973 and 1981 the violent crime rate in the United States gradually increased from 36 victimizations per 1,000 persons age 12 and older to 39 per 1,000 (table 4 and figure 2). In the 4 years that followed, however, the violent crime rate decreased sharply, so that the 1985 rate of 32 victimizations per 1,000 persons age 12 and older was the lowest in the 13 years for which the measure has existed.

Most of the increase in the violent crime rate between 1973 and 1977 was the result of an increase in the rate for simple assault, the least serious type of violent crime measured by the survey. However, between 1978 and 1981, while the rate for simple assault stopped rising, the robbery rate began to increase, resulting in a peaking of the violent crime rate in 1981.

In contrast, the decreases in the violent crime rate since 1981 resulted from decreases in the rates for robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault. Only rape, the least frequent

Violent crime rates, 1973-85

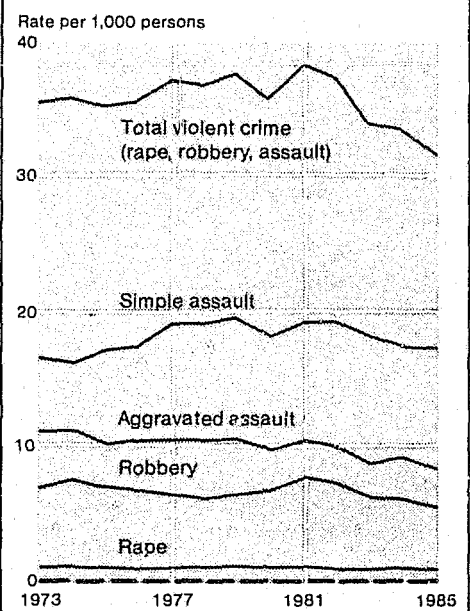


Figure 2

Table 4. Victimization rates for crimes of violence, 1973-85

Type of crime	Victimization rates per 1,000 persons age 12 and older													
	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	
Crime of violence	35.5	35.8	35.3	35.6	37.1	36.9	37.6	35.8	38.5	37.5	34.0	33.6	31.8	
Rape	1.0	1.0	0.9	0.9	1.0	1.1	1.1	1.0	1.0	0.8	0.8	1.0	0.8	
Robbery	7.0	7.5	7.0	6.8	6.4	6.2	6.5	6.8	7.7	7.3	6.2	6.0	5.4	
Assault	27.5	27.3	27.4	28.0	29.8	29.6	30.1	28.1	29.8	28.3	27.0	26.7	25.7	
Aggravated	11.0	11.1	10.2	10.5	10.6	10.5	10.6	9.8	10.4	9.9	8.7	9.2	8.3	
Simple	16.5	16.2	17.2	17.5	19.2	19.1	19.5	18.3	19.4	19.4	18.3	17.5	17.4	

Note: Detail may not add to totals shown because of rounding. Rates in this table differ from rates in annual publications because of inclusion of series incidents; see Methodology.

type of violent crime measured by the NCS, did not change significantly during the 13-year period.

Simple assault, the least serious type of violent crime measured by the NCS, underwent the most year-to-year fluctuation during the 13-year period. With the exception of a marginal decline from 1979 to 1980, the rate for simple assault rose between 1973 and 1982. Since 1982 the rate has declined, and in 1985 it was at a level similar to what it had been at the beginning of the period.

While simple assault rates rose for much of the period, the rates for aggravated assault exhibited a primarily declining trend. The rate in 1985 was well below that in 1973.

Robbery rates showed three distinct short-term trends during the period. Between 1974 and 1978 the rate fell. It rose from 1979 to 1981, after which it again declined until 1985 when it reached its lowest level of the 13-year period.

#### Victim characteristics

Although the Nation as a whole experienced a gradual rise and more rapid decline in violent crime between 1973 and 1985, the various groups that make up American society experienced very different violent crime trends during this period.

#### Sex

The victimization rates for violent crimes for men and women showed very different trends between 1973 and 1985 (figure 3). The rate for men showed no clear trend for most of the period until it declined from 1981 to 1985. On the other hand, the rate for women underwent a slow increase between 1973 and 1979, declined in 1980, and peaked in 1981-82. Since 1982 the rate has fallen, and by 1985 it was almost identical to the violent crime rate in 1973.

#### Race

The overall increase in the Nation's violent crime rate between 1980 and 1981 was primarily the result of the substantial increase in the black victimization rate (figure 4).

While the rate for blacks peaked in 1981, by 1985 it had fallen to a level not substantially different from the rate in 1973. The violent crime victimization rate for whites showed much less year-to-year fluctuation during the period than did the rate for blacks. The violent victimization rate for whites increased marginally between 1973 and 1982 but fell between 1982 and 1985 to a lower level than in 1973.

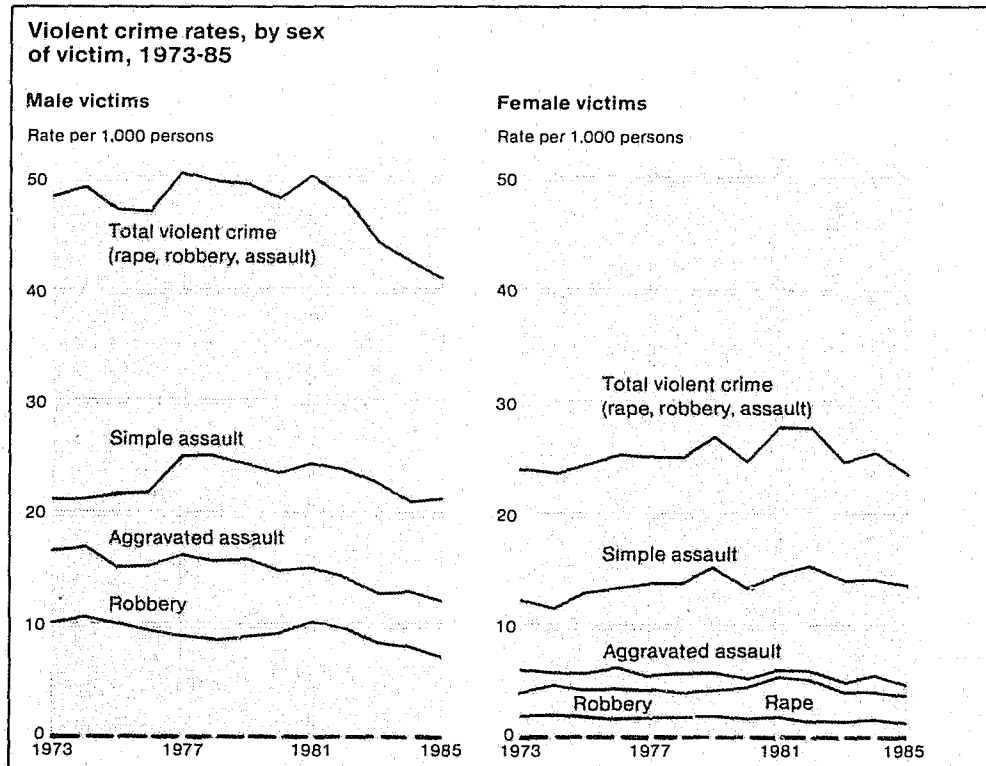


Figure 3

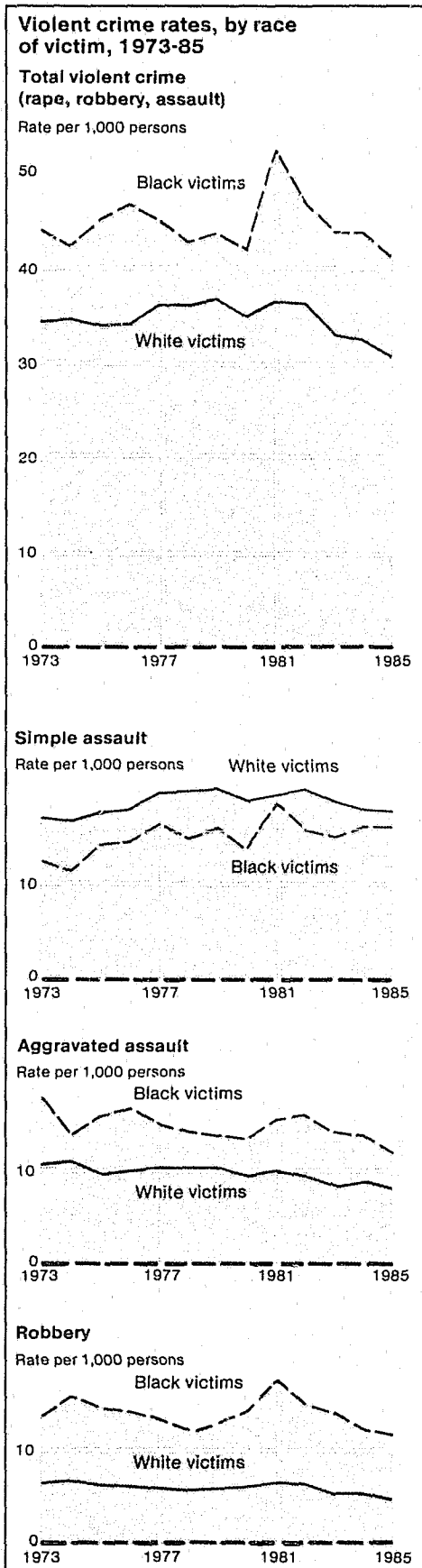


Figure 4

The victimization rates for the various types of crime for both blacks and whites showed a great deal of year-to-year change. However, if the 13-year period is viewed in its entirety, whites had lower aggravated assault and robbery rates in 1985 than they did in 1973; blacks had lower aggravated assault rates but marginally higher simple assault rates in 1985 than in 1973.

## Age

The violent crime victimization rates for younger people were higher and underwent greater year-to-year change than did such rates for older people (figure 5). The rate for persons age 12-15 fluctuated greatly from year to year but had no distinct trend over the period. The rate for 16-19-year-olds increased from 65 per 1,000 in 1973 to 76 per 1,000 in 1982, but ended the period at 71 per 1,000 in 1985.

The rate for 20-24-year-olds exhibited both steep increases and decreases during the period, peaking in 1979 but finishing at a level not significantly different than in 1973. Persons age 25-34 had a violent crime victimization rate in 1985 that was identical to that of 1973 because the rate had risen steadily from 1973-82 and fallen thereafter. Except for the peak in 1981, the rate for persons age 35-49 was relatively unchanged throughout the entire period. The rates for persons age 50-64 and age 65 and older were characterized by gradual declines for most of the 13 years.

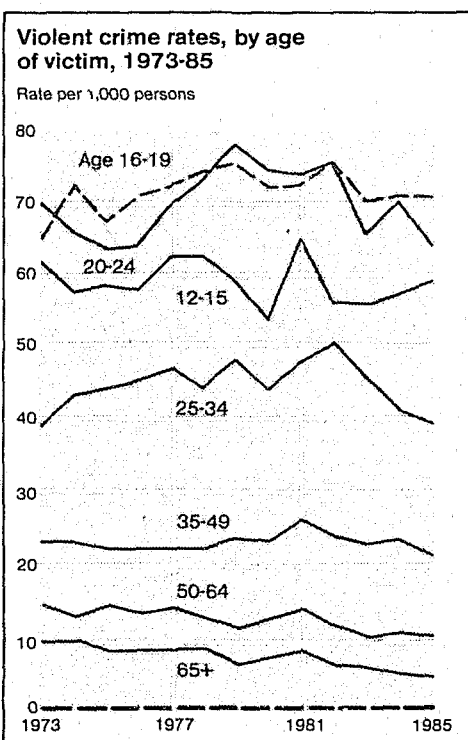


Figure 5

Most of the year-to-year fluctuation in the violent crime victimization rates for persons under age 25 was due to changes in the rates for simple assault (figure 6). By contrast, aggravated assault rates generally exhibited less year-to-year change.

## Residence

Persons living in urban and rural areas had violent crime victimization rates in 1984 that were about the same as those in 1973, while persons in urban and suburban areas had rates in 1984 that were somewhat below those of 12 years earlier (figure 7).<sup>3</sup>

Between 1973 and 1979 the violent victimization rate in suburban areas gradually rose, while that for urban areas did not change significantly. In the 2 years after 1979, the rate for urban areas dipped somewhat and then rose; however, since 1981 it has declined steeply. The rate for suburban areas has declined steadily since 1979. Rural areas' violent crime rate has run counter to the experience of urban and suburban areas, declining early in the period and increasing since then until 1982. Since 1982 the violent crime rate for rural areas has declined.

While blacks living in cities had a different violent crime trend than blacks living in suburban and rural areas for most of the period, blacks in urban and rural areas shared the sharp increase in violent victimization rates between 1980 and 1981. Declines since 1981 resulted in black urban dwellers having rates in 1984 about the same as existed 12 years earlier.

Blacks in suburban areas had, for the most part, a declining violent crime trend during the period, although the apparent difference between 1973 and 1984 victimization rates was not statistically significant. Rural blacks, despite much year-to-year fluctuation, had in 1984 a violent victimization rate not significantly different from that of 1973.

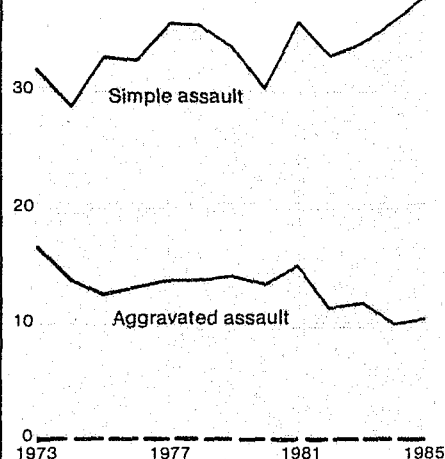
White urban dwellers experienced the same sharp increase in violent crime rates felt by urban and rural blacks in 1980-81, while white suburban and rural residents experienced no change in crime rates at that time. In 1984 whites in all residential locations had violent victimization rates about the same as those of 12 years earlier.

<sup>3</sup>Estimates for 1985 were not included in this analysis because they are not comparable to those of previous years. Geographic codes for 1985 estimates are based on 1980 census definitions, while previous years are based on 1970 census definitions. Some areas that were considered rural in 1980 were coded suburban in 1980, and some 1970 suburban areas became urban in 1980.

## Assault rates, by selected ages of victims, 1973-85

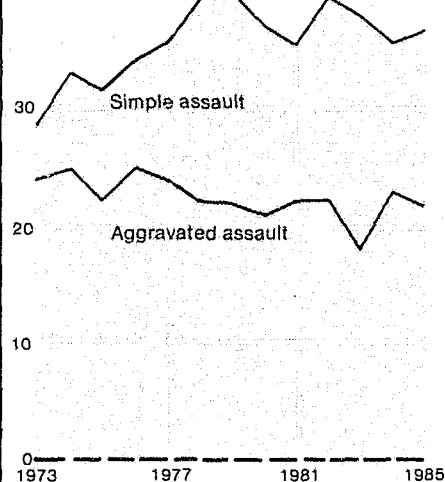
### Age 12-15

Rate per 1,000 persons



### Age 16-19

Rate per 1,000 persons



### Age 20-24

Rate per 1,000 persons

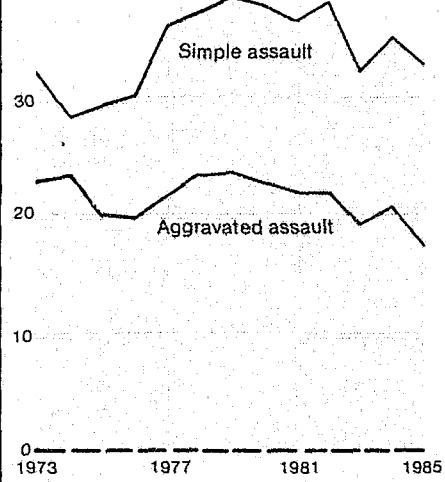
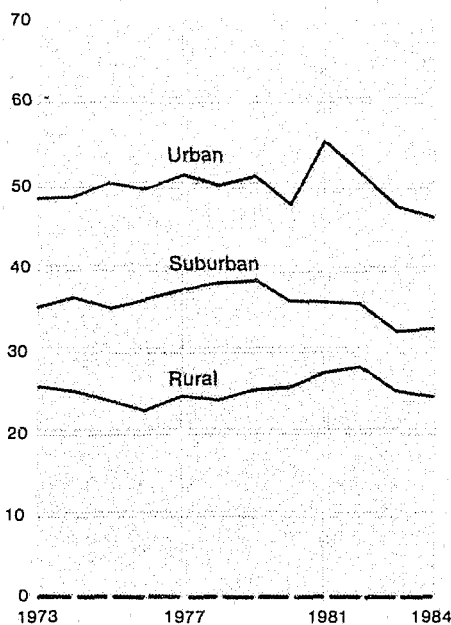


Figure 6

## Violent crime rates, by victim's race and place of residence, 1973-84

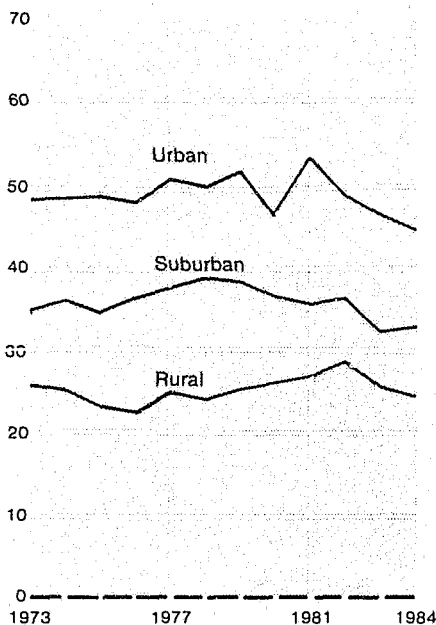
### All victims

Rate per 1,000 persons



### White victims

Rate per 1,000 persons



### Black victims

Rate per 1,000 persons

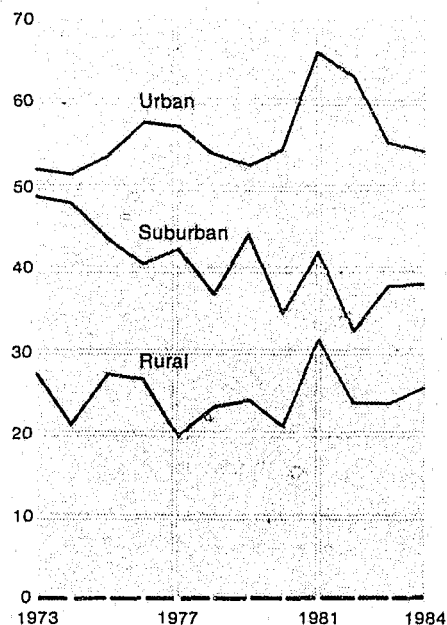


Figure 7

## Methodology

The data for this report were obtained from the NCS for the years 1973-85. An average sample of 128,000 individuals age 12 and older in 58,000 households was interviewed twice a year about crimes—including those crimes not reported to the police.

This report covers the three violent crimes measured by the NCS. These are defined as follows:

**Assault**--An unlawful physical attack, including attempted or threatened attack, with or without a weapon. Excludes rape and attempted rape as well as attacks involving theft or attempted theft, which are classified as robbery. Simple assault includes attempted or threatened attacks without a weapon or attacks that result in less than serious bodily injury. Aggravated assault includes attacks resulting in serious bodily injury as well as threats or attempts to inflict bodily injury or death with a weapon.

**Rape**--Completed or attempted unlawful sexual intercourse with a male or female through the use of force or the threat of force. Statutory rape (without force) is excluded.

**Robbery**--Completed or attempted theft, directly from a person, of property or cash by force or threat of force, with or without a weapon.

Series crimes (those representing three or more similar incidents about which the victim could not provide details on separate events) were included in the counts as one incident, each based on details of the most recent incident. Because series incidents are excluded from estimates in annual reports, rates provided in this report will be slightly higher than those in annual NCS publications. On average, series incidents (counted as one incident per series) represent about 8% of all violent crimes per year.

All comparisons presented in this report are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level or above, except when the phrases "some evidence" or "marginally" are used. Such comparisons are statistically significant at or above the 90% confidence level.

Bureau of Justice Statistics special reports are written principally by BJS staff. This report was written by Michael R. Rand. Catherine Whitaker provided statistical assistance. The report was edited by Frank D. Balog. Report production was administered by Marilyn Marbrook, publications unit chief, assisted by Jeanne Harris, Tina Dorsey, Sara E. Smith, and Arlene F. James.

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Jail inmates 1985, NCJ-105586, 7/87  
The 1983 jail census (BJS bulletin), NCJ-95536, 11/84  
Census of jails, 1978: Data for individual jails, vols. I-IV, Northeast, North Central, South, West, NCJ-72279-72282, 12/81  
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