

Perceptions of Crime and Victimization in North Carolina 1997:

A Baseline Analysis

Richard A. Hayes, Michael L. Vasu, and Matt Zingraff

The 1997 North Carolina Citizen's Perceptions of Crime and Victimization Survey was funded under a grant from the Governor's Crime Commission as a tool to investigate trends in attitudes about crime and levels of victimization within the state. Specifically, the objective was to determine citizen's perceptions of crime in their communities. As an instrument for policy makers, this type of data analysis provides a "big picture" utilizing citizen's perceptions as a measurement for comparison with traditional incident based data. The survey has been designed as a replicable tool that will be administered periodically to provide trend analysis. Information on crime incidents, proactive crime prevention, school children's victimization, sexual assault, domestic violence, geographic and demographic data are gathered along with questions designed to measure citizen's attitudes about criminal justice related issues. While the majority of the survey has no previous data for comparison, some of the attitudinal questions are derived from either a 1992 study or from a 1986 survey, allowing for some quasi comparisons. Therefore, the baseline analysis presented here consist mostly of frequency data, however, analysis of prior historical data and comparisons with Uniform Crime Report data are presented on one variable to provide an in depth description of how perceptual trends compare to standard crime data.

INTRODUCTION

Typical approaches to researching crime trends examine factual incident based data. With weak crime victim representation in random surveys, the sample size and expense required to produce a meaningful crime victims survey for any single state tends to be prohibitive. Thus, researchers depend on the National Crime Victimization Surveys (NCVS) for extracted state data, which may represent exceptionally small sample pools. However, victimization might play an important role in a respondent's perceptions of crime. Therefore, a measurement of crime victimization, utilized in covariance analyses of attitude, generates much utility for the collection of such data when surveying for perceptions of crime. Comparisons of actual crime trends to the attitudes of citizens also controlling for victimization and demographic features could provide policy and decision makers with a fuller understanding of crime

issues. This research attempts to lay the groundwork, setting baseline measurements for future comparative analysis of survey replication.

METHODOLOGY

Sample analysis of crime victimization, based on the data from the National Crime Victimization Surveys (NCVS), indicated that the percentage of the population age 12 and over that would have been a crime victim over the previous 12 months would be roughly 25 percent. Confidence intervals and sampling error, as a percent of baseline error, for this study were determined by Donald Tomaskovic-Devey of North Carolina State University. His analysis indicates that victimization is a rare event and as such should have little variance, thus estimates of standard errors for predicting victimization are low. He based his estimates of assumed frequency on results of "North Carolina Violent Crime Project 1992" which surveyed over 9,000 state residents. Since victim and non-victim attitudes provide for comparative measurement, it was determined that a sample of at least 3,000 would be necessary to produce a large enough pool of victims for analysis.

The Center for Urban Affairs and Community Services at North Carolina State University was contracted to conduct a telephone survey of randomly selected adult residents (over 18 years of age) of North Carolina. Over 6,500 calls were placed in the months of August and September 1997 producing 3,007 completed surveys. The phone numbers were drawn evenly from the three telephone area codes covering the state.

The survey was designed to capture three types of information; 1) crime victimization data, 2) citizen's perceptions of crime, and 3) demographic data including zip code for geographic analysis.

ONE-WAY FREQUENCIES

A sample size of 3,007 ($n=3,007$) was obtained. There were 1,473 male respondents ($n_m=1,473$) representing 49 percent of responses. Female response was 1,534 ($n_f=1,534$) consisting of 51 percent of responses. Additional response frequencies are offered under the categories of Victimization, Perceptions, and Demographic information.

Victimization

Remembering that victimization events were predicted to be rather low, the following table depicts victimization of respondents along with their predicted percentage levels as estimated for a sample of 3,000. The table is broken down into type of crime, whether the crime type is considered violent or nonviolent as part of the crime index, the frequency and percent of respondents that were victimized, and the predicted victimization values.

TABLE 1: Crime Victimization

Type of Crime	Frequency	Percent	Predicted	Violent or Nonviolent
Theft	26	.9	.8	Nonviolent
Robbery	19	.6	NA	Violent
Weapon Assault	32	1.1	1.4	Violent
Assault	43	1.4	2.1	Violent
Verbal Threats	98	3.3	3.1	Violent
Break-in (burglary)	303	10.1	12.4	Nonviolent
Rape	4	.3	1	Violent

As the data reveals, 17.7 percent of the sample reported incidents of crime victimization, 62 percent of the reported incidents were nonviolent crimes. This in comparison with the 73.9 percent nonviolent victimization reported in the 1993 NCVS. However, this comparison must be used carefully due to the many methodological differences between the NCVS which queries age 12 and above and asks a multitude of specific crime victimization questions and the rather limited victimization portion of this survey. Also, realized percentages of criminal victimization types are within expected ranges for verbal threats, theft, and assaults with weapons, however, rape, burglary, and simple assaults fell well short of the confidence intervals predicted for each percentage. This illustrates the difficulty in relying on small sample victimization surveys for trend data.

Attitudinal Analysis

Questions 20 through 37 attempt to measure the attitudes or perceptions of citizens about crime and criminal justice issues. Perhaps the most useful of information in measuring trends in this survey format due to the value of comparing crime trends from Uniform Crime Report data and public perceptions of trends. Questions 20 and 21 attempt to gauge perceptions of violent crime trends. These two questions were extracted from the “North Carolina Violent Crime Project 1992” a statewide survey of 9,000 residents and will serve for more in depth analysis in the trend analysis portion of this paper. However, the current issue is a discussion of responses.

Question 20 asked the respondent to give his/her perception of the trend movement of violent crime in their community over the previous three years. Response options were 1) increased, 2) remained the same, and 3) decreased. Response rates were: 1,613 or 53.6 percent felt violent crime had increased, while 1,117 or 37.1 believed it had remained the same, and 168

(5.6%) perceived violent crime was on the decrease in their community. There were 109 respondents (3.6%) that either refused to respond or did not have an opinion.

Question 21 probes the respondents to predict the trend movement of violent crime in their community. Again, the response categories were; 1) increase, 2) remain the same, or 3) decrease. There were 1,859 respondents that believe violent crime will increase over the next three years, accounting for 61.8 percent of responses. Those who felt that violent crime would remain the same made up 25.1 percent or 756 respondents. Lastly, 230 respondents (7.6%) thought violent crime is likely to decrease over the next three years. There were 162 respondents (5.4%) that either refused to respond or did not have an opinion.

Question 22 asked, “do you think schools in your community are generally: 1) safe places, 2) no more or less safe than other public places, or 3) unsafe places. The intent of this question was to gauge public attitudes concerning the safety of school environments. The results are that 42.7 percent of the respondents (n=1,284) felt that schools were generally safe places, 37.8 percent (n=1,137) perceived schools as no more or less safe than other public areas, and 14.1 percent (n=423) felt that schools were generally unsafe places. There were 162 respondents (5.4%) that gave no opinion on this question.

The next three questions attempt to determine respondents knowledge about victims of domestic violence, community policing programs, and if their children have been involved in violent incidents while at school. Table 2 illustrates citizen’s knowledge of these events.

TABLE 2: Citizen’s Knowledge of Events

Question	Frequency		Percentage	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Do you know of anyone that has been a victim of domestic violence within the past year?	710	2,289	23.6	76.1
Does your police department or sheriff’s office operate a community policing project in your community?	1,616	898	56.2	29.9
If you have school-age children (ages 6-18), living with you in your household, have they been a victim of school violence?	148	1,689	4.9	56.2

The following ten questions concern the safety of one’s person and property and were taken from a 1986 study entitled *Crime In North Carolina* Which was conducted by members of the sociology department at North Carolina State University. This would provide for comparative analysis if the original data can be converted into a useable format. The remaining questions concern perceptions of law enforcement, the court system and aspects of the criminal justice system in the state. Because categorical scales provide a means for comparing ordinal categorical distributions, these 10 questions were developed in a Likert-

type scale format with the resulting degree of agreement and disagreement presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3: Perceptions of Safety and the Criminal Justice System

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Opinion
When I am away from home, I worry about the safety of my property.	9.3%	40.5%	43%	4.3%	2.9%
I worry a great deal about my personal safety from crime or criminals.	7.8	36.6	48.9	3	3.5
In my own home, I'm not safe from people who want to take what I have.	3.1	21.1	64	9.4	2.1
I feel safe going anywhere in my community or neighborhood in the daytime.	24.4	64	9.8	.9	.8
I feel safe going anywhere in my community or neighborhood after dark.	5.3	44.1	38.5	9.4	2.2
Crime is more serious than the TV and newspapers say.	9.1	47.6	33	1.6	5.4
Law enforcement officers treat all suspects the same.	.8	26.7	46.2	13.9	6.7
Courts are concerned with the defendant's constitutional rights.	11.6	54.7	17.6	3.2	7.1
Juries are biased and unfair when it comes to deciding cases.	2.8	27	50.5	4.1	9.9
The criminal justice system in North Carolina is effective in controlling crime.	.5	34.7	41.6	10.7	8.5

The remaining two attitudinal questions are safety or security related. These questions are designed to determine if citizens are involved in any traditional proactive measures to reduce their risk of victimization. When asked if they have taken any special measures to protect home, automobile, or other possessions by purchasing alarm systems, dead-bolt locks, motion activated lights or other precautions, 69.5 percent (2,091) indicated they had. The second question asked if the respondent was an active participant in a neighborhood watch or other program designed to prevent or reduce crime in their community. There were 35.7 percent of respondents (1,075) that indicated they were active in such programs while 64 percent (1,923) did not involve themselves in such activities.

Demographics

Responses from all 100 counties in North Carolina were gathered. The demographic breakdown of this survey was representative of the general population in North Carolina. Respondents were predominately employed (68.4%), working in a city (46.6%), married (60.5%), with 39.2 percent having dependant children living at home. Gender breakdown was almost even with 49 percent male and 51 percent female respondents. Racial breakdown was 78.1 percent white, 17.6 percent African American, and the remainder falling into 6 other categories. Educational attainment was 15.9 percent with less than high school equivalency and 28.7 percent completing four or more years of college. Income was reported as .8 percent earning less than \$5,000 per year, 17.8 percent earning between \$5,000 and \$20,000, 33.7 percent had household incomes of between \$20,000 and \$40,000, and the remaining 33.8 percent earned greater than \$40,000 per year.

Analysis of Data Association

Question 20, which was also on the 1992 survey, asked respondents to express their perceptions of trends in violent crime over the previous three year period. In 1992 slightly more than 64 percent of the respondents believed that violent crime had risen over the

preceding 3 years (1989-1992).

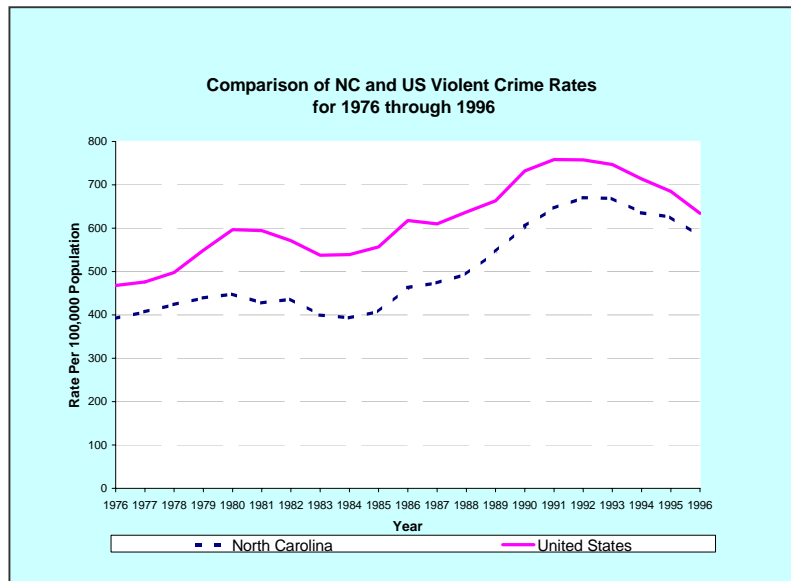
By 1997, this had reduced to just

over 53 percent perceiving an increase in violent crime over the previous 3 years (1993-

1996). This chart plots the rate of violent crime in both the United States and in North Carolina as provided in the national and state Uniform Crime Reports. As can be seen,

in 1992 there had been a progressive growth in violent crimes, not only over the

previous three years, but for at least seven years. However, by 1997 as violent crimes had realized a downward trend for four consecutive years, greater than 50 percent of citizens continued to feel violent crime was increasing. This information provides fuel for social scientific hypothesizing, but for policy makers utilizing the available victimization data from this survey might help provide insight into reasons why citizen's perceptions are not mirroring incident data.



Comparing perceptions of victims to determine if perception might be dependent on victimization was achieved by creating a composite variable entitled *VICTIM*. This variable is the result of a Boolean extraction of respondents that responded “yes” to any of the victimization questions (questions 1, 3, 5, 8, 11, 14, or 17) else the remainder were classified as non-victims. The results of these comparisons provided insignificant differences between victims and non-crime victims on their perceptions of violent crime trends. The low number of victimization events did not allow for any reliable analysis.

Yet another avenue for comparisons is from demographic variables. If one’s perception of violent crime trends is dependent on specific demographic variables, then policy makers could determine which segments of the population would benefit most from information campaigns. While this is generally summarized well in ‘fear of crime’ surveys, understanding perceptions of crime trends is often of less concern than describing fear of victimization. Question 20 is neutral on fear of being victimized seeking, rather, to focus on individual’s perceptions based on their knowledge. Table 4 presents the 2-by-2 distributions for question 20 when crossed with selected demographic variables.

TABLE 4: Perception of Violent Crime by Demographic Variables

Question	Response Category	Violent crime has ___ over the past 3 years.			x^2	df	P<
		Decreased	Increased	Stayed Same			
Gender of Respondent	Male	6.9	52.7	40.4	12.421	2	.002
	Female	4.7	58.5	36.8			
Race of Respondent	Black	10	48.4	41.6	28.011	4	.000
	White	4.9	57.7	37.4			
	Other	4.6	43.7	51.7			
Are you employed full-time?	Yes	6.4	53.1	40.5	17.824	4	.015
	No	4.5	61.3	34.1			
Level of Education	< H S	7.2	55.9	36.9	12.406	4	.015
	HS < Col.	9.6	47.5	42.9			
	Col. Grad	11.9	45.3	42.8			
Household Income	< \$20,000	8.5	55.7	35.8	15.797	4	.003
	\$20 – 40,000	10.7	45.9	43.4			
	> \$40,000	11	38.5	50.5			

Association of the demographic variables to the perception of 3-year violent crime trends is tested via the chi square methodology. As the probability scores (P) presented in the table illustrate, each of the independent demographic variables has an effectual relationship with the dependent variable question 20. While other of the demographic variables along with victimization and attitudinal questions could be tested in the same manner and a predictive model for question 20 could be developed, this exceeds the scope of this research.

As a final consideration of demographic comparison, gender and race were collapsed as independent variables to determine if they affect the dependent variable question 20. These results also provide fuel for several interesting questions. Racial categories are restricted to African American (Black) and Caucasian (White) because all other racial groups combined represented less than 3.5 percent of the sample population. The results are provided in Table 5.

TABLE 5: Perception of Violent Crime by Race and Gender

Race	Gender	Violent crime has ___ over the past 3 years.			χ^2	df	P<
		Decreased	Increased	Stayed the Same			
Black	Male	10.3	45.7	44	1.296	2	.523
Black	Female	3.6	50.7	39.6			
White	Male	6.2	54.7	39.1	13.348	2	.001
White	Female	9.7	60.6	35.8			

When gender is the control variable, note the differences between the genders and races for perceptions of increased violent crime. African Americans are far less likely than Caucasians to perceive an increase in violent crime; however, the association of race and question 20 when gender is used as a control is far weaker for blacks than whites. While the difference between black males and females demonstrates a weaker relationship than the difference between the corresponding white gender counterparts, it is great enough to warrant additional investigation in future research projects.

SUMMARY

This initial investigation was not designed to provide grand answers to questions of crime and justice in North Carolina, but rather to lay the groundwork for future comparisons. As can be seen by the data presented, there is much information to be gained from one administration of this survey, however, the real value will be in comparative analysis of each future administration. It is hoped this survey will be replicated every two years. With each

administration, we can gain more insight into citizen's perceptions of crime and the correlation of these perceptions to incident based reporting data. For policy makers a greater understanding of how citizens perceive these issues provides for more informed decision making practices and the knowledge of where to focus public information and education efforts. ■

Design of the "1997 North Carolina Citizen's Perceptions of Crime and Victimization Survey" was a collaborative research effort of the following individuals and organizations:

Principle Investigators

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| Michael Vasu | Professor - Department of Public Administration, North Carolina State University. |
| Matt Zingraff | Professor – Department of Sociology, North Carolina State University. |
| Richard Hayes | Research Analyst – North Carolina Criminal Justice Analysis Center – NC Governor's Crime Commission. |

Collaborators

- | | |
|------------------------|---|
| Joel Rosch | Program Policy Planner - N.C. Governor's Crime Commission. |
| Donald Tomosovic-Devey | Professor – Dept. of Sociology, N.C. State University. |
| Joanne McDaniel | Research Director – Center for the Prevention of School Violence. |
| Tony Queen | N.C. Division of Crime Prevention. |
| Mike Bolling | Professor – Injury Prevention Research Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. |
| Mike Helms | Research Associate – N.C. Criminal Justice Academy |

The "1997 North Carolina Citizen's Perceptions of Crime and Victimization" questionnaire, code-book and dataset will be made available on the North Carolina Governor's Crime Commission WEB page after April 1, 1998. This paper and additional papers related to this data will also be made available. Our WEB address is WWW.GCC.STATE.NC.US