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U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
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Bureau of Justice Statistics
Special Report

# Handgun Crime Victims

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July 1990

Each year an estimated 639,000 residents of the United States face an offender armed with a handgun. This Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report describes key findings from an analysis of handgun crimes reported in the National Crime Survey for 1979-87. It describes the victims of hand-gun crime, how the handgun was used during the crime, and the nature and extent of handgun crime injury. It also provides information on handgun offenders, the location of handgun crimes, and whether the crime was reported to the police.

BJS thanks the victims of handgun crimes for describing their experiences to survey interviewers and thereby providing the data necessary for reports such as this one.

Joseph M. Bessette
Acting Director

Offenders armed with handguns committed an average of 639,000 violent crimes each year between 1979 and 1987. These criminals used handguns to kill an average of 9,200 people each year and to wound 15,000; they injured approximately 76,000 victims a year in ways other than by shooting them.

In 87% of the nonfatal crimes involving handguns, the offender did not fire the weapon but used it to intimidate — according to victims' reports gathered through the National Crime Survey (NCS), an ongoing survey conducted in a nationwide sample of households. Victims reported that the offender fired the gun but missed in 10% of the crimes involving handguns and wounded the victim in 2%.

Other major findings on the role of handguns in crime include the following:

• Young black urban males were the group most vulnerable to victimization by an offender armed with a handgun. Urban black men age 16 to 24 were victimized at a rate more than twice as high as the rate of urban white men and of urban black women of similar ages.

• Handgun crimes represented 10% of all violent crimes and 27% of all violent crimes by armed offenders that occurred during the period 1979-87. Offenders with handguns committed about 7% of all rapes, 18% of all robberies, and 8% of all assaults (22% of aggravated assaults) during this period. Approximately 4 in every 10 victims of murder or nonnegligent manslaughter were killed by offenders with handguns.

• For violent crimes committed with a handgun, white offenders were responsible for 43% of the rapes, 22% of the robberies, and 58% of the aggravated assaults; blacks were responsible for 51% of the rapes, 67% of the robberies, and 35% of the assaults.

• A higher percentage of crimes by strangers involved handguns than did crimes by acquaintances or relatives of victims. While 12% of all violent crimes by strangers were committed by offenders wielding handguns, 5% of violent crimes by acquaintances and 6% of violent crimes by relatives were committed with a handgun.

**Handguns and crime, 1979-87**

| | Average annual number |
|---|---|
| Handgun crimes | 638,900 |
| Murder | 9,200 |
| Rape | 12,100 |
| Robbery | 210,000 |
| Assault | 407,600 |
| Nonfatal handgun crimes | 629,700 |
| Victims injured | 91,500 |
| Shot | 15,000 |
| Other injury | 76,400 |

Note: Detail may not add to total because of rounding.

• Of victims injured but not killed by gunshot injuries, 28% were treated in emergency rooms and released, and 68% were hospitalized overnight or longer. About 21% of all victims of nonfatal gunshots were hospitalized for 3 weeks or more.

• Victims of handgun robberies were more apt than other robbery victims to lose property in the robbery. Eighty percent of handgun robberies were completed versus 61% of robberies not involving handguns.

• Victims of handgun crimes were much less likely to take self-protective measures such as fighting back, running away, or trying to dissuade the offender than were victims of other violent crimes. Fifty-five percent of handgun crime victims took self-protective measures, compared to 76% of victims of violent crimes with no handgun present.

## Crimes committed with handguns

Between 1979 and 1987 an average of 639,000 violent crimes per year were committed by offenders wielding a handgun (table 1). Of these, almost two-thirds were assaults and a third were robberies. Rape accounted for about 2% of handgun crimes, and murder, about 1%.

Murder and nonnegligent manslaughter by persons with a handgun are discussed separately from the other crimes committed by offenders armed with handguns. (See the discussion on page 7.) The NCS relies on interviews with victims and cannot report on murder and manslaughter.

Victims of robbery were more likely than victims of rape or assault to be confronted by an offender armed with a handgun. Eighteen percent of all robberies were committed by such offenders, compared to 8% of all assaults and 7% of all rapes.

The NCS counts a handgun present in a crime when a victim reports that the offender carried a handgun, shot it, or threatened with words or gestures to use it. Any assault in which a handgun is displayed is, by NCS definition, an aggravated assault. Any injury caused by a gunshot is, by NCS definition, a serious injury.

**Table 1. Average annual number and percent of handgun crimes, 1979-87**

| Violent crime | Average annual number of violent crimes | Crimes committed with handguns: Average annual number | Percent of violent crime | Percent of handgun crime |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total | 6,668,000 | 638,900 | 9.6% | 100.0% |
| Murder* | 20,600 | 9,200 | 44.4 | 1.4 |
| Rape | 168,200 | 12,100 | 7.2 | 1.9 |
| Robbery | 1,183,300 | 210,000 | 17.7 | 32.9 |
| Assault** | 5,295,900 | 407,600 | 7.7 | 63.8 |

Note: Detail may not add to total because of rounding.
*Murder includes nonnegligent manslaughter.
**Assault total includes both aggravated and simple assault. By definition offenders in simple assaults are unarmed.

## Victim characteristics

Victims of crimes in which a handgun was present resembled victims of all violent crimes. Members of the groups most vulnerable to violent crime — males, blacks, persons age 16 to 34, and urban residents — were also the most vulnerable to handgun crime (table 2). When susceptibility to all violent crime and susceptibility to handgun crime are compared, males and blacks were even more liable than females and whites to be victims of handgun crimes.

### *Sex*

Excluding victims of murder, nonnegligent manslaughter, or simple assault, males were twice as likely as females to be a victim of a violent crime, while they were 2.4 times more likely than females to face a criminal who had a handgun (table 3). On average each year, for every 1,000 males age 12 or older, there were 4.8 criminal victimizations involving a handgun; for every 1,000 females, 2.0 such victimizations.

### *Race*

Blacks were three times as likely as whites to be victims of a violent crime committed with a handgun. For every 1,000 blacks age 12 or older, there were an average 8.1 victimizations involving handguns each year; for every 1,000 whites, 2.7 victimizations; and for every 1,000 persons of other races, 3.0.

**Table 2. Average annual rate of handgun crime, by victim characteristics, 1979-87**

| Victim characteristics | Average annual rate of crimes committed with handguns per 1,000 persons *: Total | Rape | Robbery | Assault** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total | 3.3 | .1 | 1.1 | 2.2 |
| Sex | | | | |
| Male | 4.8 | -- | 1.7 | 3.1 |
| Female | 2.0 | .1 | .6 | 1.3 |
| Race | | | | |
| White | 2.7 | .1 | .8 | 1.9 |
| Black | 8.1 | .2 | 3.6 | 4.3 |
| Other | 3.0 | -- | 1.3 | 1.7 |
| Ethnicity | | | | |
| Hispanic | 5.3 | .1 | 1.9 | 3.3 |
| Non-Hispanic | 3.1 | .1 | 1.0 | 2.0 |
| Age | | | | |
| 12-15 years | 1.8 | .1 | .6 | 1.1 |
| 16-19 | 6.8 | .2 | 1.7 | 4.8 |
| 20-24 | 7.6 | .1 | 2.1 | 5.4 |
| 25-34 | 4.6 | .1 | 1.6 | 2.9 |
| 35-49 | 2.4 | -- | .9 | 1.5 |
| 50-64 | 1.6 | -- | .7 | .8 |
| 65 or older | .6 | -- | .4 | .2 |
| Place of residence | | | | |
| Central city | 5.9 | .1 | 2.4 | 3.4 |
| Suburbs | 2.7 | -- | .8 | 1.8 |
| Nonmetropolitan area | 1.7 | -- | .3 | 1.4 |

Note: Rates may not add to total because of rounding. Rates do not include persons killed by handguns during a crime.
--Less than .05 crimes per 1,000 persons or too few cases to obtain a statistically reliable estimate.
*Rate per 1,000 persons age 12 or older in each specified category of the population.
**All assaults that involve handguns are considered aggravated assaults.

**Table 3. Average annual rate of violent crime (rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) and handgun crime, by sex, race, and ethnicity, 1979-87**

| | Average annual rate of violent crime victimizations per 1,000*: All crimes** | Involving handguns | Percent involving handguns |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sex | | | |
| Male | 22.6 | 4.8 | 21.1% |
| Female | 11.5 | 2.0 | 17.4 |
| Race | | | |
| White | 15.3 | 2.7 | 17.7 |
| Black | 28.1 | 8.1 | 28.9 |
| Other | 17.8 | 3.0 | 16.6 |
| Ethnicity | | | |
| Hispanic | 22.9 | 5.3 | 22.9 |
| Non-Hispanic | 16.2 | 3.1 | 19.4 |

*Rate per 1,000 persons age 12 or older in each specified category of the population.
**Rates do not include simple assault, murder, and nonnegligent manslaughter.

Blacks were four times as likely as whites to be victimized by robbers with handguns and about twice as likely as whites to be assaulted by someone with a handgun.

Among all the violent crimes committed, offenders used handguns in a larger percentage of crimes against blacks than of those against whites. Handgun crimes made up about a fourth of all violent crimes committed against black men and about an eighth of all such crimes against black women, compared to an eleventh and a fifteenth of violent crimes committed against white men and white women, respectively.

Rates of handgun victimization for Asians, Pacific Islanders, American Indians, or Alaska Natives, grouped as "other races," were similar to the rates for whites.

*Ethnicity*

Hispanics had higher handgun crime victimization rates (5.3 crimes per 1,000) than did non-Hispanics (3.1 per 1,000). The difference between rates of handgun victimization of Hispanics and non-Hispanics was essentially the same as the difference between overall rates of victimization by violent crime for Hispanics and non-Hispanics.

*Age group*

Of all age groups, persons age 16 to 24 were the most vulnerable to handgun crime, suffering about 7 such crimes per 1,000 persons each year. Persons age 25 to 34 had the next highest vulnerability to handgun crime, with an annual average of almost 5 such crimes per 1,000. The risk of handgun victimization declined for older age groups. Persons older than age 64 had an average annual rate of less than 1 handgun crime per 1,000 persons. This pattern of higher risk for older teens and young adults and lower risk with increasing age held true across all race, sex, and place-of-residence categories.

*Place of residence*

City dwellers were the most likely, and rural Americans were the least likely, to be victimized by an offender with a handgun. For every 1,000 residents in central cities, there were annually 5.9 crimes that included handguns; for every 1,000 suburbanites, 2.7 such crimes; and for residents in nonmetropolitan areas, 1.7.

**Victim characteristics considered together**

Young black males were victimized by offenders with handguns at a rate about seven times that of the population as a whole (table 4). The rates for black males, regardless of age group, were at least two to three times those of white males of similar age, and the rates for black females were consistently higher than those for white females across all age groups. For most age groups the rates for black females were similar to those for white males.

Urban black males age 16 to 24 faced a criminal with a handgun relatively more often (32 crimes per 1,000 persons) than any other group characterized by sex, race, age, and place of residence (table 5). They were followed by urban black men age 25 to 34 and suburban black males age 16 to 19 (20 and 19 crimes per 1,000, respectively). Young white urban males and young black urban females had similar handgun crime rates (14 and 13 per 1,000, respectively).

**Table 4. Average annual rate of handgun crime, by sex, race, and age of victim, 1979-87**

| Age of victim | Average annual rate of crimes committed with handguns per 1,000 persons* | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Male victims | | Female victims | |
| | White | Black | White | Black |
| Total | 3.8 | 12.2 | 1.7 | 4.7 |
| 12-15 years | 1.5 | 6.4 | 1.0 | 2.7 |
| 16-19 | 7.2 | 24.0 | 3.4 | 8.1 |
| 20-24 | 9.7 | 22.0 | 3.4 | 8.6 |
| 25-34 | 5.2 | 15.0 | 2.3 | 6.6 |
| 35-49 | 2.7 | 7.9 | 1.3 | 3.3 |
| 50-64 | 1.6 | 5.9 | 1.0 | 2.4 |
| 65 or older | .6 | 3.7 | .3 | .8 |

*Rate per 1,000 persons age 12 or older in each specified category of the population. Rates do not include murder and nonnegligent manslaughter committed with handguns.

**Table 5. Average annual rate of handgun crime, by sex, race, age, and place of residence of victim, 1979-87**

| Place of residence and age of victim | Average annual rate of crimes committed with handguns per 1,000 persons* | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Total | | Male victims | | Female victims | |
| | White | Black | White | Black | White | Black |
| **Central city** | | | | | | |
| 12-15 years | 3.5 | 7.0 | 4.0 | 9.7 | 3.1 | 4.2 |
| 16-19 | 9.8 | 23.1 | 14.2 | 33.9 | 5.7 | 13.2 |
| 20-24 | 9.4 | 20.1 | 14.5 | 29.7 | 4.6 | 12.2 |
| 25-34 | 5.8 | 13.9 | 7.6 | 19.9 | 4.0 | 9.2 |
| 35-49 | 3.4 | 7.2 | 4.3 | 11.9 | 2.5 | 3.6 |
| 50-64 | 2.3 | 6.1 | 3.2 | 9.1 | 1.5 | 3.7 |
| 65 or older | .6 | 2.6 | .9 | 5.6 | .5 | -- |
| **Suburbs** | | | | | | |
| 12-15 years | .8 | -- | .9 | -- | .6 | -- |
| 16-19 | 5.0 | 10.6 | 6.7 | 18.8 | 3.2 | -- |
| 20-24 | 5.7 | 9.1 | 8.5 | 17.4 | 3.0 | -- |
| 25-34 | 3.6 | 6.8 | 5.3 | 11.2 | 1.8 | 2.9 |
| 35-49 | 1.7 | 4.0 | 2.5 | 4.2 | 1.0 | 3.7 |
| 50-64 | 1.3 | -- | 1.6 | -- | 1.0 | -- |
| 65 or older | .6 | -- | 1.0 | -- | .3 | -- |
| **Nonmetropolitan area** | | | | | | |
| 12-15 years | .7 | -- | .9 | -- | -- | -- |
| 16-19 | 2.6 | 4.7 | 3.3 | 8.1 | 1.9 | -- |
| 20-24 | 4.9 | 6.8 | 6.8 | 7.8 | 2.9 | -- |
| 25-34 | 2.4 | 4.5 | 3.0 | 6.2 | 1.7 | -- |
| 35-49 | 1.5 | -- | 2.1 | -- | .9 | -- |
| 50-64 | .6 | -- | .6 | -- | .6 | -- |
| 65 or older | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |

--Less than 0.5 crimes per 1,000 persons or too few cases to obtain a statistically reliable estimate.
*Rate per 1,000 persons age 12 or older in each specified category of the population. Rates do not include murder and nonnegligent manslaughter committed with handguns.

## Weapon use in violent crime

Of the 6.7 million violent crimes occurring each year, 2.3 million were committed by offenders armed with a weapon. Handgun crimes accounted for 27% of the violent crimes committed by armed offenders. The "other weapon" category, representing a third of violent crimes committed with weapons, encompasses a wide variety of objects, such as rocks, bottles, clubs, pipes, and martial arts weapons.

| Weapon type | Average annual number, 1979-87 | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Any weapon | 2,341,000 | 100% |
| Handgun | 629,700 | 27 |
| Other gun | 180,100 | 8 |
| Knife or sharp object | 625,100 | 27 |
| Other weapon | 807,600 | 35 |
| Type not known | 98,500 | 4 |

Note: Weapon types are listed in perceived order of seriousness. For crimes in which the offender(s) had more than one type of weapon, the crime is classified by the most serious weapon present. Detail may not add to total because of rounding.

## Handgun crime characteristics

Most handgun crimes were characterized by a lone offender armed only with a handgun (table 6). On average, lone offenders committed almost three-fifths of the handgun crimes in a year. Groups of five or more offenders, one or more of them having a gun, accounted for about 5% of the crimes.

In 9 of 10 handgun crimes, the gun was the only weapon the offender had.

A stranger to the victim committed the crime in 72% of handgun crimes. Acquaintances of the victims committed about 17% of the crimes that had a handgun present, and victims' relatives, about 5%. Crimes committed by strangers were more likely to involve an offender armed with a handgun than were crimes committed by people known to or related to the victim. Twelve percent of all violent crimes by strangers were committed with handguns, compared to 5% committed by acquaintances and 8% by relatives.

Victims identified the offenders' race as white or black in an equal percentage of violent crimes committed with handguns (46%). Five percent of all handgun crimes in which the victim could identify the offender's race were committed by Asian or American Indian offenders, and 3% involved offenders of mixed racial groups.

The race of offender or offenders varied according to the type of crime, as shown in the following:

| Race of offender(s) | Rape | Robbery | Assault |
|---|---|---|---|
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| White | 43 | 22 | 58 |
| Black | 51 | 67 | 35 |
| Other | -- | 6 | 4 |
| Mixed | -- | 5 | 2 |

Note: Detail may not add to 100% because of rounding. Data include only crimes in which the victim could report both race and number of offenders. Multiple offenders of different races are reported as "mixed."
--Too few cases to obtain a statistically reliable estimate.

Offenders in handgun crimes were, on average, older than other violent offenders. Victims reported that in almost 2 of every 3 handgun crimes the offender, or all offenders if there were more than one, was age 21 or older. This compares with 56% of the violent crimes not committed with handguns.

| Perceived age of offenders | Rape, robbery, and assault: Handgun crimes | Rape, robbery, and assault: No handgun present |
|---|---|---|
| Total | 100% | 100% |
| All under 12 years | -- | 1 |
| All 12-21 | 18 | 33 |
| Some 21 or older | 8 | 5 |
| All 21 or older | 65 | 56 |
| Age unknown | 9 | 6 |

--Too few cases to obtain a statistically reliable estimate.

Almost 42% of the violent crimes with a handgun present occurred on the street. Another 11% took place near a victim's home, including the sidewalk or yard. About 20% of the crimes, an average of over 127,000 every year, happened in a commercial establishment. A victim's home was the location for almost 13% of the crimes that involved a handgun.

**Table 6. Characteristics of handgun crimes, 1979-87**

| Characteristic | Crimes committed with handguns: Average annual number | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Total | 629,700 | 100.0% |
| Number of offenders | | |
| One | 368,100 | 58.5% |
| Two | 131,000 | 20.8 |
| Three or four | 79,800 | 12.7 |
| Five or more | 29,900 | 4.8 |
| Number unknown or unreported | 20,800 | 3.3 |
| Type of weapon | | |
| Handgun only | 561,800 | 89.2% |
| Handgun and other gun | 13,400 | 2.1 |
| Handgun and knife | 35,800 | 5.7 |
| Handgun and other weapon | 18,700 | 3.0 |
| Victim-offender relationship | | |
| Relative | 32,100 | 5.1% |
| Acquaintance | 107,400 | 17.1 |
| Stranger | 453,100 | 72.0 |
| Unknown or unreported relationship | 37,000 | 5.9 |
| Place of occurrence | | |
| At home, in a vacation home, hotel, or motel | 80,000 | 12.7% |
| Near home | 67,100 | 10.7 |
| At a business | 127,300 | 20.2 |
| In an office | -- | 1.3 |
| On the street | 263,000 | 41.8 |
| In school | -- | .3 |
| Other places | 82,300 | 13.1 |

Note: The number of handgun crimes does not include murder and nonnegligent manslaughter.

--Too few cases to obtain a statistically reliable estimate.

The place of occurrence for handgun crimes varied according to the victim's relationship to the offender (figure 1). About two-thirds of handgun crimes committed by relatives occurred in the victim's home, while half of those committed by persons who were strangers to the victim took place on the street. Handgun crimes committed by persons known by but not related to the victim had the widest variation in place of occurrence, being about as likely to occur in the victim's home as they were to occur on the street or near the victim's home.

### Injuries resulting from handgun crime

In the 5.7 million victimizations committed with a handgun present from 1979 to 1987, offenders shot but did not kill about 135,000 victims (table 7). Offenders fired their weapon in 13% of all handgun crimes (an annual average of about 79,000). In 10% of all handgun crimes, the offender fired but missed, and in 2%, 15,000 handgun crimes annually, the criminal shot the victim. (There was also an annual average of 9,200 murders and nonnegligent manslaughters by offenders with handguns. See the discussion on page 7.) Victims did not report whether the offenders who missed had tried to hit the victim or whether the offenders were missing intentionally.

In almost 9 of every 10 handgun crimes between 1979 and 1987, the offender did not fire the gun. Instead, in 68% of all handgun crimes the gun was used solely as an instrument of coercion and threat; the presence of the handgun or the offender's threat to use it was the only violence. In 18% of all handgun crimes the offender attacked the victim in some way other than by firing the gun.

**Table 7. Actions of offenders armed with handguns, 1979-87**

| Action of armed offender(s) | Crimes committed with handguns, 1979-87 Number | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Total | 5,667,400 | 100.0% |
| Shot at victim | 713,100 | 12.6% |
| Hit victim | 135,400 | 2.4 |
| Missed victim* | 577,700 | 10.2 |
| Nongunshot injury | 28,100 | .5 |
| No physical injury | 549,600 | 9.7 |
| Did not shoot at victim | 4,954,300 | 87.4% |
| Other attack** | 996,000 | 17.6 |
| Verbal threat of attack | 445,600 | 7.9 |
| Weapon present | 3,389,200 | 59.8 |
| Other threat | 30,800 | .5 |
| Unknown action | 92,600 | 1.6 |

*May include a few cases in which the offender tried to attack the victim in ways other than by shooting at him or her.
**Includes assault with a knife or object, hitting, kicking, knocking down, and rape.

During the 9-year period, over 800,000 nonfatal injuries resulted from crimes in which handguns were present — gunshot wounds accounting for about 16% of those injuries.

| | Number | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Victimizations with handguns | 5,667,400 | 100% |
| Without injury* | 4,836,100 | 85 |
| With injuries | 823,400 | 15 |
| Gunshot | 135,400 | 2 |
| Other serious injuries | 138,900 | 3 |
| Minor injuries | 549,100 | 10 |

*NCS does not measure psychological trauma experienced by victims of violence.

Of the crimes in which a handgun was present and an injury resulted from something other than a gunshot, nearly 7 out of 10 of those injuries were classified as minor — bruises, cuts, swelling, or unspecified conditions that required less than 2 days in a hospital.

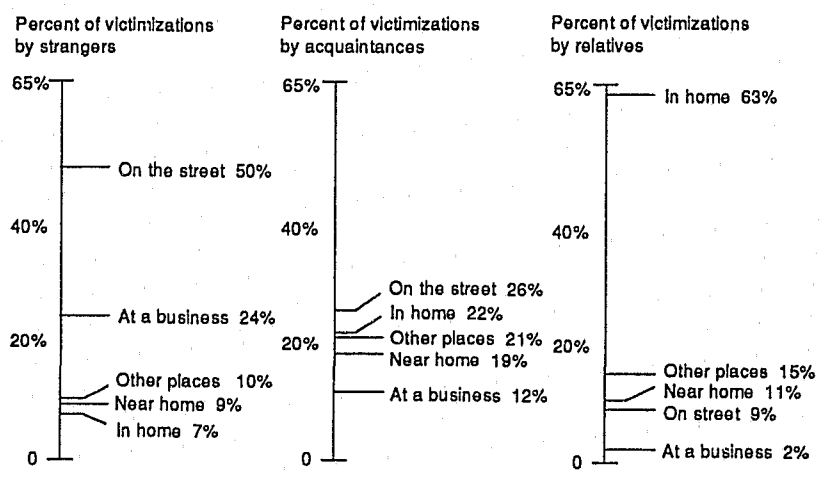
About two-thirds of the victims who were shot required overnight hospital care (table 8). Those victims not hospitalized were either treated and released from emergency rooms or obtained treatment elsewhere. (Two percent of gunshot victims reported receiving no medical care.) Among violent crime victims injured by a gunshot and receiving hospitalization, nearly half stayed more than a week, 17% had stays of 8 to 20 days, while 30% required at least 3 weeks of hospital care.

**Table 8. Medical care given victims of nonfatal handgun crimes, 1979-87**

| | Victims shot during crimes committed with handguns Number | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Gunshot injuries | 135,400 | 100.0% |
| Care outside hospital | -- | 4.5% |
| Emergency room care | 37,200 | 27.5% |
| Hospital care overnight or longer | 92,100 | 68.0% |
| 1-2 days | 21,700 | 16.0 |
| 3-7 | 21,300 | 15.7 |
| 8-20 | 15,400 | 11.4 |
| 21 or more | 28,100 | 20.8 |
| Unknown number of days | -- | 4.1 |

--Too few cases to obtain a statistically reliable estimate.

**Place where victimization occurred, by victim-offender relationship, 1979-87**




Note: Numbers may not add to 100% because of rounding.

*Figure 1*

## Comparing crimes where offenders had handguns to other violent crimes

Relatively fewer handgun crime victims were injured than were victims of violent crime in which handguns were absent (15% of handgun crime victims versus 31% of other violent crime victims) (table 9). When they were injured, however, victims of crimes committed by offenders carrying handguns were more likely to suffer serious injury than were victims of violent crimes without the presence of handguns. One in three injured handgun crime victims was injured seriously, compared to 1 in 6 victims injured in other violent crimes. Handgun crime victims were also more likely than other violent crime victims to require hospitalization.

Victims of handgun robberies were more apt than other robbery victims to lose property in the robbery. Eighty percent of handgun robberies were completed, compared to 61% of robberies committed by offenders who had other weapons or who were unarmed.

Victims of handgun crimes were much less likely to take self-protective measures such as fighting back, running away, or trying to dissuade the offender than were victims of other violent crimes. If they did take self-protective measures, they were less likely to fight back than other violent crime victims. Fifty-five percent of all handgun crime victims reported that they took self-protective measures during the crime, compared with 76% of other violent crime victims. A fourth of the handgun crime victims who defended themselves actively fought back — using or brandishing a weapon or trying physical force — compared to a third of the victims of other violent crimes.

**Table 9. Crimes of violence involving handguns, compared to crimes of violence without handguns, by selected characteristics, 1979-87**

| Characteristic of crimes | Crimes of violence: Involving handguns | Crimes of violence: No handguns present |
|---|---|---|
| Total | 100.0% | 100.0% |
| Injuries from crime | | |
| No physical injury | 85.3% | 68.5% |
| Injury* | 14.5 | 31.1 |
| Serious injury | 4.5 | 4.9 |
| Injury from rape | .3 | .4 |
| Minor injury | 9.7 | 25.8 |
| Extent of injury unknown | .1 | .4 |
| Outcome of robberies | | |
| Completed | 79.9% | 61.2% |
| Attempted | 20.1 | 38.8 |
| Victims' measures of self-protection | | |
| No self-protective measure taken | 44.6% | 23.9% |
| Self-protective measures | 54.9 | 75.6 |
| Active self-defense** | 13.4 | 25.9 |
| Passive self-defense*** | 41.5 | 49.7 |
| Amount or kind of self-protection unknown | .5 | .6 |
| Reporting to police | | |
| Crime was reported | 68.8% | 46.0% |
| Crime was unreported | 30.1 | 52.7 |
| Reporting unknown | 1.1 | 1.3 |

*For definitions of serious and minor injury see *Methodology*, page 8. Aggregating injuries as serious or minor must be somewhat arbitrary. Long-term health problems could result from minor as well as serious injury.

**Includes fighting back and using a weapon.

***Includes running away and trying to dissuade the offender.

Victim injury and self-defense and offender action appear to be interrelated. Offenders with handguns are more menacing than other offenders, able to coerce victims into complying without using other violence, and therefore a lower rate of injury results. When the handgun is used, however, the consequences of physical attack are often much more serious for the victim than when other or no weapons are used.

Because the data do not record the sequence of threat or attack and injury, it is not possible to determine whether victims who were injured sustained their injuries before, during, or after they took any self-defensive action. Nor can the NCS reveal whether the offender intended from the beginning to injure the victim, was responding to the victim's actions, or was responding to other factors.

**Handgun crime trends, 1979-87**

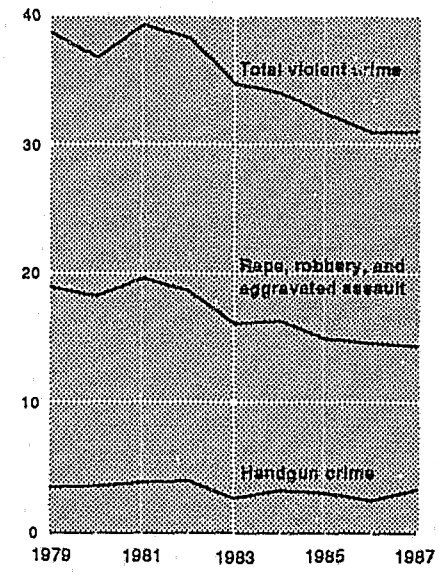



*Figure 2*

## Calling the police

Victims of handgun crimes were more likely than other violent crime victims to report the crime to the police. The higher likelihood of reporting a crime that involved a handgun existed whether an injury had occurred or not. Sixty-nine percent of handgun crimes were reported to law enforcement authorities, compared to 46% for all other violent crimes.

## Trends

The annual rates of criminal victimization for all violent offenses and for the combined offenses of rape, robbery, and aggravated assault declined from 1979 to 1987 (figure 2). The average of rates of violent crime in which a handgun was present, from 1983 to 1987, was also significantly lower than the average of rates from 1979 to 1982.

## Handgun murder and nonnegligent manslaughter

About 9,200 persons were victims of handgun murders and nonnegligent manslaughter each year from 1979 to 1987, representing 44% of all homicides.* The majority of handgun murders occurred in the course of arguments or when no other crime was being committed. Of all handgun murders for which the offenders' motives were known, a fourth resulted during commission of another crime, most often robbery. About half were committed primarily in arguments or fights.

**Circumstances of handgun murders in which offenders had known motives, 1986**

| | Adjusted number | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Total | 7,128 | 100% |
| Murder committed during another felony | 1,746 | 25% |
| Rape | 22 | -- |
| Robbery | 929 | 13 |
| Burglary | 79 | 1 |
| Larceny | 22 | -- |
| Sex offense | 13 | -- |
| Drug offense | 566 | 8 |
| Other felony | 113 | 2 |
| Murder committed during suspected felony | 155 | 2% |
| Murder committed during argument | 3,624 | 51% |
| Romantic triangle | 233 | 3 |
| Property or money | 252 | 4 |
| Other arguments | 3,139 | 44 |
| Miscellaneous circumstances | 1,603 | 23% |

Note: In 1986 there were 1,926 murders for which the motive was unknown. Detail may not add to total because of rounding.
--Less than 0.5%.

Because the NCS does not collect information on murder, these data come from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), compiled from reports of law enforcement agencies. Supplemental reports submitted by law enforcement authorities described about 93% of the victims of murder in 1986. Ratios were applied to the available data to estimate the number of murders by type of weapon. In 1986 an estimated 9,054 murders were committed with handguns, representing 44% of all murders. Four out of five handgun murder victims were male. About half the victims were black. Persons age 20 to 34 made up 55% of all handgun murder victims.

*In this discussion a mention of murder includes nonnegligent manslaughter and excludes justifiable or accidental homicide.

**Handgun murders, 1986**

| | Number of victims | Rate per 100,000* |
|---|---|---|
| Total | 9,054 | 3.8 |
| Sex | | |
| Male | 7,352 | 6.3 |
| Female | 1,702 | 1.4 |
| Race | | |
| White | 4,442 | 2.2 |
| Black | 4,429 | 15.1 |
| Other | 183 | 2.5 |
| Age | | |
| 0-11 years | 86 | .2 |
| 12-15 | 128 | .9 |
| 16-19 | 728 | 4.9 |
| 20-24 | 1,763 | 8.6 |
| 25-34 | 3,254 | 7.6 |
| 35-49 | 2,053 | 4.6 |
| 50-64 | 732 | 2.2 |
| 65 or older | 310 | 1.1 |

*The rates are expressed for 100,000 persons rather than for the 1,000 used in the rest of this report to avoid expressions with multiple decimal places.

Adjusted rates show that handgun murder rates, like nonfatal handgun crimes, were highest for males, for blacks, and for persons age 20 to 24.

In 1986, 15 of every 100,000 blacks died in a murder involving a handgun — about 6 times the 2.2 handgun murder victims per 100,000 whites. This difference between the races in murder rates exceeds the difference between the rates for nonfatal handgun crimes: 810 black victims per 100,000 blacks — about 3 times the 270 white victims per 100,000 whites.

In comparisons of rates for the sexes, 6.3 per 100,000 males and 1.4 per 100,000 females died in a handgun murder. For every 100,000 persons of each sex, in nonfatal handgun crimes there were 480 male victims and 200 female victims. The handgun murder rate for males was 4.5 times that for females; the victimization rate for males in a nonfatal handgun crime was 2.6 times that for females.

While persons age 20 to 24 had the highest rates of fatal and nonfatal handgun crime of any age group, handgun murders were relatively more prevalent in older victim age categories than were nonfatal handgun crimes. Persons age 25 to 34 had a slightly lower handgun murder rate than persons age 20 to 24, and persons age 16 to 19 had a much lower handgun murder rate than those age 20 to 24. This pattern reverses the order for nonfatal handgun victimization rates. The rate for teenagers was only slightly lower than for persons age 20 to 24, and the rate for those age 25 to 34 was significantly lower.

When the age and race of murder victims killed by handguns are examined together, blacks age 20 to 34 had rates that were about 9 times the rate of the population as a whole, regardless of age (see appendix table on page 8). By contrast, whites and persons of other races age 20 to 34 had rates that were just slightly higher than the overall rate.

For all age groups except the youngest, black males had handgun murder victimization rates that were from 7 to 10 times that of white males of similar ages. For all the sex-race-age categories, the highest rates of handgun murder were for black males age 20 to 24 — 61 victims per 100,000 persons — and black males age 25 to 34 — 57 per 100,000. The handgun murder rate for black females age 20 to 34 was higher than that for white males of any age group.

Source: The murder and nonnegligent manslaughter counts for 1986 were calculated from the Uniform Crime Reports, Supplementary Homicide Report for 1986. This data set is available from the National Archive of Criminal Justice Data, P.O. Box 1248, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48106 (1-313-763-5010). Estimates of the resident population were used to calculate rates per 100,000 and were obtained from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-25, No. 1022, *United States Population Estimates by Age, Sex, and Race, 1980-1987.* The author adjusted the homicide counts for missing data and calculated the homicide rates.

**Appendix table. Number of murders with handguns per 100,000 persons, by race, sex, and age of victim, 1986**

| Age of victim | Number of handgun murders per 100,000 persons | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Total | | | Male victims | | Female victims | |
| | White | Black | Other | White | Black | White | Black |
| Total | 2.2 | 15.1 | 2.5 | 3.5 | 27.2 | 1.0 | 4.2 |
| 0-11 years | .2 | .4 | .4 | .2 | .4 | .2 | .4 |
| 12-15 | .6 | 2.8 | .4 | .7 | 4.8 | .5 | .8 |
| 16-19 | 2.4 | 19.3 | 1.6 | 3.8 | 33.3 | 1.0 | 5.2 |
| 20-24 | 4.6 | 33.9 | 4.9 | 7.4 | 61.3 | 1.8 | 8.4 |
| 25-34 | 4.1 | 32.1 | 4.6 | 6.7 | 57.3 | 1.5 | 9.7 |
| 35-49 | 2.9 | 18.2 | 3.3 | 4.5 | 34.4 | 1.4 | 4.8 |
| 50-64 | 1.5 | 8.6 | 2.3 | 2.3 | 16.7 | .8 | 2.0 |
| 65 or older | .7 | 4.9 | .2 | 1.0 | 10.0 | .5 | 1.5 |

Note: Rates have been adjusted for missing data. Source: Uniform Crime Reports, 1986.

## Methodology

The data for this report for all crimes except homicide were obtained from the NCS for 1979 to 1987. Data for murder and nonnegligent manslaughter were drawn from the UCR. In the NCS an average sample of 114,000 individuals age 12 or older in 52,000 households were interviewed twice a year about all crimes that they had experienced during the previous 6 months, including any not reported to police.

The crimes measured in this report are those in which the victim reported that the offender used a handgun to threaten, to shoot at, or to shoot the victim. To threaten includes displaying the gun, waving or pointing it, and referring to it verbally.

Definitions of some terms that are used in this report are as follows:

*Serious injury* — injuries (1) that involve gunshot or knife wounds, internal injuries, broken bones, loss of consciousness, loss of teeth or (2) that are of an undetermined nature and required 2 or more days of hospitalization.

*Minor injury* — injuries (1) that involve bruises, black eyes, cuts, scratches, swelling or (2) that are of an undetermined nature and required less than 2 days of hospitalization.

Some research suggests that the NCS may undercount the number of persons nonfatally injured by handguns. In a 1985 study of gunshot victimizations, Philip Cook calculated a gunshot death-to-injury rate from NCS data and UCR criminal homicide data, for 1973 to 1979.* The rate was the number of UCR gun homicides divided by the sum of the NCS estimate of nonfatal gunshot victimizations and the UCR gun homicides. He compared this rate to similar rates constructed from small-area police data and to national data on the num-ber of police officers assaulted or killed.

Cook found that the NCS-UCR death-to-injury rate indicated that 35% of all persons shot during a crime died from the attack; other studies cited by Cook indicated that about 15% of all gunshot victims died. (NCS and UCR data for this report produce a rate of 38% for handguns. Cook's calculations included all types of guns.)

Because Cook thought it unlikely that all the other studies were incorrect, he concluded that the NCS underestimates nonfatal gunshot injuries. He presented two possible causes for the undercount: (1) Persons shot by relatives or while engaged in criminal activity may not report such injuries to NCS interviewers; (2) persons most likely to be victims of serious violent crime — young males and persons not living in established households — are probably underrepresented in the NCS sample and therefore are never interviewed.

It could be argued that a rate of gunshot injuries to deaths based on police injuries and deaths would be lower than such a ratio based on the general population because police officers are better prepared than civilians to defend themselves. Police officers' actions may divert the offenders' aim, and police officers are more likely than others to be wearing protective clothing that would help to prevent fatal injury. Because police officers are often accompanied and have communication and emergency procedures, when they are shot, they are likely to receive quicker medical attention than other victims of gunshots. At present, however, there are no data that address these issues of self-defense and treatment.

Even if Cook's conclusions and conjectures are correct, the NCS, while failing to count everyone injured by handguns, does accurately estimate the number of gunshot injuries among people living in stable household settings. It thus enables most Americans to judge the degree to which they are vulnerable to gunshot injury.

*Philip J. Cook, "The case of the missing victims: Gunshot woundings in the National Crime Survey," *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* (1985) 1:91-102.

## Reliability of comparisons

All comparisons presented in this report were tested to determine if the differences were statistically significant. Most comparisons passed a hypothesis test at the .05 level of statistical significance (or the "95% confidence level"), meaning that the estimated difference between comparisons was greater than twice the standard error of this difference. Statements qualified by the phrase "somewhat" or "some evidence" were significant at the 90% level.

The data tables note when estimates are based on 10 or fewer sample cases. It is not possible to compute standard errors accurately for such estimates. Therefore, it is inadvisable to compare estimates based upon 10 or fewer sample cases to other small estimates.

More information on NCS sample design and estimation procedures can be obtained from appendix III of *Criminal Victimization*

BJS Special Reports are written principally by BJS staff. Michael R. Rand wrote this report. Thomas Hester edited it. Carolyn Levine provided statistical review. Marilyn Marbrook, publications unit chief, administered production, assisted by Yvonne Boston, Tina Dorsey, and Jayne Pugh.

July 1990, NCJ-123559

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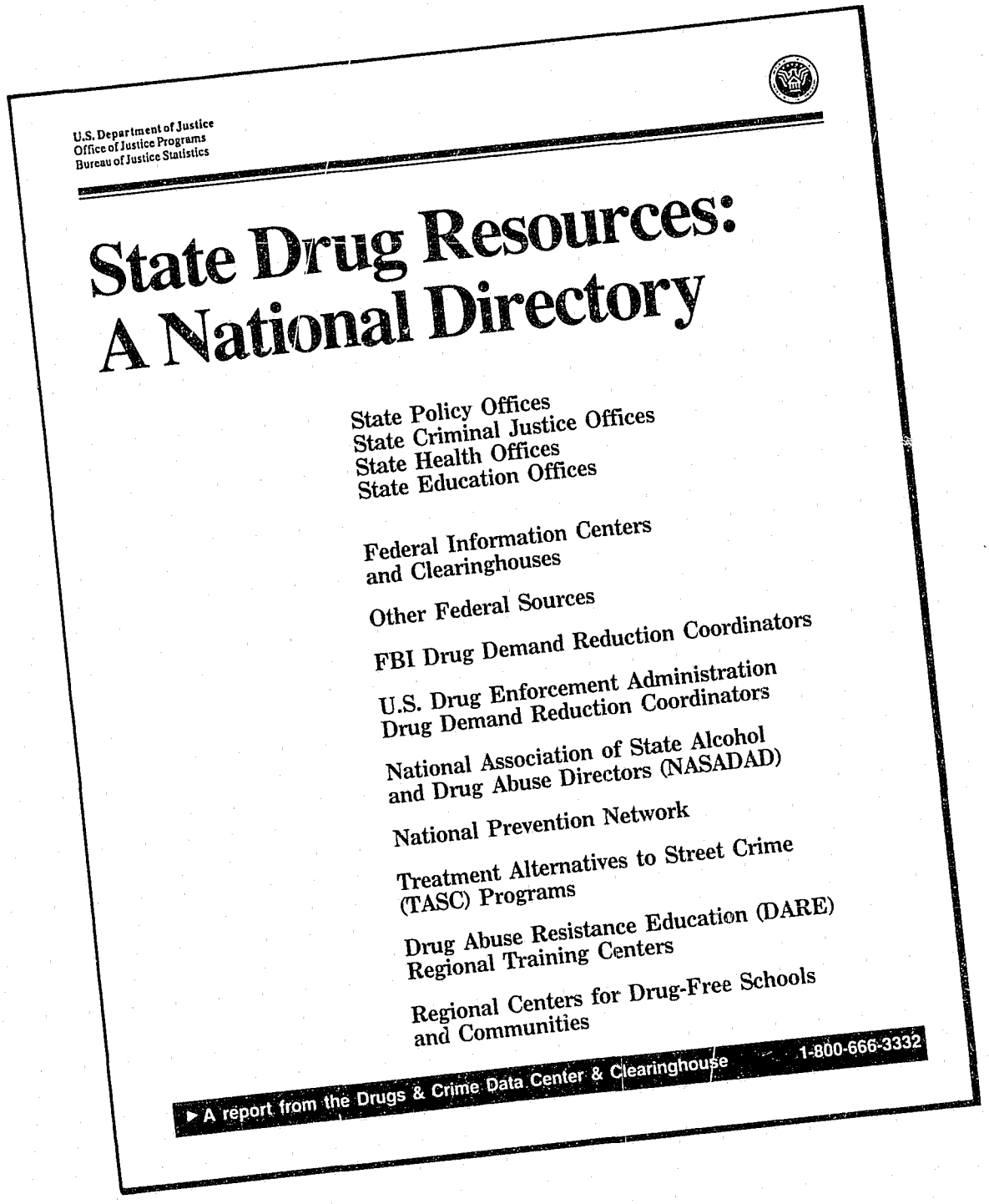

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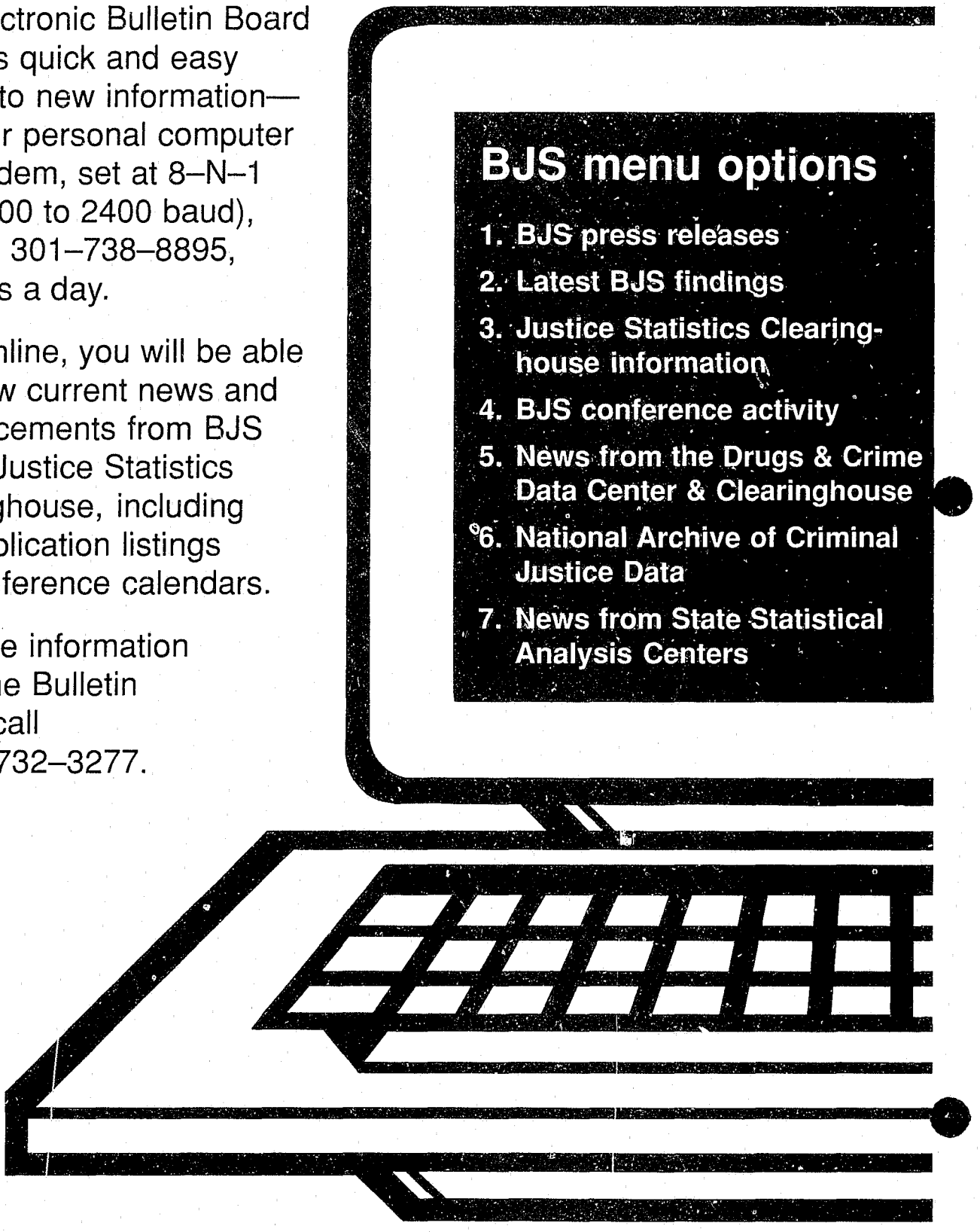

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