Urban and Rural Victimization

While national-level crime statistics provide important information regarding overall crime trends, they cannot yet demonstrate differences in crime and victimization at the sub-national level. For instance, reporting local data through the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program is voluntary, making it difficult to isolate factors contributing to crime. The Bureau of Justice Statistics has recognized the need for sub-national victimization data, and is working to estimate crime at the state and local levels. Currently, results from the UCR and the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) indicate that cities with a larger population generally have higher crime rates than suburban or rural cities. While differences in crime rates may be related to population size, they may also be caused by other local factors. For example, rural policing agencies may have organizational, resource-related, or technological differences compared to their urban and suburban counterparts, resulting in underreported crime and victimization. For more about the UCR and NCVS, see the Crime and Victimization in the United States fact sheet in this series.

Trends

Since 1995, serious violent victimizations in urban areas have decreased by approximately 72%. Other forms of victimization, including simple assault, personal theft, and household burglary have declined by 74%, 84%, and 52%, respectively. In comparison, serious violent victimizations in suburban and rural areas have decreased by 65% and 48%, while simple assaults have dropped 71% and 66%. On average, motor vehicle and household thefts have declined by about 75% and 62% across urban, suburban, and rural areas.

In 2014, victims from urban areas accounted for: 55% of all rapes and sexual assaults, 50% of robberies, and 31% of aggravated assaults. Victims from suburban areas accounted for 51% of all aggravated assaults. And victims from rural areas accounted for: 10% of rapes and sexual assaults, 6% of robberies, and 18% of aggravated assaults.

Household Victimization in Urban, Suburban, and Rural Communities

Victimization by Location of Residence

Did You Know?

Motor vehicle theft occurs 2.2 times more frequently in urban areas than rural areas.

The rate of household burglary is greater in rural areas compared to suburban areas but lower than the rate of household burglary in urban areas.
Residents of urban areas experienced the highest rates of victimization in 2014. While rates of violent victimization in urban areas were similar for both men and women (9.4 and 9.3 per 1,000 individuals, respectively), the rate of violent victimization in suburban areas was about 23% lower for women than for men. Similarly, in rural areas the rate of victimization among women was about 32% lower than among men.

In 2014, rates of victimization for different age groups were similar across urban, suburban, and rural communities. Notably, youth ages 15 – 17 in rural areas were victimized at a rate 3.9x greater than youth of the same age in urban areas, and 4x greater than youth in suburban areas.

Only 56% of victims of serious violent victimization in 2014 reported their victimization to the police. Among urban and suburban locales, rape and sexual assault were the least reported form of violent victimization, averaging about 30% each. Comparatively, 60% of rape and sexual assault victims in rural communities said that they had reported their victimization to the police.

In 2013, 12% of LGBTQ students in rural areas reported that they had been physically assaulted because of their sexual orientation—about 1.5x as many victims as in urban or suburban areas. Similarly, 8% of rural students who identified as gender nonbinary reported being physically assaulted, compared to 6% of urban and 5% of suburban students.