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Crime Data Brief

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Handgun Victimization, Firearm Self-Defense, and Firearm Theft

Guns and Crime

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In 1992 offenders armed with handguns committed a record 931,000 violent crimes. Handgun crimes accounted for about 13% of all violent crimes. As measured by the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), the rate of nonfatal handgun victimizations in 1992 — 4.5 crimes per 1,000 people age 12 or older — supplanted the record of 4.0 per 1,000 in 1982.

On average per year in 1987-92, about 62,200 victims of violent crime, about 1% of all victims of violence, used a firearm to defend themselves. Another 20,300 used a firearm to defend their property during a theft, household burglary, or motor vehicle theft.

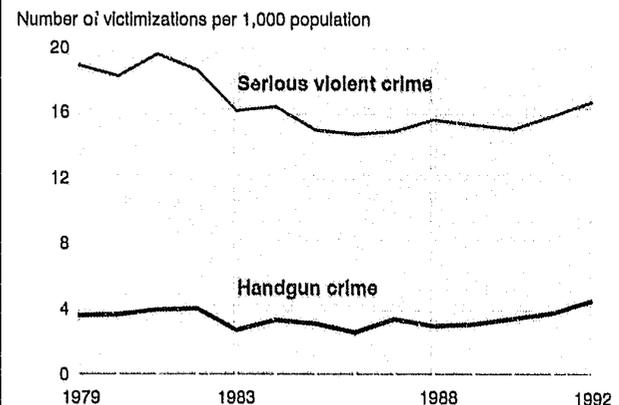
For 1987-92 victims reported an annual average of about 341,000 incidents of firearm theft. Because the NCVS asks for types but not a count of items stolen, the annual total of firearms stolen probably exceeded the number of incidents.

Handguns and crime, 1987-92

	1992	Annual average, 1987-91
Handgun crimes	930,700	667,000
Homicide	13,200	10,600
Rape	11,800	14,000
Robbery	339,000	225,100
Assault	566,800	417,300

Note: Detail may not add to total because of rounding. Data for homicide come from the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports.

The 1992 handgun victimization rate was the highest on record



Source: BJS National Crime Victimization Survey, 1979-92.

Note: Serious violent crime includes rape, robbery, and aggravated assault.

Violent crime rates

Unlike the record rate of handgun crimes in 1992, the overall rates for violent crimes were well below the 1981 peaks.¹ The total 1992 rate for rape, robbery, and aggravated and simple assault was 35 per 1,000 persons, compared to 39 per 1,000 in 1981. The 1992 rate of 17 per 1,000 for the more serious violent crimes (rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) was also less than the 20 per 1,000 in 1981.

Most likely victims of handgun crime

- Males were twice as likely as females to be victims of handgun crimes, and blacks 3 times as likely as whites.
- Young black males continued to be the population subgroup most vulnerable to handgun crime victimization.
 - For males age 16-19 —
 - The rate for blacks (40 per 1,000 persons) was **4 times** that of whites (10 per 1,000).
 - For males age 20-24 —
 - The rate for blacks (29 per 1,000) was **3 times** that of whites (9 per 1,000).

Males, blacks, and the young had the highest rates of handgun crime victimization, 1987-92

Age of Victim	Average annual rate of crimes committed with handguns (per 1,000 persons)*					
	Male victims			Female victims		
	Total	White	Black	Total	White	Black
All ages	4.9	3.7	14.2	2.1	1.6	5.8
12-15	5.0	3.1	14.1	2.5	2.1	4.7
16-19	14.2	9.5	39.7	5.1	3.6	13.4
20-24	11.8	9.2	29.4	4.3	3.5	9.1
25-34	5.7	4.9	12.3	3.1	2.1	9.0
35-49	3.3	2.7	8.7	1.7	1.4	3.3
50-64	1.5	1.2	3.5	0.8	0.7	1.6
65 or older	0.8	0.6	3.7	0.3	0.2	2.3

*Rate per 1,000 persons age 12 or older in each age category. Rates do not include murder or nonnegligent manslaughter committed with handguns. The totals include persons of other races not shown separately.

¹Except where noted, this brief excludes homicides, which NCVS does not measure.

When offenders fired at victims

Offenders fired their weapon in 17% of all nonfatal handgun crimes (or about 2% of all violent crimes). In 3% of handgun crimes, about 21,000 a year, the victim was wounded. (An additional annual average of 11,100 were victims of homicide by handgun.) The offender shot at but missed the victim in 14% of handgun crimes.

Self-defense with firearms

- 38% of the victims defending themselves with a firearm attacked the offender, and the others threatened the offender with the weapon.
- A fifth of the victims defending themselves with a firearm suffered an injury, compared to almost half of those who defended themselves with weapons other than a firearm or who had no weapon. Care should be used in interpreting these data because many aspects of crimes — including victim and offender characteristics, crime circumstances, and offender intent — contribute to the victims' injury outcomes.
- In most cases victims who used firearms to defend themselves or their property were confronted by offenders

About three-fourths of the victims who used firearms for self-defense did so during a crime of violence, 1987-92

	Average annual number of victimizations in which victims used firearms to defend themselves or their property		
	Total	Attacked offender	Threatened offender
All crimes	82,500	30,600	51,900
Total violent crime	62,200	25,500	36,700
With injury	12,100	7,300	4,900
Without injury	50,000	18,200	31,800
Theft, burglary, motor vehicle theft	20,300	5,100	15,200

Note: Detail may not add to total because of rounding. Includes victimizations in which offenders were unarmed. Excludes homicides.

who were either unarmed or armed with weapons other than firearms. On average between 1987 and 1992, about 35% (or 22,000 per year) of the violent crime victims defending themselves with a firearm faced an offender who also had a firearm.²

Theft of firearms

- Although most thefts of firearms (64%) occurred during household burglaries, a significant percentage (32%) occurred during larcenies. Loss of firearms through larceny was as likely to occur away from the victim's home as at or near the home. In 53% of the firearm thefts, handguns were stolen.

341,000 incidents of firearm theft occurred per year, 1987-92

Crime in which firearm was stolen	Average annual number of victimizations in which firearms were stolen		
	Total	Handgun	Other gun
Total	340,700	180,500	160,200
Violent crime	7,900	5,300	2,600
Personal theft	56,200	33,900	22,300
Household theft	52,600	31,700	20,900
Household burglary	217,200	105,300	112,000
Motor vehicle theft	6,700	4,400	2,400

Note: Detail may not add to total because of rounding. The table measures theft incidents, not numbers of guns stolen. See text on page 1.

²Because the NCVS collects victimization data on police officers, its estimates of the use of firearms for self-defense are likely to include police use of firearms. Questionnaire revisions introduced in January 1993 will permit separate consideration of police and civilian firearm cases.

Offenders shot at victims in 17% of handgun crimes, 1987-92

	Percent
Shot at victim	16.6%
Hit victim	3.0
Missed victim	13.6
Nongunshot injury	1.6
No physical injury	12.0
Did not shoot at victim	83.4%
Other attack/attempt	19.9
Verbal threat of attack	15.4
Weapon present	46.8
Other threat	.8
Unknown action	.5
Average annual number	699,900

Note: Excludes homicides.

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