**U.S. Department of Justice**
Office of Justice Programs

# Bureau of Justice Statistics
# Special Report

November 2007, NCJ 219411

*National Crime Victimization Survey*

# Identity Theft, 2005

Katrina Baum, Ph.D.
*BJS Statistician*

In 2005, 6.4 million households, representing 5.5% of all households in the United States, discovered that at least one member experienced one or more types of identity theft. This is the first full year of data on identity theft available from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). Questions on identity theft were first added to the NCVS in July 2004.

Unauthorized use of an existing credit card account, the most prevalent type of identity theft, was experienced by about 3 million households. About 1.6 million households experienced theft of existing accounts other than a credit card (such as a banking account) and 1.1 million households discovered misuse of personal information (such as a social security number). An estimated 790,000 households experienced more than one type of identity theft during the same episode.

| | Number of households | Percent of all households |
|---|---|---|
| **Total** | 117,110,800 | 100% |
| **Identity theft** | 6,426,200 | 5.5% |
| Existing credit card | 2,966,500 | 2.5 |
| Other existing accounts | 1,586,500 | 1.4 |
| Personal information | 1,083,100 | 0.9 |
| Multiple types during same episode | 790,200 | 0.7 |
| **No identity theft** | 109,206,700 | 93.3% |
| **Unknown** | 1,477,800 | 1.3% |

Note: Details do not add to total because of rounding.

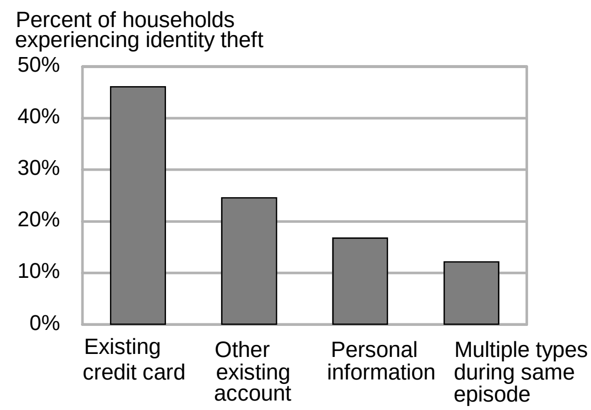
For the NCVS, the definition of identity theft includes three behaviors:

• unauthorized use or attempted use of existing credit cards

• unauthorized use or attempted use of other existing accounts, such as checking accounts

• misuse of personal information to obtain new accounts or loans, or to commit other crimes.

**Almost half of victimized households experienced unauthorized use of an existing credit card, 2005**




Three percent of households headed by persons age 65 or older experienced identity theft, a lower percentage than any other age group. Households located in the West were more likely to experience identity theft than households in other regions. Households in urban or suburban areas were more likely than those in rural areas to experience identity theft.

One in 10 households with incomes of $75,000 or higher experienced identity theft, making this income group more vulnerable than households with lower annual incomes. About 7 in 10 households victimized by identity theft reported a financial loss. The average amount was $1,620.

The majority of households that experienced identity theft did not experience any other type of crime measured by the NCVS. Fewer than 1% of households in the U.S. experienced both identity theft and a violent or property crime.

These findings represent annual prevalence estimates and were drawn from interviews conducted from January through December 2005 for the NCVS. The interviews were conducted with respondents age 18 or older in each sampled household who knew about discoveries of identity theft of anyone in their household during the previous six months.

### A majority of households victimized by theft did not experience other types of measured crime

About 81% of the households experiencing identity theft in 2005 did not experience any other type of crime measured by the NCVS (table 1). Crimes measured by the NVCS include rape, sexual assault, robbery, assault (aggravated and simple), personal theft, household burglary, motor vehicle theft, and property theft. About 980,000 households, representing 15% of households victimized by identity theft, reported at least one property crime during the previous six months. About 109,000 households, or fewer than 1% of all households, experienced identity theft and had a household member age 12 or older who experienced at least one violent crime or property crime during the previous 12 months.

### Households headed by persons age 65 or older had identity theft victimization rates at least half that of younger age groups

Seven percent of households headed by persons ages 18 to 24 experienced identity theft during 2005 (table 2). They were equally likely as households headed by persons ages 25 to 64 to discover at least one type of identity theft. Persons age 65 or older were the least vulnerable to identity theft.

No differences in identity theft victimization were detected by race. The proportion of households victimized by identity theft was similar for whites, blacks, and other racial groups. Hispanic households experienced fewer episodes of identity theft than non-Hispanic households.

### Households in the West were at least 1.5 times more likely than those in other regions to experience identity theft

One in 14 households in the West experienced identity theft, compared to about 1 in 20 households in the Northeast, Midwest, or South. Urban and suburban households were equally likely to experience identity theft with 6% of each group being victimized. Households in rural areas experienced the lowest victimization rates (4%).

**Risk of credit card theft**

Data needed to estimate the likelihood of an individual credit card holder to become a victim of identity theft are currently not available. The NCVS does not ask whether individual respondents have a credit card nor are such estimates available from other sources.

At yearend 2005, there were approximately 1.2 billion credit cards in the U.S. This included Visa, Mastercard, Discover, American Express, and private-label store accounts.

Source: *Cards and Payments: Card Industry Directory*, Thompson Media, 2006.

**Table 1. Other type of crime that occurred among households experiencing identity theft**

| | Number of victimized households | Percent of households |
|---|---|---|
| **Total** | 6,426,200 | 5.5% |
| **Identity theft with —** | 1,237,300 | 1.0% |
| Violent crimes | 150,200 | 0.1 |
| Property crimes | 978,200 | 0.8 |
| Violent and property crimes | 108,900 | 0.1 |
| **Identity theft only** | 5,188,900 | 4.4% |

**Table 2. Age, race, Hispanic origin, region and location of residence of head of households experiencing identity theft**

| Head of household characteristic | Number of victimized households | Percent of all households in each category |
|---|---|---|
| **Total** | 6,426,200 | 5.5% |
| **Age** | | |
| 18-24 | 545,100 | 7.0% |
| 25-34 | 1,225,900 | 6.1 |
| 35-49 | 2,240,400 | 6.1 |
| 50-64 | 1,725,800 | 5.9 |
| 65 or older | 689,100 | 3.0 |
| **Race** | | |
| White | 5,410,100 | 5.6% |
| Black | 693,700 | 4.8 |
| Other race | 255,800 | 4.9 |
| More than one race | 66,600 | 7.5 |
| **Hispanic origin** | | |
| Hispanic | 551,900 | 4.4% |
| Non-Hispanic | 5,850,200 | 5.6 |
| **Region** | | |
| Northeast | 997,600 | 4.7% |
| Midwest | 1,394,600 | 5.0 |
| South | 2,157,000 | 5.0 |
| West | 1,877,000 | 7.4 |
| **Location of residence** | | |
| Urban | 2,010,800 | 5.8% |
| Suburban | 3,548,500 | 5.9 |
| Rural | 866,900 | 3.9 |

### Households with incomes of $75,000 or higher were most vulnerable to identity theft

Ten percent of the households with incomes of $75,000 or higher experienced identity theft; that was about twice the percentage of households earning less than $50,000 (table 3). Households with annual incomes between $50,000 and $74,999 were less likely to experience identity theft than those in the highest income group (7% versus 10%).

Identity theft victimization did not differ by the marital status of the head of household. The percentages of victimized households headed by married and unmarried people were similar to the national average (5.5%).

### Households with 2 or 3 persons age 12 or older were more likely than 1-person households to experience identity theft

About 7% of households with 2 or 3 members age 12 or older experienced identity theft. About 5% of households with 1 member age 12 or older was victimized.

**Table 3. Income, marital status, and size of households that experienced identity theft**

| | Number of victimized households | Percent of all households in each category |
|---|---|---|
| **Total** | 6,426,200 | 5.5% |
| **Household income** | | |
| Less than $7,500 | 241,900 | 4.7% |
| $7,500-14,999 | 316,900 | 3.7 |
| $15,000-24,999 | 455,600 | 3.9 |
| $25,000-34,999 | 548,400 | 4.9 |
| $35,000-49,999 | 774,300 | 5.5 |
| $50,000-74,999 | 1,056,800 | 6.8 |
| $75,000 or more | 2,054,800 | 9.6 |
| **Marital status of head of household** | | |
| Married | 3,539,700 | 5.8% |
| Not married | 2,852,600 | 5.3 |
| **Number of persons in household age 12 or older** | | |
| 1 | 1,523,100 | 4.7% |
| 2-3 | 4,149,300 | 7.1 |
| 4-5 | 673,100 | 3.0 |
| 6 or more | 80,800 | 2.1 |

### About 3% of households experienced identity theft during a 6-month period in 2005

Since identity theft was added to the NCVS in July 2004, 18 months of data are available to determine if there has been a change in identity theft victimization over time.

To account for seasonal effects in the data, such as the impact that a holiday season may have on identity theft, the same 6-month periods in 2004 and 2005 were compared. From July to December 2005, 3.3 million households experienced 1 or more types of identity theft.

This apparent decline from the nearly 3.6 million households that experienced identity theft during the same period in 2004 was not statistically significant.

In comparing the two 6-month periods, an estimated 1.5 million households experienced unauthorized use of existing credit cards in 2005 which was a marginal decline from the 1.7 million households that experienced this type of theft in 2004. Unauthorized use of other existing accounts and misuse of personal information remained stable during the 6-month periods.

| | July-December 2004 | | July-December 2005 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Number of households | Percent of all households | Number of households | Percent of all households | Percent change |
| **Identity theft** | 3,589,100 | 3.1% | 3,282,200 | 2.8% | -9.5% |
| Existing credit card | 1,736,700 | 1.5 | 1,476,800 | 1.3 | -15.9* |
| Other existing accounts | 896,500 | 0.8 | 872,900 | 0.7 | -3.7 |
| Personal information | 538,700 | 0.5 | 561,200 | 0.5 | 3.0 |
| Multiple types during same episode | 417,100 | 0.4 | 371,300 | 0.3 | -11.9** |
| **No identity theft** | 111,749,000 | 96.1% | 113,530,400 | 96.6% | 0.5% |
| **Unknown** | 919,600 | 0.8% | 715,000 | 0.4% | -- |

Note: The 2004 estimates for no identity theft and unknown differ from previously published numbers. The unknown category includes 657,800 households that did not provide any answers about identity theft which decreased the no identity theft category by 24,400 households.

--Not calculated.

* Significant at 90%-level.

** Significant at the 95%-level.

## 6% of victimized households experienced more than one episode

About 94% of households that experienced identity theft during the 6-month reference period reported that they experienced one episode. For the 6% of households that experienced more than one episode during the previous 6 months, characteristics of the most recent episode were obtained. Subsequent findings in this report are based on characteristics of the most recent episode of identity theft.

| Number of episodes | Number of victimized households | Percent of victimized households |
|---|---|---|
| 2 or more | 382,900 | 6.0 % |
| 1 | 6,043,300 | 94.0 |

## Missing money or unfamiliar charges was the most common way identity theft was discovered from existing accounts

For almost a third of identity thefts in 2005, missing money or noticing unfamiliar charges on an account was the means by which the identity theft was discovered (table 4). This was the most common method for thefts from existing credit card or other accounts.

For 1 in 5 victimized households, identity theft was discovered when the individual was contacted about a late or unpaid bill. This was the most common method of the specified ways of becoming aware of the theft for households that experienced misuse of personal information.

Thirteen percent of all victimized households discovered the theft when they had banking problems. This method of discovery was more common for households with theft from existing accounts, excluding credit card accounts. Fifteen percent or less of victimized households discovered the theft by noticing an error in a credit report, noticing a credit card or checkbook was missing, or having an account blocked by the issuer.

## 1 in 5 households experienced some type of problem as a result of the identity theft

Examples of problems that can occur as the result of identity theft victimization include having banking problems or being contacted by a debt collector. Households experiencing misuse of personal information were more likely to experience problems associated with the identity theft than households experiencing unauthorized use of existing accounts excluding credit cards. Households with theft of existing credit card accounts were the least likely to experience problems.

| | Percent of households experiencing problems, by type of identity theft | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Total | Existing credit card | Other existing accounts | Personal information | Multiple types during same episode |
| No problems | 40.1% | 43.9% | 46.7% | 33.4% | 21.6% |
| Any problem | 18.7 | 9.0 | 18.0 | 33.7 | 35.7 |
| Unknown | 41.3 | 47.1 | 35.3 | 32.9 | 42.7 |

Note: Unknown includes households that did not provide any information about the problems associated with the identity theft.

### The Federal Trade Commission

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) reported that about 10.1 million people experienced identity theft in 2003, the most recent year of data. More information about the FTC study is available at <http://www.ftc.gov/os/2003/09/synovatereport.pdf>.

The FTC estimates of identity theft differ from the NCVS estimates primarily because of methodological differences between the two programs. Variation in methodology include unit of analysis (persons versus households), reference period, counting method, and use of a "reference person" (person owning, buying, or renting the unit).

Several Office of Justice Programs component offices and the FTC are coordinating to field a supplement to the NCVS in 2008 that will expand the scope of information collected about identity theft victimization.

**Table 4. Ways victim became aware of identity theft, by type of theft**

| | Percent of households experiencing theft involving — | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Total | Existing credit card | Other existing accounts | Personal information | Multiple types during same episode |
| Noticed missing money/unfamiliar charges on account | 30.8% | 33.5% | 43.5% | 5.2% | 30.6% |
| Contacted about late/unpaid bills | 20.6 | 26.8 | 6.4 | 23.3 | 22.4 |
| Banking problems | 13.1 | 10.4 | 17.7 | 9.1 | 19.7 |
| Noticed a credit report error | 5.6 | 4.8 | 3.5 | 10.0 | 6.2 |
| Noticed missing credit card/checkbook | 5.3 | 6.7 | 5.4 | 1.1* | 5.3 |
| Account blocked by issuer | 4.3 | 4.9 | 4.1 | 1.6* | 5.9 |
| Other ways | 29.6 | 20.1 | 30.8 | 52.2 | 32.0 |

Note: Multiple responses permitted.
* Estimate based on 10 or fewer cases.

**About 29% of victimized households spent 1 day or less resolving problems; 17% spent one month or more**

Households experiencing unauthorized use of credit card accounts were more likely than households victimized by other types of identity theft to spend a day or less resolving problems (table 5). Households experiencing multiple types of theft during the same episode were less likely than households with unauthorized use of existing credit card or other accounts to resolve problems in a day or less.

About 1 in 6 victimized households spent one month or more resolving problems. The proportion was higher for households experiencing unauthorized use of credit cards (1 in 5) than for households experiencing misuse of personal information (1 in 7) or theft from other accounts (1 in 7). About 1 in 20 victimized households spent three months or more resolving problems since the discovery during the previous six months. Time spent resolving problems does not account for time that may have been spent after the NCVS interview.

Overall a fifth of victimized households reported that at the time of the interview they were still experiencing problems associated with the identity theft, such as clearing up credit accounts or credit reports. Households experiencing unauthorized use of credit card accounts were the least likely to have ongoing problems.

**Table 5. Time spent resolving problems, by type of identity theft**

| | Percent of households experiencing theft involving — | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Total | Existing credit card | Other existing accounts | Personal information | Multiple types during same episode |
| Ongoing problems | 18.0% | 9.1% | 17.6% | 33.6% | 30.5% |
| Problems resolved | 71.8% | 81.2% | 73.1% | 49.9% | 63.6% |
| 1 day or less | 28.6% | 36.5% | 26.1% | 19.9% | 16.2% |
| 2-7 days | 16.6 | 15.4 | 21.1 | 10.8 | 19.7 |
| 8-14 days | 6.5 | 6.7 | 7.7 | 3.6 | 7.4 |
| 15-28 days | 3.1 | 3.2 | 3.6 | 1.4* | 3.7* |
| 1-2 months | 12.2 | 14.1 | 10.6 | 9.6 | 11.5 |
| 3 or more months | 4.8 | 5.3 | 4.0 | 4.6 | 5.1 |
| Unknown | 10.2% | 9.7% | 9.3% | 16.4% | 5.8% |

Note: Excludes 3% of households that did not provide information about how much time was spent resolving problems.

*Estimate based on 10 or fewer cases.

Misuse of identity had stopped for 76% of victimized households (table 6). Among households experiencing misuse of personal information more than half (57%) reported that the misuse of their information had stopped.

**More than two-thirds of victimized households reported financial losses**

About 69% of households victimized by identity theft reported a financial loss of $1 or more at the time of the interview (table 7). The dollar loss may or may not have been covered by a company such as a credit card company or insurance company. In 40% of the victimized households, the dollar loss was less than $500. For all types of identity theft, about 5% of victimized households reported that $5,000 or more was lost as a result of the identity theft.

Households experiencing theft of existing credit card accounts were less likely than households with thefts of other existing accounts or misuse of personal information to report that no money was lost. Households experiencing misuse of personal information were twice as likely as victimized households overall to report that no money was lost.

**Table 6. Status of misuse of identity, by type of identity theft**

| | Percent of households experiencing theft involving — | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Misuse | Total | Existing credit card | Other existing accounts | Personal information | Multiple types during same episode |
| Stopped | 75.7% | 79.6% | 77.4% | 57.1% | 82.4% |
| Ongoing | 18.6 | 17.1 | 18.0 | 28.8 | 11.8 |
| Unknown | 5.7 | 3.2 | 4.6 | 14.1 | 5.8 |

Note: Excludes 1% of households that did not provide information as to whether or not misuse was ongoing.

**Table 7. Amount of financial loss due to identity theft, by type of identity theft**

| | Percent of households experiencing theft involving — | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Amount of loss | Total | Existing credit card | Other existing accounts | Personal information | Multiple types during same episode |
| $0 | 18.3% | 13.3% | 16.8% | 37.3% | 14.8% |
| $1-99 | 16.7 | 21.2 | 18.8 | 5.6 | 10.6 |
| $100-249 | 12.0 | 12.4 | 14.8 | 7.8 | 10.1 |
| $250-499 | 10.8 | 11.8 | 12.2 | 4.5 | 12.2 |
| $500-999 | 10.8 | 11.3 | 11.7 | 6.2 | 13.2 |
| $1,000-2,499 | 10.2 | 10.0 | 10.8 | 7.6 | 13.1 |
| $2,500-4,999 | 3.6 | 4.2 | 2.3 | 2.5 | 5.5 |
| $5,000 or more | 4.7 | 3.8 | 3.2 | 6.6 | 8.7 |
| Don't know | 12.9 | 11.9 | 9.4 | 21.8 | 11.8 |
| Mean* | $1,620 | $980 | $1,220 | $4,850 | $2,460 |
| Median* | 300 | 300 | 300 | 500 | 540 |

Note: Excludes 1% of households that did not provide information as to whether any money was obtained during the theft.

*Mean and median calculations based on losses of $1 or more.

**Theft of personal information led to higher average losses than from existing credit card or other accounts**

Across all types of identity theft, the average amount lost per household was $1,620. This includes only the loss from the most recent episode for households experiencing more than one episode (6.9% of victimized households). Households experiencing misuse of personal information reported that about three times as much money was lost ($4,850) on average. Theft of existing credit card accounts resulted in the lowest average losses ($980).

The median dollar amount obtained in all identity theft for existing credit card or other accounts was $300. The median amount of money obtained from households with misuse of personal information was $500. Averages, or arithmetic means, are influenced by extremely low or high values. A median, or midpoint at which half the households fell above or below, is not impacted by extreme values.

## Methodology

In 2004 questions were added to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) to provide ongoing estimates of identity theft victimization (see appendix for questions). To minimize cost and burden to respondents, these questions were administered once in each household to the household respondent. In the NCVS, the household respondent answers more in-depth questions about crimes the entire household may have suffered as a whole, such as burglaries.

Time limitations permitted asking only about the circumstances of the most recent episode of identity theft if more than one had been experienced by the household during the 6-month reference period. For more information refer to the Final Report of Cognitive Research on the New Identity Theft Questions for the National Crime Victimization Survey <http://www.census.gov/srd/papers/pdf/ssm2004-02.pdf>.

Demographic characteristics presented in this report are of the household member age 18 or older who owns, is buying, or is renting the sample housing unit. This person, designated the household head or reference person, is usually the first person listed in the household membership roster. If all household members are under 18, the interviewer will choose the person identified as owning or renting the living quarters.

Because the person designated as the household head may arbitrarily be either the husband or wife in households with married couples, gender was omitted from demographic comparisons. Similarly, the age distribution presented in this report refers to the age of the household head but not necessarily the age of the person who experienced the identity theft. The survey did not ask which member of the household was the victim of the identity theft.

*Standard error computations*

Comparisons of estimates discussed were tested to determine if the differences were statistically significant. Differences described as higher, lower, or different passed a hypothesis test at the .05 level of statistical significance (95%-confidence level). That is, the tested difference was greater than twice the standard error of that difference. For comparisons of estimates which were statistically significant at the 0.10 level (90%-confidence level), differences are described as somewhat, marginal, or slight.

Caution is required when making comparisons of estimates not explicitly discussed in this report. What may appear to be a large difference in estimates may not test as statistically significant at the 95% or the 90%-confidence level. Significance testing calculations were conducted at BJS using statistical programs developed specifically for the NCVS by the U.S. Census Bureau. The programs account for the complex NCVS sample design when calculating generalized variance estimates.

## Appendix. Identity theft questions included in the National Crime Victimization Survey

The full NCVS questionnaire and additional methodology are available at the BJS World Wide Web Internet site: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/cvict.htm#ncvs>.

45c. During the last 6 months, that is since ______ ____, 20___, have you or anyone in your household discovered that someone —

(a) Used or attempted to use any existing credit cards or credit card numbers without permission to place charges on an account?

(b) Used or attempted to use any existing accounts other than a credit card account — for example, a wireless telephone account, bank account or debit/check cards — without the account holder's permission to run up charges or to take money from accounts?

(c) Used or attempted to use personal information without permission to obtain NEW credit cards or loans, run up debts, open other accounts, or otherwise commit theft, fraud, or some other crime?

45d. Was the misuse of — (the credit card account(s)/any existing accounts other than credit cards/personal information or new account(s)) one episode or more than one episode of identity theft?

45e. Did these episodes occur separately or at the same time?

45f. Which episode of identity theft was most recently discovered?

45g. How did you become aware of the identity theft?

45h. What was the total dollar amount of the credit, loans, cash, services, and anything else the person obtained while misusing (the credit card account(s)/any existing accounts other than credit cards/personal information or new account(s))?

45i. Has the misuse of — (the credit card account(s)/any existing accounts other than credit cards/personal information or new account(s)) stopped (e.g. you or a household member closed a checking account)?

45j. Is the misuse of — (the credit card account(s)/any existing accounts other than credit cards/personal information or new account(s)) still causing problems for you or any other household member? For example, are you still spending time clearing up credit accounts or your credit report.

45k. How much time did it take to resolve ALL PROBLEMS associated with the misuse of — (the credit card account(s)/any existing accounts other than credit cards/personal information or new account(s)) after the misuse was discovered?

45l. As a result of (any of) the misuse of — (the credit card account(s)/any existing accounts other than credit cards/personal information or new account(s)) discovered in the last 6 months, have you or anyone in your household. . .

Been turned down for a loan?
Had banking problems?
Had problems with credit card accounts?
Had phone or utilities cut off or been denied new service?
Had to pay higher interest rates on credit cards, loans, etc.?
Been turned down for insurance or had to pay higher rates?
Been contacted by a debt collector or creditor?
Been the subject of a civil suit or judgment?
Been the subject of a criminal investigation, warrant, proceeding, or conviction?
Had some other problems? Specify _______
____________________________________

**U.S. Department of Justice**
Office of Justice Programs
Bureau of Justice Statistics

Washington, DC 20531

NCJ 219411

PRESORTED STANDARD
POSTAGE & FEES PAID
DOJ/BJS
Permit No. G-91

Official Business
Penalty for Private Use $300

This report in portable document format and in ASCII and its related statistical data and tables are available at the BJS World Wide Web Internet site: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/abstract/it05.htm>.

**Office of Justice Programs**

*Innovation • Partnerships • Safer Neighborhoods*
http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov

The Bureau of Justice Statistics is the statistical agency of the U.S. Department of Justice. Jeffrey L. Sedgwick is the director.

Katrina Baum, Ph.D., wrote this report, under the supervision of Michael R. Rand. Wendy Lin-Kelly verified the report. Tina Dorsey produced and edited the report, and Jayne Robinson prepared the report for final printing, under the supervision of Doris J. James.

November 2007, NCJ 219411