

Characteristics of Crimes against Juveniles

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Statistics on crimes against children have not been readily available until recently, because The Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) system, which has served as the Nation's primary source of information about crime since 1929, has never collected information on reported crimes by age of victim, with the exception of homicides. However, as more jurisdictions participate in the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI's) developing National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS), a national picture of juvenile crime victims is beginning to emerge. Even though NIBRS is far from a comprehensive national data system, its scope is sufficient to provide a glimpse of what the scope and characteristics are of crimes against children coming to police attention.

An analysis of 2008 NIBRS data from jurisdictions in 34 states and the District of Columbia reveals some key findings:

- An estimated 1.3 million crimes against juvenile victims came to the attention of police in the U.S. as a whole in 2008, comprising 9 percent of all crime victims.
- An estimated 187,100 sex offenses against juveniles were also known to police, constituting 66 percent of sex crime victims of all ages, adult and juvenile (figure 1).
- Simple assaults are the most commonly reported crime against juveniles, constituting 46 percent of all juvenile victimizations reported to police (figure 2). Sexual offenses make up 14 percent, aggravated assaults 9 percent, and kidnappings 1 percent of all the crimes against juveniles reported to police.
- Girls predominate as victims of sex offenses and kidnapping, but boys predominate as victims of all other crimes.
- Children under age 12 make up approximately one-quarter of all juvenile victims known to police more than one half (53 percent) of the juvenile victims of kidnapping, and 46 percent of juvenile victims of forcible sex offenses.
- Adult offenders are responsible for 48 percent of juvenile victimizations, most disproportionately for kidnapping, sex offenses, and the victimizations of children younger than 6 and older than 15.
- Family perpetrators make up 26 percent of the offenders against children, but they make up a majority of offenders against children under age 4 and are disproportionately represented among kidnappers and sex offenders.

NIBRS Data on Juvenile Victims

NIBRS is designed to become the national statistical database on crimes coming to the attention of law enforcement agencies. It collects more detailed information about individual crimes, victims, perpetrators, and crime characteristics than is available from the Uniform Crime Reporting program, the system it is intended to replace. Because NIBRS data include the age of juvenile victims (to the nearest year in most cases), victim age is one of the important new variables that NIBRS makes available for the profiling of crime. NIBRS also provides detailed information on other victim characteristics, crime type, and victimization circumstances. Data are collected on numerous categories of crime, including homicide, assault, kidnapping, robbery, and sexual assault, and on specific offenses within each category.

For example, assault can involve aggravated assault, simple assault, or intimidation, while sexual assault encompasses forcible rape, forcible sodomy, sexual assault with an object, and forcible fondling. NIBRS also collects information on nonviolent crimes that can be linked to individual victims, including theft and vandalism, and non-forcible sex offenses such as statutory rape and nonforcible incest. Although homicide is the most serious violent crime and NIBRS collects data about homicide, it is not analyzed here. Other more complete and detailed national data sets on this crime are available and have been analyzed elsewhere (Finkelhor, 1997; Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2001b).

In addition to information about the victim and type of offense, NIBRS reports a wealth of details about the circumstances of an incident. Among other particulars, incident time and location are recorded, facts about perpetrators are listed, use of weapons and weapon types are noted, and stolen property is cataloged.

Thus, NIBRS provides information for a fuller description of juvenile victimizations coming to the attention of the police, both in terms of victim characteristics and incident attributes, than was previously available in the UCR.¹

Juvenile and Adult Victims

Juveniles make up 9 percent of all the crime victims reported in the police jurisdictions providing NIBRS data (figure 1). Extrapolated on a national basis, this suggests about 1,295,900 juvenile victimizations (table 1). Strikingly, however, for sex offenses, juveniles make up a majority of the victims, 66%. This corresponds to a national estimate of 187,100 sex offenses against juveniles known to police. The juvenile proportion of crime victims for other crimes is notably smaller: aggravated assault (16 percent), simple assault (16 percent), robbery (11 percent), homicide (11 percent), larceny (5 percent), vandalism (2 percent), and motor vehicle theft (under 1 percent). The low percentage for motor vehicle theft is obviously related to the small number of juveniles who own motor vehicles. Overall, juveniles make up 18 percent of violent crime victims and 4 percent of property crime victims (when individuals rather than institutions are identified as victims).

Figure 1. Juvenile Versus Adult Victimization by Type of Crime and Victim's Age Group

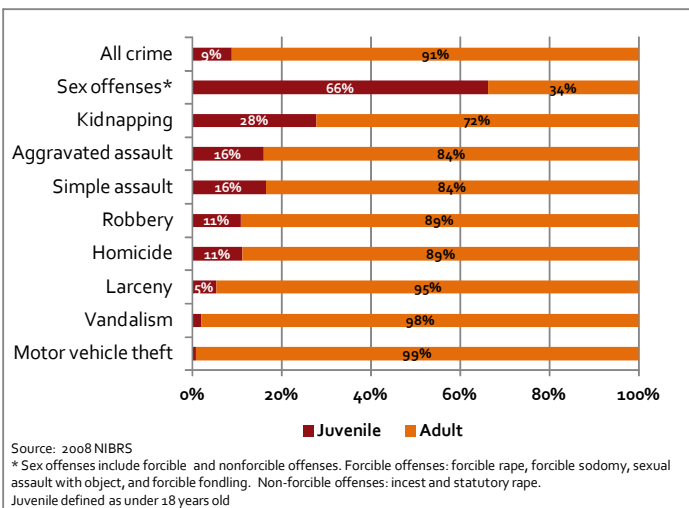


Table 1. Estimate of National Incidence of Reported Crime Against Juveniles, by offense type

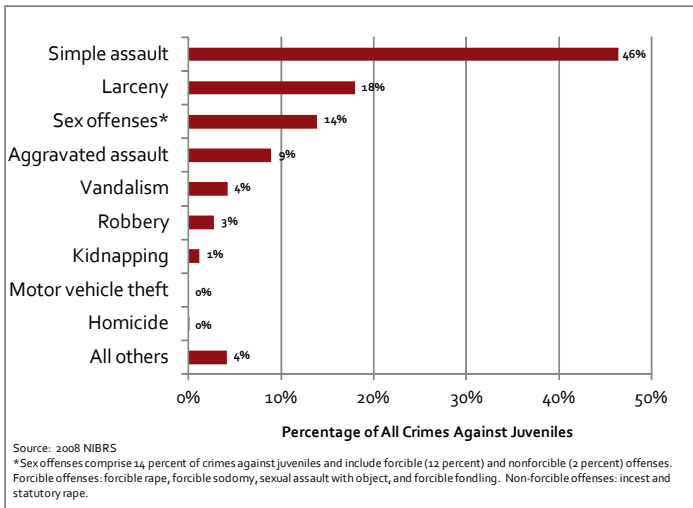
	NIBRS 2008 Count	National estimate
Total crimes against juveniles	336,944	1,295,900
Simple assault/intimidation	163,108	627,300
Larceny	63,139	242,800
Aggravated assault	31,448	121,000
Vandalism	14,710	56,600
Robbery	9,776	37,600
Kidnapping	4,210	16,200
Motor vehicle theft	1,513	5,800
Homicide	382	1,500
Any sex offense	48,658	187,100
Specific sex offenses		
Forcible fondling	22,940	88,200
Forcible rape	12,626	48,600
Statutory rape	5,688	21,900
Forcible sodomy	4,354	16,700
Sexual assault with an object	2,049	7,900
Incest	1,215	4,700

* In 2008, agencies reporting to NIBRS represented 25% of the U.S. population and 26% of reported crime. National estimates were obtained by dividing the NIBRS 2008 count by 0.26 and rounding to the nearest 100.

¹ Victims or offenders involved in multiple incidents in a given year will appear in the NIBRS database more than once, counted as separate victims and offenders. Thus, NIBRS data may over-represent characteristics of victims and offenders who appear more frequently.

In addition to the percentage of juvenile victims for various crimes, NIBRS data can also provide a perspective on the mix of different kinds of crimes being reported by juveniles (figure 2). Simple assault is by far the most common crime committed against juveniles, constituting 46 percent of all offenses against juveniles known to police. After that, in decreasing order of magnitude, are larceny, sex offenses, aggravated assault, vandalism, robbery, kidnapping, motor vehicle theft, and homicide. There is a set of additional property crimes, such as burglary, arson, and fraud, with a small number of juvenile victims recorded in NIBRS. These crimes are categorized as "all others" in figure 2, but, along with homicide, are not discussed individually in this Bulletin.

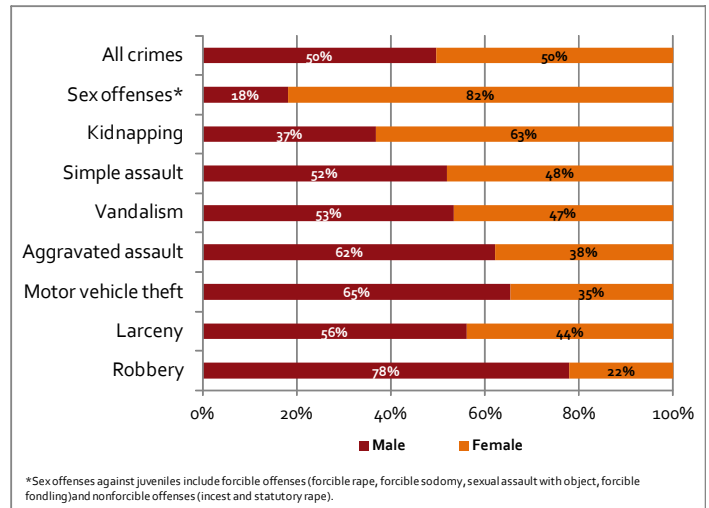
Figure 2. Juvenile Victimization, by Type of Crime



Although sexual assault is the crime with the highest percentage of juvenile victims, it is the third most common juvenile crime reported, behind simple assault and larceny. This is true, even with female victims, for whom sex offenses constitute 23 percent of all the reported victimizations. Therefore, while sex crimes against juveniles receive a lion's share of public attention, they constitute a minority of the offenses against juveniles known to law enforcement.

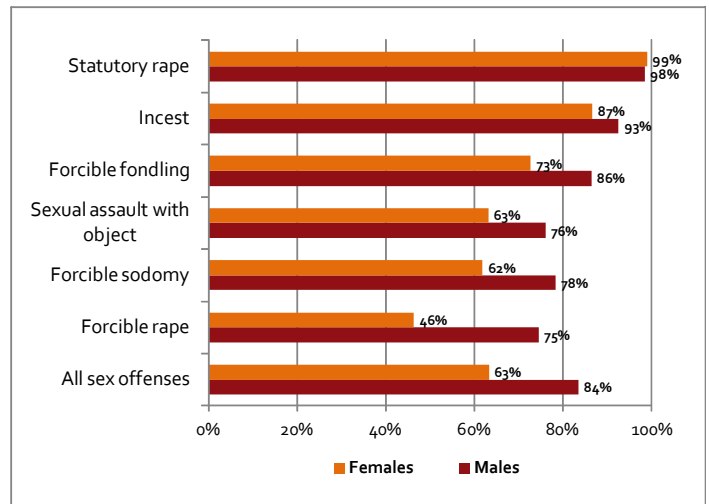
Gender disparities among juvenile crime victims parallel gender differences for crime victims in general (figure 3). Girls outnumber boys as victims of sex offenses (82 percent and 18 percent, respectively) and kidnapping (63 percent and 37 percent, respectively), while boys outnumber girls as victims of robbery (78 percent and 22 percent, respectively) and larceny (56 percent and 44 percent, respectively). Overall, boys and girls experience nearly equal levels of crime victimization.

Figure 3. Juvenile Victimization, by Type of Crime and Victim's Gender



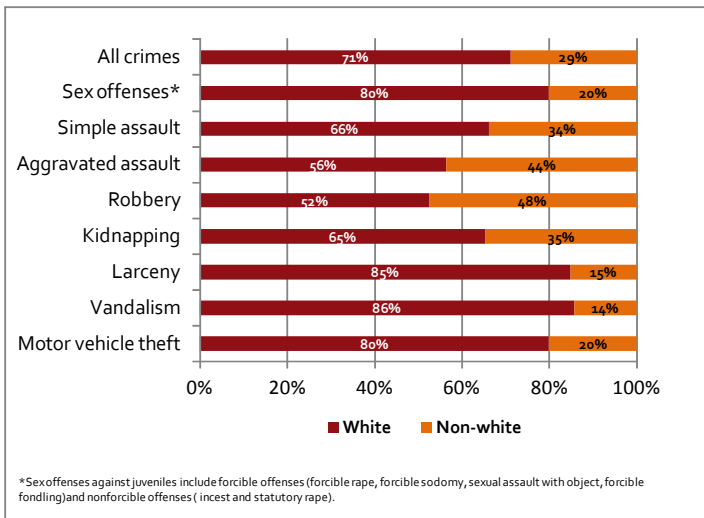
Comparisons of Figure 1 and Figure 3 show sex offenses as the crime with the highest proportion of juvenile victims and also the highest proportion of female victims. However, an examination of the gender and age patterns of specific sex crimes shows some variability (figure 4). For forcible rape, juveniles constitute about half of the female victims, whereas for forcible fondling and incest, they represent close 70 percent or more. (Statutory rape is by definition a crime against juveniles). For male sexual assault victims, there is less variability by type of sex offense. Juveniles account for more than three-quarters of male victims in every type of sex crime. Thus, in terms of what comes to the attention of police in NIBRS jurisdictions, male sexual victimization mostly involves juveniles.

Figure 4. Juvenile Victims as a Percentage of All Sex Offense Victims, by Type of Crime and Victim's Gender



Juvenile crime victims are slightly more likely to be from non-white backgrounds than adult victims (29 percent and 24 percent, respectively). Compared with levels reported for “all crimes,” non-white juveniles are particularly overrepresented relative to white juveniles as victims of violent crimes, especially aggravated assault and robbery (figure 5). They are underrepresented as victims of the property crimes of larceny, vandalism, and motor vehicle theft.

Figure 5. Juvenile Victimization by Type of Crime and Victim's Race



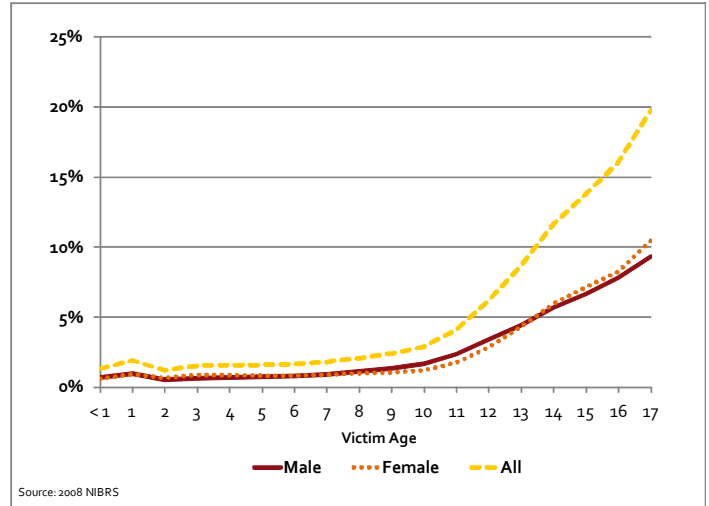
Crime Victimization and the Stages of Childhood

Childhood is a period characterized by developmental changes, so generalizations about all juvenile victims must be tempered. Crimes need to be analyzed as to how they are distributed across the various stages of childhood, an exercise elsewhere called “developmental victimology” (Finkelhor, 2008). This Bulletin uses the year-by-year age categories available in NIBRS to capture these different patterns.

Substantially more crime is reported for teenagers (youth ages 12 to 17) than for preteens (youth ages 11 and younger) (figure 6). Teenagers account for 76 percent of all juvenile crime victimizations reported by NIBRS jurisdictions. However, police statistics almost certainly under-represent the victimization of younger children. Thus, the association between victimization and age shown in figure 6 may be, in part, an effect of the less frequent reporting of crimes involving younger victims to the police. NCVS data and other studies clearly show that older teenagers are more likely than younger teenagers (and presumably preteens) to report crimes to the police (Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, in submission; Finkelhor & Ormrod, 1999). Combining this with the finding that overall crimes against juveniles are less likely to be reported to police than crimes against adults suggests that police data in general and NIBRS data in particular are not complete indicators of the true

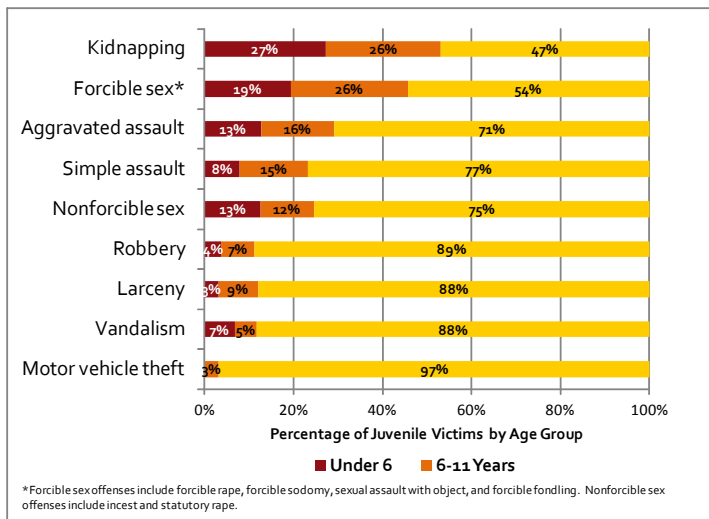
burden of crime victimization by age group, but only the relative proportions of these victimizations that police are likely to encounter.

Figure 6. Juvenile Victimization (All Crimes), by Victim's Age and Gender



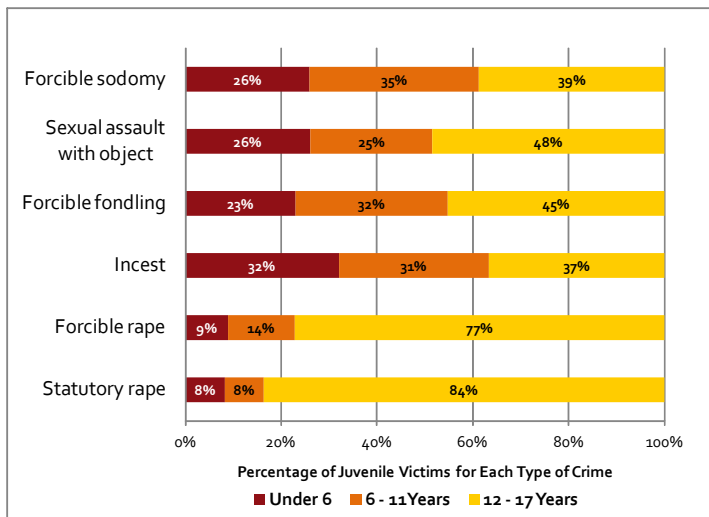
From this reported-crime vantage point, some crimes, like kidnapping, have a relatively large number of preteen victims (53 percent). Others, like robbery, have relatively few (11 percent). Figure 7 suggests that there are three broad patterns of police-reported juvenile crime victimization that emerge when NIBRS data are examined by the victim's age group. There are crimes that are reported almost exclusively by teenagers and rarely by preteens (less than 10 percent), what might be called the “teen-exclusive” pattern, motor vehicle theft being the classic case. There are other crimes, such as kidnapping, that are reported across all stages of childhood with both teens and preteens, including many preschoolers, experiencing substantial levels of victimization, what might be called a “transchildhood” pattern. Finally, there are crimes that are reported disproportionately among teens but also to some modest degree (more than 10 percent) among preteens, what might be called a “teen-predominant” pattern, which would describe the pattern for simple and aggravated assault.

Figure 7. Juvenile Victimization, by Type of Crime and Victim's Age Group



Individual sex crimes can also be characterized with these patterns (figure 8). Statutory rape is a teen-exclusive pattern crime. Forcible sodomy, sexual assaults with objects, forcible fondling, and incest all appear to be trans-childhood pattern crimes, with substantial proportions of victims ages 6 to 11 and even younger. Forcible rape conforms to the teen-predominant pattern, with approximately 23 percent of victims younger than age 12. Of course, these patterns are not necessarily illustrative of the true distribution of crime because they reflect patterns of reporting and may also be influenced by the way crimes are defined or classified.

Figure 8. Juvenile Sexual Victimization, by Type of Crime and Victim's Age Group

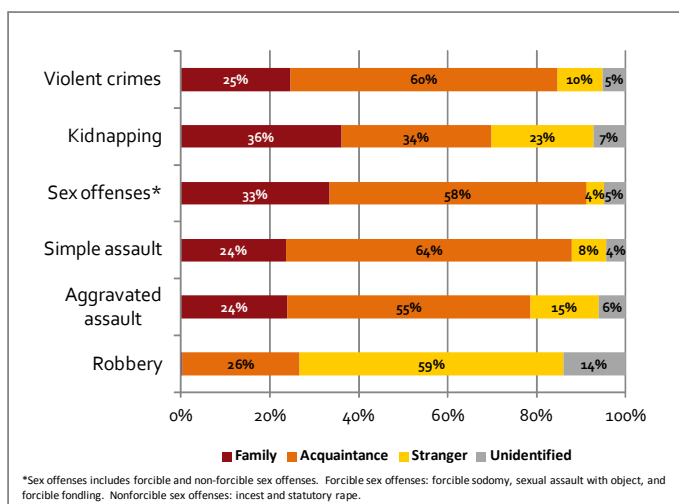


Perpetrators against Juveniles

As figure 9 shows, in incidents where knowledge of perpetrators allows their identification as family member, acquaintance, or stranger, most offenders against juveniles (89 percent) are known to the victim (i.e., the offender is a family member or an acquaintance). Only 10 percent of the child victimizers in violent crimes are strangers, suggesting that while “stranger danger” may be an important concept in child safety training, it is far from sufficient. There are two violent crimes with relatively higher percentages of stranger perpetrators—kidnapping (23 percent) and robbery (59 percent). Kidnapping, however, also has a relatively high percentage of family offenders (36 percent) as do sex offenses (33 percent). Despite the stereotypes about stranger molesters and rapists, sex offenses are the crimes least likely to involve strangers as perpetrators.

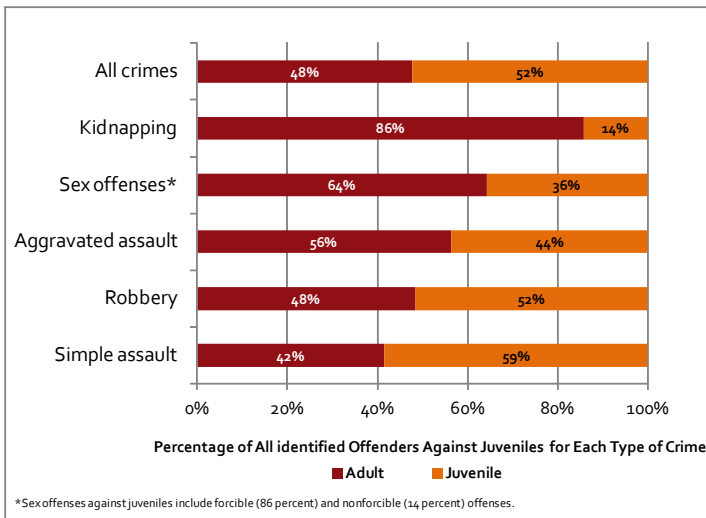
Juveniles are more likely than adults to be victimized by other juveniles, but their victimization is much less exclusively at the hands of juveniles than might be imagined. At least one adult is involved in 56 percent of the juvenile victimizations known to police and adults constitute 48 percent of all identified offenders against juveniles. However, NIBRS data may exaggerate the percentage of adult offenders, because adult-perpetrated crimes are more likely than juvenile-perpetrated crimes to be reported to the police, a reality reflected in the NCVS self-reported data (Finkelhor, et al., in submission; Finkelhor & Ormrod, 1999).

Figure 9. Juvenile Victimization, by Type of Crime and Offender's Relationship to the Victim



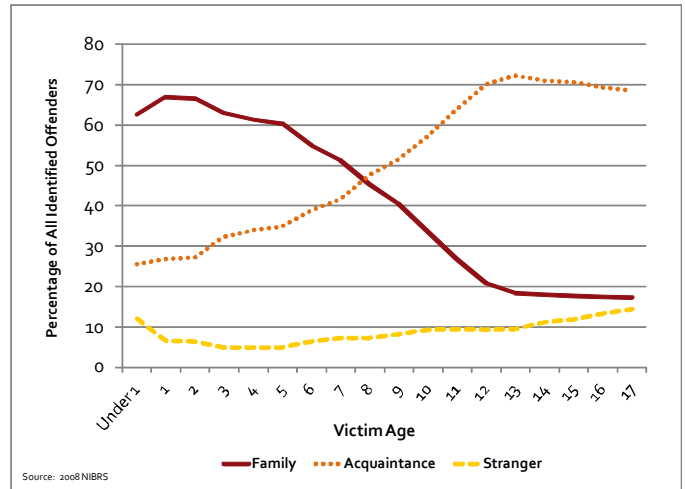
In the NIBRS jurisdictions, the percentage of adult perpetrators is highest for kidnapping (86 percent) and sex offenses (64 percent), consistent with the stereotype, but there is no specific crime, not even simple assault, for which the percentage of adult perpetrators (among all identified perpetrators) falls below 40 percent (figure 10). Thus, a substantial portion of the crimes reported to police involving child victims are cases that have the potential to be processed in the criminal (as opposed to juvenile) court. Conversely, kidnapping and sex crimes against juveniles have a substantial proportion of juvenile perpetrators (14 percent and 36 percent, respectively), something not necessarily reflected in the stereotypes of these crimes.

Figure 10. Juvenile Victimization, by Type of Crime and Offender's Age Group



The characteristics of perpetrators change quite dramatically, depending on the age of the victim (figure 11). For example, family perpetrators commit most of the reported crimes against juveniles younger than age 5, but this percentage declines steadily until adolescence, when family members constitute less than 20 percent of all perpetrators. In a nearly mirror opposite trend, the percentage of acquaintance perpetrators rises throughout childhood, reaching a steady level of approximately 70 percent for victims ages 12 and older. The percentage of perpetrators who are strangers also rises slightly, but not dramatically, as juvenile victims grow older and spend more time in public areas.

Figure 11. Juvenile Victimization (All Crimes), by Victim's Age and Offender's Relationship to the Victim



In NIBRS incident reports, the ratio of adult perpetrators to juvenile perpetrators also changes with the age of the victim (figure 12). Adult perpetrators predominate for children younger than age 9 but during school years juvenile perpetrators prevail, until the late teenage years. Then, as juvenile victims come closer to maturity and more of their peers reach adulthood (age 18), the level of adult perpetration rises once again. It may also be that as juvenile offenders reach adult status, they are more likely to be reported to the police, a pattern suggested by an analysis of NCVS data on reporting (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 1999).

Figure 12. Juvenile Victimization (All Crimes), by Victim's Age and Offender Age Group



Preteen Victims

One of the biggest opportunities data from NIBRS jurisdictions provide is the possibility of looking at crimes against children under age 12, a segment of the population that is not covered by the extensive self-report crime victimization information that has been available from the NCVS. Although children younger than age 12 represent only a small percentage of all reported victims (2 percent of all crimes and 5 percent of crimes against persons), their crime profile is unusual (table 2). Sexual assault accounts for almost one third of this preteen victimization, more than twice the proportion for older juveniles, and family offenders make up one half of the offenders against this group, more than twice the proportion for older juveniles. The familial and sexual nature of the crimes underscores some of the challenges this victim group poses for law enforcement. Victim and family cooperation with law enforcement is often problematic, as is the need to mitigate victim distress and trauma.

Table 2. Preteen and Teenage Crime Victimization Patterns

Outcome	Preteens (<12 years)	Teenagers (12-17 years)
Type of crime	n= 71,035 offenses	n= 186,165 offenses
Aggravated assault	13%	12%
Simple assault	53%	67%
Forcible sex offenses	27%	12%
Nonforcible sex offenses	2%	3%
Kidnaping	3%	1%
Robbery	2%	5%
All offenses	100%	100%
Relationship to offender	n= 70,779 offenders	n= 198,638 offenders
Family	48%	18%
Acquaintance	44%	70%
Stranger	7%	12%
All offenses	100%	100%

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

Conclusion

If patterns of crime against juveniles in the rest of the country parallel the patterns from the jurisdictions now reporting to NIBRS, it would appear that crimes against juveniles constitute about one in eleven of all the crimes currently reported to law enforcement officials. However, these crimes carry special burdens. About two-thirds of reported sex offenses involve juvenile victims. Moreover, crimes against children involve special investigatory and prosecutorial challenges. Some of these relate to the young age of victims—approximately one quarter of juvenile victims are under age 12. Some of these relate to the intimate character of the perpetrators, 26 percent of whom are family and 63 percent of whom are acquaintances.

The developing NIBRS database offers some welcome opportunities for analyzing and tracking this special category of crime victims. For example, it allows analysis of changes in crime victimization patterns across the stages of childhood. It also offers opportunities to look at special offender categories, such as parents and caretakers (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2001a).

The system may be able to highlight some obvious needs for law enforcement attention or training. For example, in recent years, sex offenses have been the major focus of those concerned with juvenile victims, but data from NIBRS jurisdictions reveal that aggravated assaults against juveniles are reported at about the same frequency. Little is known about the needs of such victims and the handling of their victimizations by the criminal and juvenile justice systems. In years to come, NIBRS should prove to be a valuable tool for researchers and practitioners interested in improving public policies toward juvenile victims.

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