

Reporting Assaults Against Juveniles to the Police

Barriers and Catalysts

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Reporting crimes to the police is a two-stage process. Victims and families first recognize whether a crime has occurred and, if so, are influenced by a variety of considerations in deciding whether to report it. In a national sample of physical and sexual assaults against juveniles, recognition of the assault as a crime was more likely for episodes involving adolescent (vs. preadolescent) victims, adult and multiple offenders, physical injuries, female victims, and when families had prior experiences with police. Among families who recognized the episode as a crime, actual reporting to police was more likely when the perpetrator was an adult, the family had been advised to report, the family had prior experience with the police, the family believed the police would take the episode seriously, and when the child was believed still to be in danger from the perpetrator. Reporting was less likely for assaults that occurred at school.

Keywords: police; reporting; juvenile victims; sexual assault

Most crimes against juveniles are not reported to the police. The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) found that only 28% of violent crimes against juveniles ages 12 to 17 become known to the police. This compares to 48% of crimes against adults, meaning that juvenile victimization is significantly underreported compared to adult victimization. The disparity is even larger for property crime: 10% for juvenile victims compared to 30% reporting for adults. Moreover, the disparities cannot be explained by differences in the nature of the crimes suffered by the two groups. So even after controlling for differences in such things as the level of injury, the use of a weapon, the location of the crime, and the identity and age of the perpetrator, there is a substantial underreporting associated simply with being a juvenile victim (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 1999, 2001). Indeed, the younger the juvenile, the greater the underreporting.

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The underreporting of juvenile victimization has a variety of possible sources, which we have categorized as Definitional, Jurisdictional, Developmental, Emotional/Attitudinal, and Material (Finkelhor, Wolak, & Berliner, 2001). Definitional factors refer to the reluctance to view assaultive and deviant behavior involving juvenile victims as crimes or as relevant to police. Instead, they are often viewed as normal parts of being young, as learning experiences, as fights, or as family problems. Jurisdictional factors refer to the fact that juveniles have multiple authorities built into their lives—parents, schools, child protective agencies—who have jurisdiction in handling victimizations and often serve as alternatives or gatekeepers to police reporting. Developmental factors refer to special developmental orientations of children and youth than can inhibit police reporting, such as the emphasis adolescents place on autonomy and independence from adult interference. Emotional and attitudinal factors relate to concerns about embarrassment, fear of retaliation, and concerns about secondary trauma from the justice system, which can be particularly intense among juvenile victims and their families. Material factors are the concerns about time and financial losses that sometimes inhibit police reporting of juvenile victimizations, although they may be no more influential than in the case of adult victims.

Some research has addressed the general issue of obstacles to police reporting, but very little has looked at juvenile victims in particular. Studies with mostly adult victim samples have shown that more serious and injurious crimes get reported more often (Bachman, 1998; Harlow, 1985). Friends and family can influence reporting as can positive attitudes about the police and previous positive experiences with the police. Demographic characteristics are weak predictors of reporting, but women and African Americans may be somewhat more likely to report (Bachman, 1998; Harlow, 1985).

Scattered evidence on issues related to the reporting of juvenile victimization is available from a variety of studies. For example, definitional issues are suggested in the NCVS by the number of nonreporters who characterize episodes of juvenile victimization as minor or "kid stuff" (Hashima & Finkelhor, 1999). The NCVS also signals the relevance of some jurisdictional factors, in that nonreported juvenile victimizations are more likely than adult victimizations (15% vs. 7%) to be reported to "other officials," presumably mostly school authorities in the case of juveniles (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 1999). Another national survey showed that violent victimizations of youth were three times more likely to be reported to schools than to the police (Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1994). Concerns about confidentiality, embarrassment, and possible offender retaliation are shown to be factors in reporting from studies on adults (Greenberg & Ruback, 1992; Kilpatrick, Saunders, Veronen, Best, & Von, 1987) and children (Finkelhor, 1984; Sauzier, 1989).

Concerns about the special difficulties that children and youth face at the hands of police and crime investigators have been widely voiced and have been central to the establishment of special agencies—like Children's Advocacy Centers—to improve this experience and, among other things, encourage more reporting of victimizations (Dziech & Schudson, 1989; Whitcomb, 1992).

This study grows out of the evidence that special dynamics surround the reporting of crimes against juveniles. These dynamics suggested the utility of a conceptual model for framing the process of reporting, especially in cases involving juvenile victims. This model, more fully described elsewhere (Finkelhor et al., 2001) is called the Two-Stage Model of Police Reporting. It suggests that there is an initial Recognition Stage in the wake of a victimization, in which the victim or victim's family places an interpretation on the episode that defines it as a crime (or not). Then, if the event is recognized as a crime, in a second phase, the Consideration Stage, the victim or family weighs the benefits and costs of reporting and is subject to additional influences based on advice or prior experiences in deciding whether to report. This study is an effort to confirm the Two-Stage Model of Police Reporting and to explore some of the factors that explain both the recognition of victimizations as crimes and their subsequent reporting to police.

METHOD

The Survey of Police Reporting Among Families of Child Assault Victims (Reporting Survey) consists of interviews with 157 parents or other primary caretakers from a national sample of households in which a juvenile was physically or sexually assaulted. The respondents were identified through a large national survey, the Second National Incidence Study of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMA2 2). During 1999, interviewers for NISMA2 spoke with caretakers in a nationally representative sample of 16,111 households containing youths 18 years and younger, screening for, among other things, episodes of physical and sexual assault against juveniles ages 0 to 17 that had occurred in the previous year. When households with juvenile assault victims were identified, NISMA2 2 interviewers obtained information about the details of incidents and asked respondents for contact information for the Reporting Survey follow-up telephone interviews, which generally took place within a few weeks. During the follow-up interviews, interviewers confirmed the episode reported in the previous interview and then asked an extensive series of questions about police reporting and law enforcement contact.

Caretakers were interviewed rather than youth victims themselves for two reasons. First, we wanted to cover the full age spectrum of juvenile victims from preschool through adolescence, and we could not administer such a complex interview to younger children. Second, we deemed that decisions about police reporting of juvenile victimizations are often made by and monitored by parents and other caretakers, and so they would be the best informants about the sequence of events and spectrum of considerations that might be involved.

Sample Information

There was some attrition in the final sample from those identified as eligible in the NISMART 2 survey. Of those eligible in NISMART 2, 46% of the respondents refused to give contact information, yielding 258 households for follow-up by interviewers. These households underwent additional screening for inclusion in the Reporting Survey, based on information provided to NISMART 2 interviewers. To be included at this second screening, the child victim had to have suffered a completed assault or a serious attempt (involving a weapon or significant danger to the victim), and the victim had to be age 17 or younger at the time of the incident. Fifty-eight households were ineligible for inclusion because the assaults involved attempts that did not meet the required level of seriousness, because the victims were older than 17 when the incidents occurred, or in a few cases, because contact information was inadequate due to computer errors.

Finally, telephone numbers for 200 eligible households were provided to Reporting Survey interviewers. Of these numbers, 9% were not active residential phone numbers at the time of the Reporting Survey, and 4% were ineligible for other reasons, including cases in which the designated respondent was not in the household, was incapacitated, or could not be reached. Of the remaining 174 households, 17 refused to be interviewed (10%), whereas 157 completed the interview (90%).

This national sample of parents or caretakers in families with a juvenile assault victim was mostly female (84%) and White (87%), living with a spouse (58%), had some college education or more (64%), and lived in a household where the head of household was employed full time (79%) (see Table 1). About a quarter of the households (28%) had incomes less than \$25,000. Slightly fewer than half were living in small towns or rural areas. There were no significant differences in these characteristics between the respondents who completed interviews and the caretakers in households who refused to give contact information or those who gave contact information but did not complete interviews for other reasons.

TABLE 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>% (N = 157)</i>
Respondent gender	
Male	16
Female	84
Mean age of respondent	39 years
Respondent race	
White	87
African American	6
Other	7
Marital status	
Married and living with spouse	58
Divorced or separated	25
Never married	8
Widowed	5
Living with partner	4
Household income ^a	
Less than \$25,000	28
\$25,000 through \$40,000	31
More than \$40,000	40
Educational level	
Not high school graduate	5
High school graduate	31
Some college	32
College graduate	32
Employment of head of household	
Employed full-time	79
Unemployed (includes retired)	11
Homemaker or student	6
Employed part-time	5
Type of area	
Large city	19
Suburb of large city	17
Large town (25,000 to 100,000)	16
Small town	27
Rural area	21

a. Some categories do not add up to 100% because of rounding or missing data.

Variables

The goal of this analysis was to test the two stages of the proposed model of police reporting by identifying a sample of serious victimizations and examining what features of the crimes, victims, and families predicted recognition of victimizations as crimes and, for those victimizations that were recognized as crimes, what characteristics acted as barriers or catalysts to police

reporting by families as they considered whether to report an incident to the police.

Victimizations. Assault victimizations were initially identified through four screener questions in the NISMART 2 survey, which asked about physical or sexual assaults against a youth in the household in the past 12 months (i.e., "In the past 12 months, was there any time when anyone tried to sexually molest, rape, attack, or beat up [this child]?") When a respondent answered one of these questions affirmatively, NISMART 2 interviewers conducted a follow-up interview to gather details about the characteristics of the incident. These variables were included in the data set for the Reporting Survey, and their accuracy was confirmed at the beginning of the Reporting Survey interview.

Dependent variables. The dependent variables were two dichotomous variables: (a) recognized as a crime or police matter (yes or no) and (b) reported to police (yes or no). Recognized as a crime or police matter was coded on the basis of two questions: "Thinking back to when you first found out about this, did you think what happened was a crime?" and "When you first found out, did you think what happened was something the police would be concerned about?" If a respondent answered yes to either of these questions, the incident was coded as *recognized* as a crime or police matter.

To determine whether an incident was reported to the police, respondents were asked, "Did you or anyone in your household report this incident to the police?" This definition of reporting is narrower than the definition of police reporting used in the NCVS, which includes all incidents known to the police "by any means," including direct police observation and reports made by others outside the household. We focused on household members' reports alone, because the conceptual framework for this study targets family decision making related to reporting. According to all available evidence, victims and caretakers play the predominant role in the reporting process. Eighty-five percent of the police reports in this study were made by household members, by far the greatest single source of reports. Reporting by sources outside of the family certainly entails different considerations, and not only did we not have access to first-hand information on these outside decision makers, but the number of cases in this survey was too small to draw any reliable conclusions.

Independent variables related to the Recognition Stage. The independent variables, all of which were coded dichotomously, included factors thought to be related to the two stages of the model of police reporting. Variables

related to the recognition stage include "characteristics of the assault episode," most of which were derived from the NISMART 2 interview as described above. Because of the theoretical importance of victim and perpetrator age, four dummy variables were constructed to explore that relationship. These variables represented preadolescent victims (ages 2 through 11) with adolescent perpetrators (ages 12 through 17), preadolescent victims with adult perpetrators (older than age 17), adolescent victims with adolescent perpetrators, and adolescent victims with adult perpetrators. Four additional episode characteristics were asked about in the Reporting Survey: whether the victim was injured and three questions about victim culpability, including whether the victim was at fault to some degree for the assault, lied to some degree about the incident, or hit, hurt, or tried to hurt the perpetrator. Other independent variables were "characteristics of the caretaker respondent": gender, race, age, marital status, income, educational level, employment, type of area of residence, and whether the respondent had prior experience with police. Respondents had prior experience with police if, before the juvenile assault that was the subject of this interview, any member of their household had been a victim of or witness to a crime that was reported to the police or been arrested as a suspect in a crime.

Independent variables related to the Consideration Stage. The episode and respondent characteristics used in the Recognition Stage analysis were also used in the analysis of the Consideration Stage along with measures of social influence, alternative jurisdictions for dealing with the assault, the respondent's perception of the seriousness of the assault, and concerns about police involvement and about the perpetrator. "Social influence" was measured by two questions, which were combined into one variable. Respondents who said they were advised by someone to report the assault or, for incidents that occurred at school, said the school advised or discussed reporting with them were coded as being *advised* to report the assault. "Alternative jurisdictions" were measured with two variables, one that denoted whether the incident happened at school and one that denoted whether the family itself dealt directly with the perpetrator or, for juvenile perpetrators, the perpetrator or his or her parents. "Seriousness" was defined by asking respondents to rate the assault on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = *not serious at all* to 10 = *as serious as you can imagine*). Assaults rated at 6 or higher were coded as highly serious.

"Concerns about police involvement" were measured by a series of questions about attitudes toward the police (i.e., "When you first found out about this, did you think it was your duty to report it to the police?" ". . . did you think the police would take it seriously?" ". . . did you worry other people

would find out about this if you went to the police?”). “Concerns about the perpetrator” were measured by a series of five questions (i.e., “. . . did you worry the one who did this would get in trouble with the law?” “. . . did you think the one who did this might try to get back at your child or your family if you reported this?”).

Analyses. Bivariate cross-tabulations were examined to see if the model involving a two-stage recognition–consideration process was supported. Because it was (as will be shown below), further analysis was divided into the prediction of “Recognition (as a crime/police matter),” and then, among assaults that were recognized crimes, the prediction of “Reporting.” In the first stage, characteristics of assault incidents and respondent characteristics were entered into a logistic regression, using a forward stepwise method, to determine which characteristics predicted that parents would recognize assault incidents as crimes. In the second analysis, characteristics of the assault, respondent characteristics, and variables relevant to the consideration of police reporting (social influence, alternative jurisdiction, seriousness, concerns about police involvement and about the perpetrator) were entered into a logistic regression, also using a forward stepwise method. This method was chosen because of the large number of variables to be tested with a relatively small number of cases, particularly at the second stage of the model when $n = 87$. The forward stepwise method allows the variables to be entered one at a time and then removed, based on their significance level, rather than entering the variables into the model together. At the second stage of the model, two logistic regressions were performed. In the second regression, variables were entered using the forward stepwise method, but then a final variable was forced into the regression equation. Logistic regression tables report an “Adjusted Relative Risk,” which are the logistic odds ratios, adjusted by a method proposed by Zhang and Yu (1998), to approximate true relative risk when the outcomes of interest are common (greater than 10%).

FINDINGS

Nine tenths of the assaults reported by parents were physical assaults (90%), and one tenth were sexual assaults (see Table 2). They occurred across the age span, half against adolescents, 39% against 6- to 11-year-old children, and 11% to preschoolers. (Because of the small number of preschoolers, these were collapsed with the 6- to 11-year-olds for further analyses.) Two thirds of the victims were male. Three quarters (79%) of the assailants were other youth and three quarters (75%) were acquaintances of the victim.

TABLE 2: Characteristics of Assault Episodes

<i>Episode Characteristic</i>	<i>% (n = 157)</i>
Type of assault	
Physical	90
Sexual	10
Number of perpetrators	
Single	70
Multiple	30
Relationship of perpetrator to victim ^a	
Acquaintance	75
Stranger	20
Family	6
Age of victim	
0 through 5 years	11
6 through 11 years	39
12 through 17 years	50
Age of perpetrator	
Preadolescent (< 12)	33
Adolescent (12-17)	46
Adult (18+)	21
Gender of perpetrator	
Male	85
Female	15
Victim was injured	
No	52
Yes	48
Weapon was involved	
No	80
Yes	20
Victim gender	
Male	66
Female	34
Victim at fault in assault incident to some degree	
No	57
Yes	43
Victim lied about incident, even a little	
No	84
Yes	16
Victim hit, hurt, or tried to hurt perpetrator	
No	78
Yes	22
Incident recognized as crime	
No	45
Yes	55
Incident reported by a household member	
No	67
Yes	33

a. Some categories do not add up to 100% because of rounding.

Family members made up 6% of assailants, and strangers made up 20%. Thirty percent of incidents involved more than one assailant. In 48%, the victim was injured in the course of the episode. Although the age range in this sample includes many children younger than those in the NCVS (which uses a 12-year-old cutoff), a comparison of this sample with the NCVS for victims of the same age range shows a similarity on many episode characteristics (type of assault, victim gender, perpetrator age), but this sample had somewhat more acquaintance (and fewer stranger) perpetrators, higher levels of victim injury, and more reporting to police. These last two differences may reflect the fact that respondents in this study were caretakers and not victims themselves as in the NCVS.

Recognition Stage

Of the episodes, 55% ($n = 87$) were recognized as crimes or police matters, and 33% ($n = 51$) were actually reported to the police by a household member. Consistent with the predictions of the Two-Stage Model, defining the episode as a crime stood in unique relationship with reporting. Of the episodes that were not recognized as crimes, only a single case (1% of total) was reported to the police. (That episode contained another more "crime-like" event involving another victim, which appeared to be the basis for the police report.) Of the incidents recognized as crimes, a majority (57%, $n = 50$) were reported.

Certain characteristics of the episodes influenced the likelihood that assaults against juvenile victims would be defined as crimes or police matters, as shown in the bivariate associations in Table 3. The ages of the victims and offenders were particularly salient factors in predicting recognition. Victimization of adolescents were much more likely to be recognized as crimes or police matters than victimizations of preadolescents. At the same time, offenses by adults were more likely to be recognized as crimes than offenses by adolescents, whose offenses in turn were recognized as more criminal than those of preadolescents. The combination of victim and offender age groups (see Figure 1) shows a regular progression from preadolescent-against-preadolescent episodes, only a third of which were recognized as crimes or police matters, to episodes involving adults assaulting adolescents, which were almost always so recognized.

Other factors influencing whether an episode was recognized as a crime or police matter included injury to the victim or having multiple or stranger perpetrators. Households in which the caretaker respondent was not living with a spouse or was not employed full time were also more likely to recognize episodes as crimes. A prior experience with the police also made a difference in

TABLE 3: Recognition Stage: Bivariate Differences Between Episodes Recognized as Crimes and Those Not Recognized ($N = 157$)

Characteristic	% Recognized	n	Adjusted Relative Risk ^a	95% Confidence Interval ^a
Episode characteristics				
Type of assault				
Physical	54	141		
Sexual	69	16	n.s.	—
Number of perpetrators				
Single	49	110		
Multiple	70	47	2.4**	1.2 to 5.1
Relationship of perpetrator to victim				
Known	52	126		
Stranger	71	31	2.3*	1.0 to 5.4
Age of victim				
Younger than age 12	40	78		
Age 12 through 17	71	79	2.0***	1.5 to 2.4
Age of perpetrator				
Preadolescent	33	52		
Adolescent (12-17) (preadolescent comparison category)	60	72	1.6**	1.2 to 1.9
Adult (18+) (preadolescent comparison category)	82	33	4.2***	2.4 to 5.6
Gender of perpetrator				
Male	53	133		
Female	71	24	2.2†	0.9 to 5.6
Victim was injured				
No	42	81		
Yes	70	76	1.9***	1.4 to 2.3
Weapon was involved				
No	52	125		
Yes	69	32	2.0†	0.9 to 4.6
Victim gender				
Male	51	104		
Female	64	53	n.s.	—
Victim at some fault in assault incident				
No	60	90		
Yes	49	67	n.s.	—
Victim lied about incident, even a little				
No	55	132		
Yes	56	25	n.s.	—
Victim hit, hurt, or tried to hurt perpetrator				
No	59	123		
Yes	44	34	n.s.	—

(continued)

TABLE 3 (continued)

Characteristic	% Recognized	n	Adjusted Relative Risk ^a	95% Confidence Interval ^a
Respondent characteristics				
Respondent gender				
Male	40	25		
Female	58	132	2.1 [†]	0.9 to 5.0
Respondent race				
Non-White	52	21		
White	56	136	n.s.	—
Respondent age				
19 through 39	53	86		
40 through 62	58	71	n.s.	—
Marital status				
Married and living with spouse	46	91		
Not married and living with spouse	68	66	2.5**	1.3 to 4.8
Household income				
More than \$25,000	52	114		
\$25,000 or less	65	43	n.s.	—
Educational level				
Some college or higher	53	101		
High school or less	59	56	n.s.	—
Head of household employment				
Full-time	51	124		
Not full-time	73	33	2.1*	1.1 to 3.7
Type of area				
City or suburb of city	46	56		
Large or small town or rural	60	101	0.6 [†]	0.3 to 1.1
Respondent had prior experience with police				
No	46	78		
Yes	65	79	2.1*	1.1 to 4.0

a. Adjusted to correct for overestimation of risk (Zhang & Yu, 1998).

† $p \leq .10$. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.

recognition. There was more recognition when a weapon was involved in the offense, but the association was only marginally significant. Similarly, female respondents were marginally more likely to recognize incidents as crimes.

In a multiple logistic regression to examine the independent contribution of these factors (see Table 4), the ages of victims and perpetrators continued to be significant predictors of recognition (with the exception that preadolescent victims with teen perpetrators—a cell with a small “n”—was not significantly different from preadolescent victims with preadolescent perpetrators).

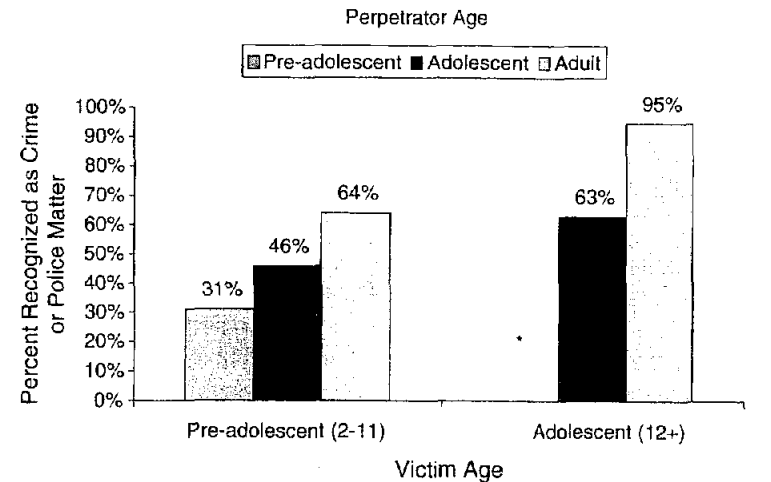


Figure 1: Recognition of Assault as a Crime by Age of Victim and Perpetrator

TABLE 4: Logistic Regression Predicting Parental Recognition That An Assault Episode Is A Crime (N = 157)

Variable ^a	B	Adjusted Relative Risk ^b	95% Confidence Interval ^b
Adolescent victim and adult perpetrator	4.211	34.9***	6.6 to 64.3
Victim injured	1.449	2.1***	1.4 to 2.5
Prior experience with the police	1.301	1.8**	1.3 to 2.1
Multiple perpetrators	1.550	2.7***	1.6 to 3.7
Preadolescent victim and adult perpetrator	2.233	9.3**	2.3 to 37.5
Adolescent victim and adolescent perpetrator	1.217	1.9**	1.3 to 2.5
Female victim	1.040	1.9*	1.1 to 2.7
-2 log likelihood	153.031		
Model chi-square	62.773***		
R ² (Cox & Snell)	.33		
R ² (Nagelkerke)	.44		

a. The variables are listed in the order they were entered into the regression equation.

b. Adjusted to correct for overestimation of risk (Zhang & Yu, 1998).

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.

Injury, multiple perpetrators, and prior experience with police also all appeared as significant in the regression. One variable that was not significant in the bivariate comparisons, victim gender, entered after other factors

were controlled for, suggesting that episodes involving female victims were somewhat more likely to be recognized as crimes. When this gender variable was excluded, the sexual assault variable entered the equation, suggesting that some combination of female victim or sexual assault could contribute to the recognition as a crime.

Consideration Stage

We examined the operation of the Consideration Stage of the reporting process by looking at the factors, both incident characteristics and family considerations, that were associated with police reporting among the 87 cases in which families defined the episode as a crime (see Table 5). Of the incident characteristics that predicted whether an assault was recognized as a crime, only one, adult perpetrator, was significantly associated with police reporting in the Consideration Stage of the model as well. It is important that victim age was not associated with police reporting, despite its importance as a factor in the Recognition Stage. Two social influence and jurisdictional variables were associated with reporting. Being advised by someone to report the incident to police was associated with reporting, and incidents occurring at school were associated with nonreporting. When families perceived episodes as "highly serious," they were more likely to report. Several attitudes and expectations about the police were associated with reporting: trusting the local police, believing there was a duty to report, believing the police would take the matter seriously, and believing that the child would feel better as a result. Not wanting others to find out about the incident was also related to reporting (marginally significant, $p < .10$), but reporters worried about this at higher rates than nonreporters. (It appears that this worry did not deter people from reporting, but was, rather, a concern of people who reported.) Concerns about the perpetrator were mostly not related to reporting, but parents who thought their children were still in danger from the perpetrator were more likely to report (although $p < .10$). Less educated respondents and those with prior experience with police were also more likely to report.

All factors except one were entered into a stepwise logistic regression (see Table 6). "Duty to report" was excluded from the model because of its extremely high correlation with reporting ($r = .496^{***}$) and because we deemed it as conceptually equivalent for some respondents with their "decision to report." (When "duty to report" was forced into the model after other factors were taken into account, it had no influence.) In addition, examination of the final model showed two highly correlated variables ($r = .584^{**}$), "thought reporting would make child feel better" and "believed police would

TABLE 5: Consideration Stage: Bivariate Differences Between Reported and Unreported Incidents ($n = 87$)

Characteristic	% Reported	n	Adjusted Relative Risk ^b	95% Confidence Interval ^b
Episode characteristics ^b				
Age of perpetrator				
Juvenile (17 and younger)	45	60		
Adult (18 and older)	85	27	4.3***	1.9 to 6.8
Social influence and jurisdictional				
Advised to report to police				
No	47	58		
Yes	79	29	2.8**	1.4 to 4.4
Incident happened at school				
No	70	47		
Yes	43	40	0.3**	0.1 to 0.8
Parents dealt directly with perpetrator				
No	53	57		
Yes	67	30	n.s.	—
Seriousness of incident				
Respondent considered incident highly serious				
No	37	24		
Yes	65	63	1.4*	1.1 to 1.5
Concerns about police involvement				
Trusted the local police				
No	17	6		
Yes	61	81	1.1*	1.0 to 1.1
Believed it was their duty to report				
No	12	17		
Yes	69	70	1.6***	1.4 to 1.7
Wanted to put the incident behind them				
No	43	23		
Yes	63	64	n.s.	—
Believed police would take the matter seriously				
No	23	17		
Yes	66	70	1.4**	1.2 to 1.5
Worried how the police would treat their child				
No	58	57		
Yes	57	30	n.s.	—
Worried the police would upset their child				
No	55	53		
Yes	62	34	n.s.	—
Did not want others to find out what happened				
No	54	76		
Yes	82	11	3.3 [†]	0.8 to 9.6

(continued)

TABLE 5 (continued)

Characteristic	% Reported	n	Adjusted Relative Risk ^a	95% Confidence Interval ^a
Thought reporting would make child feel better				
No	28	25		
Yes	69	62	1.7***	1.3 to 1.8
Concerns about perpetrator				
Thought child still in danger from perpetrator				
No	39	18		
Yes	62	69	1.2†	1.0 to 1.3
Wanted the perpetrator punished				
No	57	7		
Yes	57	80	n.s.	—
Did not want perpetrator in trouble with police				
No	58	72		
Yes	53	15	n.s.	—
Feared retaliation from perpetrator if reported				
No	58	19		
Yes	57	68	n.s.	—
Believed perpetrator would harm others				
No	71	7		
Yes	56	80	n.s.	—
Respondent characteristics ^b				
Respondent race				
Non-White	82	11		
White	54	76	3.3†	0.8 to 9.6
Educational level				
Some college or higher	46	54		
High school or less	76	33	2.3**	1.3 to 3.3
Respondent had prior experience with police				
No	44	36		
Yes	67	51	2.5*	1.0 to 6.0

a. Adjusted to correct for overestimation of risk (Zhang & Yu, 1998).

b. Only significant characteristics are listed.

† $p \leq .10$. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.

take the matter seriously," competing for entry in the model. For theoretical reasons, we gave priority to the latter.

The regression showed two very strong predictors of reporting: assaults with adult perpetrators were much more likely than other assaults to be reported to the police and being advised to report the incident was very influential in reporting. Parents who were advised to report the assault to the police were almost five times more likely than other parents to do so. Having

TABLE 6: Consideration Stage: Logistic Regressions Predicting Reporting After Parental Recognition That Assault Episodes Are Crimes

Variable (N = 87) ^a	B	Adjusted Relative Risk ^b	95% Confidence Interval ^b
Adult perpetrator	2.409	5.3**	1.9 to 8.1
Advised to report to police	2.859	4.8***	2.3 to 5.8
Prior experience with police	2.880	2.0***	1.6 to 2.1
Police would take seriously	2.033	1.4*	1.1 to 1.5
Child was still in danger	2.843	1.4**	1.2 to 1.4
Happened at school	-1.448	0.3*	0.1 to 0.9
-2 log likelihood	65.717		
Model chi-square	52.941***		
R ² (Cox & Snell)	.46		
R ² (Nagelkerke)	.61		

a. The variables are listed in the order they were entered into the regression equation.

b. Adjusted to correct for overestimation of risk (Zhang & Yu, 1998).

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.

prior experience with the police and believing the police would take the report seriously also predicted reporting. One variable that had not been significant in the bivariate comparisons, being concerned that the child was still in danger, entered the model once other variables were controlled for. Also, assaults that happened at school were less likely to be reported.

Several factors that are frequently raised as possible inhibitors or incentives to reporting also were notable for not making a difference in this analysis. Confidentiality concerns or worries that others might find out as a result of reporting were not factors in reporting, although the bivariate analysis suggests this may be a concern once the decision to report is made, rather than an inhibiting factor. Concerns about the perpetrator—either wanting to protect him or her from getting into trouble or eagerness to see him or her punished—also made no difference, although parents who believed their children were still in danger from the perpetrator were more likely to report. Issues related to protecting children from the impact of the police seemed minimal. Families did not seem influenced in their decision to report by wanting to put the episode behind them or being concerned about how the police would treat their child. It seems likely that the influence of families' concerns about children's well-being were captured by how confident they were about how seriously the police would consider the matter, rather than any independent concern about whether the police would treat the child well or how the child would feel.

DISCUSSION

These interviews with a national sample of families with a juvenile assault victim confirm that a complex mix of considerations influences the decision to report. The question of whether the family recognizes the episode as a crime does appear to be a gateway issue, supporting the idea of a two-stage process. Almost no family reporting occurs without such a definition of the episode, and such a definition (in what we are calling the Recognition Stage) is more likely for episodes involving adolescent (as opposed to preadolescent) victims, adult and multiple offenders, physical injuries, female victims, and when families had prior experiences with police. Then, among those who recognize an episode as a crime, in what we are calling the Consideration Stage, reporting is made much more likely when the assault was perpetrated by an adult or families are advised to report. Other factors that catalyze reporting in this stage are having prior experience with the police, believing the police would take the episode seriously, or believing the child to be still in danger. School episodes were also less likely to be reported.

In considering these findings, a variety of caveats need to be borne in mind. First, these findings apply only to juvenile victimization episodes that are known to families. Many juvenile victimizations, especially to adolescents, may not be disclosed to and surely escape detection by family. The considerations that affect the reporting of these undetected episodes are certainly very different. In addition, even for episodes about which families are aware, in this study we only have access to the parental perceptions about decision making. The perceptions of the victims themselves and the considerations that are important to them in the reporting process may be very different.

These findings are also limited by the smallness of the sample. Many additional considerations might have proven significant in a larger sample that could more sensitively detect differences. Further, because of the small sample size, the subsamples of sexual assaults and assaults perpetrated by family members were too small to analyze separately. It is certainly possible that different factors predict recognition and reporting when children experience sexual assaults or intrafamily violence.

Conceptual Implications

Most assaults against juveniles do not get reported to the police, but it is not necessarily a problem that they do not. Although, in general, our normative expectation is that crimes ought to be reported to the police, we also recognize classes of technically criminal acts that are not well suited to formal

criminal justice system adjudication or that may be better handled by other, less formal mechanisms. Some assaults against and by children fall into this category, as well as minor thefts and property damage, and disorderly conduct even involving adults. However, judgments about the irrelevance or inappropriateness of formal justice system adjudication are social constructions and not based on clear evidence of the negative consequences of reporting or optimized institutional functioning. In recent history, some of these presumptions have been questioned and changed, most notably in the case of domestic violence, which was once viewed as outside the purview of formal adjudication, except in its more severe forms (Sherman, 1992).

In the case of child victimization, there has also been an expansion in the past 25 years in the range of episodes that are judged to be appropriate for criminal justice system involvement, that is, in what is recognized as a crime against a child. The expansion has occurred with regard to such offenses as date rape, sexual harassment, physical and sexual assaults by parents, and sexual molestation by juveniles (Dziech & Schudson, 1989; Heinz, Ryan, & Bengis, 1991; Smith, 1995; Stein, 1997). To some extent, this scope of involvement has increased as the police and justice system have developed institutions (like juvenile officers, school resource officers, child sensitive investigators) seen as more suitable for working with this population (Whitcomb, Hook, & Alexander, 2001). Nevertheless, people are inclined to still see an assault by an 8-year-old against another 8-year-old as inappropriate for police intervention. But this may be in part simply because police have not yet developed institutions and practices for dealing with such assaults. We have no problem seeing school authorities as appropriate arbiters of such offenses, even when they use policies and procedures similar to those used by the justice system.

As the scope of police concern has increased, interest in child victimization has also resulted in dramatically increased reporting of crimes such as child molestations that would have always been considered appropriate for police intervention even under earlier standards. Reports of serious child molestations by adults skyrocketed during the 1970s and 1980s (Sedlak, 1991; Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996). At the same time, other sorts of child victim episodes that were previously thought of as accidents have proven, under more careful investigation, to be parental homicides and aggravated assaults (U.S. Advisory Board, 1995). Thus, the increased reporting of juvenile victimization has not simply resulted from changing definitions but also from increased surveillance for and reduction in the barriers against the reporting of conventionally serious crimes.

It can clarify these processes to characterize victimizations that go unreported to the police as falling into three categories. The first are victimiza-

tions that are universally viewed as noncriminal. This clearly includes most corporal punishment (which is specifically exempted by law) as well as assaults by preschool-age children (with the possible exception of those that are sexual or cause lethal or extremely serious physical injuries). There is widespread agreement that these, under current social arrangements, should not be reported to the police. This would even include cases, such as one in this sample, where one 6-year-old severely choked and smashed the head of another 6-year-old into the window of a school bus. At the other end of the spectrum, there are victimizations that almost everyone agrees do constitute crimes and require a police report—these include sexual assaults and physical assaults with serious injuries or weapons committed by adults and teenagers against juveniles of any age. Even these, we now realize, are often unreported to police, but not because they are seen as noncriminal.

Finally, there is a large class of juvenile victimizations that are normatively ambiguous as crimes, what might be called the “criminally ambiguous” acts. These include simple assaults by parents and some other adult authorities—for example, the hitting with potentially dangerous objects, punching, and slapping—and may depend on the degree of injury and the age of the child. It also includes assaults by teens on other teens and younger children depending again on how injurious they are and whether weapons or gangs are involved. The standards are probably different for criminally ambiguous sexual assaults, because parents and adults do not get a disciplinary exemption, and even sexual aggression between children is seen as more deviant. Still, 5 of the 17 sexual assaults identified in this sample were not viewed as crimes, and these fell into two categories: sexual aggressions committed by preteens (e.g., an 8-year-old boy who took off his clothes and sat on the face of 5-year-old boy) and sexual aggressions by teens that involved no or only transient physical contact (threats or grabbing). In addition to perpetrator and episode characteristics, the bounds of the criminally ambiguous episodes probably vary a great deal according to individual family and community norms, and police practices.

Unfortunately, our findings, although supportive of the outlines of this categorization, cannot truly confirm it. There were few categories of episodes in the study for which virtually all or virtually none of the episodes were recognized as crimes. In the category of adult perpetrators against adolescents, 95% of assaults were recognized as crimes. But this group of adult-on-adolescent assaults did not include any cases of parents assaulting teenage children, many of which would probably not have been recognized as criminal had they been described. At the other extreme, most assaults by preadolescents on other preadolescents were not recognized as crimes, but 31% were (primarily involving older preadolescents), suggesting that even

among the most conventionally noncriminal episodes there are always exceptions. The empirical evidence suggests that the recognition of assaults as crimes involves an interplay of a number of factors that may interact in a complex way.

Our data confirm that the age of victim and age of perpetrator grid are crucial core elements in recognizing something as a crime, with injury, multiple perpetrators, weapons, sexual intent, and even possibly gender of victim as complicating factors, and other contextual matters like experience with police as contributing as well. This study is unfortunately not able to test fully all the elements of this classification, given its limited size. For example, there were relatively few sexual assaults in the sample, relatively few assaults by preadolescents, and relatively few assaults by family members. Patterns of crime definition almost certainly vary considerably within these subgroups.

The criminally ambiguous acts are ones where police reporting could be greatly increased if police were interested in broadening their jurisdiction. One can find numerous examples of such categories where police have taken jurisdiction as a result of family or victim initiative (see, for example, a recent case of police investigation of elementary-school-age sexual assault; Nacelewicz, 2000; “Responsibility for the Injustice,” 2000) or as a result of community policy (for example, where police and prosecutors agree to investigate and charge parental assaults investigated by child protection agencies; Smith, 1995).

The analysis in this study that pertains to reporting (as opposed to recognition) applies to some instances of criminally ambiguous episodes as well as to the conventionally serious crimes. But it clearly suggests that recognizing something as a crime does not guarantee reporting. There are doubts in families’ minds about whether crimes are worth reporting, especially when the perpetrator is a juvenile or they have any concern that the police might not take the episode seriously.

Policy Implications

The findings of this survey suggest ways in which police reporting of juvenile victimization could be stimulated as a matter of public policy. First, there is the finding that both recognition and reporting are affected by prior experience with police. This clearly suggests that increased police-citizen interactions, like the kind envisioned by community policing initiatives, will encourage families to view victimizations as crimes and as potentially and actually reportable. When police have more interactions with families, they will get more reports. Second, there is the finding that reporting is greater among those who view the police as likely to take the episode seriously. This

is reinforced by the finding (significant in the bivariate, but not the multivariate, analysis) that recognition is higher among those who live outside of cities and city-suburbs. City dwellers may have internalized the perception that police in those jurisdictions are so busy with "serious conventional" crimes that they are not interested in or prepared to think about juvenile victimizations, whereas nonurban residents may, by contrast, see their police as more general community helpers. In other words, there may be a perception of police "domain-availability" as well as actual network proximity. In both cases, it suggests that when police evince an interest in juvenile victimizations, it can increase both recognition and reporting. Such police interest can probably be demonstrated by having special child victimization units, by taking action in child victim cases that reach the news media—especially ones like juvenile-on-juvenile encounters that might be seen as marginally reportable—and by conducting public education campaigns for schools and families on juvenile victimization issues such as bullying and property crime. Police may want to directly advertise and announce to the community that they take such juvenile victimizations seriously.

Another very strong practical finding in the study concerns the effect of advice. Families who were advised to report were enormously more likely to actually report. The study was unfortunately not detailed enough to be able to compare in a statistically sensitive manner advice from various sources, but advice from school officials was not conspicuously more influential in this regard than advice from other sources. This certainly suggests, however, that police could increase reporting by encouraging officials and citizens alike to advise juvenile crime victims and their families to report their victimizations. This may not be as easy as it sounds because many potential advisors may mistrust the police, but police may be able to do more to allay such suspicions and reluctance, especially among those in official circles.

Another finding from the study with potential policy implications is the lower level of police reporting for assaults that occur in schools, a finding highlighted by the large number of juvenile crime victims in the NCVS who give "report to another authority" as an explanation of nonreporting to police (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 1999). When assaults occur in schools, it is understandable why victims and family members would defer to the governing school authorities in deciding whether to involve police. School authorities do not automatically involve police and, in fact, do not seem very often to take the initiative to report when family members defer. In this study, only 11% of the 57 offenses occurring in schools that were not reported by household members became known to the police through some other reporter. Whether school authorities provide a good alternative response system for assault victim is a very important and unexplored question. It is quite possible that

schools' individualistic knowledge of the victims and offenders, and the important sanctions and social control mechanisms they wield, may give them advantages over the police and formal justice system. It is also clear from cases brought to litigation in recent years that schools can sometimes be an impediment to victim protection and justice (Stein, 1997). What seems important, based on these findings that schools appear to intercept police reports, is that school officials and law enforcement develop protocols and mutual understandings about the kinds of assault episodes that warrant police reporting and that victims and their families at least be fully informed about options and implications of the different reporting scenarios. Studies comparing police and school management of assault would also be helpful.

The findings from this study do not give support to some of the most commonly mentioned barriers to police reporting. For example, there was little evidence in the study that families were concerned that police involvement would upset their child or broadcast the news of the victimization too widely. There was also little evidence that families failed to report because they were either afraid of perpetrator retaliation or wanted to protect the perpetrator from a criminal record. There was also surprisingly little evidence that families were inhibited when they thought the juvenile victim precipitated the victimization in some way or had covered it up in some way. These concerns are all frequently discussed in the victim advocacy literature. However, they may be less common than many people think, or they may apply primarily to victims of sexual assault or intrafamily violence, subgroups we could not analyze independently.

Research Initiatives

The issues of what is viewed as crime and what is viewed as reportable in the domain of juvenile victimization has so many considerable policy implications that it is worthy of much more research. Given the range of potential contributing factors to include in an analysis, it will be important to have large samples of victims and, particularly, to examine some of the reporting issues with sample subgroups, such as youth who have been sexually abused or assaulted by family members or who are ethnic minorities. We would also urge replicating research of this type using youth themselves as respondents. Other studies that could enhance knowledge about recognition and reporting issues could be based on vignettes of episodes that could be given to youth and parents to obtain judgments about which were crimes and which were in need of reporting.

One obvious venue for such research is the NCVS. The barriers to crime reporting are actually a central issue of the NCVS, which is a very large sur-

vey, but unfortunately, the NCVS has several significant limitations in the exploration of this issue with regard to juveniles. First, the NCVS does not interview youth younger than age 12, one of the groups for whom the issue of crime recognition and reporting is most important. Second, the strong "crime context" of the NCVS questionnaire may work to exclude many of the criminally ambiguous situations that would be of central interest to such a research undertaking. However, within its current framework, the data from NCVS could be made much more useful for the issue of juvenile crime reporting by several changes in the current questionnaire. One would be to ask a systematic series of Consideration Stage-type questions of all crime victims, whether they reported or not. Under its current structure, different questions are asked of nonreporters and reporters, making it impossible to compare the two. Second, the types of questions asked and answer categories used could be more relevant and specific to the reporting issues involved in juvenile victimizations. For example, in its current structure, interviewers are allowed to simply code the reason for nonreporting as "kid stuff," which fails to probe what aspects of the episode created this perception in the victim. Similarly, when respondents say they did not report the crime to police because they reported to other authorities, no information is gleaned on which authorities (for example, school officials vs. child protection officials) and whether this was viewed as a substitute for reporting to police or simply with the expectation that the other authority would make the decision about police reporting. The NCVS might also consider conducting some kind of special supplemental study on reporting, with a focus on juvenile victims. It is important to note that although one of the rationales for excluding preadolescents in the NCVS is that much of what they experience is not viewed as criminal, about a third of assaults in this study occurring to preadolescents were recognized as crimes and more than half of those were reported to police.

CONCLUSION

In trying to improve our nation's health, issues related to the question of how and whether people decide to seek health care have assumed considerable importance as a matter of policy and research. This is particularly true with regard to those whose health is most vulnerable, such as the poor and the elderly. Unfortunately, in efforts to improve our nation's dispensation of justice, considerations of access have not been nearly so prominent. Given their high vulnerability to crime, and some of the apparent obstacles to acquiring protection and justice, it is incumbent on us to turn more of our policy and

research attention to the question of what helps and hinders victimized children in getting assistance from the police and justice authorities.

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