Crimes against Children Known to Police

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Key Findings:

An analysis of 2019 NIBRS data from jurisdictions covering approximately 45% of the national population revealed several key findings:

- Children make up 10% of all crime victims known to police. They are overrepresented based on their population size for the crimes of sexual offenses and kidnappings, constituting 58% of known sexual offense victimizations and 40% of kidnappings.

- Simple assault is the most common offense against children, constituting 40% of all victimizations known to police.

- Sex offenses make up 18% of child victimizations known to police, while aggravated assaults make up 11% and kidnapping 1%.

- Girls predominated in sexual offense (83%) and kidnappings (56%) compared to boys, who experienced more victimizations for all other types of crimes.

- Most child victims were age 12-17. Rape, sex trafficking, and statutory rape victims were particularly more likely to be teens.

- Over 50% of crimes were perpetrated by offenders known to the victim, only 5% of crimes were perpetrated by strangers.

- Family offenders perpetrated 27% of all crimes against children, including most kidnappings and most crimes against young children. Crimes against older children were more likely to be perpetrated by acquaintances.

INTRODUCTION

Violence against children has a long history of public interest. Kidnapped children or victims of especially grievous crimes often dominate the news cycle despite the infrequency of such occurrences. Substantial effort has been put into researching and preventing child victimization in recent decades, though available data limits researchers' knowledge. Historically, two U.S. data samples have been used to explore crime victimization: the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Uniform Crime Report (UCR) and the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), both with their own set of strengths and limitations.

The UCR collects data from law enforcement agencies across the U.S. and has an extensive record dating back to the 1930s. The data is comprised of crimes that were reported to police, which is useful for examining trends of crime known to police. There is no age limit on victims, so the UCR captures incidents of crimes perpetrated against children from birth and beyond. However, no information is reported on age of victim, thus preventing analysis of crimes against children using UCR data.

The NCVS, a population survey asking about recent victimization, attempts to ameliorate the underreporting problem characteristic to the UCR. However, a great limitation of the NCVS is that it does not survey children under the age of twelve, so large portions of child victimization incidents are not captured in the NCVS. Additionally, the NCVS fails to capture crimes of great interest to crime researchers, including sexual abuse, kidnapping, and homicide.

The FBI's National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) was developed as an extension of the UCR's Summary Reporting System (SRS) in an attempt to expand the data collected for crime incidents reported to law enforcement. NIBRS asks participating agencies to provide details beyond the scope of its predecessor in areas including but not limited to age of victim, location of crime, victim/offender relationship, use of substances, and time of day. The large number of incidents reported along with the depth of details allows for nuances in these crimes to be identified and analyzed. Further, NIBRS captures data on multiple offenses within an incident rather than just the one determined to be the most serious by the reporting agency and collects data on a greater variety of offenses as compared to the SRS.

Compared to the NCVS, NIBRS covers the full spectrum of childhood and allows researchers to identify victims by a specific age, contributing to our understanding of developmental differences in criminal victimization and perpetration. Additionally, NIBRS covers virtually all crime types, while the UCR and NCVS are more limited in scope. Therefore, NIBRS allows for the analysis of all types of crimes child victims are experiencing across all stages of childhood, which can reveal important patterns of victimization that may inform policies to protect children from future victimization.

While police data are often criticized for not reflecting the actual level of crime due to underreporting, NIBRS importantly can be utilized to understand the types of crimes that are being brought to the attention of the police. This is an important consideration, as resources are being allocated based on the numbers and types known to police. So, while NIBRS may not address the "dark figure" of crime, it is a useful resource to analyze the crimes that are demanding energy and funding.

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Much of the literature on crimes against children comes from surveys. But these surveys, including the NCVS, do not portray the dimensions and key features of the crimes against children being identified by a group with particular vulnerabilities and capacities not shared by other crime victim populations. As of January 2021, the FBI had retired the SRS, encouraging law enforcement agencies to transition to NIBRS for future crime reporting. Deriving information from this enormous and growing data resource is a crucial need for better service to this population.
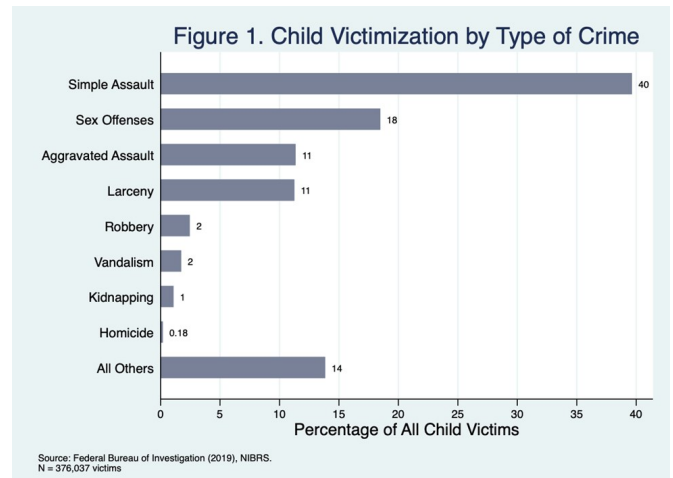
Methods

A descriptive analysis of secondary open-source data from the FBI was conducted to investigate recent characteristics in crimes against children in the United States. As part of their UCR program, the FBI compiles data annually through NIBRS. For the purpose of this analysis, NIBRS data reporting on crimes that occurred in 2019 was utilized, as it was the most recent data available at the time. Crimes were analyzed at the victim level and addressed the first offense listed for each victim. Only 2% of episodes reported more than a single offense. Relationships to offender was analyzed using the first offender listed in the incident. Broader relationship categories were condensed for analyses. "Family" indicates that the victim-offender relationship was in some way familial; "acquaintance" indicates that the victim and offender were familiar to each other in some sense; "stranger" indicates that the offender was previously unknown to the victim before the incident occurred; while "unknown" indicates that the victim-offender relationship was not known to the reporting law enforcement agency.

Offenses were categorized to broadly identify crime types of interest, including simple assault, aggravated assault, sex offenses, larceny, robbery, vandalism, kidnapping, and homicide. Other types of crime, such as identity theft, intimidation, fraud, bribery, and arson, were not included in the analysis as they represented a vast array of victimization types and only accounted for a small portion (14%) of crimes against children reported in 2019.
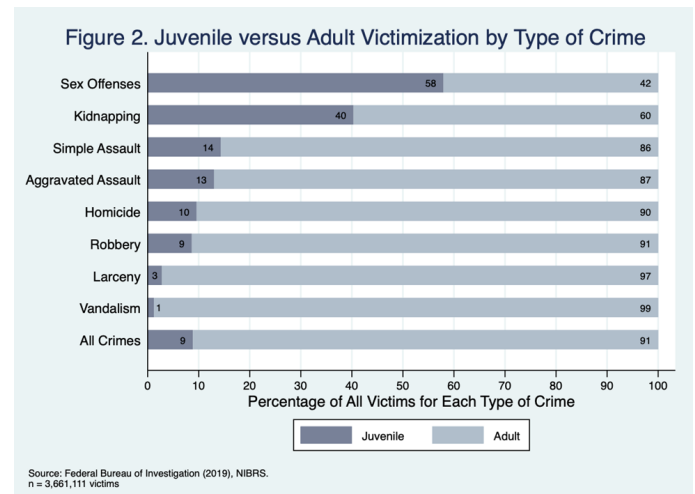
In 2019, nearly 8,500 US law enforcement agencies participated in NIBRS, whose jurisdictions covered about 150 million residents (US DOJ, 2020). This accounts for approximately half of all US law enforcement agencies and approximately 44.6% of the entire US population as recorded by the US Census.
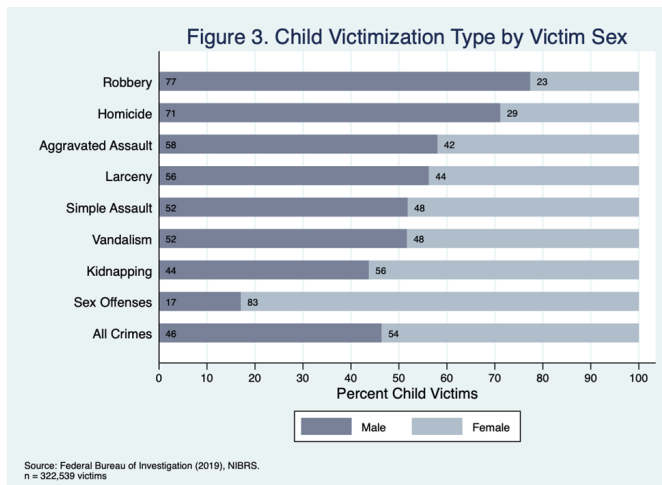
Results

Most literature pertaining to violence against children focuses on crimes such as kidnapping, sex offenses, and homicide, with little focus on non-sexual assaults and property crime. However, of crimes against children reported in 2019, over 80% were non-sexual assaults. The most common victimization experienced by children in 2019 was simple assault (Figure 1), defined as an unlawful attack by one person upon another, though this type of offense is only discussed in relationship to parental physical abuse and in the bullying literature. Comparatively, aggravated assaults include the use or threat of use of a dangerous weapon, or the victim suffered severe bodily injury as a result of the assault and this was the third most common type of victimization at 11%.

Figure 1. Child Victimization by Type of Crime

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation (2019), NIBRS.
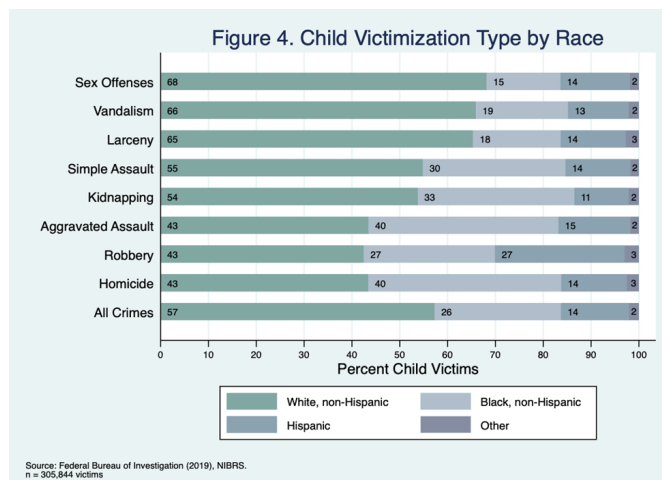N = 376,037 victims

Approximately one-fifth of crimes against children were sexual offenses, including rape, statutory rape, sodomy, sexual assault with an object, and fondling . Fifteen percent of reported crimes against children were property crimes, including robbery, larceny, and vandalism; however, these crimes are largely left out of the child victimization conversation. Kidnapping and homicide were only a small portion of child victimizations reported, but like sexual offenses, they overshadow less violent crimes that occur more frequently. Additional crimes that accounted for very little of the overall picture of crime reported in 2019 were combined and represent around 14% of crime. This category includes crimes such as arson, bribery, extortion, fraud, computer invasion, and intimidation, among others.

Figure 2. Juvenile versus Adult Victimization by Type of Crime

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation (2019), NIBRS.
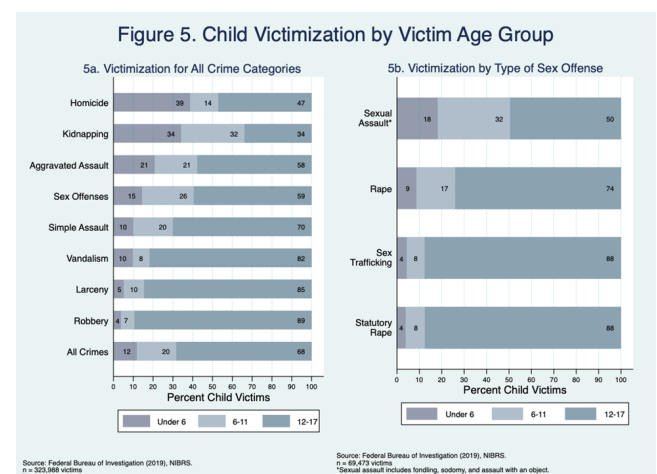n = 3,661,111 victims

In 2019, children made up around 20% of the US population (US Census Bureau, 2019) and just under 10% of crime victimization overall; however, children were largely overrepresented as victims of sexual offenses, accounting for over half of the sexual offense victims reported via NIBRS (Figure 2). Kidnapping was the second crime type with children overrepresented in their numbers compared to adults, which could be explained by the common sexual motivation of kidnappings of juveniles.

Figure 3. Child Victimization Type by Victim Sex

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation (2019), NIBRS.
n = 322,539 victims

Child victimization is gendered in some ways (Figure 3). About half of child victims reported overall in 2019 were male. But three-quarters of robbery victims and nearly three-quarters of homicide victims reported were male. Alternatively, the majority of sex offense victims and slightly more than half of kidnapping victims were female. Considering the sexual motivation of many kidnappings, the data suggest that females were more likely to be victims of sexually-based crimes as compared to males. Other crimes, such as simple and aggravated assault, larceny, and vandalism do not appear to be gendered.

Figure 4. Child Victimization Type by Race

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation (2019), NIBRS.
n = 305,844 victims

The majority of child victims were white, as were the majority of sex crime victims, vandalism victims, and larceny victims (Figure 4). Black victims were over-represented per population and accounted for a large portion of aggravated assault and homicide victimizations. Minorities in general were the majority affected by aggravated assault, robbery, and homicide victimizations.

Figure 5. Child Victimization by Victim Age Group

5a. Victimization for All Crime Categories

5b. Victimization by Type of Sex Offense

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation (2019), NIBRS.
n = 323,968 victims

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation (2019), NIBRS.
n = 69,473 victims
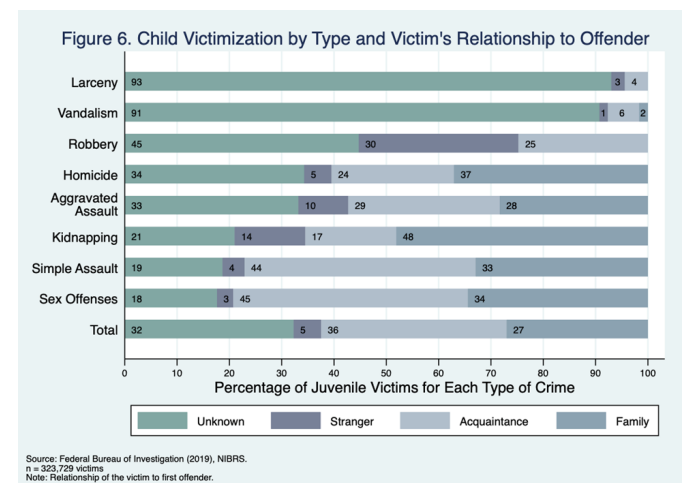*Sexual assault includes fondling, sodomy, and assault with an object.

Child victims were organized into age groups based on Finkelhor's (2008) dependency continuum to analyze victimization by age. Children under the age of six were a large portion of homicide and kidnapping victims, but a low percentage of crime victims overall (Figure 5a). One-fifth of victimizations reported in 2019 were children between the ages of six and eleven (Figure 5a). Children in this age group have a low representation among homicide victims, and also property crimes.

The majority of crime victims reported in 2019 were children ages twelve to seventeen (Figure 5a). The higher proportion in property crime categories may reflect the acquisition of more valuable possessions as children age. Children ages twelve to seventeen were victims of over half of the sex offenses reported (Figure 5a) and were more likely to be victims of commercial sex trafficking and statutory rape compared to younger children (Figure 5b).

Sexual offenses against non-teens were less likely to have penetration and were more likely to be charged as rape, as opposed to statutory rape (Figure 5b). Half of sexual assault victims, defined here as those who experienced fondling, sodomy, or sexual assault with an object, were under the age of twelve. Sexual assaults were the most common type of sex offense experienced by victims under the age of six (18%), followed by rape (9%) (Figure 5b).

About one-third of crimes against children were perpetrated by acquaintances of the victim, while nearly one-third were perpetrated by family members (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Child Victimization by Type and Victim's Relationship to Offender

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation (2019), NIBRS.
n = 323,729 victims
Note: Relationship of the victim to first offender.

Similarly, in nearly one-third of crimes reported to law enforcement agencies, the offender's relationship to the victim was unknown to police. This was especially likely in property crimes. Crimes perpetrated by strangers were a very small percentage (5%) of crimes against children overall. Homicides and kidnappings were perpetrated largely by offenders known to the victims and nearly half of kidnappings were perpetrated by family members. While stranger perpetrated offenses were low in general, they were especially low for sex offenses. Three-quarters of sex offenses were perpetrated by someone known to the victim. Around half were perpetrated by acquaintances, while 34% were perpetrated by family members.

Figure 7. Violent Crime Victimization by Age and Relationship to Offender

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation (2019), NIBRS.
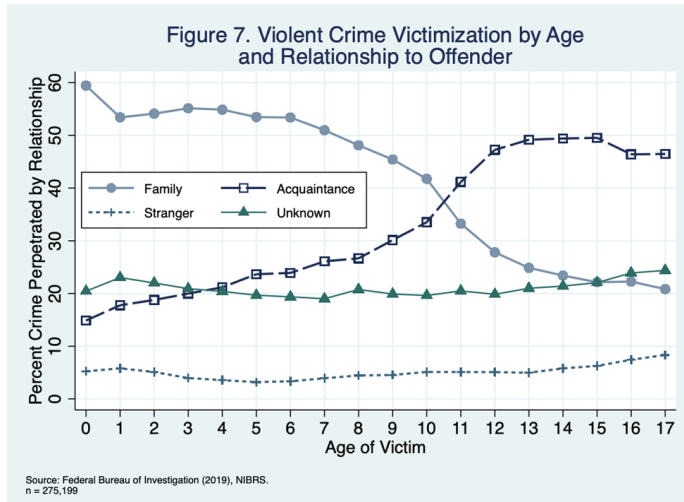n = 275,199

Figure 7 shows the shifts in perpetrator identity over the developmental span of childhood for violent crimes, including robbery, sexual offenses, homicide, kidnapping, aggravated and simple assault. For young children, familial offenders perpetrate the greatest proportion of violent crimes, but the proportion of familial perpetrated offenses begins to decline around age six, with a sharper decline at age eleven, after which acquaintance perpetrated violent crimes begin to increase. Violent crimes perpetrated by strangers remain low across all ages, increasing slightly for crimes perpetrated against the oldest teens. Violent crimes perpetrated by offenders with relationships unknown to law enforcement remain relatively stable across childhood.

Rough estimations of the actual prevalence of crimes against children were calculated by dividing the population of the U.S. in 2019 by the population covered by participating NIBRS jurisdictions for the same year. The frequencies of each crime type reported in 2019 were multiplied by 2.25 to estimate the number of child victims for each type of crime (see Table 1).

Table 1. Estimates of Crimes Against Children at the National Level			
Crime	NIBRS	Percent	National Estimate
Simple Assault	149,045	39.56	335,351
Sex Offenses	70,146	18.62	157,829
Aggravated Assault	42,698	11.33	96,071
Larceny	42,289	11.23	95,150
Robbery	9,236	2.45	20,781
Vandalism	6,500	1.73	14,625
Kidnapping	4,059	1.08	9,133
Homicide	688	0.18	1,548
All Others	50,762	13.47	114,215
Total	376,722	100	847,625

NIBRS covered 146.5 million U.S. residents. The estimated U.S. population was 328.3 million, with approximately 73 million being under the age of 18. The national estimate is calculated by multiplying the NIBRS count by 2.25—the ratio of the national population to the population of the jurisdictions covered by NIBRS.

The lack of participation in NIBRS, especially by large, urban agencies (discussed further below) may distort the national estimates in Table 1; however, past research has shown that extrapolations for crimes that have high or mandated participation in reporting - such as homicide- are similar to those predicted from less-representative NIBRS samples (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000; Rantala & Edwards, 2000). So, while crude, national estimates in Table 1 are comparatively reliable and reinforce the notion that large numbers of physical assaults and sexual offenses against children and youth come to the attention of law enforcement.

Discussion

Though children make up 10% of U.S. crime victims reported to the police, they are overrepresented as sex offense and kidnapping victims. Proportions of child homicide victims are very low compared to adults, but receive considerable attention in the violence against children literature. Simple assaults comprise the majority of victimization experienced overall by children but literature examining this is scant. Additionally, property crimes accounted for 15% of child victimizations and are also frequently left out of the conversation, while sex offenses, which accounted for 20% of child victimizations, command a great deal of attention.

Male victims experienced the majority of robberies, aggravated assaults, and homicides, while female victims experienced the overwhelming majority of sex offenses and the majority of kidnappings. Since kidnappings often have a sexual motivation, this may explain why females are kidnap victims slightly more frequently than males. Other violent crimes, such as robbery or homicide, are experienced primarily by males, while property crimes and simple assaults do not appear gendered.

Additionally, the overrepresentation of Black and Hispanic child victims of homicide, aggravated assault, and robbery suggests that minorities are disproportionately victims of violent crime.

Findings from this analysis generally support the notion of a dependency continuum, under which the dynamics of crime changes with the dependency characteristics of victims. Very young children and older teens were the most likely victims of homicide, with the smallest proportion of these victims between ages six to eleven. Young children are vulnerable to homicides due to their small size and the demand they place on parents. In instances of corporal punishment, small children are more likely to succumb to injuries than older, larger children. Young children also do not have the ability to avoid or limit association with caregivers that older children may have. The oldest children, due to their increased freedom and reduced supervision, are vulnerable to homicides perpetrated by acquaintances, such as peers, or strangers compared to younger children.

The largest proportion of sex offense victims overall were children ages twelve to seventeen. The older the child, the more likely they were to be a victim of a penetrative sex offense and greater proportions were victims of statutory rape and commercial sex trafficking, compared to younger children. Older children are more likely to run away from home and therefore are at greater risk for involvement in commercial sex trafficking and are more likely to be involved in a voluntary sexual relationship to which they cannot legally consent. However, it is important to note that half of all sexual assault (fondling, sodomy, and sexual assault with an object) victims reported by police were under the age of twelve.

About one-third of crimes reported to law enforcement agencies in 2019 were perpetrated by offenders with a relationship to the victim that was unknown or unclear to police. This was especially true in cases of property crimes. Around 20% of violent crimes were perpetrated by unknown offenders regardless of victim age, while no more than 10% of violent crimes across childhood were perpetrated by offenders who were definitively strangers. The majority of kidnappings and sexual offenses were perpetrated by offenders known to the victim, despite the common fear of sexually-motivated stranger abductions that often garner national attention. Both aggravated and simple assaults were perpetrated primarily by offenders known to the victim. Approximately 30% of both types of assault are perpetrated by family members, suggesting that a large threat of physical violence toward children begins in the home.

Looking across all the crimes perpetrated against children, strangers were the smallest proportion of offenders. The remaining crimes were perpetrated almost equally by unknown offenders, acquaintances, and family members, each comprising approximately one-third of crimes against children. This research shows that victim age and victim-offender relationship may suggest specific preventative approaches for very young victims and older victims. When working to prevent victimization of young children (below 6), special attention should be paid to familial perpetrators, since this victim-offender relationship constitutes the largest proportion of crimes against young children. Alternatively, when attempting to prevent victimization of teens, strategies that target acquaintance offenders should be utilized, as this victim-offender relationship becomes more common as children age.

Lastly, these findings show that simple and aggravated assaults are commonly experienced by children. Despite this fact, most crimes against children research focuses on less common experiences such as homicide and kidnapping. While still important to study, assault victimization and property crime victimization are more likely to occur in a child's life than homicide or kidnapping and resources should be utilized to study these issues and develop strategies to address and prevent them.

Limitations

Some limitations of this analysis include the fact that NIBRS data does not fully cover the US population and that crime, in general, is underreported—contributing to weakness in law enforcement or administrative data samples. NIBRS has a history of low participation rates of large agencies. This overrepresentation of small- and medium-sized agencies limits the accuracy of overall crime trends in the U.S., especially in major urban areas (Bibel, 2015; Addington, 2019). In addition to low participation of large agencies, participation in the UCR program overall by federal law enforcement agencies has been low; and despite the switch to a NIBRS-only reporting system in 2021, participation by any agency still remains voluntary (Addington, 2019).

The incident-level reports in NIBRS, while full of rich detail to analyze, can be cumbersome and problematic for analysts (Bibel, 2015). For the purposes of this study, incidents were analyzed at the victim level to assess the overall prevalence of victimization in the available sample; however, only the first offense and first offender.[1] listed in the non-hierarchical reporting structure was analyzed due to analytical complexities of transforming the data.

Additionally, there is currently no measurement in place for data accuracy or completion prior to the compilation and subsequent release of data (Bibel, 2015).

Child victimization, especially of young children, has additional challenges compared to adults, as it requires in many cases for the child to disclose the victimization to a trusted adult and for that adult to then report it to authorities. Other common childhood experiences, such as bullying, is not captured in NIBRS data, unless the incident were volatile enough for authorities to consider it a criminal act. So, while NIBRS is a useful tool for studying crimes against children due to the ability to analyze victims from birth in ways that previous administrative data did not allow, it is limited in capturing minor, more common childhood victimizations.

Conclusion

Despite NIBRS' limitations, the rich detail it provides has unlocked enormous potential in the criminal data analytics field for those willing to engage with a cumbersome dataset. We can only hope that agency participation continues to rise in the years following the 2021 transition. While accuracy issues, generalization issues, and analytical challenges exist, NIBRS still allows us to look at a snapshot of victimization specifically being addressed by U.S. police agencies in any given year.

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[1] 53,999 of 376,037 reported incidents had two or more child victims, while 7,664 incidents had two or more offenses reported in a single incident. Total number of offenders is more difficult to determine due to non-hierarchical rules for reporting victim-offender relationship

Upon reviewing just what NIBRS offers, it is clear that more attention should be paid to aggravated and simple assaults, as well as property crimes perpetrated against children. The data also clearly support that continued care be made to investigate and prevent sexual offenses against children. Further, NIBRS finally reveals, in an administrative capacity as opposed to survey or self-report, nuances in victim age and victim-offender relationships previously unable to be analyzed. The details provided in NIBRS bridges gaps left by the NCVS in the ability to study children of all ages and the study of homicide, sexual abuse, and kidnapping. Additionally, it remedies pitfalls of the UCR by allowing for incident-, victim-, and offender-level analyses of a greater variety of criminal offenses. NIBRS should be embraced as a tool to gain a deeper understanding of the scope of victimization experienced by children.

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