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# OJJDP

May 2001

## JUVENILE JUSTICE BULLETIN

### Child Abuse Reported to the Police



**David Finkelhor and Richard Ormrod**

*The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) is committed to improving the justice system's response to crimes against children. OJJDP recognizes that children are at increased risk for crime victimization. Not only are children the victims of many of the same crimes that victimize adults, they are subject to other crimes, like child abuse and neglect, that are specific to childhood. The impact of these crimes on young victims can be devastating, and the violent or sexual victimization of children can often lead to an intergenerational cycle of violence and abuse. The purpose of OJJDP's Crimes Against Children Series is to improve and expand the Nation's efforts to better serve child victims by presenting the latest information about child victimization, including analyses of crime victimization statistics, studies of child victims and their special needs, and descriptions of programs and approaches that address these needs.*

When parents assault or molest their children, it is conventionally thought of as child abuse and, therefore, a child welfare problem. However, these acts are also crimes, and a substantial portion of child abuse cases are investigated and adjudicated by the criminal justice system. Some cases are referred to law enforcement agencies by child welfare investigators, while others are reported directly to law enforcement by victims, families, and other concerned individuals.

Unfortunately, the law enforcement perspective on child abuse is greatly neglected. Most publicly available statistics on the problem come from child welfare agencies and describe child welfare system activities alone. Even such a basic fact as the percentage of cases that are reported to law enforcement agencies is not tallied by the National Child Abuse

and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), the main national system that measures and tracks child maltreatment.

Until recently, no law enforcement data were available to provide researchers with a criminal justice system perspective on child abuse equivalent to the child welfare system perspective provided by NCANDS. However, the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) for law enforcement agencies is being implemented to capture much more detailed information about crime and its victims. NIBRS will allow researchers to analyze incidents coming to the attention of police that involve child victims and parent or other caretaker perpetrators—incidents that are generally thought of as child abuse.

#### A Message From OJJDP

Child abuse is commonly regarded as a child welfare problem, and a considerable amount of information has been amassed from this perspective. When a child is assaulted, however, it is not only a child welfare problem, it is a crime, and yet there is a lack of law enforcement data available for researchers to analyze. Use of the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS), which collects detailed data about crime and its victims, should help fill this gap.

This Bulletin describes NIBRS and its role in depicting police experience with child abuse and reports key findings derived from NIBRS data. Analysis of these data indicates that parents and other caretakers commit 49 percent of the kidnappings and 27 percent of the sexual assaults of juveniles. These and other caretaker offenses are reviewed in these pages.

The Bulletin also offers an informative comparison of NIBRS and child welfare system data and discusses the policy implications arising from NIBRS data.

To fully comprehend the harm that child abuse inflicts on children, policy-makers need a clearer understanding of the role law enforcement plays—and could play—in addressing the problem of child maltreatment.

The NIBRS data described in this Bulletin contribute to increasing that understanding and clarify law enforcement's critical role.

## The Role of Law Enforcement in Child Abuse Cases

Child abuse can come to the attention of police in a variety of ways: from victims and their families, from concerned community members, from professionals such as teachers and doctors, and from other authorities such as child welfare agencies. Professionals in all States, and even ordinary citizens in some States, are mandated to report child abuse to responsible authorities. In some States, police are considered to be the responsible authority for reporting purposes, and in many States, statutes now require child welfare authorities to share all child maltreatment reports with law enforcement. Child welfare investigations substantiate or confirm about one-third of all child maltreatment reports. In some States, these investigations are conducted jointly by child welfare and police; in a few jurisdictions, responsibility for investigation lies with law enforcement only. Thus the police have become increasingly involved in child abuse cases, but their role in the reporting and investigation of child abuse can vary quite a bit from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.

This Bulletin shows how NIBRS data can be used to describe police experience with child abuse. Analysis of aggregate NIBRS data from 12 States for 1997 and comparison with child welfare data reveal the following key findings:

- ◆ Incidents of child abuse committed by parents and other caretakers make up about one-fifth (19 percent) of violent crimes against juveniles (ages 0–17) reported to the police and 4 percent of violent crimes against persons of any age.
- ◆ The majority (73 percent) of these parent and other caretaker crimes are physical assaults, and 23 percent are cases of sexual abuse.
- ◆ Child abuse constitutes more than one-half of the crimes against children age 2 or younger reported to the police.
- ◆ Male offenders are responsible for three-quarters of the child abuse incidents reported to the police, including 92 percent of sexual assaults and 68 percent of physical assaults.
- ◆ Thirteen percent of the episodes of parental assault against a child reported to the police are associated with an assault against a spouse or former spouse.
- ◆ In spite of protocols in some States that require police notification about child maltreatment, there is evidence that police data tally only a fraction of physical and sexual abuse investigated and substantiated by child welfare authorities.

The large number of child abuse cases reported to law enforcement agencies suggests that more attention should be paid to how law enforcement agencies investigate these crimes and arrest and prosecute the offenders. How law

enforcement handles cases of parental physical assault against children needs to be examined, particularly in light of recent policy debates over the arrest and prosecution of offenders who have committed other forms of domestic violence.

## Identifying Child Abuse in NIBRS Data

As noted on page 3, NIBRS collects a wide range of information on victims, offenders, and circumstances for a variety of offenses. Generally, the term “child maltreatment” is thought of as referring to offenses and threats to a child’s well-being that are committed or caused by parents and other caretakers. Although for child welfare purposes the definition of caretakers can vary somewhat from State to State, the term typically includes parents, other responsible adult family members, and, in some cases but not always, professional caretakers such as teachers, recreation leaders, and babysitters. Unfortunately, NIBRS does not have a specific caretaker category, but it does specify parent and stepparent perpetrators, who constitute the vast majority of child maltreatment offenders (Sedlak and Broadhurst, 1996). To these two groups, the authors added grandparents, other adult family members (but not in-laws), babysitters, and parents’ boyfriends or girlfriends. There is no NIBRS category that allows the separation of professional caretakers, such as teachers or recreation workers, from the larger category of acquaintances. However, in State child maltreatment reports, the categories that include nonfamily caretakers such as teachers and other school staff account for only 6 percent of perpetrators identified (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 1999). Furthermore,

babysitters—a group identified separately in NIBRS records—are included in this 6 percent.

Several crimes coded by NIBRS clearly fall within the child maltreatment domain when committed by caretakers: simple assault, aggravated assault, and sex offenses. In NIBRS, sex offenses include both forcible sexual assaults, which are considered violent crimes and make up the great majority of sex crimes, and nonforcible sex offenses such as statutory rape and nonforcible incest. These acts clearly correspond to child physical and sexual abuse.

Unfortunately, no NIBRS code designates acts of neglect. NIBRS collects information only on a standardized set of offenses that fall specifically within the domain of law enforcement. Neglect accounts for a large proportion of child maltreatment cases, but it is not often considered criminal in nature and frequently may not be reported to law enforcement. The same is true for psychological abuse.

Another offense reported in NIBRS and categorized as a violent crime is kidnaping, which, when committed by a caretaker, is clearly a child welfare offense. However, little is known about how kidnaping is reported or classified in the child welfare system’s child maltreatment data. The authors have opted to include it in this Bulletin.

Therefore, NIBRS data used in this analysis concern the violent crimes of assault, sexual assault, and kidnaping, plus nonforcible sex offenses, committed against juveniles under age 18 by parents, stepparents, grandparents, babysitters, other adult family members, and parents’ boyfriends or girlfriends. Together, these crimes are categorized as “offenses by parents and other caretakers.” With the possible exception of family kidnaping—an offense that has an unclear child welfare system status and that accounts for only 4 percent of the total reports in the data analyzed in this Bulletin—this category corresponds fairly well to the child welfare system’s concept of child abuse (but not neglect).

## Characteristics of Child Abuse Reported by NIBRS

### Caretaker Offenses

Analysis of NIBRS data on incidents known to police reveals that parents and other caretakers are responsible for nearly one in

five (19 percent) of all violent crimes (plus nonforcible sex offenses) committed against juveniles (figure 1). Strangers are responsible for only half as many (10 percent) of these police-known crimes. The largest category of those known to police who commit offenses against juveniles comprises noncaretaker acquaintances (63 percent), both juveniles and adults, and the smallest category (8 percent) consists of noncaretaker family members, mostly juveniles.

The parent and other caretaker proportion for some offenses is quite a bit higher than for others. Parents and other caretakers commit 26 percent of sexual assaults of juveniles and 49 percent of kidnappings of juveniles, compared with 16 percent and 18 percent for aggravated and simple assaults, respectively (figure 2).

Also, as might be expected, offenses by parents and other caretakers play a particularly large role in the victimization of younger children, who do not have many persons other than caretakers in their lives (figure 3). Data on incidents known to police show that more than half of the crimes against children age 2 and younger are committed by parents and

other caretakers; for juveniles age 12 and older, the role of parent and other caretaker offenders dwindles to less than 20 percent of all offenders.<sup>1</sup>

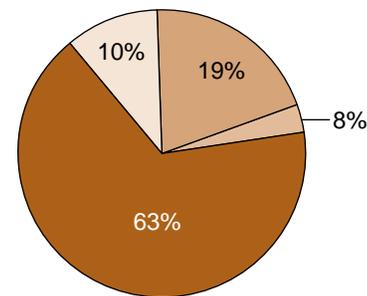
The high percentage of young children victimized by caretakers should not be misinterpreted. The majority of caretaker offenses in NIBRS are not actually committed against younger children (figure 3). Juveniles age 12 and older are victims in 53 percent of all NIBRS caretaker offenses, whereas children age 5 and younger are victims in only 21 percent. This is because the overall rate of victimization reported to NIBRS is lower for younger children. Of the relatively smaller number of crimes against younger children, however, a very large percentage are committed by parents and other caretakers.

### Types of Caretaker Offenders

Within the parent and other caretaker offender category defined in this Bulletin,

<sup>1</sup> In figures 3 through 7, "age" refers to age at the time the offense was reported, not necessarily age at first occurrence.

**Figure 1: Offenses Against Juveniles, by Type of Offender**



- Caretaker offenses
- Strangers
- Noncaretaker acquaintances
- Noncaretaker family

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997.

Note: Includes all violent crimes and nonforcible sex offenses.

## The National Incident-Based Reporting System

The U.S. Department of Justice is replacing its long-established Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) system with the more comprehensive National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS). While the UCR monitors only a limited number of index crimes and, with the exception of homicides, gathers few details on each crime event, NIBRS collects a wide range of information on victims, offenders, and circumstances for a greatly increased variety of offenses. Offenses tracked in NIBRS include violent crimes (e.g., homicide, assault, rape, robbery), property crimes (e.g., theft, arson, vandalism, fraud, embezzlement), and crimes against society (e.g., drug offenses, gambling, prostitution). Moreover, NIBRS collects information on multiple victims, multiple offenders, and multiple crimes that may be part of the same episode.

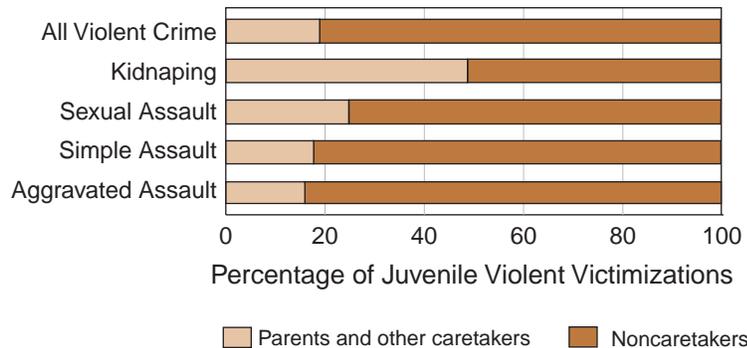
Under the new system, as with the old, local law enforcement personnel compile information on crimes coming to their attention, and this information is aggregated in turn at the State and national levels. For a crime to be counted in the system, it simply needs to be reported and investigated. It is not necessary that an incident be cleared or an arrest made, although unfounded reports are deleted from the record.

NIBRS holds great promise, but it is still far from a national system. Its implementation by the FBI began in 1988, and participation by States and local agencies is voluntary and incremental. By 1995, jurisdictions in 9 States had agencies

contributing data; by 1997, the number was 12; and by the end of 1999, jurisdictions in 17 States submitted reports, providing coverage for 11 percent of the Nation's population and 9 percent of its crime. Only three States (Idaho, Iowa, and South Carolina) have participation from all local jurisdictions, and only one city with a population greater than 500,000 (Austin, TX) is reporting. The crime experiences of large urban areas are particularly underrepresented. The system, therefore, is not yet nationally representative nor do findings represent national trends or national statistics. Nevertheless, the system is assembling large amounts of crime information and providing a richness of detail about juvenile victimizations previously unavailable. The patterns and associations these data reveal are real and represent the experiences of a large number of youth. For 1997, the 12 participating States (Colorado, Idaho, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, North Dakota, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, and Virginia) reported a total of 1,043,719 crimes against individuals, with 119,852 occurring against juveniles (including more than 15,000 perpetrated by caretakers). Nevertheless, patterns may change as more jurisdictions join the system.

More information about NIBRS data collection can be found at these Web sites: (1) [www.jrsa.org/ibrrc/](http://www.jrsa.org/ibrrc/), (2) [www.fbi.gov/ucr/nibrs/manuals/v1all.pdf](http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/nibrs/manuals/v1all.pdf), (3) [www.fbi.gov/ucr/nibrs.htm](http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/nibrs.htm), (4) [www.search.org/](http://www.search.org/).

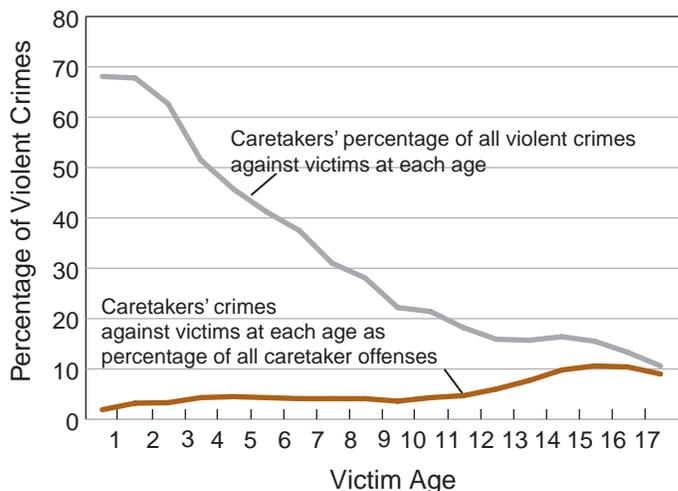
**Figure 2: Offenses Against Juveniles, by Type of Offender and Type of Crime**



Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997.

Note: Includes nonforcible sex offenses.

**Figure 3: Offenses Against Juveniles by Parents and Other Caretakers, by Victim Age**



Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997.

Note: Includes nonforcible sex offenses.

parents are responsible for 60 percent of all crimes. Stepparents and parents' boyfriends and girlfriends account for another 19 percent. Males are considerably more likely than females (73 percent versus 27 percent) to be perpetrators. This gender difference holds true even among babysitter offenders, although males are much less likely than females to be babysitters. Biological fathers account for two-fifths (41 percent) of all offenders, and stepfathers and parents' boyfriends account

for nearly one-fifth (18 percent) (figure 4). Men account for 92 percent of caretaker sex assault, 67 percent of aggravated assault, 68 percent of simple assault, and 58 percent of kidnaping offenders.

### Gender of Victims

A somewhat larger number of girls than boys are victims of parent and other caretaker offenses (58 percent versus 42 percent). This is largely accounted for by

the disproportionate number of female sexual assault victims (80 percent girls versus 20 percent boys) (figure 5). Victim gender is fairly evenly distributed for simple assaults, aggravated assaults, and kidnappings.

In the category of sex offenses by parents and other caretakers, the percentage of victims who are female rises with age across the span of childhood (figure 6). In the category of nonsexual caretaker offenses (physical assaults and kidnappings), the percentage of victims who are female also rises at adolescence, perhaps because boys grow big and strong enough to deter parental assaults or because parental conflicts with girls (particularly concerning sexual behavior) are intensified during adolescence.

### Connection Between Child Abuse and Other Domestic Violence

Spouse abuse is one factor that may bring parent and other caretaker offenses against children directly to the attention of police. Officers responding to a home where domestic violence is occurring may discover an assault against a child as well. Multiple victims are coded by NIBRS, which means that incident data can include both spousal and child victims. For incidents known to police, 3 percent of spouse and other intimate partner assaults also include a child abuse victim, while 13 percent of child abuse victimizations include a spouse or other intimate partner assault. Thus, response to spousal violence may be one way in which child abuse by a parent is discovered by the police.

In some cases, more than one child is victimized by the same parent or caretaker. NIBRS data on parent and other caretaker assaults show that 7 percent of physical assaults and 10 percent of sexual assaults involved more than one child. Multiple-victim assaults were more likely to involve younger than older children. Seventy percent of juvenile victims in multiple-victim assaults were under 12 years of age, compared with 42 percent in single-victim assaults.

### Weapons and Injury in Child Abuse Cases

Most offenses by parents and other caretakers do not involve weapons. Only 1 percent of episodes involved a firearm and only 2 percent involved a knife—rates of weapon use that are less than half those for other perpetrators against children.

Severe injury is also relatively infrequent in offenses by parents and other caretakers reported to police. NIBRS data indicate major physical injury (such as severe lacerations, broken bones, and unconsciousness) to only 3 percent of the juvenile victims and minor physical injury (such as bruises or scratches) to another 42 percent. The impression has been that, compared with other types of juvenile victimization, offenses by parents and other caretakers require a higher threshold of injury to bring them to the attention of police. In fact, however, NIBRS data show that the level of injury in offenses by parents and other caretakers reported to police is about the same as that in offenses committed against juveniles by other perpetrators. Major injuries are more common for younger children (6 percent for victims age 5 and younger versus 3 percent for children age 6 and older), which may reflect the greater physical vulnerability of younger children.

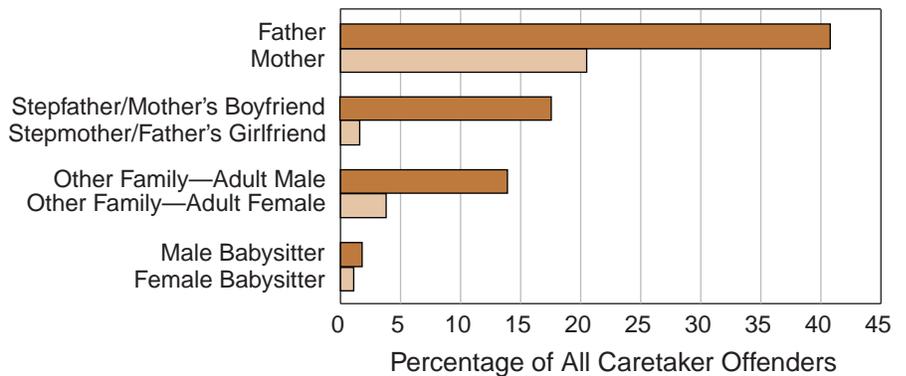
## Comparing NIBRS and Child Welfare System Data

### Similarities and Discrepancies

Law enforcement data confirm certain features of the child abuse problem that are known from child welfare sources. However, they also reveal some discrepancies. Law enforcement data validate child welfare data showing that parents are the most common caretaker abusers, that male caretakers are responsible for most sexual abuse, and that although girls are disproportionately victims of sexual abuse, the proportions of boys and girls who suffer physical abuse are about equal.

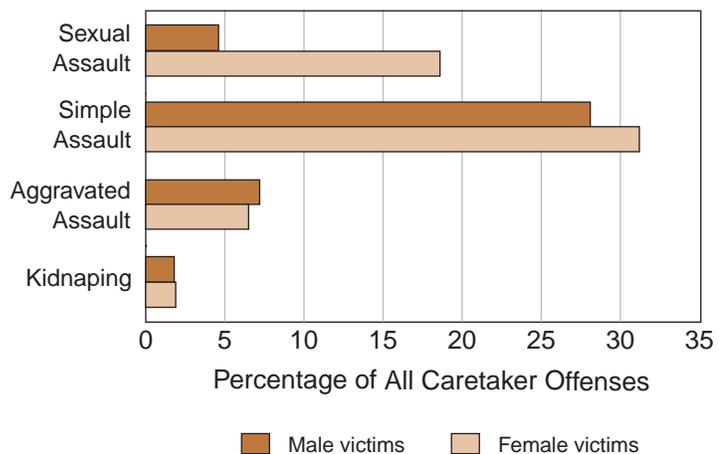
NIBRS data also confirm that there is substantially more physical abuse than sexual abuse of juveniles. Despite what might be inferred from the predominance of sexual abuse reports in the news, the majority of the parent and other caretaker offenses reported to police involve physical assaults, not sexual offenses, at a ratio of 2.9 to 1. The comparable ratio in the child welfare system national child maltreatment data for 1997 is 2.2 to 1 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 1999). Some earlier research had suggested that physical abuse was less likely than sexual abuse to be regarded as criminal and that child welfare sources infrequently passed on incidents of physical abuse to police

**Figure 4: Offenses Against Juveniles by Parents and Other Caretakers, by Perpetrator Identity**



Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997.

**Figure 5: Offenses Against Juveniles by Parents and Other Caretakers, by Victim Gender and Type of Crime**



Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997.

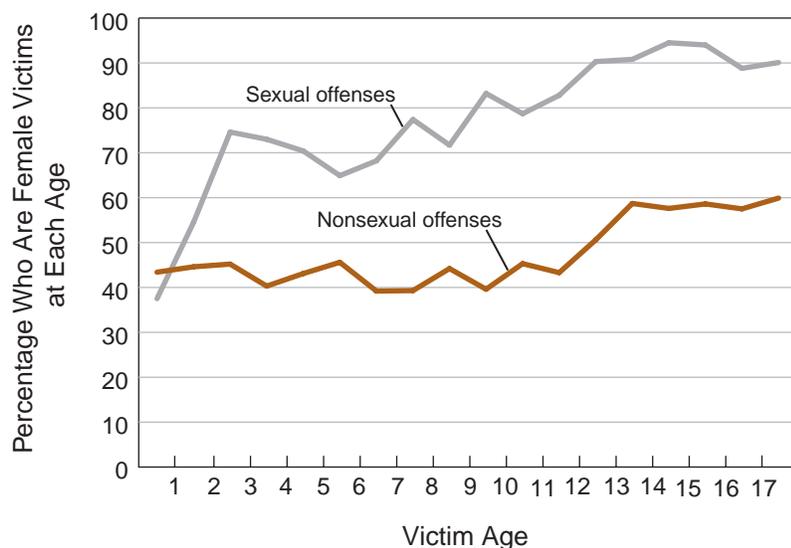
(Finkelhor, 1983). The more recent NIBRS data documenting more physical than sexual abuse suggest that this was not true or is no longer true and that physical abuse by parents and other caretakers is being regarded as sufficiently criminal to be referred to police. Whether physical abuse is prosecuted as aggressively as sexual abuse is another matter.

Despite some similarities, other comparisons of NIBRS and child welfare system data suggest that the two systems may not be dealing with identical populations

(table 1).<sup>2</sup> For example, although the age distribution of sexual abuse victims looks quite similar in the two systems, the distribution for physical abuse victims is different—the child welfare system has many more younger children than NIBRS.

<sup>2</sup> The comparative data for the child welfare system are taken from child abuse data provided by 16 States, as part of the Detailed Case Data Component of NCANDS. These are not the same States that provide NIBRS data, so discrepancies between law enforcement and child welfare data could simply be due to State variation.

**Figure 6: Offenses Against Female Juveniles by Parents and Other Caretakers, by Type of Crime and Victim Age**



Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997.

Forty-two percent of the physical abuse cases in the child welfare system data involved victims who were age 7 and younger, compared with only 24 percent in NIBRS. This difference in the two systems regarding the distribution of victim ages is consistent with a difference in data regarding perpetrator gender: females constitute 51 percent of the physical abusers in child welfare data, but only 32 percent in NIBRS data. Together, these discrepancies suggest that caretaker assaults against younger children and by females may be viewed by potential reporters as less criminal or as matters in which police have less expertise. Thus, these assaults may be less likely to be referred to police even by child welfare agencies.

It will be easier to know how NIBRS and child welfare system data correspond when complete data are available for entire States. Currently, only three States—Idaho, Iowa, and South Carolina—have both statewide child abuse data and close to 100 percent law enforcement agency participation in NIBRS (table 2). In both Idaho and Iowa, child welfare agency protocols dictate that law enforcement agencies must be notified of all maltreatment known to child welfare; nevertheless, police reports of caretaker assaults are only a fraction of the substantiated abuse recorded by child welfare authorities. In Idaho, the NIBRS tally of physical assaults

is only one-third as large as the number of physical assaults substantiated by child welfare; in Iowa, NIBRS records only one-fifth the number of substantiated cases. Possible factors that may explain this discrepancy include incomplete NIBRS data collection or broad child welfare definitions of child abuse that include noncriminal acts. However, the data are consistent with the possibility that a great deal of criminal child abuse is not reported to or recorded by law enforcement in some States. The situation in South Carolina suggests a different story. In that State, sexual assault cases in NIBRS data are equal in number to sexual abuse cases in child welfare data, but physical assault cases in NIBRS data actually exceed the number reported in child welfare data. In South Carolina, it is possible that child abuse reports are readily passed on to law enforcement but that the threshold for substantiating physical abuse in the child welfare system may be higher than the threshold for recording a crime in NIBRS.

### A Contrasting National Perspective on Child Abuse

Up until now, in the absence of national law enforcement data, the only national statistics on violence specifically against children have been abuse data collected by child welfare agencies. An expanding NIBRS will eventually supply national data repre-

senting a law enforcement point of view on crimes committed against all juveniles and will provide a new and potentially contrasting perspective on the problem of violence against children. For example, based on information from 43 States, child welfare data for 1997 documented nearly 300,000 substantiated cases of child physical and sexual abuse, yielding an estimate of 350,000 cases nationwide (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 1999). These numbers, however, primarily capture incidents of violence committed against juveniles by parents and other caretakers and exclude assaults by noncaretaker perpetrators, which are outside the domain of the child welfare system. Presently available NIBRS data reveal that noncaretaker perpetrators are responsible for four-fifths of all the crimes against juveniles that are reported to the police.<sup>3</sup> A crude extrapolation from the current NIBRS States would yield a national estimate of close to 900,000 violent crimes against juveniles that are reported to the police. Therefore, data from the child welfare system almost certainly cannot be considered a good representation of the magnitude of violent crimes perpetrated against juveniles and reported to authorities.

### Policy Implications

NIBRS data confirm that large numbers of offenses against juveniles by caretakers (commonly thought of as child abuse) are, in fact, reported to the police. These incidents are predominantly physical assaults, involve more older than younger children, and involve more male than female caretakers. Only about one-half of these cases are associated with any recorded injury to the victim.

The fact that a large number of physical assaults by parents and other caretakers are referred to police every year is an important, if generally unrecognized, reality for the justice system that also raises questions about how these cases are being handled. Most of the research on how the justice system manages juvenile victims of caretaker offenses focuses on sex crimes (Cross, Whitcomb, and De Vos, 1995; Runyan et al., 1988). Many justice system reforms and innovations have been developed to deal with these sexual abuse cases, including the establishment of multidisciplinary teams and children's advocacy centers (Kolbo and Strong, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> For more information on noncaretaker crimes, see Finkelhor and Ormrod, 2000.

**Table 1: Comparison of Child Welfare Data and NIBRS Data for Physical and Sexual Abuse/Assault, by Victim Age**

Victim Age Group	Percentage of Victims in Age Group			
	Physical Abuse/Assault		Sexual Abuse/Assault	
	Child Welfare* (n=48,265)	NIBRS† (n=9,166)	Child Welfare* (n=22,193)	NIBRS† (n=3,120)
0-3	16%	11%	9%	13%
4-7	26	13	27	27
8-11	23	15	25	22
12-15	27	37	29	29
16-17‡	8	24	10	9
Totals	100%	100%	100%	100%

\*1997 Detailed Case Data Component selected case-level data from 16 States: Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Utah, Vermont, Washington, and Wyoming, as reported in U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families (1999), Table 4-1, p. 4-4.

†1997 National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) selected victim-level data (caretaker offenders) from 12 States: Colorado, Idaho, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, North Dakota, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, and Virginia, as reported by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (1997).

‡ Age grouping for child welfare data is "16+."

**Table 2: Comparison of Child Welfare Data and NIBRS Data on Number of Juvenile Victims of Physical and Sexual Abuse/Assault for Three States**

State	Number of Victims			
	Physical Abuse/Assault		Sexual Abuse/Assault	
	Child Welfare	NIBRS	Child Welfare	NIBRS
Idaho*	2,743	911	1,607	351
Iowa†	3,525	663	1,382	341
South Carolina*	1,278	2,923	728	732

\*1997 figures. Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families (1999), State Data Tables, Section 4.1, p. D-13; 1997 NIBRS selected victim-level data (caretaker offenders).

†1995 figures. Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families (1998), State Data Tables, Section 4, pp. 3-7; 1995 NIBRS selected victim-level data (caretaker offenders).

There is little indication in this literature that the majority of parent and other caretaker assaults that enter the justice system involve physical rather than sexual assault. If physical assaults are the predominant reported crime committed by parents and other caretakers against children, the handling of these offenses by the justice system merits more research and policy debate (Smith, 1995).

An active policy debate has occurred regarding the justice system's handling of physical assaults between adult domestic

partners. This debate involves questions of how aggressively the justice system should pursue these offenses and seek to arrest and prosecute offenders (Chalk and King, 1998; Ford and Regoli, 1993; Schmidt and Steury, 1989; Sherman, 1992). Policymakers in this domain have had to balance competing needs: to reinforce clear norms against domestic violence, to sanction offenders, to protect victims who have ongoing relationships with perpetrators, to empower and respect victims whose interests differ from those of the

justice system, and to use limited justice resources efficiently. These needs all have parallels in dealing with physical assaults against children. Could more aggressive arrest and prosecution of caretakers who physically assault their children raise awareness about the problem, reinforce norms of conduct, reduce recidivism, and empower victims? Or would more aggressive action inhibit victim reporting, increase retaliation or anxiety about retaliation, and further damage the caretaker-child relationship? These issues need to be brought out, discussed, and researched as extensively as they have been in the area of spousal assault.

Reforms are currently under way that will also increase the salience of criminal justice issues in the child abuse domain. For example, some States (e.g., Florida) are expanding the role of law enforcement in the investigation of child abuse, giving to sheriffs and police functions that were previously handled by child welfare authorities (Peacock, 1999). In addition, children's advocacy centers and multidisciplinary response teams are being implemented across the country, further involving the criminal justice system in child abuse investigations.

## Conclusion

Policymakers concerned about child welfare need to know the full extent of harm perpetrated against children. Policymakers also need to know which categories of incidents are handled by law enforcement, which are handled by child welfare, and which are handled by both systems. The large number of child abuse incidents found in NIBRS data and described in this Bulletin, coupled with the trend toward greater police involvement in child maltreatment cases noted above, highlights the need for more understanding of the role law enforcement currently plays and potentially could play in responding to the problem of child abuse.

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