

UNH Researchers Find Under-Reporting of Juvenile Crime Victimization

Sociologists lament the lack of crucial support to young victims

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DURHAM, N.H. -- A new Justice Department report authored by University of New Hampshire researchers finds that juvenile victims of rape, robbery and assault are substantially less likely to have their victimization reported to police.

In an analysis of national data for 1995-6, only 28 percent of violent crimes against juveniles aged 12 to 17 became known to police compared to 48 percent for crimes against adults. Even when the crimes involved a weapon or an injury to the victim, if the victim was a juvenile, less than half of the crimes were reported.

"This shows youths are at a double disadvantage. They're twice as likely to be crime victims and only half as likely to have their victimization reported to police," says David Finkelhor, study co-author and director of the UNH Crimes Against Children Research Center. "Given they're so vulnerable to victimization, children are the group that most needs the attention of the justice system."

The analysis, completed by Finkelhor and center colleague Richard Ormrod, was based on data from the National Crime Victimization Survey, conducted annually by the Department of Justice and involving 50,000 American households.

Finkelhor and Ormrod also found that thefts against juveniles were even more under-reported than violent crime. Only 10 percent of thefts against juveniles were reported to police, compared to more than 30 percent for adults.

Of particular concern, reporting to police declined with age. So for children age 12, only 20 percent of the violent crime victims had their crime reported to police.

The researchers write, "Serious kinds of juvenile victimizations that should be coming to the attention of police and other authorities are not."

They argue that under-reporting stems from a variety of factors. Teen victims often fear that they will be not taken seriously or blamed for their own victimization. Moreover, adolescents' concerns about personal autonomy and freedom make them reluctant to involve authorities in their affairs, particularly if they think it will lead to a curtailment of their freedoms.

Parents, for their part, are often concerned about the impact of the justice system on juveniles.

Finkelhor and Ormrod make several recommendations they believe will help promote the reporting of juvenile victims. Among them:

- Train and deploy more officers specializing in work with juvenile victims;
- Provide incentives to report, including information about how youth can protect themselves from future victimization;
- Publicize the availability of crime compensation funds for juvenile victims; and
- Make police more available at places and times juvenile victimizations typically occur.

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