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UNH Report Finds Adults Who Commit Crimes against Juveniles Not Like Other Offenders

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DURHAM, N.H. -- Adults who commit violent crimes against children and end up in prison are very different from other imprisoned criminals, according to a new study by researchers at the University of New Hampshire's Crimes Against Children Research Center, published today by the U.S. Department of Justice.

According to the report, "Offenders Incarcerated for Crimes Against Juveniles," offenders against children and youth are mostly white men, over the age of 30 and have been married at some time. Two-thirds are sex offenders and the vast majority committed their crimes against a family member or an acquaintance.

By contrast, a majority of incarcerated offenders against adults are nonwhite, under 30, never married and committed largely nonsexual offenses against strangers.

The study, authored by David Finkelhor, director of the UNH center, and Richard Ormrod, a research professor, was based on a large national survey conducted in 1997 of inmates incarcerated in state correctional facilities.

Along with differences in demographic and offense characteristics, the researchers also uncovered disparities in the way that offenders against juveniles are sentenced. In spite of popular perceptions, offenders against young children did not receive sentences that were lenient for the type of offenses they had committed. However, sentences for offenders against teenagers were more lenient. Offenders against teens
were 52 percent less likely to receive a life or death sentence and their prison sentences were on average two years shorter than otherwise equivalent offenders who had victimized adults in similar kinds of crimes.

"We think the lighter sentences for these offenders is probably due in part to negative stereotypes about teenagers," says Finkelhor. "Judges may be prone to see teenage victims of physical or sexual assault as having behaved provocatively or irresponsibly, and in their minds this mitigates offenders' culpability.

"People want juvenile victims to be the model of innocence," he adds, "but with almost any teenager, it is hard to make that model fit. Nonetheless, teenagers are the most criminally victimized segment of the population. If we want to help change that, we need to take their victimization as seriously as anybody else's."

The study also found a dramatic increase in the number of people incarcerated for violent crimes against children, up 33 percent in six years to 93,760. Finkelhor says that the "get-tough" policy this increase represented may have something to do with a decrease in juvenile crime victimization that was observed during the 1990s.

"When offenders are out of circulation, they are not assaulting and molesting, and there are a lot more out of circulation now than there used to be," says Finkelhor, adding that he is encouraged by recent crime declines, which he thinks have resulted from more than simply increased incarceration. But he thinks that studies like this one help point the way to even more effective strategies to reduce the toll of crimes against children.

The full report, "Offenders Incarcerated for Crimes Against Juveniles," is available on-line at http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/pubs/new.html

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