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OJJDP

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JUVENILE JUSTICE BULLETIN

Crimes Against Children by Babysitters



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.

In recent years, parents and policymakers have become increasingly concerned with ensuring the safety of children when they are in the custody of childcare workers. Such concerns have sparked extensive debates about how childcare providers should be hired and screened and whether routine criminal background checks should be used to uncover potential offenders. These safety concerns have even prompted the use of surveillance devices to monitor workers who care for children (Wen, 2000).

Unfortunately, information that might clarify these issues is limited. For example, public data on juvenile abuse and crime victimization do not routinely present the identity of perpetrators in a way that allows identification of specific groups of offenders, such as teachers or daycare operators. Instead, perpetrators are

grouped more generally, either as undifferentiated childcare providers or simply as acquaintances of the victim.

Parents are particularly concerned about babysitters, whose recruitment and screening are often informal. Nonfamilial paid babysitters have generated anxiety ever since they became a nearly universal social phenomenon in the post-World War II childrearing environment (Kourany, Gwinn, and Martin, 1980). As mothers entered the workforce and fewer families lived with other relatives, more and more parents relied on babysitters to care for their children. Concerns about babysitters may have increased in recent years, especially in the wake of cases like that of Louise Woodward, the Boston-area au-pair convicted of killing 8-month-old Matthew Eappen, who was in her full-time care (Doherty, 1997; Kahn, 1997).

A Message From OJJDP

Although only 14 percent of our Nation's 18.5 million children less than 5 years old are cared for regularly by a nonrelated inhome childcare or family daycare provider, many—perhaps most—have been cared for by a babysitter on occasion.

Highly publicized criminal cases such as the conviction of au-pair Louise Woodward in the tragic death of 8-month-old Matthew Eappen have raised public concern about children's safety and the manner in which childcare providers are screened and monitored. Such regard for the welfare of children is both understandable and laudable, but what are the facts about the risks involved in childcare?

Until recently, little was known about the prevalence of criminal offenses among babysitters. This Bulletin, part of OJJDP's Crimes Against Children Series, draws on the FBI's National Incident-Based Reporting System to provide data on the frequency and nature of crimes against children committed by babysitters.

The fact that babysitters account for approximately 4 percent of crimes committed against children less than 6 years old—a rate below that of complete strangers—helps put the matter in perspective.

Of course, the victimization of any child is unacceptable, and it is hoped that the information that this Bulletin offers will enhance efforts to combat such crimes.

Despite such publicity, the literature on the offenses of babysitters is scant (Margolin, 1990; Margolin and Craft, 1990; Martin and Kourany, 1980). However, this lack of information is beginning to change. Babysitters are one of the new categories of offenders for whom specific information is now being collected within the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI's) growing National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS). The availability of these data for the first time, combined with public and policy interest, makes babysitter offenses worthy of analysis.

Analysis of NIBRS data on crimes against juveniles (ages 0 to 17) reveals the following information:

- ◆ Babysitters are responsible for a relatively small portion of the reported criminal offenses against children: 4.2 percent of all offenses for children under age 6—less than the percentage accounted for by family members or strangers.
- ◆ Among the reported offenses that babysitters commit, sex crimes outnumber physical assaults nearly two to one.
- ◆ Children most at risk of physical assaults by babysitters are younger (ages 1–3) than those at risk of sex crimes (ages 3–5).
- ◆ Males constitute the majority of sex-offending babysitters reported to the police (77 percent); females make up the majority of physical assaulters (64 percent).
- ◆ Juvenile offenders are responsible for nearly half the babysitter sex crimes known to police (48 percent) but only 15 percent of the physical assaults.
- ◆ Babysitter offenses rarely result in death, but victims of babysitter crimes known to police are more likely than other child crime victims to suffer an injury (75 percent versus 53 percent for victims under age 6).

The Data

NIBRS, which compiled the data that are the basis of this analysis, was created to eventually supplant the existing Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) program as the national statistical database of crimes reported to the police. NIBRS can collect considerably more detailed information about crime incidents than UCR, including the range of offenses committed, victim characteristics (including age), offender characteristics,

and incident circumstances. While NIBRS is not yet national in scope and only encompasses jurisdictions in 17 States (see sidebar on p. 3 for further discussion of NIBRS), the combined reports for 1995, 1996, 1997, and 1998 yielded 1,427 babysitter victimizations for analysis. Given the general absence of data on this group of offenders, this large number of cases merits investigation—even though the cases are not nationally representative and the findings drawn from them are preliminary.

“Babysitter” is a term with some ambiguity. Children are cared for by a variety of people, including close and extended family, friends, family daycare operators, professional daycare centers, and schools; some of these providers may be paid while others are not. The term “babysitter” may be loosely applied to any of these providers, with the exception of schools and, possibly, daycare centers. Fortunately, the NIBRS system uses the more common meaning of the term, following the usage typical of many State child protective agencies (Margolin, 1990; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). NIBRS considers babysitters to be those persons who temporarily care for children for pay, usually in the child's or babysitter's home. This usage excludes preschool and commercial daycare center staff members but includes both licensed and unlicensed home-based daycare providers. NIBRS protocols, like those of many State child protective services, also exclude family offenders from the babysitter category. Offenders who commit crimes against family members are identified in NIBRS by their family relationship to the victim, and not as babysitters, because NIBRS only categorizes offenders in a single relationship category. As a result, babysitters identified by NIBRS reporting agencies are not members of the victim's family. Thus, the majority of babysitter offenders identified in NIBRS are paid nonfamily juveniles or adults caring for children in a home setting. However, NIBRS relies on local law enforcement agencies to collect data, and specification practices may vary somewhat from agency to agency.

An accurate number of children in the United States cared for by babysitters (as defined in NIBRS) is difficult to estimate. The National Child Care Survey (NCCS) estimated that, in 1990, 14 percent of the 18.5 million children under age 5 had a nonrelative inhome provider or family daycare as their primary childcare arrangement (Hofferth et al., 1991). However, NCCS and other

childcare surveys tally only children's “primary arrangements.” Large numbers of children whose primary arrangements involve care by their own mother, another relative, or a daycare center are also occasionally cared for by babysitters. Therefore, it seems likely that a majority of all young children are exposed to paid babysitters at some time.

Findings

Reporting

Babysitters were only a small portion of the offenders in NIBRS jurisdictions who committed violent crimes against children. They accounted for 0.5 percent of offenders who committed crimes against juveniles (youth under age 18) and 4.2 percent of those who committed crimes against young children (those under age 6) (figure 1).¹ In contrast, family members (including nonparental offenders) accounted for 21.4 percent of offenders who committed crimes against all juveniles and 53.5 percent of those who committed crimes against young children. (Parental family offenders alone are 12 percent and 36 percent, respectively.) Complete strangers accounted for 11.0 percent of offenders against juveniles and 5.6 percent of offenders against young children. In assessing these figures, it would be useful to compare babysitters with other categories of professional childcare providers, such as teachers or youth workers, but such comparisons are not possible because these categories are not separately identified in NIBRS.

Victim Characteristics

Children under age 6, the group most likely to be cared for by babysitters, are also those most likely to be victimized by them (figure 2). Children in this age group made up 60 percent of the victims of babysitter crimes in the NIBRS jurisdictions, although youth 12 and older were sometimes victimized. (The victims in the older age group may have included disabled youth who

¹ Counts of offenders by relationship to victim are based only on victimizations where perpetrators can be identified as family members, strangers, babysitters, or other acquaintances, thus excluding the “unknown” category. Furthermore, comparisons of babysitter-perpetrated offenses with those committed by nonbabysitters are limited to only incidents involving crimes against persons (homicide, sexual assault, assault, kidnapping, and nonforcible sex offenses) because these are the only crimes linked in NIBRS data to babysitter offenders.

The National Incident-Based Reporting System

The U.S. Department of Justice is replacing its long-established Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) program with a more comprehensive National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS). While UCR monitors 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 greater 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. The incident does not need to be cleared or an arrest made, although unreported reports are deleted from the record.

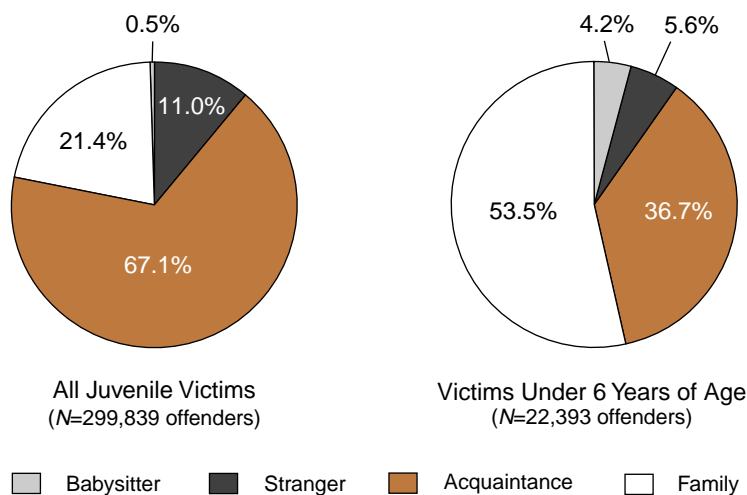
NIBRS holds great promise, but it is still far from a national system. Its implementation by the FBI began in 1988, and participation by States and local agencies is voluntary and incremental. By 1995, jurisdictions in 9 States had agencies contributing data; by 1997, the number was 12; and by the end 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 its data

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 1998, the 17 participating States¹ reported a total of 1,344,361 crimes against individuals, with 143,523 occurring against juveniles. 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.fbi.gov/ucr/nibrs.htm, (2) www.search.org/nibrs/default.asp, (3) www.jrsa.org/ibrrc/.

¹ Colorado, Connecticut, Idaho, Iowa, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, and West Virginia.

Figure 1: Percentage of Offenders Who Committed Violent Crimes Against Juveniles, by Relationship to the Victim



Note: The data also include nonforcible sex offenses. Data are provided only for incidents with identified offender(s). Juveniles are persons under 18 years of age.

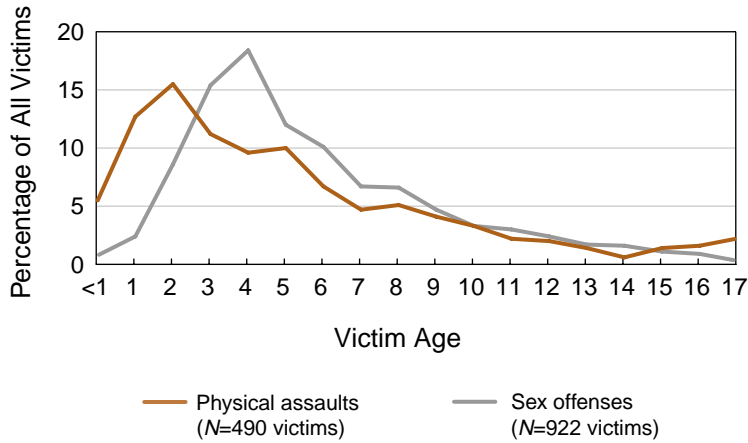
Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation (1995, 1996, 1997, 1998), *National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS)* computer file (17 States only), Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice. Tabulations undertaken by Crimes against Children Research Center.

still require some professional childcare.) In terms of racial distribution, juvenile victims of babysitter offenses known to police were more likely to be white (92 percent) than juvenile crime victims in general (75 percent). This racial disparity may exist because nonwhite children are less likely to be cared for by paid nonfamily babysitters due to cost factors and the greater availability of care by relatives (Casper, 1997).

Among babysitter offenses that were reported to the police, sex offenses outnumbered physical assaults 65 percent to 34 percent (figure 3). Most of the sex offenses involved fondling rather than the more serious crimes of rape or sodomy (41 percent, 9 percent, and 11 percent of all babysitter offenses, respectively). Simple assaults made up 25 percent of all reported babysitter offenses, whereas aggravated assaults accounted for 9 percent. A very small fraction of the offenses entailed a kidnapping (0.5 percent) or homicide (0.6 percent).

The age distribution of victims in NIBRS reports varies, depending on the type of offense. Children ages 1 to 3 faced the

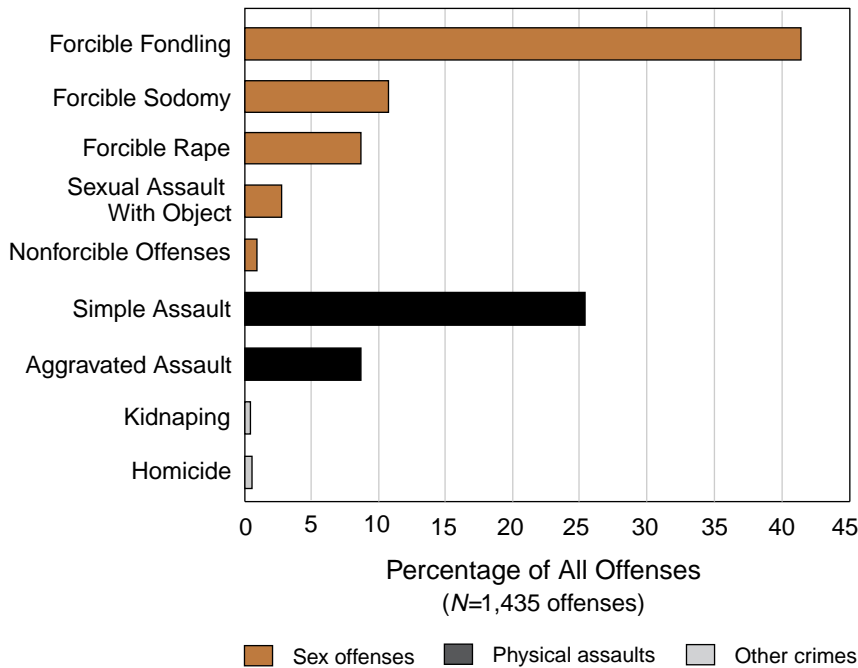
Figure 2: Age of Victims of Physical Assaults and Sex Offenses Committed by Babysitters



Note: Percentages calculated separately for physical assaults and sex offenses.

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation (1995, 1996, 1997, 1998), *National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS)* computer file (17 States only), Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice. Tabulations undertaken by Crimes against Children Research Center.

Figure 3: Types of Crime Committed Against Juveniles by Babysitters



Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation (1995, 1996, 1997, 1998), *National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS)* computer file (17 States only), Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice. Tabulations undertaken by Crimes against Children Research Center.

greatest risk of physical assault, whereas children ages 3 to 5 were most vulnerable to sex offenses (figure 2). Victim gender also varied by type of offense. More boys than girls were victims of physical assault by babysitters (54 percent versus 46 percent), whereas girls made up 65 percent of the sex offense victims (figure 4).

Offender Characteristics

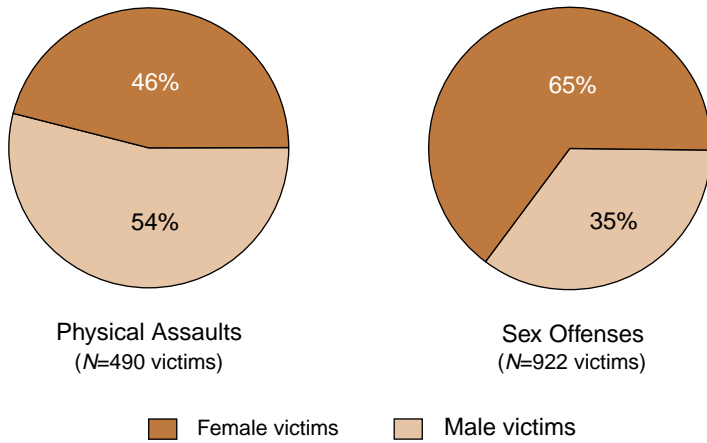
Overall, among babysitters, male offenders outnumbered female offenders (63 to 37 percent) in police reports.² However, this percentage masks the true disproportion in the risk of male offending, in that most children are exposed to more female than male babysitters, both in terms of numbers and the amount of time spent in their care. No reliable information is available about the overall gender ratio of babysitters, but one teen survey found that females were twice as likely as males to have had babysitting experience (Kourany, Martin, and LaBarbera, 1980). Among adult babysitters, the ratio is considerably higher (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001). Therefore, the true risk of a male babysitter offending is likely much greater than the two-to-one ratio of male to female offenders found in the data.

Males were disproportionately involved in sex offenses (77 percent of offenders known to police). Females committed the majority of the physical assaults (64 percent of offenders). Of babysitters who committed sex offenses, males were more likely than females to target female victims and victims ages 6 and older (figure 5). They were also more likely to be adults (58 percent), whereas female sex offenders were predominantly juveniles (67 percent), mostly ages 13 to 15.

In addition to gender of the offenders, one of the most dramatic differences between sex offenses and physical assaults reported in NIBRS jurisdictions was the offender

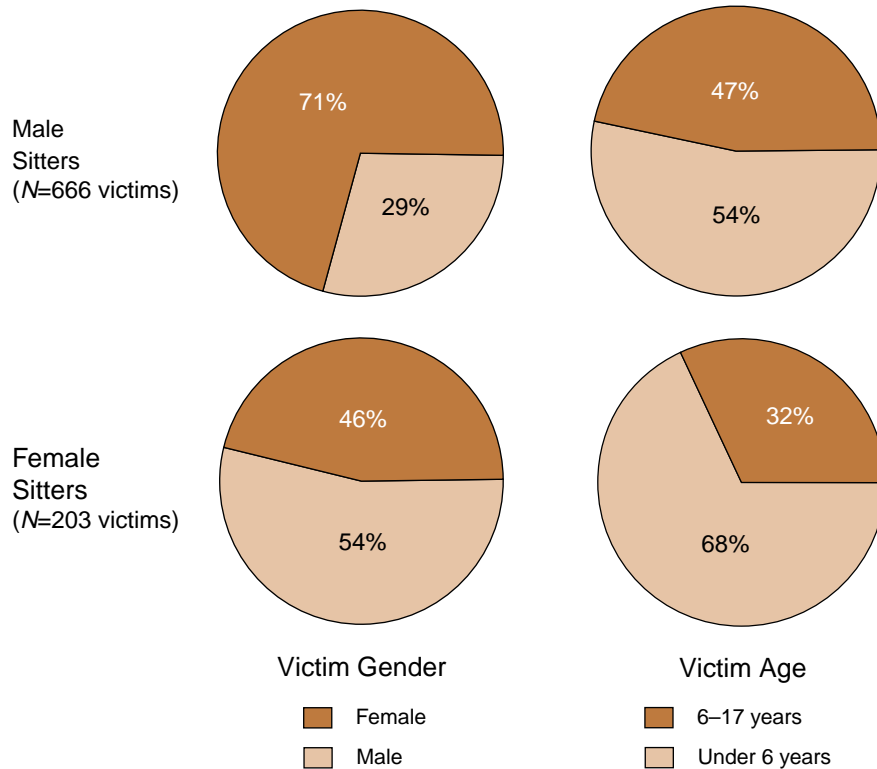
² Some babysitter victimizations are perpetrated by multiple sitters, or by one sitter and other offender(s), yielding mixed offender patterns and offender-victim associations. In cases with multiple offenders, non-babysitter offenders are identified by their relationship to the victim, not to the babysitter. To avoid ambiguity, only incidents containing a single babysitter acting alone are used when specifying offender characteristics and describing offender-victim links. Single babysitters acting alone accounted for 93 percent of all babysitter victimizations reported in 1995, 1996, 1997, and 1998 NIBRS data.

Figure 4: Gender of Juvenile Victims of Babysitters, by Type of Offense



Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation (1995, 1996, 1997, 1998), *National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS)* computer file (17 States only), Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice. Tabulations undertaken by Crimes against Children Research Center.

Figure 5: Gender and Age of Juvenile Victims of Sex Offenses Committed by Babysitters, by Offender Gender



Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation (1995, 1996, 1997, 1998), *National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS)* computer file (17 States only), Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice. Tabulations undertaken by Crimes against Children Research Center.

age profile (figure 6). Nearly half (48 percent) of the babysitter sex offenders were themselves juveniles. On the other hand, only 15 percent of the physically assaultive babysitters were under age 18. This age pattern—teens overrepresented in the commission of sex offenses and adults in the commission of physical offenses—held true for both male and female offenders. One possible explanation for this pattern may be that adult babysitters are more likely to be given responsibility for young children for longer periods (e.g., a whole day or several days a week) than teenage babysitters, and this continuous exposure creates the kind of stress and control-related conflicts that tend to trigger physical assaults on young children. Sex offenses, by contrast, are often crimes of opportunity that occur during the more occasional exposures that children have with teen babysitters.

Injury

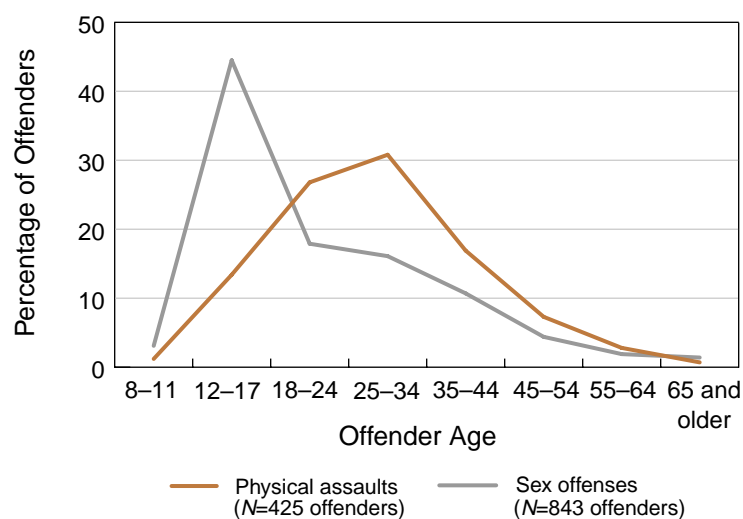
Death was a relatively uncommon outcome for victims of babysitter crimes in NIBRS jurisdictions (0.6 percent). However, babysitter victims were more likely to sustain injuries than juvenile victims of other offenders. Among juvenile victims of physical assault, 67 percent of those assaulted by babysitters incurred a major or minor injury, compared with 52 percent of victims of other offenders (figure 7). For assault victims under age 6, the injury discrepancy was even larger (75 percent of babysitter victims injured versus 53 percent of victims of other offenders). Sexual assault injury rates are fairly low and similar for babysitters and nonsitters alike.

Implications

Police data reveal that babysitters do indeed commit serious crimes against children in their care. While NIBRS data cannot be used to estimate national crime statistics, the numbers extrapolated from NIBRS jurisdictions (which represent about 6 percent of the Nation's crimes for 1997 and 1998) suggest that roughly 7,000 to 8,000 babysitter offenses—the majority of which are sex crimes—are reported to police over the course of a year. This estimate is certainly large enough to justify that precautions be taken by parents in screening and hiring care providers.

However, the threat posed by babysitters, especially when compared with other childhood threats, should not be overemphasized. Babysitters were responsible for

Figure 6: Age of Babysitters Who Committed Physical Assaults and Sex Offenses Against Juveniles



Note: Percentages calculated separately for physical assaults and sex offenses.

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation (1995, 1996, 1997, 1998), *National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS)* computer file (17 States only), Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice. Tabulations undertaken by Crimes against Children Research Center.

only 4.2 percent of the reported crimes against children under 6 years—fewer than crimes committed by family members, other acquaintances, or even strangers. Given the large number of children exposed to babysitters, this is a relatively small percentage. The data reinforce other studies that suggest primary efforts should seek to shield young children from crimes committed by family perpetrators, not childcare providers (Finkelhor and Ormrod, 2001). It is important to keep in mind, however, that the numbers in NIBRS represent only the most serious criminal acts, the ones reported to the police; therefore, they do not fully reflect the scope of babysitter misconduct. Although sexual acts toward children are usually considered very serious and reported to police, many acts of physical assault by babysitters, even those resulting in injury, are unlikely to be reported. In addition, episodes of babysitter neglect and emotional abuse are rarely reported to police. Data from child protection agencies might document more instances of physical abuse, neglect, and emotional abuse, but parents are probably more inclined to simply terminate a babysitter's services than bother with official police or child protection reports. In addition, babysitter crimes may be

disproportionately obscured because younger victims are often unable to communicate this abuse to their parents.

In short, crime reports on babysitters are only a crude guide to the perils children face in the company of babysitters. For example, the finding of NIBRS data that sex offenses by babysitters outnumber physical assaults may only reflect the kind of crime considered serious enough to be reported to police. In reality, physical assaults may be more common than sex offenses but less reported. Similarly, to the extent that physical assaults are underreported compared with sex offenses, the offenses of female babysitters may be underreported compared with those of males.

Other NIBRS findings may not be so tainted by reporting biases. Children under 6 are likely the main targets of babysitter offenses because they spend the most time with babysitters. Teenagers likely commit more of the sex offenses against children because the sexual pressures and conflicts of their adolescence may motivate them to take advantage of the children in their care. Male babysitters probably outnumber female babysitters among offenders because males outnumber females in virtually all categories of

crime, including family offenses and offenses against children.

Also, despite their limitations, NIBRS data highlight the diversity of offenders and victims. It is now clear that both female and male babysitters commit sexual offenses. Sexual assaults do occur against some very young children, and some older children also are being criminally victimized by babysitters.

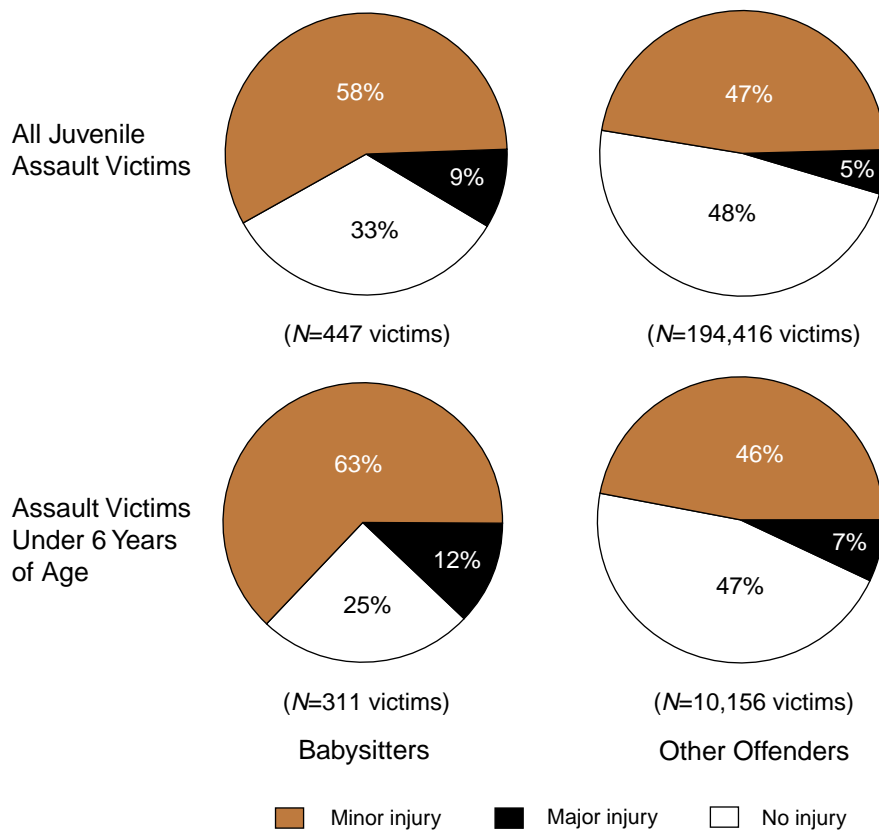
These data are neither comprehensive nor detailed enough to offer strong guidance about preventive efforts. However, the young age of sexual abuse victims does confirm the potential value of providing preschool children with age-appropriate awareness about inappropriate touching (Wurtele et al., 1989). The frequent appearance of adolescent sexual abusers in NIBRS babysitter data suggests that parents may need to carefully screen and train young babysitters with this in mind. The preponderance of male offenders, given the relatively small number of males in the childcare workforce, certainly contributes to the already evident dilemma of those who would increase children's exposure to nurturant males. Unfortunately, the implications of all these findings have policy complexities that require better data than NIBRS can currently provide about the particular features of offenders, victims, their families, and the process by which potential babysitters are screened and chosen.

NIBRS is still in its formative stage, and its data may prompt more questions rather than provide firm answers. However, to the extent that its data remind the public and policymakers of the diverse perils that confront children, including threats from babysitters and other care providers, NIBRS may eventually improve the entire effort of crime prevention and detection for this vulnerable population.

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Figure 7: Injuries Sustained by Juvenile Victims of Physical Assaults Committed by Babysitters and Other Offenders



Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation (1995, 1996, 1997, 1998), *National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS)* computer file (17 States only), Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice. Tabulations undertaken by Crimes against Children Research Center.

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Acknowledgments

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