



Research Bulletin

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Underreporting of violent victimization impedes justice, services

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Less than half of all violent victimization crimes occurring in Illinois are reported to police, a percentage that typifies the frequency of crime reporting in the nation as a whole, U.S. Department of Justice statistics indicate. Severe under-reporting to police of all types of crime, including violent crime, is a consistent finding in crime victimization research.

This *Research Bulletin* summarizes a violent victimization data analysis conducted by Callie Rennison, Ph.D. The analysis, "Victim and Household Characteristics: Reporting Violence to the Police," was based on results of the Authority-sponsored Illinois Crime Victimization Survey, a 2002 data collection effort de-

signed to provide indications of victimization across Illinois. A random sample of non-institutionalized Illinois residents 18 years and older and possessing a driver's license or state identification card was surveyed.

Survey background

One of the survey's main goals was to provide information to policymakers who design programs that aim to increase contact between victims and police. Research into police contact with non-fatal violent crime victims in Illinois may help identify what predicts under-reporting and assist policymakers in creating strategies to increase overall crime victimization reporting across the state. The survey also helped identify victimization and reporting patterns that might suggest why victimizations are not reported, including both victim unwillingness and inability to report crime.

Effects of crime under-reporting

One result of disproportionate reporting of victimization to police is that under-reporting groups do not receive full access to justice and the services available to victims. Not reporting crime also essentially eliminates the possibility that offenders will be punished, allowing them to remain free to victimize others. In addition, geographic areas where severe under-reporting occurs may not obtain the police and public resources needed to adequately ensure public safety.

Survey respondents and data

The survey reached a respondent group similar to Illinois' population in known demographic information. The final response rate was 28 percent, with 380 victimizations reported.

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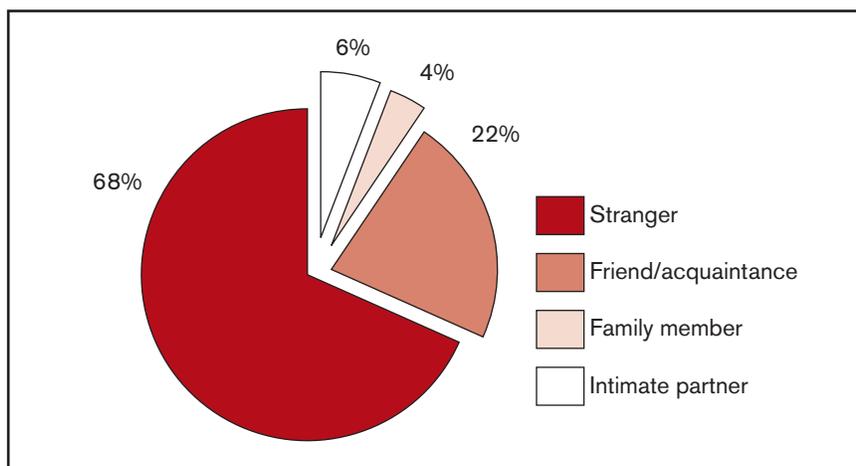
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Figure 1
Victim-offender relationship



Survey sample victims provided the following statistics: 71 percent were non-Hispanic whites, 65 percent were employed full-time, 62 percent were female, and half were married.

Offender statistics indicate that 62 percent of offenses did not involve weapons, 50 percent of offenders were white, and about 42 percent were male. Also, 89 percent of all violent victimizations did not result in physical injury to the victim. Half of all victimizations occurred at or near the victim's home.

Victimization reported by anyone, including individuals unrelated to the victim, were included in this analysis. Previous research was restricted to reporting only by the victim or the victim's family (*Figure 1*).

An estimated 44 percent of all violent victimizations in Illinois were reported to police during 2002, a figure comparable to the national figure of 49 percent.

Predictors of incident reporting

Six predictors were determined to have statistically significant effects on the likelihood of a victim reporting an incident to police. The predictors were determined after controlling for victim characteristics (race, marital status, employment, age, gender); household characteristics (length of residency, presence of children, locale type, household type, annual household income); offender characteristics (gender, approximate age, race, victim-offender relationship); and incident characteristics (use of a weapon, any physical injury sustained, and distance from home).

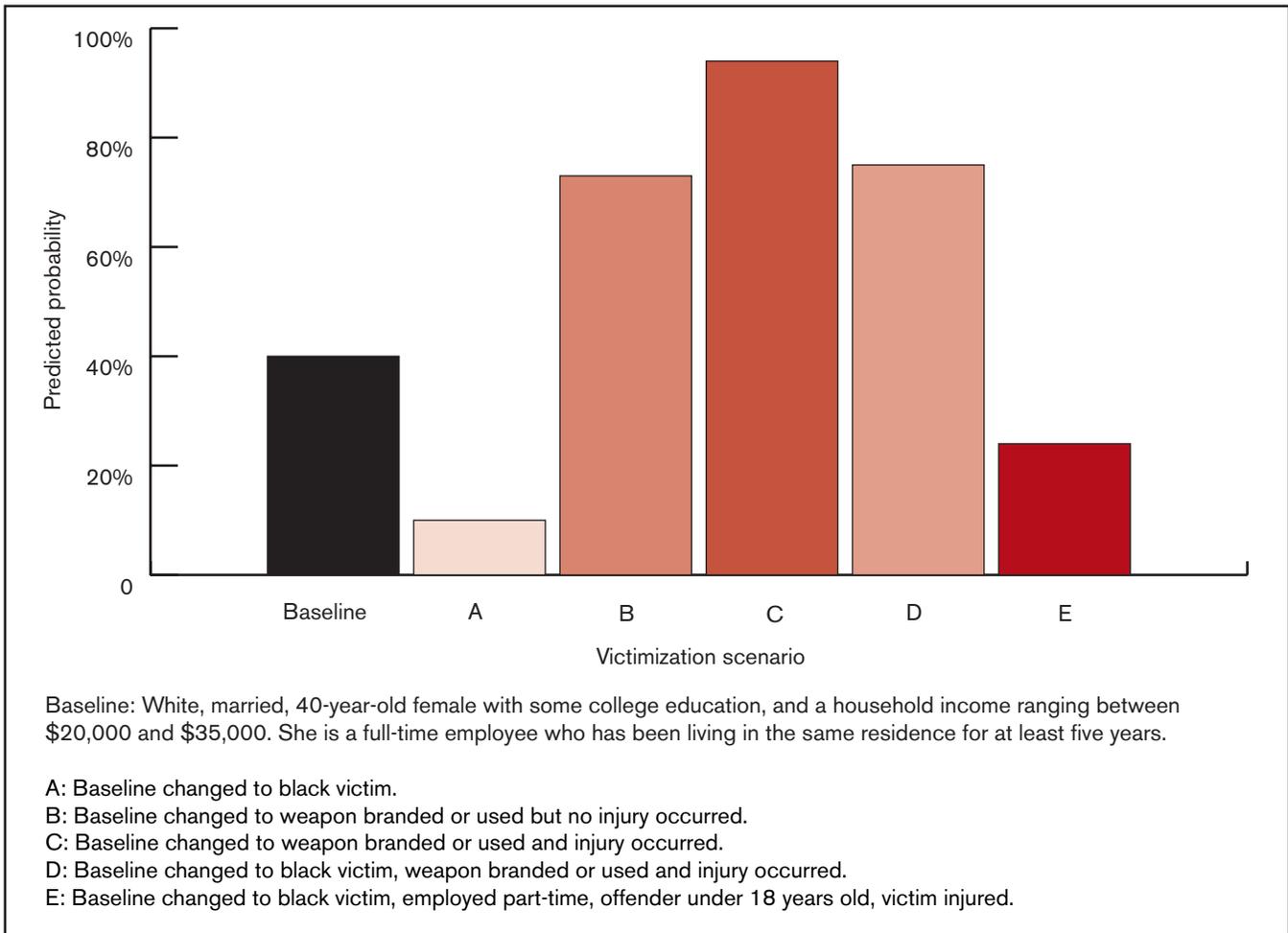
Odds of a non-Hispanic black reporting an incident to police were 83 percent less than if they were non-Hispanic white. Length of residency also had a strong effect on the likelihood of reporting to police. Residents who had lived in their homes for more than one year were about nine times as likely to report to police than those living in their home for less than one year.

The odds of reporting victimization to police by offenders 30 years and older were 82 percent less than for victimization by offenders thought to be 18 years old and under. A weapon being involved with the victimization increases the odds of being reported to four times as many as without a weapon. Injuries sustained during the victimization also increased the odds of being reported to the police by nearly 6.5 times. Part-time employees and the unemployed were respectively only 80 and 85 percent as likely as those fully employed to report a violent victimization.

Baseline comparisons

Figure 2 presents various hypothetical scenarios predicting reporting probabilities (Roncek, 1991). The baseline for this figure is a white, married, 40-year-old female with some college education, and household income ranging between \$20,000 and \$35,000. She is employed full-time and has been living at her residence for at least five years. The offender is a stranger, a white male, between the ages of 19 and 29. No weapon was used or present, no injury occurred, and the incident took place within a mile from the victim's home. In this scenario, the predicted probability that the victim

Figure 2
Predicted probabilities for reporting victimization



Source: Illinois Criminal Victimization Survey 2002

would report the crime to the police is 40 percent.

Figure 2 also shows how changes in significant variables from this baseline will affect the likelihood that the victim would report the crime to police. For example, a weapon being used or brandished increases the reporting probability to 73 percent, and a compounded injury results in a 94 percent chance of the incident being reported.

National findings differ from state

Some of these findings differ from previous research on reporting victimization at the national level. For example, violence against blacks is more likely to be reported to the police at the national level, but in Illinois violence against blacks is much less likely to be reported than violence against whites (Baumer, 2002;

Hart and Rennison, 2003).

Older victims of violence also were found nationally to report victimization more often (Baumer, 2002; Hart and Rennison, 2003), but in Illinois there was no significant effect from age. In addition, being married and having more education were associated with higher reporting rates at the national level, but neither significantly changed the likelihood of a person reporting a violent victimization in Illinois.

The effect due to offender age shows a contradictory pattern for Illinois compared nationally. While older offenders are more likely to be reported nationally, Illinois offenders who are younger than 19 are most likely to be reported. The use or brandishing of a weapon, and/or the occurrence of an injury resulting from the victimization, increase the likelihood the victim will

report an incident to the police at both the national and state levels.

Conclusion

This research suggests several important considerations for policymakers. First, non-Hispanic blacks showed a lower likelihood of reporting victimization to the police than that of a non-Hispanic white, despite that blacks proportionately experience more victimization than whites. At the national level, violence against whites is actually less likely to be reported to the police, the opposite of what Illinois-specific research indicates.

Second, individuals who have resided in a home for less than one year are not reporting violent victimizations to the same extent as those who have lived in their home for a longer period of time.

Finally, individuals employed part-time report victimizations at a much lower rate compared to those who are fully employed.

Research on the reasons these discrepancies exist is lacking. However, the need for policies directed toward public awareness of the importance of reporting violent victimization are clearly warranted.

Endnotes

Baumer, Eric P., "Neighborhood Disadvantage and Police Notification by Victims of Violence," *Criminology* 40 (August 2002): 617-647.

Hart, Timothy C., and Rennison, Callie, *Reporting Crime to the Police, 1992-2000*, Special Report, Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics., March 2003, NCJ-195710.

Roncek, Dennis W., "Using Logit Coefficients to Obtain the Effects of Independent Variables on Changes in Probabilities," *Social Forces* 70 (December 1991): 509-518.