Social Context of Victimization

WASHINGTON STATE STATISTICAL ANALYSIS CENTER
Criminal Justice Research & Statistics Center
Informing a data-driven justice system

This one-page report focuses on victimization patterns in Washington State from 2013 to 2023 using NIBRS data. Victimization is structured by social context—particularly relationships, life stage, and patterns of exposure—rather than occurring randomly. Across age, sex, and race, the most consistent finding is that victimization is embedded in social interactions and environments.

Data Parameters

This one-page report analyzes publicly available National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) data from 2013–2023 to examine victimization patterns across demographic factors, using incident-level data compiled by the monthly reported incident-based offense statistics from participating law enforcement agencies and accessed via the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR). Because NIBRS differs methodologically from the legacy Summary Reporting System and participation is voluntary, findings are not intended to be generalized, and comparisons with other datasets should be made cautiously. The dataset includes over 4.6 million incidents:

- Due to the missing or incomplete demographic data, the final dataset varied depending on the missing or incomplete demographic data. For example, the final dataset included:
  - 3,410,564 records with reported sex data (73.9% of all unique NIBRS offense events) for victims.
  - 2,995,861 records with reported race data (64.9% of all unique NIBRS offense events) for victims.
  - 3,396,428 records with reported age data (73.6% of all unique NIBRS offense events) for victims.
- Relationship-to-offender categories were grouped into broader social proximity classifications (e.g., familial, intimate partner, acquaintance, stranger, and non-familial relationships) to examine how victimization patterns vary across interpersonal contexts and demographic groups.

Limitations

All data comes with its limitations. This report identifies a few major limitations, and there are likely more not listed that could impact work that utilizes this data. Limitations include:

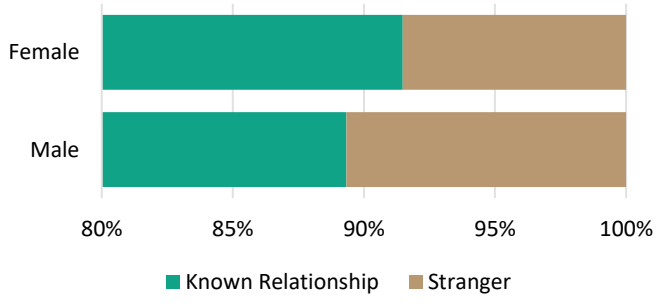
- Analyses are descriptive and non-generalizable. Any inferences and implications are limited, and results are modest. Further analyses must be completed for causal relationships to be determined.
- Administrative data and the lack of detail or richness significantly limits any conclusions yielded from this work.
- In terms of demographic assessment, these results must be interpreted with caution. Race information in administrative criminal justice data may be incomplete or misclassified, which can affect the reliability and validity of analyses of victimization patterns by race. For age analyses, records with valid age/DOB information were required; for sex and race analyses, the corresponding demographic field was required. The reported distributions may not represent all NIBRS victim records because observations with incomplete demographic information were excluded. Additionally, this brief was limited to values collected by the NIBRS.
- The dataset includes exclusively NIBRS victim records and may be subject to underreporting, as it reflects only participating jurisdictions and does not represent all law enforcement agencies.
- NIBRS reporting variability (voluntary participation, updates over time, uneven county/jurisdiction coverage) creates inconsistencies and potentially skews the data.
- Changes in law-enforcement operations and reporting during the COVID-19 period may affect comparability across the study period.

Literature on victimization consistently emphasizes that harm is structured through social context, particularly the nature of interpersonal relationships, routine activities, and exposure within everyday environments. Research distinguishes between different relational contexts of victimization, noting that non-familial and non-stranger interactions often constitute a large share of incidents, reflecting the importance of broader social networks beyond immediate family or unknown offenders. It also highlights that victimization varies across the life course, with differing levels of exposure across age groups, while maintaining similar underlying relational patterns. Studies further show that both familial and non-familial victimization are distributed across sex and race in ways that reflect differential exposure within social and community settings rather than isolated demographic risk. Within this framework, victimization is commonly understood as emerging from routine patterns of social interaction, where household structure, peer networks, and community environments shape opportunities for harm.

Sex shapes relational proximity

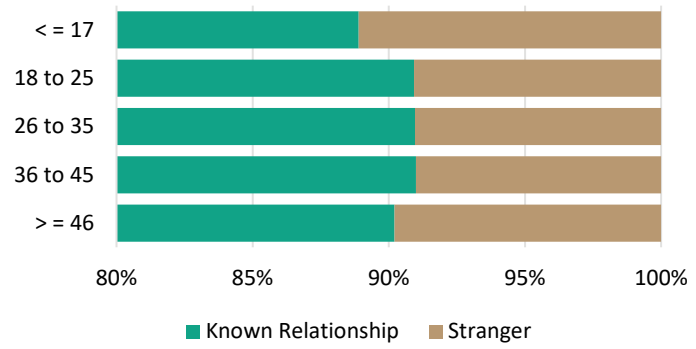
Figure 1 shows the average frequency distribution by sex and by relationship to the offender. Findings show a consistent pattern for both NIBRS records associated with male and female victims in which victimization accounted for a larger proportion with known relationships than with strangers. The female distribution contained a larger proportion of known-relationship victim observations than the male distribution. In both victim groups, known-relationship cases far exceed stranger cases, indicating that most victimization involves individuals who are already known to the victim. Stranger relationships accounted for a smaller proportion of the reported victim observations than known relationships. Findings show a stable relationship-based structure of victimization across both sexes.

Figure 1. Percentage distribution by sex and relationship to the offender



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Figure 2. Percentage distribution by age and relationship to the offender



Life-course shifts in relationships

Figure 2 shows the average frequency distribution by age at time of victimization and by relationship to the offender. Findings show a consistent pattern across all age groups in which victimization is accounted for a larger proportion within known relationships than with strangers. Across age groups, known-relationship victim observations represented a substantially larger share than stranger victim observations. Stranger victimization remains comparatively low across all age groups but is slightly more elevated among NIBRS records associated with younger individuals, particularly NIBRS records associated with those aged 18–25. Despite differences in magnitude between age groups, the overall structure remains stable, with known relationships accounting for the majority of victimization in each category. The distribution shows a similar relationship pattern across the age groups examined.

Racial patterns reflect consistency more than difference

Figure 3 shows the average frequency distribution by race and by relationship to the offender. Findings show a consistent pattern across all racial groups in which victimization accounted for a larger proportion- within known relationships than with strangers. In every group, known-relationship cases greatly exceed stranger cases, with NIBRS records associated with White victims showing the largest proportion of observations in both categories, followed by NIBRS records associated with Black/AA victims, while NIBRS records associated with Asian, AI/AN, and NHIPO victims report lower overall totals but the same overall structure. The gap between known and stranger victimization is particularly large across all races, indicating that most incidents involve individuals who are already known to the victim rather than unknown offenders. Although stranger victimization is comparatively low across all groups, it is highest in absolute terms among NIBRS records associated with White and Black/AA victims, reflecting their larger overall proportion of observations. The observed distributions show a similar relationship pattern across the racial groups examined.

Figure 3. Percentage distribution by race and relationship to the offender

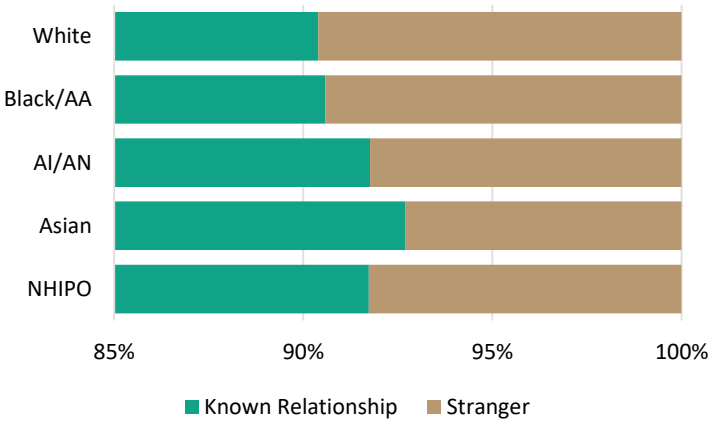
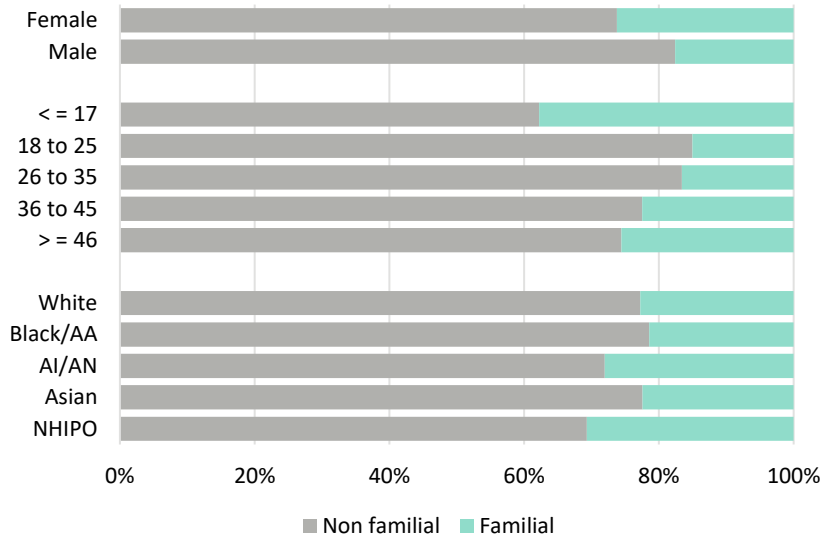


Figure 4. Percentage distribution by demographic characteristics and familial/non-familial relationship



Non-familial relationships represent a larger share

Figure 4 shows the average frequency distribution by sex, age at time of victimization, and race and by relationship to the offender. Findings show a consistent pattern across sex, age, and racial groups in which non-familial relationships represented a larger proportion of victim observations than familial ones. Within the sex-specific distributions, NIBRS records associated with female victims had larger proportions of both non-familial and familial victim observations than NIBRS records associated with male victims. Across all racial categories, non-familial victimization greatly exceeds familial victimization, with White and Black/AA individuals recording the largest proportion of observations in both categories, reflecting their larger overall representation. The same structure is observed across age groups, where non-familial victimization includes the largest proportions of NIBRS records associated with those aged 46 and older and NIBRS records associated with those aged 26–35, while familial victimization remains comparatively lower but still follows the same age distribution pattern. The distribution can suggest a stable pattern in which victimization is more frequently associated with non-familial contexts across demographic groups, with familial cases representing a smaller but consistent portion of incidents.

Victimization research emphasizes social context, especially the relationship between victim and offender, along with differences across age, sex, and race. Across the demographic groups examined, known relationships accounted for a larger share of victim observations than stranger relationships. Separately, non-familial relationships accounted for a larger share than familial relationships. These findings describe the distribution of reported NIBRS victim records and do not establish causal relationships or population-level victimization risk.

This one-page report is part of a series intended to provide a concise summary of victimization patterns in Washington State; for a more detailed analysis, please refer to *Utilizing the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS): Demographic Patterns of Victimization in Washington State*.

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