

Sex crimes on Halloween

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Purpose of the Study

States, municipalities, and parole departments have adopted policies banning known sex offenders from Halloween activities, based on the concern that there is unusual risk on this day. Whether or not there is actually a measured elevation in child sex crime risk on Halloween is unknown. The purpose of this study was to empirically examine whether the rate of sex crimes against children on Halloween differs from what we would expect on any given day.

Methods

National incident-based reporting system (NIBRS) crime report data from 1997 through 2005 were used to examine daily population adjusted rates from 67,045 non-familial sex crimes against children age 12 and younger. Halloween rates were compared to expectations based on time, seasonality and weekday periodicity.

Results

There were no significant increases in sex crimes on or around Halloween, and Halloween incidents did not evidence unusual case characteristics. Findings

did not vary across years prior to and after these policies became popular.

If these policies produced a net effect over time on overall Halloween victimization, we would expect that the rates of offenses on Halloween would show greater decline over time relative to the rates for other days. In order to test whether there may have been greater reductions in sex offense rates on Halloween relative to other days over the nine-year span, a year-by-Halloween interaction term was added to the model. No statistically significant differences were found.

In order to contextualize sex crimes against children we examined over 5 million victimizations that took place in 30 states on or around Halloween in 2005. The most common types of crime from among the incidents reported on Halloween and adjacent days were theft (32%), destruction or vandalism of property (21%), assault (19%) and burglary (9%). Vandalism and property destruction accounted for a greater proportion of crime around Halloween compared to other days of the year (21% vs. 14% of all reports). Sex crimes of all types accounted for slightly over 1% of all Halloween crime. Non-familial sex crimes against children age 12 and under accounted for less than .2% of all Halloween crime incidents.

Figure 1: Observed daily counts, aggregated across years, with reference line at Halloween.

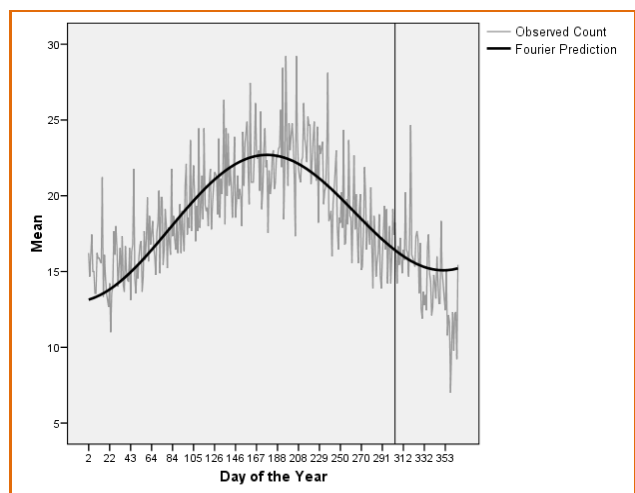
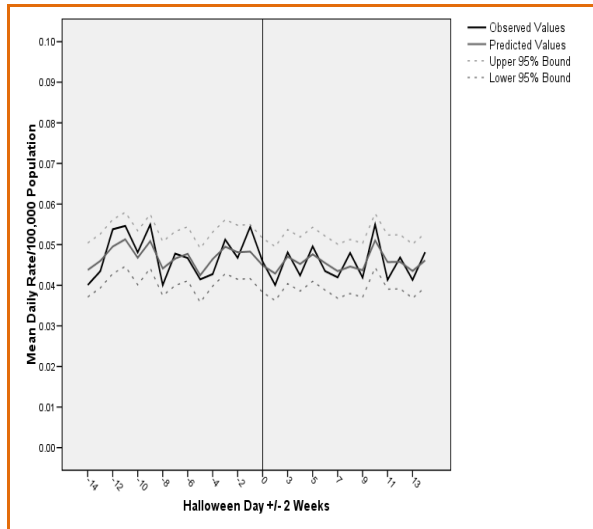


Figure 2: Observed Rates vs. Predicted Rates for the Month Surrounding Halloween. Reference line at Halloween.



Conclusions

This study found no significant increase in risk for non-familial child sexual abuse on or around Halloween. Sexual molesters sometimes use seemingly innocent opportunities to engage children for sexual abuse and therefore might be expected to use trick-or-treat for ulterior purposes. However, this logic does not appear to translate into an increase in sex offenses around Halloween. The absence of a Halloween effect remained constant over the nine year period, beginning well before the current interest in Halloween sex offender policies and extending to recent years. Any Halloween policies that have been adopted by reporting jurisdictions during that period appear not to have impacted the overall sex offense rate.

Halloween was also typical of other days in terms of victim and offender characteristics, the types of child sex offenses reported, and the categories of victim-

offender relationships involved. Children are sexually abused on Halloween, just not at higher than expected rates for any other autumn day. Reasonable parental supervision and vigilance on Halloween is appropriate, but there does not appear to be cause for alarm concerning sexual abuse risk in particular. Increased vigilance concerning risk should be directed to the summer months, where regular seasonal increases in sex crimes are readily seen.

Other risks to children are more salient on Halloween. According to the Center for Disease Control, children ages 5 to 14 are four times more likely to be killed by a pedestrian/motor-vehicle accident on Halloween than on any other day of the year. Regarding criminal activity on Halloween, theft and vandalism are particularly common. Sex crimes against children by non-family members account for two out of every thousand Halloween crimes, calling into question the justification for diverting law enforcement resources on that day away from more prevalent public safety concerns.

AUTHORS' NOTE

This report is a summary of a research article published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal:

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