

Statistical bulletin

# Sexual offences in England and Wales overview: year ending March 2020

Figures on sexual offences from the year ending March 2020 Crime Survey for England and Wales and crimes recorded by police.

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# 1 . Other pages in this release

This release brings together data on sexual offences from the Crime survey for England and Wales and police recorded crime from the Home Office. Commentary is split into a number of separate publications:

- [Sexual offences prevalence and trends, England and Wales: year ending March 2020](#)
- [Sexual offences victim characteristics, England and Wales: year ending March 2020](#)
- [Nature of sexual assault by rape or penetration, England and Wales: year ending March 2020](#)

## 2 . Main points

- The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) provides the best measure of victimisation and estimated that for the year ending March 2020 there were 773,000 adults aged 16 to 74 years who were victims of sexual assault (including attempts) in the last year, with almost four times as many female victims (618,000) as male victims (155,000).
- Over the past 15 years, the prevalence of sexual assault in the last year among the adult population aged 16 to 59 years has fluctuated between 1.5% and 3.0%, with a decrease in the latest year to 2.2% driven by a reduction in indecent exposure or unwanted sexual touching; however, the prevalence of rape or assault by penetration over this time has remained around 0.5%.
- While the volume of sexual offences recorded by the police has almost tripled in recent years, the latest figures for the year ending March 2020 show a decrease of 0.7% to 162,936 offences compared with the previous year.
- Changes in police recording practices and victims' willingness to report are likely to result in annual variations in the number of offences recorded by the police; however, police recorded crimes remain well below the number of victims estimated by the survey.
- Latest estimates from the CSEW showed that fewer than one in six (16%) female victims and fewer than one in five (19%) male victims aged 16 to 59 years of sexual assault by rape or penetration since the age of 16 years reported it to the police.

## Statistician's comment

Commenting on today's figures, Helen Ross from the ONS Centre for Crime and Justice said:

“Our latest findings from the crime survey showed a decrease in the prevalence of sexual assault in the year ending March 2020, though it should be noted that the current estimate is similar to levels seen over much of the last 15 years. The drop was driven by reductions in indecent exposure or unwanted sexual touching however there was no change in the prevalence of rape or assault by penetration.

“In the same period the number of sexual offences recorded by the police has fallen slightly, after nearly tripling in recent years. The number of offences recorded by the police remains well below the number of victims estimated by the survey, with fewer than one in six victims of rape or assault by penetration reporting the crime to the police.”

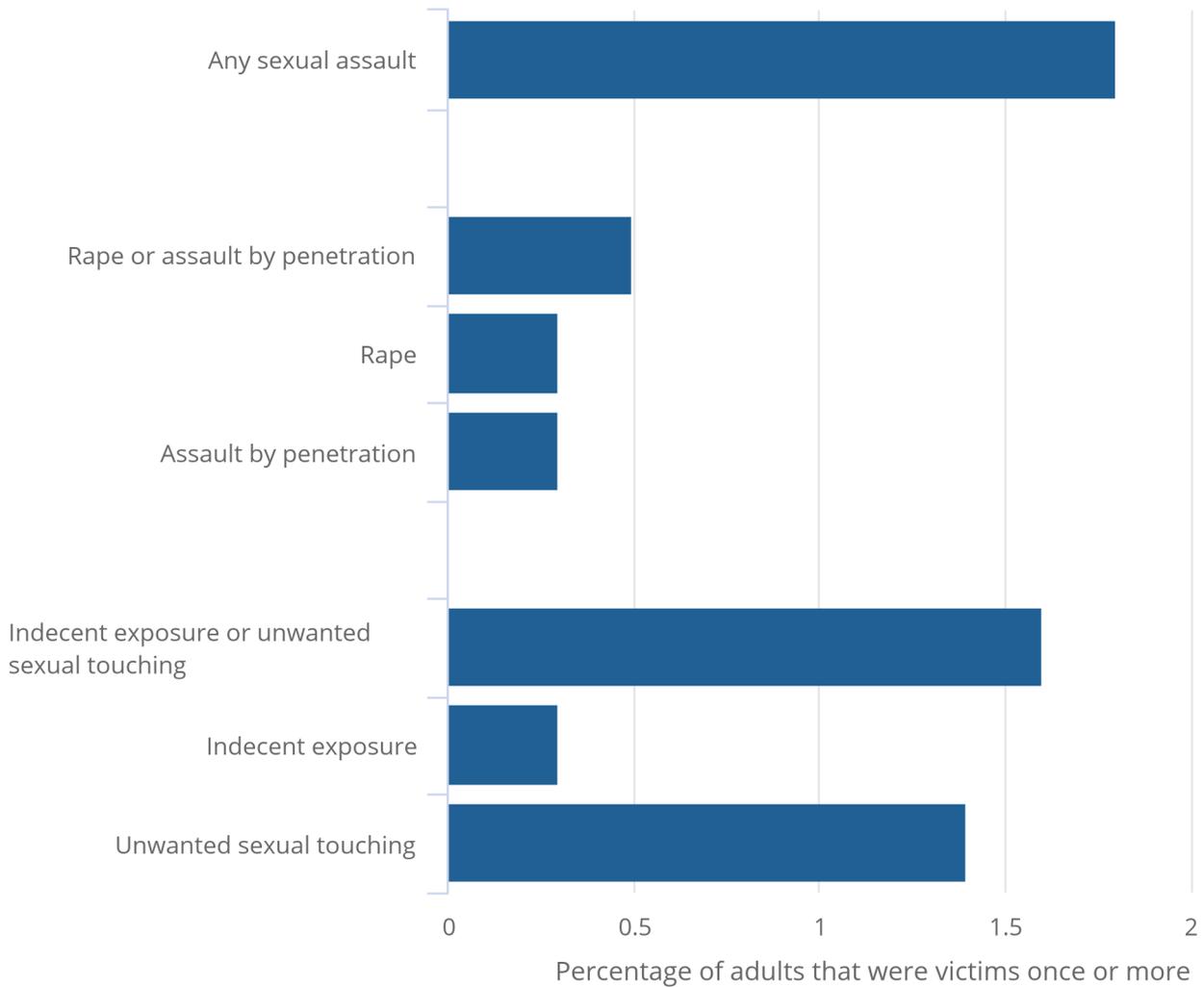
### **3 . Latest figures for the year ending March 2020**

**Figure 1: Unwanted sexual touching was the most common type of sexual assault experienced in the last year**

Prevalence of sexual assault in the last year, among adults aged 16 to 74 years, by type of abuse, England and Wales, year ending March 2020

Figure 1: Unwanted sexual touching was the most common type of sexual assault experienced in the last year

Prevalence of sexual assault in the last year, among adults aged 16 to 74 years, by type of abuse, England and Wales, year ending March 2020



Source: Office for National Statistics – Crime Survey for England and Wales

Notes:

1. The categories “any sexual assault”, “rape or assault by penetration”, “rape” and “assault by penetration” include attempts.

According to the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) year ending March 2020, an estimated 1.8% of adults aged 16 to 74 years experienced sexual assault (including attempts) in the last year (Figure 1). A higher percentage of adults experienced unwanted sexual touching, which was the most common type of sexual assault experienced (1.4%) compared with rape (0.3%) or assault by penetration (0.3%).

A total of 162,936 sexual offences were recorded by the police in England and Wales in the year ending March 2020.

More information on the prevalence of sexual offences can be found in the article [Sexual offences prevalence and trends, England and Wales: year ending March 2020](#).

## 4 . Trends over time

**Figure 2: Sexual assault estimated by the survey decreased in the last year**

Prevalence of sexual assault in the last year for adults aged 16 to 59 years and 16 to 74 years, England and Wales, year ending March 2005 to year ending March 2020

### Figure 2: Sexual assault estimated by the survey decreased in the last year

Prevalence of sexual assault in the last year for adults aged 16 to 59 years and 16 to 74 years, England and Wales, year ending March 2005 to year ending March 2020



Source: Office for National Statistics - Crime Survey for England and Wales

**Notes:**

1. From April 2017, the upper age limit for the self-completion module was increased to ask all respondents aged 16 to 74 years.
2. The categories “any sexual assault” and “rape or assault by penetration” include attempts.

The prevalence of sexual assault experienced in the last year (1.8%) for adults aged 16 to 74 years was significantly lower compared with the year ending March 2019 (2.4%).

When analysing data over a longer time period we use the 16 to 59 years age range, as the change in the upper age limit for survey respondents (from 59 to 74 years)<sup>1</sup> was introduced in April 2017. There have been fluctuations in the prevalence of sexual assault experienced among adults aged 16 to 59 over the long-term, with the estimate for the latest year similar to that seen a decade ago. It is too early to say whether the decrease in the latest year is the beginning of a downward trend or another fluctuation in the series, like those seen previously.

The number of sexual offences recorded by the police in the year ending March 2020 decreased by 0.7% compared with the previous year. Prior to this decrease, the number of sexual offences recorded by police had almost tripled in recent years. The increases in police recorded sexual offences seen in recent years largely reflected improvements made by the police in how they recorded these crimes and an increased willingness of victims to come forward and report. The latest decrease may reflect the diminishing impact of recording improvements.

More information on the long-term trends in sexual offences and characteristics of victims can be found in the [Sexual offences prevalence and trends, England and Wales: year ending March 2020](#) and [Sexual offences victim characteristics, England and Wales: year ending March 2020](#) publications.

## Notes for: Trends over time

1. The age range for respondents eligible for the domestic abuse, sexual assault and stalking self-completion module of the Crime Survey for England and Wales was expanded in April 2017, changing from adults aged 16 to 59 years to adults aged 16 to 74 years. Where analysis requires more than the last three years of data, the 16 to 59 years age range is used.

## 5 . Sexual offences in England and Wales data

### [Sexual offences prevalence and victim characteristics](#)

Dataset | Released 18 March 2021

Numbers, prevalence, types and victim characteristics, based on findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales and police recorded crime.

### [Nature of sexual assault by rape or penetration](#)

Dataset | Released 18 March 2021

Victim and perpetrator relationship, circumstances and impacts for sexual assault by rape or penetration, based on findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales.

## 6 . Glossary

## Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW)

The CSEW is a face-to-face victimisation survey in which people resident in households in England and Wales are asked about their experiences of a range of crimes in the 12 months prior to the interview. Respondents to the survey are also asked about their attitudes towards different crime-related issues, such as the police and the criminal justice system, and perceptions of crime and anti-social behaviour. Estimates used within this publication are based on the CSEW self-completion modules on domestic abuse, sexual assault and stalking, and the nature of sexual assault by rape or penetration.

### Police recorded crime

Police recorded crime data are supplied by the Home Office, who are responsible for the collation of recorded crime data supplied by the 43 territorial police forces of England and Wales, plus the British Transport Police. The data are an important indicator of police workload but, unlike the CSEW, do not include crimes that have not been reported to the police.

### Sexual assault

The term "sexual assault" in the CSEW is used to describe all types of sexual offences measured by the survey. It includes rape or assault by penetration (including attempts), and indecent exposure or unwanted sexual touching. The term "sexual assault" in police recorded crime refers to one type of sexual offence, that is, the sexual touching of a person without their consent.

### Sexual offence

Sexual offences recorded by the police cover a broader range of offences than are measured by the CSEW including rape, sexual assault, sexual activity with minors, sexual exploitation of children, and other sexual offences. There are a number of different offence codes used for rape and sexual assault, depending on the age and sex of the victim.

## 7 . Measuring the data

The sexual offences data included in this release are sourced from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) and police recorded crime. The release is largely unaffected by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

The [User guide to crime statistics for England and Wales](#) provides detailed information about the crime survey and police recorded crime data.

The [Crime in England and Wales QMI](#) report contains important information on:

- the strengths and limitations of the data
- the uses and users of the data
- how the output was created
- the quality of the output including the accuracy of the data

More recent data on the number of sexual offences recorded by the police can be found in the latest [quarterly crime publication](#).

## 8 . Strengths and limitations

Data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) are classified as National Statistics. Police recorded crime and outcomes data from the Home Office are classified as official statistics. [National Statistics](#) are a subset of [official statistics](#) that have been certified by the UK Statistics Authority as compliant with its [Code of Practice for Statistics](#).

One of the strengths of the CSEW is that it covers many crimes that are not reported to the police. Under-reporting to the police is particularly acute for sexual offences, with many more offences committed than are reported to and recorded by the police. The CSEW provides reliable estimates of the prevalence of sexual assaults using a consistent methodology that is not affected by changes in recording practices and police activity or by changes in the propensity of victims to report to the police. While the CSEW provides the best available estimate of trends in the prevalence of sexual assault, it cannot be used to make any inferences about demands on the police.

Given the different factors affecting the reporting and recording of these offences, police data do not provide a reliable indication of current trends in sexual offences.

## 9 . Related links

[Sexual offending: victimisation and the path through the criminal justice system](#)

Article | Released 13 December 2018

An overview of sexual offending in England and Wales, using a range of National Statistics and official statistics from across the crime and criminal justice system.

[Sexual offences in England and Wales: year ending March 2017](#)

Article | Released 8 February 2018

Analyses on sexual offences from the year ending March 2017 Crime Survey for England and Wales and crimes recorded by the police.

[Domestic abuse in England and Wales overview: November 2020](#)

Bulletin | Released 25 November 2020

Figures on domestic abuse from the Crime Survey for England and Wales, police recorded crime and a number of different organisations.