Office for National Statistics

Statistical bulletin

Sexual offences in England and Wales overview: year ending March 2022

Data on sexual offences from the year ending March 2022 Crime Survey for England and Wales, police recorded crime, and victim services.

Contact:
Meghan Elkin
crimestatistics@ons.gov.uk
+44 (0)20 7592 8695

Release date:
23 March 2023

Next release:
To be announced

Table of contents

1. Other pages in this release

2. Main points

3. Crime Survey for England and Wales

4. Police recorded crime

5. Victim services

6. Sexual offences in England and Wales data

7. Glossary

8. Measuring the data

9. Strengths and limitations

10. Related links

11. Cite this statistical bulletin

1 . Other pages in this release

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

- Sexual offences prevalence and trends, England and Wales: year ending March 2022
- Sexual offences victim characteristics, England and Wales: year ending March 2022

2 . Main points

- The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) provides the best measure of victimisation and estimated that 2.3% of adults (3.3% women and 1.2% men) aged 16 years and over were victims of sexual assault (including attempts) in the year ending March 2022 survey; this equates to an estimated 1.1 million adults (798,000 women and 275,000 men).
- Approximately 16.6% of adults aged 16 years and over (7.9 million) had experienced sexual assault (including attempts) since the age of 16 years; 1.9 million were a victim of rape (7.7% women and 0.2% men).
- Despite no significant change in the prevalence of sexual assault experienced by adults aged 16 to 59 years in the last year (2.7%) compared with the year ending March 2020 (2.2%), there has been a significant increase since the year ending March 2014 (1.5%), which aligns with trends seen in police recorded crime.
- The volume of sexual offences recorded by the police has been increasing over the last decade although the numbers remain well below the number of victims estimated by the survey; the latest figures for the year ending March 2022 show an increase of 31%, to 193,566 police recorded offences, compared with the previous year.
- The impact of high-profile incidents, media coverage, and campaigns on people's willingness to report both recent and historical incidents to the police are likely to result in annual variations in the number of offences recorded by the police.
- Data from organisations supporting sexual assault victims can provide a snapshot of the demands on these services, with data from Victim Support showing an increase in demand in recent years.

CSEW data for the year ending March 2022 survey are not badged as National Statistics. They are based on six months of data collection between October 2021 and March 2022. Caution should be taken when using these data because of the impact of the reduced data collection period and lower response rates on the quality of the estimates.

3 . Crime Survey for England and Wales

The face-to-face Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) was suspended on 17 March 2020 because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Although the Telephone CSEW (TCSEW) allowed us to carry on providing estimates for certain crimes, concerns around confidentiality and respondent safeguarding led to sexual offences questions being excluded.

Data collection for the face-to-face CSEW resumed on 4 October 2021. Data based on six months of CSEW interviews, rather than 12 months, have been used in our articles for the year ending March 2022. CSEW data presented in this release are not badged as National Statistics, and caution should be taken when using these data because of the impact of the reduced data collection period and lower response rates on the quality of the estimates.

For more information on sexual assault by age group following the removal of the upper age limit, see Section 5 of our Sexual offences victim characteristics, England and Wales: year ending March 2022 article.

Latest figures

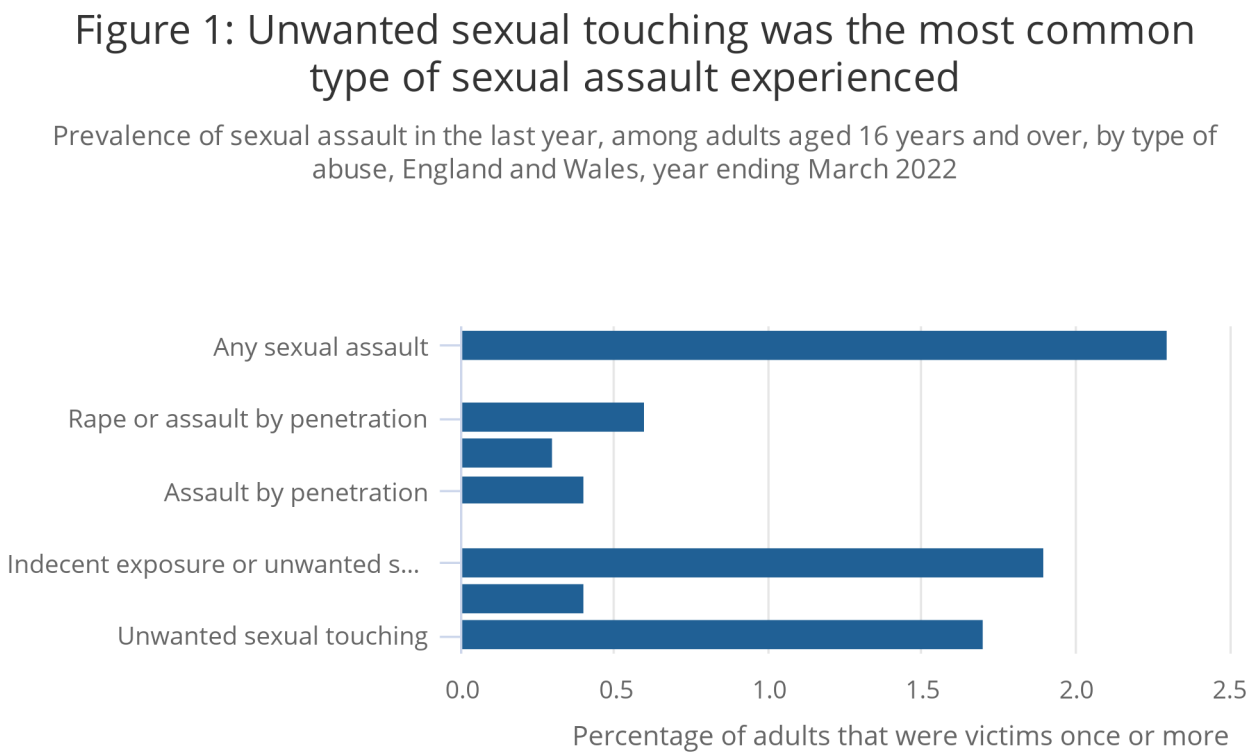
The CSEW estimated that 1.1 million adults aged 16 years and over experienced sexual assault in the year ending March 2022 (798,000 women and 275,000 men). This equates to a prevalence rate of approximately 2.3% of adults (3.3% women and 1.2% men).

Figure 1 shows unwanted sexual touching was the most common type of sexual assault experienced by adults (1.7%) compared with rape (0.3%) or assault by penetration (0.4%).

More information on the prevalence of sexual offences can be found in our Sexual offences prevalence and trends, England and Wales: year ending March 2022 article.

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

Prevalence of sexual assault in the last year, among adults aged 16 years and over, by type of abuse, England and Wales, year ending March 2022



Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Data for the year ending March 2022 are not badged as National Statistics. Caution should be taken when using these data because of the impact of the reduced data collection period and lower response rates on the quality of the estimates.

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

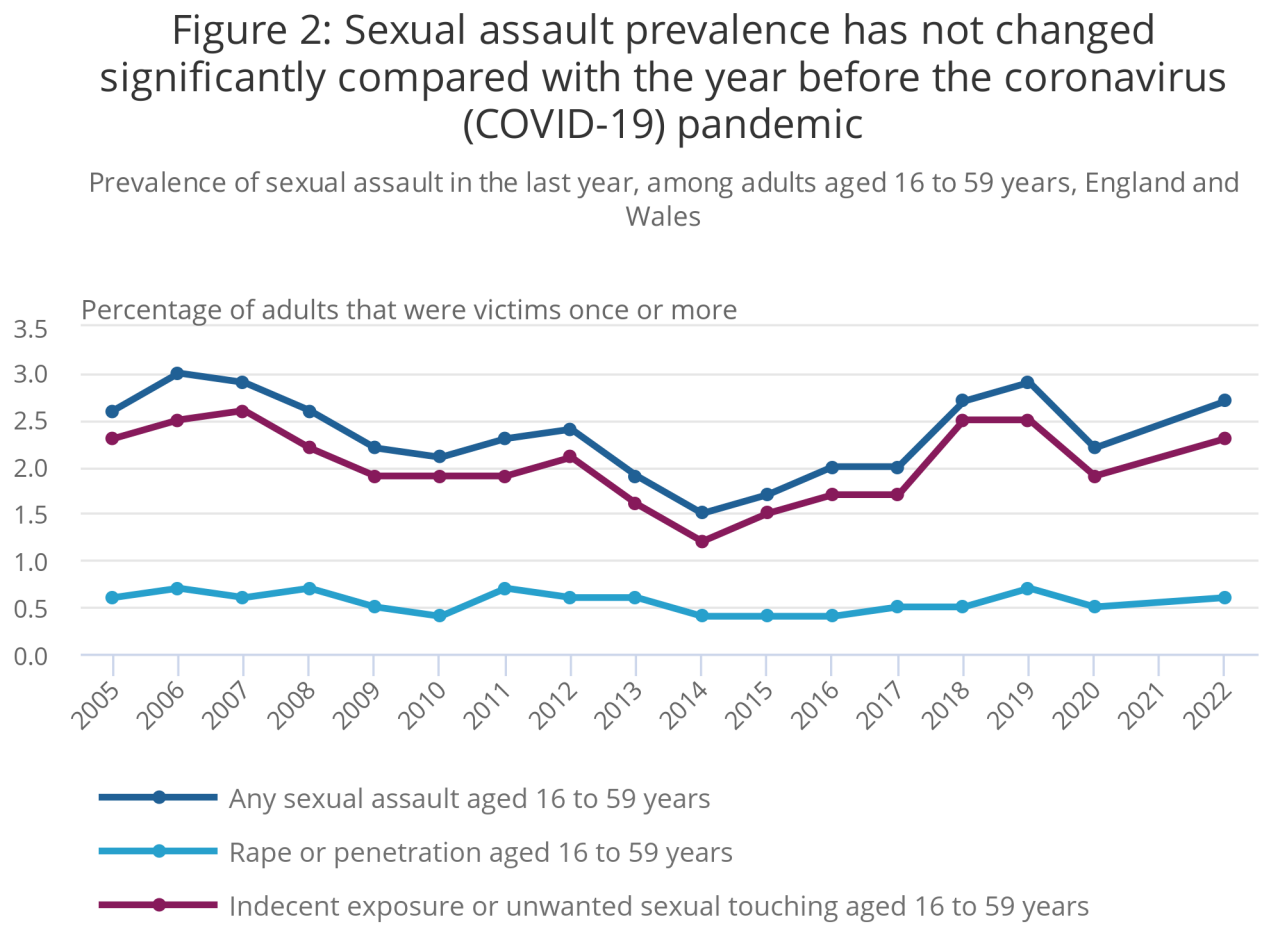
Trends over time

Following the removal of the upper age limit for survey respondents in October 2021, when analysing data over time, we use the 16 to 59 years age range to give a comparable time series. The prevalence of sexual assault among adults aged 16 to 59 years has fluctuated between 1.5% and 3.0% over the last 17 years, with a significant increase seen between the year ending March 2014 (1.5%) and the latest data for the year ending March 2022 (2.7%).

The latest figure was not significantly different to the year ending March 2020, a year largely unaffected by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, and the last time the data were collected (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Sexual assault prevalence has not changed significantly compared with the year before the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

Prevalence of sexual assault in the last year, among adults aged 16 to 59 years, England and Wales



Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Data for the year ending March 2022 are not badged as National Statistics. Caution should be taken when using these data because of the impact of the reduced data collection period and lower response rates on the quality of the estimates.

2. No data are available for the year ending March 2021 because the Crime Survey for England and Wales was suspended because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

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

4 . Police recorded crime

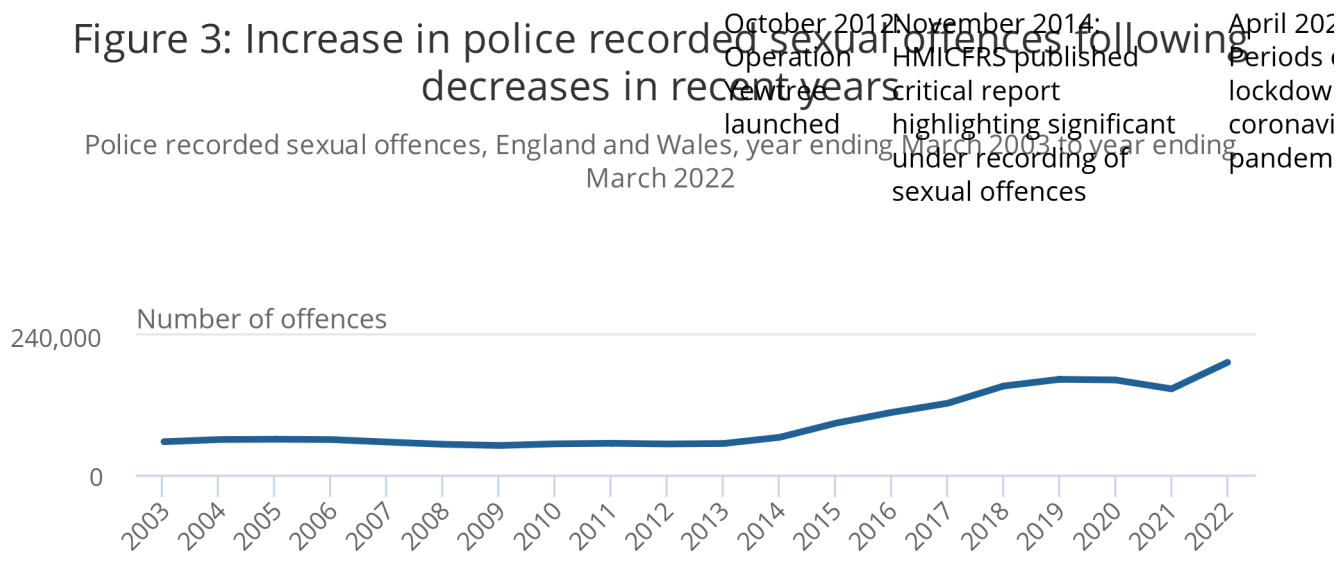
Sexual offences recorded by the police do not provide a reliable measure of trends. Improvements in police recording practices and increased reporting by victims have contributed to increases in recent years. The figures do, however, provide a good measure of the crime-related demand on the police.

A total of 193,566 sexual offences were recorded by the police in England and Wales in the year ending March 2022, which is the highest level recorded. This was an increase of 30,322 compared with the year ending March 2020 and an increase of 45,731 from the previous year (Figure 3).

Although decreases were seen in the years ending March 2020 and March 2021, likely because of national lockdown restrictions, the number of sexual offences recorded by police has been increasing since the year ending March 2012. Therefore, the most recent increase is in line with trends seen before the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Figure 3: Increase in police recorded sexual offences following decreases in recent years

Police recorded sexual offences, England and Wales, year ending March 2003 to year ending March 2022



Source: Police recorded crime from the Home Office

Notes:

1. Police recorded crime data are not designated as National Statistics.
2. The Sexual Offences Act 2003, introduced in May 2004, altered the definition and coverage of sexual offences.
3. From July 2016, the Home Office counting rules regarding rape were changed to record rape on a per offender basis.
4. Operation Yewtree is the police investigation into allegations of sexual abuse, launched in the wake of the Jimmy Savile scandal.

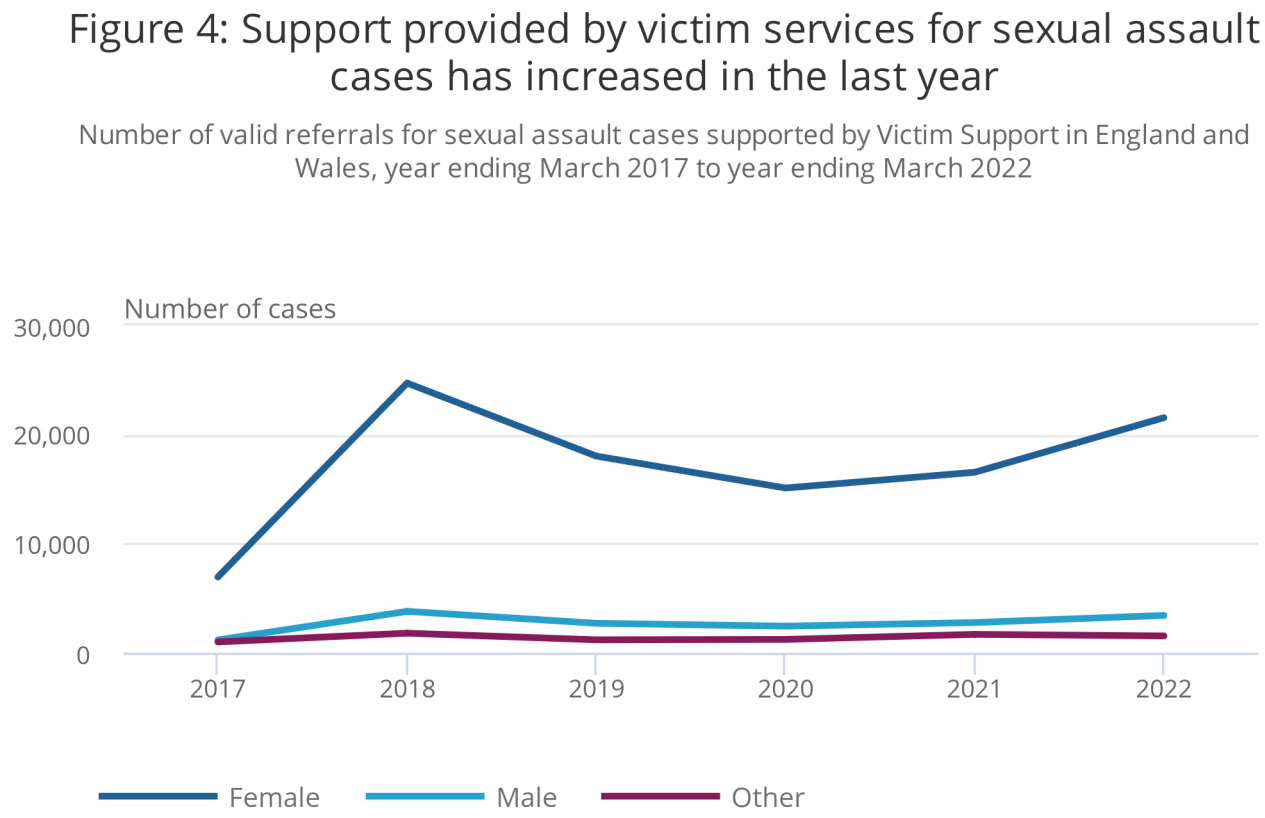
5 . Victim services

Alongside data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) and police recorded crime, we have sourced data from several organisations that support victims of sexual assault. Bringing these data together helps provide a more coherent picture of sexual assault, demonstrating the demand on services. However, the data are not a direct measure of the number of victims or offences.

The organisation Victim Support reported an increase in the number of referrals for sexual assault cases, from 9,114 in the year ending March 2017 to 26,641 in the year ending March 2022 (Figure 4). Most of these referrals (around 80% each year) were for female victims. In the year ending March 2022, 53% of the victims supported were aged between 16 and 35 years.

Figure 4: Support provided by victim services for sexual assault cases has increased in the last year

Number of valid referrals for sexual assault cases supported by Victim Support in England and Wales, year ending March 2017 to year ending March 2022



Source: Victim Support

Notes:

1. Victim Support data are not classified as official statistics.

2. Data are available at varying levels of detail across years. Because of system improvements, more detailed data are available from the year ending March 2018 onwards.

3. The dataset is dynamic because of the changing nature of commissioned services within different contract areas and service types. Therefore, year-on-year changes in the total number of clients or cases may be influenced by this, as opposed to a genuine increase or decrease in victims.

Although the data we have sourced from organisations supporting sexual assault victims provide a snapshot of the demands on these particular services, there is no comprehensive picture available across England and Wales. More inclusive and improved data collection from victim services may help to build a better picture of the prevalence, trends, and characteristics of victims of sexual offences.

More detail, alongside data from other victim services, can be found in our Sexual offences victim services dataset.

6 . Sexual offences in England and Wales data

Sexual offences prevalence and victim characteristics, England and Wales
Dataset | Released 23 March 2023
Sexual offence numbers, prevalence and victim characteristics, including breakdowns by type of incident, sex, victim-perpetrator relationship and location based upon findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales and police recorded crime.

Sexual offences victim services
Dataset | Released 23 March 2023
Data from different organisations on the availability of services for victims of sexual offences and the characteristics of service users.

7 . 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.

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 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.

8 . Measuring the data

The sexual offences data included in this release are sourced from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW), police recorded crime, and services supporting victims of sexual offences.

Our User guide to crime statistics for England and Wales: March 2020 methodology provides detailed information about the crime survey and police recorded crime data.

More quality and methodology information (QMI) on strengths, limitations, appropriate uses, and how the data were created is available in the Crime in England and Wales QMI.

More recent data on the number of sexual offences recorded by the police can be found in our latest quarterly Crime in England and Wales bulletin.

9 . Strengths and limitations

Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) data presented in this release for the year ending March 2022 are not badged as National Statistics. They are based on a six-month collection period from the face-to-face CSEW, between October 2021 and March 2022. Caution should be taken when using these data because of the impact of the reduced data collection period and lower response rates on the quality of the estimates.

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.

To provide further insight into how services respond to victims of sexual offences, we have sourced data from a range of organisations. These data are sourced from non-governmental, administrative datasets and are not classified as official statistics.

10 . Related links

Sexual offences in England and Wales overview: year ending March 2020
Bulletin | Released 18 March 2021
Figures on sexual offences from the year ending March 2020 Crime Survey for England and Wales and crimes recorded by the police.

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.

Violence against women and girls: research update November 2022
Article | Released 25 November 2022
An update of our current and future research and publications relating to violence against women and girls (VAWG).

Domestic abuse in England and Wales overview: November 2022
Bulletin | Released 25 November 2022
Figures on domestic abuse from the Crime Survey for England and Wales, police recorded crime and a number of different organisations.

11 . Cite this statistical bulletin

Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 23 March 2023, ONS website, statistical bulletin, Sexual offences in England and Wales overview: year ending March 2022