

Article

Sexual offences prevalence and trends, England and Wales: year ending March 2020

Prevalence, long-term trends and types of sexual offences experienced by adults, based on findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales, and police recorded crime.

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1 . Main points

- According to the Crime Survey for England and Wales year ending March 2020, an estimated 1.8% of adults aged 16 to 74 years (773,000) experienced sexual assault (including attempts) in the last year.
- Following fluctuations in the prevalence over the last 15 years, the latest estimate was significantly lower compared with the year ending March 2019 (2.4%); the decrease was largely driven by reductions in indecent exposure or unwanted sexual touching.
- 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 recorded crime may reflect changes in police recording practices and victim's willingness to report; the number of offences recorded by the police remains well below the number of victims estimated by the survey.

2 . Understanding sexual offences

Sexual offences are often hidden crimes that are not reported to the police. Therefore, data held by the police can only provide a partial picture of the actual level of crime experienced. One of the strengths of the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) is that it covers many crimes that are not reported to the police.

Sexual assaults measured by the CSEW combine rape (including attempts), assault by penetration (including attempts), indecent exposure and unwanted sexual touching. Information is collected on whether these types of assault were carried out by a partner (including a former partner), family member other than a partner, someone else known, or a stranger.

The Home Office collects data on the number of sexual offences recorded by the police. These are grouped into two main categories; rape and other sexual offences. The other sexual offences category covers a broader range of offences than the CSEW, for example, sexual assault, sexual exploitation of children, incest and sexual grooming. Given the broader range of offences covered in police recorded crime and other differences described in this section, these figures are not directly comparable with the estimates from the CSEW.

For more information on how sexual assaults and offences are measured within the CSEW and by the police, see [Data sources and quality](#).

This publication is largely unaffected by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic as it mainly relates to the period prior to the lockdowns. Further information on the impact of the pandemic on the CSEW and police recorded crime data can be found in [Data sources and quality](#).

3 . Crime Survey for England and Wales

Prevalence of sexual assault experienced in the last year

For the year ending March 2020, the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) showed that an estimated 773,000 adults aged 16 to 74 years¹ experienced sexual assault (including attempts) in the last year. This equates to a prevalence rate of approximately 2 in 100 adults (Figure 1). There was a [statistically significant](#) decrease in the latest prevalence estimate compared with the year ending March 2019 (1.8% compared with 2.4%).

In terms of the types of abuse experienced in the last year, unwanted sexual touching was the most common type of sexual assault experienced by adults (1.4%) (Figure 1). Rape or assault by penetration (including attempts) was experienced by (0.5%) of adults.

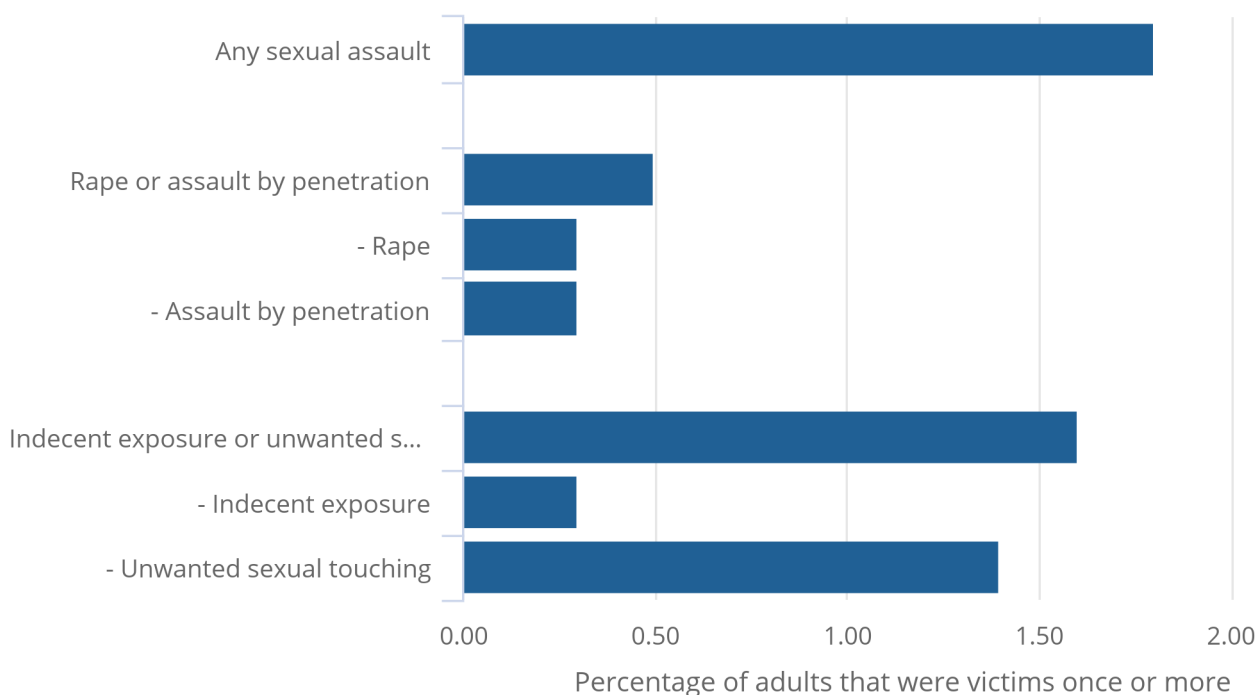
Information on the prevalence of sexual assault by demographic characteristics such as age, sex and ethnicity can be found in [Sexual offences victim characteristics, England and Wales: year ending March 2020](#).

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

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.

In the last year, for adults aged 16 to 74 years who experienced rape or assault by penetration (including attempts), the perpetrator was more likely to be a partner or ex-partner (32%) than a family member (5%) ([Appendix Table 12](#)). More information on the victim-perpetrator relationship can be found in [Sexual offences victim characteristics, England and Wales: year ending March 2020](#) and [Crime in England and Wales: Annual supplementary tables](#).

Following the change in the upper age limit for survey respondents in April 2017 (from 59 to 74 years)¹, when analysing data over a longer time period we use the 16 to 59 years age range. The prevalence of sexual assault experienced among adults aged 16 to 59 years over the last 15 years has fluctuated between 1.5% and 3.0% with no clear long-term trend. Despite the short-term fluctuations, for the year ending March 2020 there was no significant change in the overall prevalence of sexual assault experienced in the last year (2.2%) compared with the year ending March 2005 when the data series began (2.6%) (Figure 2).

For the year ending March 2020 the prevalence of sexual assault experienced in the last year by adults aged 16 to 59 years (2.2%) was significantly lower compared with the year ending March 2019 (2.9%) ([Appendix Table 4b](#)). As a result, the number of estimated victims of sexual assault in the last year for the year ending March 2020 (729,000) was also significantly lower than the number in the year ending March 2019 (950,000) ([Appendix Table 9b](#)).

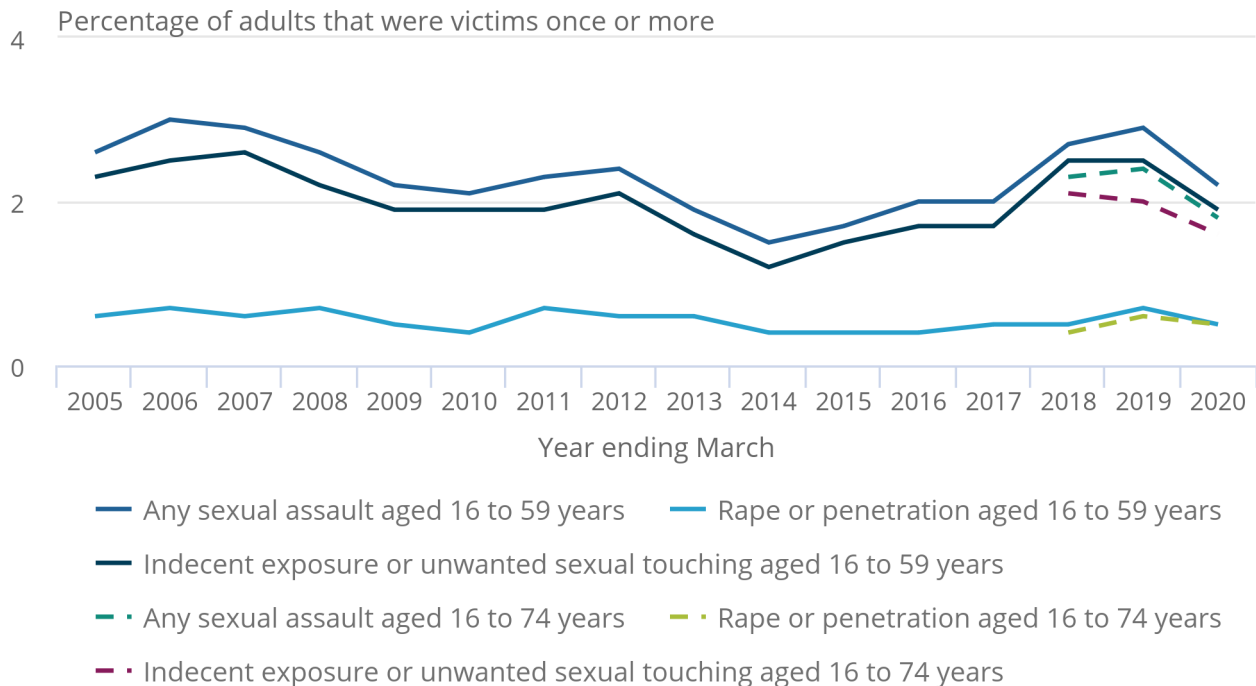
It is too early to say whether the latest decrease is the beginning of a downward trend or another fluctuation in the series, like those seen previously.

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.

Indecent exposure or unwanted sexual touching has followed very similar fluctuations to that seen for any sexual assault and has been driving the statistically significant changes seen in recent years. The prevalence of indecent exposure or unwanted sexual touching decreased to 1.9% in the year ending March 2020 (from 2.5% in the year ending March 2019).

The prevalence of rape or assault by penetration (including attempts) has remained relatively stable over the last 15 years, and the decrease between the year ending March 2019 and March 2020 (0.7% to 0.5%) was not statistically significant.

Prevalence of sexual assault experienced since the age of 16 years

For the year ending March 2020, the CSEW showed that an estimated 5.9 million victims aged 16 to 74 years¹ had experienced sexual assault since the age of 16 years. This equates to a prevalence rate of approximately 14 in 100 adults (Figure 3).

Unwanted sexual touching was more common than any other type of sexual assault with 10.2% of adults aged 16 to 74 years experiencing it since the age of 16 years, equivalent to an estimated 4.3 million victims ([Appendix Table 1](#)).

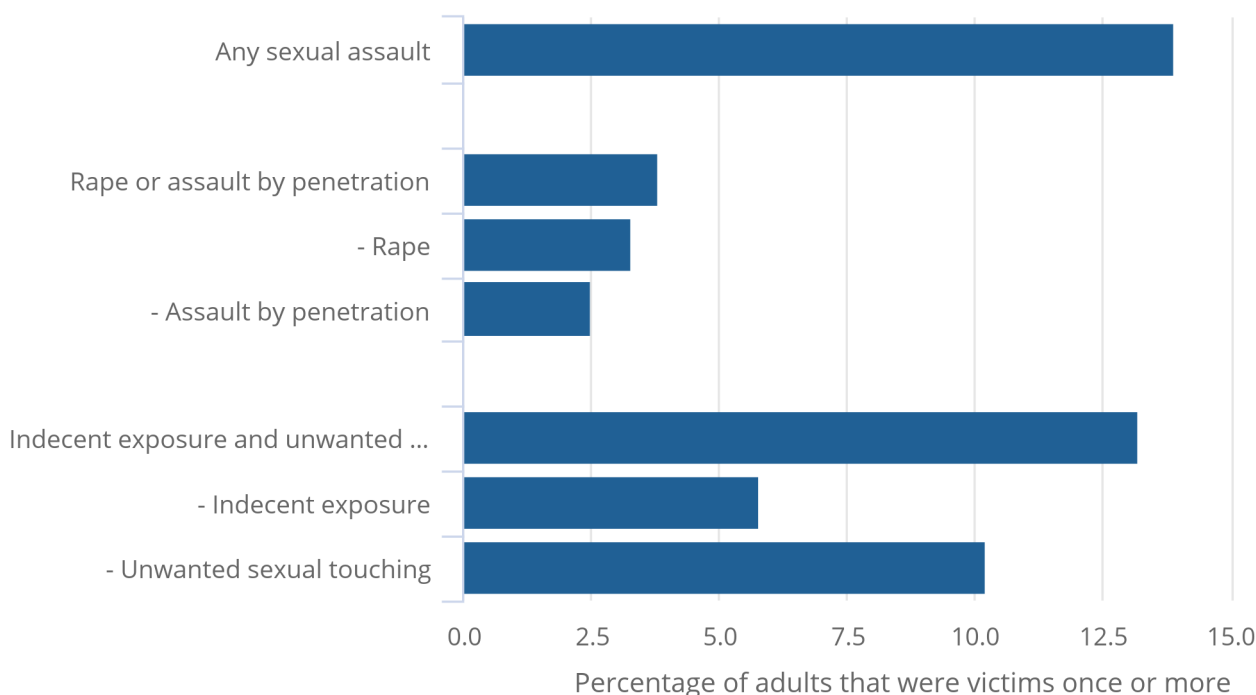
Rape (including attempts) was experienced by 3.3% of adults since the age of 16 years, an estimated 1.4 million victims. More information on rape can be found in the article [Nature of sexual assault by rape or penetration, England and Wales: year ending March 2020](#).

Figure 3: Unwanted sexual touching was the most commonly experienced type of sexual assault since the age of 16 years

Prevalence of sexual assault since the age of 16 years for adults age 16 to 74 years, by type of abuse, England and Wales, year ending March 2020

Figure 3: Unwanted sexual touching was the most commonly experienced type of sexual assault since the age of 16 years

Prevalence of sexual assault since the age of 16 years for adults age 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.

In terms of the victim's relationship to the perpetrator, since the age of 16 years, 4.6 % of adults had experienced sexual assault (including attempts) perpetrated by a partner or family member. Around three times as many adults experienced sexual assault (including attempts) by a partner (3.5%) than by a family member (1.1%) (see Table S40 in [Crime in England and Wales: Annual supplementary tables](#)).

Notes for: Crime Survey for England and Wales

1. The age range for respondents eligible for the self-completion module was expanded in April 2017, changing from adults aged 16 to 59 years to adults aged 16 to 74 years. This publication reports primarily on those aged 16 to 74 years, for which we currently have three years of data. Where analysis requires more than the last three years of data, we have reported using the 16 to 59 years age range. Data for both 16 to 59 years and 16 to 74 years are provided separately within the [Sexual offences prevalence and victim characteristics - Appendix Tables](#).

4 . Police recorded crime

A total of 162,936 sexual offences were recorded by the police in England and Wales in the year ending March 2020. This was a decrease of 0.7% (164,054) compared with the previous year ([Appendix Table 13](#)).

Prior to this decrease, the number of sexual offences recorded by police had been increasing since the year ending March 2012. Sharp increases were seen in rape, sexual assault and sexual activity with minors, but these all fell slightly in the latest year (Figure 4). Sexual offences remain a relatively low proportion of all crimes [recorded by the police](#) (2.7%).

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.

High-profile media coverage of sexual offences and the police response to reports of non-recent sexual offending in recent years, for example, the [Me too movement](#) (#metoo) is also likely to have influenced trends in police recorded sexual offences. Victims are thought to be more likely to report both recent and non-recent offences as a result.

For a subset of forces providing data to the Home Office Data Hub¹, 23% of [sexual offences recorded by the police in the year ending March 2020 were non-recent offences](#) (those that took place more than 12 months before being recorded by the police). While non-recent offences were an important contributor to rises in police recorded sexual offences in previous years, in the latest year, reports of non-recent offences have decreased.

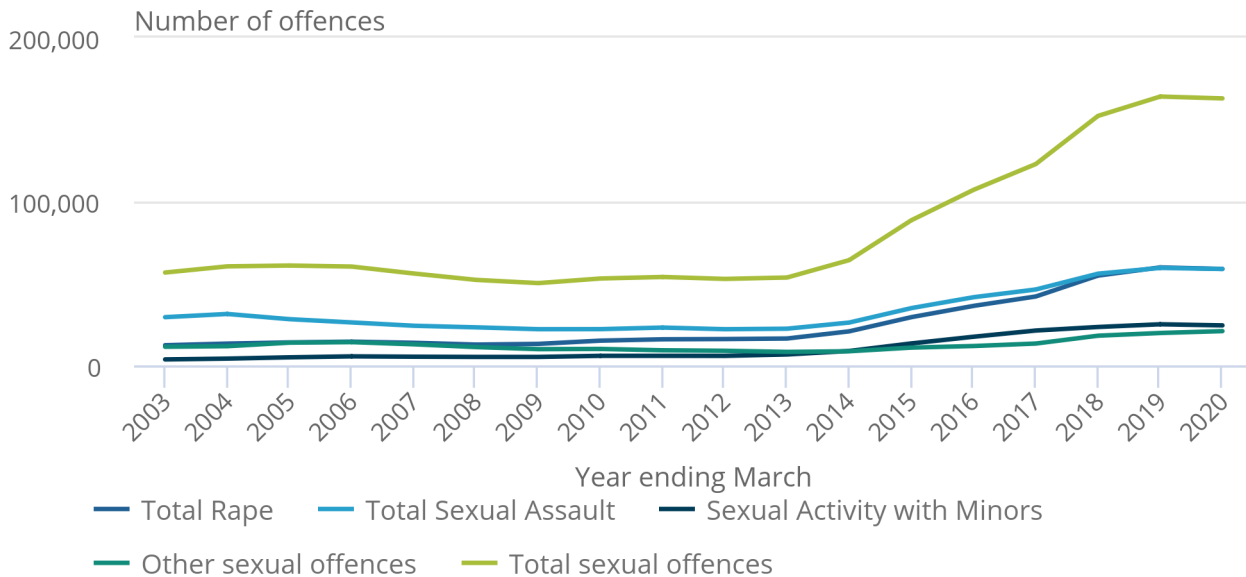
Figure 4: Decrease in police recorded sexual offences following increases in recent years

Police recorded sexual offences by offence type, England and Wales, year ending March 2003 to year ending March 2020

Figure 4: Decrease in police recorded sexual offences following increases in recent years

Police recorded sexual offences by offence type, England and Wales, year ending March 2003 to year ending March 2020

October 2012 – November 2014
Operation Yewtree
HMICFRS published a critical report highlighting significant under recording of sexual offences



Source: Home Office – Police recorded crime

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 in regard to 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.

The greatest decreases in the latest year were seen in offences recorded as sexual activity with minors, which decreased by 3% from the year ending March 2019 to March 2020. This was followed by total rape which decreased by 2%. More detailed breakdowns by offence type can be found in [Appendix Table 13](#).

Rape accounted for around one in three of police recorded sexual offences in the year ending March 2020 (36%) ([Appendix Table 13](#)). In comparison, around one in five CSEW victims of sexual assault had experienced rape (18%) ([Appendix Table 10](#)). This highlights that victims may be more likely to report rape to the police than other sexual offences.

For rape, information is also available on the number of rape incidents the police have recorded. Rape incidents cover reports where, after investigation, the police have concluded that no notifiable crime was committed within the police force area where the incident came to the attention of the police. To get a total picture of the demand upon the police that relates to rape, it is necessary to consider both rape incidents and offences together.

Of the 78,395 rape incidents and crimes recorded in the year ending March 2020 by the police in England and Wales, 14,879 (19%) remained as incidents ([Appendix Table 16](#)). Of these incidents:

- 57% (8,472) remained as incidents because the victim (or third party acting on their behalf) did not confirm the offence or could not be traced
- 15% (2,263) remained as incidents because of additional credible evidence existing to the contrary
- 28% (4,144) were transferred to another force for investigation

Notes for: Police recorded crime

1. The Home Office Data Hub is a live database that allows police forces to provide the Home Office with record-level information on every crime recorded in a year.

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 serious sexual assault by rape or penetration, based on findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales.

[Crime in England and Wales: Annual supplementary tables](#)

Dataset | Released 17 July 2020

Data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales on perceptions of the police, criminal justice system, crime and anti-social behaviour. Also contains data on prevalence of intimate personal violence.

6 . Glossary

Police incidents

Incidents that were reported to the police, but following investigation, do not amount to a crime or offence according to the National Crime Recording Standards.

Sexual assault

The term “sexual assault” in the Crime Survey for England and Wales (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 . Data sources and quality

Further quality and methodology information can be found in the [Sexual offences in England and Wales overview](#).

Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW)

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) covers the population living in households in England and Wales; it does not cover the population living in group residences (for example, care homes or student halls of residence) or other institutions. Estimates used within this publication are based on the CSEW self-completion module on domestic abuse, sexual assault and stalking.

The upper age limit for respondents eligible for the self-completion module was increased from age 59 years to 74 years in April 2017. This publication reports primarily on those aged 16 to 74 years, for which we currently have three years of data. Where analysis requires more than the last three years of data, we have reported using the 16 to 59 years age range. Data for both age groups are provided separately within the [Sexual assault prevalence and victim characteristics - Appendix Tables](#).

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 assaults, with many more offences committed than are reported to and recorded by the police. The CSEW provides reliable estimates of the prevalence of sexual assault 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.

All changes reported in this publication are statistically significant at the 5% level unless stated otherwise. Headline CSEW prevalence estimates for sexual assault included within this publication have previously been published in July 2020 alongside the [Crime in England and Wales: year ending March 2020 bulletin](#).

Measuring sexual assault within the CSEW

Sexual assault in the CSEW combines the following different types of abuse:

- rape (including attempts)
- assault by penetration (including attempts)
- indecent exposure
- unwanted sexual touching

The CSEW collects information on these types of assault carried out by a partner (including a former partner), a family member other than a partner, someone else known, and a stranger.

The CSEW term “sexual assault” differs from the term “sexual assault” used in police recorded crime data. For more information see [How the police measure sexual assault](#).

There are two headline measures of sexual assault in the CSEW: one relates to experiences since the age of 16 years and the other is limited to those experiences in the 12 months prior to interview.

For the self-completion section of the survey, respondents are handed a tablet computer to use to answer questions. This allows respondents to feel more at ease when answering these sensitive questions, because of increased confidence in the privacy and confidentiality of the survey.

While some questions are asked about sexual assaults in the face-to-face component of the survey, a very small number of respondents are willing to disclose such sensitive incidents to the interviewer. Therefore, these figures are too unreliable to report and these data are excluded from the headline CSEW estimates. The self-completion section of the survey provides the most reliable source of CSEW data on sexual assaults.

Because of the relatively low number of respondents that have been victims of sexual assault, when analysing the data it is sometimes necessary to combine and average data from the three most recent survey years to provide more robust estimates. Data for both the latest year and the latest three years combined can be found in the [Appendix Tables](#).

Following the suspension of fieldwork because of the coronavirus pandemic there will be no CSEW sexual assault data available for the year ending March 2021. Further research is underway to consider alternative approaches for future data collection. Inclusivity is an important part of this work and our aim is to capture data from as much of the population as possible.

How the police measure sexual assault

Sexual offences recorded by the police are grouped into four main categories:

- rape
- sexual assault
- sexual activity with minors
- other sexual offences

Some data tables provided by the Home Office combine the last three categories to create an “Other sexual offences” category. The other sexual offences category covers a broader range of offences than the CSEW, for example, sexual exploitation of children, incest and sexual grooming. Given the broader range of offences covered in police recorded crime and other differences described in this section, these figures are not directly comparable with the estimates from the CSEW.

The CSEW uses the term “sexual assault” to describe all types of sexual offences measured by the survey, whereas police recorded crime refers to one specific type of sexual offence - the sexual touching of a person without their consent.

[Home Office Counting Rules \(PDF, 592KB\)](#) for recorded crime differ slightly from the CSEW in the way incidents are counted. For example, from July 2016, the counting rules for rape were changed to record one crime for each perpetrator. In the CSEW only one incident would be counted regardless of the number of perpetrators involved.

In this publication, the police data for sexual offences cover those crimes reported to and recorded by the police during the year ending March 2020. The volume of sexual offences handled by the police is much lower than victimisation levels estimated by the CSEW because of a high level of under-reporting to the police. The police figures are also influenced by changes in recording practices and the willingness of victims to report to the police, which makes interpreting trends difficult.

Over the last few years, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) have conducted a range of inspections related to police forces’ crime and incident recording practices. In 2014, [Crime recording: making the victim count](#) concluded that 26% of sexual offences were not recorded by the police in England and Wales. Improvements were identified in their report [State of policing: 2019](#), with 6% of sexual offences reported to the police going unrecorded.

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.

Impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

This publication is largely unaffected by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

CSEW data presented in this publication for the year ending March 2020 are based on interviews conducted between April 2019 and the first two weeks of March 2020. Fieldwork for the year ending March 2020 was suspended two weeks early on Wednesday 18 March 2020 just prior to the lockdown restrictions being announced by the government on 23 March 2020. All estimates from the CSEW for the year ending March 2020 were therefore unaffected by the lockdown restrictions as the data were collected, and relate to, the time prior to this period.

With fieldwork being suspended two weeks earlier than anticipated, the annual sample fell just short of its target of 34,500 adult interviews (the actual figure on which the year to March estimates are based was 33,735 adult interviews). Response rates also fell from a target of 70% to 64%. Overall, the impact on the survey estimates has therefore been minimal.

The latest police recorded crime figures presented in this publication relate to crimes recorded by the police during the period April 2019 to the end of March 2020. In response to the coronavirus pandemic, restrictions in England and Wales started from 12 March 2020, with a national lockdown implemented from 23 March 2020. The start of the restrictions and the first eight days of lockdown are therefore captured in police recorded data for the year ending March 2020. We do not expect there to have been a significant impact on crime statistics in February 2020 or earlier before restrictions were applied in the country. More recent data on the number of sexual offences recorded by the police can be found in the latest [quarterly crime publication](#).

8 . Related links

[Sexual offences in England and Wales overview: 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 offences victim characteristics: year ending March 2020](#)

Article | Released 18 March 2021

Characteristics of victims of sexual offences based on findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales and police recorded crime.

[Nature of sexual assault by rape or penetration: year ending March 2020](#)

Article | Released 18 March 2021

Information from the Crime Survey for England and Wales on the amount, type and nature of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) experienced since the age of 16 years.

[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.