



**VISION
Policy
Briefing
How much
violence is there?**

How much violence is there?

We need a fairer measure of violence from the Crime Survey for England and Wales

This briefing proposes improvements to the definitions and measurement of violence using the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW), in order to more fully capture different aspects of violent crime, including violence against women and girls (VAWG). The briefing is aimed at researchers, national statistics offices, and others involved in violence research and policy. It draws on a paper recently published in *The British Journal of Criminology*, [Definition and measurement of violence in the Crime Survey for England and Wales](#).

Key Findings

The current definition of violent crime excludes key types

- The Office for National Statistics (ONS) headline measure of 'violent crime' currently excludes sexual violence, robberies, threats of violence, and many incidents of violence where criminal damage was also involved.

A broader definition would better capture scale, harm and inequalities

- We use a broader measure of violence that includes these currently excluded forms of violence.
- This broader measure not only reveals a higher prevalence of victimisation in the population as a whole, it also reveals hidden inequalities. Women are more likely than men to experience sexual violence and threats of violence: excluding these from current estimates leads to rates of violence in women, especially domestic violence, being underestimated.
- The proportion of people physically and emotionally harmed by violence is also better estimated using this broader definition, particularly affecting estimates for women.

Our recommendation for change

- National statistics on violence in England and Wales should show violence estimates using a broader definition of violence alongside violent crime statistics to give a more comprehensive overview of violence and its societal impact.

Background

There are two main sources of data on violence in England and Wales: national reporting on violent crime by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) using a victimisation survey - the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW), and police-recorded crime, with the former regarded as the more accurate national estimate of the extent of violent crime in the population. CSEW is a main source of data on violence used by researchers across government, academia and other sectors.

In line with the government's 2021 [Tackling violence against women and girls \(VAWG\) strategy](#) and [ONS's work](#) to improve measurement of VAWG as well as address evidence gaps in relation to violence and abuse, this briefing serves to contribute to the knowledge of the extent of violence in the population in England and Wales, by extending the definition of violence and investigating its impact on the gendered distribution of violence. Given the new government's mission to reduce VAWG by half within a decade, the issue of accurately measuring violence is particularly pertinent.

Definition of 'violent crime' and what constitutes violence

The ONS definition of violent crime covers a set of specific offence codes which are deemed to cross a criminal threshold, and which aim to align with the Home Office Counting Rules (HOCR) for police recorded crime in England and Wales (Home Office 2023). This definition of 'violent crime' includes physical acts of violence and attempted physical acts:

- Serious/other wounding
- Common/attempted assault
- Serious/other wounding with a sexual motive

There are, however, offences which are violent in nature but are not part of the violent crime measure. These include:

- Sexual violence, including rape, attempted rape and indecent assault
- Threats of violence
- Robbery/attempted robberies – defined as incidents of theft where “force or threats were used to further the theft; more force than was necessary to snatch property away” (Kantar 2021: 25).
- Offences which included physical force or violence but for which primary offence code differed due to priority coding of offences rules which sometimes prioritises property offences over violent offences in the event of multiple offences taking place (e.g. see Pullerits and Phoenix (2024))

Given the different purposes of recording violence across policy and service areas and definition of violence commonly used by the World Health Organisation and other victimisation surveys, estimates of violence based on CSEW should capture a broader experience of interpersonal violence in the population than is currently reflected in national reporting.

Our analysis

We investigated the implications of expanding the ONS definition of 'violent crime' to include threat of violence, sexual violence and robbery in the Crime Survey for England and Wales using 2019/20 data. We show what impact the inclusion of additional forms of violence makes to our understanding of the volume of violent incidents, the distribution of violence, and the health impacts on victim-survivors.

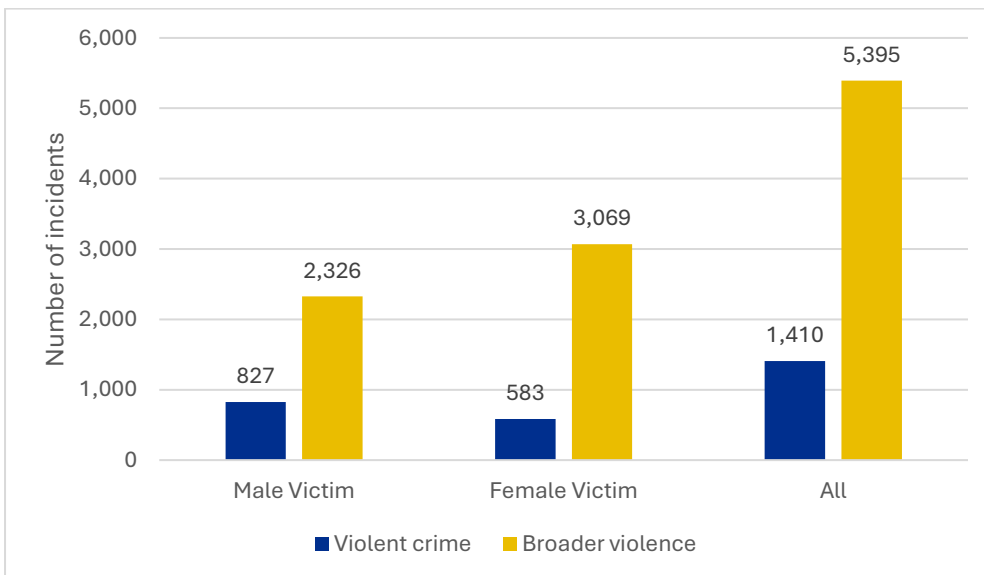
Findings

Using a broader definition of violence, which includes all violent crime offences - wounding, assault and wounding with sexual motive, as well as additional offences of sexual violence, robbery, threats and force - our analysis of the CSEW estimates that there were 3.7 million violent incidents in England and Wales in 2019/20 for an estimated mid-year 2019 population of 48,059,326 aged 16 and over (ONS 2019), a rate of 77 incidents per 1,000 population. This rate is three times as high as the estimated rate for the ONS measure of violent crime (26 per 1,000 population).

Men and women

The higher volume of victimisation using a broader definition of violence particularly affects the estimates for women. Using the ONS measure of violent crime, suggests that more incidents were experienced by men than women, as shown in Figure 1. However, using a broader definition of violence, this pattern is reversed – more incidents of violence are experienced by women. This is mainly, but not solely, due to threats of violence disproportionately affecting women.

Figure 1 Estimated number of violent incidents (in thousands) by sex in England and Wales (adults aged 16 and over), 2019/20



Notes: Authors' analysis of Crime Survey for England and Wales. Total unweighted count of incidents of violence is 13,117. The number of incidents used here is uncapped and weighted.

Victim-perpetrator relationship

Additionally, a broader definition of violence picks up more domestic abuse against women.

The ONS violent crime measure shows that female victims are most commonly victimized by acquaintances (48%), followed by domestic relations (29%), and strangers (23%). When using the broader definition of violence 43% of incidents against women are shown to be perpetrated by acquaintances, and 32% by domestic relations. The increase in the proportion of domestic violence among women is relatively small but it is likely to be an under-estimate as these figures draw on face-to-face reports. Previous research shows that the face-to-face victimisation module in the CSEW under-estimates domestic violence and abuse,

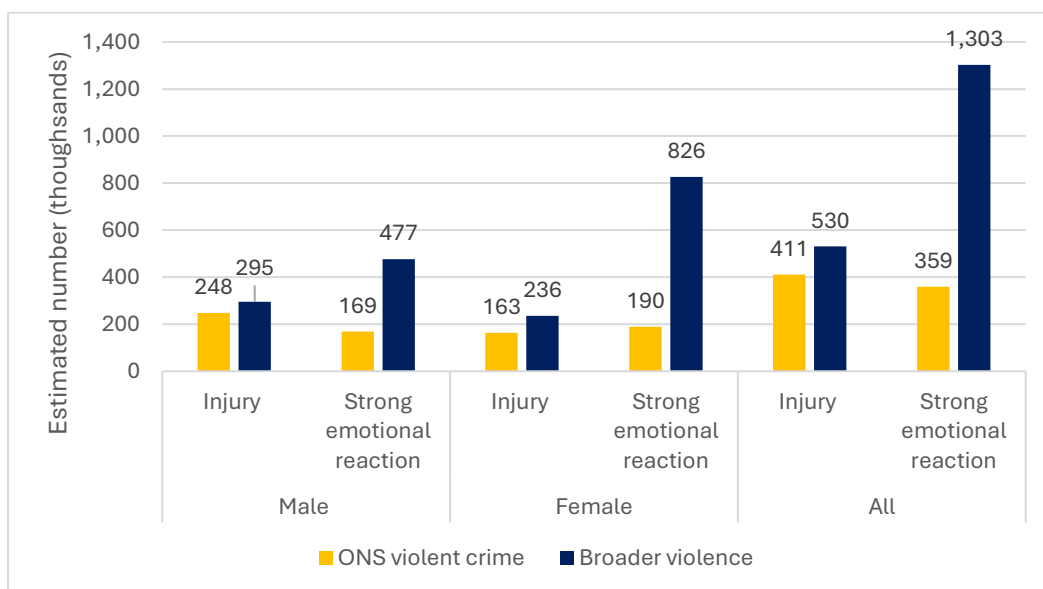
particularly among women, compared to the self-completion module in the CSEW (Cooper and Obolenskaya, 2021).

The proportion of violence against men perpetrated by different perpetrators is similar for both the ONS measure and the broader measure of violence.

Harms of violence

The narrow ONS definition of violent crime undercounts the harms against victim-survivors of violence. Our broader measure of violence picks up almost 30% more violent offences that result in injury compared to the violent crime measure (19% more for men and 44% - for women). Similarly, we show that a broader measure picks up 260% more offences that result in emotional impacts than the ONS measure, with strong gendered effects (182% more for men and 335% - for women).

Figure 2 Estimated number of injuries and strong emotional reactions (in thousands) by sex in England and Wales (adults aged 16 and over), 2019/20



Notes: Authors' analysis of Crime Survey for England and Wales. The number of injuries and strong emotional reactions used here is weighted.

The lower estimation of harmful physical and emotional consequences of violence using the ONS violent crime measure means that the burden of violence on healthcare provisions is under-estimated, particularly for women.

Conclusions and recommendations

- The narrower ONS measure of violent crime, which is widely used as a headline measure of violence in England and Wales, undercounts the rate of violence in society by a factor of 3, and especially violence against women.
- The health and wellbeing impact of violence is 30% higher for injuries and 260% for emotional impacts when a broader measure of violence is used, indicating a much higher health burden on society.
- Government statistics and policies should report on a wider range of violence to accurately reflect its scale and impact on society.

Further information

This briefing is based on the following publication:

Davies, E., Obolenskaya, P., Francis, B., Blom, N., Phoenix, J., Pullerits, M., and Walby, S. (2024), Definition and Measurement of Violence in the Crime Survey for England and Wales: Implications for the Amount and Gendering of Violence, *The British Journal of Criminology*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/zaae050>

Data reference

Office for National Statistics. (2021). Crime Survey for England and Wales, 2019-2020. London: UK Data Service. SN: 8812, doi:10.5255/UKDA-SN-8812-1

Other references

Cooper, K. and Obolenskaya, P. (2021), Hidden victims: the gendered data gap of violent crime, *The British Journal of Criminology*, 61: 905–925. doi.org/10.1093/bjc/zaaa100

Home Office (2023), Home Office Counting Rules for Recorded Crime 2022-23. London: Home Office Crime Recording Rules for Frontline Officers and Staff. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/counting-rules-for-recorded-crime>

Kantar Public (2021), Crime Survey for England and Wales Technical Report 2020/21 Volume Two [pdf], available online at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/file?uri=/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/methodologies/crimeandjusticemethodology/202021csewtechnicalreportvolume2>

Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2019), Estimates of the Population for the UK, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. available online at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/populationestimatesforukenglandandwalesscotlandandnorthernireland>

Pullerits, M. and Phoenix, J. (2024), How Priority Ordering of Offence Codes Undercounts Gendered Violence: An Analysis of the Crime Survey for England and Wales, *British Journal of Criminology*, 64: 381–99. [doi:10.1093/bjc/azad047](https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azad047)

About the VISION consortium



The VISION consortium is an interdisciplinary collaboration of epidemiologists, economists, data scientists, criminologists, evaluation experts, psychiatrists and more from multiple universities. Our research brings data together from health and crime surveys, health services, police, solicitors, and third sector domestic and sexual violence specialist services. Together with our partners we aim to improve the measurement of data on violence. We aim to influence policy and practice to reduce violence and the health inequalities that result. VISION is funded by the [UK Prevention Research Partnership](#) (Grant MR/V049879/1). The multi-funder initiative supports novel research into the primary prevention of non-communicable diseases to improve population health and reduce health inequalities.