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Policing Sexual Violence: A Five-Year Descriptive Analysis of Police-Recorded Sexual Offence Crime Trends and Regional Variation Across England and Wales

Juliet Emms [1], Dominic Willmott [1,2,*], Dara Mojtahedi [3] and B. Kennath Widanaralalage [4]

[1] Department of Criminology, Sociology & Social Policy, School of Social Science and Humanities, Loughborough University, Leicestershire LE11 3TU, UK
[2] Faculty of Psychology in Wroclaw, SWPS University, 53-238 Wroclaw, Poland
[3] Department of Psychology, University of Huddersfield, West Yorkshire HD3 3DH, UK
[4] Department of Psychology, King's College London, London SE5 8AB, UK
* Correspondence: d.willmott@lboro.ac.uk

Abstract

This study examines temporal and regional patterns in police-recorded sexual offences across England and Wales between the years ending June 2021 and June 2025. Using Office for National Statistics (ONS) police-recorded crime data, a quantitative descriptive analysis was conducted examining annual offence counts, year-on-year percentage change, overall percentage change, population-adjusted regional offence rates (per 10,000 population) and the proportion of sexual offences within overall recorded crime across England and Wales, between 2021 and 2025. The findings indicate an overall increase in police-recorded sexual offences across the five-year observation period, alongside clear regional variation. The Northeast, Northwest, and Yorkshire and the Humber, generally recorded higher rates per population, whereas London and the East of England generally recorded lower rates. Sexual offences represented a relatively small but regionally variable proportion of all recorded crime. The observed patterns may reflect not only underlying offending but also differences in victim reporting, police recording practices, legislative change and policing activity. By providing an up-to-date five-year regional analysis during a post-pandemic period, marked by policing reform and legislative change, this study contributes new evidence on recent geographical and temporal patterns in police-recorded sexual offences across England and Wales. Although police-recorded crime does not provide a direct measure of the prevalence of sexual victimisation, it offers valuable insights into recent spatial and temporal trends and provides an important evidence base for informing policing priorities, resource allocation and future research.

Keywords: policing; sexual offences; police-recorded crime; crime trends; rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO)

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1. Introduction

1.1. Sexual Violence as a Policing Problem

Sexual violence remains a persistent social and public health problem, with long-term effects on survivors, communities and the criminal justice system. Although sexual offences can affect individuals of any gender, evidence consistently indicates that women are disproportionately represented among victims (Ministry of Justice et al. 2013; Stripe 2021), with one in three women globally experiencing sexual and/or physical violence at

some point in their lives (World Health Organization 2013). Within England and Wales, a recent crime survey suggested that approximately 1.9% of people aged 16 years and over experienced sexual assault (including attempts) in the year ending March 2025. Unwanted sexual touching was the most prevalent form (1.4%), whereas rape or assault by penetration was experienced by 0.2% of individuals that year (Office for National Statistics 2025a). These figures reflect higher victimisation rates compared to a decade ago and police records corroborate this trend, with over 209,000 sexual offences having been recorded in the year ending March 2025—an increase of 11% from the previous year (Office for National Statistics 2025a). Whilst a proportion of these increases can be attributed to new offences introduced by the Online Safety Act 2023, including cyberflashing and intimate image abuse (Sexual Offences Act 2003, Schmidt 2024), it is evident that reports of sexual offences are continuing to rise.

However, these temporal changes should not be interpreted solely as changes in underlying victimisation. Recorded trends are also influenced by broader social, institutional and legislative developments that shape victims' willingness to report offences and how those offences are subsequently recorded by the police. High-profile cases can increase public awareness of sexual violence and encourage victim-survivors to report offences that may otherwise have remained undisclosed (Williams et al. 2023; Willmott et al. 2018). For instance, the widespread media attention surrounding the Jimmy Savile investigation (BBC News 2013) and Operation Yewtree, commonly referred to as the "Savile effect", was associated with substantial increases in reporting of both recent and historical sexual offences (Greer and McLaughlin 2013; Harper and Hogue 2017). Such events may increase reporting by reducing stigma, increasing confidence in criminal justice responses and improving public recognition of behaviours that constitute sexual offences. Consequently, increases in police-recorded sexual offences may reflect greater willingness to report as well as changes in underlying offending. Institutional and legislative changes may similarly influence recorded crime. More recently, Operation Soteria Bluestone sought to improve the investigation and recording of rape and serious sexual offences through more victim-centred investigative practices (Home Office 2023). However, while evaluations suggest improvements in victim engagement, implementation varied across police forces and remained influenced by organisational capacity and available resources (Allen et al. 2025; Ferreira et al. 2025; King et al. 2024; Smith et al. 2024; Willmott and Sherretts 2016). In addition, the Online Safety Act 2023 introduced new sexual offences relating to the sharing of intimate images, contributing to an increase in recorded sexual offences during the year ending March 2025 (Office for National Statistics 2025d). Consequently, changes in police-recorded sexual offences during this period may partly reflect changes in recording practices, policing activity and legislative definitions, rather than changes in offending alone.

1.2. Measuring Sexual Offences

In England and Wales (E&W), crime is primarily measured using two complementary sources: police-recorded crime and the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW). Police-recorded crime captures offences that come to the attention of the police and are subsequently recorded within official crime statistics, providing detailed information on the timing, location and nature of offences (Heiskanen 2010). In contrast, the CSEW is a nationally representative victimisation survey that estimates crime experienced by individuals, including incidents that were not reported to the police (TNS BMRB 2012). Consequently, while police-recorded data provide a measure of recorded crime and policing demand, the CSEW offers broader estimates of victimisation within the population.

Both sources have distinct strengths and limitations. Police-recorded crime provides detailed spatial and temporal information that enables consistent comparisons across police force areas and over time, making it particularly valuable for examining geographical variation, monitoring trends and informing policing policy and resource allocation (Brimicombe 2016; Iliuta et al. 2025). Recent evidence also suggests that, although police-recorded crime underestimates the total volume of offending, it provides relatively stable estimates of how crime varies geographically and exhibits less random fluctuation than survey-based estimates (Brunton-Smith et al. 2024). In comparison, the CSEW captures offences that are never reported to the police, helping to illuminate the "dark figure" of crime and providing more comprehensive estimates of overall victimisation. However, as a household survey, it is susceptible to recall bias, sampling error and limited precision for relatively rare offences, and it cannot provide the same level of geographical or temporal detail as police-recorded data (Buil-Gil et al. 2021).

These measurement challenges are further compounded by the way sexual offences are categorised within official statistics. Both police-recorded crime and the CSEW typically report sexual offences as a single overarching category, despite encompassing a diverse range of offences that differ in their nature, severity and underlying patterns of offending. While this aggregation facilitates consistent national reporting and comparison across police force areas, it can obscure important differences between offence types and complicate the interpretation of temporal and regional trends. Recognising this limitation, the Ministry of Justice et al. (2013) distinguish between "most serious sexual offences", including rape and sexual assault, and other sexual offences, cautioning against interpreting the category as a homogeneous measure of sexual violence. Nevertheless, the present study adopts the standard ONS classification to maintain consistency with official reporting and enable comparisons across England and Wales, while acknowledging that observed trends reflect changes in the aggregated category rather than individual offence types.

Beyond the challenges associated with offence aggregation, the measurement of sexual offending is further complicated by limitations inherent within both police-recorded crime and victimisation survey. Neither police-recorded or CSEW data alone provide a complete measure of sexual offending. Police-recorded crime is influenced by victim reporting behaviour, recording practices and institutional priorities, while survey estimates remain constrained by non-disclosure and sampling limitations. Consequently, both police-recorded crime and victimisation surveys are likely to underestimate the true prevalence of sexual offending. Crime survey estimates consistently reveal a substantial gap between experiences of sexual victimisation and incidents reported to the police (Ministry of Justice et al. 2013). For example, only 14.7% of victim-survivors reported sexual assault to the police between the years ending March 2020 and March 2025 (Office for National Statistics 2025b), while many others disclose their experiences only to family or friends, or not at all (Office for National Statistics 2025e). Underreporting is influenced by a range of individual and institutional factors. Prevailing rape myths and stereotypes surrounding what constitutes a "real" sexual assault or a "credible" victim (Smith et al. 2022) may discourage disclosure, particularly where the perpetrator is known to the victim or where assaults do not conform to stereotypical expectations (Estrich 1987; Fisher et al. 2003). Concerns about being disbelieved, blamed or retraumatised by the criminal justice process, together with persistently low charge and conviction rates, may further reduce victims' willingness to engage with the police (Felson and Paré 2005; Hohl and Stanko 2015; Spohn and Tellis 2012). Observed trends in police-recorded sexual offences can provide additional insight into changes in reporting behaviour, recording standards or policing practice, as well as changes in underlying victimisation (Stefanovska 2019). Nevertheless, police-recorded data remain the most appropriate source for the present study because they provide comprehen-

sive national coverage and a consistent basis for examining temporal trends and regional variation in recorded sexual offences across England and Wales. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as patterns in recorded sexual offending and policing demand, rather than direct estimates of the prevalence of sexual violence.

1.3. Regional Variation in Police-Recorded Sexual Offences

Crime is not distributed evenly across England and Wales, with both victimisation and police-recorded crime exhibiting marked geographic variation. Previous analyses of police-recorded crime and Crime Survey data have consistently identified higher levels of recorded crime in more urban and socioeconomically deprived areas, although the magnitude and nature of these patterns vary across offence types (Home Office 2010). More broadly, research demonstrates that crime is concentrated within particular neighbourhoods and locations, reflecting the interaction of offender activity, victim vulnerability and environmental opportunities (Weisburd 2015; Kearns et al. 2019; Filkin et al. 2022). While these studies are not specific to sexual offences, they provide a rationale for expecting regional variation in recorded sexual offending. The spatial distribution of sexual offences is likely to be influenced by both environmental and institutional factors. Previous Office for National Statistics [ONS] (2018) data show higher rates of sexual offences in urban areas compared to rural, which may be explained by population density. Following Routine Activities Theory (Cohen and Felson 2010), a higher population density, like in urban areas, provide motivated offenders with more suitable targets as they engage in their routine activities. Woodhams et al. (2021) found that, in a sample of serial sex offenders in the UK, half of the offenders travelled no more than 2 kms between crimes in their series, suggesting that offence clustering may be explained by proximity to familiar/known locations. Relatedly, Almond et al. (2022) found that recorded sexual offences in rural areas were most often associated with offenders travelling further compared to more densely populated urban areas. Certain forms of sexual violence, such as unwanted sexual touching, have been shown to cluster around nightlife environments characterised by high levels of alcohol consumption and transient populations (Quigg et al. 2018), whereas rape and other serious sexual offences more commonly occur in private settings involving perpetrators known to the victim (Office for National Statistics 2025d). Consequently, regional differences in police-recorded sexual offences are unlikely to reflect a single pattern of offending, but rather the interaction of differing offence types, local population characteristics and reporting behaviours. Importantly, regional variation in police-recorded sexual offences may also reflect differences in policing practice rather than underlying victimisation alone. Police force areas differ in resources, specialist investigative capacity (Walley et al. 2025) and approaches to recording and investigating sexual offences (Ferreira et al. 2025; Gekoski 2025), all of which can influence the number of offences recorded and progressed through the criminal justice system (Barbin et al. 2025; Rushin and Michalski 2020; Lovett et al. 2024).

1.4. Present Study

The literature demonstrates that geographical and temporal trends in police-recorded sexual offences are shaped by a range of legislative, societal and technological factors. Geographically, recorded crime rates may reflect neighbourhood deprivation, offenders' routine activity spaces and variations in policing practices (Home Office 2010; Menting et al. 2020; Willmott et al. 2021). Temporal trends have also been influenced by major societal changes, including the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside targeted policing initiatives such as Operation Soteria Bluestone, which have affected force-level outcomes since 2021 (Home Office 2023; Seyidoglu et al. 2024). At the same time, researchers have highlighted that analyses based on official police-recorded crime statistics should acknowledge the influence

of discretionary recording practices and the substantial underreporting of sexual offences (Stefanovska 2019; Ariel and Bland 2019).

Despite this growing body of research, an important empirical gap remains. Existing studies and government reports provide relatively little contemporary descriptive analysis of police-recorded sexual offences across different regions in England and Wales over an extended period, particularly during the post-pandemic era. This period has been characterised by recovery from COVID-19, the implementation of Operation Soteria Bluestone and the emergence of new online harms (Office for National Statistics 2025b). Furthermore, relatively little research has examined the position of sexual offences within wider regional crime profiles, limiting understanding of whether regions with higher rates of recorded sexual offences are also those in which sexual offences constitute a larger proportion of overall recorded crime.

This study addresses this gap by providing a systematic five-year regional analysis of police-recorded sexual offences across England and Wales, examining both population-adjusted rates and the relative prominence of sexual offences within wider recorded crime profiles. This approach allows the study to describe how regional differences vary across the five-year observation period, whether national changes are reflected across regions, and whether regions with high rates of recorded sexual offences are necessarily those in which sexual offences constitute the largest share of recorded crime. This distinction is important because rates and crime composition capture different dimensions of policing demand and may therefore lead to different interpretations of regional need. Drawing on the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Crime in England and Wales: Police Force Area Data Tables, the study combines annual datasets to examine these patterns across the ten standard police regions and nine major crime categories. Specifically, the study addresses three research questions:

1. How do regional rates of police-recorded sexual offences vary across England and Wales between 2021 and 2025?
2. Which regions demonstrate relatively high or low rates of recorded sexual offences across the five-year observation period?
3. How does the proportion of sexual offences within total recorded crime vary across regions in England and Wales?

Examining sexual offences alongside overall recorded crime provides a broader context for interpreting regional trends and may assist policymakers in targeting resources and specialist support where demand is greatest (Rushin and Michalski 2020). In addition, identifying geographical patterns in recorded sexual offences has the potential to inform the development of victim support services, strengthen trauma-informed responses and contribute to reducing victim attrition throughout the criminal justice process (Hohl and Stanko 2015; Ministry of Justice 2025).

2. Methodology

2.1. Data Source

The present study used secondary data from the ONS "Crime in England and Wales: Police Force Area data tables" (Office for National Statistics 2025a). Annual tables from the years ending June 2021 to June 2025 were downloaded directly from the ONS website. These tables provide police-recorded offence counts across 43 police force areas, which were grouped into the 10 standard regions of England and Wales: Northeast, Northwest, Yorkshire and The Humber, East Midlands, West Midlands, East, London, Southeast, Southwest and Wales. This regional aggregation was an analytical decision intended to provide a higher-level description of geographical patterns in police-recorded sexual offences and to facilitate interpretation of broad regional differences across the study period. Although

population-adjusted rates permit comparisons between differently sized police force areas, the use of standard regions provides a consistent geographical framework for examining broad regional patterns over time. However, aggregation necessarily removes information about variation between constituent police force areas, and the regional findings should therefore be interpreted as describing differences between the ten regions rather than variation across individual police forces. The British Transport Police data are not regionally allocated; therefore, it was manually subtracted from the overall offence counts, for each year, to ensure accurate regional counts. Population denominators for rate calculations were obtained from ONS mid-year population estimates by region, selected for methodological consistency as the official source matching crime data geographies. For the year ending June 2025, mid 2024 population estimates were used due to data availability, following standard practice for provisional crime analysis (Office for National Statistics 2025c).

2.2. Measures and Analysis

Variables recorded included police-recorded offences by crime category, police force region, reporting year and regional population estimates. Annual trends in police-recorded sexual offences were examined using descriptive statistics and line graphs. Year-on-year percentage change and overall percentage change across the study period were calculated. Given the five annual observations available, the temporal analysis was intended to provide a descriptive assessment of recent changes rather than to establish longer-term temporal trajectories. Then, regional (n = 10) comparisons were undertaken using crude rates per 10,000 population to account for differences in population size[1].

The aggregate sexual offences category also encompasses a heterogeneous range of offences that may differ substantially in their circumstances, victim–offender relationships and settings. Consequently, the regional rates presented here represent variation in the overall volume of police-recorded sexual offences and cannot establish whether particular geographical patterns are associated with specific offence types, settings or victim–offender relationships.

To visualise spatial and temporal patterns, a series of bar charts were produced, one per year, showing the rate of sexual offences per 10,000 population. Lastly, to examine the relative contribution of sexual offences within overall crime, the proportion of sexual offences as a percentage of all police-recorded crime was calculated for each region and averaged across the five-year period. This measure captures the composition of police-recorded crime within each region, rather than the absolute level or population-adjusted rate of sexual offences. A higher proportion may therefore reflect higher recorded sexual offence levels, lower levels of other recorded crime, or a combination of both. Data integrity was maintained through use of official ONS datasets and verification of regional totals against published national statistics. Temporal consistency was maintained across all years by standardising to "year ending June" reporting for each year, consistent with ONS methodology. However, the authors acknowledge that the analysis is limited by reliance on police-recorded crime, which reflects reporting and recording practices and therefore underestimates the true prevalence of sexual offending.

2.3. Ethical Considerations

No formal institutional ethical approval was required due to the anonymous and freely available secondary nature of the dataset. Nevertheless, the principles of transparency, anonymity and non-maleficence were upheld.

3. Findings

The present findings are presented in three sections. First, we examine the total figures of police-recorded sexual offences to analyse temporal trends in recorded sexual offending. Next, data pertaining to temporal trends across the different policing regions are examined using population-adjusted rates. In the final section, the proportion of recorded sexual offences within total crime across each region is considered.

3.1. Trends in Police-Recorded Sexual Offences over Time

The total number of police-recorded sexual offences for each year are presented in Figure 1. Across the five-year observation period, the number of recorded sexual offences increased overall, although the year-on-year changes were uneven. From 2021 to 2022, the number of recorded sexual offences increases sharply from 163,856 to 195,075. This rise of more than 31,000 offences corresponds to a year-on-year percentage increase of 19.05%, the largest single year change in this analysis. Between 2022 and 2023 the count declines from 195,075 to 191,138 offences (2.02% reduction). From 2023 to 2024, recorded sexual offences rise again slightly, from 191,138 to 192,310 (0.61% increase). Across the full period, the total number of recorded sexual offences increased from 163,856, in the year ending June 2021 to 208,960 in the year ending June 2025: an overall rise of 27.53% across the five years.

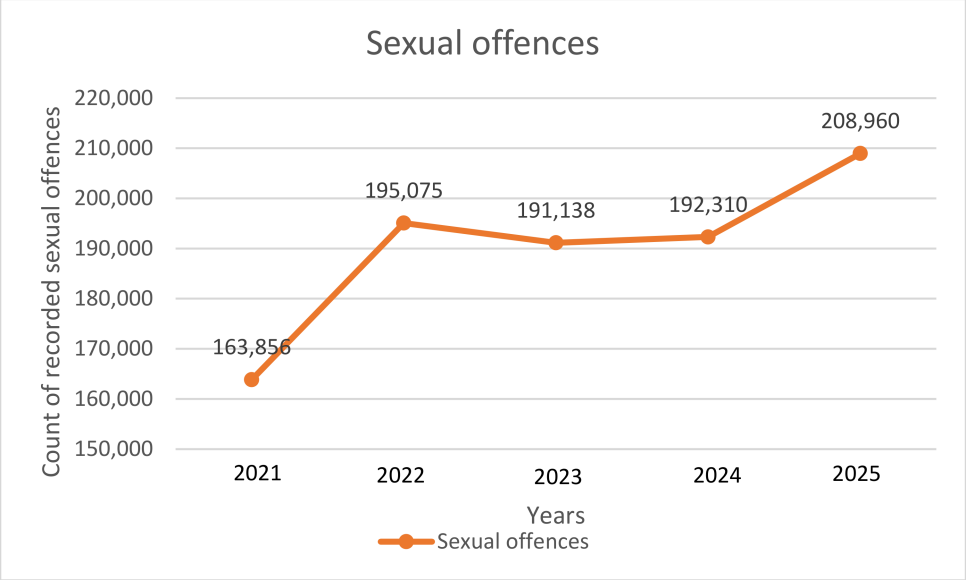


Figure 1. Total recorded sexual offences from the years ending June 2021 to 2025.

3.2. Regional Differences in Recorded Sexual Offences

Figures 2 and 3 indicate clear variation in recorded sexual offences per 10,000 population across regions. For the year ending June 2021, northern regions reflect comparatively higher levels of sexual offences relative to other areas. In contrast, regions such as London and the East have comparatively lower rates per 10,000 population. These differences demonstrate clear regional variation in police-recorded sexual offence rates within the geographical units examined. All regions surge between 2021 and 2022 before slight reductions or plateaus in 2023–2024. By 2025 all but one region's rates rise again. Across the five-year period, the Northeast records among the highest rates of sexual offences. The rate increases from the low 30s in 2021 to nearly 40 per 10,000 by 2025. Aside from a small decrease in 2024, rates increase steadily, followed by a sharper rise between 2024 and 2025 from 36.44 to 39.67 per 10,000. By the end of the period, the Northeast records the highest rate. The Northwest records relatively high sexual offences rates, although the trajectory

differs slightly from the Northeast: Increasing from just under 30 offences per 10,000 in 2021 before rising sharply to 36.27 in 2022, rates then stabilise between 2023 and 2024 before increasing again in 2025 to 36.89 per 10,000.

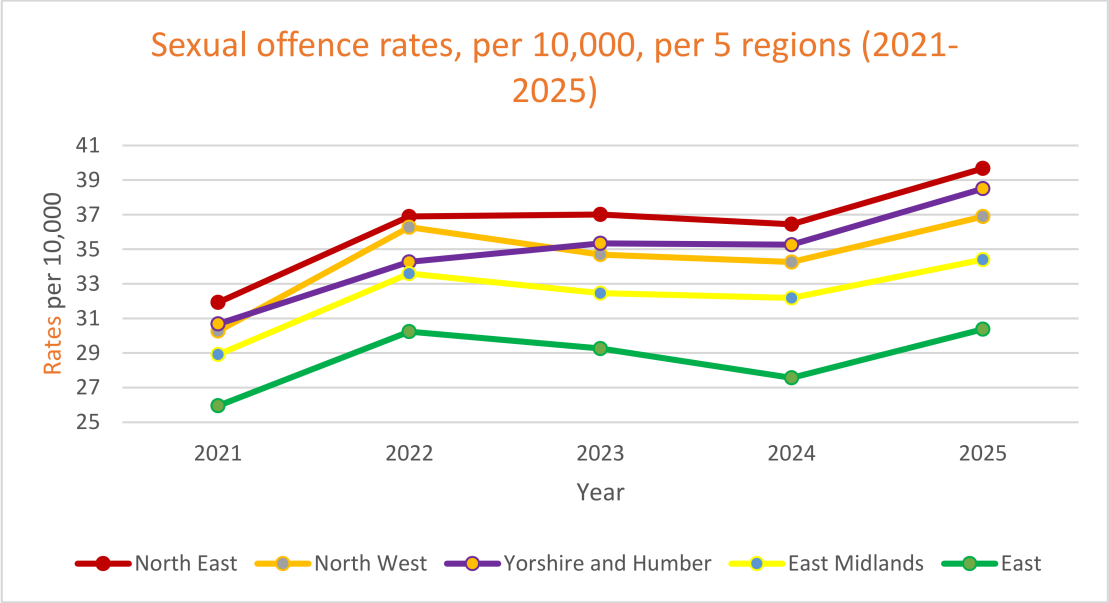


Figure 2. Sexual offence rates, 2021–2025, Northeast, Northwest, Yorkshire and Humber, East Midlands and East regions.

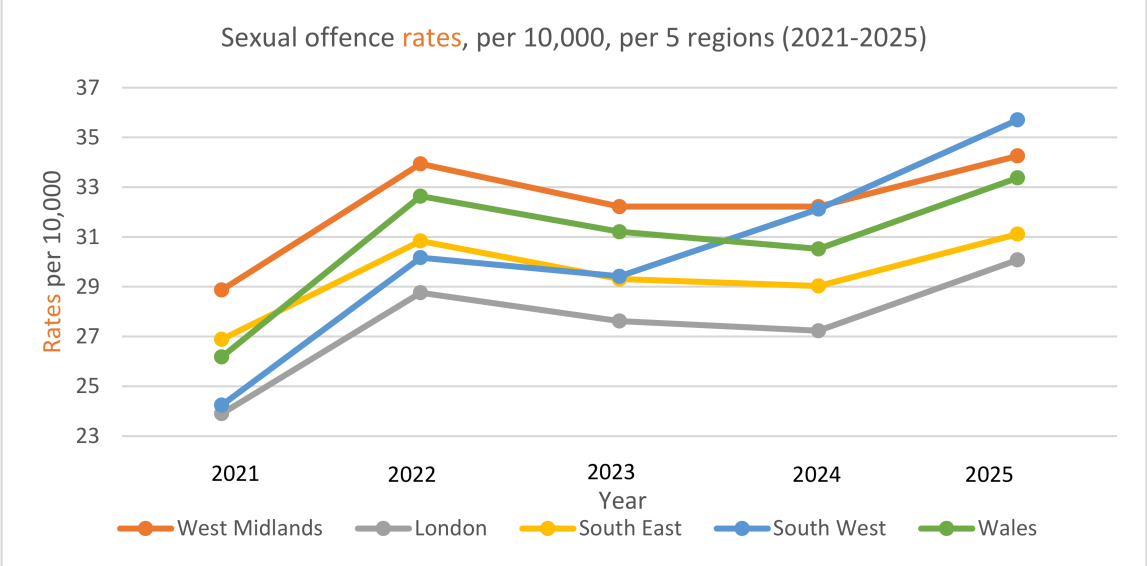


Figure 3. Sexual offence rates, 2021–2025, West Midlands, London, Southeast, Southwest and Wales regions.

Yorkshire and the Humber followed a similar trend, rising from 30.69 per 10,000 in 2021 to 38.5 by 2025, placing the region among the higher rates by the end of the five years. The Southwest demonstrates a notable late period increase, rising sharply after 2023 and reaching 35.71 per 10,000 by 2025. This growth places the region closer to the higher rate northern regions by the end of the period. In contrast, several regions display notably lower rates across the five-year period. London records some of the lowest rates relative to population size. Beginning in the mid-20s per 10,000 population in 2021, the rate increases moderately over time to 30.08 by 2025 but remains below most other regions.

These findings place London among the relatively lower-rate regions within the broader regional distribution. A similar pattern can be observed in the East of England, which remains within the lower to mid-range of regional rates. This region finishes at 30.38 per 10,000 in 2025. Although the region experiences modest growth over time, its rates remain below those recorded in several northern and western regions. The East Midlands also falls within this middle range, displaying moderate increases while remaining below the highest rates in the regional distribution, only reaching 34.4 by 2025.

Another notable feature of the regional data is the change visible towards the end of the period. While differences between regions remain evident, several regions demonstrate broad increases between 2024 and 2025. This pattern suggests that the wider national escalation in recorded sexual offences, identified earlier, is reflected across multiple regions rather than being driven by a small number of outliers. Taken together, the results show regional differences in police-recorded sexual offence rates across the ten regions examined. The Northeast, Northwest and Yorkshire and the Humber generally record comparatively high rates relative to population size, while London and several eastern regions generally record lower rates. Other regions occupy intermediate positions within the regional distribution. These findings highlight the importance of considering geographic variation when analysing trends in recorded sexual offences, as national increases may mask substantial differences in regional patterns (Hudson et al. 2015).

3.3. Examining Sexual Offences as a Proportion of Total Recorded Crime

Figure 4 shows sexual offences within the broader national offence profile, illustrating the averages of all recorded crimes in England and Wales. Although the data demonstrate increases in the rates of recorded sexual offences between 2021 and 2025, sexual offences account for a relatively small share of all recorded crime during this period, averaging 3.63% of all police-recorded offences in E&W (see Figure 4).

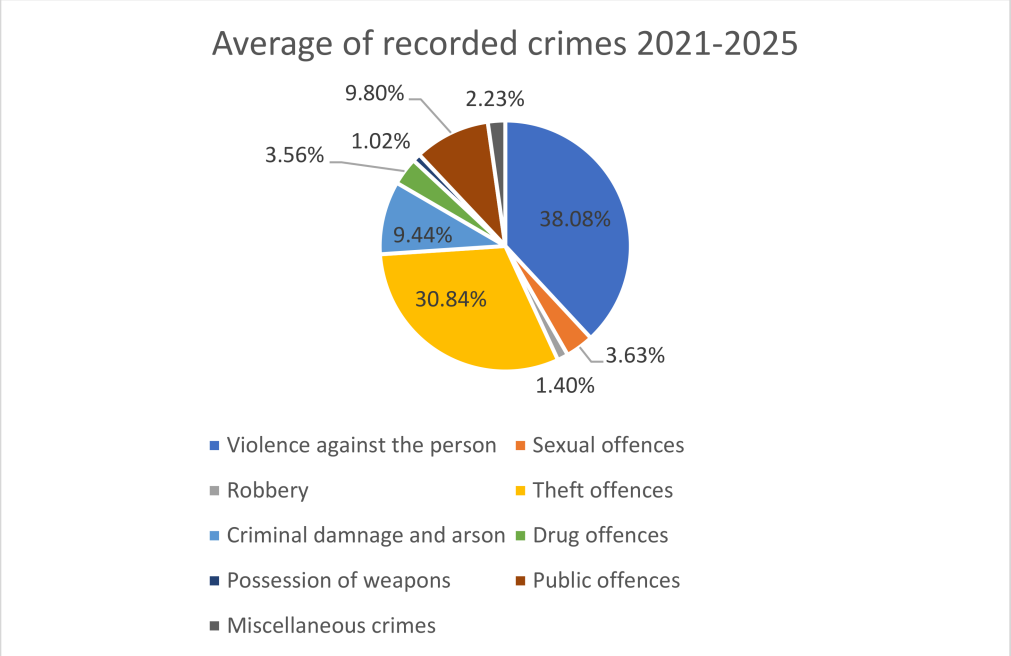


Figure 4. Average of all recorded crimes in E&W (2021–2025).

Figure 5 shows the average sexual offence as a proportion of all crime in each region (2021–2025) and shows how the proportion of sexual offences varies between the ten regions examined. The Southeast records the highest average proportion of sexual offences at 10.23% of all recorded crime, followed by the Northwest at 9.62% and London

at 9.02%. In contrast, Wales and the Northeast record the lowest proportions at 3.55% and 3.61%, respectively. Yorkshire and the Humber, the East Midlands and the West Midlands record intermediate proportions of 7.14%, 5.90% and 7.20%, respectively, while the East of England and Southwest also fall within the middle of the regional distribution. Overall, the results show that sexual offences constitute different proportions of recorded crime across the regions examined. These proportions provide contextual information alongside the population-adjusted rates but should not be interpreted as measures of the absolute level of sexual offending. For example, the Northeast records one of the highest population-adjusted rates but one of the lowest proportions of sexual offences within total recorded crime. Conversely, the Southeast records the highest proportion despite not having the highest population-adjusted rate. These differences illustrate that the two measures capture different aspects of the recorded crime profile.

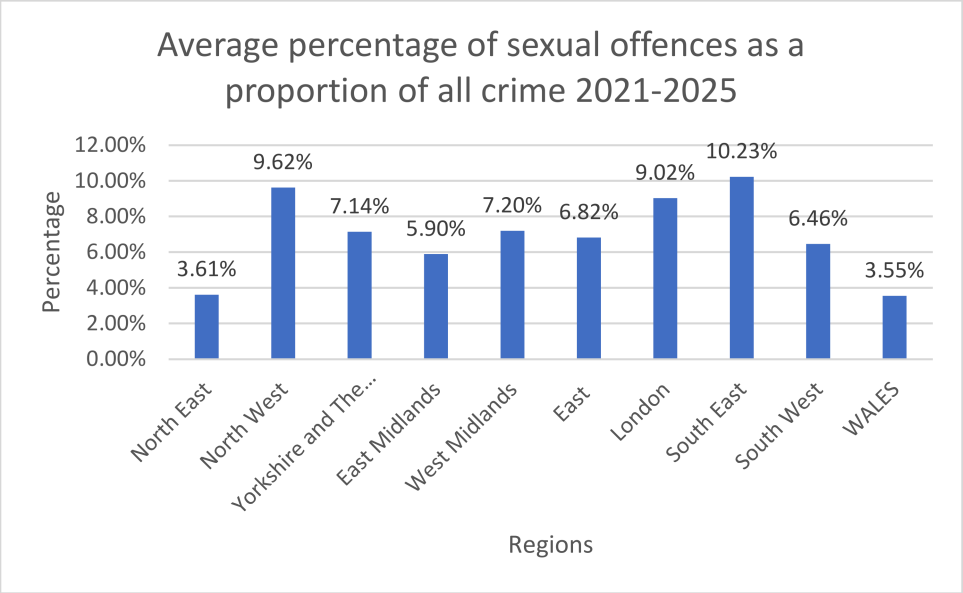


Figure 5. Average sexual offence as a proportion of all crime in each region (2021–2025).

4. Discussion

The present study analysed police-recorded sexual offences in England and Wales between 2021 and 2025 to identify temporal and regional patterns in recorded offending. The principal findings are discussed below, together with plausible explanations for the trends identified and their implications for policy and practice. However, these interpretations should be considered in light of an important limitation of the study: the analyses were based on secondary police-recorded crime data. Consequently, while the findings describe patterns in recorded offences, they cannot establish the causes of those patterns. The explanations proposed are therefore necessarily tentative and should be viewed as hypotheses that warrant further investigation using complementary data sources and more analytically robust research designs which make use of varied datasets (e.g., Haynes and Kebbell 2025; Tennent and Richardson 2025; Gauvin et al. 2026; Pisano et al. 2025).

4.1. Temporal Trends in Recorded Sexual Offences

Recorded sexual offences increased overall from 2021 to 2025, with offences rising from 163,856 to 208,960. This overall increase is unlikely to represent a straightforward rise in sexual offending alone. Rather, the increase may reflect changes in victim reporting, recording practices and legal developments that affect what is captured in official statistics. While the present study does not measure changes in reporting behaviour or recording

practices, the sharp increase between 2021 and 2022 is consistent with research showing that sexual offence recording is highly sensitive to contextual shocks, media attention and institutional initiatives that shape victims' willingness to report (Frentzen et al. 2022; Mulder et al. 2021). It is possible that the post-pandemic period may have played a role, as the return of social interaction, nightlife and routine activity created more opportunities for both victimisation and disclosure (Statista 2025), yet further research is needed to test this assumption. High profile cases, such as Savile and Everard may have helped normalise reporting and reduce stigma (Greer and McLaughlin 2013; Harper and Hogue 2017; McCabe 2026). The rise between 2024 and 2025 is particularly important because it coincides with the Online Safety Act 2023 and the introduction of new sexual offences relating to intimate images. Office for National Statistics (2025a) identifies this as a major factor in the increase in recorded sexual offences for the year ending March 2025. This indicates that legislative change can affect recorded crime by broadening legal recognition and encouraging reporting. The descriptive trend therefore reflects not only criminal behaviour but also changing visibility of sexual misconduct within official systems. This interpretation is strengthened by the gap between recorded crime and survey estimates. The CSEW estimate of 898,000 victims of sexual assault in the year ending March 2025 far exceeds the 208,960 police-recorded offences, confirming that official statistics capture only a fraction of victim experiences (Office for National Statistics 2025a, 2025b). This disparity highlights the ongoing importance of underreporting, mistrust in the criminal justice system and barriers to disclosure. It also suggests that the observed rise may partly reflect improved confidence in reporting, rather than a direct rise in prevalence.

However, the temporal pattern should be interpreted cautiously given the relatively short observation period. The analysis includes only five annual observations, with the earliest observation occurring during a period substantially affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, the increase observed between 2021 and 2025 should be understood as change within this specific observation window rather than evidence of a longer-term trajectory in police-recorded sexual offences. The influence of pandemic-related changes in social activity, mobility, reporting behaviour and policing during the early part of the period further limits the extent to which these observations can be separated from broader structural trends.

4.2. Regional Variation in Recorded Sexual Offences

The regional analysis revealed differences in recorded sexual offence rates across the ten regions examined. The Northeast and Yorkshire and the Humber generally recorded comparatively high rates, while London and parts of the East of England generally recorded lower rates. These findings partly align with earlier research showing that crime is unevenly distributed across space and tends to concentrate in areas with deprivation, population movement and environmental opportunity structures (Home Office 2010). However, the current pattern is notable because some northern regions recorded higher rates than London, complicating earlier assumptions that urban areas experience the highest levels of crime. This may reflect differences in reporting patterns and policing practices, alongside possible differences in underlying victimisation, rather than a single cause (Loveday 2000).

Routine activity theory provides one possible framework for generating hypotheses about these regional differences, although the present data cannot directly test this explanation. The theory emphasises the convergence of motivated offenders, suitable targets and the absence of capable guardianship (Kearns et al. 2019; Menting et al. 2020). From this perspective, differences in environmental context, population mobility and patterns of social activity could contribute to geographical variation in recorded sexual offences. The higher rates observed in the Northeast, Northwest and Yorkshire and the Humber

may therefore be consistent with the possibility that place-based factors and institutional visibility contribute to regional variation (Ceccato 2014). However, because the present analysis does not include measures of these factors, it is not possible to determine whether they account for the regional differences observed. These possibilities should therefore be treated as hypotheses for future research rather than explanations established by the current findings.

Institutional factors may also contribute to regional variation. Forces with greater resources may be better able to identify and record sexual offences, particularly when specialist units and victim-focused practices are in place (Rushin and Michalski 2020). The low charge rate of 4.2% in the year ending March 2025 shows that high recording does not necessarily translate into strong criminal justice outcomes (Ministry of Justice 2025). This supports the possibility that regional variation reflects differences in reporting and recording capacity as well as differences in underlying victimisation. The staggered rollout of Operation Soteria Bluestone further complicates interpretation. Only Durham was included among the northern forces in the early stages of the programme. Therefore, the higher northern rates cannot readily be attributed to earlier exposure to the reform and may instead reflect other structural or institutional factors). This interpretation is consistent with Horvath and Davies (2025), who found that even forces engaged with Soteria encountered barriers to embedding change, suggesting that regional variation may reflect differences in institutional capacity as well as victimisation levels.

4.3. Sexual Offences Within Overall Crime Profiles

Sexual offences accounted for an average of 3.63% of all recorded offences between 2021 and 2025, showing that they remain a relatively small part of the overall recorded crime picture. However, this average hides notable regional variation, with proportions ranging from 3.55% in Wales to over 10% in the Southeast. This indicates that sexual offences occupy different positions within the overall police-recorded crime profiles of the regions examined. The fact that regions with high rates do not always have the highest proportions is important. For example, the Northeast had some of the highest crude rates but one of the lowest proportions. The proportional measure therefore provides contextual information that complements the population-adjusted rate. A region with a high rate of recorded sexual offences may nevertheless have a relatively low proportion if other forms of recorded crime are also high. Conversely, a relatively high proportion does not necessarily indicate a high level of sexual offences, as it may partly reflect lower levels of other recorded crime. The measure should therefore be interpreted as an indicator of crime composition rather than as a standalone measure of sexual offending, risk or local need. These findings reinforce that sexual offences should not be viewed in isolation from wider crime patterns. As the Ministry of Justice et al. (2013) note, broad categories can obscure meaningful differences in prevalence, risk and policy need. Similarly, Gullotta et al. (2020) show that aggregated offence categories can hide variation in patterns of victimisation and offending. Although this study used the ONS combined category for comparability, the regional proportions nevertheless demonstrate that sexual offences occupy different positions within local police-recorded crime profiles. Crime composition can therefore provide useful contextual information alongside population-adjusted rates when interpreting regional police-recorded crime profiles.

4.4. Implications for Policy, Practice and Research

The findings have several potential implications for policy and practice. First, the overall rise in recorded sexual offences suggests that specialist support services and investigative resources must be sustained rather than treated as temporary responses to public

concern (Robinson and Davies 2026). If recorded offences continue to rise because more victims are willing to report, services must respond appropriately without overstretching. Second, regional differences suggest that national policy should be responsive to variation in local circumstances. A one size fits all approach may overlook how local crime structures, force capacity and reporting behaviour differ across regions. Regional variation in recorded sexual offences may provide one component of the evidence used to inform resource allocation, but recorded rates should be considered alongside information on victimisation, reporting patterns, policing practices and wider contextual factors when assessing local need. Third, the gap between CSEW estimates and police-recorded sexual offences highlights the importance of improving reporting pathways and reducing disclosure barriers. Addressing rape myths, survivor mistrust and fears of secondary victimisation remains essential if recorded crime is to reflect true prevalence (Estrich 1987; Fisher et al. 2003; Hohl and Stanko 2015). Finally, the interaction between legislative change, media coverage and recording practices suggests that policymakers should be cautious in interpreting rising sexual offence statistics as evidence of increasing sexual violence. Instead, official statistics should be read alongside survey data and qualitative research to separate prevalence shifts from changes in visibility and institutional response (Stefanovska 2019; Ariel and Bland 2019).

4.5. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study provides an analysis of contemporary police-recorded sexual offences using nationally representative data. However, there are several limitations that require acknowledgement. The study aggregates 43 police force areas into ten standard geographical regions. Although this provides a consistent framework for examining broad regional patterns, geographical aggregation may introduce a modifiable areal unit problem (MAUP), whereby the magnitude and apparent pattern of spatial variation can depend upon the geographical units selected. Consequently, regional rates may conceal substantial differences between constituent PFAs, and patterns observed at the regional level should not be assumed to apply uniformly across all forces within a region. The present findings should therefore be interpreted as describing variation between the ten regions used in the analysis rather than providing a comprehensive account of spatial variation across individual police force areas. Future research could examine PFA-level data and assess whether the regional patterns identified here are robust to alternative geographical aggregations.

The present study's reliance on police-recorded crime means that the analysis is affected by the dark figure of under reported sexual victimisation and by institutional recording discretion (Loveday 2000; Gruszczyńska and Heiskanen 2012). Consequently, the observed regional patterns represent recorded offences rather than true victimisation levels, underscoring the partial nature of official statistics. Also, combining sexual offences into a single category, following ONS practice, may ignore differences between different specific sexual offences and how each may respond differently to policy changes and social trends (Ministry of Justice et al. 2013; McGlynn et al. 2024). Similarly, no publicly available dataset was identified that separates recorded sexual offences by a specific offence type and region simultaneously. While ONS provide regional totals and national level breakdown by offence type, the absence of a cross tabulated dataset limits specific sexual offence analysis and the ability to tailor interventions accordingly.

The relatively short five-year observation period is another limitation. The analysis includes only five annual observations and begins during a period substantially affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (which in itself introduced a plethora of confounding societal impacts, see Conway. Although this timeframe captures important recent developments, including post-pandemic recovery, the implementation of Operation Soteria Bluestone and

the introduction of the Online Safety Act 2023, it does not provide a pre-COVID baseline or sufficient temporal depth to distinguish short-term fluctuations from longer-term structural changes. The findings should therefore be interpreted as describing recent variation in police-recorded sexual offences within the 2021–2025 observation window rather than as evidence of a longer-term temporal trajectory.

Also, the absence of CSEW self-report data excludes victim-centred perspectives, increasing underreporting biases inherent to sexual offences. Male victims, facing disclosure barriers including masculinity norms, homophobia fears and institutional distrust, are likely underrepresented skewing the analysis toward formally disclosed cases (Mathura and Khan 2026; Lovell et al. 2025; Lovell and Widanaralalage 2025).

While these issues mirror limitations acknowledged in comparable police data studies, they do not undermine the value of this analysis mapping recent, regional trends in this timeframe, offering insights where prior work is sparse. Future research should build on these foundations by addressing identified gaps. Triangulating police data with victimisation survey estimates would help quantify reporting discrepancies and provide a more complete picture of regional variation. Disaggregated offence-level analyses could reveal whether regional patterns vary by subtype, such as intimate image offences versus contact crime. Extended longitudinal designs incorporating pre- and post-pandemic observations would provide greater temporal depth and help distinguish longer-term structural changes from shorter-term fluctuations. Finally, mixed methods approaches, such as integrating quantitative mapping with qualitative interviews of victims, police and support services, could demonstrate how local institutional cultures and resource disparities may influence recording and victimisation. These advances would refine understanding of the geography of sexual offences in England and Wales and inform more evidence-led approaches to policy and practice that move beyond one-size-fits-all national strategies.

5. Conclusions

This study examined trends in police-recorded sexual offences across England and Wales between the years ending June 2021 and June 2025. Three key findings emerged. First, police-recorded sexual offences increased overall during the five-year observation period. Second, clear regional variation was evident across the ten regions examined, with some regions consistently recording higher population-adjusted rates than others. Third, regional differences in the proportion of sexual offences within overall recorded crime did not always correspond with regional offence rates, demonstrating that these measures capture different aspects of regional crime profiles. But by providing an up-to-date five-year regional analysis of police-recorded sexual offences during a period characterised by post-pandemic recovery, policing reform, and legislative changes, this study contributes new evidence on recent temporal and geographical patterns in recorded sexual offending across England and Wales. The findings highlight the value of police-recorded crime data for monitoring trends, identifying regional variation and informing evidence-based policing and resource allocation. Future research should build on these findings through offence-level analyses, longer-term time series and the integration of police-recorded crime and victimisation survey data to further develop understanding of sexual offence patterns across England and Wales.

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Note

[1] The resulting rates represent the frequency of sexual offences recorded by the police relative to the population of each geographical unit. They should not be interpreted as direct measures of the prevalence of sexual victimisation or underlying geographical differences in offending or victimisation risk. Police-recorded sexual offences are influenced by factors including reporting behaviour, police recording practices, policing activity and the characteristics of offences brought to police attention.

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