

Article

Offences involving the use of firearms: year ending March 2019

Analyses of information held by the Home Office on offences involving the use of firearms recorded by police in England and Wales.

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1 . Main points

- In the year ending March 2019, there were 9,787 offences in which firearms were involved; this is a 4% increase compared with the previous year.
- The number of offences has increased by just over a quarter (27%) compared with five years ago, primarily driven by non-air weapon offences, but the latest rise indicates a slowing in the rate of increase and levelling-off in the trend over the last two years.
- The 9,787 offences recorded in the latest year was less than half (59% lower than) the level recorded at its peak in the year ending March 2004 (24,094 offences).
- There were 33 fatalities resulting from offences involving firearms; this is three more than the previous year.
- Of all offences involving a firearm, the weapon was fired in around half (51%) of cases, and in most other cases it was used as a threat (47%).
- As in previous years, offences involving firearms were disproportionately concentrated in urban areas, with almost 6 in 10 offences (58%) recorded in five metropolitan Police Force Areas (Metropolitan Police, West Midlands, West Yorkshire, Greater Manchester and Merseyside).
- Most victims of offences involving firearms were in younger age groups, with 56% aged between 15 and 34 years; this is more than twice the proportion this age group made up in the total population of England and Wales (25%).

2 . How are firearm offences defined and measured?

The data presented in this article are based on information supplied by police forces in England and Wales on the number of recorded offences that involved a firearm. Headline figures for these offences, covering a more recent period, are published as part of the quarterly [Crime in England and Wales](#) bulletin. However, this article provides more detail about the nature and circumstances of firearm offences than the regular quarterly bulletin.

In line with previous years, the [weapons appendix table](#) file accompanying this article also includes figures for offences involving knives and sharp instruments. Equivalent figures, covering a more recent period, are published as part of the quarterly [Crime in England and Wales](#) bulletin.

Offences involving firearms

"Offences involving firearms" encompass any notifiable offence¹ recorded by the police where a firearm has been fired, used as a blunt instrument or used as a threat. Firearm possession offences, where the firearm has not been used in the course of another offence, are not included in this analysis. These offences are published in [appendix table A4](#) in the Crime in England and Wales quarterly release.

The different types of firearms included in these data mirror those covered by the [Firearms Act 1968](#) and the associated amendments to the Act. These are:

- firearms that use a controlled explosion to fire a projectile -this category includes handguns, shotguns and rifles; these types of weapon are often used in more serious offences and tend to account for most of the fatalities and more serious injuries that arise
- imitation firearms - this category includes replica weapons and low-powered weapons that fire small plastic pellets, such as BB guns and soft air weapons; while injuries can occur from offences involving these weapons, they are less common and tend to be less serious
- other firearms - this category includes CS gas, pepper spray, stun guns and any other firearms that are not covered by the previous two categories and that are also not classified as an air weapon
- air weapons - the majority of offences that involve air weapons relate to criminal damage; while air weapons can cause serious injury (and sometimes fatalities), by their nature they are less likely to do so than firearms that use a controlled explosion

Firearms that use a controlled explosion, imitation and other firearms are combined for the purposes of some analyses, creating two broad categories: non-air weapons and air weapons.

Prevalence and trends of offences involving firearms

Offences involving firearms make up a small proportion of overall police recorded crime. In the year ending March 2019, they were used in 0.2% of all police recorded offences (excluding fraud), a similar proportion to previous years ([appendix table 1](#)).

The police recorded 9,787 offences involving a firearm in the year ending March 2019, an increase of 4% compared with the previous year (9,395 offences). There were increases in both non-air and air weapons offences over the last year (Figure 1; [appendix table 2](#)) with offences involving non-air weapons increasing by 3% (to 6,759) and offences involving air weapons increasing by 6% (to 3,028).

There was a long-term downward trend in offences involving firearms between the year ending March 2004 and the year ending March 2014. The number of offences fell by 68%, from 24,094 to 7,729. The fall was particularly pronounced in offences involving air weapons, which fell by 79%, from 13,756 to 2,783. Offences involving non-air weapons fell by 53%, from 10,338 to 4,856, over the same period.

Since the year ending March 2014, the number of offences involving firearms increased by 27%, from 7,729 to 9,787. However, the number of offences recorded in the latest year was 59% lower than the level recorded at its peak in the year ending March 2004 (Figure 1; [appendix table 2](#)).

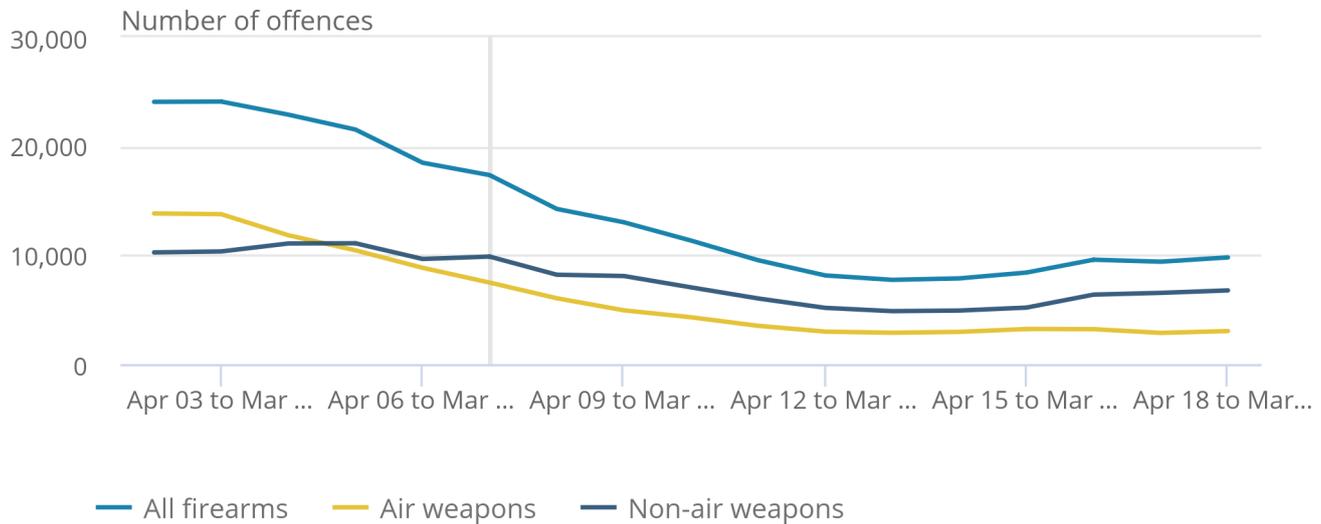
The rise compared with five years ago has been driven by a 39% increase in offences involving non-air weapons, from 4,856 to 6,759. The majority of the rise was between the years ending March 2016 and March 2017, when the number of offences increased by almost a quarter in one year (23%). Over the last two years, the rate of increase in non-air weapons offences has slowed to 6%, from 6,375 to 6,759. Offences involving air weapons during the same two-year period have fallen by 5%. The combined effect over this period has been a levelling-off in the trend for total offences involving firearms.

Figure 1: Rises in recorded firearm offences over the last five years following long-term falls

Offences recorded by the police in which firearms were reported to have been used, England and Wales, year ending March 2003 to year ending March 2019

Figure 1: Rises in recorded firearm offences over the last five years following long-term falls

Offences recorded by the police in which firearms were reported to have been used, England and Wales, year ending March 2003 to year ending March 2019



Source: Home Office – Police recorded crime

Notes:

1. Police recorded crime data are not designated as National Statistics
2. More explicit guidelines for the classification of weapons introduced on 1 April 2004 may have increased the recording of firearm offences, particularly those committed by imitation weapons.
3. Further weapon breakdowns were available for the first time on 1 April 2004.
4. The Violent Crime Reduction Act, introduced in October 2007, made it illegal to import firearms and tightened the rules for the manufacture and sale of certain types of weapons.
5. Imitation firearm includes weapons such as BB guns and soft air weapons, which can fire small plastic pellets at low velocity.

The coverage of the firearms collection is wide. The increases in offences involving more serious weapons such as handguns and shotguns are more likely to reflect genuine rises. For less serious weapon types, it is likely that improvements in crime recording will also be a factor. For example, in the year ending March 2015, there were 301 offences recorded by the police that involved CS gas, pepper spray or stun guns. This had increased to 633 in the year ending March 2019. It is likely that the police are now including these offences in their returns when previously some may have been excluded.

Notes for How are firearm offences defined and measured?

1. Notifiable offences cover those that could possibly be tried by a jury (these include some less serious offences, such as minor theft, that would not usually be dealt with in this way) plus a few additional closely related offences, such as assault without injury.

3 . What types of weapons are used in offences involving firearms?

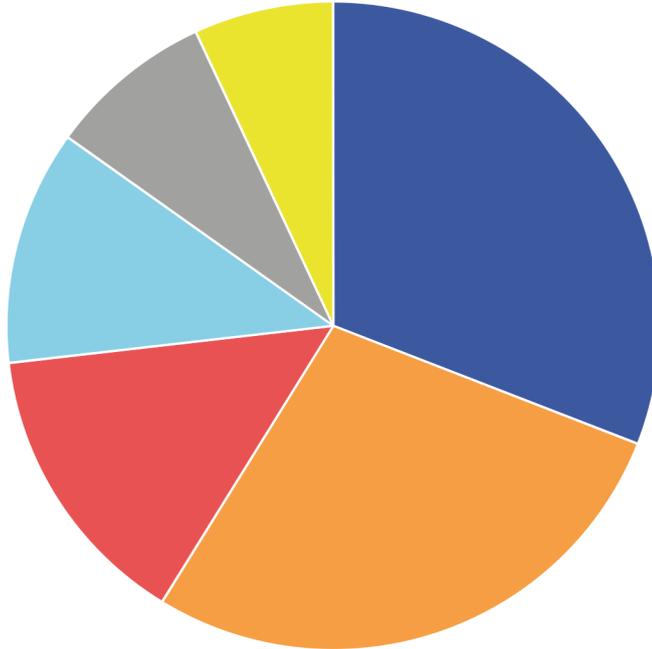
Handguns were used in 28% of all offences involving firearms (2,726 offences) in the year ending March 2019, making them the second most commonly used firearm after air weapons (3,028 offences; Figure 2). Imitation weapons were used in 14% (1,407) of offences involving firearms, while in 12% (1,147) of cases the type of firearm used was unidentified.

Figure 2: Air weapons were the most commonly used firearm in firearm offences in the last year

Offences recorded by the police in which firearms were reported to have been used, by type of principal weapon, England and Wales, year ending March 2019

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Offences recorded by the police in which firearms were reported to have been used, by type of principal weapon, England and Wales, year ending March 2019



Source: Home Office – Police recorded crime

Notes:

1. Police recorded crime data are not designated as National Statistics
2. More explicit guidelines for the classification of weapons introduced on 1 April 2004 may have increased the recording of firearm offences, particularly those committed by imitation weapons.
3. Further weapon breakdowns were available for the first time on 1 April 2004.
4. Imitation firearm includes weapons such as BB guns and soft air weapons, which can fire small plastic pellets at low velocity.

Over the longer term, there have been falls in offences involving firearms across most types (Figure 3). For example, offences involving handguns have fallen by 51%, from a peak of 5,549 in the year ending March 2003 to 2,726 in the year ending March 2019. The number of imitation weapon offences peaked later, at 3,373, in the year ending March 2005 and was 58% lower in the year ending March 2019 (1,407 offences).

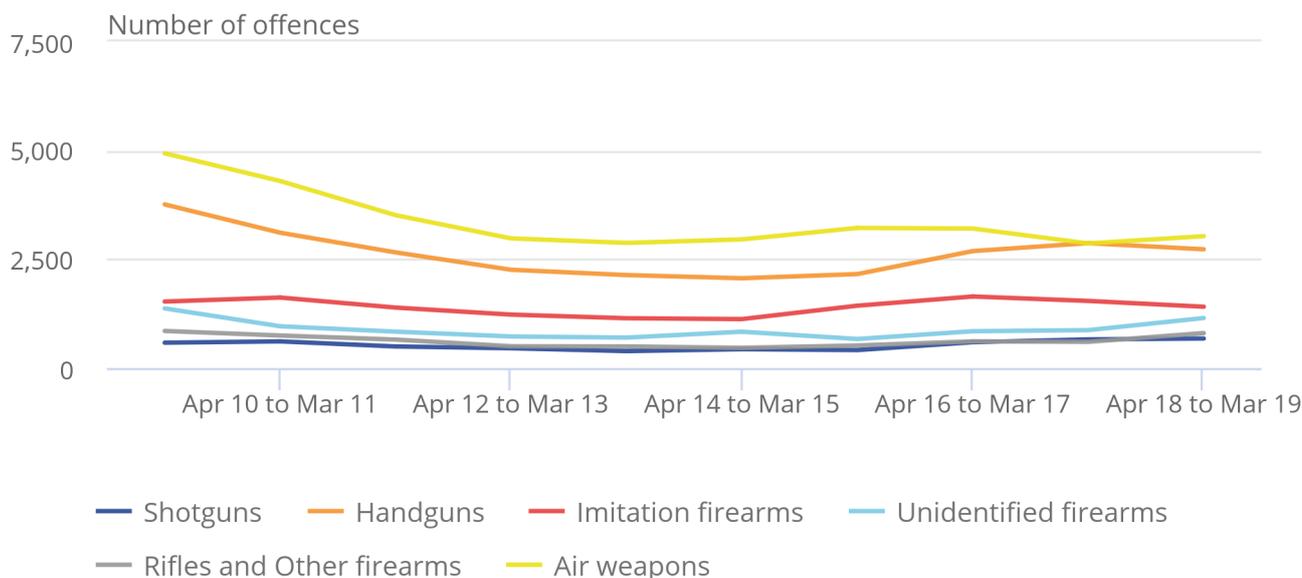
The trend in the use of shotguns is different to other weapon types. Between the year ending March 2005 and the year ending March 2011, there were around 600 offences involving shotguns per year. Between 2014 and 2016, this fell to around 400 offences per year before rising again to 677 in the last year.

Figure 3: Offences involving handguns fell to the year ending March 2015, before increasing since then

Offences recorded by the police in which weapons were reported to have been used, by type of principal weapon, England and Wales, year ending March 2010 to year ending March 2019

Figure 3: Offences involving handguns fell to the year ending March 2015, before increasing since then

Offences recorded by the police in which weapons were reported to have been used, by type of principal weapon, England and Wales, year ending March 2010 to year ending March 2019



Source: Home Office – Police recorded crime

Notes:

1. Police recorded crime data are not designated as National Statistics.
2. More explicit guidelines for the classification of weapons introduced on 1 April 2004 may have affected the recording of firearm offences committed using handguns, imitation weapons, and other weapons.
3. Further weapon breakdowns were available for the first time on 1 April 2004.
4. The Violent Crime Reduction Act introduced in October 2007 made it illegal to import or sell imitation firearms and tightened the rules for the manufacture and sale of certain types of air weapon.
5. Imitation firearms include weapons such as BB guns and soft air weapons, which can fire small plastic pellets at low velocity.
6. Rifles and other firearms includes starting guns, prohibited firearms (including CS gas) and other firearms

The type of weapon used in offences involving firearms has changed over the last decade. In the year ending March 2009, non-air weapons were used in 58% of offences involving firearms while 42% involved air weapons. By the year ending March 2010, the proportion of offences involving non-air weapons had increased to 62%, with a corresponding fall in air weapons to 38%. This was largely because of a declining trend in the use of air weapons, which fell by 18% from the year ending March 2009 to the year ending March 2010, whereas the use of non-air weapons only fell by 1% across the same time period. Since the year ending March 2010, the proportion of offences involving non-air weapons has increased further, to 69% ([appendix table 3](#)).

4 . How were firearms used?

Of the 9,787 offences recorded by the police in the year ending March 2019, the firearm was ([appendix tables 3 and 7](#)):

- fired in 51% of cases (4,957 offences)
- used as a threat in 47% of cases (4,599 offences)
- used as a blunt instrument in 2% of cases (231 offences)

As in previous years, the likelihood of a weapon being fired varied considerably by weapon type (Figure 4; [appendix table 3](#)).

Air weapons were fired in 78% of the 3,028 offences in which they were involved (2,355 offences) and the most likely weapon to be fired of the main firearm categories. This may reflect that air weapon offences largely do not come to the attention of the police unless the weapon is fired. Around two-thirds (64%) of offences involving air weapons were criminal damage offences, compared with just 7% of non-air weapon offences ([appendix table 8](#)).

In contrast, non-air weapons were fired in 38% of the offences in which they were involved (2,602 offences). Within this broad group, handguns were fired in 16% of the 2,726 offences in which they were used (427 offences). In 78% (2,138) of offences they were used as a threat and in 6% (161) as a blunt instrument. In recent years, the proportion of offences where a handgun has been fired has risen. The latest figure (16%) compares with 9% of handguns being fired in the year ending March 2014.

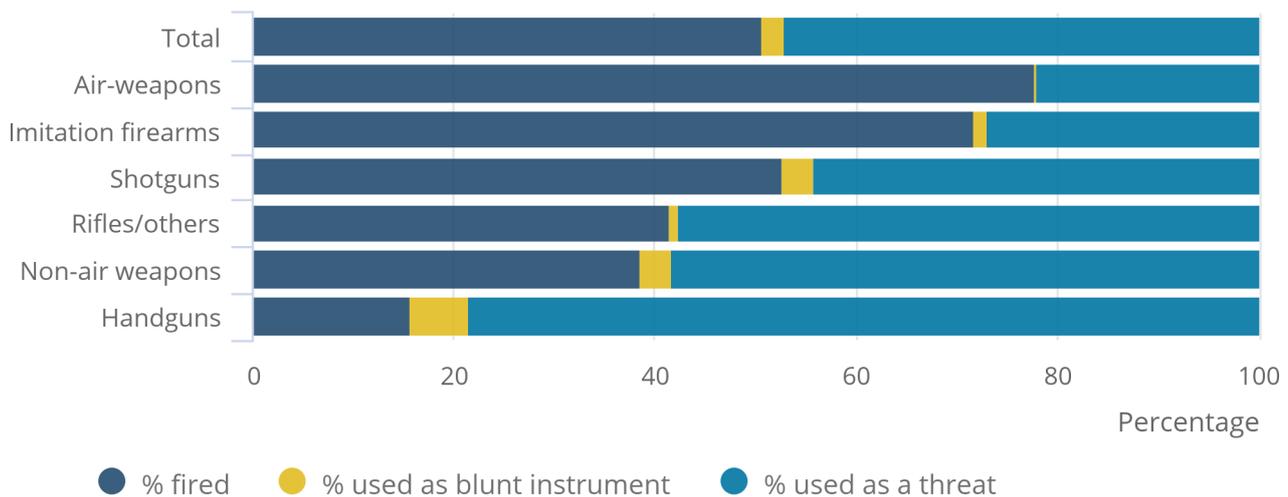
Shotguns were fired in 53% of the 677 offences in which they were used and in 44% were used to threaten.

Figure 4: Firearms were fired in around half of the offences recorded in the last year

Offences recorded by the police in which firearms were reported to have been used, by type of principal weapon and weapon usage, England and Wales, year ending March 2019

Figure 4: Firearms were fired in around half of the offences recorded in the last year

Offences recorded by the police in which firearms were reported to have been used, by type of principal weapon and weapon usage, England and Wales, year ending March 2019



Source: Home Office – Police recorded crime

Notes:

1. Police recorded crime data are not designated as National Statistics.
2. Imitation firearms include weapons such as BB guns and soft air weapons, which can fire small plastic pellets at low velocity.
3. Rifles and others includes starting guns, supposed or type unknown, prohibited firearms (including CS gas), and other firearms.

Operationally, some police forces report on "lethal-barrelled" firearms where fired, a subset of the offences involving firearms presented in this article. Lethal-barrelled firearms include weapons such as handguns, shotguns and rifles but exclude imitation weapons, ball bearing guns and sprays such as CS Gas.

There were 1,141 offences in the year ending March 2019 where a lethal-barrelled or unknown firearm was fired, an increase of 7% compared with the previous year. Compared with 5 years ago, these offences have almost doubled (an increase of 95%), from 586 in the year ending March 2014 to the 1,141 offences seen in the latest year. This is a far steeper increase than in all offences involving firearms, which have increased by 27% over the same period (from 7,729 to 9,787). Further data on the use lethal-barrelled firearms can be found in [appendix tables 17 and 18](#).

5 . Injuries sustained in offences involving firearms

There were 1,688 injuries as a result of offences involving firearms in the year ending March 2019 ([appendix table 5](#)). This was a slight rise of 3% on the previous year (1,638 offences). The number of injuries in the last year was 31% lower than 10 years ago (2,453 injuries in the year ending March 2009).

Over the last 10 years, 19% of offences involving firearms resulted in an injury. In the year ending March 2019, 17% of offences involving firearms resulted in an injury, similar to the 10-year average.

Severity of injuries sustained

Police forces are required to grade injuries sustained as a result of offences involving firearms as being "slight", "serious" (that is, requiring a stay in hospital or involving fractures, concussion, severe general shock, penetration by a bullet or multiple shot wounds) or "fatal". In the year ending March 2019, there were increases in both fatal and slight injuries and a decrease in serious injuries.

There were 33 fatalities resulting from firearm offences, three more than in the previous year. However, the number of fatalities from firearm offences has shown a downward trend over the long term. Over the last five years, between the year ending March 2015 and the year ending March 2019, there was an average of 28 fatal injuries per year. In the previous five years, between year ending March 2010 and the year ending March 2014, the average was 40, and between the year ending March 2005 and the year ending March 2009, the average was 56 - double the number seen in the last five years. As in previous years, fatal injuries continue to constitute less than 1% of the total number of firearm offences.

Serious injuries decreased by 10% during the year ending March 2019, from 343 injuries to 310. The number of serious injuries was 21% lower than 10 years ago (391 injuries in the year ending March 2009).

Slight injuries, which account for around 8 in 10 of the injuries caused by firearms, increased from 1,265 to 1,345 in the year ending March 2019, a 6% rise. The number of slight injuries were a third lower (34%) than they were 10 years ago in the year ending March 2009 (2,023 injuries).

Injuries by severity and weapon used

The severity of injuries sustained from offences involving firearms varied according to the type of weapon used. This is to be expected given the range of mechanisms and projectiles associated with individual weapons (for example, air propulsion, controlled explosion, bullets and pellets) and variations in the circumstances and offences in which they are used ([appendix table 4](#)). Of the 33 fatalities resulting from firearm offences, nearly two-thirds (64%) involved handguns.

Injuries to police officers

There were 17 injuries sustained by on-duty police officers in the year ending March 2019, four of which were serious. This was the highest number of injuries to police officers involving firearms since the year ending March 2010 ([appendix table 15](#)). Of these offences, 15 of the 17 involved CS spray, pepper spray and stun guns.

6 . Types of offences where firearms were used

Violence against the person was the most common offence group in which firearms were involved (28%), followed by criminal damage (25%) and robbery (18%). Together, these three offence groups accounted for almost three-quarters (72%) of all offences involving firearms in the year ending March 2019. While there were falls in all three of these offence types up to the year ending March 2013, the trends have since differed ([Figure 5, appendix table 8](#)). In particular:

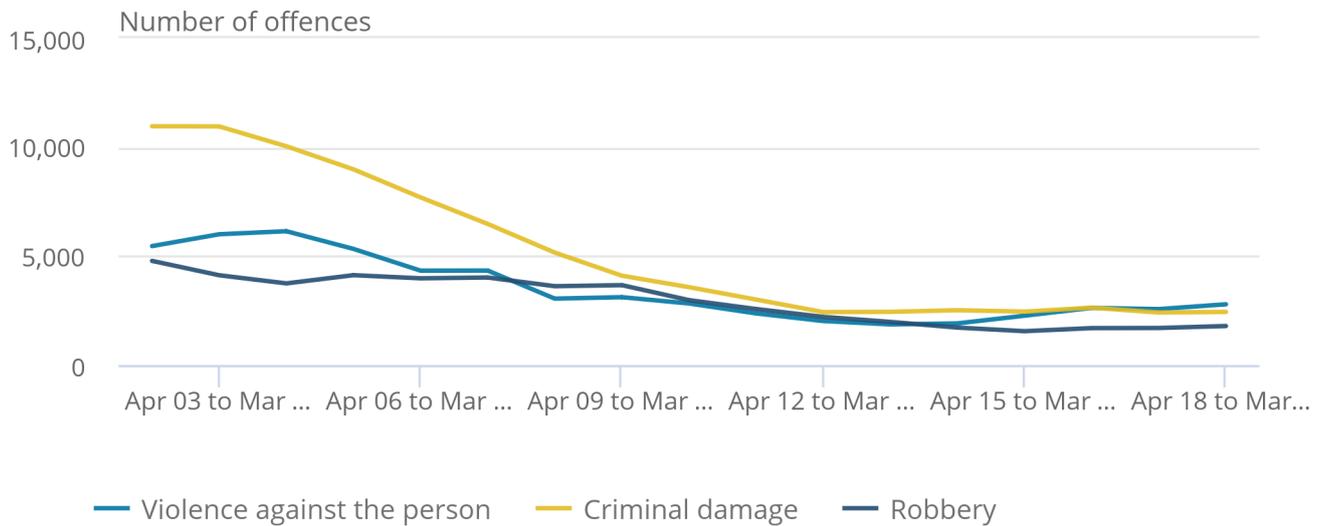
- violence against the person offences involving firearms have increased by 50% over the last five years, including a 9% increase in the last year, from 2,564 to 2,785 offences
- robbery offences have increased by 15% from the year ending March 2016 to the year ending March 2019, to 1,787 offences; however, the number of robberies involving firearms was around half of those seen 10 years ago (3,615 offences in the year ending March 2009)
- trends in criminal damage offences involving firearms have been relatively flat over the last seven years, with the 2,435 offences recorded in the year ending March 2019, similar to the 2,426 offences recorded in the year ending March 2013

Figure 5: Violence against the person offences involving firearms have been increasing since the year ending March 2014, following a long-term decline

Offences recorded by the police in which firearms were reported to have been used by selected offence type, England and Wales, year ending March 2003 to year ending March 2019

Figure 5: Violence against the person offences involving firearms have been increasing since the year ending March 2014, following a long-term decline

Offences recorded by the police in which firearms were reported to have been used by selected offence type, England and Wales, year ending March 2003 to year ending March 2019



Source: Home Office – Police recorded crime

Notes:

1. Police recorded crime data are not designated as National Statistics.
2. Prior to the year ending March 2005, air weapon offences were recorded as homicide, attempted murder, other violence against the person, robbery, burglary, criminal damage or other offences. Unlike non-air weapons, data on the specific offences that constitute these groups are not held. Therefore, the correction relating to “other violence against the person” offences can only be applied to air weapon data from the year ending March 2005 onwards.
3. From the year ending March 2006, “threat or conspiracy to murder” offences are included within the “other violence against the person” category.
4. The Violent Crime Reduction Act introduced in October 2007 made it illegal to import or sell imitation firearms and tightened the rules for the manufacture and sale of certain types of air weapon.
5. The offence classifications around serious wounding or GBH changed in April 2008 and April 2012.

Robberies involving a firearm

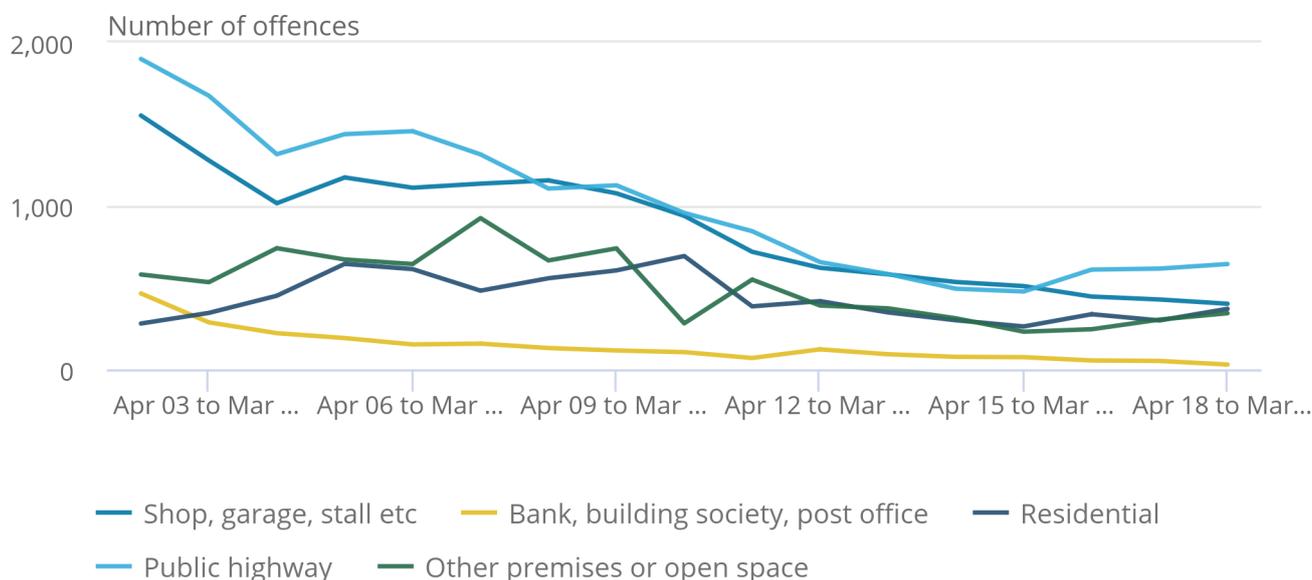
Of the 1,787 recorded robbery offences involving a firearm in the year ending March 2019, 36% were committed on public highways (644 offences), 22% in shops and garages (401 offences), and 21% in a residential location (370 offences) (Figure 6, [appendix table 10](#)).

Figure 6: Over a third (36%) of robberies involving firearms were committed on a public highway in the year ending March 2019

Number of robberies in which firearms were reported to have been used, by location of offence, England and Wales, year ending March 2003 to year ending March 2019

Figure 6: Over a third (36%) of robberies involving firearms were committed on a public highway in the year ending March 2019

Number of robberies in which firearms were reported to have been used, by location of offence, England and Wales, year ending March 2003 to year ending March 2019



Source: Home Office – Police recorded crime

Notes:

1. Police recorded crime data are not designated as National Statistics
2. These crimes are classified as robberies but are mostly break-ins where firearms have been used immediately before or at the time of stealing items from a residential property and in order to steal these items. If firearms are used instead in the getaway, the crime is classified as a burglary.

In the year ending March 2019, 59% of robberies involving firearms were committed with a handgun ([appendix table 11](#)).

7 . Geographical distribution of firearm offences

As in previous years, offences involving the use of non-air weapons (which tend to be used in more serious offences) were geographically concentrated in some of the larger metropolitan areas. Almost 6 in 10 offences (58%) were recorded in five Police Force Areas (PFAs) in England and Wales: Metropolitan Police, West Midlands, West Yorkshire, Greater Manchester and Merseyside. In comparison, less than a third (31%) of the population of England and Wales resided in these areas (Figure 7, [appendix table 12](#)).

There were 11 firearm offences per 100,000 people in England and Wales in the year ending March 2019. For the police forces mentioned before, the rates were¹:

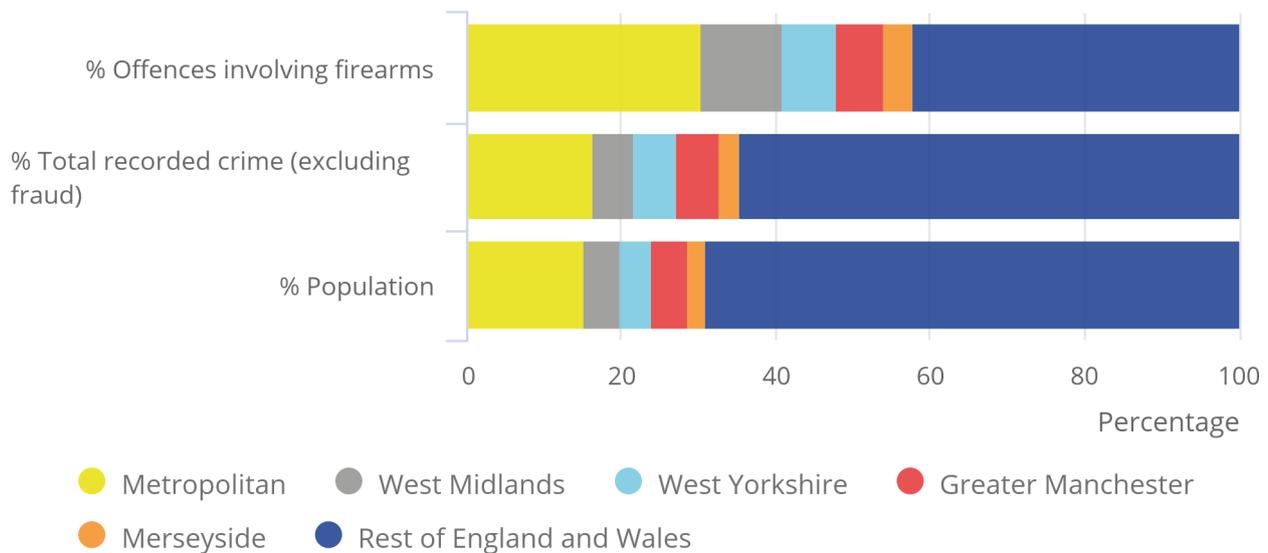
- 24 per 100,000 in the West Midlands PFA
- 23 per 100,000 in the Metropolitan PFA
- 21 per 100,000 in the West Yorkshire PFA
- 17 per 100,000 in the Merseyside PFA
- 15 per 100,000 in the Greater Manchester PFA

Figure 7: Of offences involving firearms in the year ending March 2019, 58% were recorded in five metropolitan areas

Proportion of non-air weapon offences, in five police force areas and the rest of England and Wales, compared with population profile of those forces, England and Wales, year ending March 2019

Figure 7: Of offences involving firearms in the year ending March 2019, 58% were recorded in five metropolitan areas

Proportion of non-air weapon offences, in five police force areas and the rest of England and Wales, compared with population profile of those forces, England and Wales, year ending March 2019



Source: Home Office – Police recorded crime

Notes:

1. Police recorded crime data are not designated as National Statistics.
2. The population figures are based on mid-2018 estimates from the Office for National Statistics.

Notes for Geographical distribution of firearm offences

1. Population estimates are based on the number of people resident in each Police Force Area (PFA), while number of offences recorded may include those committed against non-residents, for example, people who travel into the city to work. This could partly explain the differences in rates between those areas with large non-resident populations (for example, cities) and those with lower non-resident populations.

8 . Firearm offences by victim characteristics

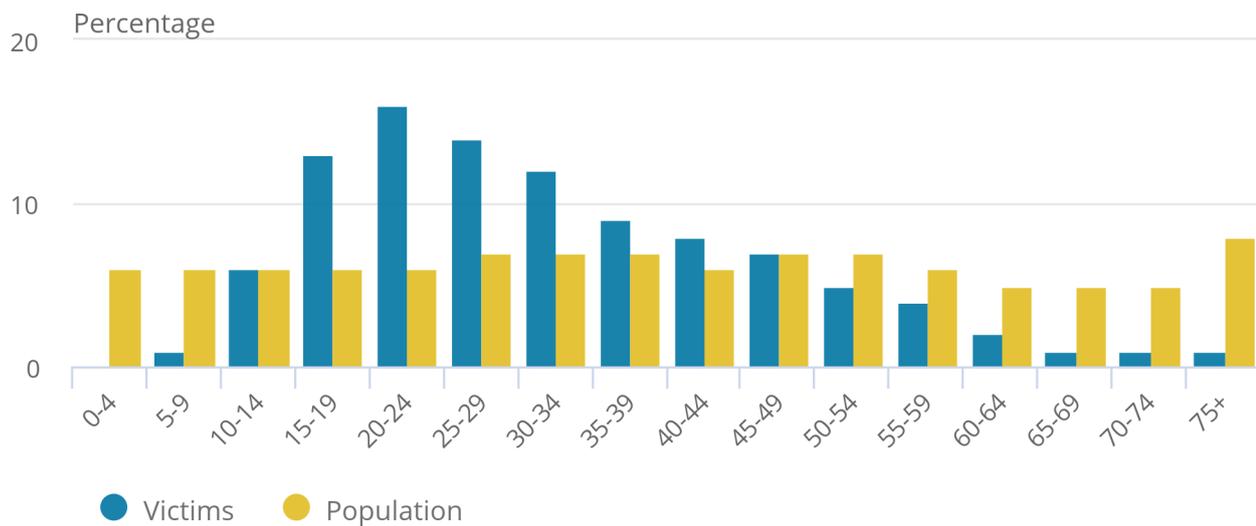
As in previous years, there was variation in the risk of being a victim of an offence involving a non-air weapon by age ([appendix table 13](#)). In the year ending March 2019, of the non-air weapon offences in which the age of the victim was known (90% of all instances), 56% of victims were aged between 15 and 34 years, even though this age group made up only 25% of the total population of England and Wales. Also, in the year ending March 2019, people aged 60 years and over were less likely to be victims, accounting for 5% of victims of non-air weapon offences but comprising 24% of the population.

Figure 8: More than half of the victims of offences using firearms were aged 15 to 34 years, who only make up a quarter of the population

Age profile of firearm victims, excluding air weapons, compared to population profile for England and Wales, England and Wales, year ending March 2019

Figure 8: More than half of the victims of offences using firearms were aged 15 to 34 years, who only make up a quarter of the population of the population

Age profile of firearm victims, excluding air weapons, compared to population profile for England and Wales, England and Wales, year ending March 2019



Source: Home Office – Police recorded crime

Notes:

1. Police recorded crime data are not designated as National Statistics
2. Excludes 656 cases where victim age was unknown
3. The population figures are based on mid-2018 estimates from the Office for National Statistics.

9 . Quality and methodology

In accordance with the [Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007](#), statistics based on police recorded crime data have been assessed against the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#) and found not to meet the required standard for designation as [National Statistics](#). The full assessment report can be found on the [UK Statistics Authority](#) website.

Alongside the main collection of police recorded crime data, additional information is available from the police on whether a firearm is used during any recorded notifiable offence. If a firearm had been used, the Home Office receive additional data about the circumstances of that offence.¹

Offences involving firearms

Although information is collected on the type of weapon used in an offence, it is not always possible to identify the firearm. For example, some imitation weapons are so realistic that they are indistinguishable from a real firearm. The police will record which type of weapon has been used in an offence, given the evidence available. The categorisation of the weapon may also depend on descriptions given by victims or witnesses. If the police do not have sufficient information about the type of firearm used in the offence (for example, if the weapon was not recovered or if the firearm was concealed during the offence), then the police will record the weapon as an "unidentified firearm".

Notes for Quality and methodology

1. The overall firearm offence figures reported here differ from those in the [Crime in England and Wales quarterly releases](#) for two reasons; first, because these data contain air weapon offences, whereas the quarterly releases exclude these offences, and secondly because data in the quarterly releases are provisional and are not reconciled with police forces before publication.