

Article

Nature of sexual assault by rape or penetration, England and Wales: year ending March 2020

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



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1 . Main points

The year ending March 2020 Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) estimated that 1.6 million adults aged 16 to 74 years had experienced sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) since the age of 16 years. Analysis of the nature of these assaults uses CSEW data from the years ending March 2017 and March 2020 combined and is limited to adults aged 16 to 59 years.¹

Of victims who experienced sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) since the age of 16 years:

- almost half (49%) had been a victim more than once
- fewer than one in six (16%) reported the assault to the police and of those that told someone but not the police, 40% stated embarrassment as a reason, 38% did not think the police could help, and 34% thought it would be humiliating
- more than four in ten (44%) were victimised by their partner or ex-partner
- nearly one in ten (9%) were victimised on the street, in a car park, park, or another open public space compared with over one-third (37%) in their own home
- over half (54%) said the perpetrator used physical force, such as holding them down, to make them have sex with them, and 6% said the perpetrator had threatened to kill them

Notes for: Main points

1. The age range for respondents eligible for the self-completion modules of the CSEW was changed in April 2017, from adults aged 16 to 59 years to adults aged 16 to 74 years. When combining data from the years ending March 2017 and March 2020, the 16 to 59 years age range is therefore used.

2 . Understanding sexual assault

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

This publication focuses specifically on sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts). It contains data from the CSEW self-completion module on the nature of sexual assault by rape or penetration and provides more detail on the circumstances of these types of sexual assaults experienced by respondents since the age of 16 years. Data from the year ending March 2020 have been combined with data from the year ending March 2017 (when it was last previously collected) to provide more robust estimates.

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

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

3 . Amount and type of sexual assault experienced

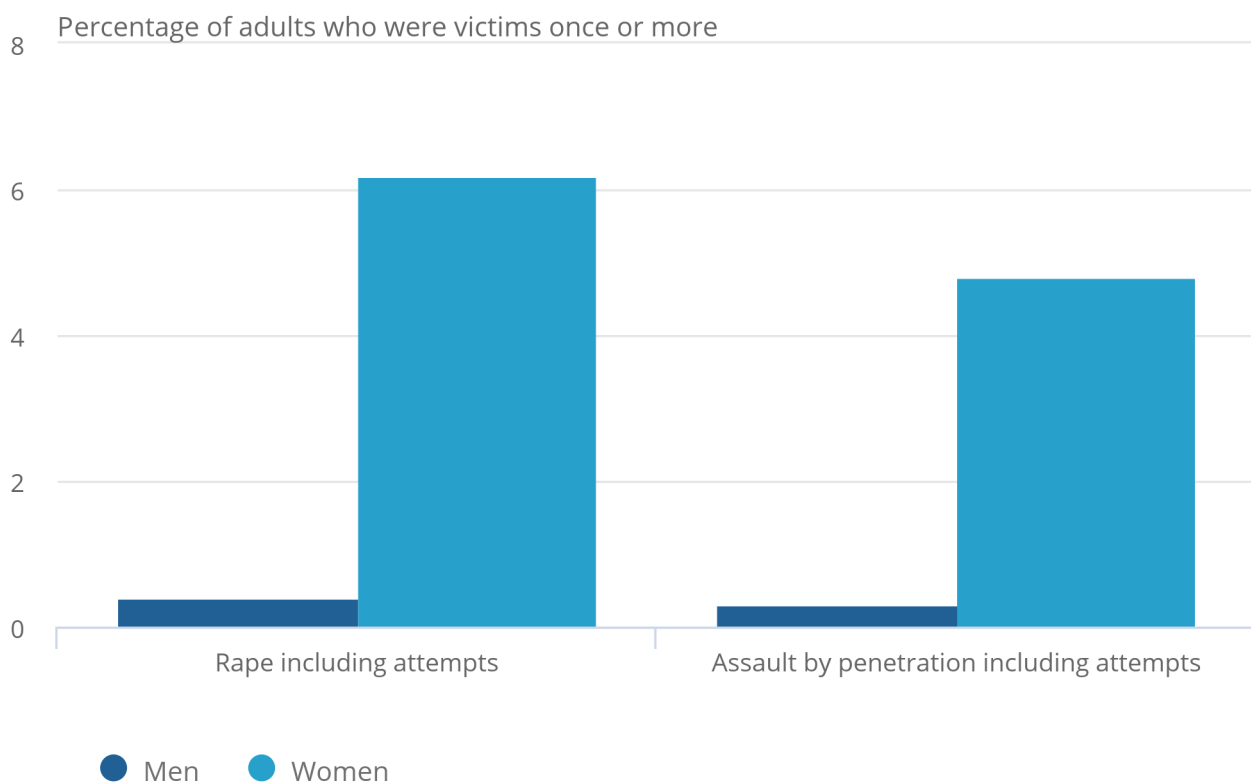
For the year ending March 2020, the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) estimated that 3.8% of adults aged 16 to 74 years (1.6 million) had experienced sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) since the age of 16 years (7.1% for women and 0.5% for men; see [Sexual offences prevalence and victim characteristics – Appendix Tables, Table 1](#)). More than one in 20 women (6.2%) had experienced rape (including attempts) since the age of 16 years, and 4.8% had experienced assault by penetration (including attempts; Figure 1).

Figure 1: Women were more likely than men to experience rape or assault by penetration (including attempts)

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

Figure 1: Women were more likely than men to experience rape or assault by penetration (including attempts)

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



Source: Office for National Statistics – Crime Survey for England and Wales

In the years ending March 2017 and March 2020 combined, nearly half of victims aged 16 to 59 years¹ who experienced rape or assault by penetration (including attempts) since the age of 16 years, had been a victim more than once (49%). This proportion was higher for women than men (51% and 22% respectively). Over one-fifth of victims reported experiencing this type of assault more than three times since they were 16 years old (22%) ([Appendix Table 7](#)).

Notes for: Amount and type of sexual assault experienced

1. The age range for respondents eligible for the self-completion modules of the CSEW on sexual assault was expanded in April 2017, changing from adults aged 16 to 59 years to adults aged 16 to 74 years. This publication combines data from the years ending March 2017 and March 2020 and therefore uses the 16 to 59 years age range.

4 . Perpetrator characteristics

In the years ending March 2017 and March 2020 combined, the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) estimated that the majority of victims who experienced rape or assault by penetration since the age of 16 years had been assaulted by a single perpetrator (66%), with 21% assaulted by two different perpetrators, 8% by three perpetrators and 5% by more than three perpetrators ([Appendix Table 6](#)).

Age and sex

In the years ending March 2017 and March 2020 combined, the majority of victims who had experienced rape or assault by penetration since they were 16 years old reported that the perpetrator(s) were male (98%). Almost two-thirds (65%) reported that the perpetrator was a male aged between 20 and 39 years ([Appendix Table 3](#)).

At the time of the most recent incident, most victims reported being assaulted by a male of a similar age to themselves ([Appendix Table 4](#)).

Relationship to victim

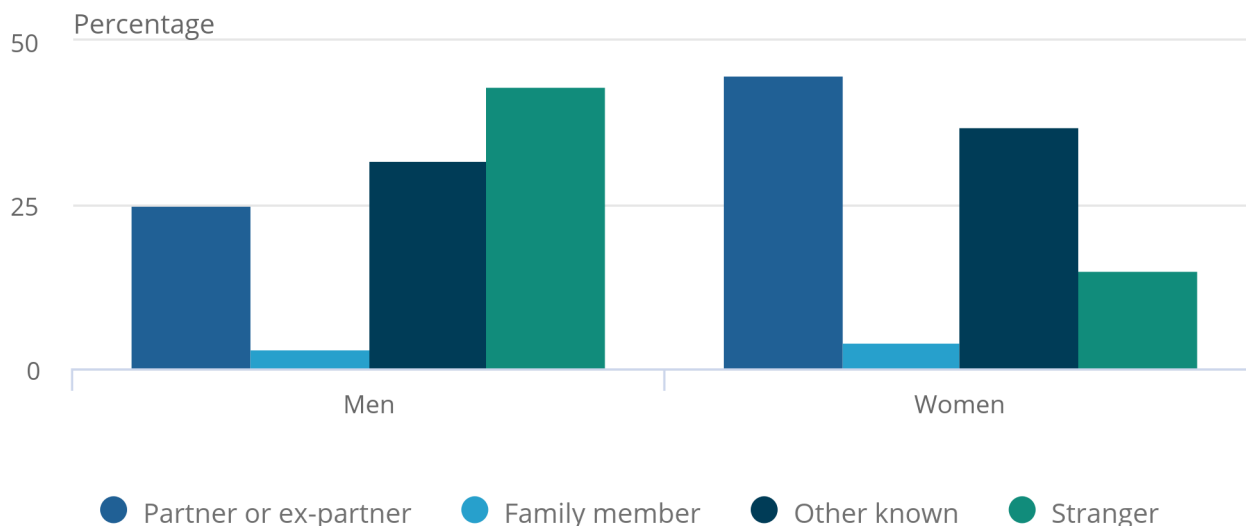
For the years ending March 2017 and March 2020 combined, victims who experienced sexual assault by rape or penetration since the age of 16 years were most likely to be victimised by their partner or ex-partner (44%). This was closely followed by someone who was known to them other than a partner or family member (37%), which includes friends (12%) and dates (10%) ([Appendix Table 1](#)). More than one in seven women (15%) reported being assaulted by a stranger, whereas this was true for almost half of male victims (43%) (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Women were more likely to know their perpetrator than men

Victim-perpetrator relationship for rape or assault by penetration (including attempts) experienced by adults aged 16 to 59 years since the age of 16 years, by sex of victim, England and Wales, year ending March 2017 and year ending March 2020

Figure 2: Women were more likely to know their perpetrator than men

Victim-perpetrator relationship for rape or assault by penetration (including attempts) experienced by adults aged 16 to 59 years since the age of 16 years, by sex of victim, England and Wales, year ending March 2017 and year ending March 2020



Source: Office for National Statistics – Crime Survey for England and Wales

Notes:

1. These data are based on combined data from the year ending March 2017 and the year ending March 2020 to create a larger sample size. These questions are asked every three years in the "Nature of sexual assault" module. The latest years that include these data are year ending March 2017 and year ending March 2020.
2. If the victim had experienced more than one sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts), question was asked of the most recent incident.
3. "Other known" includes date, friend, neighbour, an acquaintance (outside work, or school, college or university), person in a position of trust or authority (not at work, school, college or university), colleague or peer from work or school, college or university.
4. Percentages may sum to more than 100, as multiple perpetrators could be identified.

More information on the relationship between the victim and perpetrator for all types of sexual assault can be found in the article: [Sexual offences victim characteristics, England and Wales: year ending March 2020](#).

5 . Circumstances of the sexual assault

Location

For the years ending March 2017 and March 2020 combined, the most common location for rape or assault by penetration to occur was in the victim's home (37%), followed by the perpetrator's home (26%). The assault had taken place in a park, other open public space, car park or on the street for 9% of victims ([Appendix Table 8](#)).

Alcohol and drug consumption

Respondents who reported they had been victims of rape or assault by penetration since they were aged 16 years old were asked whether they thought the perpetrator(s) was under the influence of alcohol or drugs, and whether they were under the influence of alcohol or drugs themselves at the time of the incident.¹

In their most recent incident of rape or assault by penetration (including attempts), 39% of victims reported that the perpetrator(s) were under the influence of alcohol. The same percentage (39%) reported being under the influence of alcohol themselves ([Appendix Table 10](#)).

Fewer victims reported that the perpetrator was under the influence of drugs (8%) and that they themselves were under the influence of drugs they had chosen to take (2%). In addition, 5% of victims reported that they thought that the perpetrator had drugged them during the last incident of rape or penetration they had experienced ([Appendix Table 10](#)).

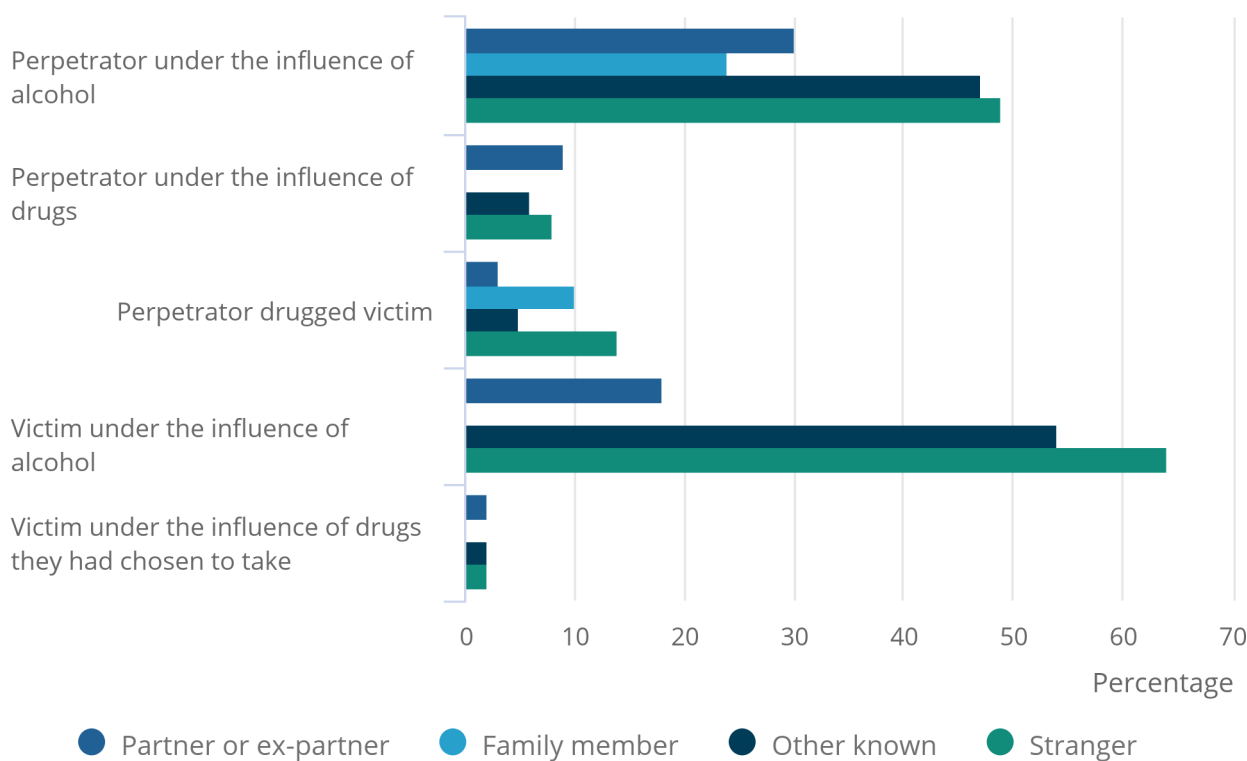
Of victims who reported the perpetrator was a stranger, the majority (64%) reported that they themselves were under the influence of alcohol at the time of the assault, almost half (49%) reported that the perpetrator was under the influence of alcohol, and 14% said they thought they had been drugged. For victims who reported the perpetrator was a partner or ex-partner, these percentages were lower (Figure 3) ([Appendix Table 11](#)).

Figure 3: Almost half of victims who reported the perpetrator was a stranger, said the perpetrator was under the influence of alcohol when the sexual assault took place

Influence of alcohol and drugs for rape or assault by penetration (including attempts) since the age of 16 years, for adults aged 16 to 59 years, by victim-perpetrator relationship, England and Wales, year ending March 2017 and year ending March 2020

Figure 3: Almost half of victims who reported the perpetrator was a stranger, said the perpetrator was under the influence of alcohol when the sexual assault took place

Influence of alcohol and drugs for rape or assault by penetration (including attempts) since the age of 16 years, for adults aged 16 to 59 years, by victim-perpetrator relationship, England and Wales, year ending March 2017 and year ending March 2020



Source: Office for National Statistics – Crime Survey for England and Wales

Notes:

1. If the victim had experienced more than one sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts), question was asked of the most recent incident.
2. These data are based on combined data from the year ending March 2017 and the year ending March 2020 to create a larger sample size. These questions are asked every three years in the "Nature of sexual assault" module. The latest years that include these data are year ending March 2017 and year ending March 2020.
3. Data not shown for some categories as estimates based on fewer than 50 respondents are not published.
4. "Other known" includes date, friend, neighbour, an acquaintance (outside work or school, college or university), person in a position of trust or authority (not at work, school, college or university), colleague or peer from work or school, college or university.
5. Percentages for these categories may not sum to total of combined percentage as respondents could have selected more than one response.

Method used by perpetrator

For over half (54%) of victims, physical force had been used by the perpetrator to try to make them have sex with them, with 10% reporting the perpetrator had choked or tried to strangle them. Over one-fifth (22%) of victims reported feeling frightened or that the perpetrator had threatened to hurt them, and in 6% of reported cases, threats to kill the victim were made by the perpetrator.

Over a fifth (21%) of victims were either unconscious or asleep during the most recent incident of sexual assault by rape or penetration.

Notes for: Circumstances of the sexual assault

1. Some respondents to these questions on the influence of drink or drugs responded, "Don't know or cannot remember" or "Don't want to answer". Those who answered "Don't want to answer" were excluded from the analysis.

6 . Effects of the sexual assault on the victim

Victims of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) since the age of 16 years were asked questions on physical injury and other, non-physical effects experienced as a result of the most recent incident of assault.

Nearly two-fifths of victims (36%) reported that they suffered some sort of physical injury. The most common types of injuries were minor bruising or black eye (23%) and scratches (15%) ([Appendix Table 22](#)).

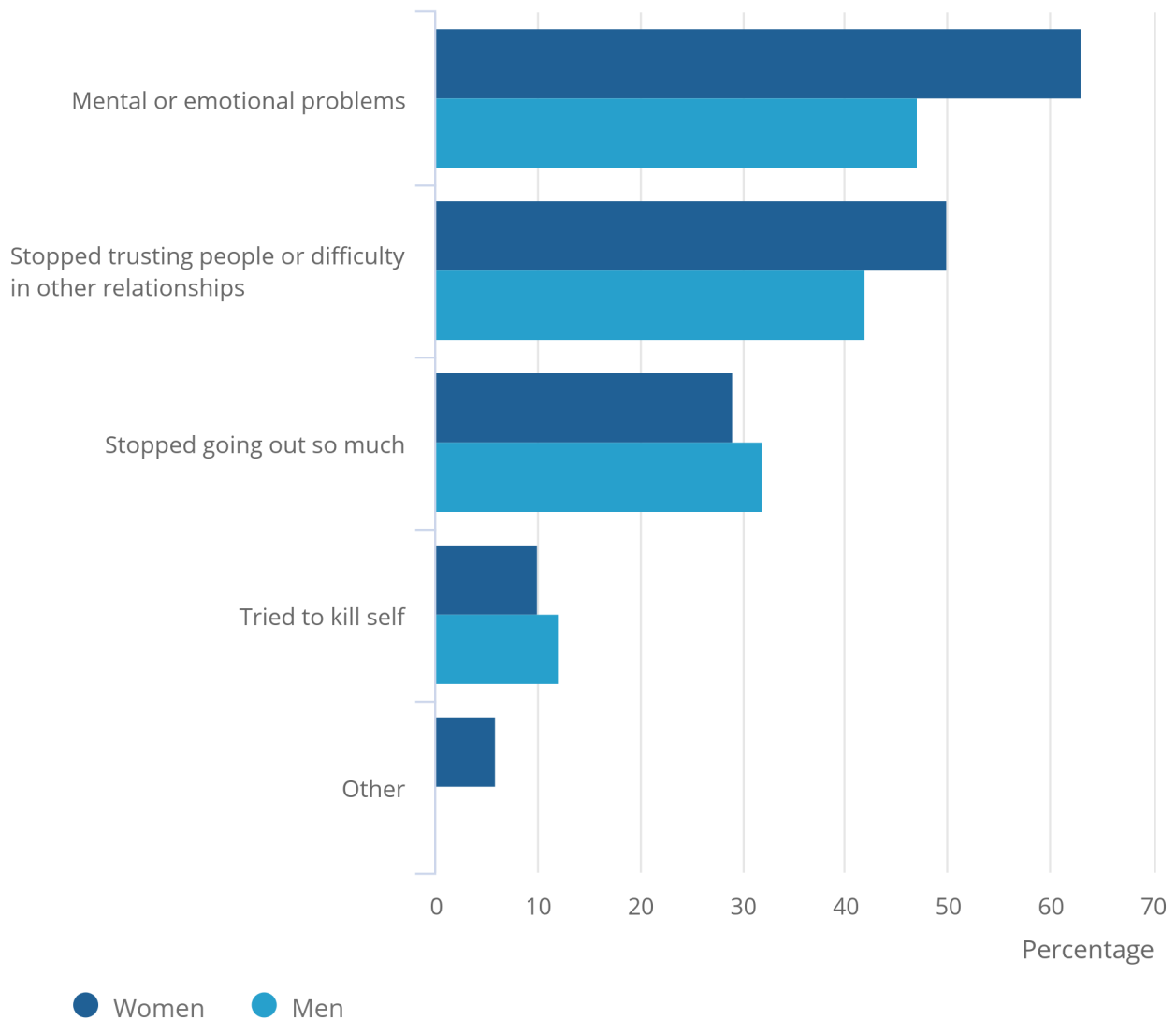
Victims were presented with a list of other non-physical effects and were asked if they had suffered any of these as a result of the assault. For both men and women, the category most likely to be reported was "mental or emotional problems" (47% of male victims and 63% of female victims). Around one in ten victims (12% of men and 10% of women) said they had attempted suicide as a result (Figure 4) ([Appendix Table 22](#)).

Figure 4: The most likely non-physical consequence of rape or assault by penetration was “mental or emotional problems”

Non-physical effects of rape or assault by penetration (including attempts) experienced by adults aged 16 to 59 years since the age of 16 years, by sex of victim, England and Wales, year ending March 2017 and year ending March 2020 combined

Figure 4: The most likely non-physical consequence of rape or assault by penetration was “mental or emotional problems”

Non-physical effects of rape or assault by penetration (including attempts) experienced by adults aged 16 to 59 years since the age of 16 years, by sex of victim, England and Wales, year ending March 2017 and year ending March 2020 combined



Source: Office for National Statistics – Crime Survey for England and Wales

Notes:

1. "Other" includes became pregnant or contracted a disease. Data for this category are not available for men due to small cell counts.
2. Percentages may sum to more than 100, as more than one option could be selected.

Victims of rape or assault by penetration were asked about the impact of the assault on their work. Over a fifth of victims (21%) said that they took time off work because of the assault, and 6% reported losing their job or giving up work.

7 . Sources of support sought by victims

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) years ending March 2017 and March 2020 combined showed that the majority (69%) of victims told someone about the sexual assault by rape or penetration they had experienced since the age of 16 years. Victims were most likely to tell someone they knew personally (60%) ([Appendix Table 13](#)).

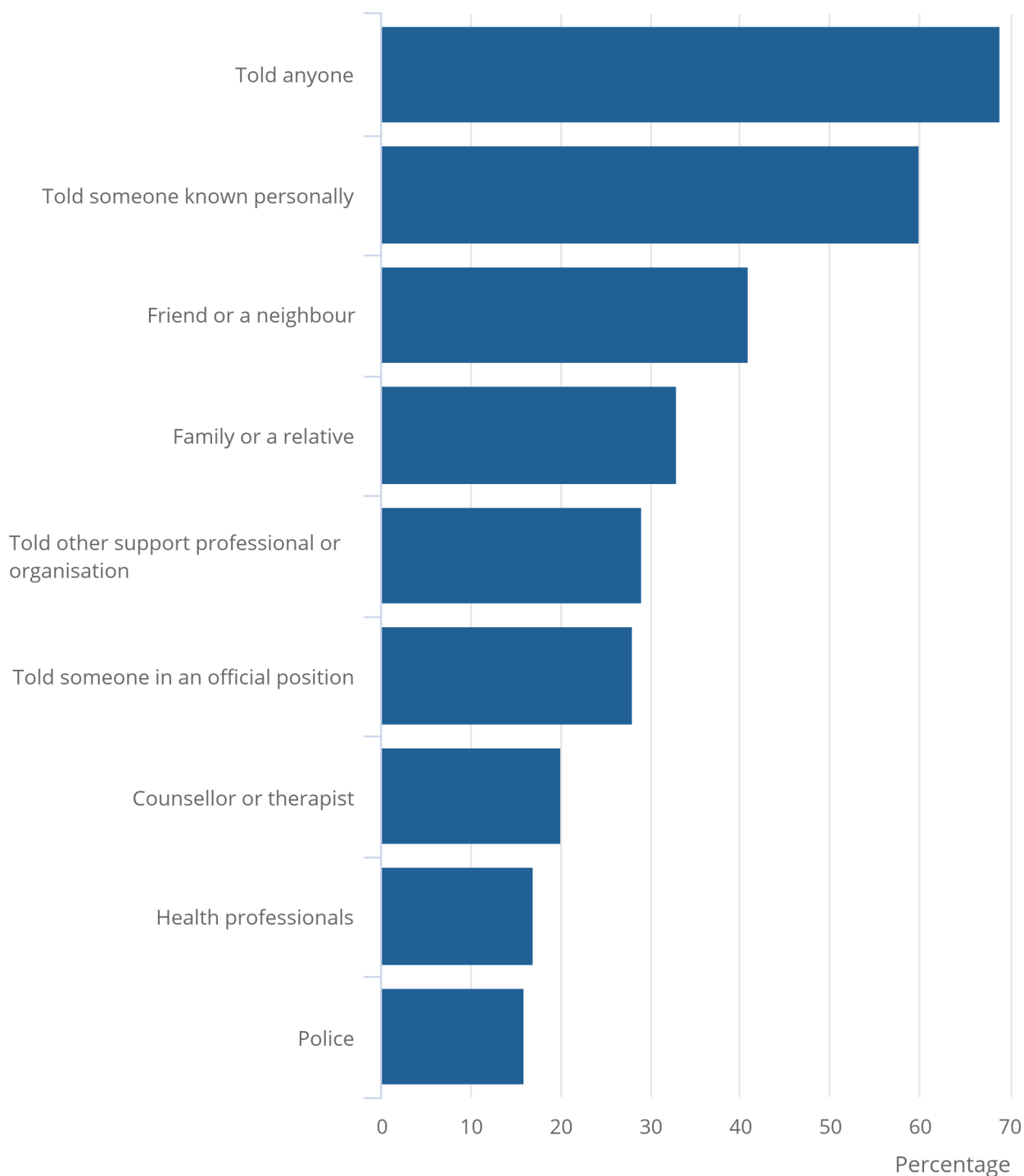
Victims were equally as likely to tell someone in an official position (28%) as another support professional or organisation (29%) about the assault experienced.

Figure 5: Most victims told someone about the assault, but rarely the police

Who victim told of rape or assault by penetration (including attempts) experienced by adults aged 16 to 59 years since the age of 16 years, by sex of victim, England and Wales, year ending March 2017 and year ending March 2020

Figure 5: Most victims told someone about the assault, but rarely the police

Who victim told of rape or assault by penetration (including attempts) experienced by adults aged 16 to 59 years since the age of 16 years, by sex of victim, England and Wales, year ending March 2017 and year ending March 2020



Notes:

1. If the victim had experienced more than one incident of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts), question was asked of the most recent incident.
2. These data are based on combined data from the year ending March 2017 and the year ending March 2020 to create a larger sample size. These questions are asked every three years in the "Nature of sexual assault" module. The latest years which include these data are year ending March 2017 and year ending March 2020.
3. Percentages may sum to more than 100, as more than one option could be selected.

More victims told someone about the rape or assault by penetration when the perpetrator was a stranger (83%) compared to a partner or ex-partner (65%) ([Appendix Table 15](#)).

8 . Reporting sexual assault to the police

Victims of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) since the age of 16 years were asked questions surrounding issues on reporting the assault to the police.

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) for the years ending March 2017 and March 2020 combined showed that fewer than one in six victims (16%) had reported the assault to the police ([Appendix Table 13](#)). This figure was similar to that seen in the year ending March 2014 (17%).

For those that told someone about the abuse, but did not report it to the police, the most common reasons given were: embarrassment (40%), did not think they could help (38%) and thought it would be humiliating (34%). A quarter of victims also thought the police would not believe them ([Appendix Table 16](#)).

Victims who did tell the police did so primarily to prevent it happening to others (47%), although, believing it to be the right thing to do (44%) and wanting the perpetrator(s) punished (43%) were similarly common ([Appendix Table 17](#)).

As victim age increased, so did the number of victims telling the police: just 10% of 16- to 19-year-olds reported the assault to the police, compared with 27% of 35- to 44-year-olds ([Appendix Table 14](#)).

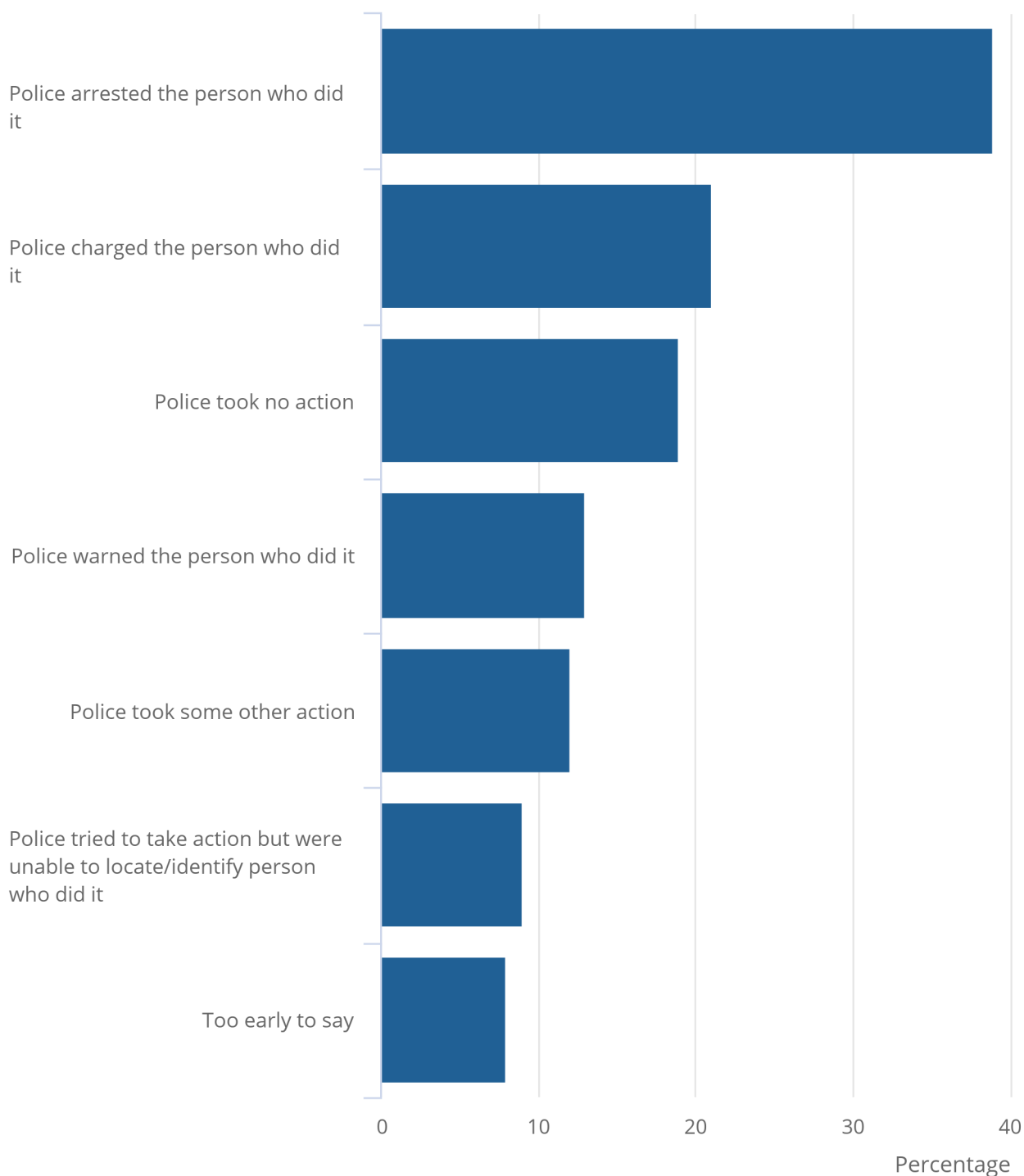
In incidents where the police came to know about the assault, respondents were asked what actions were taken by the police. The police took some sort of action in 81% of cases. The most common action taken by the police was to arrest the perpetrator (39%). In 21% of cases the perpetrator was charged, and more than half of cases went to court (55%) ([Appendix Table 18](#)).

Figure 6: The most common outcome of the police investigations was arresting or charging the person who did it

Outcome of police investigation of rape or assault by penetration (including attempts) experienced since the age of 16 years by adults aged 16 to 59 years, by sex of victim, England and Wales, year ending March 2017 and year ending March 2020 combined

Figure 6: The most common outcome of the police investigations was arresting or charging the person who did it

Outcome of police investigation of rape or assault by penetration (including attempts) experienced since the age of 16 years by adults aged 16 to 59 years, by sex of victim, England and Wales, year ending March 2017 and year ending March 2020 combined



Notes:

1. Percentages may sum to more than 100, as more than one option could be selected.

When asked about how they viewed their experience, the majority of victims of rape or assault by penetration (72%) felt what happened to them was a crime ([Appendix Table 21](#)).

9 . Nature of sexual assault data

[Nature of sexual assault by rape or penetration](#)

Dataset | Released 18 March 2021

Victim and perpetrator relationship, circumstances, and impacts for sexual assault by rape or penetration, based on findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales.

[Sexual offences prevalence and victim characteristics](#)

Dataset | Released 18 March 2021

Numbers, prevalence, types and victim characteristics, based on findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales and police recorded crime.

10 . Glossary

Assault by penetration

Introduced as a legal offence in 2003, assault by penetration is the penetration of the vagina or anus with an object or other body part without consent.

Rape

Rape is the penetration of the vagina, anus or mouth by a penis without consent. This is the legal category of rape introduced in 2003.

Sexual assault

The term “sexual assault” in the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) is used to describe all types of sexual offences measured by the survey. It includes rape or assault by penetration (including attempts), and indecent exposure or unwanted sexual touching.

11 . Data sources and quality

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

Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW)

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

The upper age limit for respondents eligible for the self-completion module was increased from 59 years to 74 years in April 2017. This publication reports primarily on those aged 16 to 59 years as it uses data from the year ending March 2017, before the upper age limit was increased.

One of the strengths of the CSEW is that it covers many crimes that are not reported to the police. Under-reporting to the police is particularly acute for sexual assaults, with many more offences committed than are reported to and recorded by the police. The CSEW provides reliable estimates of the prevalence of sexual assault using a consistent methodology that is not affected by changes in recording practices and police activity, or by changes in the propensity of victims to report to the police. While the CSEW provides the best available estimate of trends in the prevalence of sexual assault, it cannot be used to make any inferences about demands on the police.

Measuring sexual assault within the CSEW

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

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

This publication focuses specifically on sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts). It contains data from the CSEW self-completion module on the nature of sexual assault by rape or penetration and provides more detail on the circumstances of these types of sexual assaults experienced by respondents since the age of 16 years. For those who had experienced more than one incident, only the most recent incident was asked about if the respondent was at least aged 16 years when the incident occurred. Data from the year ending March 2020 have been combined with data from the year ending March 2017 (when it was last previously collected) to provide more robust estimates.

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

Impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

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

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

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

12 . Related links

[Sexual offences in England and Wales overview: March 2020](#)

Statistical bulletin | Released 18 March 2021

Figures on sexual offences from the year ending March 2020 Crime Survey for England and Wales and crimes recorded by the police.

[Sexual offences prevalence and trends, England and Wales: year ending March 2020](#)

Article | Released 18 March 2021

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

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

Article | Released 18 March 2021

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

[Sexual offending: victimisation and the path through the criminal justice system](#)

Article | Released 13 December 2018

An overview of sexual offending in England and Wales, using a range of National Statistics and official statistics from across the crime and criminal justice system.