

Impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on reporting of rape, serious sexual offences, and domestic abuse in one English police force

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Abstract

Research suggests that during the Covid-19 pandemic reports of rapes and serious sexual offences to the authorities have declined whilst calls to domestic violence helplines have soared. This paper focuses on the impacts of the Covid-19 outbreak on reporting to the police in cases of rape, serious sexual offences, and domestic abuse in one police force area in England. Data from the force's crime reporting system was provided from 2018 to 2021, including over 10,000 reports of rapes and serious sexual offences and over 5,000 reports of domestic abuse. An Interrupted Time Series analysis was used to evaluate the impact of lockdown on reporting rates, with segmented regression to measure the changes in reporting before and after the start of the pandemic in March 2020. This paper is the first of its kind to explore the impact of Covid-19 on sexual and domestic violence at more than an aggregate level, demonstrating the how Covid-19 has had a variable impact on different groups of victims, and how stay at home orders specifically have impacted on reporting rates. These data provide novel and valuable insights into the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the reporting of sexual violence and domestic abuse.

Key Messages

RASSO reporting significantly decreased and reports of DA offences significantly increased during the pandemic, with periods of lockdown significantly exacerbating these trends.

Sexual offences against children aged 13-15 and against strangers significantly decreased during the pandemic.

Key words/short phrases:

COVID-19; Rape; Serious Sexual Assault; Domestic Abuse; Police

Word count: 6,610

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic and mandatory stay-at-home ordersⁱ implemented to curb the spread of the virus have had immense impact globally, affecting physical and mental health, putting strain on healthcare systems and essential services, and disrupting daily routines (Langton, Dixon, & Farrel, 2021). Research is beginning to expound on the impact lockdown measures have had on crime and how it is reported (e.g. Ashby, 2020; Langton et al., 2021), and emerging international studies are starting to address the impact on rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO) and domestic abuse (DA), particularly where these measures have limited social interactions, increased stress, and shut down support systems (e.g. Campbell, 2020; Jetelina, Knell, & Molsberry, 2020; Piquero et al., 2020; Raj et al., 2020; Stevens et al., 2021). Where emergencies and natural disasters have historically increased the risk of sexual and domestic violence (WHO, 2020), the UN have predicted the emergence of a ‘shadow pandemic’ (UN Women, no date), and understanding the impact of Covid-19 as it unfolds on these offences is critical to mitigating against this.

Pre-pandemic reporting of RASSO and DA

Globally, one in three women have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime (WHO, 2020). Recent years have seen a stark increase in the reporting of RASSO and DA; pre-pandemic UK data shows RASSO reports quadrupling from 8,000 to 10,000 in 2012-13 to over 43,000 in the year ending March 2020 (ONS, 2021a), and a nine percent rise in police-recorded DA-related crimes in the same year (ONS, 2020). By contrast, figures recorded by the Crime Survey for England and Wales stayed roughly the same (a non-significant decrease) from the previous year; 1.6 million women and 757,000 men experienced DA in the year ending March 2020 (ONS, 2020). These figures together suggest that, while the incidents of DA remained consistent, more victims reported to the police during this period. The 2021 review of the criminal justice response to adult RASSO in England and Wales attributed the rise of RASSO reporting, in part, to the increased media coverage of significant cases and the #MeToo movement, increased third-party reporting, increased reporting of non-recent rape cases, improved confidence in the police, and a greater understanding of consent (George & Furguson, 2021).

These improvements in reporting rates are, however, overshadowed by sharp declines in RASSO charging, prosecution, and conviction rates (Shaw, 2020), demonstrating a disparity between public discourse around rights and reporting, and victims’ experiences of the criminal justice process and actual justice outcomes (George & Furguson, 2021). Victims are subject to long delays, increased ‘no further actions’ by the police and the Crown Prosecution Service, and challenges faced during investigations (George & Furguson, 2021). The year ending March 2020 saw only 3.2% of sexual

offences ending in a charge or summons in England and Wales (down from 5.2% in 2018), while over 50% of cases were not progressed due to ‘evidential difficulties’, including attrition due to victims withdrawing their support for the investigation (Home Office, 2020). Research has also implicated the role of police scepticism, over amplified expectations of false allegations, lack of confidence between victims and police, suspects’ ethnicity, rape myths and stereotypes, and over anticipation of jury decision making in increasing attrition rates (e.g. Hohl & Stanko, 2015; Kelly, Lovett, & Reagan, 2005). The Victims’ Commissioner, Dame Vera Baird, recently noted that the Crown Prosecution Service cut the number of cases they charge in order to achieve higher conviction rates (Shaw, 2020), highlighting issues throughout the criminal justice process. These difficulties associated with the criminal justice process are also seen in DA offences, with referrals of suspects by the police to the Crown Prosecution Service for a charging decision falling by 19% from the previous year (year ending 2019; ONS, 2020).

Where victims feel able to engage with the criminal justice process, they are then liable to face severe delays in their search for justice. Home Office data shows that for an offence recorded by the police within a day of its occurrence, police took an average of over 200 days to reach a charging decision in 2015-19, and this increased to almost 400 days for historical cases recorded over 10 years since the incident (George & Ferguson, 2021). That RASSO and DA victims face a plethora of challenges directly caused by these delays is well documented, including leaving them vulnerable to secondary victimisation (Kelly et al., 2005). Delays cause significant disruption to victims’ lives, impacting mental health, work and study, causing difficulties in maintaining close relationships, and preventing recovery (Burnham & Brooks-Hay, 2020). In interviews with victims on their experience with the Scottish criminal justice system (Brooks-Hay et al., 2019), those who faced delays between two and three years described feeling out of control, living ‘in limbo’, ‘dealing with the burden of hope’, and losing confidence in the criminal justice system (Burman & Brooks-Hay, 2020, p. 3).

Reporting and experiences of RASSO and DA during the pandemic

It is clear that even before the Covid-19 pandemic there were a number of challenges associated with reporting RASSO and DA offences, which needs to be acknowledged in terms of understanding the broader context in which victims are expected to report and the deep-rooted issues they face when doing so. The pandemic itself, however, is likely to have had an impact on the reporting rates of RASSO and DA, due to the potential variation in the number of offences committed during this period and the changing conditions which may hinder reporting. Initial research suggests during the Covid-19 pandemic reports of RASSO to the authorities have declined (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020), whilst calls to domestic violence helplines have soared (Grierson, 2021; ONS, 2020). Calls to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline, for instance, increased by 65% in April to June 2020 (ONS, 2020), and evidence increasingly indicates rising DA internationally (Campbell, 2020). This

disparity between helpline calls and cases dealt with by authorities is apparent across the globe. A study in Rochdale (New York State) saw a rise in interpersonal violence-related calls to a domestic violence service (from 14% to 20% of calls), and a simultaneous fall in interpersonal violence incidences dealt with by Monroe County Sheriff's Office (70 down from 82) during a three-month period while a stay-at-home order was in place, compared with the same period in 2019 (Burchard et al., 2021). While this research represents data from only one small area, it is indicative of the way in which pandemic-related stay-at-home orders may result in an increase in DA offences due to victims and perpetrators being in continuous, close proximity, combined with a fall in reporting because of the decreased opportunities for victims to report those offences. The nature of stay-at-home orders exacerbate risk factors associated with DA, including DA-related RASSO. Financial strains, loss of work, food insecurity, worsened mental health, stress, reduced social support, and alcohol abuse are well documented risk factors for violence in the home that are likely increased by measures imposed (Campbell, 2020; Jetelina et al., 2020; Sharma & Borah, 2020; WHO, 2020). DA perpetrators commonly isolate and exert control over victims and may monitor social media, internet, or phone use (Campbell, 2020), limiting victims' chances to reach out or report, while in-person methods are also restricted; stay-at-home orders limit access to essential services and family and friends that can provide respite to victims or offer opportunities to seek help (WHO, 2020). The importance of community is often stressed following emergencies, yet the nature of stay-at-home orders enforcing separation could mean greater increase in DA (Campbell, 2020), which service providers must be aware of and prepared for in such circumstances, including the Covid-19 pandemic.

While lockdown measures are likely to affect the incident and reporting rates of RASSO and DA, they are unlikely to affect everyone equally. For instance, health emergencies have been shown to heighten gender inequality and complicate gender-based power dynamics impacting violence against women (Bellizzi et al., 2020; Stevens et al., 2021). According to pre-pandemic data, women are more likely to know their perpetrator than men, with 43% of men and only 15% of women assaulted by strangers in the years ending March 2017 and March 2020 (ONS, 2021b). For both RASSO and DA, it is likely that victims and perpetrators might be confined in the same space under stay-at-home-orders (Piquero et al., 2020), which means that there is potential for women in particular to be at an increased risk of violence committed by perpetrators that they are confined with.

Emerging international studies also indicate effects vary by age. In the US, the National Sexual Assault Hotline saw a 22% rise in calls in March; half of these calls were from minors for the first time, with 79% of these reporting that they were living with the perpetrator (Piquero et al., 2020). In Kenya, child victims were more likely to be victimised in a private residence by someone known to them during the pandemic (Stevens et al., 2021). Again, when considering victim age, victim-

perpetrator relationships and the proximity of the perpetrator are an issue with regards to the rates and nature of RASSO being committed under stay-at-home-orders.

Finally, pre-existing understanding of the complexities of DA and RASSO indicate Black and Minority Ethnic victims – already more likely to experience sexual of domestic violence – may face additional hurdles under Covid-19 measures. Pre-pandemic, those of Black or Black British (2.9% of victims) or Mixed ethnicity (3.6%) were significantly more likely to experience sexual assault than White (2%), Asian (1.4%), or other (0.8%) ethnic groups in the UK (statistics from April 2017-March 2020; ONS, 2021c), and international studies have begun report the unequal impact of stay-at-home orders on those already over-represented as victims. A survey of 9,284 women conducted by the Australian Institute of Criminology, for instance, demonstrated that in three months during the pandemic, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women were four times more likely than non-indigenous women to experience physical and sexual partner violence. They were also five times more likely to experience coercive control, and those from a non-English speaking background were 1.3 times more likely to experience physical and sexual partner violence (Boxall & Morgan, 2021). These figures are combined with data from the UK to show that Black and Minority Ethnic women experience greater barriers to accessing protection and justice, such as being greeted with racialised responses by statutory organisations, and a lack of funding for specialised services (EVAWC, 2020). Amid mounting calls to helplines, Black and Minority Ethnic organisations were already underfunded by 39% pre-pandemic (Sheil, 2020, cited by the End Violence Against Women Coalition; EVAWC, 2020), and these inequalities are likely to be exacerbated during the pandemic, leading to an unequal impact on Black and Minority Ethnic victims where the ‘conducive context’ of stay-at-home orders that increase the risk of domestic and sexual abuse is harder to escape for some women (EVAWC, 2020, p. 1).

The current study

While some information is starting to emerge about the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on RASSO and DA reporting, there is still very limited information on how reporting rates are affected, whether the victims reporting and suspects committing RASSO and DA offences pre- and during the pandemic have changed, and whether stay-at-home orders during the pandemic were responsible for any specific changes in reporting. The aims of this research were to establish:

- 1) Whether RASSO and DA reporting rates changed when the Covid-19 pandemic (and associated restrictions to people’s movement) started;
- 2) Whether differences can be seen in the victims reporting and the suspects committing RASSO pre- and during Covid-19; and
- 3) Whether RASSO reporting rate decreased when stay-at-home orders were enforced.

Method

Sample and procedure

Avon and Somerset Constabulary are responsible for policing in Bristol, Somerset, and South Gloucestershire, covering 1,847 square miles and a population of 1.72 million people (accurate as of 2019/2020; HMICFRS, n.d.). Avon and Somerset Constabulary was the first research site for Project Bluestone, a government funded initiative in England and Wales to improve the way RASSO are investigated. The data used in this paper was collected as part of the wider Project Bluestone research (see the recently published end-to-end rape review in the UK for further details of this project; HM Government, 2021). The researchers provided the Constabulary with a 'wish-list' of variables in relation to RASSO and a much more limited list of variables for DA (due to the time constraints of the project) which the Constabulary extracted from their crime reporting system (NICHE). NICHE is the Avon and Somerset Constabulary system which is used by officers and administrative staff to record information about crimes (including details of the crime, victim(s), suspect(s), and witnesses) and investigations, e.g. details of arrests and material collected such as forensic evidence. Crime recording systems are unique to the forces they are used by. Avon and Somerset Constabulary provided the researchers with anonymised data consisting of every RASSO incident and incident flagged as DA recorded on their crime reporting system between January 2018 and December 2020. The RASSO dataset contained 47 variables relating to the suspectsⁱⁱ, the victims, and the offence itself. There were 8,273 unique victim identities and 6,010 unique suspect identities in the RASSO dataset. The DA dataset contained 10 variables relating to the suspects and the offences (Please see the specific offence types included in each of the datasets are provided in Appendix A). There were 29,495 unique suspect identities and no victim identities provided in the DA dataset.

For Research Question 1: The interrupted time series analysis included cases if they had a unique offence code giving a total of 10,040 RASSO and 49,689 DA unique incidents in the dataset that were reported over this three-year period. The first national lockdown with stay-at-home orders commenced in the UK on 23rd March 2020; as data were aggregated weekly, the period up to and including 29th March 2020 was considered pre-Covid-19, and March 30th onwards was coded as during Covid-19.

For Research Questions 2 and 3: Cases were excluded when they had the same offender, victim (DA dataset did not include this), and offence code, as these were identified as duplicates, resulting in a total of 10,348 RASSO and 50,906ⁱⁱⁱ DA incidents in the dataset. The periods 23rd March to 13th May and 5th November to 1st December were coded as periods of stay-at-home orders or 'during

lockdown’, as these were periods of national lockdown rather than regional lockdowns and/or tiered restrictions.

Analysis

For Research Question 1: Interrupted time series analysis was used to quantify the impact of population-level interventions on reporting rates of RASSO and DA incidents by comparing data in pre-Covid-19 and during Covid-19 periods. Interrupted time series analysis establishes an underlying trend and also provides a counterfactual, which is the expected trend in the absence of the intervention given the pre-existing trend. The time series data exhibited residual correlation, therefore, a generalised least squares regression with autoregressive terms was used to estimate the effect of lockdown on RASSO and DA reporting. Seasonality refers to variation of a fixed or known frequency, occurring at regular time intervals, such as time of year. Adjustments were made for any seasonal effect by using a harmonic term specifying two sine/cosine pairs and the 12-month period.

For Research Question 2: Chi-square testing was conducted to compare differences in reporting before and during Covid-19 for different sub-groups. Continuous variables were compared using *t*-tests. To undertake these analyses, the following additional coding was undertaken:

- Ethnicity was grouped into white and non-white^{iv};
- Relationship type was grouped into relative, partner, acquaintance, and stranger;
- Suspect and victim gender was analysed as a binary category (male/female);
- Age when offence occurred was grouped into victim 16 years old and over, 13-15 years old and under 13 years old.

Mean suspect and victim age at time of reporting was calculated separately for child victims (aged 15 and under) and adult victims (those aged 16 and over). Suspect and victim ethnicity and relationship type, as well as victim gender and age, were not available for the DA dataset. Where data were missing (which includes either the information not being known, or the information not being recorded) for these categories, this is noted.

Research Question 3: Analyses were also conducted to investigate whether rates of reporting had significantly changed in the period during Covid-19, separated by whether lockdown was imposed or not. The periods 23rd March to 13th May and 5th November to 1st December were coded as ‘during lockdown’ as these were periods of national lockdown (rather than regional lockdowns and/or tiered restrictions). All other dates in the during Covid-19 dataset that did not fall in these periods were coded as ‘not lockdown’. The two groups were compared to see if reporting rates increased/decreased

with the imposition of stay-at-home orders. To conduct these analyses, the following additional coding was undertaken:

- Type of RASSO offence was grouped into rape offence, sexual assault offence, and non-contact offence (see Appendix A for the different offences in each of these categories);
- Type of DA offence was grouped into Arson and Criminal Damage, Burglary, Miscellaneous Crimes Against Society, Non-Recordable^v, Possession of Weapons, Public Order Offences, Robbery, Sexual Offences, Theft, Vehicle Offences and Violence Against the Person (see Appendix A for the different offences in each of these categories).

All analyses were conducted using the statistical package R version 4.0.3.

Results

Table 1 shows summary data of the average monthly incidents reported and rates over the 36 months of the time series for RASSO and DA. The rest of the results of the RASSO and DA analyses have been presented separately because the data obtained for each of these offence types varied (see Method for details), and therefore the two were not directly comparable.

Table 1 about here

RASSO analyses

Research Question 1: Did RASSO reporting rates change when the Covid-19 pandemic started?

RASSO reporting decreased during lockdown from an average of 66.87 (SD = 11.32) reports per week to 55.68 (SD = 13.79) reports per week, representing a significant decrease of 16.73% ($t(155) = 5.13, p < 0.000$). The model for all RASSO incidents reported (Figure 1) indicates that after the lockdown there was evidence of a significant positive trend with an increase in RASSO reporting of 0.49 reports per week (95% CI: 0.12-0.86, $p = 0.01$).

Figure 1 about here

Research Question 2: Are there differences in the victims reporting and the suspects committing RASSO pre- and during Covid-19?

Victim type

Table 2 demonstrates the victims' age when the offence occurred. During Covid-19 the proportion of RASSO offences reported against 13-15-year-olds significantly decreased ($X_2(2) = 7.42, p = 0.025$). Table 2 also shows there was no difference for victim gender ($X_2(1) = 3.34, n.s.$) or ethnicity ($X_2(1) = 0.23, n.s.$).

Table 2 about here

Suspect type

Table 3 demonstrates the suspects named in the RASSO offences pre- and during the Covid-19 pandemic. There were no significant differences in suspect gender pre- and during Covid-19 ($X_2(1) = 0.64, n.s.$). There was also no difference for suspect ethnicity ($X_2(1) = 0.64, n.s.$). There was no significant age difference for suspects of adult victims pre- and during Covid-19 ($t(4,273) = 1.66, n.s.$) but suspects offending against children were significantly older ($t(1,958) = -3.93, p < 0.000$). There were also no significant differences in age for suspects who were adults when the incident was reported ($t(5,712) = -0.13, n.s.$) or occurred ($t(5,090) = 0.13, n.s.$) or in age for suspects who were children when the incident was reported ($t(995) = -1.24, n.s.$) or occurred ($t(919) = -1.41, n.s.$).

Table 3 about here

Victim-suspect relationship

Table 4 shows there were significant differences in relationship type ($X_2(4) = 22.98, p < 0.001$), with the proportion of stranger offences significantly decreasing during lockdown.

Table 4 about here

Research Question 3: Did RASSO reporting rates decrease during lockdown?

Table 5 demonstrates the different types of offences reported during Covid-19 periods of lockdown and during Covid-19 where lockdown was not enforced. There were no significant differences in the proportion of offence types according to whether there was a lockdown during the pandemic ($X_2(2) = 3.13, n.s.$). The mean number of RASSO offences reported in periods of lockdown compared to periods in the pandemic not under lockdown significantly decreased from 64.88 (SD = 12.39) to 50.20 (SD = 13.76) a week, ($t(155) = 3.60, p < 0.000$).

Table 5 about here

DA analyses

Research Question 1: Did DA reporting rates change when the Covid-19 pandemic started?

The mean weekly rate of DA reporting increased during Covid-19 from 299.78 (SD = 44.83) to 365.38 (SD = 45.19), representing a significant increase of 21.88% ($t(155) = -7.99, p < 0.000$). Across the three years there was also evidence of a significant underlying trend in DA reporting of an increase of 1.03 reports per week (95% CI: 0.81-1.25, $p < 0.000$; see Figure 2). The pandemic was

associated with an increase of 334 reports (95% CI: 174-494; $p < 0.000$) and the direction of the trend changed with a decrease of 2.56 reports per week (95% CI: -3.72-1.38, $p < 0.000$).

Figure 2 about here

Research Question 2: Are there differences in the victims reporting pre- and during Covid-19?

Suspect type

Table 6 outlines the suspects reported for DA offences pre- and during Covid-19. Suspect gender did not have a significant association with lockdown ($X_2(1) = 1.21, n.s.$). Suspect age was significantly different, however, suspects reported during Covid-19 were significantly older than suspects reported pre-Covid-19 ($t(50,230) = -2.16, p = 0.03$).

Table 6 about here

Research Question 3: Did DA reporting rates decrease during Covid-19 lockdowns?

The proportion of DA crime types reported during lockdown were significantly different ($X_2(10) = 19.71, p = 0.032$), specifically the proportion of reports of violence against the person and possession of weapons increased during Covid-19. Overall, the number of DA offences reported significantly increased in periods of lockdown, compared to other points in the pandemic, from 314.29 (SD = 53.70) to 348.90 (SD = 31.29) a week ($t(155) = -2.01, p = 0.046$).

Table 7 about here

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that, at a general level, the pandemic has had a significant impact on reporting of RASSO and DA offending to one police force in England. Significantly less RASSO were reported during the pandemic and significantly more DA offences were reported during the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic levels. The findings also demonstrated that these differences are augmented by periods of enforced stay-at-home orders, with significantly less RASSO reported during periods of national lockdown compared to other points in the pandemic where movement was less restricted; conversely, significantly more DA offences were reported during periods of lockdown compared to the rest of the pandemic. It is also noteworthy that the results indicate that suspect gender remained constant across time and type of violence (DA or RASSO). This finding reinforces the importance of these offences being understood as gender-based violence, in that the vast majority of the offences are perpetrated by men against women.

These findings are in line with some research that has already been published on the effects of the pandemic on crime, showing general decreases in some crime types (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020), and increases in DA crime (Campbell, 2020). This paper's findings are also in line with theories of criminology such as routine activity theory that highlight the need for a suitable target – as well as a suitably motivated offender and an environment conducive to crime – for an offence to occur (Cohen & Felson, 1979). The restrictions on people's movement that have been imposed during the pandemic, as well as the closure of several types of businesses including large parts of the night time economy, may well have made it more difficult for offenders to find suitable victims to sexually offend against. This may explain, in particular, the fact that significantly less victims aged 13 to 15 were targeted, with teenagers less likely to be unaccompanied and more likely to be at home with parents/guardians. Conversely, the close proximity of offenders and victims in domestic contexts during the pandemic, and particularly in the periods where stay-at-home orders were enforced, means an increase in opportunity for these offenders to commit DA offences. These findings are in accord with international research that has also applied this perspective to online sexual offending and victimisation while stay-at-home orders were in place. Overall rates of online sexual offending have increased during the pandemic (Interpol, 2020). In the case of online child sexual exploitation and abuse, for example, there has been an increase in material shared online, where potential victims (the suitable target) are more likely to spend more time online (the conducive environment), and have less access to guardians such as teachers and social services who play a pivotal role in identifying cases (Interpol, 2020). As in the present study, some young people are likely under greater supervision of guardians and are thereby at reduced risk (Interpol, 2020). Rates of online sexual victimisation behaviour decreased in a survey of Spanish adults where the sample primarily consisted of students and those who are young and living at home or with friends (capable guardians) while stay-at-home orders were enforced, while those living alone were more likely to engage in behaviour associated with increased risk being offended against (Gasso et al., 2021). Data and research are still emerging and knowledge is thus far limited; research applying routine activity theory across crime types suggests that crime has changed under restrictions that impact daily activities and mobility, altering the likelihood of suitable targets and motivated offenders converging in an environment conducive to crime (Langton et al., 2021, p. 2).

Another interesting aspect of these results is the contrast to previous research regarding victims' decreased capacity to contact law enforcement while stay-at-home orders are in place (Burchard et al., 2021). In our data, DA offence reporting increased at a general level during the pandemic, and also increased specifically during periods of lockdown. While it was beyond the scope of this paper to explore the reasons for this increase, it may be indicative of an escalation in offence severity that means the threshold for reporting is more commonly being met, despite the presence of the offender

that may usually deter reporting. Certainly, our finding of a significant increase the proportion of DA violence against the person and weapon possession during lockdown suggest that escalation in offence severity was occurring, however, further studies are needed to confirm this.

Whether the nature – and not just the prevalence – of DA offending has changed during the course of the pandemic raises the question as to whether there exists a directly linear relationship between the number of crimes being committed and the willingness of the victim to report that crime. However, given that RASSO and DA offences are typically underreported, there may be other factors to consider. Rape offences, for example, are more likely to be reported when it adheres to a ‘rape stereotype’, that is, if the rapist is, say, a stranger with no previous contact, or if there has been weapon use or violence (Friis-Rødel et al., 2021). The fact that significantly fewer stranger RASSO crimes were reported is in line with decreased victim availability in locations where an offender may target strangers, however, this does not tell us whether these offenders have moved to targeting other types of victims that may feel less able to report a sexual offence.

Implications for policy and practice

These results have a number of implications for policy and practice. For the DA offences in particular, the increased reporting of these types of offences is a worrying trend that is only exacerbated by stay-at-home orders, and policy should be prepared to fund services involved in tackling this type of crime, including the police, DA offender prevention and treatment programmes, and victim support organisations. While, in the UK, additional funds were allocated to victim support services in February 2021 (BBC, 2021), these were announced just short of a year after the first lockdown was implemented, and did not extend to additional funding for increased policing response.

The increase in certain types of offences is also important to consider in the context of the delays that are seen by victims reporting certain types of offences (George & Furguson, 2021; ONS, 2020; ONS, 2021a). An increase in these crimes, combined with little increase in capacity to deal with offences by the criminal justice system, and compounded by increased, pandemic related delays to the criminal justice process such as the closure of courts, will only increase these delays and make it more difficult for victims to get proper access to justice. This is at a time where victim support services are also struggling to cope with demand and are having to find new ways to support victims where face-to-face contact is not possible (Almeida, 2020).

Limitations

In line with previous studies using data from police crime reporting systems, there are significant amounts of missing data and problems with accuracy of recording as a result of human error. These

data only came from one police force area in England, and while the dataset used was substantial, it is unlikely that these results will be generaliseable to the population of England as a whole.

It is also important to acknowledge that, as noted above, despite recent increases, RASSO and RA are crime types that remain significantly underreported (Day, Jenner, & Weir, 2018; Taylor & Gassner, 2010). This means that, while conclusions can be drawn about the effect of the pandemic on reporting rates, caution should be used when using these results to understanding offence prevalence in general. When looking at the demographics of those reporting offences, it is also important to note that some victims may be less likely to report offences to the police in the first place, again suggesting that caution is required when considering how the pandemic has affected offence prevalence, and not just reporting.

Future research

In line with the noted limitations, future research should consider whether these differences in reporting rates are indicative of offence rates going up or down, or of the reporting rates changing due to facilitated or prohibited access to police services. It is also worth considering the nature of the offences being committed during the pandemic, and whether this is also affecting the reporting rates. Understanding how offender behaviour has been changed by the pandemic, including not just whether different types of victims are being targeted, but also the *modus operandi* and severity of the offence being committed, needs to be understood by law enforcement in order that they can more appropriately prevent and respond to these types of crimes.

Conclusion

This is one of the first studies to take a more detailed look at the manner in which the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the reporting rates of RASSO and DA offences, particularly during periods of lockdown. While RASSO decreased, DA increased, with periods of lockdown augmenting these trends. Notably, the gender of the suspects remained constant across both time and offence type, but there were some key differences in the types of offences being committed, such as the significant decrease of stranger RASSO during the pandemic. Practitioners should be aware of these changes in offending behaviour to ensure that appropriate resources are in place to apprehend offenders and support victims. Equally, policymakers should be cognisant of the potential increases in certain types of crime during crises such as the Covid-19 outbreak, in order to ensure that resources can be appropriated and efficiently allocated.

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Impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on reporting of rape, serious sexual offences, and domestic abuse in one English police force: Tables

Table 1. Mean reporting rates for the duration of the time series

	Monthly reporting count (SD)	Weekly reporting count (SD)	Population (millions)	Monthly reporting rate per 100,000 (SD)	Weekly reporting rate per 100,000 (SD)
RASSO	278.89 (36.38)	63.95 (12.95)	1.60	17.43 (2.27)	3.99 (0.81)
DA	1,380.00 (218.34)	316.00 (53.17)	1.60	112.75 (13.65)	19.78 (3.32)

Table 2. Age of victim at time of occurrence for offences reported pre- and during Covid-19

	RASSO reporting		
	Pre-Covid (%)	During Covid (%)	Total (%)
Age when offence occurred			
Under 13	1,562 (17.46)	102 (18.35)	1,664 (17.51)
13-15*	1,141 (12.75)	49 (8.81)	1,190 (12.52)
16 and older	6,245 (69.79)	405 (72.84)	6,650 (69.97)
Total¹	8,948	556	9,504
Victim ethnicity			
White	4,927 (88.47)	290 (87.61)	5,217 (88.42)
Non-White	642 (11.50)	41 (12.39)	683 (11.58)
Total²	5,569	331	5,900
Victim gender			
Female	8,234 (86.26)	486 (89.01)	8,720 (86.41)
Male	1,312 (13.74)	60 (10.99)	1,372 (13.59)
Total³	9,546	546	10,092

*column proportions differ significantly from each other $p < 0.05$

¹ Age was missing for 844 (8.20%) reports

² Ethnicity was missing for 4,448 (43.0%) incidents

³ Gender was missing for 247 (2.4%) incidents and recorded as indeterminate for 9 (0.1%)

Table 3. Different suspect types reported for RASSO pre- and during Covid-19

	RASSO reporting		
	Pre-Covid	During Covid	Total
Suspect ethnicity			
White (%)	3,787 (81.35)	220 (79.42)	4,007 (81.24)
Non-White (%)	868 (18.65)	57 (20.58)	925 (18.76)
Total¹	4,655	277	4,932
Suspect gender			
Female (%)	284 (4.38)	20 (5.25)	304 (4.43)
Male (%)	6,197 (95.62)	361 (94.75)	6,558 (95.57)
Total²	6,481	381	6,862
Age when offence reported³			
18+ M (SD) / range	39.59 (16.58)	39.72 (17.91)	39.60 (16.65) / 18-120
≤ 17 M (SD) / range	14.28 (2.20)	14.71 (1.79)	14.29 (2.18) / 0-17
Age when offence occurred			
18+ M (SD) / range	37.05 (14.71)	36.94 (15.25)	37.04 (14.75) / 18-100
≤ 17 M (SD) / range	13.99 (2.35)	14.51 (1.65)	14.01 (2.32) / 0-17
Suspect and victim age			
Suspects with adult victims M (SD) / range	36.77 (15.41)	35.14 (15.63)	36.66 (15.44) / 0-120***
Suspects with child victims M (SD) / range*	33.26 (21.41)	42.13 (24.44)	33.69 (21.65) / 4-120****

*Column proportions differ significantly from each other $p < 0.05$

***selected victims aged 16+ when occurred, age of suspect when reported in table

****selected victims aged ≤15 when occurred, age of suspect when reported in table

¹ Suspect ethnicity missing for 5,416 (52.35%) incidents

² Suspect gender missing for 3,485 (33.68%) incidents and recorded as indeterminate for 1 (0%)

³ One suspect was removed because their age was listed as -2. One suspect was listed as having an age of zero; the next lowest age was nine years old

Table 4. Different victim-suspect relationship types reporting RASSO pre- and during Covid-19

Relationship type	RASSO reporting		
	Pre-Covid (%)	During Covid (%)	Total (%)
Acquaintance	1,957 (42.50)	135 (42.72)	2,092 (20.22)
Relative	775 (16.83)	52 (16.46)	827 (7.99)
Partner	1,110 (24.10)	95 (30.06)	1,205 (11.64)
Stranger*	763 (16.57)	34 (10.76)	797 (7.70)
Total¹	4,605	316	4,921 (47.56)

*Column proportions differ significantly from each other $p < 0.05$

¹ Relationship type was missing for 4,995 (47.9%) incidents and recorded as 'not known' for 472 (4.56%)

Table 5. Different types of RASSO offences reported pre- and during Covid-19

	RASSO reporting		
	Covid – not lockdown (%)	During Covid lockdown (%)	Total (%)
Offence type			
Rape offence	4,697 (47.99)	260 (46.35)	4,957 (47.90)
Sexual assault	5,060 (51.70)	297 (52.94)	5,357 (51.77)
Non-contact	30 (0.31)	4 (0.71)	34 (0.33)
Total	9,787	561	10,348 (100)

Table 6. Different suspect types reported for DA offences pre- and during Covid-19

	DA reporting		
	Pre-Covid	During Covid	Total
Suspect gender			
Male (%)	35,571 (76.14)	3,013 (75.36)	38,584 (76.08)
Female (%)	11,149 (23.86)	985 (24.64)	12,134 (23.92)
Total¹	46,720	3,998	50,718
Suspect age: M (SD) / Range ²	34.56 (13.01)	35.02 (13.17)	34.59 (13.02) / 0-98

¹ Suspect gender was missing for 179 (0.4%) cases and recorded as indeterminate for 9 (0%)

² Four (0%) suspects had an age of zero and a further 36 were aged < 10 (0.1%)

Table 7. Different types of DA offences reported pre- and during Covid-19

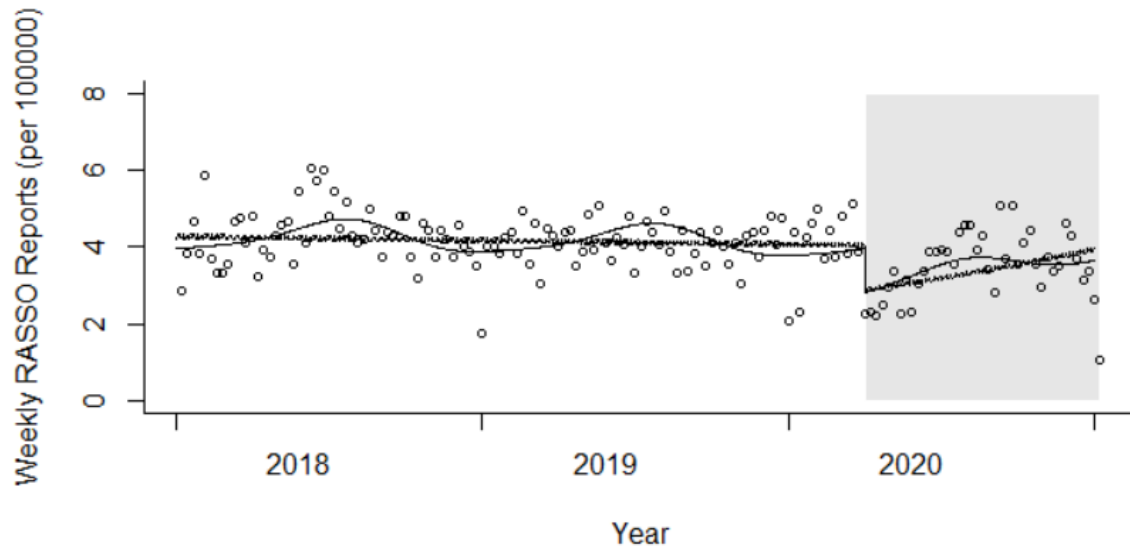
	DA Reporting		
	Covid – not lockdown (%)	During Covid lockdown (%)	Total
Offence group			
Arson and criminal damage	3,350 (7.15)	257 (6.41)	3,607 (7.09)
Burglary	360 (0.77)	22 (0.55)	382 (0.75)
Miscellaneous crimes against society	491 (1.05)	45 (1.12)	536 (1.05)
Non-recordable	93 (0.20)	3 (0.07)	96 (0.19)
Possession of weapons*	51 (0.11)	11 (0.27)	62 (0.12)
Public order offences	2,730 (5.83)	218 (5.44)	2,948 (5.80)
Robbery	85 (0.18)	5 (0.12)	90 (0.18)
Sexual offences	1,717 (3.67)	146 (3.64)	1,863 (3.66)
Theft	1,384 (2.96)	116 (2.89)	1,500 (2.95)
Vehicle offences	324 (0.69)	25 (0.62)	349 (0.69)
Violence against the person*	36,248 (77.40)	3,162 (78.85)	39,410 (77.51)
Total¹	46,833	4,010	50,843

*column proportions differ significantly from each other $p < 0.05$

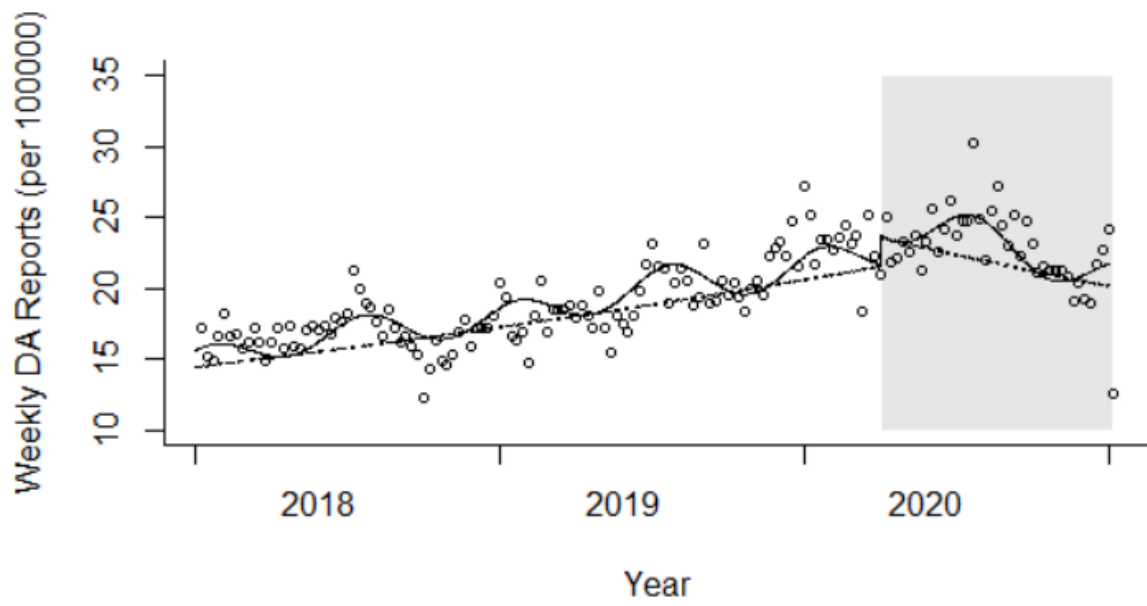
¹ There were 13 incidents missing an offence group category. Additionally, offences recorded as crime related incidents ($n = 11$; 0%), drug offences ($n = 37$; 0.1%), and fraud ($n = 2$; 0%) were excluded from the analysis due to expected cell counts < 5

Impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on reporting of rape, serious sexual offences, and domestic abuse in one English police force: Figures

Figure 1. A graph to demonstrate the RASSO reporting rates pre- and during Covid-19



Model adjusted for seasonality. Dashed line: predicted trend based on the seasonally adjusted regression model. Solid line: de-seasonalised trend



Model adjusted for seasonality. Dashed line: predicted trend based on the seasonally adjusted regression model. Solid line: de-seasonalised trend

ⁱ Stay-at-home orders, or ‘lockdown measures’, in the UK refer to laws introduced in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, including local and national restrictions on movement, gatherings, and businesses (Brown & Kirk-Wade, 2021, p. 3). Such measures are a legal concept under the legislation: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020. Although this statutory instrument was amended multiple times throughout the three lockdowns in the UK between March 2020 and April 2021 and was later repealed, it provides the legal basis for the key lockdown restrictions. At the strictest level, restrictions included: people prohibited from leaving their home or staying away from home overnight without a ‘reasonable excuse’; a ban on gatherings over two people aside from for exempted purposes; hospitality closures and high street business closures; and international travel bans for those without a ‘reasonable excuse’ (Brown & Kirk-Wade, 2021, p. 3). Regulations were made that gave the police new powers to enforce these laws, whereby they could issue Fixed Penalty Notices for those suspected of breaking restrictions without reasonable excuse (Brown & Kirk-Wade, 2021).

ⁱⁱ Because data were taken from the policing reporting system NICHE, the dataset included the details of people who were identified as suspects of, but not necessarily convicted of, RASSO and DA offences. This may have included suspects that were originally considered as having perpetrated a crime, but who were subsequently eliminated. The term ‘suspects’ was used here in recognition of this fact.

ⁱⁱⁱ There are more cases for research questions 2 and 3 than for research question 1 because the analysis used for research question 1 is for unique reports – so one incident report including two offenders = one case, whereas the analysis used for research questions 2 and 3 are for anything that is not a duplicate – so one incident including two offenders = two cases.

^{iv} Ethnicity was grouped in this manner due to the small number of non-white victims and suspects.

^v According to the ACRO Criminal Records Office, a recordable offence is ‘an offence for which the police are required to keep a record. Generally speaking, these are crimes for which an individual could be sentenced to a term of imprisonment or they have otherwise been made recordable by statute. The term also includes a number of non-imprisonable offences for example begging and illegal taxi touting. The police are not able to take or retain the biometric information of an individual who is arrested for an offence which is not recordable.’ (ACRO Criminal Records Office, no date).