



NCA

National Crime Agency

Emerging new threat in online dating

Initial trends in internet dating-initiated serious sexual assaults

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The Emerging Threat

The National Crime Agency's Serious Crime Analysis Section (SCAS) has identified a significant increase in the number of reports to UK police forces about serious sexual assaults carried out by strangers that have been initiated through online dating. Reports indicate that these offences took place during the first face-to-face meeting between the victim and the offender after they initially met online. This emerging threat appears to be a result of the increasing popularity of online dating – including free and subscription services, dating websites, apps and 'hook up' services- combined with the behaviours and expectations fostered by an online environment.

Early analysis indicates that the online dating phenomenon has produced a new type of sexual offender. These offenders are less likely to have criminal convictions, but instead exploit the ease of access and arm-chair approach to dating websites. This is aided by potential victims not thinking of them as strangers, but someone they have got to know.

In many ways, the advent of dating web sites has made finding relationships a more convenient, easier and potentially less daunting affair for many. One in three relationships now start online¹ and 7 million UK users are registered with online dating sites². The Online Dating Association (ODA) predicts that the number of internet dating sites and the number of individuals using them will rise³ and a similar increase in the use of dating apps and hook up sites is also predicted.

In general, these online dating platforms offer relatively safe and positive opportunities for individuals to meet prospective partners. However, the observed increase in offences arising from them is still one that is substantial. Its significance strengthens when considered within the context of the levels of underreporting of rape offences, which is generally accepted at being only 17%⁴ of the true figure.

¹ 'Online Dating UK', Mintel Group, January 2015

² 'Online Dating UK', Mintel Group, January 2015

³ 'Dating on the Move'. Opportunities and challenges for the online dating industry' September 2015

⁴ Sourced from Crime Survey England and Wales (ONS 2015)

The danger is that, although this offender is a stranger, the online disinhibition effect means the victim may not view him as a stranger. Preliminary analysis also reveals that this rapist is less likely than other stranger rapists to have criminal convictions. Furthermore those previous convictions that do exist typically tend to be for less serious offences, such as minor road traffic offences. This indicates that these rapists exhibit lower levels of criminality prior to their sexual offending. Behavioural experts say people often feel they are a good judge of character and think they would recognise a rapist when they see him. This analysis reminds us that sexual offenders come in many guises.

By highlighting the identified behaviours and expectations associated with online dating, the NCA wishes to both encourage individuals to protect themselves when meeting someone in person for the first time and to deter would be offenders from engaging in these types of crimes.

Key Statistics

The NCA's Serious Crime Analysis Section (SCAS) is a national service supporting investigations into serious sexual offences by strangers. They receive relevant case files from police forces across the UK and analyse the information.

SCAS analysts flagged an increase in the number of serious sexual offences linked to online dating websites and apps and requested all police forces in the UK provide their data on the offence type to investigate this emerging trend. Based on a five year trawl of data from all forces, who were able to provide this information (two thirds of the UK's police forces), it was found there had been a six-fold increase in online dating initiated sexual offences from 2009 to 2014⁵

Following this scoping exercise, SCAS carried out in-depth analysis of its own dataset of offences occurring between 2003 – 2015 which had been initiated through online dating. This analysis of data⁶ showed:

- The victims in 85% of these offences were female, 15% were male.
- 42% of female victims were in the 20-29 age groups, whilst 24% were from the 40-49 age category.
- 25% of the male victims fall within the 15-19 age group.
- Communications of a sexual nature prior to the first meeting in person were reported in more than half of cases where this data had been recorded.
- In 43% of cases where the information was available, the first face-to-face meeting between the victim and the offender took place within one week of their initial contact online.
- In 41% of cases, the victim and offender started their date at a residence.
- Ultimately, 72% of offences were committed at the victim's or offender's residence.
- 49% of people suspected of committing a sexual offence facilitated through online dating sites have a previous conviction compared to an overall figure from previous research showing that 84% of stranger rapists would be expected to have a previous conviction.

⁵ 33 offences in 2009, 39 in 2010, 62 in 2011, 79 in 2012, 145 in 2013 and 184 in 2014

⁶ Data obtained from the ViCLAS database of the Serious Crime Analysis Section, July 2015

- In the financial year 2014/15, SCAS reviewed twice as many cases of internet dating sexual offences compared to bogus taxi driver sexual offences. Internet dating cases have overtaken the amount of burglary-initiated offences dealt with by SCAS in this year.

Behaviours & Expectations

The substantial rise in sexual offences initiated through online dating can be attributed not only to the surge of popularity that online dating has seen, but also to behaviours and expectations brought about in the circumstances of two individuals initially meeting and interacting in an online environment. Behavioural experts, guided by specialist officers in SCAS, have carried out extensive analysis of this emerging phenomenon and worked with getsafeonline.com to provide safety advice for online daters, based upon an enhanced understanding of the dynamics of online dating initiated rape cases. This work took a broad perspective, covering online dating websites, 'hook-up' sites and mobile applications, which included both free and subscription services. Over 40 different sites and applications featured in the sample.

Increased trust and intimacy

Online relationships tend to progress more quickly than those offline, as people feel freer in the anonymous online world to be more open and emotionally honest. Research has shown that asking questions, looking at photographs, checking social media profiles and even using emoticons also increase feelings of trust and closeness with the other person. The result of this, however, is that individuals may then have a sense of being at a more advanced stage in the relationship by the time they meet the other person face-to-face and no longer regard them as a stranger, even though it is the first time they are meeting.

The higher level of trust can lead to individuals taking more risks than they otherwise would, thereby putting themselves in more vulnerable situations.

Much of the current safety messaging aimed at users of online dating advises them to meet in public places; however, the data analysed indicates that many still choose to meet in private. Of further concern is that despite others following the current guidance of meeting in public initially, many choose to move onto somewhere private during the first meeting.

Expectations

A key theme identified by the research is that offenders have increased expectations of sexual activity at initial face-to-face meetings and these expectations differed from those of the victim. It also indicated that offenders were unwilling to accept that expectations differed.

A number of aspects specific to online dating are found to influence an offender's expectations:

- perceived investment
- increased sense of intimacy
- previous experience of dating
- online flirting or sexually explicit messages/disclosures
- rapid transition to face-to-face meeting
- invitation to the other party's residence.

Online anonymity allows a person to behave in a way that they may not behave face-to-face, and this can lead to increased flirting and sexual communications prior to meeting. Consequently, these factors bring about heightened feelings of trust, intimacy and affection that not only lead people to decide to meet sooner, but may also result in misdirected expectations around, for example, what will happen between them at that first meeting.

It is important to remember that many people use online dating for the purpose of meeting for sex, which may also result in assumptions about the other person, as well as about the sexual activity that may take place. However, these assumptions may not be held by both parties and regardless of the circumstances, sexual activity against someone's will is a crime.

Individual decision-making and a person's commitment or persistence with regards to a relationship has been shown to be affected by past investment. For example, the time spent communicating online or money spent on travelling to meet or on the other person, may foster expectations that the relationship will progress even more rapidly upon meeting, or may even create the attitude that an individual has a right to get what they want from that meeting.

Analysis of the available data indicates that managing expectations may be key. A good plan of action for a first face-to-face meeting following an online introduction is to keep it brief and in a public place, ensure both parties are aware of this plan and stick to it.

Coercion and persuasion

Research has shown that offenders have frequently used persuasion, coercion and perseverance to get victims (who were often initially resistant or indifferent) to agree to a first date early on. It also shows that some of the coercive aspects of offenders' behaviour often extended to the organisation of, and agreement on, the location of the meeting in terms of whether this was a private or public place.

Victims have been noted to frequently recall offenders making justifications for a return to a private residence.

Protecting & Preventing

By highlighting the identified behaviours and expectations associated with online dating, the NCA wishes to both encourage individuals to protect themselves when meeting someone in person for the first time and to deter would be offenders from engaging in these types of crimes.

In conjunction with behavioural experts and victim support organisations, the NCA have worked with Get Safe Online to develop safety messaging aimed at members of the public and, in particular, users of online dating websites. It is tailored to address these behaviours and expectations. The messaging:

- aims to empower users to avoid feeling pressured into meeting prematurely in person.
- advocates creating and adhering to a date plan that promotes independence and considers the location, timing, duration of date and method of transportation. Make these intentions explicit to the other person in advance, thereby managing their expectations prior to the first meeting and empowering the individual to avoid being coerced into changing their plans during the meeting itself.
- emphasises the need to both meet in public and stay in public, as well as to incorporate this as part of a wider date plan, treating the first date as a short screening process.
- raises awareness of the fact that online interaction is not the same as meeting face-to-face and it is important to treat the first date as a fresh start. Although there may have been extensive or intimate online interaction, the other person is still a stranger.
- aims to manage expectations by warning that the other person may be more cautious than they were online, as well as empowering individuals to avoid being pressured into taking the meeting further than they want.

To learn how best to protect oneself during any online activity, the public are asked to follow the link www.getsafeonline.org/protecting-yourself/online-dating where the key tips for online daters can be viewed in full.

Reporting

Whilst this report has identified a significant increase in the number of internet-initiated rape offences, the levels of underreporting in the UK in relation to sexual assault (as mentioned previously within this report) means that the real level of incidents is unknown.

The very nature of these offences could sometimes lead to particular barriers that may dissuade victims from reporting offences. It is important that victims recognise that having engaged in sexual conversations with the offender online or going willingly to their residence on the first date does not make the sexual assault their fault. Sexual assault is a crime and all victims are encouraged to report it to the police who will take them seriously and investigate. It is imperative that victims of internet initiated sexual assaults feel empowered to report the perpetrators, regardless of the circumstances leading up to their meeting, and to know that they will be supported and listened to.

As previously mentioned, this new type of sexual offender - who initiates contact through online dating - is far less likely than previous offenders to have criminal convictions and may never previously have come to notice of police.

The National Crime Agency is working alongside every police force in the country and together with them, wants the clear message to go out to victims of this type of crime that regardless of the circumstances, sexual activity against your will is a crime.

As such, victims of sexual offences are directed towards www.derbyshire.police.uk/sash. This website provides readily accessible information that aims to help victims of sexual assault. It hopes to help individuals make informed decisions about next steps in seeking support and to empower them with a view to ultimately increasing levels of reporting.

Pursuing Offenders

The Serious Crime Analysis Section (SCAS) of the National Crime Agency supports all police forces across the UK in their work to stop serious sexual offenders.

The NCA brings together behavioural specialists, crime analysts and data experts to help spot emerging serial patterns among sexual offences at the earliest opportunity. This vital intelligence assists forces in the early apprehension of rapists and sexual offenders. The NCA's team of highly trained specialist analysts have access to the most extensive information on these crimes which can be used to profile different offender and crime types.

Annex A – Internet Dating Offence Statistics

The data used to examine the nature of online dating initiated stranger rape or serious sexual assault cases have been drawn from the National Crime Agency’s SCAS database (ViCLAS). 163 cases were identified that had been coded and were available for analysis. These occurred between 2003 and July 2015. It is important to note that there would have been other offences of this nature that would have occurred during this period but were either; not fully coded or may not have been sent into the department from UK police forces for analysis.

When comparing these online dating offences to other types of stranger rape or serious sexual assault cases a sample of 953 cases were taken from the same database that occurred in 2014/15, additionally 5186 named suspects (from between 2003 and 2015) were identified and used for previous conviction comparison.

It is accepted that the 163 offences represents a relatively small sample and is operational data in relation to known suspects. However, more academic research will be carried out to further validate these emerging operational findings.

Victim age and gender

Table 1. A breakdown of the ages and gender of the victims where the offence was initiated through online dating.

| Victim Age group | No. of Male victims | No. of Female victims | Total no. of victims | % victims in age group |
|------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| 15 years | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| 16 to 19 years | 5 | 15 | 20 | 12 |
| 20 to 24 years | 4 | 34 | 38 | 23 |
| 25 to 29 years | 4 | 25 | 29 | 18 |
| 30 to 34 years | 2 | 15 | 17 | 10 |
| 35 to 39 years | 2 | 10 | 12 | 7 |
| 40 to 44 years | 2 | 19 | 21 | 13 |
| 45 to 49 years | 1 | 14 | 15 | 9 |
| 50 to 54 years | 2 | 3 | 5 | 3 |
| 55 to 59 years | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Unknown | 1 | 2 | 3 | 2 |
| Total | 24 | 139 | 163 | |
| % victims gender | 15 | 85 | | |

Communications prior to meeting

Table 2: In online communications prior to meeting, where known, the percentage of cases where that communication included sexual content.

| Communication of a sexual nature prior to meeting? | % cases |
|--|---------|
| Yes | 54 |
| No | 46 |

In 52 cases the communications prior to the meeting was not provided in detail.

Time from online contact to first meeting

Table 3: The length of time between the initial online contact and the first face to face meeting.

| Time span | % cases |
|--------------------------|---------|
| Within 1 day | 20 |
| Between 1 day and a week | 23 |
| More than one week | 57 |

In 46 cases this detail was not provided.

Offence locations

Table 4: The number of victims who first met or who were assaulted in a residence.

| Location | % victims who met at a residence | % victims were assaulted at a residence |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|---|
| Residence (victims or offenders) | 41 | 72 |

Named suspects and previous convictions

For the 163 cases for which full analysis was conducted there were 152 named suspects identified.

Table 5: The number and percentage of named suspects who had a conviction prior to the online dating offence.

| Conviction prior to offence | No. of suspects | % Suspects |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|------------|
| No | 76 | 51 |
| Yes | 74 | 49 |
| Total | 150 | |

It was not possible to establish this information for two individuals.

Types of previous convictions

Of the 74 named suspects who have a previous conviction (above) the nature of those convictions are shown in the table below. The same suspect can have more than one type of conviction so may appear against more than one category. The suspects for online dating cases have been compared against the 5186 named suspects entered on ViCLAS for stranger rapes and serious sexual assaults, who also had a conviction prior to their offence.

Table 6: Previous convictions for suspects of online dating offences compared to suspects of other types of rape and sexual offences.

| Offence type | <i>% of online dating suspects</i> | <i>% of all named suspects</i> |
|--|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Drugs Offences | 27 | 29 |
| Firearms/Shotguns/Offensive Weapons | 11 | 20 |
| Fraud and related Offences | 16 | 15 |
| Miscellaneous Offences - Harassment | 7 | 5 |
| Miscellaneous Offences - Minor Road Traffic | 43 | 38 |
| Offences Against Property | 31 | 37 |
| Offences Against The Person (incl. murder and assault) | 35 | 46 |
| Offences Related To Immigration | 1 | 1 |
| Offences Related To Police/Courts/Prisons (incl Breach of court order and bail offences) | 32 | 49 |
| Public Disorder And Rioting | 18 | 34 |
| Sexual Offences | 7 | 14 |
| Theft Offences - Burglary | 14 | 27 |
| Theft Offences - Robbery | 5 | 16 |
| Theft Offences - Theft | 43 | 47 |

Comparison of crime types

The offences initiated via online dating sites were compared against other crime types for the last financial year.

Table 7: The percentage of offences that were initiated through online dating compared to rapes or serious sexual offences that were committed by a bogus taxi driver, or as part of a burglary at the victims residence.

| Financial year – offence occurred | <i>% Bogus taxi drivers</i> | <i>% Burglary</i> | <i>% Online Dating</i> |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| 2014/ 2015 | 2.3 | 3.6 | 4.5 |

NB: Burglary offences include any offence that has occurred in the victims residence where the offender forced entry or gained entry through an insecure door or window regardless of whether property was stolen.