

Serious Crime Analysis Section

**Sexual offences initiated via online dating
submitted to SCAS
2003 to 2021**

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V1.1**

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Introduction

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 with the overarching objective of identifying serial sex offenders at the earliest opportunity.

In 2016, SCAS highlighted a trend identified by their Analysts relating to an increase in the number of serious sexual offences linked to online dating websites and apps. This current report provides an update, showing that although no longer increasing in frequency, offences occurring after contact has been made through online dating remain an issue, and have continued throughout the recent lockdown restrictions imposed as part of the UK's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This report should be read in conjunction with the 2016 report¹.

Key statistics

Analysis of SCAS data² for April 2003 – March 2021 showed:

- The victims in 83% of these offences were female, 17% were male; this is a slight change from the previous report with a 2% increase in the proportion of male victims.
- Although the largest proportion of female victims (41%) were in the 20-29 age groups, there has been a substantial increase in the proportion aged 19 or under since the 2016 report (22% compared with 12%).
- 31% of the male victims were aged 19 or under, an increase from 25%.
- Similar to the data reported in 2016, in 42% of cases, the victim and offender started their date at a residence.
- Ultimately, 74% of offences were committed at the victim's or offender's residence.
- 47% of suspects for these offences have a previous conviction, compared with 54% of all named suspects on the SCAS database.
- In the financial year 2020/21, SCAS reviewed nearly 10 times as many cases of internet dating sexual offences compared to bogus taxi driver sexual offences. Internet dating cases were also more prevalent than burglary-initiated offences dealt with by SCAS in this year. However, it is anticipated that the pandemic will have influenced this, with lockdown measures impacting these other forms of offending.

¹ NCA (2016). Emerging new threat in online dating: Initial trends in internet dating-initiated serious sexual assaults. London.

² Data obtained from the ViCLAS database of the Serious Crime Analysis Section, July 2021

Internet Dating Offence Statistics

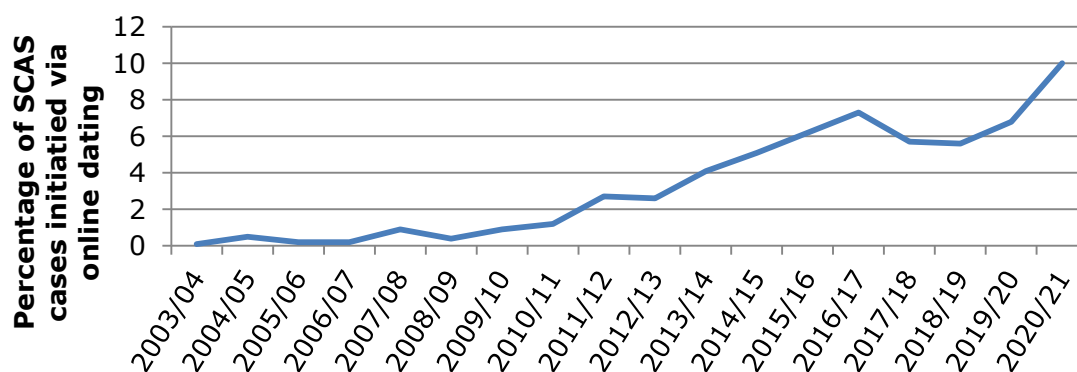
SCAS collect stranger rapes and sexual offences from across the United Kingdom. SCAS codes the behaviour that occurs within these offences onto the ViCLAS database, in order to identify behavioural similarities.

671³ cases occurring between 01 April 2003 and 31 March 2021 that had been initiated on a dating site/app, were identified and available for analysis. It is important to note that in order for cases to be included on the database they must first be reported to the police and then submitted to SCAS. All cases that are submitted to SCAS are prioritised based on the risk factors identified within the offences, hence some lower risk cases have not yet been added to ViCLAS. Therefore there may be some offences of this nature that occurred during this period which are not included within these statistics.

Proportion of cases initiated through a dating site or app

The graph below shows the proportion of SCAS cases which were initiated via online dating. Since the issue was first highlighted by SCAS in 2016, the proportion of offences linked with online dating has been relatively stable, until 2020/21. However, it should be borne in mind that the figures from this year have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, as many offences that are normally linked to the night-time economy⁴ ceased to occur. Additionally, there was less opportunity to socialise and meet new people, and it is therefore deemed likely that this would have led individuals to making increased use of online sites to do so. It is too early to determine if this trend will continue post-pandemic.

Graph 1. Percentage of SCAS cases initiated via online dating (N=671).



³ Statistics run 27 July 2021.

⁴ The term night-time economy is used to describe a wide range of activities such as going out for dinner or to the cinema/theatre, attending pubs/clubs and other events.

Victim age and gender

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

Victim Age group	% of male victims	% of female victims	% overall victims in age group
15 years or less	7	3.2	3.8
16 to 19 years	23.7	19	19.8
20 to 24 years	21.9	23.4	23.2
25 to 29 years	14.9	17.9	17.4
30 to 34 years	11.4	11.5	11.5
35 to 39 years	6.1	6.9	6.8
40 to 44 years	6.1	6.4	6.4
45 to 49 years	4.4	5.3	5.2
50 to 54 years	2.6	3.4	3.2
55 to 59 years	0	1.2	1
Over 60 years	0	0.5	0.4
Unknown	1.8	1.1	1.2
<i>Overall gender split</i>	<i>16.8</i>	<i>83.2</i>	

It should be noted that for the 671 offences there were 677 victims, as several crimes involved more than one victim.

Table 2: A breakdown of the age and gender of the victims across all sexual offences⁵.

Victim Age group	% of male victims	% of female victims	% overall victims in age group
15 years or less	18.5	15.7	15.9
16 to 19 years	20.2	25	24.6
20 to 24 years	20.5	21.7	21.6
25 to 29 years	11.2	12.3	12.2
30 to 34 years	8.4	7.9	8
35 to 39 years	6	5.8	5.8
40 to 44 years	4.4	4.1	4.1
45 to 49 years	3.4	2.6	2.6
50 to 54 years	2.1	1.7	1.7
55 to 59 years	1.3	0.8	0.9
Over 60 years	1.6	1.5	1.5
Unknown	2.4	0.9	1
<i>Overall gender split</i>	<i>6.9</i>	<i>93.1</i>	

⁵ Provided for context. All rapes, attempted rapes or sexual assaults held in the ViCLAS database were considered; n=21,362. All offenders were unknown to their victims (coded as strangers or clients of sex workers).

Offence locations

Table 3: The number of victims who first met or who were assaulted in a residence when the offence was initiated through online dating.

Location	% victims who met at a residence	% victims were assaulted at a residence
Residence (victims or offenders)	42	74

Named suspects and previous convictions

For the 671 cases, there were 529 named suspects identified. Of these suspects, 47% had a previous conviction. This compares with 54% of all named suspects on the database⁶.

Of those named suspects who have a previous conviction (where the information is available), a review was completed of the nature of those prior convictions, 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 offending history of suspects for online dating cases have been compared against the prior conviction information for all named suspects entered on ViCLAS.

Table 4: The types of previous convictions that named suspects have, comparing those accused of an online dating offence to other named suspects of rapes and sexual offences.

Offence type	% of online dating suspects	% of all named suspects
Drugs Offences	25	30
Firearms/Shotguns/Offensive Weapons	16	21
Fraud and related Offences	14	15
Miscellaneous Offences - Harassment	11	7
Miscellaneous Offences - Minor Road Traffic	43	39
Offences Against Property	35	39
Offences Against The Person (incl. murder and assault)	53	62
Offences Related To Immigration	0	0
Offences Related To Police/Courts/Prisons (incl Breach of court order and bail offences)	39	50
Public Disorder And Rioting	27	35
Sexual Offences	12	19
Theft Offences - Burglary	11	26
Theft Offences - Robbery	7	16
Theft Offences - Theft	35	47

⁶ Provided for context. All rapes, attempted rapes or sexual assaults held in the ViCLAS database were considered; n=21,362. All offenders were unknown to their victims (coded as strangers or clients of sex workers).

Comparison of crime types

The offences initiated via online dating sites were compared against other crime types for 2020/21. As highlighted above, it is anticipated that various forms of sexual offending, including the number of bogus taxi driver and burglary-type offences, will have been impacted to differing degrees by the pandemic, due to lockdown restrictions.

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

Financial year – offence occurred	% Bogus taxi drivers	% Burglary*	% Online Dating
2020/2021	1.2	6.1	10.0

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

Protecting & Preventing

Preventing sexual violence is a priority for the Government⁷ and for SCAS. 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 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

⁷ HMG (2021) Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy.

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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 <http://www.getsafeonline.org/protecting-yourself/online-dating> where the key tips for online daters can be viewed in full.

Reporting

Whilst this report has indicated continued concern relating to the number of internet dating related rape offences, the level of underreporting in the UK in relation to sexual assault⁸ means that the real level of incidents is unknown. It is also suspected that the pandemic may have resulted in increased levels of underreporting.⁹

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 dating related 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.

Readily accessible information for victims of sexual assault, however recent, can be found at: <https://sexualabusesupport.campaign.gov.uk>. 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.

⁸ The latest Crime Survey for England and Wales indicated that only 16% of assaults were reported to the police (ONS, 2021)

⁹ Reported for certain types of offences, including Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (Interpol, 2020)