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Citation: Obolenskaya, P., Fadeeva, A., Barton, E. R., Walker, A., Snowdon, L. C. & McManus, S. (2025). Temporal trends in prevalence of violence in Wales: analysis of a national victimisation survey. *Public Health*, 245, 105775. doi: 10.1016/j.puhe.2025.105775

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Permanent repository link: <https://city-ref-test.eprints-hosting.org/id/eprint/35265/>

Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2025.105775>

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Short Communication

Temporal trends in prevalence of violence in Wales: analysis of a national victimisation survey

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Violence

Cross-sectional studies

Public health

Public health Wales

Crime survey for England and Wales

Violent crime

ABSTRACT

Objectives: Monitoring violence trends and distribution is key for a public health approach to violence prevention. However, national survey estimates for Wales have not been disaggregated from those for England and Wales combined. We therefore aim to examine whether the trends in violence in Wales differ from trends in England. **Study design:** Descriptive analysis of repeated cross-sectional data.

Methods: Using data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales, a nationally representative household victimisation survey, for years 2002–2020, we compare trends in prevalence of violence victimisation between Wales and England, for all adults and by gender.

Results: Country-disaggregated data shows that the prevalence of violence was generally lower in Wales than in England for the first decade of the century. Analyses by gender shows further disparities between countries. Males in Wales and England and females in England experienced a decline in violence victimisation between 2002 and 2015. However, no decline in violence was evident for females in Wales until after 2016.

Conclusions: Given differences in prevalence and trends in violence between Wales and England, relying on estimates based on the countries combined to inform strategic planning in Wales is problematic. Using Wales-specific estimates and trends in violence is therefore recommended.

1. Introduction

Violence is a public health problem, with significant individual, economic, health and social care costs.^{1,2}

Monitoring violence trends and distribution is a key step of a public health approach to violence prevention, as it facilitates identification of individual and community risk and protective factors and hotspot areas to inform interventions and assess the effectiveness of prevention efforts.³

Health service data in England and Wales are often used to monitor temporal change in violence prevalence.⁴ However, administrative data relies on service contact and recording practices, while nationally representative surveys, such as the Crime Survey for England and Wales

(CSEW), record information on violence even when services were not sought. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) uses CSEW to estimate prevalence of violent crime and changes over time, publishing these for England and Wales combined. Therefore, there is a need to examine whether trends in violence in Wales differ from trends in England, which is the aim of this report.

When CSEW is used in research, estimates for Wales are subsumed within the combined estimates for England and Wales due to disproportionality in the adult population between Wales and England. Whilst there are commonalities in violence prevention approaches across countries, particularly through Home Office oversight of the Serious Violence Duty and Violence Reduction Unit programme, there are divergences in demography, culture, education, economics,

This article is part of a special issue entitled: Violence as a Public Health issue published in Public Health.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2025.105775>

Received 17 December 2024; Received in revised form 8 May 2025; Accepted 9 May 2025

Available online 29 May 2025

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legislation, governance, and policies on violence prevention.^{5,6} There have also been pioneering initiatives, devolved health and social services, and unique programmes that have had an impact on violence prevention in Wales.⁵ The countries warrant disaggregated examination of violence, as similarity in prevalence and temporal trends cannot be presumed.

This report aims to a) present temporal trends separately for Wales and England, drawing on directly comparable survey data, and b) examine whether overall and gender-disaggregated trends for the two countries differ.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design and respondents

The CSEW is an annual victimisation survey of a representative sample (16 and over) of household residents in England and Wales. We draw on all adult data collected from 2002 to 2020, with an achieved sample of approximately 30,000 to 48,000 individuals (see supplementary tables for exact sample sizes). The CSEW has been administered on a financial year basis, taking place between April and March each year (e.g. data collected between the beginning of April 2018 and the end of March 2019 is denoted here as 2019). While the COVID-19 pandemic halted the data collection in mid-March 2020, the majority of planned data collection for that year was achieved before the disruption, resulting in only a minor impact on the sample.^{7,8}

We use data from the main victimisation module, collected face-to-face. Adults are asked about experience of victimisation in the last 12-months. Detailed information is collected about each event, which ONS subsequently categorises into a series of criminal offence codes. Whether the events pass the criminal threshold is decided post-interview by trained coders.

2.2. Measures

To measure exposure to violence, we derived a binary ‘combined violence’ indicator, which includes experience of any one or more of the following criminal offences and/or experience of force.

- ONS official measure of *violent crime*: offences of serious/other wounding, common/attempted assault, serious/other wounding with sexual motive.
- Sexual crime: offences of rape, attempted rape, and indecent assault.
- Robbery (crime): defined as an incident of theft where the amount of force or threat used was exceeding what was required to seize the property. Incidents of robbery were included in the ONS measure of violent crime up until 2013, when they were removed due to their primary purpose being theft. However, the violent nature of robberies justifies their inclusion within violence.
- Offences of threats (crime): threats to kill/assault, sexual threats, other threats or intimidation that meet a criminal threshold.
- Force: offences which involve a use or threat of force (even if the incident was recorded as a non-violent offence code by the ONS).

ONS priority coding practices, which assign a single principal offence code to each criminal event where more than one crimes took place, mean that some violent offences are categorized under non-violent offence codes, and so are not included in published estimations of violence.^{9,10} We follow methodology of previous work¹ on recategorising offence codes in the CSEW,^{9,10} and use questions within the survey to identify incidents where force was used or threatened to recategorise

some of the ONS non-violent offences into violent. This, to a degree, bypasses ONS’ hierarchical priority coding of offences. Our ‘combined violence’ measure therefore includes a wider range of experiences of violence than the ONS official violent crime measure.

Note that reports on experience of domestic and sexual violence within CSEW data (not related to criminal offences) collected in the self-completion module are not included in our analysis.

Information on country of residence (England or Wales) is based on participants’ postal address, and sex – on self-reported binary sex indicator (male/female).

2.3. Statistical analysis

The analysis in this report focuses on the combined measure of violence, analysis by other violence indicators are presented in the Data Supplement.

We present prevalence of combined violence for each year, for England and Wales, and by sex (Fig. 1 below and Tables 6 and 7 in Data Supplement). Tables 2–7 and Fig. 1 in the Data Supplement also show prevalence for different overlapping violence indicators (ONS violent crime; ONS violent crime & sexual crime & robberies; threats; and force).

A series of logistic regressions were used to test for differences in combined violence prevalence between Wales and England in each survey year (Table 1 in Data Supplement). We use prevalence of combined violence in each year and associated 95 % confidence intervals to test whether there was significant change between years for England and Wales separately (Table 6 in Data Supplement). Logistic regressions were also used to test for interactions between year and country and interactions between sex and year for each country. Resulting predicted probabilities are plotted alongside their associated 95 % confidence intervals. Since we use unadjusted logistic regressions, predicted probabilities represent sample percentages and match those in Tables 6 and 7.

The data were weighted by calibrated respondent weights, which adjust for unequal selection and response probabilities and differing responses by age, sex, and regional sub-groups. Analyses were undertaken using STATA 17.

3. Results

Fig. 1 shows that for the first decade of the century, adults in Wales were less likely to experience violence than adults in England. However, this was less clear in the second decade, when rates in the two countries were more similar (also see Supplemental Table 1).

The trends in violence vary between Wales and England. Considering the annual estimates of combined violence along with the 95 % confidence intervals (Table 6 in Data Supplement), in England, there was a significant decline in violence from the previous year in 2005, 2008, 2012 and 2014. Furthermore, there was no year-on-year decline since 2014 and no significant change in prevalence of violence between 2014 and 2020 in England. In Wales, a significant decline in violence from the previous year was observed in 2017 and 2020, and over the entire period between 2002 and 2020.

In Wales, prevalence of violence fell from 6.5 % in 2002 to 4.8 % in 2019 (non-significant change) with a further, significant, drop in 2020 to 3.4 %. In England, prevalence of violence fell significantly from 7.3 % in 2002 to 4.9 % in 2020 (Fig. 1 and Supplemental Table 6).

Analysis by sex shows females were generally less likely to experience violence than males between 2002 and 2012 in Wales, and between 2002 and 2015 in England. In both countries, rates converged in the years that followed (Fig. 1, and Supplemental Table 7). In England, violence decreased in prevalence for both sexes up to 2015, before increasing for females and remaining broadly stable among males between 2015 and 2020. In contrast, in Wales, while there was a decline in violence among males over the period 2002 to 2020, prevalence of violence among females reduced only after 2016.

¹ Please refer to these studies (9 and 10 in reference list) for further information on how the measures differ, and what impact using different measures has on estimates of violence.

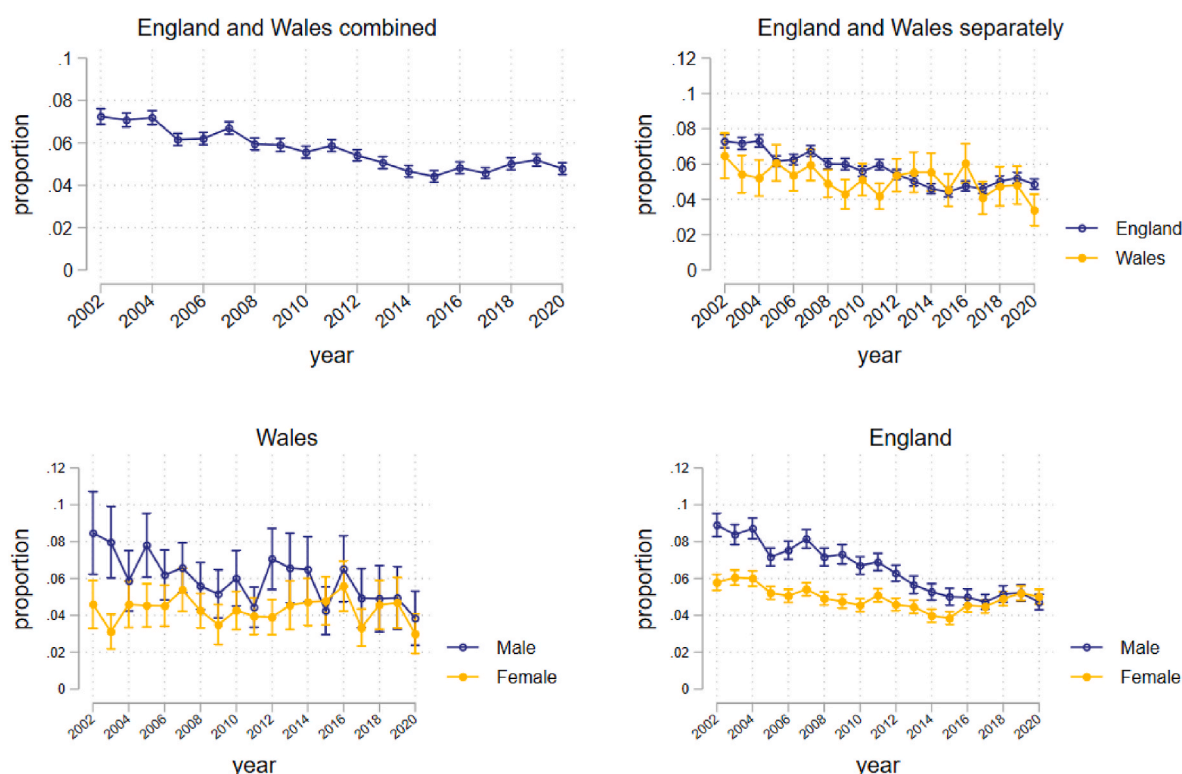


Fig. 1. Temporal trends in prevalence of combined violence in Wales and England, and by sex, 2002 to 2020

Notes: 1. See T tables 6 and 7 in Data Supplement for underlying figures (unweighted frequencies, weighted percentages and 95 % confidence intervals); 2. The annual estimates of violence for Wales may fluctuate due to relatively small sample sizes. Please see Tables 8 and 9 in Data Supplement for sensitivity analyses using three-year pooled data for Wales.

4. Discussion

Our analysis of CSEW data shows that prevalence and trends in violence differ in Wales and England. We use a ‘combined violence’ measure, which includes crimes of wounding and assault, sexual crimes, robbery, threats, and other experiences of physical force in the past 12 months. We show that prevalence of violence was generally lower in Wales than England, but only for the first decade of the century. Males in Wales and England and females in England experienced a decline in violence victimisation between 2002 and 2015. However, no decline in violence was evident for females in Wales over this period. Furthermore, while there was an upturn in prevalence of violence among females in England since 2015, there was a decline in violence experienced by females in Wales after 2016. The recent decline in violence against women in Wales coincides with the introduction of the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse, and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV) Act 2015. The purpose of the Act is to improve arrangements for prevention, protection of victims and support for people affected by violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence. It has had implications for law and policy in Wales in joint efforts to prosecute offenders and prevent gender-based violence. The Act places a duty on Welsh Ministers, and other public sector bodies to publish, regularly review and implement strategies which contribute to the purpose of the Act. In recent years, Wales also has made significant steps to develop and implement a public health approach to violence prevention which may have contributed to changes in violence in population. Pioneering initiatives such as the Wales Violence Prevention Unit which aims to prevent violence through a public health approach, Wales Without Violence: a shared framework for preventing violence among children and young people, Policing in Wales and Welsh Government’s VAWDASV Blueprint Approach, which provides a multi-agency plan for a whole system approach, and the Trauma-informed Wales Practice Framework which aims to facilitate

the development of a whole system approach to preventing and responding to adversity and trauma.

Different patterns of violence in England and Wales indicate that relying on combined estimates of violence for England and Wales in strategy development and planning in Wales should be avoided. Further work is required to understand why trends differ between England and Wales, including analyses accounting for socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of each population, as well as thorough considerations of potential policy drivers.

Author statements

Ethical approval

These secondary analyses were approved by the committee at City St George’s, University of London that considers medium risk applications (ETH21220–299).

Funding

This work was supported by the UK Prevention Research Partnership [Violence, Health and Society; grant number: MR-VO49879/1], a Consortium funded by the British Heart Foundation, Chief Scientist Office of the Scottish Government Health and Social Care Directorates, Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, Economic and Social Research Council, Health and Social Care Research and Development Division (Welsh Government), Medical Research Council, National Institute for Health and Care Research, Natural Environment Research Council, Public Health Agency (Northern Ireland), The Health Foundation, and Wellcome.

Competing interests

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

Data availability

Data may be obtained from a third party and are not publicly available. Polina Obolenskaya received approval from the UKDS to use Crime Survey for England and Wales data series under the condition of the End User Licence [End User Licence (ukdataservice.ac.uk)]. Data reference: Office for National Statistics. (2021). Crime Survey for England and Wales. [data series]. 3rd Release. UK Data Service. SN: 200009, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-Series-200009>.

Acknowledgements

We thank the tens of thousands of people across Wales and England who generously participated in the survey series and our funder, UK Prevention Research Partnership for enabling this work. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the UK Prevention Research Partnership. We also thank Niels Blom for statistical support, as well as a STATA code he developed to combine different parts of the data for multiple survey years.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2025.105775>.

[org/10.1016/j.puhe.2025.105775](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2025.105775).

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