

Crime and victimisation

Initial findings from the Millennium Cohort Study at Age 23

Crime and victimisation remain issues of deep public concern. Early brushes with the justice system or experiences of victimisation can have long term impacts, shaping health, employment, and life chances¹⁻⁴. Experiences of crime, both as a victim and perpetrator, tend to be concentrated in adolescence and early adulthood.

This briefing draws on new evidence from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), a UK nationally representative study which has followed more than 19,000 people born around the year 2000. At age 23, 9,675 participants shared their experiences, including those of crime and victimisation. These findings are set alongside earlier data from ages 14 and 17, offering a window into how offending and victimisation evolve from adolescence into early adulthood.

The analysis examines both crime and criminal justice contact (police stops, cautions or arrests, court appearances, weapon carrying) and victimisation (physical and weapon assault, unwanted sexual approach, sexual assault, and violence or abuse within intimate relationships). Findings are broken down by sex, ethnicity, education, and UK country, revealing where risks are most acute and where inequalities persist.

Understanding these patterns is not only vital for researchers but also for policymakers seeking to reduce harm and protect communities. The findings speak directly to the Government's 'Safer Streets' mission – which aims to halve knife crime within a decade – and to the national strategy on violence against women and girls, which has set the same ambition.

ABOUT THE DATA

Millennium Cohort Study Age 23 Sweep

The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) is a UK longitudinal birth study. It is following the lives of around 19,000 young people born across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2000–02. At age 23, 9,675 study members took part in a 60–75 minute survey, either online or with an interviewer. Data from this and previous sweeps of MCS are available to download from the UK Data Service.

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Key findings

- By age 23, criminal justice contact increased compared to adolescence: 19% had been stopped by police (16% at age 17), 11% had been cautioned or arrested (7% at age 17).
- Physical assault perpetration (11%) and weapon carrying (2%) declined with age, from 24% and 3% respectively at age 17.
- Experiencing unwanted sexual approach (16%) and sexual assault (5%) became more common at 23, from 13% and 3% respectively at age 17. Unwanted sexual approach was more commonly reported by those with higher education (22% vs 11%).
- Intimate partner experiences were first measured at 23, with 3% of those with a partner reporting violence from their partner and 11% reporting emotional abuse.
- Males reported higher levels of criminal justice involvement (e.g. 16% had been cautioned or arrested vs 6% of females) and higher assault victimisation (14% v 8%).
- Females were more likely to experience sexual and relationship-based victimisation, e.g. 7% of females reported having been sexually assaulted in the past year vs 2% of males.

Results

Crime and victimisation at age 23 compared to adolescence

Figure 1 presents the prevalence of criminal involvement and experiences of victimisation at age 23, with comparable data at ages 14 and 17 where available, allowing for changes over time to be examined.

In terms of lifetime prevalence of crime-related behaviours, most measures increased between adolescence and early adulthood. By age 23, 19% reported having been stopped by the police at some point in their life, compared with 16% by age 17 and 13% by age 14. Similarly, 11% of 23-year-olds had been cautioned or arrested, up from around 7% by both 14 and 17. Appearances in court as an accused also rose, with 2.5% reporting this experience by age 23, compared with 0.3% by 17. The only behaviour that declined was weapon carrying in the past year, which fell to 1% at age 23, down from 2.8% at age 17 and 2.4% at age 14.

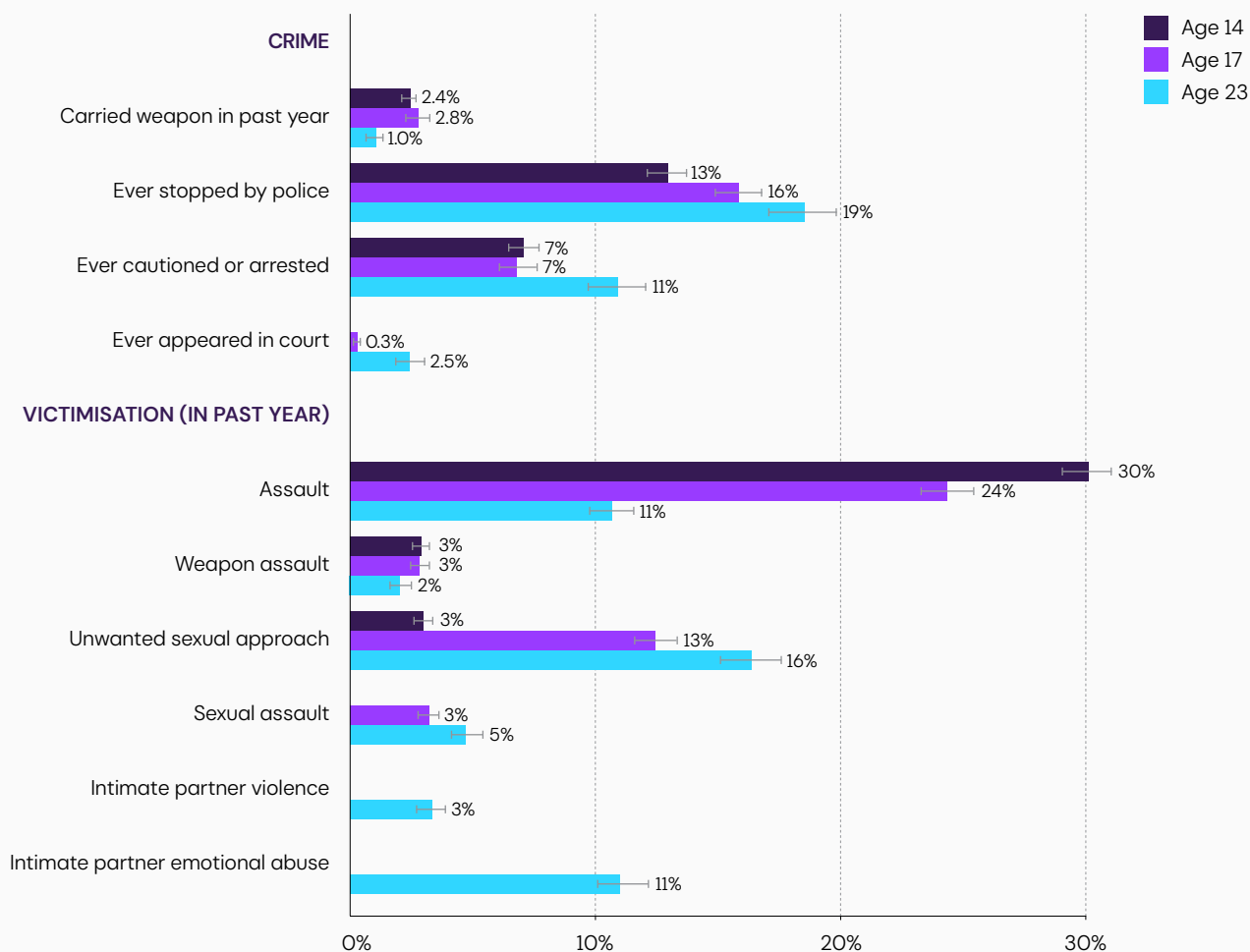
Patterns of victimisation in the past year show a more mixed picture. Reports of physical assault (being pushed, hit, slapped or punched) declined substantially with age, with 11% of 23-year-olds reporting this compared

with 24% at 17 and 30% at 14. Experiences of assault with a weapon also fell slightly, with 2% reporting this at age 23 compared to 3% at both 14 and 17.

By contrast, unwanted sexual approaches became more common, reported by 16% of 23-year-olds, up from 13% at 17 and 3% at 14. Reports of sexual assault also increased, rising to 5% at age 23 from 3% at 17. Measures of intimate partner violence and abuse were collected for the first time at age 23, showing that among those who had been in a relationship in the past year (81% of the sample), 3% had experienced violence from a partner and 11% reported emotional abuse.

19% reported having been stopped by the police at some point in their life.

FIGURE 1: CRIME AND VICTIMISATION AT AGE 23 AND EARLIER IN ADOLESCENCE



How does the experience of crime and victimisation vary for different groups?

Figure 2 shows how crime and victimisation at age 23 differ by participants' sex, ethnicity, educational pathway, and county of residence.

Sex

All crime-related behaviours were significantly more common among males than females. Males reported higher rates of weapon carrying (1.7% vs 0.4%), being stopped by the police (27% vs 10%), being cautioned or arrested (16% vs 6%), and appearing in court as an accused (4% vs 1%). Patterns of victimisation in the past year were mixed. Males reported higher rates of being assaulted (14% vs 8%) and slightly higher rates of weapon victimisation (2.8% vs 1.5%). In contrast, females experienced higher levels of unwanted sexual approach (25% vs 8%), sexual assault (7% vs 2%), intimate partner violence (4% vs 2%), and emotional abuse from a partner (14% vs 8%).

Ethnicity

In terms of ethnicity, we observed some differences between groups, although we note that fully statistically significant differences are difficult to detect due to the small size of the ethnic minority groups. Nevertheless, there were some emerging patterns. Black respondents had the highest rates of weapon carrying and criminal justice involvement (stopped by police, cautioned or arrested, court appearance); these rates were lowest among those with an Asian background. In terms of victimisation, rates were highest in those of Mixed origin and generally lowest amongst Asian participants.

Educational Pathway

Educational background was strongly linked to crime and victimisation. Individuals without higher education reported higher rates across most measures: 23% had been stopped by the police compared with 14% of those with higher education, 16% had been cautioned or arrested compared with 5%, and 4.5% had appeared in court compared with 0.3%. Victimization showed a similar pattern, with higher rates of assault (12% vs 9%), weapon victimisation (2.7% vs 1.5%), and intimate partner violence (4% vs 2%) among those without higher education compared to those with. However, there were no clear differences between groups for sexual assault or intimate partner emotional abuse. In contrast, unwanted sexual approaches were more commonly reported by those with higher education (22% vs 11%).

Country

Regional variation in crime and victimisation was evident on some measures, though patterns were mixed. Respondents in Northern Ireland reported the highest rate of being stopped by the police (27%), with the lowest rate in England (18%). By contrast, court appearances were less common in Northern Ireland (0.8%) than in the other nations (2.4%– 3.2%). No significant regional differences were observed on a number of crime-related experiences (weapon carrying, arrests, assault victimisation), or for victimisation with a weapon, unwanted sexual approach, sexual assault victimisation, or intimate partner violence. However, emotional abuse within intimate relationships was lowest in Northern Ireland (7%), compared with the other UK nations (11–12%).

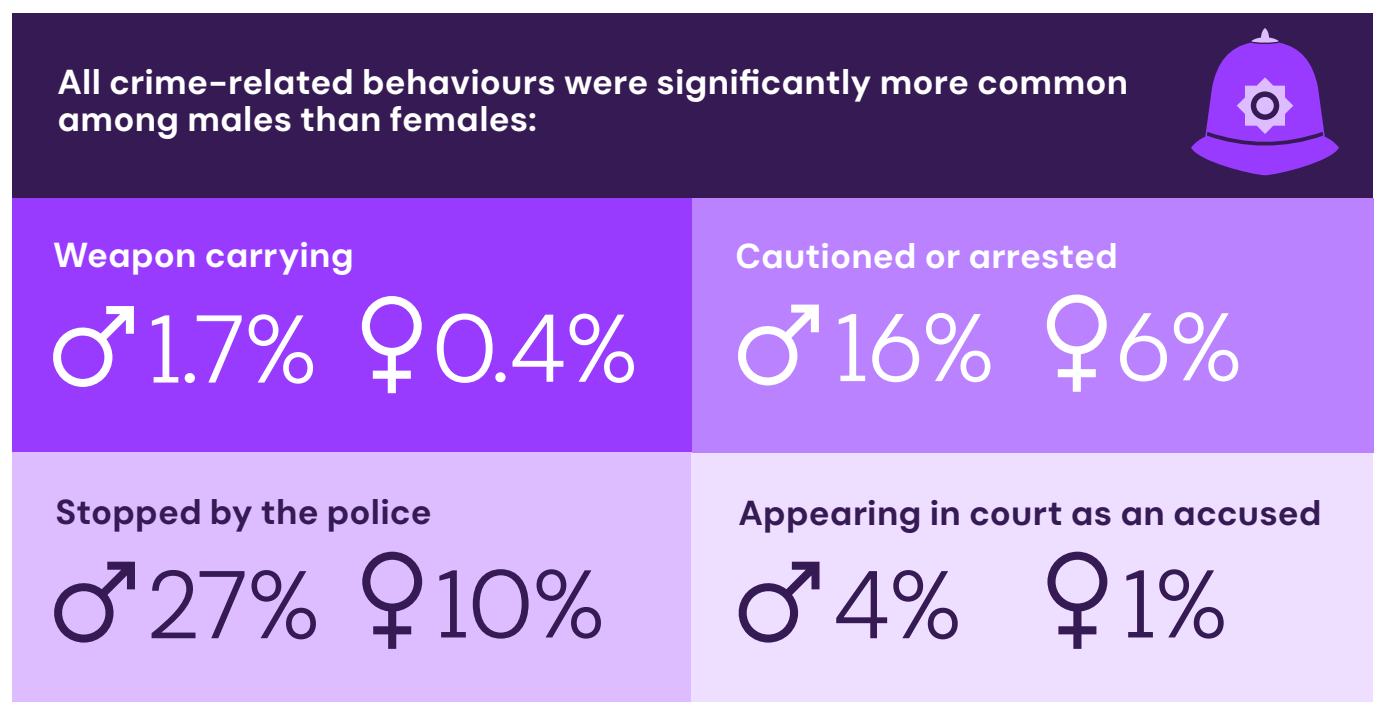
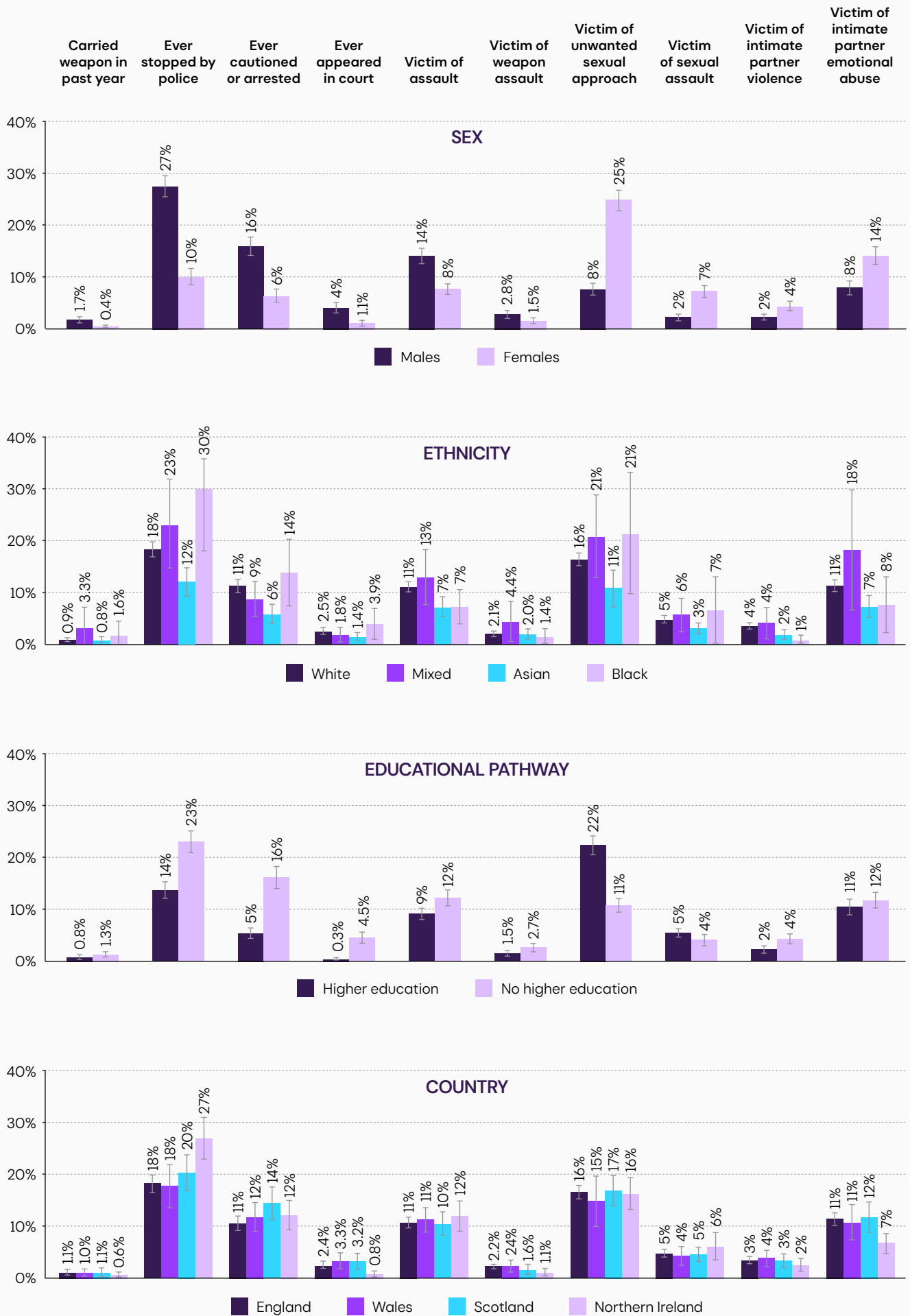


FIGURE 2: CRIME AND VICTIMISATION AT AGE 23 BY SEX, ETHNICITY, EDUCATIONAL PATHWAY, AND COUNTRY



Considerations for policymaking

These findings highlight how crime and victimisation affect young people's early adult lives. Our analyses show that while some risks, such as physical assault, decline between adolescence and early adulthood, others – particularly unwanted sexual approach, sexual assault, and intimate partner abuse – emerge more strongly. Such patterns align closely with government priorities on tackling violence against women and girls.

Marked differences by sex, ethnicity, education, and region point to persistent inequalities that policymakers must keep in mind. For example, men are more likely to have contact with the criminal justice system, while women face higher risks of sexual and partner-related violence. Those without higher education were more exposed to both offending and victimisation. These disparities raise questions about fairness, prevention, and the adequacy of existing support systems.

Policymakers and practitioners should consider how interventions can be better tailored to different groups. They may also wish to draw on wider evidence to understand the drivers of crime and victimisation and to ensure policies are informed by robust longitudinal data.

Opportunities for future research

The MCS age 23 survey provides a unique opportunity to examine how crime and victimisation unfold across adolescence and early adulthood within a nationally representative cohort. Its longitudinal design allows researchers to trace pathways from childhood through to adult outcomes, offering insights into how early life factors – such as family background, education, and neighbourhood context – shape later risks of criminal involvement or victimisation.

Several evidence gaps could be addressed using these data. The rich longitudinal measures open scope for analysing the predictors of first contact with the criminal justice system, and the long-term implications of such contact for health, employment, and relationships. Second, the age 23 data on intimate partner violence and abuse are the first in the series, providing a baseline for future work on the drivers and consequences of these experiences. Third, the data enable intersectional analysis – examining for instance how gender, education, and geography combine to create differing patterns of risk and resilience.

Future research could also explore links between crime, victimisation, and wider wellbeing outcomes such as mental health, housing, and financial security. In doing so, the MCS is perfectly positioned to provide a critical evidence base to inform both prevention strategies and policies aimed at reducing inequalities in exposure to crime and harm.

About the Millennium Cohort Study

The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) is a UK longitudinal birth study. It is following the lives of around 19,000 young people born across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2000–02. There have been seven main sweeps of MCS to date, at ages 9 months, 3, 5, 7, 11, 14, 17 and 23 years. It has tracked measures such as physical, socio-emotional, cognitive and behavioural development, economic circumstances, parenting, relationships and family life across the life course. MCS is core funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and a consortium of government departments.

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