

Hidden rise in violent crime driven by growth in violence against women

While violence against men continues to fall, new research uncovers upward trend coinciding with austerity-led cuts to domestic violence services

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Women are bearing the brunt of an invisible rise in violent crime, a new analysis shows. Domestic violence and violence against women have increased since 2009, researchers found, pushing up overall levels of violent crime.

The findings contradict the official message that violent crime has been in decline since the mid-90s. They also begin to challenge the assertion that men are the most likely victims; violent crime against men continues to fall.

A team led by Sylvia Walby, Unesco chair in gender research and a professor of sociology at Lancaster University, discovered the rise in violent crime after looking again at data collected by the Crime Survey of England and Wales (CSEW) between 1994 and 2014.

Official statisticians cap the number in a series of crimes that a single person can report to the survey at five, to stop outliers skewing the statistics. But Walby argues that this method excludes the experiences of “high frequency” victims - particularly victims of domestic violence - who often make up more than 5% of respondents.

To take these victims into account, Walby and her colleagues instead looked at all reported crimes. The new study also slightly alters the definition of violent crime to include sexual offences such as rape, which are usually given their own category in CSEW figures.

Abandoning the cap and including sex crimes shows the fall in violent crime reached a turning point in 2009, when a rise in domestic violence and violence against women by acquaintances begins. Although violence against women by strangers remains flat, and violence against men continues to fall, the rises are so marked they fuel an overall rise in violent crime.

Women’s groups say it is no coincidence that the rise begins at the same time as the financial crisis and the beginning of austerity politics in Britain. They are calling for a reversal of cuts to specialist domestic violence services. Many have closed as a result of belt-tightening in local government since 2010.

The change coincides with the repercussions of the financial crisis, the researchers point out. “The turning point in the rate of these violent crimes is consistent with an explanation focused on the reduced economic independence of women and the impact of the cuts to services on which women disproportionately depend,” they write, although they add that more investigation is needed.

Vivienne Hayes, chief executive of the Women’s Resource Centre, said that while austerity had played a part in the rise in violence against women, some of it was also the result of a troubling resurgence of sexism.

“While we are deeply saddened by the results of Walby’s research, we are not surprised,” she said. “Our member organisations have been telling us repeatedly that demand for their services, which include rape crisis centres and small specialist Violence Against Women and Girls services, has rocketed, whilst investment in services has plummeted.

“Research from a range of sources strongly suggests that over the last few years our societal view of women, from violent pornography, violent computer games, street harassment and everyday sexism, to the lack of women in positions of leadership and the attempt to remove women’s contribution to political progress in the A level curriculum, is creating a view of women which nurtures and normalises our violation.

“Only when we take a bird’s eye view of all of these issues and develop a joined up strategy to tackle them head on, will we see a reduction in violent crime against women.”

WRC cited House of Commons research showing that direct taxes and social security cuts will take £9.6bn net a year from families - £7bn of which is from women. The group’s own research has found that 95% of women’s organisations had experienced cuts, rising to 100% for BME women’s organisations.

The CSEW is a face-to-face survey asking people about their experiences of a range of crimes in the past year. It is regarded as the gold standard of crime statistics since it includes unreported crimes and is unaffected by changes in police recording practices.

Official statisticians have argued that the cap on the number of crimes a single person can report to eliminate volatility in the results, allowing them to better identify trends. Walby and her colleagues get around that problem by instead using a three-year moving average of statistics.

Survivors of domestic abuse most often report not just one incident of violence and intimidation, or even several, but a systematic and sustained campaign of repression that can last years.

That was the case with Ava Freebody, from Sussex, who spent 27 years with her abusive husband before she was finally able to escape. She has contempt for any suggestion that crime statistics would cap the number in a series of incidents reported by a single victim, calling it ridiculous.

“How can you possibly put a cap on something and say that after five times it doesn’t count? I remember all the incidents, I remember all the things that were done to me, and to say we are only going to count five times makes me feel worthless,” she said. “It’s like somehow this is your fault, it’s like if this had happened more than five times then you must have been asking for it.

“I think we have a situation here where I think of this as domestic terrorism. If the perpetrators were Isis we would be throwing so many resources into it and we would recognise the repeated attacks on liberties and health.”

Walby also condemned the capping, saying it “omits crimes and therefore biases the crime rate downwards - it is lower than it should be. The objection to taking the cap off is that this introduces more year-to-year volatility. Uncapping and [giving] three-year moving averages provides an unbiased figure that also solves the volatility problem.”

Christina Jay, an activist with Sisters Uncut, which campaigns against cuts to such services, added: “This research proves the urgent need for meaningful investment in domestic violence support. We hope the government acknowledges the undeniable human cost of austerity and put substantial measures, policies and funding commitments in place to make sure that all domestic violence survivors can flee violence and live safely.”

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