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A comparison of "only-once" and repeat male and female sex offence suspects

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ABSTRACT

Understanding differences between male and female sex offence suspects is vital for developing appropriate prevention, assessment, and treatment guidance. Previous comparisons have used clinical, prison, or arrest data, or small samples. Larger studies have been based in the United States. This study analysed a large sample of sex offences recorded by three police forces in England and Wales to compare characteristics of male/female sex offence suspects reported once – "only-once suspects" –, or multiple times – "repeat suspects". Suspects were more likely to be male and a greater proportion of repeat suspects were male. However, when separated into only-once versus repeats, male/female suspects did not significantly differ in either their number of sex offence reports, or their number of victims. Nonetheless, females were significantly less likely to be charged, suggesting authorities are less confident in taking forward these cases. Implications of findings and how male/female sex offence suspects are policed are discussed.

PRACTICE IMPACT STATEMENT

Repeat male and female sex offence suspects were associated with the same number of victims and crimes. However, female suspectswere charged to a lesser extent suggesting there is a gap in sex offender punishment and more needs to be done to increase professional awareness of the risks posed by females who sexually offend.

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Introduction

In comparison to male sex offenders (MSOs), female sex offenders (FSOs)[1] are under-researched (Almond et al., 2017; Ireland et al., 2016). To some extent, this may reflect cultural biases where females are seen to be caregivers, offences by women are perceived as less serious, and/or victims are reluctant to report due to the perpetrator's gender (Bunting, 2005; 2007), as well as the fact that sexual violence is perpetrated more

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commonly by males (Aceves & Tarzia, 2024; Basile et al., 2022). Offences committed by females may also not be perceived as abuse because they can be accompanied by affection or caregiving (Denov, 2004). These stereotypical views of females may lead to the under-identification, reporting, and conviction of FSOs. Indeed, victimisation surveys find higher rates of female perpetrators than in official figures, with survey figures ranging from 12% (Cortoni et al., 2017) to 20% (McLeod, 2015). By contrast, Cortoni and colleagues have reviewed official records from Canada, the United Kingdom (UK), United States (US), Australia, and New Zealand and consistently found females contribute between four to five percent of all sex offences reported to the police (Cortoni et al., 2010; Cortoni et al., 2017; Cortoni & Hanson, 2005), whilst Williams and Bierie (2015) found this figure to be five percent in the US. Figures released by the Ministry of Justice (2022) showed that in 2021, female offenders in England and Wales accounted for only two percent of sex offence prosecutions, and only one percent of all arrests for sex offences involved women. As with the known under-reporting, policing, and prosecuting of sex offences by males (Barrett & Pierre, 2011; Johnson & Lewis, 2023; Stripe, 2021), these discrepancies suggest that FSOs are not being reported, investigated, arrested, or charged at rates proportionate to their actual offending – and that these issues may be even greater for FSOs than for MSOs.

Several studies have directly compared FSOs and MSOs based on data about convicted offenders. Freeman and Sandler (2008) compared case files of 390 FSOs and 390 MSOs on the sex offender registry in New York State. Male offenders had a greater number of previous sexual and non-sexual convictions and were more likely to have offended against females. A comparison by Williams and Bierie (2015) using national data in the US found male and female sex offenders were likely to know their victims but that females were more likely to offend against their own children, whilst males were more likely to offend against stepchildren. Both males and females were more likely to offend against victims of the opposite sex. Additionally, females were more likely to commit their offence with a male accomplice and the distinction between female solo and co-offending females has become a topic of investigation in its own right (Budd et al., 2017; ten Bensel, Gibbs, and Burkey, 2019; Vandiver, 2006; Williams et al., 2019). Studies find that solo female offenders are more likely to abuse male victims, whilst those with male co-offenders are equally likely to abuse females and relatives (Muskens et al., 2011; Vandiver, 2006).

Studies of MSOs demonstrate they tend to have offended against higher numbers of victims than FSOs as well. In a study of 120 male undetected rapists, 63.3% reported committing repeat rapes against either multiple victims or more than once against the same victim (Lisak & Miller, 2002). Similarly, in a study of crossover offending, Heil et al. (2003) found 31% of paroled sex offenders and 89% of incarcerated sex offenders admitted to offending against more than one victim, whilst a study of child sexual abusers found 70% of the men had committed offences against one to nine victims, 23% had committed offences against 10–40 children, and seven percent had committed offences against 41–450 children (Elliott et al., 1995). Comartin and colleagues (2018) found that 34% of their sample of 60 incarcerated FSOs had abused more than one victim, whilst just under half had repeatedly offended against the same victim, while Wijkman et al. (2011) also found that 26% had abused more than one victim.

The present study

The available research indicates there is a need for gender-specific approaches to working with sex offenders (Gannon et al., 2010; Gannon & Alleyne, 2013). The prevention, assessment, and treatment needs of FSOs and MSOs are likely to differ based on a range of factors which are currently poorly understood. Therefore, a better understanding of FSOs and the ways in which their offending differs from MSOs can assist law enforcement and policy makers. Many of the existing studies of FSOs tend to involve small samples (e.g. Gillespie et al., 2015; Vandiver & Walker, 2002; Williams et al., 2019), or clinical, prison, or arrest data (e.g. Muskens et al., 2011; Vandiver, 2006; Wijkman et al., 2011), including those studies which compare male and female offenders (Freeman & Sandler, 2008). However, only a minority of sex offenders are arrested (Lapsey et al., 2022; Morabito et al., 2019; Williams & Bierie, 2015), which suggests these samples might be unrepresentative of the wider sex offender population and skewed towards the most serious offenders (Vandiver & Walker, 2002). Where there are larger scale studies, these tend to be conducted in the US (Budd & Biere, 2020; Williams & Bierie, 2015).

The current study addresses these limitations by using a large sample of sex offences that were reported to several police forces in England and Wales with varied police outcomes (collected as part of Operation Soteria Bluestone[2] [OSB]), to compare those offences committed by males and those committed by females. Specifically, it answers the following research questions:

(1) Are there differences in characteristics of male and female sex offence suspects who have been named in connection with one sex offence ("only-once" suspects) and those who have been named in multiple sex offence reports ("repeat" suspects)?
(2) Do male and female only-once and repeat sex offence suspects' criminal histories differ?

Methods

Sample

The initial dataset consisted of details of all sex offences recorded by three police forces in England and Wales over a three-year period from 1st January 2019 to 31st December 2021. Recorded in this context means any time a crime was logged on a police system, which would have contained details about a named or unknown suspect or suspects. For the purposes of this paper, the dataset contained only identified suspects and victims, meaning they had a suspect and victim ID. This was so that suspects and victims could be tracked across crimes by their unique ID. Additionally, the criminal history for each identified suspect during this time was collected, covering any criminal history previous to the three-year dataset, as far back as 1st March 2007. Thus, th working dataset contained details of 163,938 crimes, 28,543 suspects, and 95,604 victims. Suspects where sex[3] was missing or not recorded as "male" or "female" were excluded from all analyses (n = 4,101, 14.4%). The final dataset consisted of 159,025 crimes (33,987 sex offences), 24,442 suspects, and 91,403 victims where suspect sex was known. There were 21,532 (13.54%) crimes (including 8,260 [24.30%] sex offences) with no missing values and an additional 137,493 (86.46%) crimes (including 25,727 [75.70%] sex offences) with missing values in at least one of the measured

Table 1. Frequencies and percentages of missing values for the variables.

	Complete response, N		Complete %		Missing response, N		Missing %	
	SO	AO	SO	AO	SO	AO	SO	AO
Victim Sex	66,990		73.3		24,413		26.7	
Suspect Age	33,126	157,419	97.5	99.0	861	1,606	2.5	1.0
Victim Age	31,372	111,888	92.3	70.4	2,615	47,137	7.7	29.6
Relationship	8,729	24,349	25.7	15.3	25,258	134,676	74.3	84.7
Outcome	26,951	116,073	79.3	73.0	7,036	42,952	20.7	27.0
Sex Offences	33,987	–	100	–	0	–	0	–
Offence Type	–	159,025	–	100	–	0	–	0

Note: SO = Sex Offences, AO = All Offences. Victim sex is by victim; all other variables are calculated by crime.

variables. The variables and their respective percentages of missing values are presented in Table 1.

Procedure

As part of OSB, three police forces in England and Wales provided anonymised summary data on the sex offences reported in their individual jurisdictions, as well as the criminal history for each identified suspect. A list of various coded variables regarding the suspects, victims, and offences were requested from each force, who then provided as many of the variables to the researchers as they were able. The variables all forces were able to extract included suspect and victim sex and age, relationship between the victim and suspect, crime type, and police outcome, and were extracted directly from each force's crime recording system. The variables underwent some recoding by the researchers to ensure parity between the forces and to create more suitable categories for analysis:

- *Suspect age* was truncated to between 10 and 100 years old; ages outside of this range were assumed to be errors.
- *Victim age* was truncated to between 1 and 100 years old; ages outside of this range were assumed to be errors.
- *Relationship* represents the originally 73 defined relationships between victim and suspect (see supplementary Appendix A) which were subsequently categorised into four groups: *partner* (e.g. spouse, boyfriend, ex-partner); *relative* (e.g. son, step-daughter, aunt); *acquaintance* (e.g. friend, flatmate, colleague); and *stranger*. The police data did not consistently distinguish between biological and step-relatives.
- *Repeat suspects* were those who were named in association with more than one report.
- *Sex offences* were categorised as rape, contact offences, and non-contact offences using Home Office codes. "Rape" consisted of rape and attempted rape, "contact offences" included crimes where physical contact took place (e.g. sexual assault, causing or inciting a child to engage in sexual activity), and "non-contact offences" were those where physical contact did not take place (e.g. voyeurism, exposure, communications with a child).
- *Outcome* represents the 22 outcome codes originally provided that were subsequently grouped into five broader outcome types (pending outcomes were excluded from the outcome-related analysis; n = 1,292). This was done to increase generalisability and interpretability, as well as to ensure sufficient data in each group for reliable analysis:

  - OC1: charged into *charge*;
  - OC14: evidential difficulties victim based and OC16: evidential difficulties: victim does not support were grouped into *victim does not pursue* (which includes where a guardian took the decision not to pursue on behalf of the victim);
  - OC9: Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) decide not to prosecute, OC10: police decide not to prosecute, OC15: evidential difficulties: victim supports, OC18: investigation complete: no suspect identified, and OC21: investigation not in the public interest were grouped into *law does not pursue*;
  - OC2: caution – youths, OC3: caution – adults, OC4: taken into consideration, OC8: community resolution, OC20: further action taken by another agency, and OC22: diversionary activity were grouped into *closed without charge*;
  - OC5: offender died, OC6: penalty notice for disorder, OC7: cannabis warning, OC11: prosecution prevented – suspect under age, OC12: prosecution prevented – illness, OC13: prosecution prevented – victim died, and OC17: prosecution time limit expired were grouped into *logistical*.
- *Offence type* was provided by the police and consisted of 12 categories: Arson and Criminal Damage, Burglary, Drug Offences, Fraud, Miscellaneous Crimes Against Society, Possession of Weapons, Public Order Offences, Robbery, Sexual Offences, Theft, Vehicle Offences, and Violence Against the Person.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained by Bournemouth University (39633) and University of Suffolk (RETH21/006). While all data obtained from the forces were anonymised, strict data storage, sharing, and security protocols were put in place to ensure the data were kept in line with force requirements outlined in Data Protection Impact Assessments that were put in place. Due to the sensitive nature of the project, all researchers working on these data had access to regular clinical supervision.

Analysis

The sex offence suspects were categorised as having been reported in association with one sex offence – "only-once suspects", or multiple (i.e. two or more) sex offences – "repeat suspects". Non-sex offences were investigated only in terms of the criminal histories of the only-once and repeat sex offence suspects. This means that both the only-once and repeat sex offence suspects could have had non-sex offences in their criminal histories, but the repeat offending category was denoted by *repeat sex offending only*. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the sample. Categorical variables were compared using chi-square and column proportion comparisons with Bonferroni adjustments. One-way ANOVAs were used to compare continuous variables.

Results

Overall, there were 1,686 (6.9%) female and 22,756 (93.1%) male sex offence suspects in the dataset. Females were significantly more likely than males to be only-once suspects with no other offences reported (i.e. one sex offence only) (χ^2 (1) = 93.71, $p < .001$;

48.9% [n = 824/1,686] vs. 37.0% [n = 8,425/22,756]). Additionally, the proportion of female only-once suspects with no other offences reported was greater than the proportion of male only-once suspects with no other offences reported (χ^2 (1) = 26.21, $p < .001$; 56.5% [n = 824/1,459] vs. 49.5% [n = 8,425/17,022]). There was also a significant association between suspect sex and being a repeat sex offence suspect (χ^2 (1) = 117.20, $p < .001$); there were significantly more male than female repeat sex offence suspects (96.2% vs. 3.8%; see Table 2). The proportion of male suspects who were repeats was also significantly greater than the proportion of female suspects who were repeats (χ^2 (1) = 117.20, $p < .001$; 25.2% of male suspects [n = 5,734/22,756] compared to 13.5% of female suspects [n = 227/1,686]). Female suspects were also significantly more likely than males to have *only* been named in sex offences, whether as an only-once ($\chi^2(1)$ = 26.21, $p < .001$; 56.5% vs. 49.5%) or a repeat ($\chi^2(1) = 8.66$, $p = .003$; 37.0% vs. 28.0%) sex offence suspect. Male and female repeat suspects did not significantly differ in terms of the number of sex offence reports (F = 1.24, *n.s.*) nor the number of victims (F = .06, *n.s.*). Female suspects were significantly younger than males at age of report, whether they were only-once (F = 99.69, $p < .001$) or repeat (F = 16.23, $p < .001$) suspects.

Sex offence victims

Female suspects were significantly more likely than male suspects to be named in crimes against male victims, regardless of whether they were only-once (χ^2 (1) = 977.36, $p < .001$; 45.8% vs. 12.2%) or repeat suspects (χ^2 (1) = 292.42, $p < .001$; 44.6% vs. 14.1%). There were also significant differences in the age of victims across male and female suspects (only-once [χ^2 (4) = 169.03, $p < .001$]; repeat suspects [χ^2 (4) = 136.61, $p < .001$]). Specifically, only-once female suspects were significantly more likely than only-once male suspects to offend against victims aged 1–5 (6.3% vs. 2.9%), 6–12 years (17.7% vs. 10.0%), and 13–15 years (20.7% vs. 15.9%), and female repeat suspects were significantly more likely than male repeat suspects to offend against victims aged 1–5 (8.8% vs. 2.6%) and 6–12 years (23.9% vs. 12.2%).

There was a significant association between suspect sex and relationship type for only-once suspects (χ^2 (3) = 67.53, $p < .001$). Compared to males, only-once females were significantly more likely to offend against relatives (28.7% vs. 17.5%) and acquaintances (50.6% vs. 41.8%), and less likely to offend against partners (14.5% vs. 29.5%) and

Table 2. Characteristics of male and female suspects.

	Only-Once Suspects		Repeat Suspects	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Suspects %	92.1	7.9	96.2***	3.8
Only Named in Sex offences %	49.5	56.5***	28.0	37.0***
Named in Sex & Other Offences %	50.5	43.5	72.0***	63.0
Total	*17,022*	*1,459*	*5,734*	*227*
Sex Offences M (SD)	1 (0)	1 (0)	2.82 (2.48)	2.51 (1.07)
All Offences M (SD)	4.93 (10.08)	4.54 (9.51)	11.96 (16.97)	10.68 (16.74)
Sex Offence Victims M (SD)	1.01 (.10)	1.01 (.12)	2.49 (1.83)	2.08 (1.06)
Victims M (SD)	3.35 (6.41)	3.56 (6.87)	7.88 (11.13)	7.69 (12.43)
Suspect Age M (SD)	33.17 (16.16)	28.67 (15.93)***	32.50 (16.02)	28.08 (15.22)***

Note: Suspect age was missing in 0.5% of crimes and excluded from suspect age analysis; the victim was not identified in 9.1% of crimes and excluded from total victim analysis.
***Significance at $p < .001$

strangers (6.2% vs. 11.1%). There was also a significant association between suspect sex and relationship type for repeat suspects (χ^2 (3) = 12.82, $p < .01$). Female repeat suspects were significantly more likely than males to offend against relatives (27.4% vs. 16.8%) and less likely to offend against partners (16.3% vs. 25.2%) (see Table 3).

A comparison of female only-once and female repeat suspects demonstrated their victims did not differ in terms of sex (χ^2 (1) = .19, *n.s.*) or relationship (χ^2 (3) = 6.47, *n.s.*), but there was a significant association between type of female suspect (i.e. only-once or repeat) and victim age (χ^2 (4) = 20.13, $p < .001$). Specifically, the victims of female repeat suspects were significantly more likely than the victims of female only-once suspects to be aged between 6–12 years old (23.9% vs. 17.7%) and less likely to be 26 and over (25.2% vs. 32.8%). Conversely, a comparison of male repeat and male only-once suspects showed the victims differed in terms of sex (χ^2 (1) = 21.26, $p < .001$) and relationship (χ^2 (3) = 30.18, $p < .001$), as well as victim age (χ^2 (4) = 235.08, $p < .001$). Male repeat suspects were significantly more likely to have male victims than male only-once suspects (14.1% vs. 12.2%). They were more likely to be named in offences against strangers (14.0% vs. 11.1%) and less likely to be named in offences against partners (25.2% vs. 29.5%). As with female repeat suspects, male repeat suspects were also more likely to have victims aged 6–12 years old (12.1% vs. 10.0%) and 13–15 years old (20.6% vs. 15.9%), and less likely to have victims aged 26 and over (33.5% vs 40.7%).

Type of sex offence

There was a significant association between suspect sex and type of sex offence whether they were only-once suspects (χ^2 (2) = 888.31, $p < .001$) or repeat suspects (χ^2 (2) = 286.44, $p < .001$). Female only-once suspects were significantly less likely than male only-once suspects to be accused of rape (6.5% vs. 45.0%) and more likely to be accused of contact offences (86.0% vs. 47.1%). Female repeat suspects were also significantly less likely than male repeat suspects to be accused of rape (4.6% vs. 38.4%) and more likely to be accused of contact offences (84.3% vs. 50.7%). Female repeat suspects were also more

Table 3. Sex offence victim characteristics by male and female suspects.

	Only-Once Suspects		Repeat Suspects	
	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Victim Sex				
Male	12.2	45.8**	14.1	44.6**
Female	87.8**	54.2	85.9**	55.4
Victim Age				
1–5 years old	2.9	6.3***	2.6	8.8***
6–12 years old	10.0	17.7***	12.1	23.9***
13–15 years old	15.9	20.7***	20.6	17.2
16–25 years old	30.5	22.5	31.3	24.9
26 and over	40.7	32.8	33.5	25.2
Relationship to Suspect				
Partner	29.5***	14.5	25.2**	16.3
Relative	17.5	28.7***	16.8	27.4**
Acquaintance	41.8	50.6***	43.9	43.7
Stranger	11.1***	6.2	14.0	12.6

Note: Victim sex missing in 16.0% of sex offences; victim age was 0 or below in 1.0% crimes and missing in 6.9%; relationship missing in 74.4% of crimes.
**Significance at $p < .01$; ***Significance at $p < .001$

likely than female only-once suspects to commit non-contact sex offences (χ^2 (2) = 8.87, p = .012; 11.1% vs. 7.5%). There were significant differences between male repeat and only-once suspects (χ^2 (2) = 183.87, $p < .001$). Male only-once suspects were more likely than male repeat suspects to commit rape (45.0% vs. 38.4%) and less likely to be named in connection with contact (47.1% vs. 50.7%) and other (8.0% vs. 10.9%) sex offences (see Table 4). Overall, FSOs were less likely than MSOs to be named in connection to rape offences, and more likely to be accused of contact offences. Both female and male only-once suspects were more likely to be named in connection to rape, whereas repeat suspects of both sexes were more likely to be accused of contact and non-contact offences.

Police outcomes for sex offences

Police investigative outcomes were significantly different for male and female suspects, whether they were only-once suspects (χ^2 (4) = 108.26, $p < .001$) or repeat suspects (χ^2 (4) = 42.35, $p < .001$).[4] Female only-once suspects were significantly less likely to have an outcome of charge (2.7% vs. 7.5%) and victim does not proceed (44.3% vs. 51.4%), and more likely to have an outcome of law does not pursue (42.6% vs. 35.7%), closed without charge (7.7% vs. 3.9%), and logistical reasons for not continuing with the case (2.7% vs. 1.4%; see Table 5). Female repeat suspects were significantly less likely to have an outcome of charge (8.7% vs. 20.1%), and more likely to have an outcome of law does not pursue (44.2% vs. 35.1%) and closed without charge (6.2% vs. 3.5%). Male (χ^2 (4) = 926.20, $p < .001$) and female (χ^2 (4) = 37.69, $p < .001$) repeat suspects were more likely to have an outcome of charge than only-once suspects (20.1% vs. 7.5% and 8.7% vs. 2.7% respectively).

Criminal history

Regardless of suspect sex, the most common type of offence in the criminal histories was violence against the person. There was a significant association between suspect sex and crime type for only-once (χ^2 (11) = 544.10, $p < .001$) and repeat suspects (χ^2 (11) = 204.20, $p < .001$). Compared to male repeat suspects (those with multiple *sex* offences), a significantly higher proportion of crimes in the history of female repeat suspects were violence against the person (43.2% vs. 38.6%) and public order offences (15.7% vs. 10.6%), and the criminal history of only-once female suspects (those with one *sex* offence) had a significantly higher proportion of sexual, violence against the person, and theft offences than only-once male suspects (see Table 6).

There was also a significant association between the type of female suspect and criminal history (χ^2 (11) = 116.10, $p < .001$). Repeat female suspects were significantly more

Table 4. Type of sex offence by male and female suspects.

	Only-Once Suspect		Repeat Suspect	
	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Rape	45.0***	6.5	38.4***	4.6
Contact Offence	47.1	86.0***	50.7	84.3***
Non-Contact Offence	8.0	7.5	10.9	11.1*

Note: *Significance at $p < .05$; *** Significance at $p < .001$

Table 5. Sex offence case outcomes by male and female suspects.

	Only-Once Suspects		Repeat Suspects	
	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Charged	7.5***	2.7	20.1***	8.7
Law Does Not Pursue	35.7	42.6***	35.1	44.2***
Victim Does Not Pursue	51.4***	44.3	39.8	40.1
Closed Without Charge	3.9	7.7***	3.5	6.2***
Logistical	1.4	2.7***	1.4	0.8

Note: Outcome missing in 20.5% of sex offences; outcome pending in 2.9% of sex offences.
***Significance at $p < .001$.

Table 6. Criminal history of male and female suspects.

	Only-Once Suspects		Repeat Suspects	
	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Violence Against the Person	40.9***	44.2	38.6	43.2***
Sex Offences	20.3	22.3***	23.6	23.5
Public order Offences	9.1	9.6	10.6***	15.7***
Theft	8.2	12.6***	7.3	7.2
Arson and Criminal Damage	6.4	4.6	6.3	4.6
Burglary	3.9***	1.4	3.2	1.2
Drug Offences	3.5***	1.5***	2.7	0.9
Vehicle Offences	2.5	0.5	2.3	0.3
Robbery	2.3	0.9	2.2	1.1
Miscellaneous Crimes Against Society	2.0	1.9	2.3***	1.8
Possession of Weapons	1.0***	0.5	0.9	0.5
Fraud	0.1***	0.1	0.1	0.0

Note: ***Significance at $p < .001$.

likely than female only-once suspects to commit public order offences (15.7% vs. 9.6%) and less likely to commit theft (7.2% vs. 12.6%) and drug offences (0.9% vs. 1.5%). Additionally, the type of male suspect was significantly associated with criminal history (χ^2 (11) = 530.73, $p < .001$). Repeat male suspects were more likely to have a history of miscellaneous crimes against society (2.3% vs. 2.0%) and public order offences (10.6% vs. 9.1%) and less likely to have a history of burglary (3.2% vs. 3.9%), violence against the person (38.6% vs. 40.9%), theft (7.3% vs. 8.2%), possession of weapons (0.9% vs. 1.0%), drug offences (2.7% vs. 3.5%), and fraud (0.1% vs. 0.1%). Thus, the criminal histories of male repeat and only-once sex offence suspects appear to be more different than female repeat and only-once sex offence suspects.

Discussion

This study compared the characteristics of male and female sex offence suspects who had been named in at least one sex offence. Additionally, the characteristics of the victims, type of offences reported, case outcomes, and criminal history were compared. The results show that male and female sex offence suspects are significantly different on several dimensions and crucially, also indicate where there are no differences.

Differences in characteristics of only-once and repeat male and female sex offence suspects

Female suspects did not significantly differ to male suspects in the number of sex offence reports they were named in, nor in their number of victims. This is consistent with

Vandiver and Walker (2002) who found the number of sex offences committed by males and female registered sex offenders did not significantly differ, although our sample used named, not convicted offender data. This distinction contributes a new perspective to the literature by examining all reported suspects, rather than focusing only on those who are formally registered or convicted. Conversely, our findings differ from Freeman and Sandler (2008) who found males were significantly more likely to be re-arrested. Studies suggest sexual recidivism in FSOs is rare, with estimates of between one percent (Bickart et al., 2019; Cortoni & Hanson, 2005) and approximately five percent (Elliott et al., 2010; ten Bensel, Gibbs, & Burkey, 2019; Williams et al., 2019) of FSOs having been previously convicted of a sex offence. Similarly, Cortoni and colleagues (2010) found less than three percent of FSOs sexually re-offended over an average follow-up period of six and a half years and Vandiver and Kercher (2004) reported the majority of registered FSOs had only committed one sex offence. However, these figures may be underestimates given the lower arrest and conviction rates for females. For a more ecologically valid and informative study, we separated out those named in single versus multiple sex offence reports. This separation allowed us to better understand the dynamics of repeat offending and provides important context for the differences in MSOs and FSOs observed. As females are more likely to only be named in connection with a single sex offence, it may lower the overall average of offences by females and obscure the similar rates between males and females associated with multiple sex offences. Future literature should note that the broader pattern of prevalence of males in repeat offending, as identified in prior research, is not influenced by how cases are categorised and reported.

Despite the similar number of offences, females were significantly less likely to be charged than males and significantly more likely to have police or the CPS cease proceeding with the case, even when they had been named in multiple reports of sex offending. Explanations for this from previous research include that authorities may be less confident in taking forward cases with female suspects, possibly because juries may be less willing to convict females for lesser sex offences (Mayer, 1992), or perhaps because cases involving female perpetrators are more likely to be considered a fabrication, and their abuse is often minimised (Bunting, 2007). The tendency to minimise female sex offences may also contribute to the lower charge rate, with Allen (1991) noting that only those who had committed the most serious offences were likely to be charged. However, while our data highlights these patterns, it could not provide insights into the strength of these explanations. This gap presents a key avenue for future research, particularly in understanding the contextual factors impacting charge rates for FSOs compared to MSOs, including crime type.

Additionally, as found by previous research, FSOs were more likely than MSOs to offend against victims who were males (Gerke et al., 2020; ten Bensel, Gibbs, and Raptopoulos, 2019; Williams & Bierie, 2015), children (Comartin et al., 2018; McLeod, 2015; Williams et al., 2019), and relatives (e.g. Johansson-love & Fremouw, 2009; Wijkman et al., 2011). Similarly, the MSOs in this sample offended in ways in keeping with prior studies in that they were more likely than FSOs to offend against victims who were females (McLeod, 2015; West et al., 2011; Williams & Bierie, 2015), older (Freeman & Sandler, 2008; West et al., 2011) and partners (Soldino et al., 2024; Williams & Bierie, 2015). In line with previous research, the FSOs in our study also engaged in a variety of sex offences including rape (e.g. Nathan & Ward, 2002; Sandler & Freeman, 2009). Future research should uncover

the dynamics of this variability further. These consistencies are also important as they are indicative that this sample is representative of sex offenders more broadly and gives credence to the argument that non-convicted suspects are not fundamentally different from arrested or convicted ones.

Differences in the criminal histories of only-once and repeat male and female sex offence suspects

Similar to studies using convicted or arrested samples, we found that overall, suspects were less likely to be female and that females were less likely to have any other criminal history (e.g. ten Bensel et al., 2019; Vandiver & Walker, 2002). This study found that 13% of female suspects and 25% of male suspects had been named in more than one sex offence. This study adds to the literature on male offenders by finding similar rates. For example, work by Hanson and colleagues found a five-year recidivism rate amongst MSOs of approximately 10-15% and a 10-year recidivism rate of 20% and rates of 24% after 15 years (Hanson & Bussière, 1998; Hanson et al., 2003; Harris & Hanson, 2004; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005). This study further adds to the limited literature on female reoffending by finding higher rates than in previous studies (e.g. Cortoni et al., 2010; Cortoni & Hanson, 2005); this may be due to this current study using police reports rather than conviction or arrest data (Cortoni et al., 2017; Peter, 2009). Additionally, the criminal history in this study's dataset covered a 14-year period and included all types of sex offending, such as arranging or facilitating the sexual exploitation of a child or trespassing with intent to commit a sex offence. Vandiver (2007) found sexual recidivism rates that were similar for males and females (11.4% vs. 10.8%, respectively) and this higher rate was partially attributed to the inclusion of a wide array of sex crimes such as prostitution. Indeed, reoffending rates increase if other crimes within the criminal histories of FSOs and MSOs are considered. For example, Elliot et al. (2010) estimated 16% of FSOs had committed previous non-sexual crimes, whilst Wijkman et al. (2015) found 27% of FSOs were "generalists" with a varied criminal history. Therefore, our study adds to the literature on female reoffending rates by showing that when the full range of sex crimes are considered, it may increase the rates of females who are named in multiple offences. Nonetheless, FSO reoffending remains significantly lower than what is witnessed in MSOs when considering the entirety of their offending (Cortoni et al., 2010; Cortoni & Hanson, 2005; Freeman & Sandler, 2008; Sandler & Freeman, 2009; Vandiver & Walker, 2002). For example, Sandler and Freeman (2009) found the average number of convictions for felonies, violent (including violent sexual) felonies, drug offences, child victim offences, and weapon-related offences prior to the FSOs' first sexual convictions were all less than one. On the other hand, rates of reoffending for MSOs were 28.97% for non-sex offences (Freeman & Sandler, 2008), although Harris and Hanson (2004) found 37% of MSOs reoffended over a 15-year period and Langevin et al. (2004) found 80.4% of sex offenders reoffended over a 25-year period. However, in our study, repeat FSOs were significantly more likely than only-once FSOs to have a history of violence against the person and public order offences and so future research should aim to understand the differences between the manner FSOs and MSOs reoffend, such as the type of crime committed, against whom, and in what circumstances.

Limitations

There are limitations with the data used in this study, particularly the amount of missing data. Multiple imputation was considered but was irrelevant for most variables, as they either had a "satisfactory" amount of missing data (<5%) or too much missing for imputation to be useful (> 40%; Little & Rubin, 1987). Using complete case analysis can result in biased estimates (Pedersen et al., 2017), however, given the large sample size and that the analyses used contingency table analysis where pooling results might not directly translate to a single set of expected frequencies, making interpretation of a pooled chi-square statistic challenging, pairwise deletion was used.

Additionally, the data were only taken from three police forces and, while they represent a large sample of suspects, they may not be representative of offending in England and Wales as a whole. Other variables were requested as part of the project (e.g. behavioural data at the scene; victim vulnerabilities), but were either unavailable, difficult to recode for parity between forces, or required additional examination by the police analysts extracting the data to assess their reliability before being used further. As such, the variables used in this article represent the majority of the relevant information that could be used to answer the research questions. Further, sex offences remain under-reported crimes and therefore these official police reports may not be representative or generalisable to all sex offences, suspects, and victims. Lastly, there may be a degree of inconsistency in definitions across the forces e.g. someone defined as an acquaintance by one force may have been recorded as a stranger by another. To ensure consistency across the police forces, several decisions regarding how to categorise the data had to be made (see Spence & Crivatu, 2025), which may influence the results. Given the limitations of the data, we also could not explore relationships in more depth, therefore, "relative" includes both step and biological family members, and "acquaintance" includes numerous relationship types including colleagues and people in a position of trust – ideally these would have been separated. The variables were also limited to demographic and criminal history information; psychological factors and situational characteristics, which may have provided a clearer picture of similarities and differences between male and female suspects, were not available in the data. Lastly, in this study we did not look at lone versus co-offending which is a topic of investigation in its own right and may explain some of the findings, for example, the preference of victim sex or age (Muskens et al., 2011).

Implications for policy and practice

While FSOs and MSOs share some similarities, there are differences in terms of their victimology, offence commission, and recidivism (Cortoni & Gannon, 2016; Williams & Bierie, 2015), which should be considered by all investigative and criminal justice agencies. As indicated by the findings, FSOs do exist, but they are not currently charged to the same extent as MSOs. There is a gender gap in sex offender punishment (Shields & Cochran, 2020) and as other researchers, for example Leahy (2020), have argued, it is time to question whether the current legislation and policies are adequate in dealing with sex offences committed by women. After analysing 15 years of crime data of convicted FSOs in one US state, Shields and Cochran (2020) concluded that gendered

perceptions about FSOs mean that they are treated more leniently, namely "[even] when perfectly matched across a host of demographic and legally relevant variables, females convicted of sex offences were significantly less likely than males to go to prison" and that "women are not viewed by the courts as sexual predators or as significant threats if returned to their communities" (pp. 111-112). As noted above, despite finding female suspects were associated with reports of rape, under the Sexual Offences Act (SOA) of 2003 in England and Wales women cannot technically be associated with rape as the offence requires penile penetration, unless the report falls under the legal principles of "joint enterprise" meaning the woman is an accomplice to a man who commits rape (CPS, 2022; Horvath & Gray, 2013) – perhaps this happened for some of the female suspects in our dataset, yet targeted research is needed to understand discrepancies between police recordings of sexual offences and the law. But generally, women's penetrative offences would, legally, come under "sexual assault with penetration" or "causing a person to engage in sexual activity without consent" (CPS, 2022) Sentencing guidelines for these crimes are different, with rape receiving between four years to 19 years in custody and the other sexual offences ranging from 1 year to 19 years in custody; all offences can receive a maximum of life imprisonment (CPS, 2022; Sentencing Council, n.d.). By potentially "downgrading" a rape offence to a contact offence, it will not only impact official statistics on the actual prevalence of rape by women, but also minimise the offence's severity and physical, psychological, and emotional impact on the victim, with such an offence being perceived as "less serious" (Weare, 2018). Legislation (i.e. SOA of 2003 in the English and Welsh context) and police and criminal justice policies need updating to better reflect the realities of sex offending and hold offenders accountable to the same degree regardless of their sex. While a comparative analysis of police outcomes per crime type (rape, contact, non-contact) for male and female only-once and repeat suspects was not possible in the current research due to low numbers of FSOs within each category, future research should endeavour to study how crime type impacts outcomes for female suspects.

Additionally, understanding choices of victims and offending patterns may assist in developing appropriate risk assessment tools, as well as preventive measures and early detection and apprehension. Public perceptions, including those of professionals working with sex offence cases, still minimise and overlook FSOs and their impact on the victims (Christensen, 2021; King & Roberts, 2017; Zack et al., 2018). Male victims and FSOs are rarely considered by the public, professionals, and policymakers (King & Roberts, 2017; Mancini & Pickett, 2016), while the seriousness of the crime, in general, is used to guide crime prevention priorities, investigative resources, and the prosecution processes (Pullerits & Phoenix, 2024; Sinclair, 2022). Increased awareness regarding FSOs amongst the public and professionals is needed to improve recognition and, in turn, reporting. Specialist training is also needed within the police and other criminal justice institutions and organisations so that they are better equipped to deal with sex offences and offenders, and victims are not overlooked (Barbin et al., 2024).

Conclusion

This study's results demonstrate that although MSOs far outnumber FSOs for both single and repeat crimes, when considering repeat suspects, both male and female suspects

have comparable numbers of crimes and victims. Nevertheless, compared to males, there is still a bias against charging FSO suspects. Indeed, authorities may find it especially hard to recognise female suspects given the majority had no other criminal history. However, even when there were multiple reports, these biases continued to exist. Although this study found higher rates of recidivism for female suspects than in previous research, this is in line with self-reports made by victims (Dube et al., 2005). The findings suggest there needs to be more widespread recognition that females perpetrate sex offences, and that female repeat sex offence suspects are just as prolific as their male counterparts.

Notes

1. While we refer in our terminology to "offenders", our data covers both suspects and charged/convicted offenders. We do not make judgements regarding the guilt of the people in our data and only use the terms MSOs and FSOs for ease of reading.
2. The data for this study were collected as part of Operation Soteria Bluestone (OSB), funded by the UK Home Office. OSB was designed by Katrin Hohl and Betsy Stanko, work package (pillar) leads were Kari Davies, Miranda Horvath, Kelly Johnson, Jo Lovett, Tiggey May, Olivia Smith, and Emma Williams. OSB aimed to improve the investigation of rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO) in England and Wales. The data were not collected for the purpose of this paper. Full details of the project, including timeline, details of the work packages, and the number of forces involved can be found in Stanko (2022).
3. To date research on sex offending has typically talked about differences between males and females in terms of gender. Police forces in England and Wales typically record suspect's sex based on the officer's visual assessment of the suspect without asking them how they identify themselves. 'The terms sex and gender are the subject of debate (see Mikkola, 2008 for a detailed discussion of the debates); for clarity throughout this paper we use the terms used by previous authors when discussing their studies and sex when referring to the police data we analysed as this is the terminology the police use.
4. Further analyses regarding police investigative outcomes and type of sex offence (rape, contact, non-contact) for male and female only-once and repeat suspects were not possible due to low numbers of FSOs within each category of offence. We discuss this in the "Implications for policy and practice" section of the Discussion.

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