

Article

Public perceptions of crime in England and Wales: year ending March 2016

An article covering public perceptions of crime and worry about crime at both the national and local level, using data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW).

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1 . Introduction

As well as being used to estimate actual levels of crime in England and Wales, the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) also contains a range of questions on respondents' perceptions of crime. The year ending March 2016 survey included questions on perceived levels of crime in the country as a whole and in the local area, worry about crime, perceived likelihood of victimisation and perceptions of feeling safe .

The aim of this article is to provide a picture of people's perceptions of crime and how these compare with levels of victimisation by presenting some findings from the CSEW.

Notes for: Introduction

1. Perceptions of feeling safe refer to the questions on how safe people feel walking alone after dark, walking alone during the day and being home alone at night. These questions are not included on the year ending 2017 and year ending 2018 questionnaires.

2 . Things you need to know about this release

Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) data for the year ending March 2016 have been used throughout this publication as this is the most recent year in which all of the relevant perception questions were asked in the survey.

Some caution is required when comparing perceptions of how likely people think they are to be a victim of crime in the next 12 months with victimisation rates from the CSEW. Firstly, the latter are based on experience of crime in the 12 months prior to interview, while the perception questions ask about the year ahead. Secondly, perception data are provided as a category response ranging from "very unlikely" to "very likely" and cannot be directly mapped onto a victimisation rate. It also does not necessarily follow that someone who says it is unlikely they will experience a crime in the next 12 months believes that they are at no risk.

3 . How do perceptions of local and national crime levels differ?

While the level of crime measured by the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) has been falling since a peak in 1995, the survey has consistently shown that most people perceive that crime across the country as a whole has still been rising (Supplementary table S29), although the proportion of people reporting this has decreased in recent years.

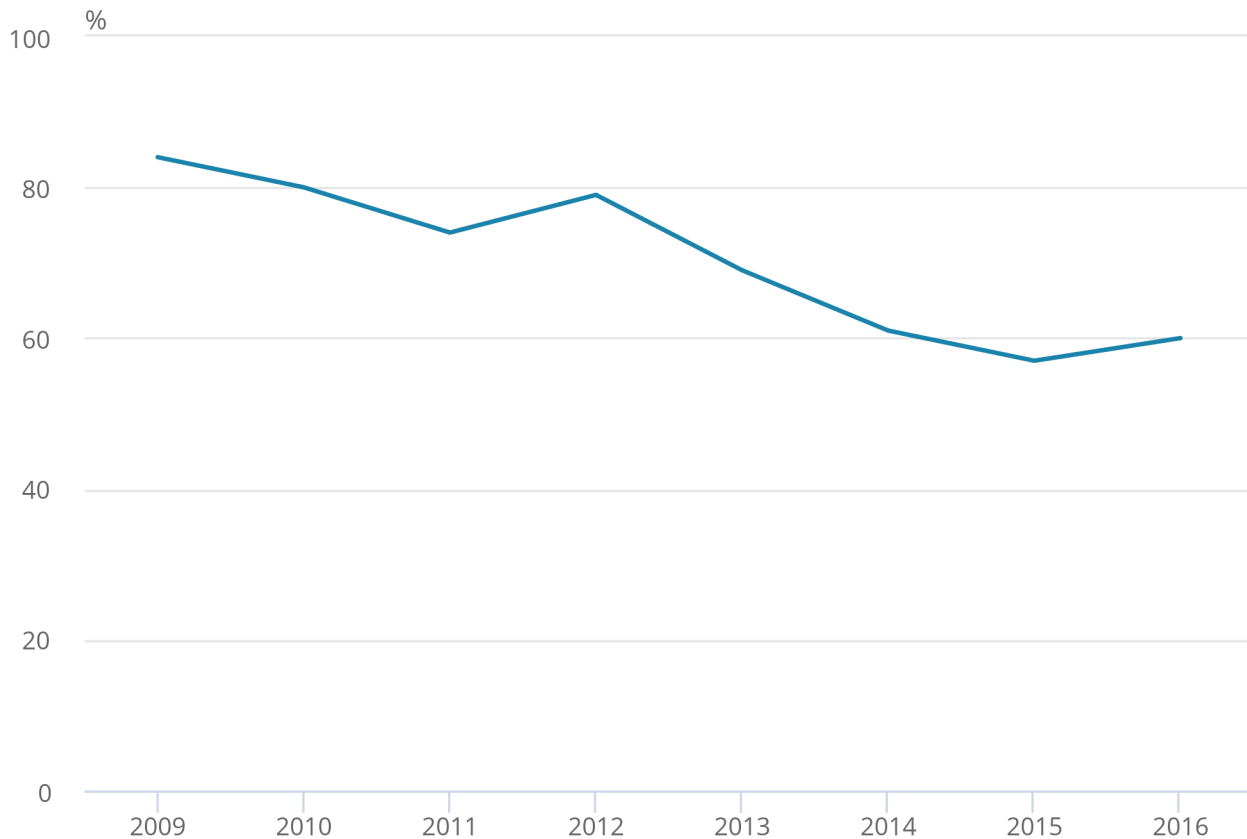
When asked whether they thought crime had gone up or down in the country in the past few years, the majority of adults (60%) responded that it had gone up, which is higher than in the previous year (57%). However, even with this small but statistically significant increase, the figure is still lower than in the year ending March 2009 ¹ when 84% of people believed crime across the country had risen.

Figure 1: Percentage of adults who think crime has gone up in the past few years in the country as a whole

England and Wales, year ending March 2009 to year ending March 2016

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England and Wales, year ending March 2009 to year ending March 2016



Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales, Office for National Statistics

Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales, Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. From the year ending March 2009 to the year ending March 2012, two questions on perceptions of changing crime levels were included in the CSEW. For the year ending March 2013, the question 'How much would you say the crime rate here has changed since two years ago?' was dropped from the survey.
2. Unweighted base refers to perceived change in national crime. Bases for local crime will be slightly smaller due to only including respondents that have lived in their area 3 years or more.

The downward trend in the number of adults who perceived crime to be increasing across the country has coincided with a real downward trend in victimisation.

A similar pattern can also be seen in the number of adults who indicated whether they thought crime was a problem for the country as a whole. In the year ending March 2016, a total of 83.5% of respondents indicated that they thought crime was a big problem. This was a statistically significant decrease from the 88.2% recorded in the year ending March 2013, but despite this downward trend, over three-quarters of adults surveyed have consistently reported that they perceive crime to be a big problem for the country.

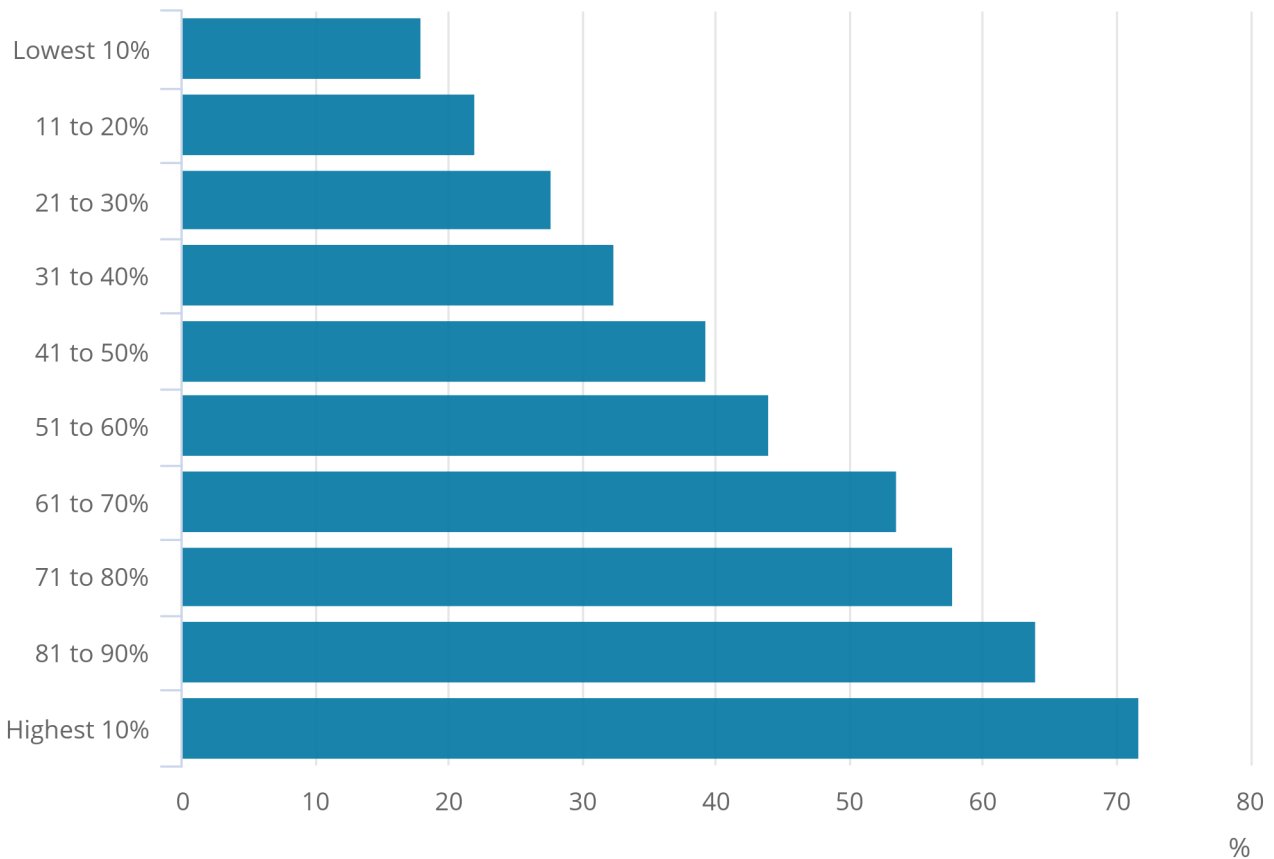
In general, the survey shows that individuals' perceptions of crime on a national level do not typically match well to reality. However, the CSEW estimate of crime does not cover all types of offences and therefore may only relate to a subset of the crimes on which people base their perceptions.

The CSEW suggests that there is better alignment between perceptions of crime and reality at the local level. When individuals are asked questions about crime in their immediate local area, perceptions seem to match reality more closely. Figure 2 shows the relationship between people's perceptions of the comparative level of crime in their local area and the Crime Domain of the English and Welsh Indices of Deprivation. The indices of deprivation are based on the level of police recorded crime per head of population and can be considered an objective proxy measure of crime.

Figure 2: Percentage of adults who thought crime in their local area was similar to, or higher than crime in the country as a whole, by Crime Deprivation

England and Wales, year ending March 2016

Figure 2: Percentage of adults who thought crime in their local area was similar to, or higher than crime in the country as a whole, by Crime Deprivation
England and Wales, year ending March 2016



Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales, Office for National Statistics

Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales, Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Crime Domain of the English Indices of Deprivation (2010) and the Community Safety Domain of the Welsh Indices of Deprivation (2014) have been combined to provide a proxy of crime levels in various lower layer super output areas. Section 7.1 of the [User Guide](#) has more information on how this is calculated.
2. 'Lowest 10%' includes areas with least crime. 'Highest 10%' includes areas with highest crime.

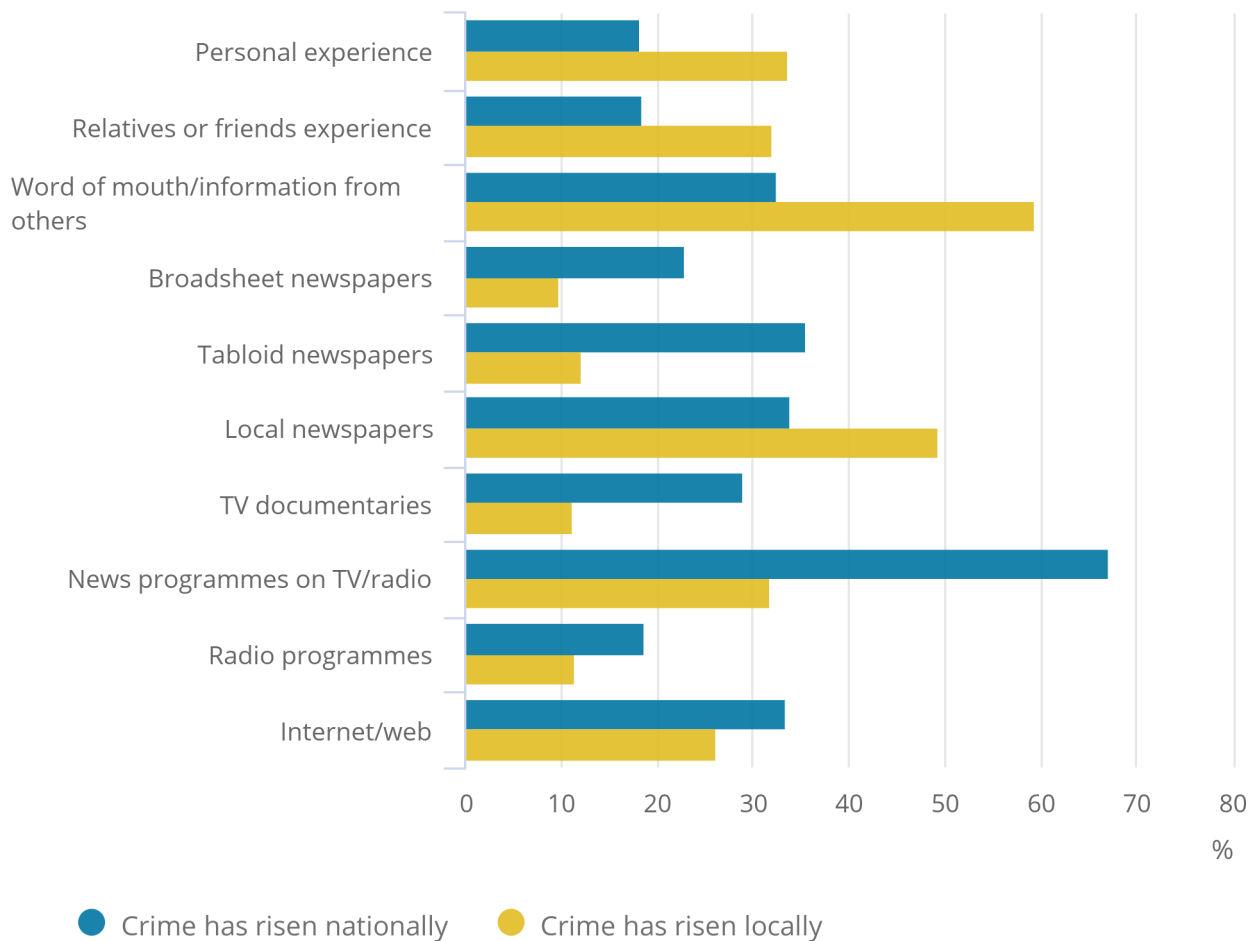
Figure 2 indicates a clear relationship between an objective measure of the levels of crime in a local area ² and people's subjective perceptions. The proportion of adults who felt that crime levels in their local area were similar to or higher than levels for the country as a whole was highest in the areas with highest levels of crimes and lowest in the lowest crime areas.

It is perhaps not surprising that people are more accurate in their perceptions of local crime than they are about crime that occurs outside of their local area, since they are more likely to have direct knowledge of local events. Figure 3 shows that the sources people said they used to inform their opinions on rising crime varied substantially depending on whether they were thinking about local or national areas. When people formed opinions about crime in their local area, they were more reliant on their own experiences or the experiences of people in their communities. However, when people formed perceptions of crime across the whole country their main source of information was the media.

Figure 3: Percentage of adults who thought crime had been rising either locally or nationally by the sources they felt had informed their opinions

England and Wales, year ending March 2016

Figure 3: Percentage of adults who thought crime had been rising either locally or nationally by the sources they felt had informed their opinions
England and Wales, year ending March 2016



Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales, Office for National Statistics

Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales, Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Unweighted base refers to perceived change in national crime. Bases for local crime will be slightly smaller due to only including respondents that have lived in their area 3 years or more.

Notes for: How do perceptions of local and national crime levels differ?

1. From the year ending March 2009, the CSEW has included the question “What do you think has happened to crime in the country as a whole over the past few years?”
2. Local area definitions for the English and Welsh Indices of deprivation are based on Super Output Areas (SOAs). These are a set of geographical areas developed following the census to produce a set of areas of consistent size for statistical reporting purposes. Lower layer super output areas (LSOAs) typically have a population of around 1,500.

4 . How do perceptions of risk compare to victimisation rates?

In April 2008, a question was introduced on the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) to ask respondents how likely they think they are to be a victim of crime in the next 12 months. In the year ending March 2009, 1 in 4 people (26.2%) said they thought they were very or fairly likely to be a victim of crime in the next year.

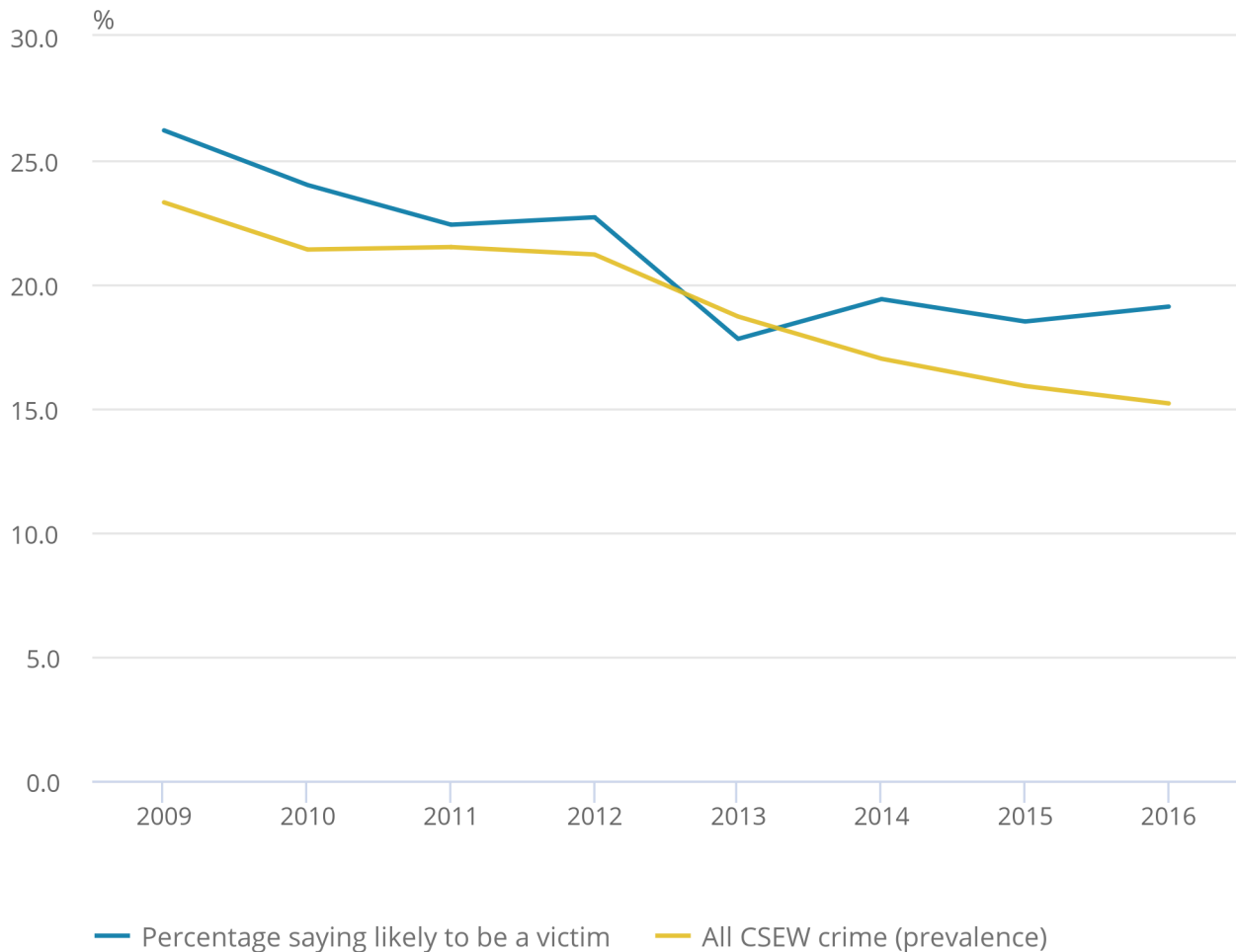
Since then, there has been a gradual but significant decline to around 1 in 5 people (19.1%) in the year ending March 2016. This decline in the perceived likelihood of being a victim of crime corresponds to the overall trend in CSEW crime prevalence¹, which significantly decreased from 23.3% in the year ending March 2009 to 15.2% in the year ending March 2016 (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Perceived likelihood of being a victim of crime and overall Crime Survey for England and Wales crime prevalence

England and Wales, year ending March 2009 to year ending March 2016

Figure 4: Perceived likelihood of being a victim of crime and overall Crime Survey for England and Wales crime prevalence

England and Wales, year ending March 2009 to year ending March 2016



Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales, Office for National Statistics

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Notes:

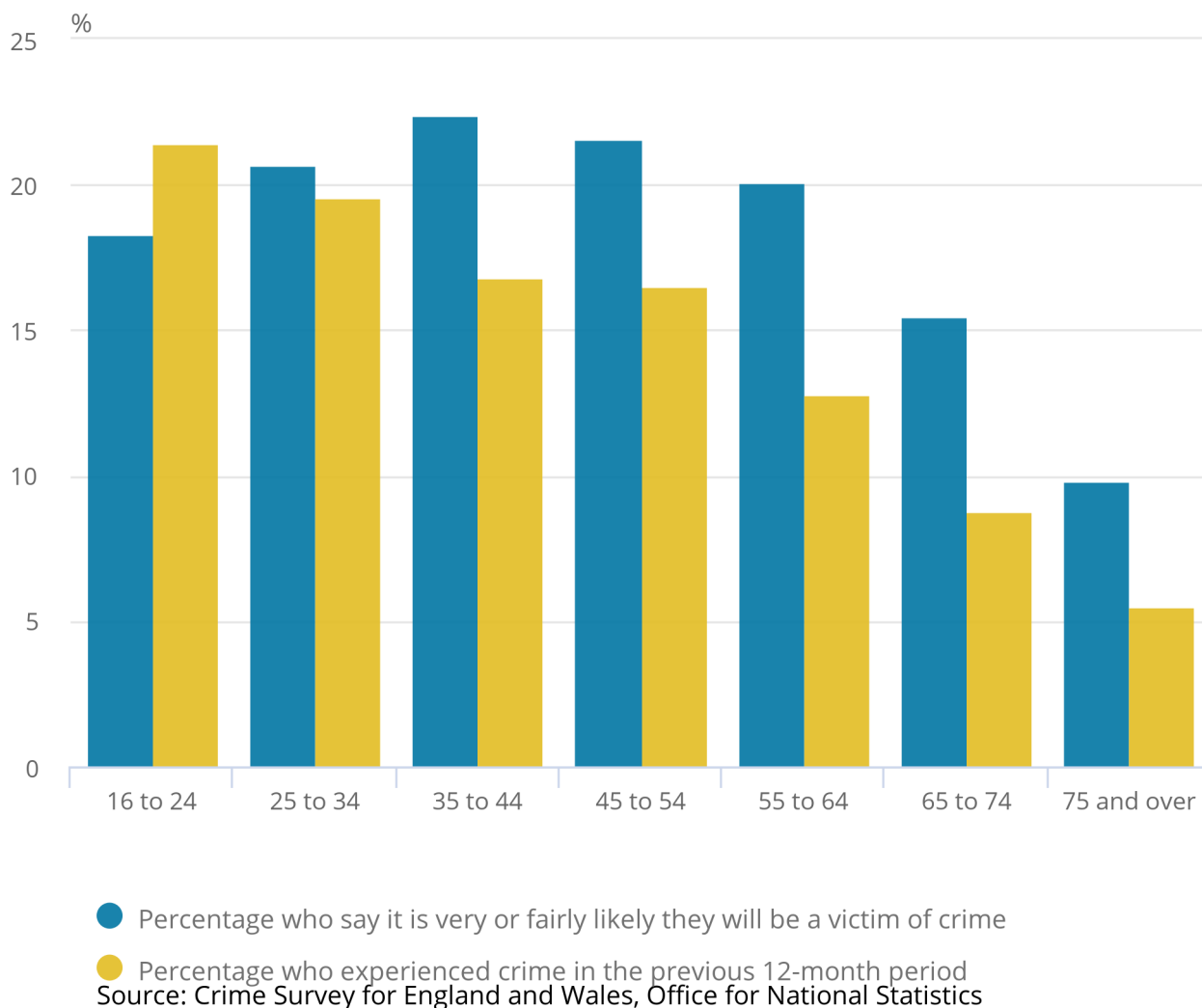
1. Questions on perceived likelihood of being a victim were only asked of three-quarters of the CSEW sample up until the year ending March 2012.

Demographic analysis of the victimisation rate² and questions about individuals' perceived likelihood of victimisation showed some variation in the accuracy of perceptions by age for the year ending March 2016. Whilst those aged 16 to 24 years showed a tendency to underestimate victimisation amongst their age group, those aged 25 to 34 years were able to produce a better estimate of their likelihood of experiencing victimisation. Individuals aged 35 and over generally tended to overestimate their likelihood of victimisation when compared to the victimisation rate.

Figure 5: Percentage of adults who thought it was likely they would be a victim of crime and the percentage of adults who had experienced a crime in the previous year by age

England and Wales, year ending March 2016

Figure 5: Percentage of adults who thought it was likely they would be a victim of crime and the percentage of adults who had experienced a crime in the previous year by age
England and Wales, year ending March 2016



Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales, Office for National Statistics

Notes for: How do perceptions of risk compare to victimisation rates?

1. CSEW crime does not provide an absolute count of crime and has notable exclusions. The CSEW excludes those crimes often termed as “victimless” (for example, possession of drugs). Homicides and some sensitive topics such as sexual offences are also excluded. Fraud was added to the types of crime covered by the survey in October 2015, but it is not included in the data presented in this article relating to the year ending March 2016.
2. Excluding fraud.

5 . Worry about crime

Trends in worries about different types of crime give a more detailed breakdown of people's perceptions and fear of crime. Since the year ending March 2003, there has been a downward trend in the proportion of adults worried about crime types such as burglary, car crime and violence, with some fluctuation from year to year (see [Supplementary table S34 from Crime in England and Wales, year ending March 2016](#)). A similar downward trend can be observed when looking at the percentages of adults or households that have been a victim of domestic burglary, vehicle-related theft, robbery and violent crime (see [Appendix Table A3](#) from Crime in England and Wales, year ending March 2016).

What information is available on worry about fraud?

In the year ending March 2014 Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW), a new question was introduced asking respondents how worried they are about being a victim of online crime, followed by the addition of a question on how worried respondents are about having their personal details used without their permission or prior knowledge in the year ending March 2015 questionnaire.

In addition, new questions covering fraud and computer misuse¹ were added to the victimisation module of the survey in October 2015 to capture the changing nature of crime enabled by new technologies such as the internet.

When looking at personal characteristics of respondents in the year ending March 2016, younger respondents were significantly less likely to worry about being a victim of online crime or having their personal details stolen than older age groups. Less than 5% of 16- to 24-year-olds worried about online crime compared with 13% of 55- to 64-year-olds and 13% of 65- to 74-year-olds. Similarly, 16% of 16- to 24-year-olds worried about having their personal details stolen compared with 28% of 55- to 64-year-olds and 28% of 65- to 74-year-olds (Figure 6).

Experimental Statistics from the CSEW for the year ending March 2016 showed 6.5% of all people aged 16 and over were victims of fraud and 3.6% were victims of computer misuse. The oldest age groups were the least likely to have experienced these types of crimes; of 65- to 74-year-olds, 4.6% were victims of fraud and 3.3% were victims of computer misuse (the equivalent figures for those aged 75 and over were 4.0% and 0.6% respectively).

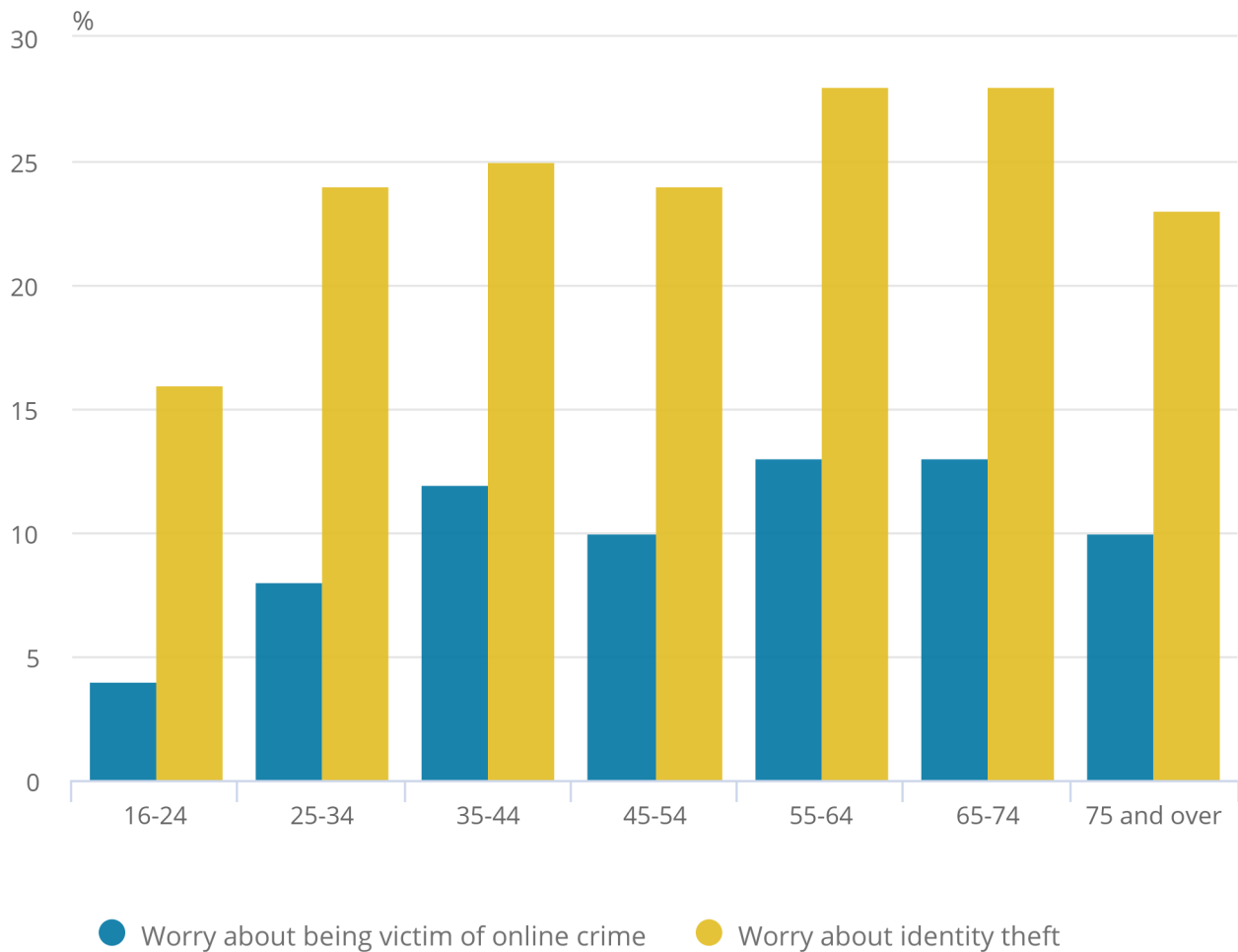
No trend data are currently available from the CSEW for crimes involving fraud and computer misuse, the first year-on-year comparisons will be available for publication in January 2018 as part of Crime in England and Wales, year ending October 2017.

Figure 6: Proportion of adults highly worried about online crime and identity theft by age

England and Wales, year ending March 2016

Figure 6: Proportion of adults highly worried about online crime and identity theft by age

England and Wales, year ending March 2016



Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales, Office for National Statistics

Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales, Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Unweighted bases refer to 'Worry about being a victim of online crime'. Other unweighted bases will be similar.

Notes for: Worry about crime

1. These questions are currently only asked of half the sample and are still considered Experimental Statistics. Because of the differing sample sizes and experimental nature of fraud data derived from these new questions, fraud has not been included in the measure of all CSEW crime for the time periods covered in this article.

6 . Does victim status affect people's perceptions of crime?

It is expected that people who have been a victim of a certain type of crime would be more worried about being a victim of that crime in the future. Table 1 shows that is the case for most crime types, for example, 63% of all victims of vehicle-related theft (including attempts) were very or fairly worried about being a victim of vehicle-related theft in the future.

However, less than 10% of victims of violent crime said they were very worried about being a victim of violence in the future, while 63% of victims were not worried about being a victim of violent crime. While it is not possible to fully identify why this may be the case, it may be related to the different crime types included in the wider "violence" category. Just over half of Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) violence (55%) falls into the sub-category of "violence without injury". Victims have consistently given these crimes a lower seriousness rating than incidents of "violence with injury" and are more likely to report that they were not emotionally affected by the incident ([Violence Nature of Crime tables 3.5 and 3.6](#)). Victims of less serious forms of violence may therefore be less likely to worry about being a victim of violence in the future. There are also definitional differences ¹ between the crime types included in the CSEW's estimates of violence and estimates of worry about violence.

Table 1: Worry about different types of crime by victimisation of headline crime type, year ending March 2016, Crime Survey for England and Wales

England and Wales				Adults aged 16 and over
	Very worried	Fairly worried	Not very / not at all worried	Unweighted base - number of adults ^{1,2}
Percentage				
Burglary				8,729
Victim	25.6	34.2	40.2	200
Not a victim	10.3	25.7	64.0	8,529
Vehicle related theft (including attempts)				6,980
Victim	15.0	48.3	36.7	230
Not a victim	5.7	23.7	70.7	6,750
Violent crime³				8,272
Victim	8.7	28.8	62.5	127
Not a victim	11.0	18.1	70.9	8,145

Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales, Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. The unweighted base for fraud and computer misuse will be smaller because the questions around whether respondents were a victim of this type of crime were only introduced in the last two quarters of the year ending March 2016 and they were only asked of a half sample.
2. The unweighted base for vehicle related theft will be slightly smaller because not every household owns a vehicle.
3. The category of worry about violent crime encompasses worry about being raped, being attacked by a stranger and being attacked because of skin colour, ethnic origin or religion. However, the offence category of violent crime encompasses many more crime types such as domestic violence, so the figures need to be interpreted with caution. For more information please see Section 5.1 from the latest User Guide.

There was a significant difference between victims and non-victims when asked about whether crime is going up or down, both nationally and locally. When asked whether crime has gone up or down in their local area, 46% of victims and 29% of non-victims reported that crime has gone up. At the national level the difference is smaller than at local level, although still significant – 63% of victims and 59% of non-victims said that crime has gone up in the country as a whole. In contrast, when asked about how much of a problem crime is in the country as a whole and in the local area, there were no statistically significant differences between victims and non-victims; a high proportion of both groups viewed crime as a big problem (see [Appendix Table A5](#)).

If respondents report that they have been a victim of crime in the 12 months prior to the interview, they are asked whether they perceive the incident to be a crime or not. Almost 3 in 4 incidents (72%) reported in the survey were considered a crime by the victim in the year ending March 2016, and this has remained at a similar level since the year ending March 2006 (see [Appendix Table A3](#)). Around one-third (31%) of all incidents that were viewed as a crime were reported to the police (Table 2). The main reasons why respondents did not report the incident to the police were: the incident being regarded as too trivial or not worth reporting (39%), the police could have done nothing (29%) and the police would not have bothered or not have been interested (17%).

Table 2: Proportion of criminal incidents that the victim viewed as a crime, by whether the victim reported the incident to the police, year ending March 2016, Crime Survey for England and Wales

England and Wales	Adults aged 16 and over	
	Victim viewed the incident as a crime	
	Yes	No
	Percentage	
Victim reported the incident to the police	31	12
Victim did not report the incident to the police	69	88
Unweighted base - number of adults	5,260	1,629

Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales, Office for National Statistics

Notes for: Does victim status affect people’s perceptions of crime?

1. Worry about violent crime consists of worry about specific violent acts including being raped, attacked by a stranger and attacked because of skin colour, ethnic origin, or religion, while the headline offence category of violence reported in the survey encompasses a wider range of violent incidents, including domestic violence.

7 . What other sources of information are available on perceptions of crime?

Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW)

Data relating to the perceptions of crime questions included in the CSEW are published annually.

The latest figures are included in the [supplementary tables](#) of the Crime in England and Wales, year ending March 2017 release. However, as data for previous years include a greater level of detail on perceptions (as some perceptions questions were removed from the survey from April 2016 onwards), this article is based on information contained in the supplementary tables for the year ending March 2016, which are also available in the [supplementary tables](#).

Scotland

Crime statistics for Scotland are collected and published separately by the [Scottish Government](#).

The Scottish Crime and Justice Survey (SCJS) follows a similar format to the Crime Survey for England and Wales, having a shared antecedence in the British Crime Survey (whose sample during some rounds of the survey in the 1980s covered Scotland, south of the Caledonian Canal). So, while there are differences in the crimes or offence classifications to reflect the differing legal systems, the data are broadly comparable.

Northern Ireland

Crime statistics for Northern Ireland are collected and published separately by the [Department of Justice \(Northern Ireland\)](#).

The Northern Ireland Crime Survey (NICS) also closely mirrors the format and content of the Crime Survey for England and Wales, using a very similar methodology with continuous interviewing and a face-to-face interview with a nationally representative sample of adults (aged 16 years and over), using a similar set of questions. Therefore, results from the two surveys are broadly comparable.