

CRIME & CULTURE

Online behaviour, public space, youth violence, hate crime and gendered safety shaped the crime picture in 2023



Prepared by
Kulturalism

Presented for
Public Interest

Kulturalism CIC. (2023). Crime and Culture in the UK 2023. Kulturalism CIC. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.21261744

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Executive Summary

Crime is shaped by behaviour, opportunity, fear, inequality, technology, public space, relationships, social pressure and the culture people live inside every day. A crime statistic may appear as a number, but behind every figure there is a victim, a suspect, a family, a community and a wider social environment.

This report looks at the 2023 crime picture through the lens of culture. It does not use the word culture to blame communities or reduce crime to ethnicity, background or identity. It uses culture in its broader and more honest sense: the conditions, attitudes, pressures, risks and behaviours that influence how crime happens, how people respond to it, and how safe people feel.

The main statistical picture used in this report is England and Wales, because crime data is collected and published separately across England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Where the phrase “UK” is used, it refers to the wider public and social context, but the main figures are drawn from England and Wales unless stated otherwise.

In 2023, England and Wales experienced 8.4 million incidents of headline crime according to the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW). While long-term trends remain lower than pre-2017 levels, certain crimes rose sharply and public confidence was tested by visible street crime, online fraud, knife carrying among young people, and everyday anti-social behaviour.

Key 2023 headlines:

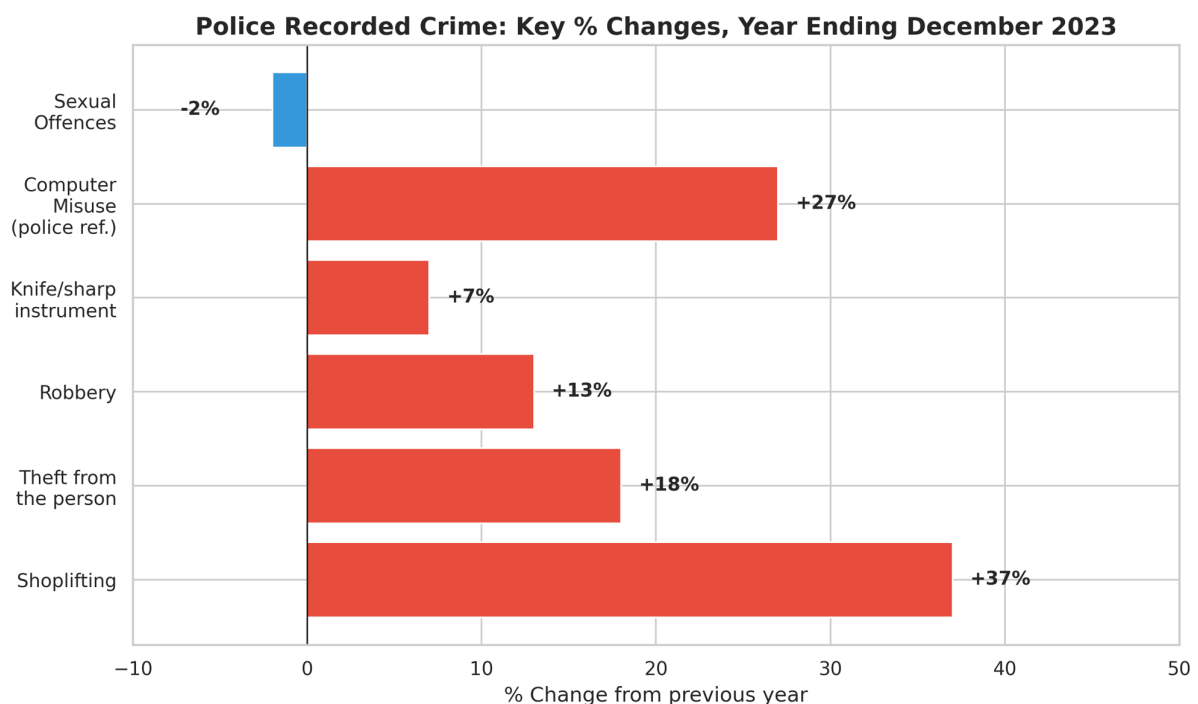
- Fraud fell but still dominated (3.1 million incidents)
- Shoplifting surged +37% (highest since 2003)
- Knife/sharp instrument offences rose +7%
- 1 in 5 teenagers skipped school because they felt unsafe
- 2.1 million people experienced domestic abuse

The 2023 crime picture

The Crime Survey for England and Wales estimated that there were 8.4 million incidents of headline crime in the year ending December 2023. This included theft, robbery, criminal damage, fraud, computer misuse and violence with or without injury. The figure did not show a statistically significant change from the previous year, but it remained 25% lower than the year ending March 2017, when fraud and computer misuse were first included in the headline measure.

That long-term reduction matters, but it does not mean communities felt safe in 2023. Public safety is not shaped by national totals alone. A person's view of crime is often shaped by what happens outside their home, what they see online, whether they trust agencies to act, whether they feel safe walking alone, whether their children are exposed to violence, and whether victims believe reporting will lead to protection.

This is why Kulturalism looks beyond the number. Crime prevention has to start before the offence, not only after the arrest. A safer society needs police, courts and prisons, but it also needs stronger communities, better education, early intervention, safer public spaces and honest conversations about the culture surrounding harm.



Online culture

Fraud, scams and computer misuse

One of the strongest messages from the 2023 figures is that crime is no longer only happening in the street. It is happening through phones, banking apps, social media accounts, emails, fake identities and online pressure.

CSEW figures (year ending December 2023):

- Fraud: 3.1 million incidents (–16%)
- Computer misuse: 984,000 incidents (+29%)

Digital crime is now part of everyday life. Prevention must include digital confidence and online safeguarding.

Street culture: theft, robbery, shoplifting and public confidence

Police recorded crime (year ending December 2023):

- Shoplifting: 430,104 offences (+37%) — highest since current recording began in 2003
- Theft from the person: 125,563 offences (+18%) — highest since 2004
- Robbery: 81,094 offences (+13%)

The Crime Survey for England and Wales **estimated 3.1 million fraud incidents** in the year ending December 2023. This was a 16% decrease compared with the previous year, but fraud still represented one of the largest crime types affecting individuals and households.

Fraud is often treated as a financial issue, but it is also a cultural issue. It relies on trust, panic, loneliness, pressure and manipulation. The offender may never meet the victim, but the harm can still enter the home, the bank account, the relationship and the victim's sense of safety.

Computer misuse moved in the opposite direction. The **CSEW estimated around 984,000** offences of computer misuse in the year ending December 2023, which was a 29% increase compared with the previous year. ONS linked this increase mainly to a rise in unauthorised access to personal information.

This matters because digital crime is now part of everyday life. The online world has created new routes into exploitation, grooming, blackmail, stalking, harassment, fraud and identity abuse. Crime prevention therefore cannot only mean locks, alarms and police patrols. It must also mean digital confidence, online safeguarding, education about scams, and practical support for people who do not know what to do when their private life is targeted through technology.

Street culture

Theft, robbery, shoplifting and public confidence

Street crime remained a major concern in 2023. Police recorded robbery offences increased by 13% to 81,094 offences in the year ending December 2023. Theft from the person increased by 18% to 125,563 offences, the highest level since the year ending March 2004. Shoplifting increased by 37% to 430,104 recorded offences, the highest figure since current police recording practices began in the year ending March 2003.

These figures show why public confidence can fall even when long-term crime trends appear lower. People do not experience safety as a graph. They experience it when they go to the shop, use public transport, walk through town, open their business, send their child out, or return home after dark.

Shoplifting is often misunderstood. It can involve poverty, addiction, organised offending, intimidation, repeat behaviour and violence or abuse towards retail workers. It affects businesses, workers, customers and town centres. When shoplifting becomes visible and persistent, it can send a message that public rules are weakening and that communities are being left to cope.

Robbery and theft from the person also connect to street culture, opportunity and fear. A phone snatch or street robbery may take seconds, but the impact can last much longer. Victims may change routes, avoid certain places, stop going out alone, feel embarrassed, or feel angry that the offender appeared to act without consequence.

The 2023 picture therefore shows that prevention must include environmental safety, visible guardianship, better lighting, community presence, youth diversion, business support and consistent responses to repeat offending.

Knife crime, fear and youth identity

Knife crime remained one of the most serious public concerns in 2023. Police recorded 49,489 offences involving knives or sharp instruments in the year ending December 2023, excluding Greater Manchester Police and Devon and Cornwall Police. This was a 7% increase compared with the previous year. Police also recorded 27,672 possession of article with a blade or point offences in the year ending December 2023, which was 19% higher than the year ending March 2020.

Knife crime is not only a criminal justice issue. It is also a cultural issue because it can be linked to fear, reputation, peer pressure, retaliation, exploitation, social media, trauma and a belief that carrying a weapon creates safety. For some young people, the knife is not carried because they intend to kill. It is carried because they are afraid, because they want status, because they believe others are carrying, or because they have been pulled into a world where violence feels normal.

That does not excuse carrying a weapon. It explains why prevention has to be realistic. Telling young people “do not carry a knife” is not enough if they live in an environment where they believe carrying one is protection. The message must be stronger: carrying a knife increases danger, escalates conflict, raises the risk of serious harm, and can destroy the life of the person carrying it as well as the person harmed.

The Youth Endowment Fund’s 2023 survey adds important context. It found that 16% of teenage children had been a victim of violence in the previous 12 months, 47% had been a victim or witness of violence, and 60% had seen real-world acts of violence on social media. It also found that 29% had seen content relating to weapons, and one in five children said they had skipped school because they felt unsafe.

These figures show why youth violence cannot be separated from youth culture. Children are not only witnessing violence in person. Many are also seeing it repeated, shared, mocked, glorified or normalised online. That changes how fear spreads. It changes how conflict escalates. It changes how young people understand risk.

Police recorded (year ending December 2023, excluding Greater Manchester and Devon & Cornwall):

- Offences involving knives or sharp instruments: 49,489 (+7%)
- Possession of article with a blade or point: 27,672 (+19% vs year ending March 2020)

The Youth Endowment Fund’s 2023 survey remains highly relevant: 16% of teenage children had been a victim of violence, 47% had been a victim or witness, and 60% had seen real-world violence on social media.

Gender, safety and sexual offending

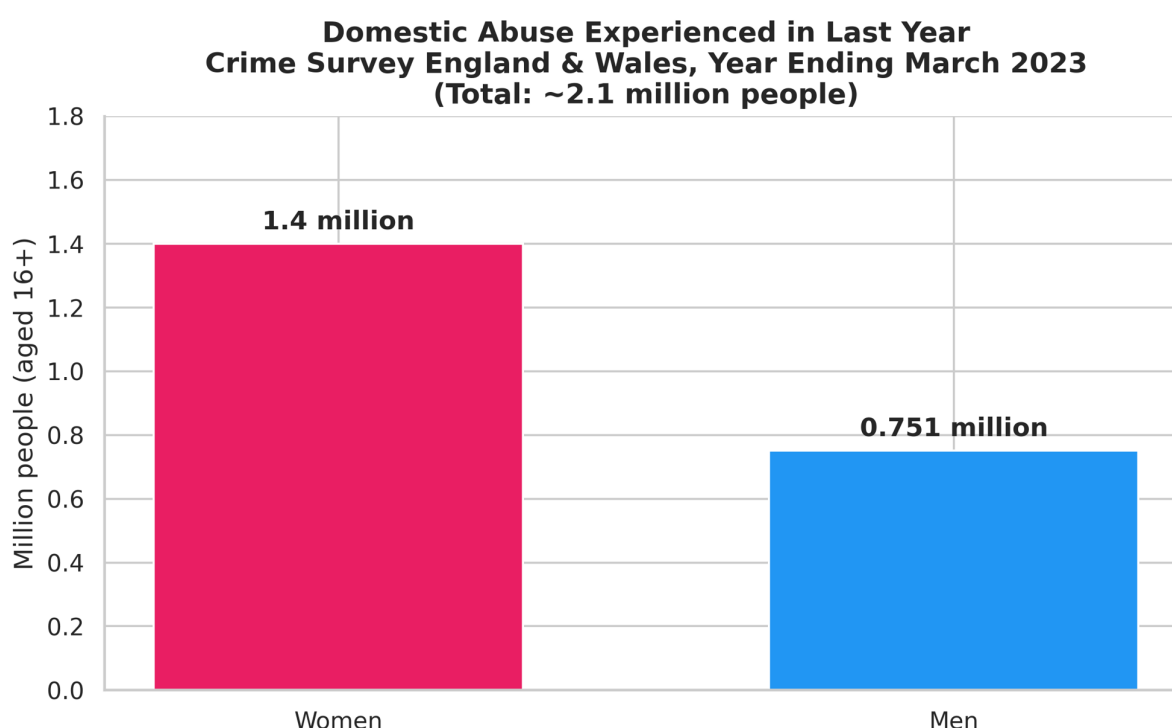
The 2023 figures also show why gendered safety must remain central to any serious crime prevention work. Police recorded 191,052 sexual offences in the year ending December 2023. Of those, 68,387 were rape offences, making up 36% of recorded sexual offences.

These figures should be read carefully. Police recorded sexual offences are affected by reporting behaviour, recording practices, historic reporting and public confidence. A fall or rise in recorded offences does not automatically mean the true level of harm has moved in the same direction. Sexual offending is often hidden, delayed in reporting, or never reported at all.

Domestic abuse also remained a major concern. For the year ending March 2023, the Crime Survey for England and Wales estimated that 1.4 million women and 751,000 men aged 16 years and over had experienced domestic abuse in the last year. That is approximately 2.1 million people.

This is where culture becomes unavoidable. Women's safety is affected by behaviour in relationships, public attitudes towards control, stalking, harassment, sexual entitlement, online abuse, public space, reporting experiences and agency responses. Men can also be victims, and support must recognise that. However, the available data continues to show that women are disproportionately affected by many forms of domestic abuse, sexual violence and fear-based restriction.

A safer culture is one where abuse is named early, stalking is taken seriously, coercive control is understood, sexual violence is not minimised, victims are believed and supported, and prevention is not left until the point of crisis.



Hate crime, belonging and public hostility

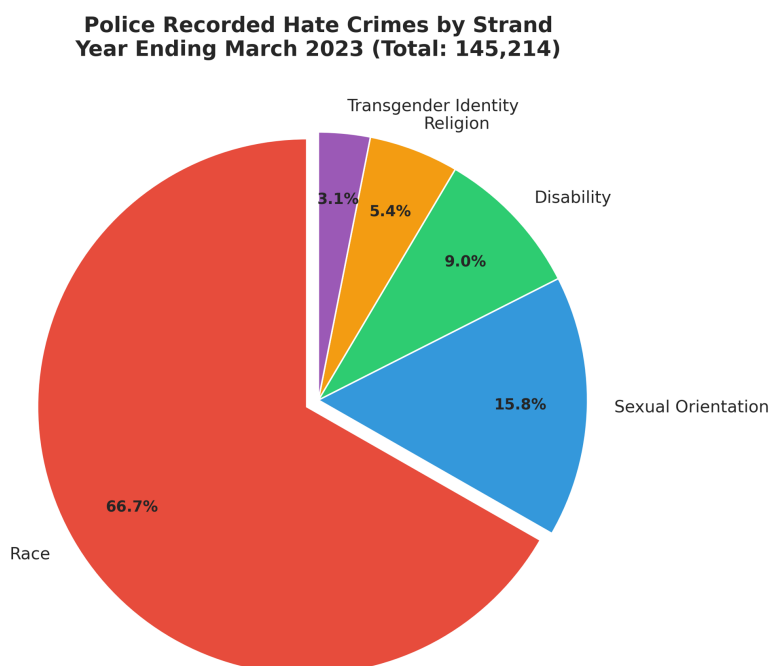
Hate crime is one of the clearest examples of crime and culture meeting directly. In the year ending March 2023, police recorded 145,214 hate crimes in England and Wales, excluding Devon and Cornwall Police. Race hate crimes accounted for 70% of recorded hate crimes, with 101,906 offences. Religious hate crimes totalled 8,241 offences, sexual orientation hate crimes 24,102, disability hate crimes 13,777, and transgender identity hate crimes 4,732.

The Home Office cautions that police recorded hate crime figures should not be treated as a full measure of prevalence. Recording practices, victim confidence and police identification all affect the numbers. Even so, the figures show the level of hate crime-related demand placed on policing and the scale of hostility being reported.

Where the targeted religion was recorded in religious hate crime offences, 44% were targeted against Muslims and 19% against Jewish people in the year ending March 2023.

Hate crime harms more than the direct victim. It sends a message to a wider group that they are not safe, not welcome, or not equal. A single offence can affect families, faith groups, neighbourhoods, schools, workplaces and public confidence. This is why hate crime must be understood as both individual offending and community harm.

A safer society cannot only respond after hate has been acted out. It must challenge dehumanisation, misinformation, public hostility, online abuse and the everyday normalisation of prejudice before it becomes violence, harassment or intimidation.



Anti-social behaviour and the everyday experience of safety

Anti-social behaviour is often dismissed as low-level, but for victims and communities it can be deeply damaging. The CSEW estimated that 35% of people had experienced or witnessed some type of anti-social behaviour in the year ending December 2023. Police recorded 1.0 million ASB incidents in the same period, including British Transport Police.

ASB matters because it affects daily life. It can make people feel trapped in their own homes, afraid to use shared spaces, anxious about retaliation, or abandoned by agencies. Repeated noise, threats, harassment, intimidation, vandalism, drug activity or disorder can wear people down over time.

The cultural issue is not only the behaviour itself. It is also the response to it. When residents report ASB and nothing appears to change, trust declines. When agencies work in isolation, victims can be left repeating themselves. When serious patterns are treated as isolated incidents, risk can escalate.

Prevention therefore requires joined-up action. Housing providers, councils, police, safeguarding teams, schools, youth services and community organisations all have a role. The earlier patterns are recognised, the less likely communities are to reach crisis point.

What the 2023 figures tell us about prevention

The 2023 figures do not point to one simple cause of crime. They show a mixed picture. Some long-term trends are lower than previous decades. Some harms are rising. Some offences are better measured through surveys. Others rely on police recording. Some crimes happen in private. Others happen in public. Some are driven by opportunity. Others are driven by control, exploitation, hostility or fear.

This is why prevention must be broader than punishment. Courts and prisons matter, but they are not the beginning of the story. By the time someone is arrested, a lot has usually already happened. There may have been missed warning signs, unmet needs, untreated trauma, exploitation, school exclusion, online radicalisation, poverty, addiction, family breakdown, fear, peer pressure or previous victimisation.

Kulturalism's position is that safer streets start before crime happens. That means practical public education, honest crime prevention, early intervention, community safety, victim support, youth guidance, digital awareness and justice information that ordinary people can understand.

The 2023 figures show five clear priorities.

First, online safety must be treated as mainstream crime prevention. Fraud, computer misuse, grooming, blackmail, stalking and harassment can all happen through digital routes.

Second, youth violence must be addressed through fear, identity, exploitation and social media, not only through enforcement.

Third, women's safety must remain central to public safety work, including domestic abuse, stalking, sexual violence, harassment and fear in public spaces.

Fourth, hate crime must be treated as community harm, not only as isolated incidents between individuals.

Fifth, anti-social behaviour must be taken seriously before repeated harm becomes normalised and communities lose trust in the systems designed to protect them.

Safer streets start with understanding the full picture

The 2023 crime picture shows that crime is not only a legal issue. It is a social issue, a cultural issue, a safeguarding issue and a community issue.

A robbery may be recorded as one offence, but it can change how a person moves through the world. A fraud offence may be recorded as financial loss, but it can destroy confidence and trust. A domestic abuse incident may happen behind closed doors, but its impact can reach children, work, housing, health and long-term safety. A hate crime may target one person, but it can frighten a whole community. A young person carrying a knife may be seen only as an offender, but prevention requires asking what made them believe the knife was necessary in the first place.

Kulturalism exists to make these connections clearer. We believe crime prevention must be honest, practical and rooted in real life. Safer streets are not created by one agency, one law or one prison sentence. They are created when communities understand risk earlier, victims are supported properly, young people are reached before crisis, and systems work together instead of waiting for harm to escalate.

Data limitations note

Police-recorded figures are affected by reporting rates and recording practices. CSEW provides a broader picture of victimisation but has its own limitations (response rates, exclusions). Both sources should be read together.

Data Sources

This report draws on official statistics from the Office for National Statistics, the Home Office, and the Youth Endowment Fund. Main crime figures are taken from Office for National Statistics, hate crime data from Home Office (2023), youth violence findings from Youth Endowment Fund (2023), and domestic abuse victim characteristics from Office for National Statistics (2023). Limitations in the data (particularly police recording, victim reporting rates, and survey coverage) should be noted.

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