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# How Priority Ordering of Offence Codes Undercounts Gendered Violence: An Analysis of the Crime Survey for England and Wales

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The Offence Classification System (OCS) of the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) applies a priority order of offences that undercounts violence. By prioritizing burglary and criminal damage above some types of assault, physical violence that co-occurs with property crimes is discounted from official counts of incidents and victims of violence. Analyzing CSEW data from 2010/11 to 2019/20, we find the OCS omits approximately 210,000 incidents of violence every year. Out of these incidents, 51 per cent are domestic violence against women, contributing further evidence to the CSEW's gendered data gap. Socioeconomically disadvantaged victims are also disproportionately undercounted. Whilst prior research has highlighted the undercounting of violence *prevalence* and *repetition* in the CSEW, the OCS undercounts the *concurrency* of violence.

**KEY WORDS:** violence, domestic violence, offence codes, gender, Crime Survey for England and Wales

## INTRODUCTION

High-quality and nationally representative victimization surveys provide robust measures of prevalence and incidence of different types of crime. Victimization surveys are conducted in multiple countries across the world to provide more accurate estimates of most crime than are provided by police recorded crime (PRC). A key example is the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW), which is a nationally representative victimization survey with core samples of about 35,000 adults that has been running since 1982, and annually since 2001 (Kantar Public 2020). The CSEW is widely considered to provide the most accurate measure of crime in England and Wales (Maguire and McVie 2017). Unlike PRC, victimization surveys like the CSEW capture crimes that are not reported to, or recorded by, the police, allowing for a more complete estimate. Violent crimes, particularly violence against women and girls, are

disproportionately underreported to authorities (Barrett and Pierre 2011). The CSEW therefore provides a key source of data to quantify violent crime and its changes over time (e.g. Walby *et al.* 2014; 2016; Ganpat *et al.* 2020), to measure specific forms of violence (e.g. Myhill 2015), and to identify characteristics and risk factors for violent crime victimization (e.g. Brennan *et al.* 2010; Bryant and Lightowlers 2021). CSEW data and analysis make a substantial contribution to evidence on the nature and scale of violence and violent crime, and are used by researchers, policy makers, and the public. The value of this evidence base is dependent on the accuracy of the data made available by the CSEW.

Research by Walby *et al.* (2014; 2016) and more recently by Cooper and Obolenskaya (2021), has demonstrated how methodologies used by the CSEW to collect and process data lead to the systematic undercounting of physically violent crime against women, and domestic violent crime. Walby and colleagues (2014; 2016) demonstrate that a cap applied by the CSEW to repeat crime counts undercounts the *repetition* of violent crime, disproportionately impacting women and victims of domestic violent crime, who are more likely to be repeatedly victimized. Cooper and Obolenskaya (2021) show that by excluding the self-completion component of the CSEW from official counts of violent crime, the *prevalence* of violent crime is undercounted disproportionately for women, as they are more likely than men to disclose victimization in the self-completion component of the CSEW (Walby and Allen 2004).

In this paper, we highlight another form of undercounting that disproportionately impacts women and victims of domestic violence, contributing further evidence to the gendered data gap of the CSEW, namely, undercounting of the *concurrency* of violence. We demonstrate that by applying a priority order of offence codes, the CSEW undercounts violence that co-occurs with other types of crime, specifically here criminal damage and burglary. The prioritization of property offences in the CSEW's counting of crime disproportionately undercounts violence against women and domestic violence. Across all forms of undercounting, it is not at the point of data collection where victims and incidents are excluded from being counted by the CSEW. Instead, it is the methodological decisions taken during data processing and publication that selectively omit incidents and victims from the official counts of violence and violent crime.

## EXISTING RESEARCH ON THE GENDERED UNDERCOUNTING OF VIOLENCE AND VIOLENT CRIME BY THE CSEW

This paper demonstrates how the prioritization of offence codes in crime statistics, here focusing on those produced by the CSEW, undercounts violence, and disproportionately undercounts violence against women and domestic violence. In doing so, this paper contributes to an ongoing body of research on the gendered data gap of the crime statistics produced by the CSEW, outlined here. Walby *et al.* (2014) demonstrated that the methodology employed by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) which capped repeated incidents at five led to an underestimation of violent crime, disproportionately undercounting violent crime against women and domestic violent crime. The cap of five applied by the ONS meant that, if for instance a respondent stated having been assaulted by an intimate partner around once a week for the last 12 months, this would be counted as five incidents in total, rather than 52. Walby and colleagues (2014) showed that when this cap was lifted and all violent crime was counted instead, the total estimate for all violent crime increased by 62 per cent. This increase was driven by repeat incidents against the same victims by domestic relations (67 per cent increase) and acquaintances (97 per cent increase).

Walby *et al.* (2016) furthered their analysis to demonstrate the impact of the cap of five on trends in violent crime over time. By removing the cap and examining uncapped levels of violent crime over a 20-year period (1994–2013/14) the authors found that a long decline in violent

crime stopped in 2008/09, after which domestic violent crime and violent crime against women started to increase, coinciding with the economic crisis and period of austerity that followed. The ONS subsequently changed their capping procedures and altered their cap on repeat incidents from a cap of five to a cap at the 98th percentile (ONS 2019). However, this change still disproportionately underestimates the repetition of violent crime against women and domestic violent crime (Walby *et al.* 2019).

Contributing further evidence to the gendered data gap, Cooper and Obolenskaya (2021) demonstrated how the published crime statistics of the CSEW undercount the prevalence of violent crime, disproportionately impacting violence against women and domestic violence. The CSEW measures domestic violence victimization in two ways. The first, which has been the focus in the previous research discussed so far, is in the main face-to-face component of the survey which captures physical violence, and disaggregates figures by domestic, acquaintance, and stranger perpetrator-victim relationships (ONS 2021b). The second method for measuring specific forms of violence, including crimes relating to domestic abuse (including non-physical forms of abuse), as well as sexual assault and stalking, is the self-completion module, which was implemented to increase confidentiality in response to the low disclosure rates on these forms of crime in the face-to-face component of the survey (Walby and Allen 2004). The self-completion disclosure rates for domestic violence are between four (Walby *et al.* 2014) to seven (ONS 2016) times higher than in the face-to-face component and therefore provide more accurate estimates of domestic violence and broader forms of violence and abuse.

However, though eliciting more accurate prevalence estimates, self-completion data are omitted from the ONS' official measure of violent crime. As the self-completion module does not include questions on violence and abuse frequency in every survey sweep, self-completion data cannot provide consistent data on the incidence of violent crime (Walby *et al.* 2014; Cooper and Obolenskaya 2021). In their combined analysis of the face-to-face and self-completion components of the CSEW, Cooper and Obolenskaya (2021) found that the prevalence of all violence (here including sexual violence, as defined and added by the authors) doubled compared to only using face-to-face data. When disaggregated by gender, the authors found that including the self-completion data led to a higher prevalence of violence against women than against men, whilst using only the face-to-face data suggested that the prevalence of violence was higher among men. The omission of self-completion data from official statistics on violence therefore undercounts the prevalence of violence and contributes another dimension to the CSEW's gendered data gap.

## 'PRIORITY OF OFFENCE CODES': ANOTHER GENDERED METHOD OF UNDERCOUNTING?

### The CSEW Offence Coding System

The literature so far has focussed on the impact of capping on repetition of violence and of the exclusion of self-completion data on prevalence of violence. This paper considers the CSEW Offence Coding System (OCS) as a further methodological aspect that contributes to the survey's gendered data gap.

The OCS is designed to match the offence coding system of PRC as closely as possible and has remained largely unchanged since the start of the survey (Kantar Public 2021). The OCS is designed to match PRC both in the codes themselves (e.g. CSEW offence of *serious wounding* closely aligns with the PRC offence of *grievous bodily harm*), and in the derivation of the offence codes. The national standards for how PRC should record and count offences are provided by the Home Office Counting Rules (HOCR). The general rules of the HOCR state that one crime is recorded per victim, and if the sequence of crimes in an incident with the same victim and same

offender involves more than one crime type, the Principal Crime Rule states that only the most serious is counted and thus just one offence code is given (with at the time of writing, exceptions for modern slavery, which can be recorded as an additional offence) (Home Office 2023).

The Principal Crime Rule provides a priority order of offences to determine which offence code is given when a sequence of offences are reported to the police. In this order, rape and serious violent crime (e.g. attempted murder, grievous bodily harm) take precedence over property crime. However, theft from the person, theft of a vehicle and burglary all take precedence over assault without injury. For criminal damage offences, the value of the property determines whether it is deemed to be more or less serious than assault without injury. In criminal damage, if the value of the property damaged is less than £5,000, then assault without injury is said to take precedence and will be recorded in PRC. If the value of the property is over £5,000, then criminal damage takes precedence over the assault (Home Office 2023).

The CSEW tries to match this coding process as closely as possible. For every respondent, the CSEW asks screener questions to identify respondents that have been a victim of crime, and to derive the categories of crime that they have experienced (Kantar Public 2021). For each reported incident, the respondent will complete a victim form (VF), including an open-ended summary of what happened. From this description, the VF goes through the CSEW OCS to determine the offence code that is assigned to the VF. The offence code is derived by trained coders, using a computer questionnaire designed to guide classification. Only one offence code is applied per VF. The coding questionnaire consists of separate modules to code high-level offences such as assault, burglary, theft, criminal damage, and fraud, which must be selected by the coder. The questionnaire then guides coders through a flow-chart of questions and applies OCS rules, namely the *priority of offence codes*, to determine the final offence code. Crucially, in cases where the incident description may include multiple offences, only one final offence code is applied. Where multiple offences occur within one incident, the OCS applies the following priority of codes to determine the final offence code, from arson (1—highest priority) down to computer misuse (10—lowest priority):

- 1 Arson
- 2 Serious wounding and rape
- 3 Robbery
- 4 Burglary
- 5 Theft
- 6 Criminal damage
- 7 Assault (which includes both ‘other wounding’ and ‘common assault’)
- 8 Threats
- 9 Fraud
- 10 Computer misuse (Kantar Public 2021: 188)

Arson as the most serious and highest priority offence is followed by serious wounding and rape, which are deemed equally serious to each other. The coding manual provides clear requirements for offence coding to separate serious wounding, other wounding and common assault. Serious wounding needs to both result in a wound which needs medical attention and the severity of the wounding needed to be intentional, while other wounding could either be wounding which needs medical attention, but where the severity of the injury was unintentional, or assault which was intentional but where medical attention was likely not necessary (Kantar Public 2021). Finally, common assault refers to assault with no injury or negligible injury (although for example, a black eye is classified as negligible injury in the OCS). It can therefore be seen that both offences of other wounding and common assault can involve injuries to the victim.

As shown in the ordered list above, in the CSEW priority order of codes, the property crimes of burglary, theft, and criminal damage take precedence over other wounding and common assault. Therefore, if an incident described by the respondent included an assault where the respondent received a dislocated shoulder, and the offender also deliberately caused damage to property, the priority order of codes indicates that the VF should be coded as criminal damage, resulting in the omission of the assault. Though a flow-chart questionnaire guides the coders to the final offence code decision, the decision as to whether an assault or damage to property is more serious is at the discretion of the coder. However, the coding manual provides two examples to help guide coders on interpreting levels of severity. The examples are the following:

if a respondent is given a beating in which his eyes are blacked and his clothes slightly torn, it makes more sense to code this as an assault than an act of criminal damage. In cases where the respondent was beaten up and their property destroyed (for example a mobile phone/mp3 player stamped on) the damage would take priority over the assault code (unless the assault amounted to serious wounding) (Kantar Public 2021: 204).

Whilst the OCS attempts to follow how the police record crime by following the HOCR as closely as possible, two key differences in their priority orders of offences need to be noted. Firstly, whilst the HOCR use a value threshold of £5,000 to determine whether or not an offence of criminal damage takes precedence over an offence of assault without injury, the CSEW OCS does not use such a threshold. Instead, it is down to the discretion of the coder to determine whether the damage or the violence is more serious, but as shown in the quote above, this threshold appears to be relatively low. The CSEW OCS therefore has the potential to undercount concurring violence with criminal damage to a greater extent than the HOCR, and therefore PRC.

Secondly, there is a difference in the unique treatment of arson by the CSEW. Arson offences take precedence over any other offence within the CSEW, including serious wounding and rape, despite being defined by the CSEW as deliberate damage by fire: *'any damage, however small, caused by deliberately setting fire to something belonging to the respondent or their household should be coded as arson'* even if the damage incurred no cost to the victim (Kantar Public 2021: 232). Only if no damage was caused at all is the offence recorded as an attempted criminal damage as opposed to arson. This coding route differs significantly to that of the HOCR. In the HOCR, arson is situated below rape, robbery, all sexual offences, and grievous bodily harm in the priority list of offence codes. Arson within HOCR only takes precedence over these offence codes if it was committed with the intention of killing someone, for example, a house set alight with someone inside and the intention is to kill that person. In cases where arson endangers life, the HOCR states that these offences be recorded as attempted murder, which takes precedence over all offences other than homicide (Home Office 2023). As the CSEW prioritizes arson over all offences, there is significant misalignment between the CSEW OCS and the HOCR. It is therefore not possible to establish the extent to which the CSEW OCS undercounts violence in relation to arson, as their definition of arson embeds both life-threatening offences and minor cases of deliberate fire damage [including, for example, 'lighters being held to fences and causing scorch marks' (Kantar Public 2021: 232)].

### The concurrency of property offences and violence in domestic violence and abuse

It may not seem immediately clear how the CSEW OCS prioritizing criminal damage and burglary offences over some forms of assault could be another form of gendered undercounting of



violence. However, analysis of police data has shown that offences flagged as domestic violence and abuse (of whom more women are victims) often include a range of offences, including criminal damage and burglary (Towers 2013; Phoenix 2021). Furthermore, studies on the nature of domestic violence and abuse have shown how perpetrators can use property offences as a method of control over a victim (Toews and Bermea 2017) and how male domestic violence perpetrators were more likely than female perpetrators to damage the victim's property (Hester 2009). Additionally, in England and Wales burglary includes 'entering a building or part of a building with intent to commit theft, grievous bodily harm or criminal damage', so the unlawful (even partial) entering is enough to constitute the offence of burglary, even if no theft, grievous bodily harm or criminal damage follows this entry (CPS 2022). As such, instances of partners/ex-partners trying to gain access to a victim as part of wider domestic abuse by unlawfully entering their home, even if nothing is taken, for example, could be an offence of burglary. For these reasons, we would expect to see greater concurrency of violence alongside other offences in domestic violence contexts as opposed to with offences committed by acquaintances or strangers. This might be further exacerbated due to the repetitive and continuous nature of domestic violence and abuse.

### THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study investigates the impact of the OCS priority order of offence codes on CSEW estimates of the number of incidents and victims of violence. The extent of the impact is considered by victim gender, victim–perpetrator relationship, and socio-economic characteristics of victims. The analysis estimates how much additional violence is lost due to the priority order of offence codes when violence is reported as co-occurring with another offence. The focus of the study is on the offence codes that take precedence over most assault in the CSEW OCS, but that do not take precedence over serious wounding. These offences include burglary, theft and criminal damage. Theft however is not included in our analysis, as the OCS states that if a theft involves the use of force or the threat of force immediately before or after the theft, then the offence must be coded as robbery, which takes precedence over all property crimes. Arson has been described as a special case as the highest priority offence code in the OCS which, as discussed earlier, is greatly misaligned from the HOCR by its lack of distinction between arson endangering life and not endangering life, and although it will lead to an undercount of violence (in this case, also serious wounding and rape) we do not include it in our analysis. As such, we focus our analysis on the two offence types of burglary and criminal damage, as the use of force alongside these offences is only counted as violence if it results in serious wounding, and is otherwise hidden behind the property offence codes.

The research questions are as follows:

1. What is the impact of the OCS priority order of codes on the overall number of violence incidents?
2. What is the impact of the OCS priority order of codes on the overall number of violence incidents, when disaggregated by victim gender and relationship between victim and perpetrator?
3. What is the impact of the OCS priority order of codes on the overall number of victims of violence?
4. What are the socio-economic characteristics of victims of violence who are undercounted within offence codes which constitute 'violence' due to the OCS priority order of codes, and how do these compare to the characteristics of victims of violence who are not undercounted?



## Method

### Data

CSEW main questionnaire face-to-face data were used in this analysis (ONS 2021a). The CSEW uses a form of stratified random sampling to select participant households from the Postcode Address File. This means non-residential addresses, including hospitals, care homes and halls of residence, are excluded, as are homeless populations and persons living in temporary addresses (Ariel and Bland 2019). We utilized ten sweeps of the CSEW in the analysis, covering years 2010/11 to 2019/20. Pooling multiple sweeps increased the available sample size and enabled incident-based analysis to be disaggregated by both victim gender and the relationship between victim and perpetrator.

### Definitions of terms

*Gender* is conceptualized here by the sex of the victim (male or female)<sup>1</sup>. *Relationship* is measured according to the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator as: stranger, acquaintance, or domestic. A relationship is coded as stranger if the victim states that they did not know the perpetrator and/or had never seen them before. Relationships coded as acquaintance include the following: workmate/colleague; client/members of public contacted through work; friend/acquaintance; neighbour; young person from local area; tradesman/builder/contractor; (ex)partner of someone else in household, or others that the victim knew at least by sight. Relationships coded as domestic involve intimate partners/ex-partners, other relatives and household members.

*Violence* is conceptualized in two ways. The first is the ONS definition of violent crime, which comprises the following CSEW offence codes: serious wounding; other wounding; serious wounding with sexual motive; other wounding with sexual motive; common assault; and attempted assault. In this paper, we operationalize a definition of violence that combines the ONS' six violent crime offence codes, as well as any burglary or criminal damage offences where the responses to the survey state that force or violence was used against the respondent during these offences.<sup>2</sup> Our measure of violence is therefore led by the use of force or physical violence against the respondent, rather than by offence codes. As the CSEW, and in many cases PRC, would not count these forms of force and violence as crime due to the priority ordering of the OCS (and the Principal Crime Rule of PRC), we use the term 'violence' rather than 'violent crime'.

*Burglary* is defined by the ONS as the following CSEW offence codes: attempted burglary to non-connected domestic garage or outhouse; burglary in a dwelling (nothing taken/something taken); attempted burglary in a dwelling; and burglary from non-connected domestic garage or outhouse (nothing taken/something taken).

*Criminal damage* is defined by the ONS as the following CSEW offence codes: criminal damage to a motor vehicle (£20 or under/over £20); criminal damage to the home (£20 or under/over £20); and other criminal damage (£20 or under/over £20).

Across both burglary and criminal damage, only cases where force or violence was used against the respondent were included in our measure of violence. Cases where force was not

1 Up until 2019/20 the CSEW only collected information on victim sex (as male and female only) and did not ask any questions on gender identity.

2 Use of force was identified first by a 'yes' responses to the question of 'Did the person/(any of the people) who did it actually use force or violence on anyone in any way, even if this resulted in no injury?' or for those who did not answer that question, the question of 'Can I check, did the person/any of the people who did it actually use force or violence on [you/anyone] in any of the ways listed on this card, even if this resulted in no injury?'. This then had to be followed by one of the following responses to the question of 'In what way did they use force or violence on you?': grabbed or pushed me; punched or slapped me; kicked me; hit me with a weapon; biting; spitting; pulled hair; scratching; head butting; pushed/held down/physically blocked; used a weapon; threw something at me.

directed against the respondent or where force was not physical (e.g. attempts, verbal abuse etc.) were excluded.

*Sexual violence.* The ONS definition of violence includes serious wounding with sexual motive and other wounding with sexual motive, but excludes rape, attempted rape and indecent assault, which form a separate category of crime of sexual violence. Although we agree with Walby *et al.* (2014; 2016) and Cooper and Obolenskaya (2021) that offences of sexual violence should be included in the definition of violence on conceptual grounds, we exclude these in this analysis as for comparability purposes our focus is only on the impact of the OCS priority order of codes on recording of violence in the data as per the ONS definition.

### Analysis

The analysis is divided into an incident-based analysis and a victim-based analysis. The incident-based analysis estimates the average number of incidents of violence and victims of violence per year according to: the ONS definition of violent crime (titled 'ONS definition'); undercounted violence which becomes visible when surpassing the OCS priority ordering (titled 'undercounted violence'); and our total violence measure, which adds the undercounted violence onto the ONS definition of violent crime (titled 'total violence'). The estimates are disaggregated by victim gender and the relationship between the victim and perpetrator. A total of 8,525 VFs were used in this analysis (7,885 for the ONS definition of violent crime, and 640 for undercounted violence). The VFs include a sample of both single and series incidents, and the number of incidents reported is recorded in each VF.

The victim-based analysis firstly focuses on victims that reported only VFs relating to 'undercounted violence', and are therefore 'undercounted victims' of violence. We then estimate the number of victims that have a VF relating to 'undercounted violence' in addition to a VF relating to 'counted violence', who would therefore be counted as victims of violence by the ONS and are thus here referred to as 'counted victims', alongside victims who reported VFs relating only to 'counted violence'. 'Undercounted victims' and 'counted victims' are then compared by victim gender, and the socio-economic characteristics of employment status, housing tenure, and household income. Differences in characteristics of counted and undercounted victims are tested using chi-square tests. The socio-economic variables were selected to align with those used in previous research to examine the extent of victim disadvantage in the CSEW (e.g. Walby and Towers 2018; Bryant and Lightowlers 2021). A total of 7,647 victims were included in this analysis: 7,032 victims had an ONS definition VF and no undercounted VF; 69 had an undercounted VF but also had an ONS definition VF and were therefore not undercounted as victims of violence by the ONS; and 546 victims had an undercounted VF and did not have an ONS definition VF and were therefore fully 'undercounted victims'.

As discussed, the capping of series incidents has been a key part of prior research into the undercounting of gendered violence in the CSEW. We therefore provide capped and uncapped estimates of overall incidents of violence in the pooled dataset to illustrate this point. However, as the focus of the article is not capping, for the main analyses we use uncapped estimates. Analyses are weighted using the individual weight variable provided in the CSEW datasets. Weighting ensures the sample is nationally representative and accounts for unequal address selection probabilities and adjusts for differential non-response (Kantar Public 2021). The figures in the results are rounded to the nearest thousand and the total number of violent incidents presented in tables may differ by a thousand (and calculated percentage increases by one tenth of a percentage) due to issues of rounding when disaggregating the figures by victim gender and relationship between victim and perpetrator.

### Caveats

A few caveats should be noted in the interpretation of the findings. Firstly, unlike the CSEW coders, we rely solely on the quantitative survey responses as we do not have access to the open text

description of the event provided by respondents. Secondly, we do not attempt to classify the uncovered incidents of violence into specific offences (i.e. other wounding or common assault), as further detail on the offence may be required to do this. Our aim is to identify incidents which include an element of physical force toward the survey respondent (regardless of whether these would be classified as other wounding or common assault) that have been assigned an offence code of burglary or criminal damage due to the OCS priority order of codes.

FINDINGS

Priority coding undercounts incidents of violence

Uncapped analysis estimates that 210,000 incidents of violence per year were undercounted by the CSEW-OCS priority of codes, as these incidents were categorized as property crime offences. This represents a 9 per cent increase in the number of incidents of violence when compared with the official ONS measure of violent crime, with the average number of violent incidents recorded by the survey per year increasing from around 2,341,000 to 2,551,000 (Table 1). When capped at the 98th percentile, estimates indicate that the number of incidents of violence increase by between 6.5 per cent (using burglary and criminal damage caps) and 8 per cent (when using violent crime caps), as shown in Table 1. Violent incidents involving criminal damage contribute slightly more to the undercounted violence figures than violent incidents involving burglary, with them contributing 53.8 per cent and 46.2 per cent respectively. Furthermore, the undercounting of violence applies not only to violence without injury, as may be expected following the OCS, but also violence with injury. In fact, three quarters (73.4 per cent) of the total undercounted incidents involved instances where the victim was bruised, scratched, cut or injured in any way. This is a result of the requirements on what the OCS classifies as serious wounding, which only include cases where the injury must clearly need medical attention and the severity of the wounding must have been intentional. As such, injuries in three-fourths of the undercounted incidents of violence did not meet the serious wounding threshold, as the injury was not said to need immediate medical attention or the severity of the wounding was not deemed to be intentional, with the property offence therefore taking precedence. The remaining results use uncapped figures and do not disaggregate burglary and criminal damage offence codes from each other.

Violence against women and domestic violence are disproportionately undercounted

Our analysis shows that the OCS disproportionately undercounts violence against women and violence by a domestic perpetrator. As shown in Table 2, a quarter (24.9 per cent) of undercounted violent incidents are committed towards men, whilst three quarters (75.1 per cent) are committed towards women. Similarly, by including the violence undercounted by the OCS,

Table 1. Impact of capping on number of violent incidents per year

	ONS definition of violence	Undercounted violence	Total violence	% Increase in violent incidents
Uncapped	2,341,000	210,000	2,551,000	9.0
Cap of 5	1,412,000	105,000	1,517,000	7.4
Cap of 98th percentile (violence cap)	1,618,000	129,000	1,747,000	8.0
Cap of 98th percentile (criminal damage and burglary cap)	1,618,000	105,000	1,723,000	6.5

the number of incidents of violence against women increases by 14.8 per cent, compared to an increase of only 4.1 per cent for men. When looking at the relationship between victim and perpetrator, less than a tenth (8.6 per cent) of the total number of undercounted violent incidents are committed by strangers, while 57.1 per cent are committed by domestic relations (Table 3). When including undercounted violence, the total number of incidents committed by a domestic relation increases by 23.3 per cent, compared to a smaller increase of 7.1 per cent in incidents committed by acquaintances, and only 2.2 per cent in incidents committed by strangers.

The gendered undercounting of violence by the OCS is most visible when estimates are disaggregated by both the gender of the victim and the victim–perpetrator relationship. The results indicate that out of the approximately 210,000 undercounted incidents of violence every year, half (106,000 incidents; 51 per cent) relate to domestic violence committed against women (Table 3). Further, when focussing only on undercounted incidents of domestic violence, 88.8 per cent of incidents were perpetrated against women, with only 11.2 per cent perpetrated against men (Table 4). It is evident that the underestimation of violence due to the priority of offence codes assigned by the OCS is therefore greatest in instances of violence against women perpetrated by domestic relations.

Whilst the extent of undercounting is largest in domestic relations, the impact of undercounting is greater for women across all relationship types. For women, including undercounted violence in the estimate of total violence increases the number of incidents by acquaintances by 9.6 per cent and by strangers by 3.0 per cent, while for men the equivalent percentage increases are 4.9 per cent and 1.9 per cent respectively (Table 4). The percentage increase for violence committed by strangers is higher for women than men despite the fact that the total number of incidents (and undercounted incidents) by strangers is much smaller for women than men, as men account for a large proportion of victims of stranger violence on the whole.

**Table 2.** Number of violent incidents per year undercounted by victim gender

	ONS definition of violence		Undercounted violence		Total violence		% increase in violent incidents
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Victim gender							
Men	1,281,000	54.7	52,000	24.9	1,333,000	52.3	4.1
Women	1,060,000	45.3	157,000	75.1	1,217,000	47.7	14.8
Total	2,341,000	100.0	209,000	100.0	2,550,000	100	8.9

**Table 3.** Number of violent incidents per year undercounted by victim gender

	ONS definition of violence		Undercounted violence		Total violence		% increase in violent incidents
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Type of perpetrator							
Domestic	514,000	21.9	120,000	57.1	634,000	24.9	23.3
Acquaintance	1,015,000	43.4	72,000	34.3	1,087,000	42.6	7.1
Stranger	812,000	34.7	18,000	8.6	830,000	32.5	2.2
Total	2,341,000	100.0	210,000	100.0	2,551,000	100	9.0

**Table 4.** Number of violent incidents per year undercounted disaggregated by relationship type and victim gender

	ONS definition of violence		Undercounted violence		Total violence		% increase in violent incidents
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Domestic							
Men	103,000	20.0	13,000	11.2	116,000	18.4	12
Women	411,000	80.0	106,000	88.8	517,000	81.6	25.8
Total domestic	514,000	100.0	119,000	100.0	633,000	100.0	23.2
Acquaintance							
Men	535,000	52.7	26,000	36.7	561,000	51.6	4.9
Women	480,000	47.3	45,000	63.3	526,000	48.4	9.6
Total acquaintance	1,015,000	100.0	72,000	100.0	1,087,000	100.0	7.1
Stranger							
Men	643,000	79.2	12,000	68.8	655,000	79.0	1.9
Women	169,000	20.8	6,000	31.2	174,000	21.0	3.0
Total stranger	812,000	100.0	18,000	100.0	829,000	100.0	2.1

**Priority coding also undercounts the number of victims**

The OCS leads to the undercounting of victims, as well as incidents, with an estimated 58,300 victims of violence being undercounted per year. Most victims who experienced a form of undercounted violence did not report experiencing another form of violence. In unweighted terms, out of a total of 615 victims with an undercounted VF, 69 victims also had at least one other VF with an offence code in the ONS definition of violence. Though the victims of these VFs experienced undercounted incidents of violence, they would be counted as victims of violence by the ONS official definition. The remaining 546 victims in the sample had no other VF coded as violence, thus as victims of violence these victims go undercounted (Table 5). Most undercounted victims had VFs with only one type of perpetrator, with about two fifths (40.8 per cent) of undercounted victims experiencing domestic violence only. However, a small number of victims had multiple VFs with different relationship types across VFs, as shown in Table 5.

**More socioeconomically disadvantaged victims are disproportionately undercounted by priority coding**

Gender and socio-economic characteristics were examined among counted and undercounted victims to identify any significant differences between them. Inferential analyses indicate relationships between socio-economic characteristics and experiences of undercounted forms of violence, but cannot identify the direction of relationships nor be used to predict any likelihood of being an undercounted or counted victim.

There was a significantly higher proportion of women among undercounted victims compared to counted victims [ $\chi^2(1) = 55.23, p < 0.001$ ]. Among undercounted victims, 56.1 per cent were women and 43.9 per cent were men, while among counted victims, a higher proportion were men (61.5 per cent) compared to women (38.5 per cent). Differences in the socio-economic characteristics of undercounted and counted victims were also identified, particularly for women. Among women, undercounted victims were significantly more likely to

be disadvantaged across all socio-economic characteristics (employment status, housing tenure, and household income) compared to counted victims. For example, while 64.7 per cent of counted female victims were employed, the equivalent percentage for undercounted women was 47.9 per cent. Similarly, while the total household income was under £20,000 for 47.4 per cent of counted female victims, this was the case for 64.4 per cent of undercounted female victims. Undercounted female victims were also significantly less likely to live in owner occupied accommodation compared to counted female victims (Table 6). The differences in socio-economic characteristics between undercounted and counted men were less pronounced than they

Table 5. Relationship type combinations

Victim form combinations	Undercounted victim		Counted victim	
	%	Unweighted N	%	Unweighted N
Domestic violence only	40.8	223	30.4	21
Acquaintance violence only	24.9	136	11.6	8
Stranger violence only	18.9	103	13.0	9
Domestic and acquaintance violence	1.5	8	8.7	6
Domestic and stranger violence	5.9	32	14.5	10
Acquaintance and stranger violence	7.7	42	17.4	12
Domestic, acquaintance and stranger violence	0.4	2	4.3	3
Total number of victim forms	100.0	546	100.0	69

Table 6. Socio-economic characteristics of counted and undercounted victims

	Men					Sig.	Women					Sig.
	Undercounted		Counted		Undercounted		Counted					
	%	N	%	N	%		N	%	N			
Employment status												
Employed	65.7	119	73.1	2,736	0.094	47.9	160	64.7	1,982	<0.001		
Unemployed	9.0	17	6.9	268		8.2	32	5.8	182			
Economically inactive	25.3	57	20.1	903		43.9	155	29.5	1,009			
Housing tenure												
Owners	49.3	90	46.6	1,868	0.003	28.8	96	41.7	1,297	<0.001		
Social rented sector	25.5	59	17.6	819		39.1	149	27.6	964			
Private rented sector	25.2	43	35.8	1,205		32.1	103	30.7	905			
Household income					0.087						<0.001	
Under £20,000	41.9	57	37.2	1,192		64.4	188	47.4	1,279			
£20,000–39,999	33.7	42	28.3	880		23.6	63	26.9	630			
£40,000 or more	24.4	27	34.5	925		11.9	24	25.8	507			

% are weighted percentages, and N are unweighted bases.



were for women, with the only significant difference between counted and undercounted men being by housing tenure. Caution is needed in interpreting some of findings for men due to relatively small base sizes. Overall, these analyses indicate that female victims from more socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds were more often undercounted as victims of violence due to the OCS.

## DISCUSSION

This paper has contributed to the ongoing debate on the measurement of violence using the CSEW, by bringing to light a further way the CSEW undercounts violence. Our results can be summarized into three key findings: (1) the CSEW OCS leads to an undercounting of violence; (2) this undercounting is gendered; and (3) this undercounting may have a greater impact on socioeconomically disadvantaged victims, especially for women. The implications of these findings are considered, firstly, empirically, for measuring violence and violent crime, and secondly, methodologically, for developing the CSEW, as well as for victimization surveys and PRC statistics more broadly.

### Implications for measuring violence and violent crime

In this paper we refer to violence as being any form of physical force and/or violence used against a person, regardless of whether the incident would be classified as a violent crime under the HOVR. Whilst this broader measure of violence may not be directly comparable to official classifications of violent crime, measuring all violence enables a more complete analysis of patterns of violence and provides better insight into the victim populations experiencing violence. The measurement of violent crime, its distribution and trends over time is a key function of the CSEW, and thus we recognize that alignment to the HOVR is important. However, the CSEW is also used for analysis of violence beyond violent crime, including to identify the victim populations at greatest risk of experiencing different forms of violence (e.g. Brennan *et al.* 2010). The priority order of offence codes applied by the OCS omits some incidents and victims of violence from such analysis, and thus has implications for understanding violence patterns and risk factors for violence victimization. Therefore, while the OCS should not undercount violent crime as such, it undercounts violence. Specifically, we found that the OCS leads to the undercounting of around 210,000 incidents of violence each year.

Returning to the measurement of crime, though the Principal Crime Rule has been criticized as misrepresenting the actual count of crime (Mayhew 2014), we recognize the alignment of the OCS to the Principal Crime Rule facilitates a comparable measure of crime between PRC and the CSEW. The ONS indicated that alignment of the OCS with the approach taken by the HOVR was one of their priorities for development (ONS 2022). However, as previously outlined, the two methods differ not only in their prioritization of arson, for which analysis was beyond the scope of this study, but also of criminal damage and assault without injury. The difference is that the OCS lacks the £5,000 threshold above which criminal damage takes precedence in an offence where both criminal damage and assault without injury occurred, instead prioritizing all criminal damage over assault without injury. Therefore, the OCS potentially undercounts violence that occurs alongside criminal damage to a greater extent than PRC. Furthermore, the discrepancies between the OCS and the HOVR in the treatment of arson and criminal damage suggests that the OCS may in fact to some extent undercount violent crime, in addition to undercounting violence.

Our findings show that not only does the OCS undercount violence, but this undercounting is gendered, with women and victims of violence by domestic perpetrators accounting for a disproportionately larger share of undercounted violence. Specifically, we found that

three quarters of undercounted violence was perpetrated against women, and 57.1 per cent of undercounted violent incidents were committed by domestic relations. Including undercounted violence in the total violence measure increases the overall number of violent incidents experienced by women relatively more than violent incidents experienced by men. Similarly, undercounted violence has a greater relative impact on the total extent of violence committed by domestic perpetrators than by acquaintances or strangers. Furthermore, when considering both victim gender and victim–perpetrator relationship, our findings show that over half of all undercounted violent incidents are attributed to domestic violence perpetrated against women. This is the case even when the nature of the data mean that the extent of domestic violence in our estimates are likely to be an underestimate for two reasons. Firstly, the analysis focussed on the face-to-face questionnaire of the survey which has a lower disclosure of domestic violence, and secondly, the CSEW samples only those in permanent residence, meaning that domestic violence victims who may stay in temporary accommodation, such as refuges or with family and friends (Bowstead 2017), may not be as readily reached by the survey. These findings make it evident that the OCS further contributes to the gendered data gap caused by the methodological decisions taken by the ONS as the commissioners of the CSEW (Walby *et al.* 2014; 2016; Cooper and Obolenskaya 2021). Accurately measuring violence against women increases its visibility and adds power to efforts aimed at eradicating violence against women (Walby *et al.* 2017). Therefore, making violence that occurs alongside other forms of crime (here burglary and criminal damage) visible, provides further insight into the nature of domestic violence and violence against women.

In addition to gendered impacts, our victim-focussed analysis demonstrated that the undercounting of the OCS has a greater impact on socioeconomically disadvantaged victims, particularly for women. Specifically, we found that a significantly higher proportion of undercounted female victims were unemployed and had lower household income compared to counted female victims. Therefore, similarly to the impact of capping used in the CSEW (Walby *et al.* 2016), the OCS disproportionately excludes female victims from socioeconomically disadvantaged populations from the count of violence. However, whilst capping methodologies undercount the *repetition* of violence, the OCS priority of codes undercounts the *concurrency* of violence. Together, our findings indicate that female victims from socioeconomically disadvantaged populations disproportionately experience not only the most frequent forms of repeat violence, but are also more likely to experience violence in concurrence with other offence types. Furthermore, our findings emphasize the need for research to examine not only the influence of gender inequality on the experience of violence, but also the intersection of gender with other forms of inequality (Crenshaw 1991). This is particularly important considering that collecting accurate data on who experiences violence and how they experience violence is crucial for guiding policy and intervention efforts (Corradi and Stöckl 2014; Walklate *et al.* 2020).

### Implications for the CSEW

The OCS priority of codes prevents accurate analysis of the nature of violence incidents and victim populations by the CSEW. We recognize the need for the CSEW to align with HOCR to provide a comparable measure of crime. In understanding experience of violence in the population, however, alignment with the HOCR holds less relevance, thus CSEW users should have access to data on occurrences of violence, in addition to the derived final offence codes. The first recommendation is, therefore, that the CSEW data owners increase the accessibility of violence data, for example, by adding an additional variable into the datasets that specifically identifies VFs that involve physical violence, regardless of the final offence code assigned to those VFs. Currently this does not exist within CSEW datasets, and data users need to use multiple variables to identify VFs that involve physical violence against the respondent.

It is important to note here that this recommendation does not suggest that physical forms of violence should be prioritized over other forms of domestic abuse, nor that the measurement of physical violence should replace, or is preferred, over the measurement of other non-physical forms of abuse. On the contrary, we agree that certain forms of violence, namely domestic violence and violence against women, cannot be understood by counting physical violence alone and that focussing on this fails to account for the gendered nature of domestic violence, the lived experiences of domestic abuse victims, and the impact of coercive control, particularly on for example, victims' 'space for action' (Myhill and Kelly 2021; Hester *et al.* 2023). The inclusion of an additional variable is to make visible the physical violence that occurs alongside other offence types and to better understand the ways in which physical violence occurs and interacts with the non-physical forms of abuse. It also further highlights the issues with relying solely on criminal offence codes to count (physical) domestic violence, which is an approach advocated by Walby *et al.* (2017) and Walby and Towers (2018). The recommendation also specifically applies to the victimization module in the face-to-face component of the CSEW, and not to the self-completion modules where broader definitions of violence and patterns of abuse are captured, and where efforts are ongoing to improve the measurement of domestic violence and abuse (Hester *et al.* 2023).

### Implications for other victimization surveys and police recorded crime

Although this paper has focussed exclusively on the CSEW, it should be noted that priority offence coding is not an issue limited to the CSEW and is applicable to some other victimization surveys too. For example, the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey (SCJS) also employs an offence coding priority where only one offence is recorded. Similar to the CSEW, in the SCJS the crimes of 'housebreaking' (burglary) and theft are higher in the priority order than minor assault, but unlike the CSEW, 'vandalism' (criminal damage) appears lower in the SCJS hierarchy than minor assault (Scottish Government 2021). In contrast to the CSEW, the SCJS also accounts for some scenarios where two offences take place concurrently and both are considered too serious for one to take priority over the other, so some double-barrelled codes exist (e.g. serious assault with sexual motive and housebreaking). Other surveys, such as the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) in the United States, also code only one crime per incident based on crime severity, but unlike in the CSEW, in the NCVS all personal offences (including simple assault) take priority over household and property offences such as burglary (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2017).

Full exceptions to the recording of one offence when multiple offences take place per incident also exist. For example, in the New Zealand Crime and Safety Survey (NZCASS) coding process, both primary and secondary offence codes are applied if more than one offence is reported within one incident. In the NZCASS, final derived offence groupings (e.g. 'violent interpersonal offences' and 'violent interpersonal offences by relationship to the offender') are based on both the primary and secondary offence codes (New Zealand Ministry of Justice 2015).

Regardless of the approach taken in the victimization survey, the commissioners/owners of the survey need to ensure that sufficient documentation and transparency on offence code hierarchy practices and on derived variables relating to violence victimization are available. Relatedly, users of victimization surveys need to be aware of offence code hierarchy practices to make an informed decision on whether they use the derived offence codes or take an alternative approach in their analysis. Returning to the specifics of the CSEW, it is therefore imperative that the ONS increase the transparency of the priority order of offence codes by including it in every published technical guidance and by referring to it in published outputs.<sup>3</sup> This is not only to help users make informed decisions, but also to be aligned with the transparency principle of

the Code of Practice for Statistics, which provides a framework of pillars which statistics must abide by to remain National Statistics ([Office for Statistics Regulation 2022](#)).

Though our recommendations have focussed on victimization surveys, there are broader implications for police data too. Priority offence coding exists in the CSEW to align with the HOCC for PRC, but the principles of the HOCC, including the Principal Crime Rule, which records only the most serious offence in a sequence, have also been recognized as distorting the count of crime ([Mayhew 2014](#)). By not counting all reported crimes, the HOCC creates a social construct of crime, rather than an accurate count (*ibid*). The broader recommendation to the HOCC would therefore be to remove the Principal Crime Rule and count all crimes in a sequence that are reported to the police, to increase the accuracy of the official count of crime in England and Wales.

A similar change in practice has recently been made in the United States, where the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) runs the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) which generates national crime statistics ([FBI 2018](#)). Since its implementation, the UCR followed a Summary Reporting System which used a hierarchy rule to record only the one most serious offence in a reported incident. However, after recognizing that the rule led to an undercount of crime, in January 2021 the UCR transitioned to the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) which eliminated the hierarchy rule and instead counts up to ten crimes per reported incident ([FBI 2018](#)). Following concerns that the NIBRS would lead to an increase in crime rates and volume, early analysis on the impact of the implementation of the NIBRS was conducted and found that large crime rate and volume increases were not likely, with 9.2 per cent of reports including more than one crime, and individual crime types increasing by a maximum of 3.1 per cent (for larceny) ([FBI 2013](#)). [The FBI \(2018\)](#) has since recognized that the NIBRS, by increasing the accuracy of crime statistics, is a more effective tool for researchers and policy makers.

## CONCLUSION

The CSEW is the most accurate source of data on incidents and prevalence of crime in England and Wales, including for most violent crime. In addition to crime, CSEW data provide insight into broader forms of violence. As such, the CSEW is a key source of national data used by policy makers, researchers and the public to analyse, advise and make decisions related to crime. However, the value of these analyses and subsequent outputs relies on the accuracy of CSEW data. This paper highlights a form of undercounting in the CSEW that disproportionately impacts measures of violence. The priority order of codes used by the Offence Classification System (OCS) of the CSEW prioritizes the counting of property crimes, namely criminal damage and burglary, over forms of physical violence that do not result in serious injury. This offence hierarchy has led to the omission of approximately 210,000 incidents of violence per year over the 10 years examined in this study. Violence against women and domestic violence are disproportionately undercounted thus widening the CSEW's existing gendered data gap ([Walby \*et al.\* 2016](#); [Cooper and Obolenskaya 2021](#)). Further research should consider the impact of the OCS on trends of violence over time, and on examining in more detail the nature of the undercounted violence, to broaden our understanding of how violence accompanies other forms of crime. Furthermore, our findings show that this undercounting occurs across lines of socio-economic disadvantage. Further research should examine differences across victim characteristics to allow for a more nuanced approach to the measurement of violence, capturing the effects of intersecting inequalities.

3 The ONS recently published the priority order of codes in Volume Two of the CSEW 2020/21 ([Kantar Public 2021](#)), which is welcomed. Prior to 2021, the priority order of codes had not been published in a CSEW technical guidance document since 2010/11 ([TNS-BMRB 2011](#)).

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