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Abstract | This study analyses Australian Bureau of Statistics data to examine trends in the rate of juveniles being proceeded against by police for sexual offences in Australia, from 2008–09 to 2020–21. Over the 13-year period, the rate of recorded sexual offences committed by juveniles per 100,000 population was consistently higher than the rate for adults. While recorded assaultive sexual offences committed by juveniles decreased during this period, recorded non-assaultive sexual offences increased notably, and were still increasing at the end of the study period.

The study highlights the need for increased focus on early intervention (from the age of 13 onwards) and prevention efforts targeting non-assaultive sexual offending by both sexes and assaultive sexual offences by male juveniles in Australia.

Recorded sexual offences among juveniles in Australia

Michael John Cahill, Sarah Napier, Dana Thomsen, Micheala McCaig and Heather Wolbers

Introduction

A growing body of research has found concerning levels of child sexual abuse occurring in the populations of various countries. A representative survey of 8,500 Australians aged 16 and over found that more than one in four (28.5%) respondents reported experiencing child sexual abuse victimisation (Mathews et al. 2023). Media reports about child sexual abuse commonly cover scenarios where the perpetrator is an adult (eg Allison 2023; Thomas 2023). Yet research from England, Europe and the United States suggests that a substantial proportion of sexual offences against children are perpetrated by individuals under the age of 18 (juveniles; Bladon et al. 2005; Ryan & Otonichar 2016). Kloppen et al. (2016) conducted a systematic review of 174 studies on child sexual abuse prevalence in five Nordic countries, finding that, among respondents who were abused during adolescence, the largest group of perpetrators were other adolescents.

Research also suggests that substantial proportions of online sexual offending against children is committed by juveniles, as the internet and advancement in technologies, including smartphones, have facilitated new ways of offending among this group. A systematic review of 32 studies from multiple countries focusing on perpetrators of online child sexual abuse found that 44 percent of offenders were aged under 18 at the time (Sutton & Finkelhor 2023).

The sharing of sexual images and videos among juveniles, otherwise known as ‘sexting’, is an overlapping yet often different behaviour to online sexual abuse. It can lead to criminalisation of juveniles when the law treats the behaviour as a form of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) offending (Moritz & Christensen 2020). Laws in most Australian jurisdictions categorise sexting among juveniles as CSAM offending, although certain jurisdictions have decriminalised some sexting-related behaviours (Moritz & Christensen 2020). An older study involving interviews with 339 Australians aged 18 to 30 years revealed that very few respondents (number not provided) knew of the possible legal penalties associated with sexting among juveniles (Albury & Crawford 2012). Furthermore, some respondents believed that sexting between individuals under the age of 18 was legal as long as it was consensual.

While some young people use sexting for pleasure and amusement, images or videos can be shared with unintended audiences—a practice known as image-based abuse (Anastassiou 2017). Madigan et al. (2018) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of 39 studies published between 1990 and 2016 ($n=110,380$) that examined the prevalence of ‘sexting’ (defined as the sharing of sexually explicit images, videos, or messages) among youth (age range: 11.9–17 years). The study found that 12.0 percent of respondents had forwarded a sext without consent from the sender, and 8.4 percent reported having their own sext forwarded to someone else without consent.

In short, due to a shift from offline to online communication over the last two decades, unlawful sexting, image-based abuse and other harmful technology-facilitated behaviours put juveniles at significant risk of sexual victimisation and criminalisation. Because of these increased vulnerabilities, it is critical to monitor trends in sexual offences committed by juveniles that come to the attention of police, including whether certain groups are at increased risk of being proceeded against for such offences. Without this information, it is difficult to plan effective interventions that help to cease harmful sexual behaviour (online or offline) among young people.

The present study

The aim of this study is to undertake a descriptive analysis of data on persons under 18 years (ie juveniles) who were proceeded against by police for a sexual offence between 2008–09 and 2020–21. This study follows on from a report by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2022), which examined sexual offences committed by Australians of all ages. The present paper investigates the trends in recorded juvenile sexual offending by age group, sex, assaultive or non-assaultive offences and, where possible, jurisdiction.

Method

Data analysed in this study were provided by the ABS, which receives data from state and territory police on recorded offenders proceeded against by police. Importantly, data were not based on convictions for these offences. While data on adults were included in the analysis, the focus was on juveniles (under 18 years). While the ABS (2022) report contained data from all eight Australian states and territories, the data provided for the current study related to five states only, due to low numbers in the three smallest jurisdictions.

The Western Australian Police Force updated their sexual offence coding for the data provided from 2017–18 onwards. This change resulted in an increase in offence numbers from 2017–18 due to the inclusion of offences that had not been included prior to this. Therefore, caution should be taken when comparing rates of sexual offences in this jurisdiction to other states and territories, and changes over time. Rates of sexual offences among adults and juveniles were calculated per 100,000 Australian population. Australian population data were sourced from ABS (2023) *National, state and territory population*. Percentage differences in these calculated rates from one year to the next were calculated using exact rates. Some figures in the raw data were randomly adjusted by the ABS to avoid the release of confidential information relating to individuals proceeded against by police. Thus, some discrepancies occurred between the totals and individual components when calculating sums.

This paper focuses on individuals who were proceeded against by police for committing sexual assault and related offences, as defined by the *Australian and New Zealand Standard Offence Classification* (ABS 2011). These offences are described as ‘acts, or intent of acts, of a sexual nature against another person, which are non-consensual or where consent is proscribed’, and are further categorised as sexual assault or non-assaultive sexual offences. Sexual assault offences involve:

Physical contact, or intent of contact, of a sexual nature directed toward another person where that person does not give consent, gives consent as a result of intimidation or deception, or consent is proscribed (i.e. the person is legally deemed incapable of giving consent because of youth, temporary/permanent (mental) incapacity or there is a familial relationship). (ABS 2011)

Non-assaultive sexual offences ‘do not involve physical contact’ (ABS 2011) and include CSAM offences and non-assaultive sexual offences against a child.

Results

Those proceeded against by police in 2020–21 included 7,519 (83.7%) adults and 1,460 (16.3%) juveniles. Despite adults committing the majority of recorded sexual offences during this year, the rate of sexual offences committed by juveniles per 100,000 Australian population was higher (38 vs 58 respectively; see Table 1).

	Number	Proportion (%)	Rate per 100,000
Adults			
Male	7,240	80.6	74
Female	276	3.1	3
Total	7,519	83.7	38
Juveniles			
Male	1,190	13.2	92
Female	267	3.0	22
Total	1,460	16.3	58
Total offenders proceeded against	8,982	100.0	N/A

a: Totals presented as the number of offenders proceeded against by their principal offence. If an offender had been proceeded against multiple times for an offence, they will appear only once in the data by their principal offence.

Note: Rate per 100,000 persons in population at 30 June 2021 (ABS 2023). Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding. The ABS randomly adjusts offence numbers to protect confidentiality, so subtotals may not add to totals.

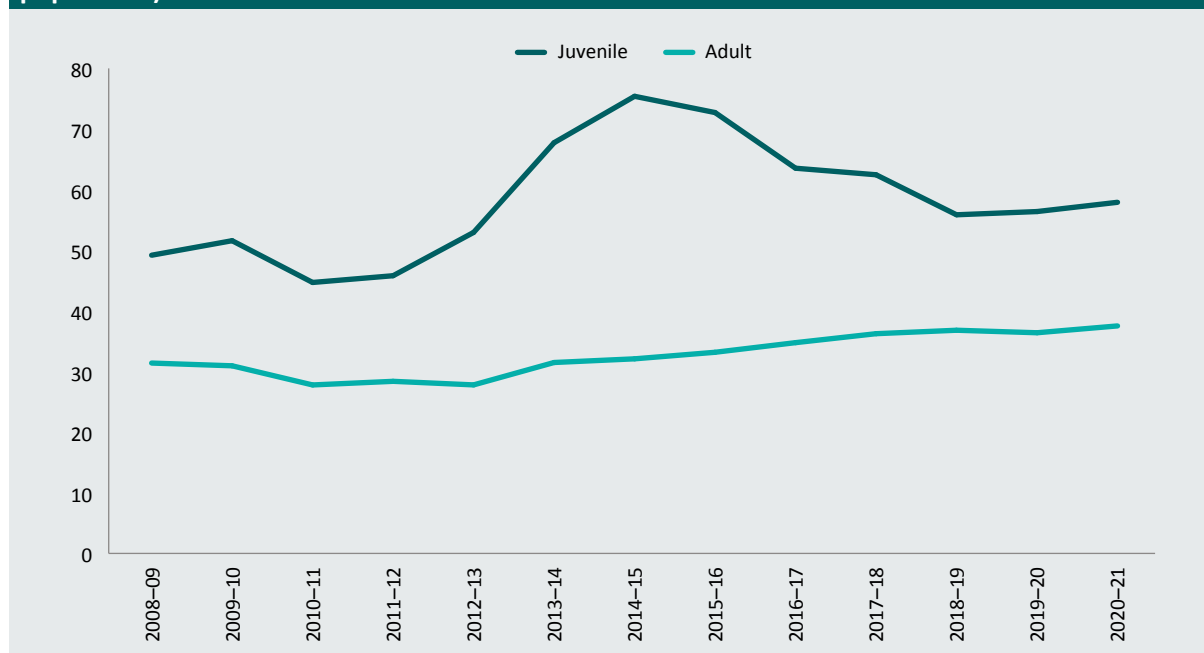
Source: ABS: Recorded Crime – Offenders, 2008–09 to 2020–21 [Customised data report]

The rate of recorded sexual offences was higher among juveniles than among adults at each data point across the 13-year period from 2008–09 to 2020–21. However, at certain points the difference between the two groups was notably larger (Figure 1).

The rate of recorded sexual offences committed by adults remained fairly stable over the 13-year period, with a slight decrease from 2008–09 to 2012–13, followed by a slow but steady increase from this point up to 2020–21. Over the 13-year period the rate of recorded sexual offences committed by adults increased from 31 to 38 per 100,000 (a 19.5% increase).

In comparison, the rate of recorded sexual offences committed by juveniles was relatively volatile over the 13-year period. Notably, between 2011–12 and 2014–15 there was a sharp spike in this rate, which reached 75 per 100,000 juveniles (a 64.6% increase) in 2014–15, more than double the rate of recorded sexual offences committed by adults during this year (32 per 100,000). Following this spike, between 2014–15 and 2018–19 the rate of recorded sexual offences committed by juveniles declined notably, before increasing again less prominently up to 2020–21. Over the 13-year period the rate of recorded sexual offences committed by juveniles increased from 49 to 58 per 100,000 (a 17.7% increase; Figure 1).

Figure 1: Recorded sexual offences by juveniles and adults, 2008–09 to 2020–21 (rate per 100,000 population)



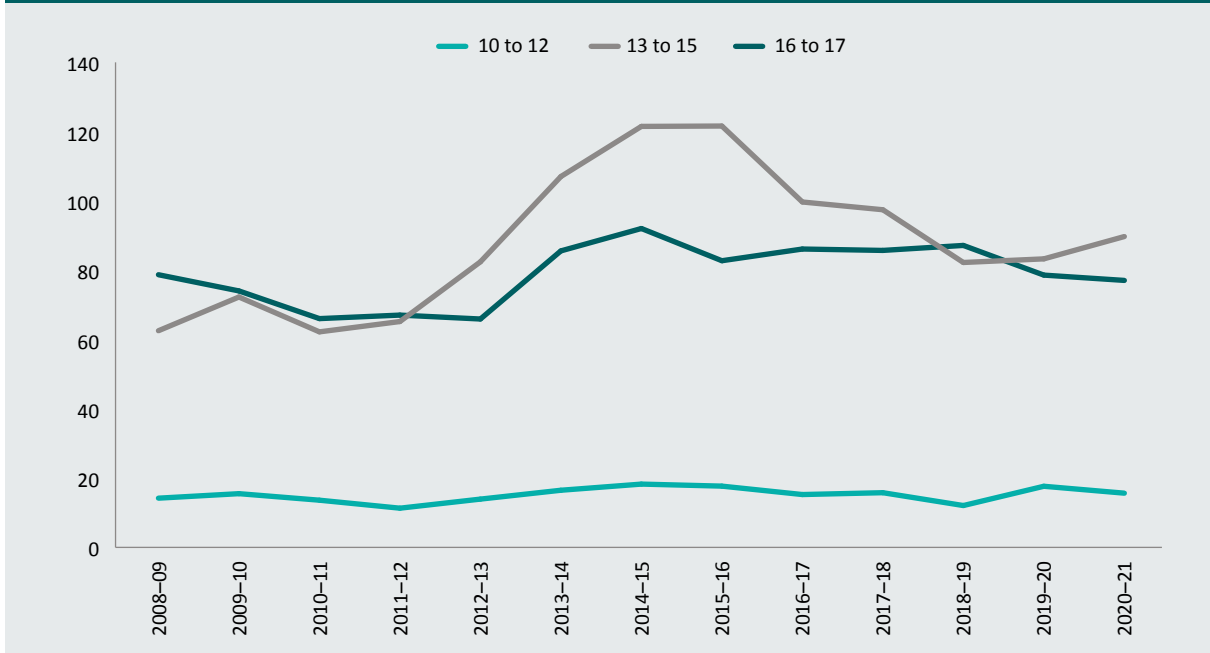
Note: Rate per 100,000 Australian population at 30 June each financial year (ABS 2023)

Source: ABS: Recorded Crime – Offenders, 2008–09 to 2020–21 [Customised data report]

The rate of recorded sexual offences committed by juveniles was disaggregated into three age categories: 10–12, 13–15 and 16–17 years. The sharp spike in recorded sexual offences committed by juveniles between 2011–12 and 2014–15 was particularly prominent among those aged 13–15 years. For this age group, the rate of recorded sexual offences increased from 65 to 122 per 100,000 during the three-year period from 2011–12 to 2014–15 (Figure 2).

Over the 13-year period, the rate of recorded sexual offences committed by 13–15-year-olds increased from 63 to 90 per 100,000 population (a 43.5% increase). For those aged 16–17 years the rate of recorded sexual offences fluctuated over the 13-year period, with an overall decrease from 79 to 77 per 100,000 (a 2.1% decrease). For those aged 10–12 years, the trend remained relatively stable over the 13 years, with an overall increase from 14 to 16 per 100,000 (a 10.2% increase; Figure 2), noting that recorded sexual offence numbers were small among this age group.

Figure 2: Recorded juvenile sexual offences by age group, 2008–09 to 2020–21 (rate per 100,000 population)



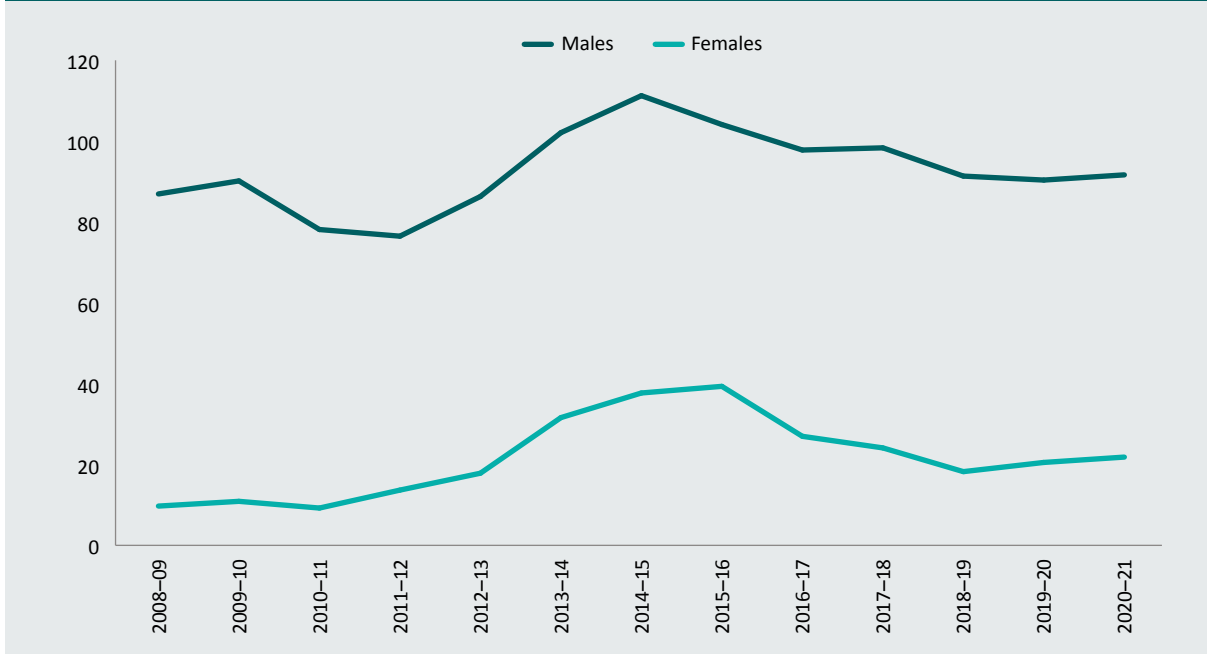
Note: Rate per 100,000 Australian population at 30 June each financial year (ABS 2023)

Source: ABS: Recorded Crime – Offenders, 2008–09 to 2020–21 [Customised data report]

The rate of recorded sexual offences committed by juveniles was calculated by sex (male/female). Over the 13-year period from 2008–09 to 2020–21, the rate of recorded sexual offences increased among both sexes (Figure 3). Among juvenile males, the rate increased from 87 to 92 per 100,000 (a 5.4% increase), and was consistently higher than for females (ranging from 3 to 9 times as high). Concerningly, the rate doubled among females during this period, from 10 per 100,000 in 2008–09 to 22 per 100,000 in 2020–21 (a 124.8% increase).

Nevertheless, the overall trend in recorded sexual offences followed a similar pattern among male and female juveniles, with the rate peaking around the middle of the 13-year period (2014–15 and 2015–16), before declining and eventually stabilising in the years that followed. For females, however, this spike commenced slightly earlier and pivoted slightly later (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Male and female juvenile recorded sexual offences, 2008–09 to 2020–21 (rate per 100,000 population)



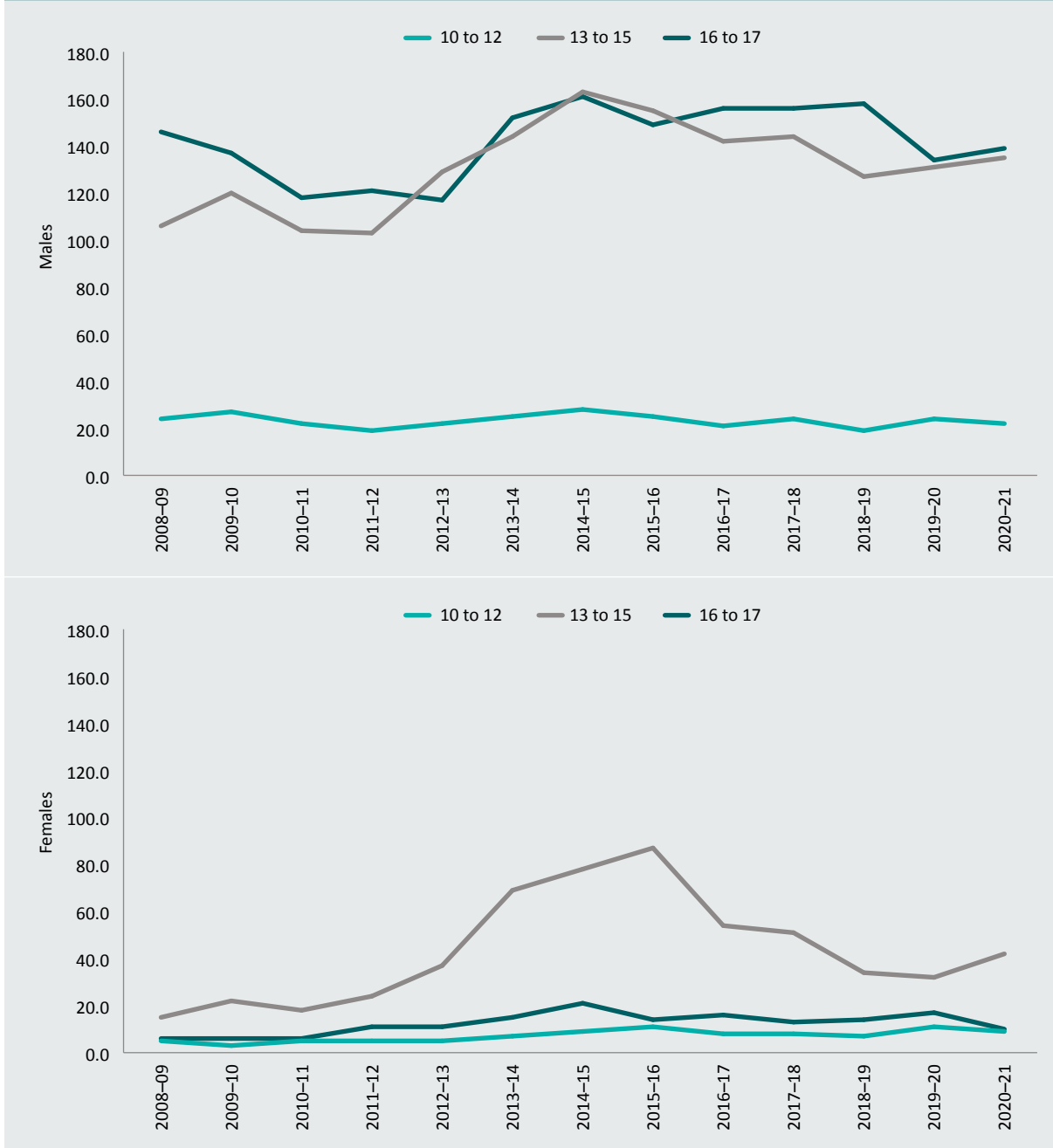
Note: Rate per 100,000 Australian population at 30 June each financial year (ABS 2023)

Source: ABS: Recorded Crime – Offenders, 2008–09 to 2020–21 [Customised data report]

Figure 4 shows the rate of recorded sexual offences committed by juveniles, by age group and sex. The spike in the rate of recorded sexual offences committed by juveniles, which peaked in 2014–15 and 2015–16, was observed among males aged 16–17 and 13–15 years and females aged 13–15 years. For other age groups among both sexes, the rate remained stable.

Between 2012–13 and 2014–15 there was a notable increase in the rate of recorded sexual offences committed by males aged 16–17 years, from 117 to 161 per 100,000 (a 37.4% increase). Similarly, between 2011–12 and 2014–15 the rate increased notably among males aged 13–15 years, from 103 to 163 per 100,000 (a 58.0% increase), before decreasing to 135 in 2020–21. Of all the age groups and sexes, the greatest rate increase at any point during the 13-year period was observed among females aged 13–15 years. Among this group, the recorded sexual offence rate rose sharply between 2010–11 and 2015–16, from 18 to 87 per 100,000 (a 391.4% increase), before declining until 2019–20, and increasing again in 2020–21. Putting this into context, in 2015–16 the recorded sexual offence rate for females aged 13–15 years was over six times greater than for females aged 16–17 years (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Recorded juvenile sexual offences by sex and age group, 2008–09 to 2020–21 (rate per 100,000 population)



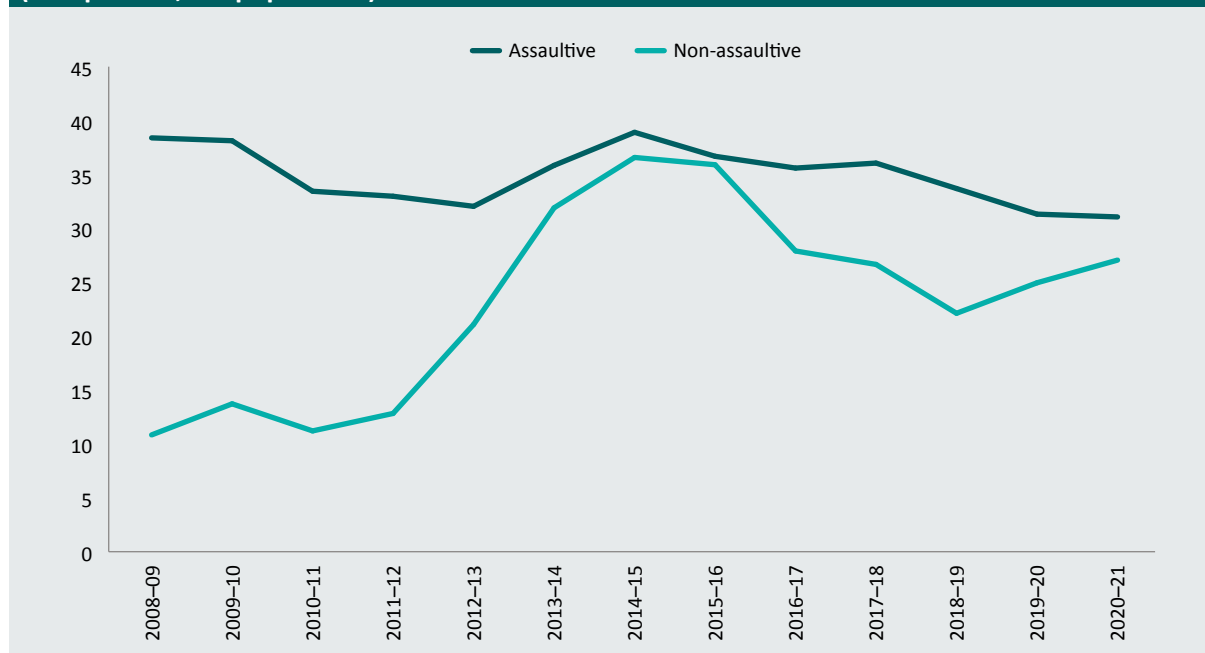
Note: Rate per 100,000 Australian population at 30 June each financial year (ABS 2023)

Source: ABS: Recorded Crime – Offenders, 2008–09 to 2020–21 [Customised data report]

The rate of recorded sexual offences committed by juveniles per 100,000 Australian population was then disaggregated into assaultive and non-assaultive sexual offences. As demonstrated in Figure 5, the spike in recorded sexual offences committed by juveniles, which commenced in 2011–12, was largely driven by an increase in non-assaultive sexual offences. Rates of recorded assaultive and non-assaultive sexual offences among juveniles both peaked in 2014–15, at 39 and 37 per 100,000 respectively. However, a more prominent spike was observed for recorded non-assaultive sexual offences, with a 237.6 percent increase in this recorded offence among juveniles from 2008–09 to 2014–15.

Over the 13-year period, the rate of recorded assaultive sexual offences committed by juveniles decreased by 19.1 percent, from 38 to 31 per 100,000. Conversely, over this period the rate of recorded non-assaultive sexual offences committed by juveniles increased by 149.7 percent, from 11 to 27 per 100,000. At the beginning of the reporting period, in 2008–09, the rate of recorded assaultive sexual offences was more than three times that of non-assaultive sexual offences committed by juveniles (38 vs 11 per 100,000 respectively), yet by 2020–21 these rates were almost equal (31 vs 27 respectively). These trends demonstrate that the number of juveniles being proceeded against by police in Australia for non-assaultive sexual offences is increasing notably over time.

Figure 5: Recorded juvenile assaultive and non-assaultive sexual offences, 2008–09 to 2020–21 (rate per 100,000 population)



Note: Rate per 100,000 Australian population at 30 June each financial year (ABS 2023)

Source: ABS: Recorded Crime – Offenders, 2008–09 to 2020–21 [Customised data report]

Comparing the trends in assaultive and non-assaultive sexual offences, Figure 6 shows that the rate of recorded assaultive sexual offences declined for both juvenile males and females over the 13-year period (by 18.0% and 38.2% respectively). However, among males this rate fluctuated during the 13-year period, while among females there were no notable peaks or troughs.

The rate of recorded non-assaultive sexual offences showed a similar pattern of fluctuation among females and males. A sharp spike and subsequent decrease in non-assaultive sexual offences was observed among both sexes between approximately 2010–11 and 2018–19. Similarly, among both sexes, this rate climbed notably again between 2018–19 and 2020–21.

Over the entire 13-year period, the rate of non-assaultive sexual offences increased among juvenile males from 16 to 35 per 100,000 (a 111.2% increase) and among juvenile females from five to 19 per 100,000 (a 304.2% increase; Figure 6).

Figure 6: Recorded juvenile assaultive and non-assaultive sexual offences by sex, 2008–09 to 2020–21 (rate per 100,000 population)

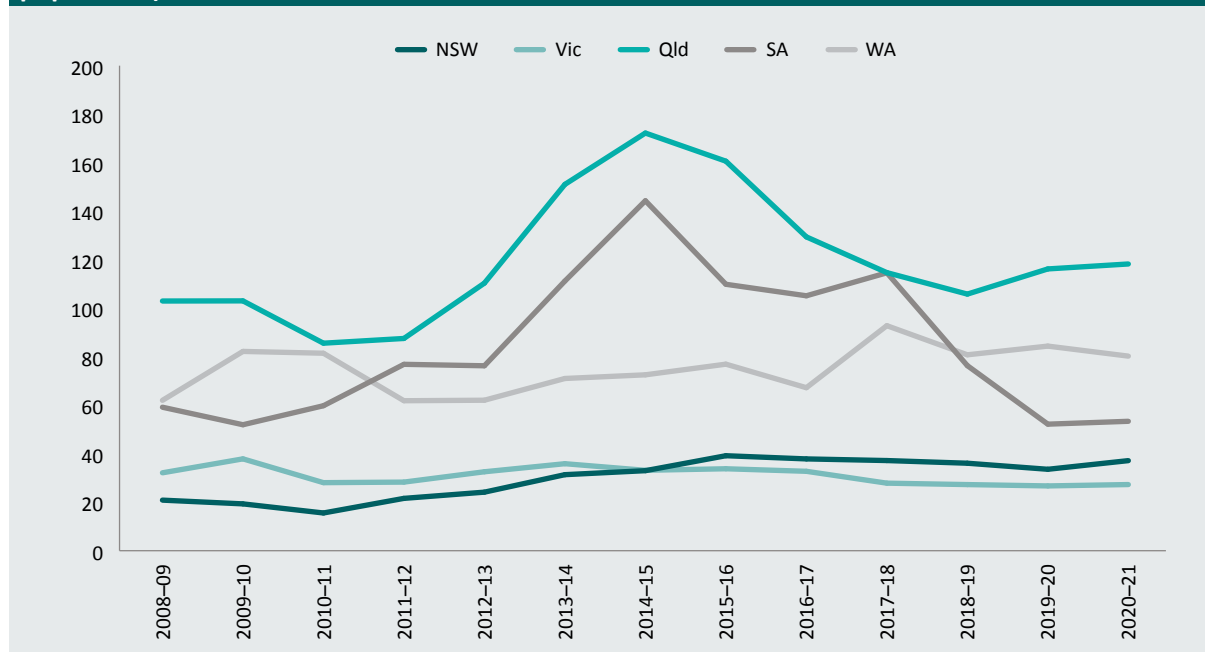


Note: Rate per 100,000 Australian population at June 30 each financial year (ABS 2023)

Source: ABS: Recorded Crime – Offenders, 2008–09 to 2020–21 [Customised data report]

We next examined rates of recorded sexual offences committed by juveniles for each jurisdiction, focusing on New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia (Figure 7). Data from Tasmania, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory were omitted due to low numbers (see *Method* section). In both South Australia and Queensland, recorded sexual offences committed by juveniles increased between 2011–12 and 2014–15, with the recorded sexual offence rates among juveniles in these states almost doubling. During this three-year period the rate in South Australia increased from 77 to 144 per 100,000, while the rate in Queensland increased from 88 to 172 per 100,000. While the rate of recorded sexual offences committed by juveniles had decreased notably in South Australia by 2020–21, it had begun climbing again in Queensland. Conversely, rates of recorded sexual offences committed by juveniles in New South Wales and Victoria remained fairly stable across the 13-year period, with no notable increases or decreases. In Western Australia the rates were slightly more volatile but there were no notable peaks or troughs.

Figure 7: Recorded juvenile sexual offences by jurisdiction, 2008–09 to 2020–21 (rate per 100,000 population)

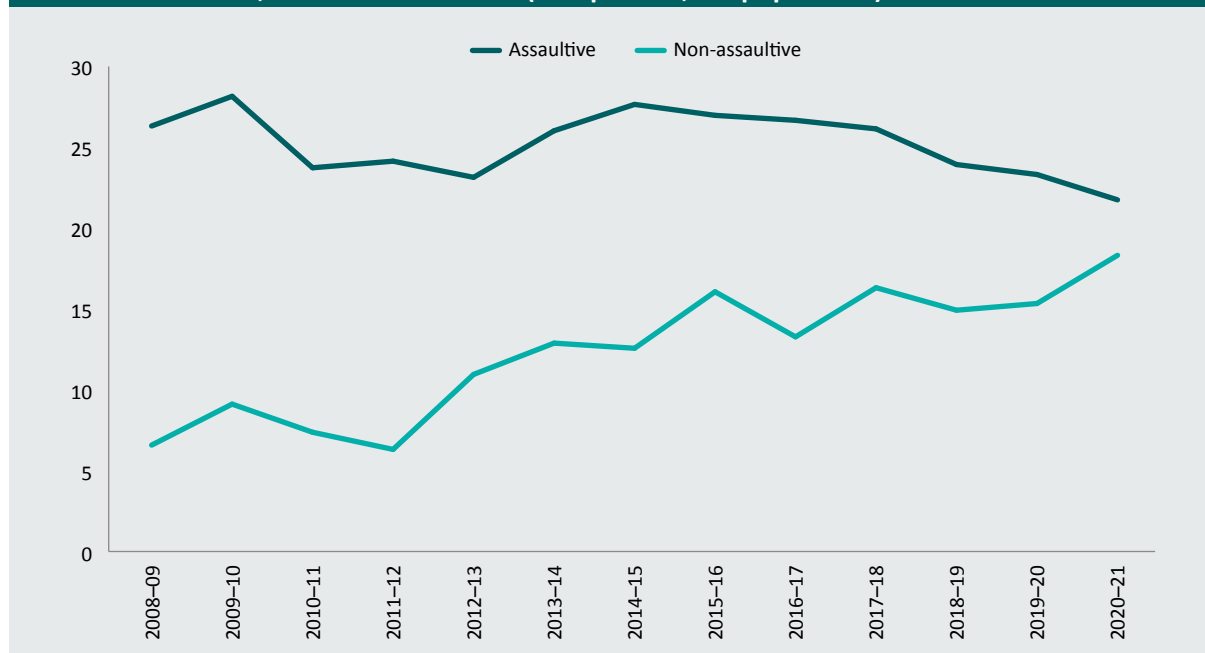


Note: Rate per 100,000 Australian population at 30 June each financial year (ABS 2023)

Source: ABS: Recorded Crime – Offenders, 2008–09 to 2020–21 [Customised data report]

As noted, three jurisdictions were omitted from Figure 7 due to low numbers. Of the five jurisdictions included, Queensland and South Australia displayed the most notable spikes during the 13-year period. Therefore, we also examined the national trend in non-assaultive sexual offences with data from these two jurisdictions removed, to determine if there was a similar pattern. Figure 8 shows the trend in recorded assaultive versus non-assaultive sexual offences in all jurisdictions (four states and two territories) combined, except Queensland and South Australia. Even with Queensland and South Australia data removed, the rate of non-assaultive sexual offences committed by juveniles increased by 178.5 percent over the 13 years, suggesting that this pattern occurred in multiple jurisdictions.

Figure 8: Recorded juvenile assaultive and non-assaultive sexual offences, excluding Queensland and South Australia, 2008–09 to 2020–21 (rate per 100,000 population)



Note: Rate per 100,000 Australian population at 30 June each financial year (ABS 2023)

Source: ABS: Recorded Crime – Offenders, 2008–09 to 2020–21 [Customised data report]

Discussion

This paper examined trends in recorded sexual offences committed by juveniles who were proceeded against by police in Australia from 2008–09 to 2020–21. Importantly, over the 13-year period the rate of recorded juvenile sexual offences increased by 17.7 percent and was still increasing in 2020–21. When separated into assaultive and non-assaultive sexual offences, data demonstrated that the former rate decreased by 19.1 percent over the 13-year period, while the latter more than doubled (increasing 149.7%). The rate of recorded non-assaultive sexual offences increased notably among both juvenile males and females in Australia over the 13 years and was still increasing in 2020–21.

Potential reasons for the observed trends

It is encouraging that the rate of recorded assaultive sexual offences committed by juveniles in Australia decreased over the 13-year study period. However, this was starting from a high base, with juvenile males committing assaultive sexual offences at a rate 53.1 percent higher than the rate of adult offending at the end of the period examined. This highlights the need for a continued focus on addressing harmful sexual behaviours among young men, which is a priority of the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021–2030 (National Office for Child Safety 2021).

The increase in recorded non-assaultive sexual offences among juveniles is also of concern, although its cause is beyond the scope of this study. It can be speculated that the trends were influenced by several factors centred around an increasing shift to online and technology-facilitated behaviours among juveniles, some of which are illegal in Australia. For example, in a systematic review of 39 studies, Madigan et al. (2018) found that over a quarter (27.4%) of respondents under 18 had received a sext, that 14.8 percent had sent a sext, and that the prevalence of both behaviours had increased significantly over time. The same study found that 12 percent of respondents had forwarded a sext without consent from the sender and 8.4 percent reported having their own sext forwarded without their consent. The Office of the eSafety Commissioner (2017) conducted a survey of 4,122 Australians aged 15–45 years, of whom one in 10 (11%) reported a nude or sexual photo or video of them had been posted online without their consent. Lastly, a survey of 6,841 Australian secondary school students aged 14–18 revealed that 87 percent had sent or received a sexually explicit text message (Power et al. 2022). As sexting and image-based abuse among juveniles become more prevalent (Madigan et al. 2018; Strasburger et al. 2019), the risk of these young people being proceeded against by police also increases.

The emergence of image-based abuse may also have influenced the trends in recorded sexual offences among juveniles in Australia across the reporting period, particularly girls and boys aged 13–15 (girls: a 181.1% increase, from 15 to 42; boys: a 26.7% increase, from 106 to 135). A survey of 4,281 Portuguese youth aged 12–20 years found middle adolescents (14–16 years) were the most likely to share sexually explicit images or videos of other people without their consent (Barroso et al. 2021). A similar survey of US high school students ($n=606$, 14–18 years) reported that 25.1 percent of respondents who had received a sext ($n=62$) had forwarded that picture to at least one other person (Strassberg et al. 2012). Given these findings, it is possible that this pattern is also occurring among young people in Australia, which could be leading to more juveniles being proceeded against by police for this and related offences. However, given the limited scope of this study it is also important to consider that other non-assaultive sexual offences that do not relate to online behaviour may be driving the increased sexual offence rate among juveniles, and future research should examine this.

The present study found a sharp spike in rates of recorded sexual offences committed by juveniles in Queensland and South Australia from 2011–12 to 2014–15, which tapered off in the years that followed. The study could not determine why this pattern was not observed in other jurisdictions. However, potential reasons could relate to differences in legislation and education strategies. For example, Victoria amended the *Crimes Act 1958* (Vic) in 2014, Western Australia amended the *Criminal Code Act Compilation Act 1913* (WA) in 2010, and New South Wales launched a campaign in schools in 2009 that warned parents and students about the dangers of sending suggestive or sexual images (ABC News, 3 May 2009: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2009-05-03/nsw-schools-to-get-sexting-fact-sheets/1670886>).

The decrease in rates of recorded sexual offences committed by juveniles in Queensland and South Australia following the spike may have been influenced by changes to police policies and relevant legislation relating to CSAM use and sexting among minors. For example, new guidance on sexting was added to the Queensland Police Service Operational Procedures Manual in November 2016 (Hunt 2017), and an amendment was made to the *Summary Offences Act 1953* (SA) to help reduce instances of children being charged with CSAM offences (Hancock 2015).

Limitations and future directions

While data on combined sexual offences included all Australian jurisdictions, data from three jurisdictions were not disaggregated due to small numbers. Thus, we were unable to examine the trends in these jurisdictions. Data did not differentiate between specific types of sexual offences and hence the study could not examine changes in the rates of specific offences. Lastly, data only included sexual offences for which someone was proceeded against by police. The findings likely under-represent the actual number of offences committed during the reporting period (Hollis & Belton 2017; Wolak & Finkelhor 2011).

This study is nevertheless important as it shows a concerning increase in recorded non-assaultive sexual offences committed by juveniles. It is crucial that increased focus be placed on interventions for juveniles who commit sexual offences either online or in person. To inform such prevention, future research should monitor trends in recorded sexual offences among juveniles disaggregated by offence type, as this study was unable to do. Given that juveniles are increasingly using the internet and smartphones, and that behaviours such as sexting and image-based abuse are increasing over time, it is important to plan for other emerging online behaviours that may increase risks to juveniles. This includes generative artificial intelligence, which anecdotal reports suggest is being used by children to produce sexual images of other children for bullying and other purposes (Long 2023). Lastly, states and territories should be consistent in their response to online sexual offending among juveniles, which includes an education and cautioning approach to ‘experimental’ sexting behaviours.

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URLs correct as at February 2024

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Michael John Cahill is a Research Analyst in the Australian Institute of Criminology's Online Sexual Exploitation of Children Research Program.

Dr Sarah Napier is the Research Manager of the Australian Institute of Criminology's Online Sexual Exploitation of Children Research Program.

Dr Dana Thomsen is a former Principal Research Analyst at the Australian Institute of Criminology.

Micheala McCaig is a former member of the Australian Institute of Criminology.

Dr Heather Wolbers is a Senior Research Analyst in the Australian Institute of Criminology's Online Sexual Exploitation of Children Research Program.

General editor, Statistical Bulletin series: Dr Rick Brown, Deputy Director, Australian Institute of Criminology.
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GPO Box 1936
Canberra ACT 2601, Australia
Tel: 02 6268 7166

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