International and domestic crime statistics indicators of sexual crimes

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Abstract

Aim: In this study, the Author reviews the criminal statistics indicators of sexual crimes. Sexual crimes can be grouped according to several classification systems – for example, the age of the victims, or the method of execution, or in light of whether they are committed with violence. Based on the latter, distinguished between violent and non-violent situations – a good example of the former is the crime of sexual violence, while the latter is child pornography. The analysis of the statistical data provides insight into how and to what extent the prevalence of sexual crime develops, as well as how and with what prevention campaigns these frequency indicators can be reduced.

Methodology: In the study, the Author makes a statistical presentation, the sources of which are international and domestic crime statistics databases.

Findings: Although the number of proceedings initiated for sexual crimes in Hungary can be considered average for the Central and Eastern European region, the numbers of cases detected are still at high levels. In order for these cases to decrease, programs are needed that effectively combat the effects of sexual violence myths, the fear of victim blaming, and stigmatisation.

Value: This study is an overview that aims to present a complex statistical point of sexual crimes, which can serve as a basis for further comparative analyses.

Keywords: sexual crimes, sexual violence, crime statistics, prevalence

Introduction

The New Year is not only a time of vows, of new beginnings, but also of summing up. We look back on the previous year and take stock of ourselves and the world. But summing up can also be very specific: the criminal field also sums up, analyses, summarises, defines. Crime statistics also help us to do this summarising, including in relation to crimes such as sexual offences, which, if it is possible to rank them, are the second most serious crimes in terms of substance after homicide (Lohner, 2019). Their investigation is also informed by this observation, as well as by the fact that these crimes are of increased professional and social interest, either because of the age of the victim, the position of the perpetrator in society or the brutality of the offence. Thus, in these cases, misrepresentation or the presentation of inaccurate and misleading conclusions to the public is not allowed.

Sexual crimes are, in my opinion, one of the most complex types of crime, with serious (psycho)traumatic consequences for everyone, be it the victim, the perpetrator or society as a whole, and which have been widely discussed by national experts (Kósa, 2015; Kuritárné Szabó & Merza, 2017; Merza, Papp & Kuritárné Szabó, 2015; Perczel-Forintos & Kocsis-Bogár, 2015). But it is not only practitioners who study the issue: empirical research on sexual offences and sex offenders has been conducted in a number of highly reputable national (Haller, Fogarasi & Farkas, 2020; Parti, Szabó & Virág, 2017, 2016) and international studies (Bulut & Çankaya, 2020; Chu & Thomas; 2010; Hall & Hall, 2007; Marschall, 1989; Money, 1990; Murray, 2000; Ryan, Huss & Scalora, 2017; Salfati & Taylor, 2006).

Despite all this information and evidence, a number of questions can be formulated in relation to sexual offences, such as what might explain the different incidence in different regions, or how the child protection indicator system should be adapted to reduce the incidence of sexual offences against children. Unfortunately, as much as I would like to find the answers to all the questions that arise, it would not be possible. However, by reviewing the crime data, we may be able to get closer to interventions, treatments and solutions to some of the problems and issues.

Sexual offences in international crime statistics

Merely to bring the concept of crime statistics to a common denominator, I will provide the reader with the conceptual framework within which I am working

with the concept: '*Crime statistics collect data on the mutually dependent and interrelated characteristics of crime as a social phenomenon of masses, on the one hand, on the subject side of crime, on the violation of criminal law, and on the other hand, on the subject side of crime, on the person who commits the crime and the victim*' (Kó, 2020). Crime statistics include data on crimes known to the investigating authority, often also referred to by the indicator structure of recorded crime, which is represented by the Uniform Crime Investigation Authority and Prosecution Statistics (Egységes Nyomozóhatósági és Ügyészségi Bűnügyi Statisztika, ENYÜBS) and court statistics.

In addition to national crime statistics systems, we can also get the information we need from international databases. One such database is the United Nations database (URL1), managed by the United Nations, which has been providing statistical data since the 1950s. The database is open and accessible to anyone and provides data on crime statistics for each continent, region and country for the period 2010–2020. The database includes both the main crimes and victim data, so that a country's crime statistics can be analysed from multiple perspectives.

The database also provides detailed figures on sexual offences and lists several categories of sexual offences. These include sexual exploitation, sexual assault or sexual harassment, which are also presented with figures, and other acts of sexual violence.

For Central and Eastern Europe, the database summarises crime data for the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Moldova, Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine and others, by criminal law category for sexual exploitation, sexual violence and other sexual violence for the period 2010–2020.

According to the UN data, Hungary's crime statistics are average in the Central and Eastern European region, although still with high incidence rates. The UN database for the Central and Eastern European region provides statistical indicators for the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Bulgaria, among others, in terms of per 100 000 inhabitants (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Statistical indicators of sexual abuse crime in the Central and Eastern European region from 2013 to 2019, per 100 000 inhabitants
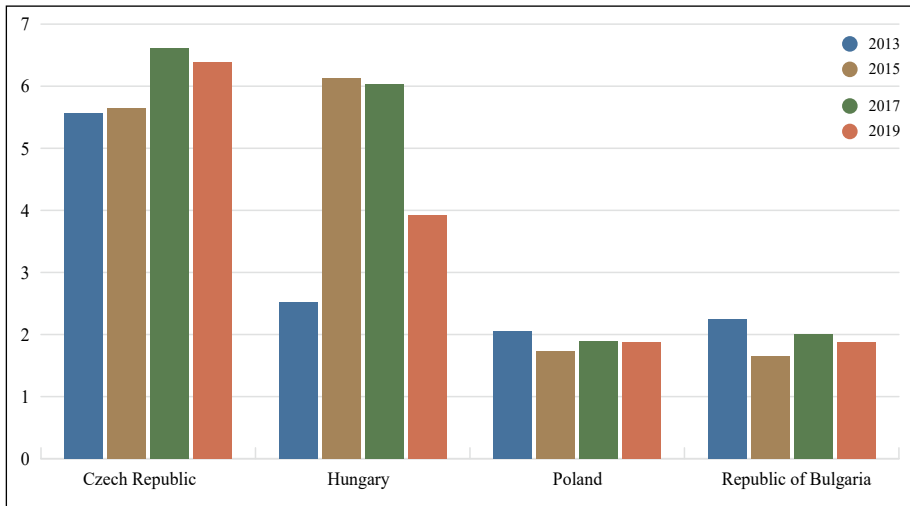
Note. The figure is the author's own work based on the UN report (URL1) (13 March 2023).

Based on the rate per 100 000 inhabitants, which is necessary due to the different territorial sizes and population densities, it can be said that our country is in the middle of the pack when it comes to sexual abuse crimes. The increase between 2013 and 2015 is noteworthy: in 2015, the incidence of sexual violence is almost three times higher than the average in 2013; and between 2017 and 2019, a slight downward trend is visible. The question arises, why? The increase between 2013 and 2015 may be due to the escalating migration crisis at the time, as well as to better acquaintance data: it can be assumed that more victims reported to the investigating authorities during this period. The graph also shows that the number of known offences in the region has remained roughly the same since 2013.

It is unfortunate that the UN database only provides data up to 2020, so we do not have data for the period of the COVID pandemic, although the safety precautions taken in the wake of the global epidemic – such as home office working, distance learning, social isolation, restricted living space, etc. – have certainly had an impact on the dynamics of sexual violence and have redefined the characteristics of the perpetration of the act.

As regards the analysis of the UN database, it should be noted that the data reported in the UN database are not always fully comparable, as the criminal law approach of each country is not always consistent with the criminal law approach of the other country. For example, while the database provides information on sexual exploitation in Hungary and the Czech Republic, this category does not appear in Poland or Bulgaria. The same is the case for sexual assault: while this is presented as a separate criminal category in the Czech Republic, no such category is found for Hungary or Bulgaria.

The UN database not only provides data on the prevalence of sexual offences, but also quantifies victimology, including the victims of sexual offences, the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim, and the gender of the victim.

There are four main types of relationships in the database: an intimate partner/ family relationship between the perpetrator and the victim; acquaintances other than family members/intimate partners; the perpetrator and the victim have never known each other; and the nature of the relationship cannot be determined. The same is true for victimology analyses as we expect to see along the crime categories: knowledge of the relationship systems is not available for all countries. For example, while in Hungary and the Czech Republic the intimate partner/family relationship relationship system is well categorised, in Poland this relationship system is not mentioned, nor is the category of acquaintances other than family members/intimate partners. In their absence, a detailed analysis is not possible.

Limiting the data of the international database to Hungary, it can be said that the victimological data have been added to the database since 2016 (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Number of victims of sexual offences in Hungary as of 2016, per 100 000 inhabitants
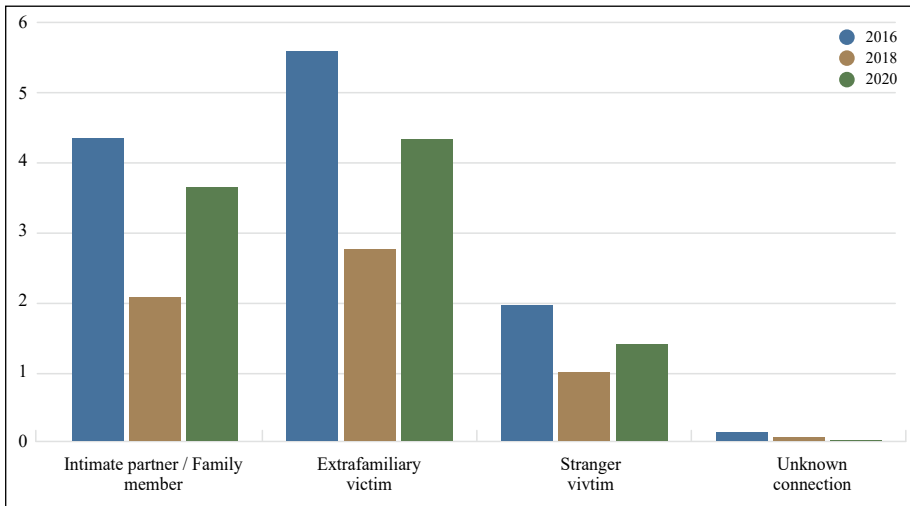
Note. The figure is the author's own work based on the UN report (13 March 2023).

Based on the statistical analysis of victimology, it can be said that the victims of sexual crimes in Hungary are typically from the perpetrator's circle of acquaintances (family, relationship or friends), while sexual assaults against unknown persons are less frequent. It is also clear that the relationship of the perpetrators of sexual assault can be identified in almost all cases: those cases where the relationship cannot be identified converge to zero. This finding becomes particularly relevant in the detection of sexual offences, as it is likely to make it much easier to narrow down the pool of possible perpetrators, which, when combined with the analysis and profiling of the sexual offenders' personalities, can lead to even faster results.

Sexual offences in the domestic ENYÜBS system

After the UN database, I also looked at the Uniform Crime Investigation Authority and Prosecution Statistics (UCCS).

First, let's look at the trends in so-called 'non-violent' sexual offences from 2019 onwards (Figure 3).

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Figure 3

Statistical indicators of so-called 'non-violent' sexual offences in Hungary for the period 2019–2022
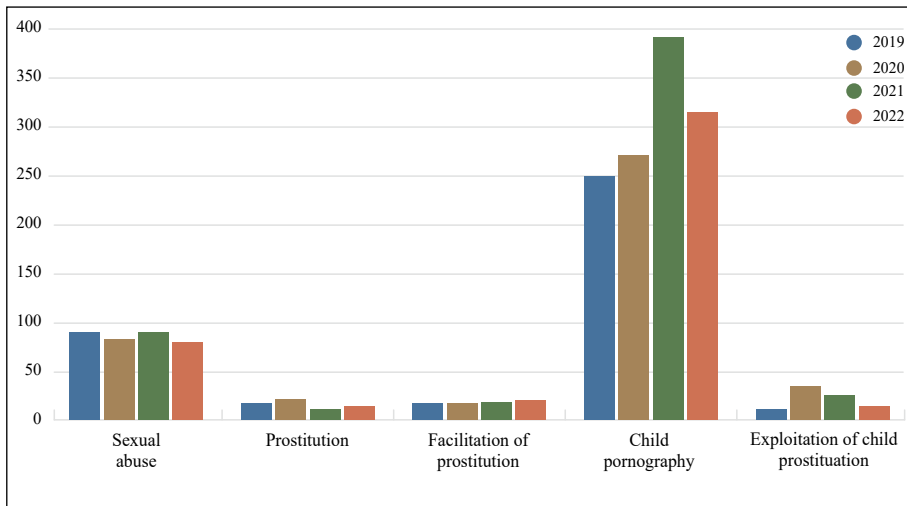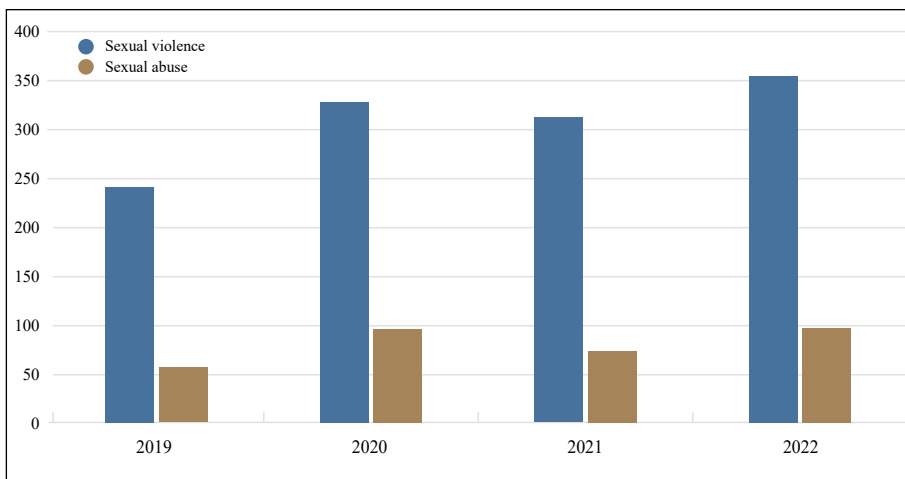

Note. The graph is the author's own work based on ENYÜBS data (3 January 2023).

The figures show that none of the offences show a drastic change compared to themselves, either in terms of an increase or a decrease in the number of cases, with the possible exception of child pornography. Sexual abuse, prostitution, facilitation of prostitution and exploitation of child prostitution show consistency between 2019 and 2022; the number of cases is almost the same in each year. For child pornography, a visible increase in the number of cases occurred in 2021, when 390 cases were registered, compared to 2020, when there were 270 cases of child pornography registered. The 'good news' is that a lower number of cases was registered again in 2022, with 314 offences.

Looking at the statistical data on the incidence of violence (Figure 4), we can say that the prevalence of sexual violence has been consistent at almost the same level since 2019, with no outliers or drastic changes, and minimal increases and decreases in the number of cases. The same finding is true for the prevalence of the crime of sexual coercion, which should be complemented by the observation that the crime of sexual coercion is less common in today's criminal justice system. While the incidence of the crime of sexual violence is over 300 cases per year, the incidence of the crime of sexual coercion is between 70 and 95 cases per year.

Figure 4

The prevalence of sexual violence and sexual coercion as violent sexual offences in Hungary between 2019–2022

Note. The graph is the author's own work based on ENYÜBS data (3 January 2023).

The ENYÜBS database can also be used to analyse the age of the offender (Figure 5) and the age of the victim (Figures 6 and 7).

In terms of perpetrators, between 2019 and 2022, there were 1 110 male perpetrators of sexual violence and only 27 female perpetrators. The majority of male perpetrators (645) are aged between 25 and 59, while the least frequent perpetrators are older people: 64 were older (over 60) at the time of the offence. The age of male perpetrators over the period under review reflects the fact that the perpetrator of sexual violence is typically an adult, although in 2022 there was a significant increase in the number of child perpetrators (0–13 years) compared to 2022: while between 2019 and 2021 the proportion of child perpetrators ranged between 10.28% and 11.22% (22 and 29 individuals), in 2022 14.84% (50 individuals) of sexual perpetrators were children.

Looking at data on victims of sexual violence, a total of 1,232 people have been victims of sexual violence between 2019 and 2022. 79.63% of the victims, 981 persons in total, were female, while 20.37%, 251 persons in total, were male. There is a very high number of cases where young girls (0–13 years old) are victims of sexual violence (49.03% of victims in the period under review belong to this group) and crimes where adult women are victims (25.08% in the period under review). In cases where the victim is male, the number of child victims is also very high: 86.45% of male victims are children.
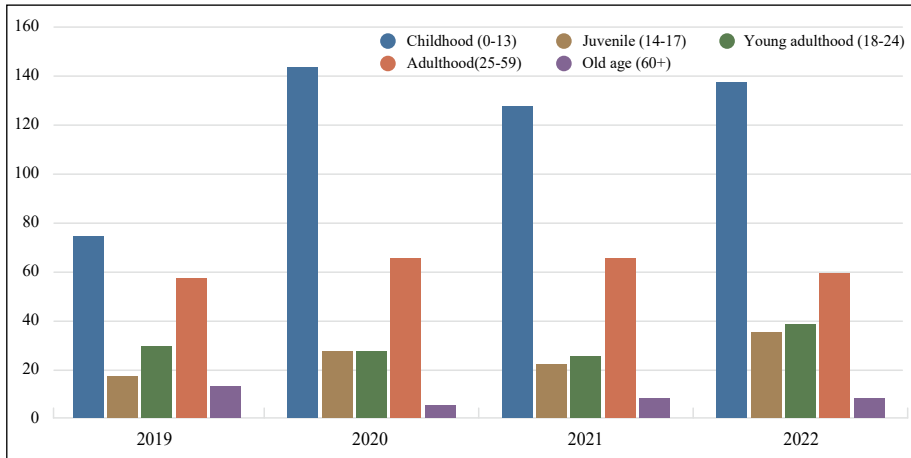
Figure 5

Age distribution of male perpetrators of sexual abuse crime in the period 2019–2022
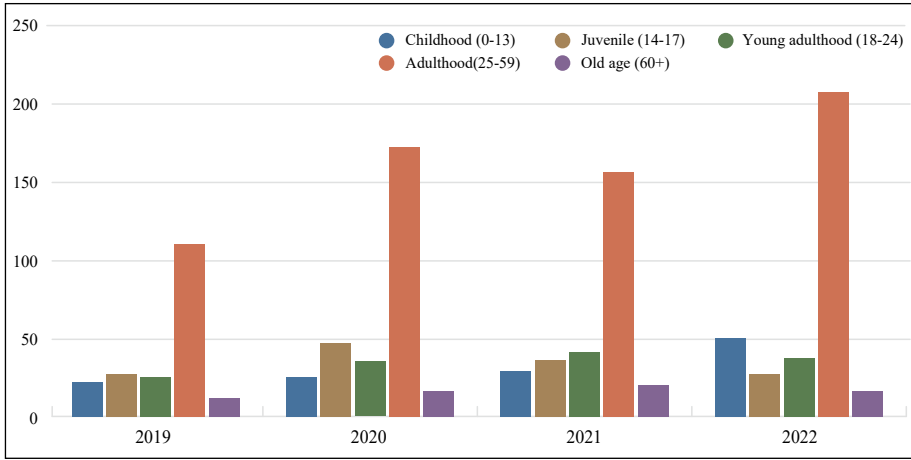
Note. The graph is the author's own work based on ENYÜBS data (3 January 2023).
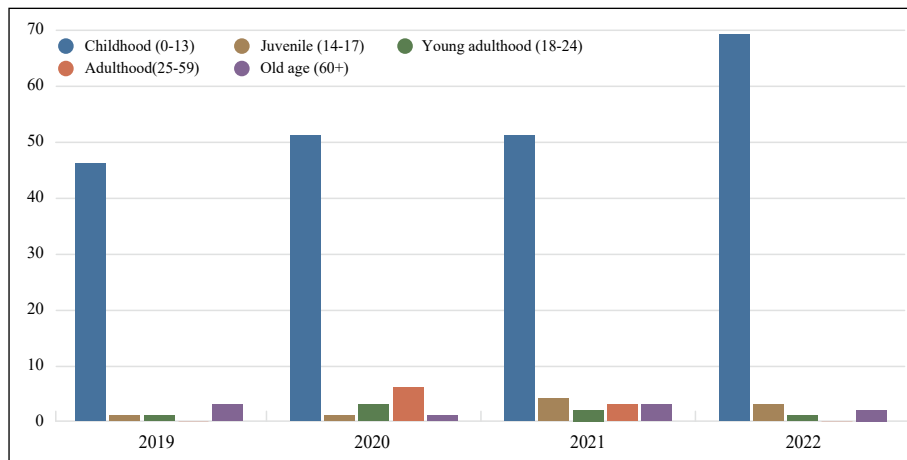
Figure 6

Age distribution of female victims of sexual violence in 2019–2022

Note. The graph is the author's own work based on ENYÜBS data (3 January 2023).

Figure 7

Age distribution of male victims of sexual violence in 2019–2022

Note. The graph is the author's own work based on ENYÜBS data (3 January 2023).

Summary

When analysing the criminal statistics of sexual violence, it can be concluded that the prevalence of sexual offences in Hungary in the Central and Eastern European region is average compared to other countries in the region, but still very high. This high number of cases is also supported by the Hungarian statistical indicators, which show a consistently high number of cases of around 300 per year.

International and domestic victim statistics show a trend that sexual violence is typically committed against close relatives and intimate partners, and that the number of child victims is very high. Data from several sources also suggest that child victims may be behind acts committed against close relatives. However, it should also be borne in mind that the latency rate for sexual offences is also high (Korinek, 2020), so that not all cases come to the attention of the investigating authorities and do not become part of official crime statistics.

Latency may be due to fear of secondary victimisation. Repeated recollection of what has happened has a strong psychotraumatogenic effect, which is particularly strong in the case of sexual violence (Janoff-Bulman, 1995; Maercker & Augsburger, 2019; Roth & Newman, 1995).

Another cause of latency may be the victim's fear of how the investigating authority will take his or her report, how seriously he or she will be taken, or

how much he or she will be convicted of the crime (Korinek, 2020; Orth, 2002). This victim-blaming attitude is the subject of the so-called gender rape myths (Ben-David & Schneider, 2005; Bridges, 1991; Norris & Cubbins, 1992; Nyúl, Ferenczy, Kende & Szabó, 2017, 2018; Parti, Szabó & Virág, 2016), which reinforce the responsibility of the victim of sexual violence, while trivialising the crime and trying to absolve the perpetrator of the crime.

In order to overcome the fear of denunciation and other negative consequences, positive effects and indicators are needed to overcome the resistance of victims. This could include a targeted educational campaign programme, sensitisation of police staff, the development of a methodology for interviewing victims of sexual offences and the use of crisis intervention by a criminal psychologist. If fears can be reduced, the fear of stigmatisation and repetitive, repetitive traumatisation will slowly disappear, leading to an increase in the number of reports and notifications, which in turn will reduce the latency of sexual offences, which in the long term could lead to a stable reduction in the prevalence of the crime itself.

The functioning and optimisation of the child protection signalling system also needs to be reconsidered. Children are at increased risk of domestic abuse, and peer abuse is also becoming increasingly prevalent, with child and adolescent victims being the main victims, often with tragic outcomes (Jármi, 2019; Siegler, 2020; Várnai et al., 2018). In order to significantly reduce the incidence of these offences, I see the need to develop a rethinking (crime) prevention campaign targeting the most vulnerable age group and those who meet and deal with them directly on a daily basis.

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Statements

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