

Why did sexual assault reports spike in March 2021?

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SUMMARY

The number of sexual assault incidents recorded by NSW Police jumped dramatically in March 2021, up 46% from February 2021 and 65% from March 2020. The sharp increase most likely reflects a temporary increase in victim willingness to report sexual assault due to heightened public attention on sexual assault and consent (rather than an increase in prevalence). The spike aligns with saturated media coverage of a number of high profile sexual assault allegations which came to light in late February and March 2021.

Key elements of the March 2021 increase in sexual assault reports include the following:

- The largest increase, both in volume and percentage, was among adult victims reporting victimisation as an adult (up 78% compared to the monthly average over the previous year). Large increases were also apparent for child victims with historic child sexual assault reports up 55% and contemporary child sexual assault reports up 43%.
- Most victims of sexual assault that come to police attention are aged between 13 and 20 at the time of the incident; these victims accounted for almost two-thirds (64%) of the increase in sexual assault.
- Female victims rose more sharply than males (62% increase for women versus 45% for men).
- Sexual assault reports showed a greater increase in Sydney (up 69%) compared to Regional NSW (up 48%).
- The rise in sexual assaults was as much to do with an increase in reports of recent contemporary assaults as it was related to an increase in historical offences.

KEYWORDS

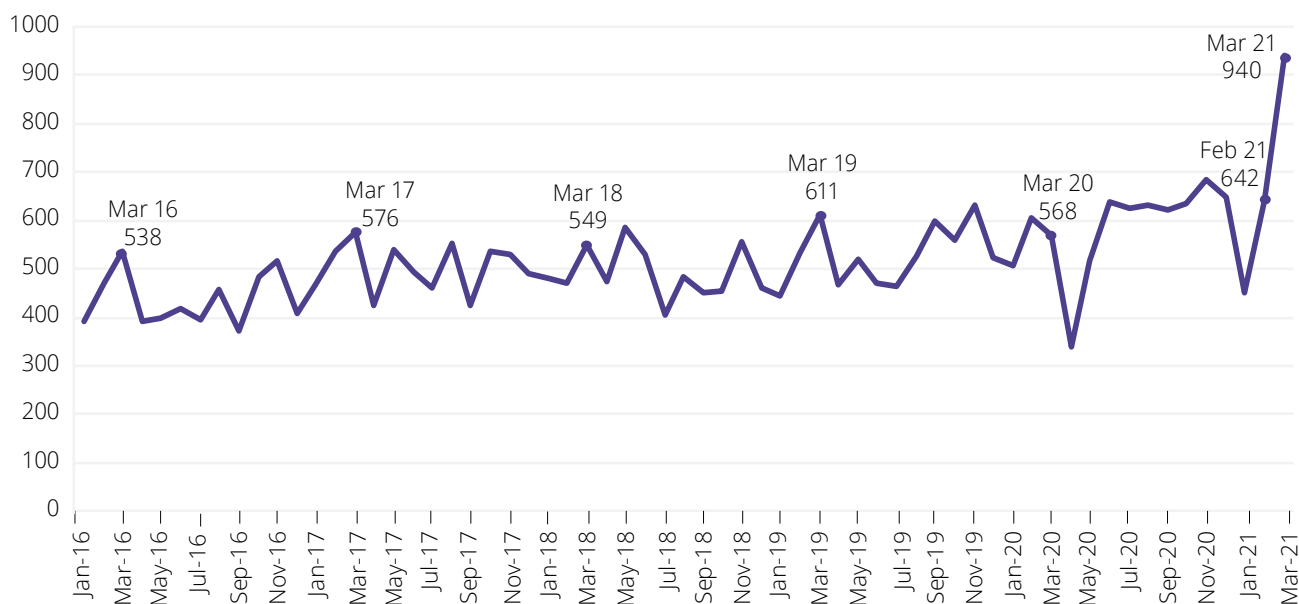
Sexual assault and violence

INTRODUCTION

In March 2021 the number of sexual assault incidents recorded by NSW Police jumped dramatically. Figure 1 shows sexual assault incidents reported to and recorded by NSW Police each month over the five years to March 2021. There are two aspects of this chart that are immediately noticeable. Firstly, the overall volume of sexual assaults steadily increased over the five years. Secondly, over and above the steady increase, the volume of incidents recorded in March 2021 is clearly an outlier in that it is substantially higher than in any previous month. This paper focusses on the second of these issues.

The 940 sexual assault incidents recorded by NSW Police in March 2021 represent a 46% increase over the number recorded in February 2021 (n=642¹), a 65% increase in the number recorded in March 2020 (n=568) and a 61% increase in the monthly average over the previous year (the average monthly number of sexual assaults in the 12 months to Feb 2021 was 583). This Bureau Brief looks more closely at the increase in reported sexual assaults in March 2021 in order to understand which types of sexual assault increased over this time.

Figure 1. Recorded incidents of Sexual assault, Jan 2016 to March 2021



Two points help interpret the result. Firstly, it is important to note that the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research reports crimes according to the date they come to police attention, not according to the date crimes occur. Thus, the March 2021 spike represents an increase in incidents reported to police in that month, not necessarily incidents taking place in that month. It follows that the March 2021 figures include historic offences reported that month.

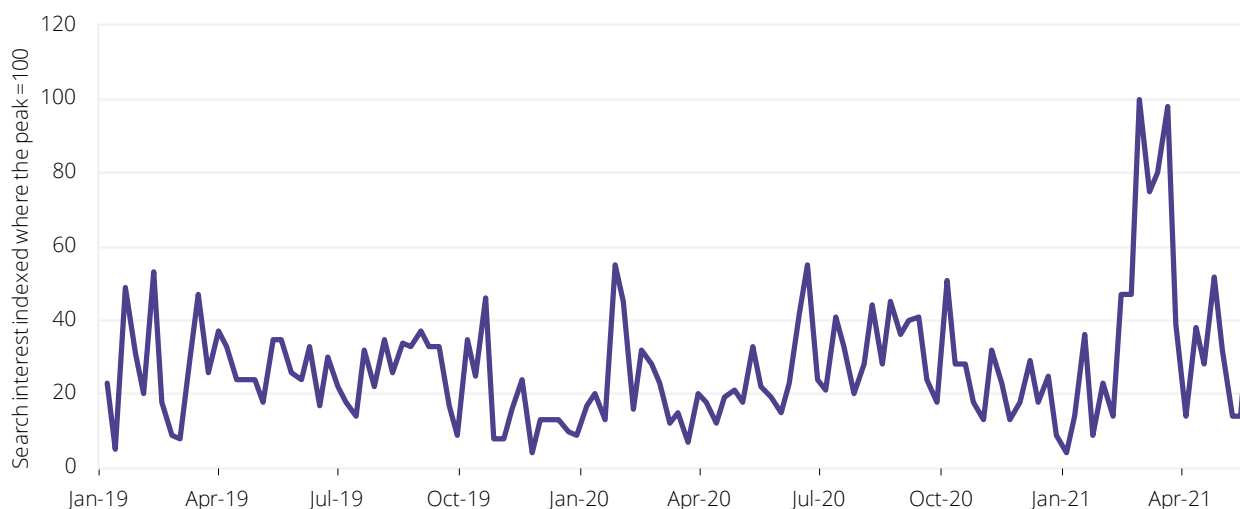
Another important contextual consideration is the significant public discussion about sexual assault and consent which began in mid-February 2021 and continued through March 2021. From 15 February 2021 an alleged 2018 sexual assault involving a Commonwealth parliamentary staff member dominated national media for many weeks (Curtis & Crowe, 2021). Much of that discussion focussed on the appropriate response to sexual assault allegations. From 19 February 2021 public discussion about sexual conduct, consent and reporting of sexual violence was further amplified by the circulation of a petition containing hundreds of first-hand accusations of sexual violence and misconduct predominantly

¹ Since February is a short month, the comparison between February 2021 and March 2021 is based on the average daily number of sexual assaults recorded. In February 2021 police recorded an average of 23 sexual assaults per day compared with 30 in March 2021.

involving Sydney based high school students over the past decade and beyond (Chrysanthos, 2021). In late February 2021/early March 2021 another high-profile sexual assault allegation came to public attention involving the Commonwealth Attorney General (ABC News, 2021).

These instances significantly increased public engagement with issues of sexual violence, victim rights, consent and gender equality. Figure 2 shows weekly Google searches for 'Sexual Assault' in NSW from Jan 2019 to May 2021. This series also shows an aberrant spike in March 2021 at a time similar to the sexual assault crime series.² Another indication of the high profile of violence against women at the time were the 'Women's March 4 Justice' events which took place on 15 March 2021 in many Australian cities and towns, in which thousands of people marched to protest against gendered violence (Nally, 2021).

Figure 2. Google search trend for Sexual assault (New South Wales)



The increase in sexual assaults in March 2021

In this section we identify what types of sexual assaults showed increased reporting in March 2021. To do this we consider characteristics of sexual assault victims recorded in March 2021 with characteristics of sexual assault victims reported over the previous year. In most cases we compare records from March 2021 with the monthly average figure over the previous year (March 2020 to February 2021).

In March 2021, NSW Police recorded 973 sexual assault victims.³ This was a 59% increase from the monthly average over the previous year; the average number of sexual assault victims recorded each month from March 2020 to February 2021 was 613.

What types of sexual assaults increased in March 2021?

Sexual assault reports can be considered according to three broad types: adult victims reporting victimisation as an adult, children reporting victimisation as a child (referred to as contemporary child sexual assault) and adults reporting historic child sexual assaults.⁴ Note that the adult/child split in this analysis follows the legal age of consent law. Accordingly, 'adult victims' include victims aged 16 and 17 years and 'child victims' are aged 15 years and under.⁵

² Data is based on Google users who have opted-in to Location History for their Google account. Data accessed from <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2019-01-01%202021-05-31&geo=AU-NSW&q=Sexual%20assault>.

³ The number of sexual assault victims recorded is slightly high than the number of sexual assault incidents recorded since some incidents involve more than one victim.

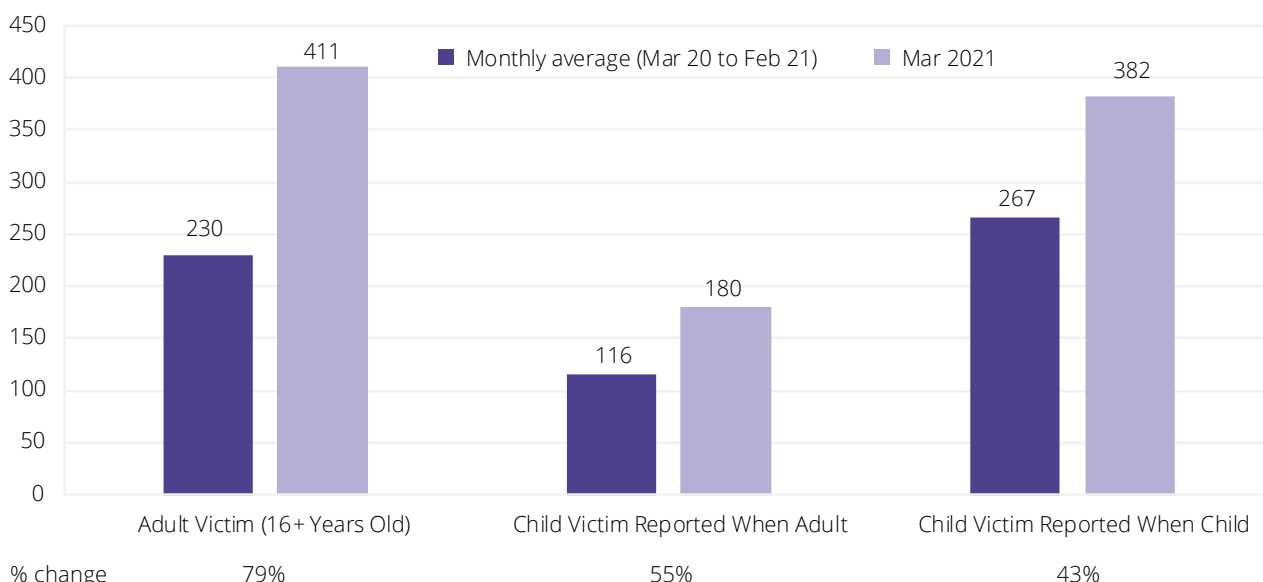
⁴ Contemporary child sexual assaults are for incidents that are reported while the victim is under 16 years of age, but the incident may have occurred months or years prior to the report date.

⁵ It is also the case that child sexual assault reports include notifications that come to police attention through mandatory reporting and secondary reporting mechanisms.

Figure 3 shows the number of sexual assaults reported in March 2021 for these three categories, versus the monthly average number over the previous year. The percentage change between the time periods is also shown. It is clear that reports of adult sexual assault victimisation, contemporary child sexual assault victimisation and historic child sexual assaults all increased in March 2021. However, the largest increase, both in volume and percentage, was among adult victims reporting victimisation as an adult; in March 2021 these reports were 79% higher than the monthly average over the previous year (an additional 181 victims). Large increases were also apparent in the other two categories with historic child sexual assault reports up 55% (an additional 64 victims) and contemporary child sexual assault reports up 43% (an additional 115 victims).

In terms of the total increase in victim records, adult victims (16+ years) accounted for 50% of the increase, while contemporary child sexual assault victims and historic child sexual assault victims accounted for 32% and 18% of the total increase respectively.

Figure 3. Sexual assaults recorded by police by type



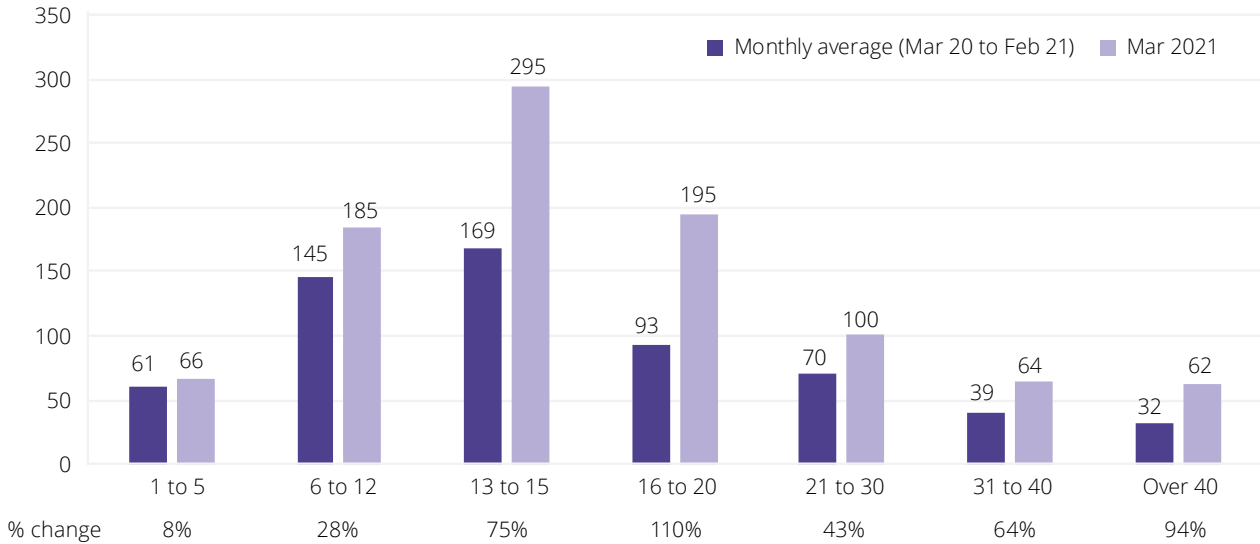
Demographic changes

While the number of adult and child sexual assault victims both rose in March 2021 it is interesting to consider which specific age groups within those broad bands showed the greatest change. Figure 4 shows the age distribution of sexual assault victims recorded in March 2021 versus the average from the previous year. Note the age shown reflects the age of the victim at the time of the incident, not at the time of report.

Most victims of sexual assault that come to police attention are aged between 13 and 20 at the time of the incident. These age groups also saw the largest increases in March 2021. Just under a third of recorded sexual assault victims are aged 13 to 15 years; reports from this group rose 75% in March 2021. While a smaller group, the number of sexual assault reports by victims aged 16 to 20 years more than doubled in March 2021 (up 110% from a monthly average of 93 to 195 in March 2021). Sexual assault reports by adults aged over 20 years also showed large increases, but they remain a small proportion of all recorded sexual assault victims. Child victims aged 12 years or under showed the smallest changes.

Slightly more than half the reports of sexual assaults involving a victim aged 17 years or under come to police attention through a secondary report (including from mandatory reporters). In March 2021, sexual assault reports from secondary sources increased at the same rate as reports directly to police.

Figure 4. Age of sexual assault victims at the time of incident



Female victims make up approximately 90% of adult sexual assault victims reported to police and about 80% of child sexual assault victims. In March 2021 the number of female sexual assault victims recorded increased by 62% compared with a 45% increase among male sexual assault victims.⁶

Time to report

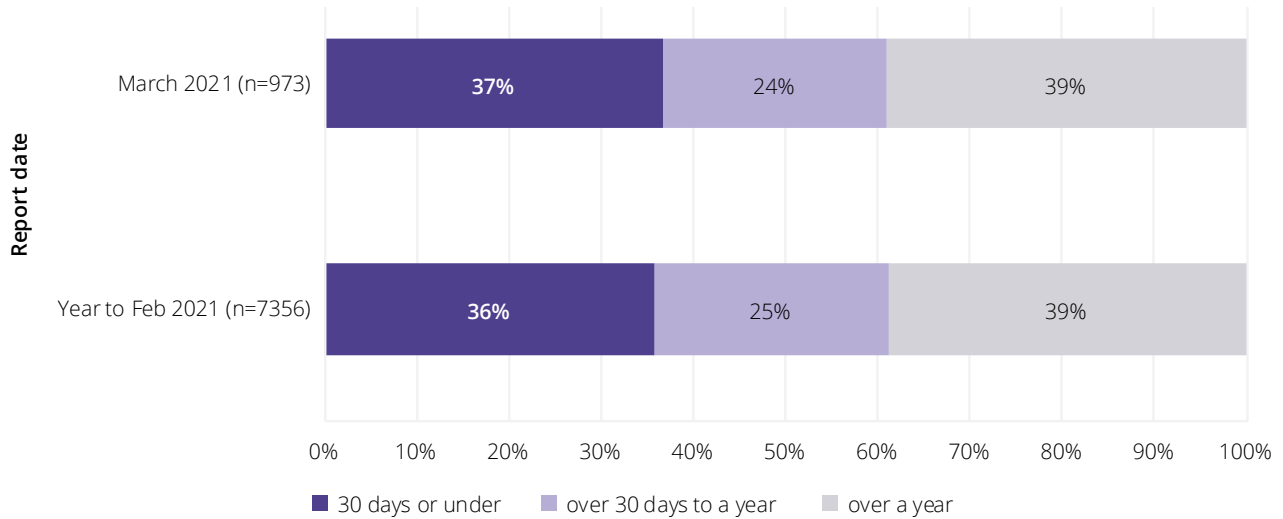
Here we consider whether the additional sexual assaults reported to police in March 2021 were dominated by offences that took place some time ago. We do this by calculating the time elapsed between the date a sexual assault incident occurred and the date it was reported ('time to report'). Figure 5 shows the proportion of March 2021 sexual assaults reports with a short (30 days or less), medium (over 30 days) and long (over a year) time to report, compared with sexual assaults reported in the previous year.

It is interesting that the time to report for sexual assaults has remained consistent despite the increase in volume. In March 2021, 37% of recorded sexual assaults occurred within 30 days of reporting to police compared with 36% in the previous year. Similarly, 39% of sexual assaults recorded in March 2021 occurred more than a year ago versus 39% of those reported in the previous year.

This comparison shows that the increase in sexual assault reports in March 2021 occurred equally across 'time to report' categories. In other words, in March 2021 victims increased their reporting of past sexual assaults as well as recent sexual assaults.

⁶ Female sexual assault victims increased from a monthly average of 504 in the year to February 2021 to 816 in March 2021. Male sexual assault victims increased from a monthly average of 108 in the year to February 2021 to 157 in March 2021.

Figure 5. Victims of sexual assault reported to NSW Police by time from incident to report



Geographical changes

Sexual assault reports did not increase uniformly across NSW in March 2021. The increase was greater in Sydney (up 69%) than in Regional NSW (up 48%). Figures 6 and 7 show the percentage change in Sydney and Regional NSW. Figure 7 shows that in many parts of Sydney the number of recorded sexual assaults doubled in March 2021 (see Ryde, Baulkham Hills and Hawkesbury, City and Inner South, Eastern Suburbs, Inner West and North Sydney and Hornsby). Two parts of Sydney saw no increase (Sutherland and Blacktown).

Regional increases were of a smaller scale than in Sydney. The Southern Highlands and the Capital region showed the largest increases.

Figure 6. Percentage change in sexual assaults - Regional NSW

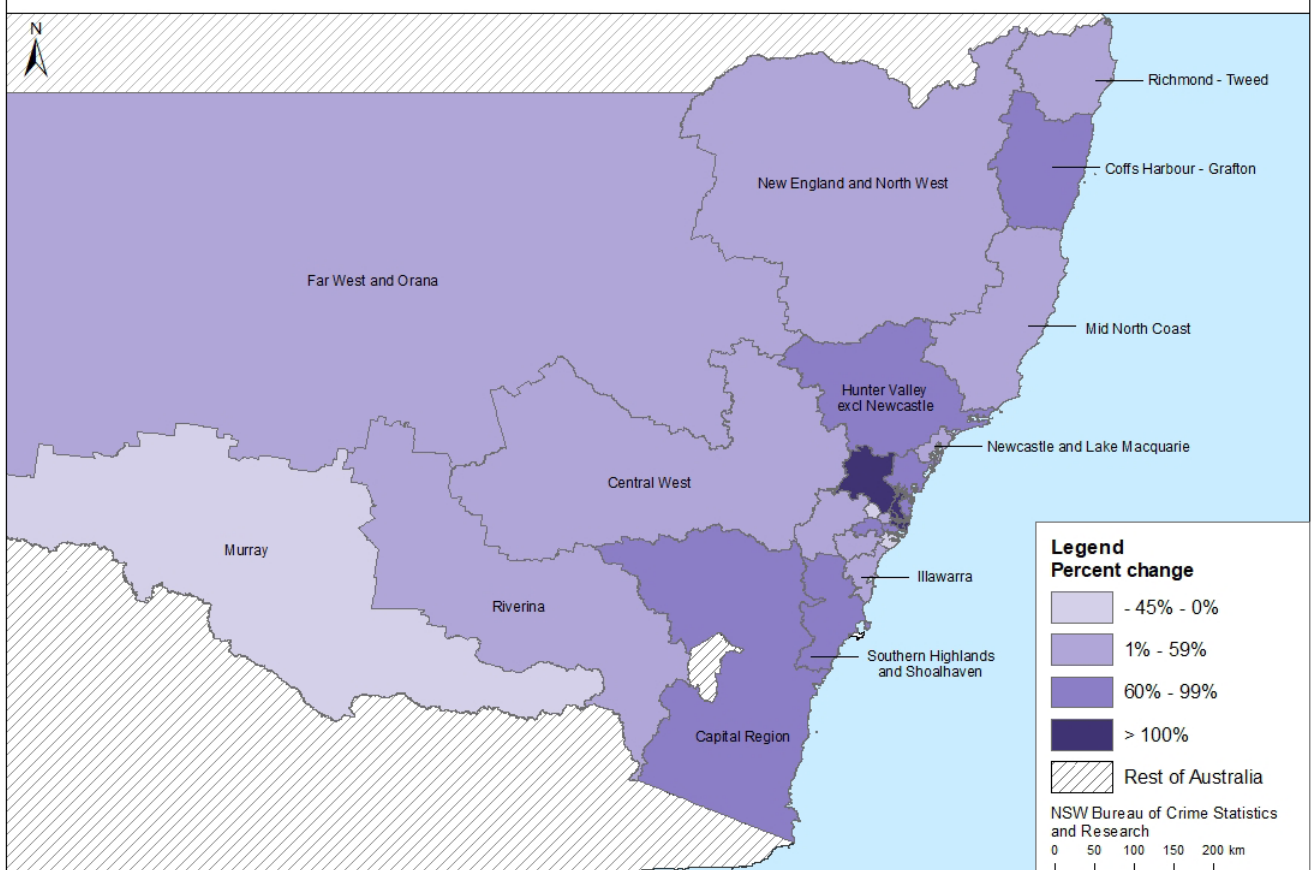
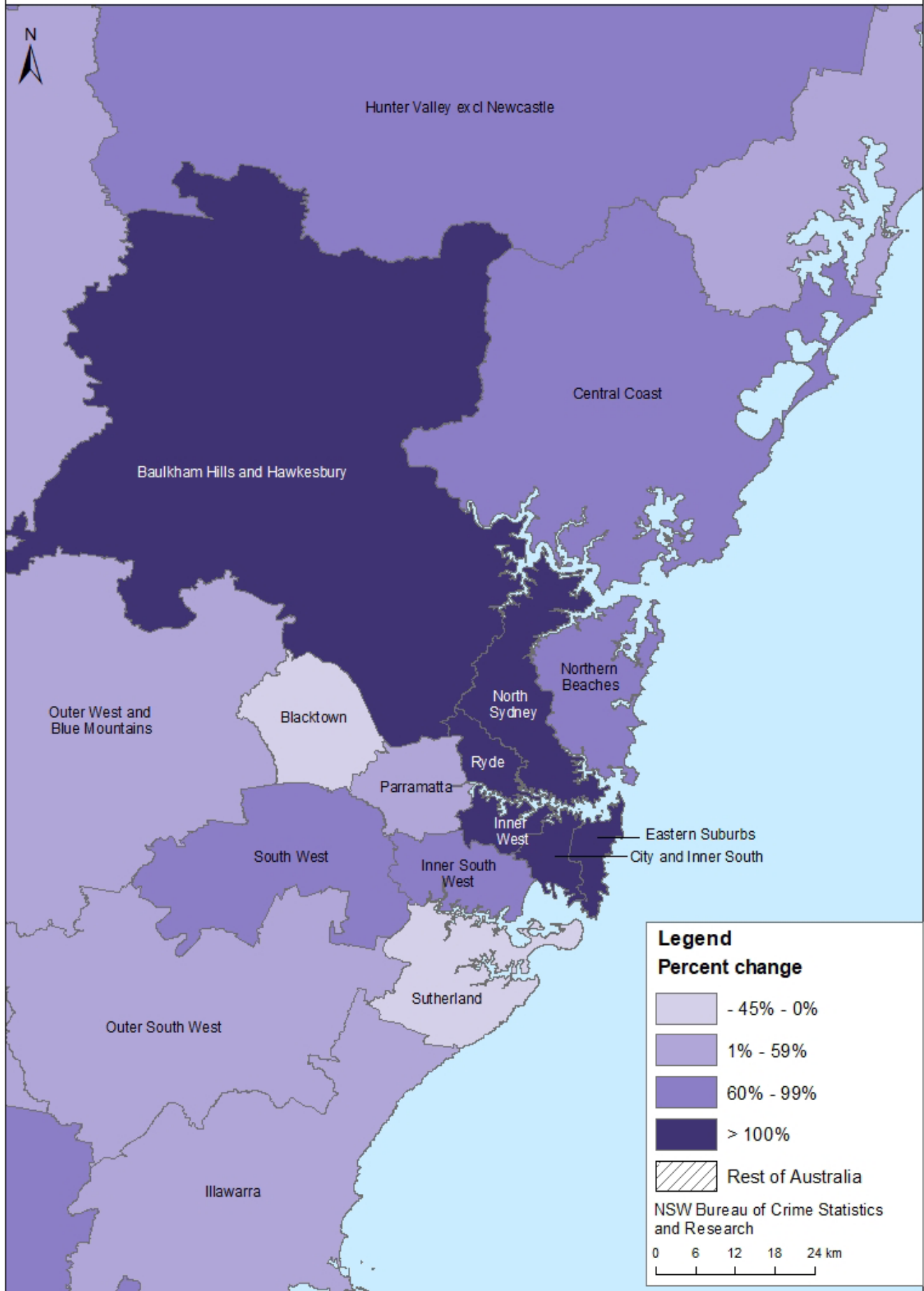


Figure 7. Percentage change in sexual assaults - Greater Sydney



CONCLUSION

Sexual assault notifications received by NSW Police increased sharply and uncharacteristically in March 2021. The number of sexual assaults recorded by NSW Police was 61% higher in March 2021 than the monthly average from the previous year. It seems most likely that the change reflects a temporary increase in sexual assault reporting driven by unprecedented national attention on sexual assault and gender issues.

Sexual assault is an offence with very low rates of reporting. The Personal Safety Survey, 2016, a Australian national household survey of adults, estimates that only 13% of adult women who experience sexual assault perpetrated by a male report the incident to police (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). This means that there is considerable scope to increase the number of police recorded incidents of sexual assault through increased reporting.

The increase in sexual assault reports in March 2021 has been widespread. Characteristics include:

- A large increase among adult victims (16 years and over) reporting adult victimisation (up 79%), plus increases in reporting of historic child sex offences (up 55%) followed by contemporary child sex assaults (up 43%)
- Age groups which traditionally have the highest number of recorded sexual assault victims also contributed most to the increase. Two-thirds (64%) of the increase was due to an increase in victims aged 13 to 20 (inclusive). Recorded sexual assaults victims aged 13 to 15 years rose by 75% while victims aged 16 to 20 years rose 110%.
- The increase in sexual assaults against young victims is due to both an increase in reports direct to police and an increase from secondary sources (including mandatory reporters).
- Female sexual assault victims rose more sharply than males (62% increase for women versus 45% for men)
- The rise in sexual assaults was as much to do with an increase in reports of recent sexual assaults as it was related to an increase in past offences
- The increase was sharper in Sydney than in Regional NSW

Preliminary data for April 2021 indicate that sexual assault volumes have already come back down.⁷ This suggest that the March 2021 spike was temporary and further supports it being associated with an increase in reporting related to the extreme media focus on the issue at the time.

The March 2021 spike in sexual assault gives a strong indication that the public's willingness to report crimes fluctuates and can be influenced by community events. This is useful to consider when interpreting patterns in offences known to have low reporting rates such as domestic assault and sexual violence. While the events and public discussion that led to the March 2021 jump were unusual, knowing that there are stimuli that can increase reporting rates is useful for policy makers trying to improve the response to victims needs.

Lastly, while the sharp March 2021 jump appears to have been an aberration, the small but steady increase in sexual assaults coming to police attention over many years is consistent and worthy of future focus.

⁷ NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (2021). (unpublished preliminary data).

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Victims of sexual assault reported to NSW Police by type of sexual assault and time from incident to report

Type of sexual assault	Time to report	Monthly average from Mar 2021 to Feb 2020	Mar-21	Difference	% increase	% of total increase
Adult victim (16 years or over)	30 days or under	125	214	89	71%	25%
	over 30 days	53	91	38	73%	11%
	over a year	52	106	54	104%	15%
	Total	230	411	181	79%	50%
Child victim reported when adult	over a year	116	180	64	55%	18%
Child victim reported when child	30 days or under	95	144	49	52%	14%
	over 30 days	97	136	39	40%	11%
	over a year	76	102	26	35%	7%
	Total	267	382	115	43%	32%
Total sexual assaults victims		613	973	360	59%	100%

Table 2. Recorded Sexual assault victims by victim's statistical area of residence

	Monthly average over year to Feb 2021	Mar-2021	Difference	% increase
Sydney - Baulkham Hills and Hawkesbury	10	27	17	170%
Sydney - Blacktown	36	35	-1	-3%
Sydney - City and Inner South	22	44	22	100%
Sydney - Eastern Suburbs	12	28	16	133%
Sydney - Inner South West	23	43	20	87%
Sydney - Inner West	10	20	10	100%
Sydney - North Sydney And Hornsby	12	31	19	158%
Sydney - Northern Beaches	11	20	9	82%
Sydney - Outer South West	23	32	9	39%
Sydney - Outer West and Blue Mountains	31	43	12	39%
Sydney - Parramatta	21	27	6	29%
Sydney - Ryde	4	17	13	325%
Sydney - South West	21	34	13	62%
Sydney - Sutherland	10	10	0	0%
Central Coast	33	61	28	85%
Greater Sydney	279	472	193	69%
Capital Region	15	26	11	73%
Central West	29	44	15	52%
Coffs Harbour - Grafton	17	28	11	65%
Far West and Orana	20	24	4	20%
Hunter Valley Exc Newcastle	31	52	21	68%
Illawarra	26	35	9	35%
Mid North Coast	26	41	15	58%
Murray	11	6	-5	-45%
New England and North West	23	30	7	30%
Newcastle and Lake Macquarie	41	61	20	49%
Richmond - Tweed	25	36	11	44%
Riverina	18	27	9	50%
Southern Highlands and Shoalhaven	13	25	12	92%
Others	294	435	141	48%
NSW	613	973	360	59%