



Serious Further Offences (SFO) 2021

Key guidance notes

SFO convictions

This bulletin reports SFO conviction figures by the **date of SFO notification**; that is, the date on which the supervising probation region notifies Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) that an offender under its supervision has appeared in court charged with an offence which qualifies for a SFO review. It reports on the number of cases notified in 2019/20 which have resulted in SFO convictions, as notified to HMPPS as at **30 September 2021**. This means that conviction figures are generally **provisional** as a proportion of cases for some years have yet to reach a definitive outcome.

A more detailed description of SFO notifications and reviews is in the [glossary](#) section.

Main points

As at 30 September 2021, there were 271 SFO convictions out of 536 notifications in 2019/20	The number of SFO convictions received by 30 September 2021 suggests lower annual conviction figures in each of the last two years than in 2017/18. The latest figure is likely to reflect reduced court activity during the COVID-19 pandemic.
Total SFO notifications received in 2020/21 was 499. By 30 September 2021, a review was completed in 440 of these notifications.	The number of SFO notifications received in 2020/21 decreased by 7% to 499 compared to the previous year. Numbers of notifications and completed reviews in 2020/21 were the lowest seen in the last six years.
In most years, about 50% of SFO notifications have resulted in a conviction of a SFO.	For the remaining cases, either charges are dropped, the offender is acquitted, or the offender is convicted of a less serious offence.

This bulletin and [associated tables](#) are part of the [Proven Reoffending statistics: October to December 2019](#). They provide statistics on SFO convictions received by 30 September 2021 relating to notifications received from 2014/15 to 2019/20, as well as statistics on notifications received from 2014/15 to 2020/21 and their resulting completed reviews. The lag between notification period and publication date for conviction figures is to allow time for most cases to complete the criminal justice process.

Users should see the [background notes](#) in this bulletin and refer to the '[2012 Compendium of Reoffending Statistics and Analysis](#)' for further definitions of the terms in this bulletin.

Statistician's comment

“Between 2014/15 and 2016/17, annual SFO notifications and resulting convictions increased markedly as a result of the implementation of the Offender Rehabilitation Act (ORA) 2014¹.

Since then, annual SFO conviction figures have mostly been stable. The latest provisional figures suggest a downward shift from the previous year, which likely reflects the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on criminal court outcomes.

The number of SFO convictions for murder has been higher in the three years to 2019/20 than before, coinciding with a period of time in which the number of overall murder convictions (non-SFO and SFO) [increased](#).

The number of SFO convictions related to rape and associated offences has trended downward in the last three years to 2019/20, and this also reflects the [decreasing](#) pattern seen in rape-related convictions generally.

The number of annual SFO notifications has been decreasing since 2016/17. There is likely to be a corresponding decrease in the number of SFO convictions as cases progress through the courts.”

For feedback related to the content of this bulletin, please contact us at:
statistics.enquiries@justice.gov.uk

¹ Under the Offender Rehabilitation Act (ORA) 2014, offenders serving short prison sentences are now released on licence and a period of post sentence supervision. Offences which would not have previously been counted, as offenders were not subject to probation supervision, now come into scope and are counted as SFOs.

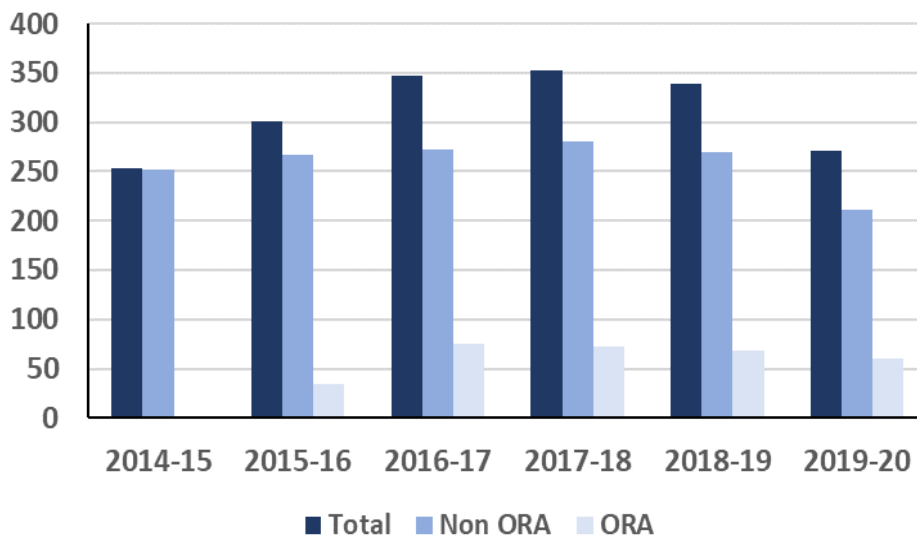
1. SFO convictions

As at 30 September 2021, there were 271 SFO convictions out of 536 notifications in 2019/20

The number of SFO convictions received by 30 September 2021 suggests lower annual conviction figures in each of the last two years than in 2017/18. The latest figure is likely to reflect reduced court activity during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The introduction of ORA in 2015 led to a significant increase in the number of offenders who became subject to post-release supervision. Where those offenders were charged with an SFO, their cases came into scope under the SFO Review Procedures. Consequently, there was a marked increase in the number of SFO notifications and marked annual increases in the number of SFO convictions from 2014/15 to 2017/18. Conviction figures in the last two years have been lower than in 2017/2018, although the latest figure is likely to reflect the impact of reduced activity at court due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 1: Number of SFO convictions by notification period as at 30 September 2021
[Source: Table 1]



Convictions

In most years, about 50% of SFO notifications result in conviction for an SFO. In the remaining cases, either charges are dropped, the offender is acquitted, or the offender is convicted of a less serious offence.

Of the 271 SFO convictions related to SFO notifications received in 2019/20, 74 were for murder and 54 were for rape, and other serious sexual offences.

The number of SFO convictions for murder has been higher in the three years to 2019/20, reflecting a period when overall murder convictions (non-SFO and SFO) also increased. The number of SFO convictions involving offences related to rape and other serious sexual offences has been on a downward trend since 2016/17, mirroring the decreasing pattern in overall rape-related convictions in the same period.

Index sentence

The majority of SFO convictions involve offenders who were being supervised either on a community sentence or a determinate custodial sentence (their index sentence). Prior to ORA, those sentenced to community supervision made up the majority of SFO convictions involved; since 2016/17, about 60% of these convictions involve offenders released from prison on a licence, including those on a period of post sentence supervision (introduced by ORA) and a small number of indeterminate sentence offenders.

Less than 10% of all SFO convictions involve an offender whose index sentence was a life sentence (life) or indeterminate sentence for public protection (IPP) (Tables 2 and 3).

2. SFO notifications and reviews

Total SFO notifications received in 2020/21 was 499. As at 30 September 2021, reviews were completed for 440 of these notifications.

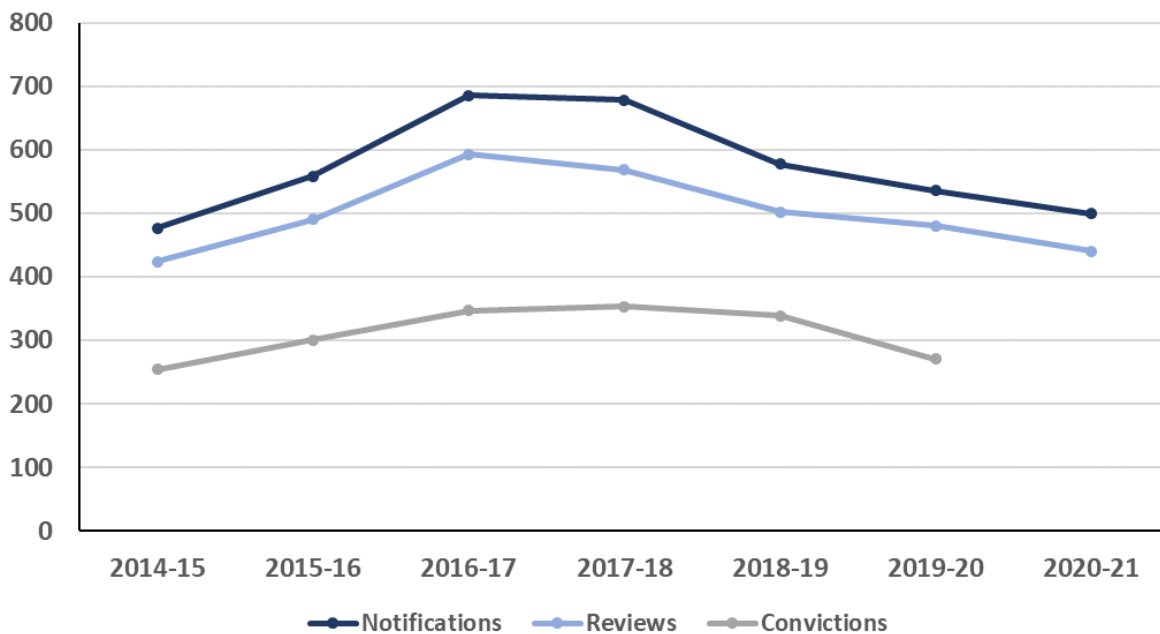
The number of SFO notifications received in 2020/21 decreased by 7% to 499 compared to the previous year. Numbers of notifications and completed reviews in 2020/21 were the lowest seen in the last six years.

In most years, about 50% of SFO notifications have resulted in a conviction of a SFO.

For the remaining cases, either charges are dropped, the offender is acquitted, or the offender is convicted of a less serious offence. (Figure 2 and Table 3).

After increasing from 2014/15 to 2016/17, in part due to the introduction of ORA, the number of SFO notifications and resulting reviews has continued to decrease, and this may explain the corresponding decrease in SFO convictions in recent years. The number of notifications in 2020/21 has decreased by 27% since 2016/17.

Figure 2: Number of SFO notifications, reviews and convictions as at 30 September 2021 [Source: Table 4]



3. Description of the Probation SFO Review Procedures

Since 1 December 2008, an SFO review will be triggered when an offender is charged and appears in court for a qualifying offence alleged to have been committed within the probation supervision period or within 28 working days of the supervision period terminating. The list of SFO qualifying offences is based on, but not identical to, Schedule 15A of the Criminal Justice Act 2003 (now repealed) and can be found as Annex A in the SFO Procedures.

SFO reviews are mandatory in the following circumstances:

- any eligible offender who has been charged and appears in court for one of the most serious SFOs – murder, manslaughter, other offence causing death, rape, assault by penetration or a sexual offence against a child under 13 years (including attempted offences); and,
- any eligible offender who has been charged and appears in court for another offence on the SFO list who is or has been assessed as high/very high risk of serious harm during their current supervision period or has not been subject to a risk assessment during that period.

A review may be carried out on a discretionary basis in the following circumstances:

- any eligible offender who has been charged and appears in court for an offence, irrespective of whether that offence is a qualifying offence, and HMPPS and the supervising probation provider have identified public interest reasons for conducting a review.

The SFO Review Procedures require a notification when an offender is charged and first appears in court for a qualifying offence. The organisation who supervised the offender completes an internal management report, known as an SFO review. Not all notifications result in a review, e.g. where the charges are dropped/discontinued or if the offender is acquitted prior to the review being completed. Not all cases which are notified as an SFO will result in a conviction. In any year, in about 50% of cases either the charge is dropped, or the offender is acquitted, or the offender is convicted of a less serious offence.

Users should refer to the [‘2012 Compendium of Reoffending Statistics and Analysis’](#) for further definitions of the terms used in this bulletin, and for commentary to help interpret these.

4. Glossary

SFOs

The HMPPS SFO Review Procedures require the Probation Service to complete an internal management report, known as a SFO review when an offender is charged with a qualifying offence alleged to have been committed during a period of probation supervision or within 28 working days of the supervision period terminating.

SFO Notification

The Probation Service will complete an SFO notification when an offender, who meets the criteria for a SFO review appears in court for the first time having been charged with an eligible offence under the SFO review procedures.

SFO notification date

The date the supervising probation region submits the paperwork to HMPPS to notify that an offender under supervision has been charged and appeared in court for an offence which qualifies for a SFO review.

SFO Review

Following the submission of an SFO notification, the Probation Service completes a SFO review which considers whether the action taken by probation to supervise the offender was reasonable and defensible and to identify any further action to promote good practice or address any areas for improvement.

Further information

Contact

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General enquiries about the statistical work of the Ministry of Justice can be e-mailed to: statistics.enquiries@justice.qsi.gov.uk

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