

# Acid attacks appear to be on the rise—what the numbers tell us about corrosive substances and crime

February 7 2024, by Matt Hopkins

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The horrific attack in Clapham, South London, has brought the issue of acid violence and chemical attacks to the fore. On January 31, Abdul

Ezedi allegedly decanted a corrosive substance over a mother and her two children. Thankfully, the injuries sustained by the victims were not life-threatening, but the mother's were described as "[potentially life changing.](#)" Police are still looking for the suspect.

Many people are often surprised to hear that this type of violence has, unfortunately, been a feature of British life [since Victorian times](#). Such attacks—also known as acid throwing, corrosive crime, noxious substance attack, vitriol attack and burns violence—emerged in countries where acids were used in industrial processes.

Spikes in acid attacks (of around 500 in 12 months) were observed again in London [in the 1980s](#) and [more recently in 2017](#) (around 616 in 12 months).

## **How many acid attacks are there?**

Data obtained by the Acid Survivors Trust International (ASTI) via a freedom of information request estimates that in England and Wales there were [941 attacks in 2017](#), falling steadily over the next few years to 427 in 2021. However, this has since gone up again, with 710 attacks reported in 2022 (an increase of 70%). Also for the first time [in 2022](#), women were more likely to be the victim of an attack than men.

The large increase from 2021-22 might partially be explained by COVID lockdowns suppressing the 2021 number. However, the shift to a higher proportion of female victims is new.

[My research](#) with colleagues into the motivations of acid offenders shows that attacks in countries including India, Bangladesh and Colombia are commonly misogynistic attacks by men against women. Such attacks may be motivated by rejections of marriage proposals, courtship or sex.

In the UK, however, acid violence has commonly been male on male. Corrosives have been used as a [weapon in street violence](#) to overcome assailants, enforce drug debts or commit robberies. They can easily be disguised in water bottles, and may be used to enhance an offender's street reputation.

As is often the case with [crime statistics](#), data on the number of acid attacks is patchy. This is mainly because we rely on whether crimes are reported to the police, and knowing what types of substances are being thrown at people.

Not all of these attacks involve high concentrate acids. [Our research](#) observed that in 455 cases of crimes involving acid, 15% were genuinely acid attacks but 32% actually involved household products such as bleach.

This distinction is important, not only because high concentrate acids are more difficult to obtain, but it also tells us something about planning and intent to cause serious harm. The research found that acid was most likely to be used against a criminal rival, while household products were most likely to be used against a partner.

While the data collected by ASTI requires further scrutiny and analysis, the potential implications are worrying. It is also possible that the figures are an underestimate, as they only include incidents reported to the police. It is unclear why victims are unlikely to report, but [my research](#) suggests it might be because the victims may also be involved in criminality.

## **What is being done to prevent acid attacks?**

During the spike in acid attacks in 2017, convicted offenders were given [heavy sentences](#), as a deterrent to others. The [Offensive Weapons Act](#) in

2019 created the offense of possession of corrosives "capable of burning human skin" in a public place, restricted sales of certain products to under-18s and gave the police powers to search people for corrosives.

Early results were promising, as the fall in attacks between 2019-21 demonstrates. However, the recent reversal is concerning. We don't really know the full picture due to unreliable data on numbers of attacks, and a lack of any formal, independent evaluation of prevention efforts.

The government's [serious violence strategy](#), published in 2018, placed a priority on acid attacks, and called for a public health approach to tackle serious violence. However, it will take time to evaluate whether this will be successful in reducing serious violence.

[Early evidence](#) from the Youth Endowment Fund suggests that some approaches to reducing violence—such as youth [violence specialists](#) in A&E and specific types of therapy—can be effective. However, these interventions require significant resources, and the evidence base for establishing what works is still in its infancy.

Thankfully, serious [acid attacks](#) like the one in Clapham are rare, though attacks where less serious injuries occur are more common. But the latest data, and the history of this specific type of crime, tells us that there are likely to be spikes in the future.

With that in mind, we owe it to any potential victims and their loved ones to do all we can to take the steps required to prevent future attacks. This means collecting more [accurate data](#) on the numbers of attacks, and educating young people in the most vulnerable communities about the dangers of carrying corrosive substances.

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