

Ask An SEO: Why Is GA Reporting Higher Organic Traffic Than GSC? via @sejournal, @HelenPollitt1



Today's question centers on the differences in Google Analytics 4 and Google Search Console measurement:

"I'm reaching out for help with a puzzling issue in Google Analytics 4 (GA4). We've experienced a sudden and unexplained surge in traffic over a four-day period, but surprisingly, Google Search Console (GSC) doesn't show any corresponding data.

The anomaly is specific to organic search traffic, and it's only affecting our main page. I'd greatly appreciate any insights you can offer on what might be causing this discrepancy."

Why GA4 And GSC Report Different Traffic Numbers

It's a very interesting and common question about data from Google Analytics 4 and Google Search Console.

They are both Google products, so you could assume their data would be consistent. However, it isn't, and for very good reasons.

Let's take a look at the differences between the two.

Traffic Mediums

Google Analytics measures user interactions with a digital property. It is highly customizable and can even accept data inputs.

Google Search Console provides an overview of your website's performance in Google Search.

This means that Google Analytics 4 is measuring traffic from all types of sources, including paid search campaigns, email newsletters, display ads, and direct visits.

Google Search Console is far narrower in scope, as it only reports on Google Search traffic.

Organic Sources

Another key difference to remember is that when reporting on organic traffic, Google Analytics will look at all sources marked as "organic search," which includes other search engines like Bing, Naver, and Yandex.

This means that unless you instruct Google Analytics 4 to filter the organic search sources to only Google, you will see vastly different numbers between the two programs.

Clicks And Sessions

The two most comparable metrics are Google Analytics 4's "sessions" and Google Search Console's "clicks." However, they are not identical metrics.

A "session" in GA4 is counted when a user either opens your app in the foreground or views a page of your website. A session, by default, lasts only 30 minutes, although this can be altered through your configuration of GA4.

A "click" in Google Search Console is counted when a user clicks on a link displayed in Google Search (across web, images, or video, and including News and Discover).

Reasons For Higher GSC Clicks Than GA4 Sessions

As you can imagine, these small but critical differences in the technical ways these two metrics are counted can have a significant impact on the end volumes reported.

There are other reasons that can impact the final numbers.

Typically, we see Google Search Console's "clicks" being higher than Google Analytics' organic "sessions" from Google.

Let's assume a user clicks on an organic search listing on Google Search and arrives at the webpage it links to. What would be registered in different scenarios?

Cookies

This is a differentiating factor that is becoming more prominent as laws surrounding cookie policies change.

GA4 requires cookies to be accepted in order to track a user's interaction with a website, whereas GSC doesn't.

This means that a user might click on an organic search result in Google Search, which registers as a “click” in Google Search Console, arrive on the webpage, but not accept cookies. It means there would be one click registered in Google Search Console but no session registered in Google Analytics 4.

JavaScript

GA4 won't work if JavaScript is blocked on the website, whereas GSC doesn't rely on your site's code to track clicks, but is based on search engine-side data. Therefore, will continue to register clicks.

If JavaScript is blocked in some way, this would again result in a click being registered on Google Search Console, but no session being registered in Google Analytics 4.

Ad Blockers

If the user is utilizing an ad blocker, it may well suppress Google Analytics 4, preventing the session from being registered.

However, since Google Search Console is not affected by ad blockers, it will still register the click.

Tracking Code

Google Analytics 4 only tracks pages that have the GA4 tracking code installed on them.

If the URL the user clicks on from Google Search results does not contain the tracking code, Google Search Console will still register the click, but Google Analytics will not register the session.

Filters And Segments

GA4 allows filtering and segments to be set up that can

discount some visits or reclassify them as coming from another source or medium.

Google Search Console does not allow this. It means that if the user clicks on a URL and displays some behavior that gets it caught in a filter, then Google Analytics may not count that session, or may reclassify it as coming from a source other than Google.

In that instance, Google Search Console would register the click, but Google Analytics 4 may not register the session, or may register it as a different source or medium.

Similarly, if your GA4 account has segments set up and these are not properly managed during the reporting process, you may find that you are only reporting on a subset of your Google organic data, even if the full data has been captured correctly by Google Analytics 4.

Why GA4 Might Report More Sessions Than GSC Clicks

In your case, you've mentioned that you have seen a surge in organic search traffic to your main page only. Let's look at some of the potential reasons that might be the case.

Semantics

I want to start by looking at the technicalities. You haven't specified what metric you are using to determine "traffic" in Google Analytics 4.

For example, if you are using "page views," then that would not be a closely comparable metric to Google Search Console "clicks," as there can be several page views per session.

However, if you are looking at "sessions," that is more comparable.

Also, you haven't specified whether you have filtered down to look at just Google as the source of the organic traffic, or if you might be including other search engines as sources as well.

That would mean you are likely getting much higher sessions reported in Google Analytics, as Google Search Console only reports on Google clicks.

Tracking Issues

I would start by looking at the way tracking has been set up on your site. It could be that you have incorrectly set up cross-domain tracking, or there is something causing your tracking code to fire twice, only on the homepage.

This could be causing inflated sessions to be recorded in your Google Analytics 4 account.

Multiple Domains

The way you have set up your Google Analytics 4 properties may be quite different from your Google Search Console account.

In GA4, it's possible to combine multiple domains under one view, whereas in GSC, you cannot.

So, for example, if you have a brand with multiple ccTLDs like example.com, example.fr, example.co.uk, then you will have these set out as separate properties in Google Search Console.

In Google Analytics 4, however, it's possible to combine all these websites to show an overall brand's website traffic.

It might not be obvious at first glance when looking at your homepage's traffic, as you'll likely only see one row with "/" as the reported URL.

When you add "hostname" as an additional column in those reports, you will be shown a breakdown of each ccTLD's

homepage, rather than a combined homepage row.

In this instance, it might be that you are viewing the Google Search Console account for one of your ccTLDs, e.g., example.com, whereas when you look at your Google Analytics 4 traffic, you may be viewing a row detailing the combined ccTLDs' homepages' traffic.

Length Of A Standard Session

Google Search Console tracks clicks from Google Search. It doesn't go much beyond that initial journey from SERP to webpage. As such, it is really reporting on how users got to your webpage from an organic search.

Google Analytics 4 is looking at user behavior on your site, too. This means it will continue to track a user as they navigate around your site.

As mentioned, by default, Google Analytics 4 will only track a session for 30 minutes unless another interaction occurs.

If a user navigated to your website, landed on the homepage, and then took a phone call for an hour, they might be shown as languishing on your homepage for 30 minutes.

Then, when they come back to their computer and navigate from your homepage to another page, it will count as a second session starting.

It is most likely that in this scenario, the second session would be attributed to direct/none, but there may be cases where Google Analytics 4 is able to identify the previous referral source.

However, it is unlikely that this would cause the sudden spike in organic traffic that you have noticed on your homepage.

Bots Mimicking Google

It might well be that Google Analytics 4 is being forced to classify landing page traffic incorrectly as coming from an organic search source due to bot traffic spoofing the referral information of a search engine.

Google Search Console is better at filtering out this fake traffic due to the way it records interactions from Google Search to your website.

If there is a surge of bots visiting your homepage with this fake Google referrer, they may be incorrectly counted by Google Analytics 4 as genuine visitors from Google Search.

Misclassified UTMs

UTM tracking is often used within paid media campaigns to assign value to different campaigns more accurately.

It enables marketers to specify the medium, source, and campaign from which the traffic came if it clicked on their advert. However, mistakes happen, and quite often, UTMs are set up incorrectly, which alters the attribution of traffic irrevocably.

In this instance, if a member of your team was testing a new campaign, or perhaps using a UTM as part of an internal split test, they may have incorrectly specified “organic” as the medium instead of the correct value.

As such, when a user clicks on the advert or participates in the split test, their visit may be misattributed as organic instead of the correct source.

If your team is testing something and has used an incorrect UTM, this would explain a sudden surge in organic traffic to your homepage.

UTMs do not affect Google Search Console in this way, so the traffic that is misattributed in Google Analytics 4 would not register in Google Search Console as an organic click.

In Summary

There are a myriad of reasons why Google Analytics 4 may be reporting a different volume of homepage sessions than Google Search Console reports homepage clicks.

When using these two data sources, it's best to recognize that they report on similar but not exactly the same metrics.

It is also wise to recognize that Google Analytics 4 can be highly customized, but improper setup may lead to data discrepancies.

It is best to use these two tools in conjunction when working on SEO to give you the widest possible view of your organic search performance.

More Resources:

Featured Image: Paulo Bobita/Search Engine Journal

<https://www.searchenginejournal.com/ask-an-seo-why-is-ga4-reporting-higher-traffic-than-gsc/547327/>