

# Statistics briefing: child sexual abuse

April 2019

## Introduction

This briefing introduces the data available about child sexual abuse. Research provides estimates of the prevalence of sexual abuse. Data is available on: children who are receiving support or are known to services because of sexual abuse; the age and gender of children who experience sexual abuse and perpetrators of sexual abuse. Statistics can help professionals, and the organisations they work for, make evidence based decisions about child sexual abuse.

## What does the data tell us?

- An estimated 1 in 20 children in the UK have been sexually abused.
- Concerns around sexual abuse have been identified for over 2,700 children in the UK who are the subject of a child protection plan or on a child protection register.
- Over a third of all police-recorded sexual offences are against children.
- Girls and older children are more likely to experience sexual abuse.
- The vast majority of children who experience sexual abuse were abused by someone they knew.

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Review data: April 2020

## What data is available?

Data about child sexual abuse is available from a number of sources. Information covered includes:

- The prevalence of self-reported experiences of sexual abuse
- The number of children who were subject to a child protection plan or on a child protection register because of concerns about child sexual abuse
- The number of recorded sexual offences against children
- The number of children talking to Childline about sexual abuse, and the number of concerned adults talking to the NSPCC helpline about sexual abuse
- The forms sexual abuse take
- Who experiences child sexual abuse
- Who perpetrates child sexual abuse

Throughout this briefing, figures given are the most up to date at the time of publication.

## How can the data be used?

Data can only ever tell part of the story. It's important to bear in mind the limitations of the data available

<b>You can use this data to:</b>	<b>But you can't use it to:</b>
✓ Get a sense of how many children experience sexual abuse	✗ Definitively say how widespread child sexual abuse is
✓ Say how many child sexual abuse cases are known and recorded by services	✗ Equate figures from services with the prevalence of child sexual abuse
✓ Identify the most common characteristics amongst children who experience sexual abuse	✗ State that children who have these characteristics are the only ones who experience sexual abuse
✓ Identify the most common characteristics amongst perpetrators of sexual abuse	✗ State that people who have these characteristics are the only ones who perpetrate sexual abuse

## What does the data tell us?

### The scale of the issue

We don't know exactly how many children in the UK experience sexual abuse. Sexual abuse is usually hidden from view. Adults in the child's life may not recognise the signs that they are being sexually abused and the child may be too young, too scared or too ashamed to tell anyone what is happening to them.

However there are a number of different sources of information, including data from services which work with children and research into children's and adults' self-reported experiences of abuse, which help build up a picture of the scale of abuse.

### **An estimated 1 in 20 children in the UK have been sexually abused**

An NSPCC study (Radford et al., 2011) asked over 6,000 adults, teenagers, children and parents about child maltreatment. The findings were reported as three subsets:

- parents of the under 11s
- young people aged 11-17
- adults aged 18-24.

It asked 2,275 young people aged 11-17 about their experiences. This study is still the only large scale research study in the UK to ask children, rather than adults, about their experiences of maltreatment.

4.8% of 11-17 year olds reported experiencing contact sexual abuse, as defined by the criminal law, at some point in childhood.

The figure does not include non-contact sexual abuse (such as flashing or saying sexual things). The proportion of young people who reported experiencing any form of sexual abuse, including non-contact abuse, is much higher. 16.5% of 11 to 17 year olds had experienced any form of sexual abuse, including non-contact abuse, at some point in their lives.

Source: Radford, 2011

### **Different surveys have different methodologies, and therefore provide different estimates of the prevalence of child sexual abuse**

Every research study asks different samples of people different questions using different definitions, so it is always difficult to make comparisons between research studies.

In 2017, the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse published a report on the "Scale and nature of child sexual abuse and exploitation". In addition to the NSPCC's Radford study, it looked at two other large scale surveys, both of which were conducted with adults.

The European Agency for Fundamental Rights' 'Violence Against Women' survey 2014 asked a sample of 1,500 women aged 18-74 about experiences of child sexual abuse before the age of 15:

- 18% of women said they had experienced any form of sexual abuse (contact and non-contact). This did not include sexual abuse by peers.

The Crime Survey for England and Wales in 2016 asked 20,582 adults aged 16-59 about their experiences of child sexual abuse before the age of 16.

- 10.5% of women and 2.6% of men said they had experienced any form of sexual assault (including indecent exposure or unwanted touching).
- 3.4% of women and 0.6% of men said they had experienced sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts)
- These figures did not include sexual abuse by peers.

The three studies each asked different questions of different cohorts, so are not directly comparable.

- The NSPCC study includes experiences of sexual abuse, as defined by the criminal law, up to the age of 18 and includes abuse by peers.
- The Crime survey and Violence against women survey includes sexual abuse only up to the age of 14 or 15, and only by adults.

The NSPCC consistently uses data from the Radford study when talking about the prevalence of sexual abuse. This is because it tells us what children have said about their experiences, rather than asking adults what happened to them during their childhood. Until another study is undertaken directly with children it remains the best and most up to date picture we have of children's experiences of abuse.

Sources: Kelly, L. and Katsna, K., 2018; Hackett, 2014; Radford, 2011; ONS, 2016 and European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014

## **Concerns around sexual abuse have been identified for over 2,700 (4% of) children who are the subject of a child protection plan or on a child protection register in the UK**

When a child is made the subject of a child protection plan, or is added to a child protection register, a record is made of the reason this has happened. This takes the form of an "initial category of abuse".

In England, recording practice means that in most cases only the main reason behind a child being made subject to a child protection plan is recorded. Where multiple abuse types are identified as equally concerning the reason is recorded as "multiple". In the other nations a combination of concerns, for example sexual and physical abuse, are often recorded.

In Scotland practitioners are able to record a wide variety of concerns. On average two or three concerns are recorded per child.

	England 31 March 2018	N. Ireland 31 March 2018	Scotland 31 July 2018	Wales 31 March 2018	UK 2018
Number of children who were the subject of a child protection plan (CPP)/on a child protection register (CPR) under the sole category of sexual abuse	2,180	115	N/A	115	N/A
Number of children who were the subject of a CPP/on a CPR where sexual abuse was one of multiple concerns identified	N/A	85	N/A	50	N/A
Total number of children who were the subject of a CPP/on a CPR where sexual abuse was a concern	2,180	200	190	165	2,735
Proportion of all children who were the subject of a CPP/on a CPR where sexual abuse was a concern	4%	10%	7%	6%	4%

Sources: DfE (2018); DoHNI (2018); Scottish Government (2019); Welsh Government (2018)

### **Over a third of police-recorded sexual offences are against children**

Police record a sexual offence when it is reported to them, or when they discover that a sexual offence may have taken place through their own investigations. Some victims will report more than one incident to the police, which means that the number of crimes recorded by the police will be higher than the number of victims reporting those crimes.

Some criminal offences can only be perpetrated against children. Police records of these offences can give us a sense of the level of sexual offences against children. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland the relevant offences are:

- rape of a child under 13
- rape of a child under 16
- sexual assault on a child under 13
- sexual activity involving a child under 13
- sexual activity involving a child under 16
- sexual grooming

- abuse of position of trust (offence against under 18s)
- abuse of children through sexual exploitation (offence against under 18s)

Similar categories are used in Scotland, but cannot always be directly matched. These offence categories do not capture the full extent of sexual abuse against children. Offence definitions mean that many offences against 16- and 17-year-olds, including rape, are counted within sexual offences against adults. However, in Northern Ireland the Police Service publishes data on the total number of sexual offences perpetrated against under-18-year-olds.

	Number of sexual offences against children (2017/18)	Rate of sexual offences per 10,000 children (2017/18)	Proportion of all sexual offences that are against children (2017/18)
England (offences against under 16s)	52,965	49.8	38%
Northern Ireland (offences against <b>under 18s</b> )	1,940	44.5	56%
Scotland (offences against under 16s)	4,347	47.4	35%
Wales (offences against under 16s)	3,986	71.3	47%

Sources: Home Office (2019); PSNI (2018); Scottish Government (2018); additional data provided to the NSPCC in correspondence with the Scottish Government.

As well as recording specific offences which can only be perpetrated against children, police in England and Wales can now “flag” an offence if it involves the sexual abuse of a child under the age of 18. The data quality for these figures is variable across police forces, but is expected to improve over time. Currently these figures are lower than those for sexual offences which can only be perpetrated against children. We would expect improvements in the way this flag is used across police forces to result in an increase in these figures over time.

Experimental statistics for the year ending March 2018 showed that:

- 51,662 crimes were flagged by police forces in England as involving child sexual abuse
- 3,184 crimes were flagged by police forces in Wales as involving child sexual abuse
- 215 crimes were flagged by the British Transport Police as involving child sexual abuse.

Source: ONS, 2019b

## The number of police recorded child sexual offences is increasing

Data also shows that the number and rate of police recorded sexual offences against children have increased over time. Offences are recorded in the year they were reported to the police, not in the year they were committed.

	Police recorded sexual offences			
	2012/3		2017/8	
	Number	Rate per 10,000	Number	Rate per 10,000
England (U16)	17,585	17.4	52,965	49.8
N. Ireland (U18)	1,060	24.6	1,940	44.5
Scotland (U16)	2,758	30.2	4,347	47.4
Wales (U16)	1,170	21.0	3,986	71.3

Sources: Home Office (2019); PSNI (2018); Scottish Government (2018); additional data provided to the NSPCC in correspondence with the Scottish Government.

There are a number of factors which have been identified as potential drivers of this rise, including:

- greater awareness of child sexual abuse leading to increased reporting
- improvements to recording processes and practices by the police since a report from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services in 2014 highlighted the significant under-recording of sexual offences
- a rise in investigations into historic cases of child sexual abuse, prompted by the launch of Operation Yewtree in 2012. 26% of sexual offences recorded by the police in the year ending March 2018 took place more than 12 months before being recorded. The proportion of sexual offences that are non-recent has remained similar (between 25% and 27%) over the last five years, so does not in itself explain ongoing increases in the number of offences (Home Office Data Hub, 2018).
- rising use of the internet making it easier for potential sexual offenders to meet and abuse children.

Source: ONS, 2019a

## **16% of police recorded child sexual offences involved an online element in England and Wales**

In April 2015, it became mandatory for all forces to return information on the number of crimes flagged as being committed online (in full or in part).

- From October 2017 to September 2018 there were 9,543 child sexual offences that were flagged as 'online crime'. This was 16% of all child sexual offences<sup>1</sup>.

The data quality for these figures is variable across police forces, but is expected to improve over time. Equivalent data is not currently available for Northern Ireland or Scotland.

Source: ONS, 2019c

## **The police recorded over 15,000 child sexual exploitation related crimes in England and Wales in 2017/18**

Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. Children in exploitative situations and relationships receive something such as gifts, money or affection as a result of performing sexual activities or others performing sexual activities on them.

Awareness around the issue of child sexual exploitation has risen in recent years following a series of high profile cases including those in Rotherham, Rochdale and Oxford. As awareness has risen, a number of attempts have been made to record the scale of the issue.

The police in England and Wales have amended recording practices to enable them to flag offences where children under the age of 18 have been sexually exploited. All offences that have been flagged as involving sexual exploitation are also flagged as involving child sexual abuse.

New experimental statistics for the year ending March 2018 showed that the police in England and Wales flagged:

- 14,546 crimes in England as involving child sexual exploitation.
- 466 crimes in Wales as involving child sexual exploitation.
- 33 crimes were flagged by the British Transport Police as involving child sexual exploitation.

The data quality for these figures is variable across police forces, but is expected to improve over time.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this figure the ONS has included the offences of: sexual assault on a male child aged under 13 years, rape of a female child under 16 years, rape of a female child under 13 years, rape of a male child aged under 16 years, rape of a male child aged under 13 years, sexual assault on a female child aged under 13 years, sexual activity involving a child aged under 13 years, sexual activity involving a child aged under 16 years, abuse of children through sexual exploitation, abuse of position of trust of a sexual nature and sexual grooming.

Equivalent data is not available for Northern Ireland or Scotland.  
Source: ONS, 2019b

### **Almost 560 children were trafficked for sexual exploitation last year**

In 2017 the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) received a total of 5,145 referrals of potential victims of trafficking. 2,118 (41%) were children under the age of 18. 559 of the children who were believed to have been trafficked were trafficked for sexual exploitation (26%). The exploitation type of 414 (20%) children believed to have been trafficked was recorded as unknown.

NRM is a victim identification and support process that is designed to make it easier for all the different agencies involved in a modern slavery case (for example, the police, UK Visa and Immigration, local authorities and NGOs) to cooperate, share information about potential victims and facilitate their access to advice, accommodation and support.

These figures are likely to be under-estimates due to the difficulties in recognising and understanding that individuals have been victims of trafficking. It is also not mandatory for a professional to make a referral to the NRM.

Source: National Crime Agency, 2018

### **There were over 10,000 counselling sessions with children and young people who talked to Childline in 2017/18 about sexual abuse**

Childline is the UK's free, 24-hour helpline for children and young people. Information from Childline counselling sessions provide a unique insight into the types of worries children are speaking to the service about.

In 2017/18 there were a total of 278,440 Childline counselling sessions. 10,878 were about sexual abuse, making it the 9th most discussed concern.

Source: NSPCC, 2018.

### **Over 8,000 contacts to the NSPCC's helpline in 2017/18 were concerns about sexual abuse**

The NSPCC helpline offers an advice and support service for anyone worried about the safety or welfare of a child. Data from the helpline gives us an insight into the types of concerns people speak to the service about.

In 2017/18 the NSPCC's helpline responded to a total of 65,067 contacts from people who were concerned about a child's welfare. 8,333 contacts related to concerns about sexual abuse.

Source: NSPCC data

## Children who have been sexually abused

### Girls are more likely to experience sexual abuse than boys

The Radford (2011) study found that for all age groups girls were more likely to have experienced sexual abuse than boys.

Maltreatment type	Under 11s		11-17s		18-24s	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Lifetime contact sexual abuse	0.2%	0.8%	2.6%	7.0%	5.1%	17.8%

Source: Radford et al, 2011

Child protection plan data, available for England only, also shows that at 31 March 2018 girls were more likely to be the subject of a child protection plan for sexual abuse than boys.

Female	% Female	Male	% Male	Missing/indeterminate	% Missing/indeterminate
1,330	61%	810	37%	40	2%

Source: DfE, 2018

### Older children are more likely to experience sexual abuse than younger children

The Radford (2011) study found that older children were more likely to report having experienced sexual abuse in the past year than younger children. Interviews were conducted with 2,160 parents and guardians of children and young people under 11 years of age and 2,275 young people between the ages of 11 and 17. Although there may appear to be limitations in asking parents and guardians to report on the abuse of their children, research suggests that accounts from caregivers are satisfactorily consistent with those from young people (Finkelhor et al, 2005).

Overall, recent sexual abuse (in the past year) was highest among girls aged 15-17.

Maltreatment type	Under 11s	11-17s
Past year sexual abuse	0.6%	9.4%
Past year contact sexual abuse	0.2%	1.9%

Sources: Radford et al, 2011

## **Perpetrators of sexual abuse**

### **Over 90% of sexually abused children were abused by someone they knew**

The Radford (2011) study asked young people aged 11-17 whether anyone had tried to make them do anything sexual. Those aged 16-17 were also asked if they had done sexual things with an adult in a position of trust or with an adult when they were still under 16 years. They were also asked whether they knew the person who had sexually abused them. 90% of young people who had been sexually abused said the perpetrator was someone they knew.

This figure uses a definition of sexual abuse that includes any unwanted sexual activity, as well as criminal sexual activity with an adult, where physical contact took place. It does not include non-contact sexual abuse (such as flashing or saying sexual things) or "consensual" sexual activity between adolescents.

Source: Radford, L. et al, 2011

### **Around a third of child sexual abuse is by other children and young people**

Hackett's overview of research and crime statistics suggests that anywhere from one-fifth to two-thirds of sexual abuse is committed by other children and young people. The NSPCC uses the figure of "around a third" as a mid-way point between the lower end and the higher end of the estimates.

Source: Hackett, 2014

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