

# Statistics briefing: child sexual abuse

**This briefing looks at what data and statistics are available about child sexual abuse to help professionals, and the organisations they work for, make evidence-based decisions.**

**February 2024**

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## 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 2,400 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 contact sexual abuse were abused by someone they knew.

## 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 child sexual abuse
- the forms sexual abuse takes
- 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.

You can use this data to:	But you can't use it to:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Get a sense of how many children experience sexual abuse.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ Definitively say how widespread child sexual abuse is.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Say how many child sexual abuse cases are known to and recorded by services.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ Equate figures from services with the prevalence of child sexual abuse.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Identify the most common characteristics amongst children who experience sexual abuse.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ State that children who have these characteristics are the only ones who experience sexual abuse.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Identify the most common characteristics amongst perpetrators of sexual abuse.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ State that people who have these characteristics are the only people who perpetrate sexual abuse.</li> </ul>

## What does the data tell us about 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, children and parents about child maltreatment. The findings were reported as three subsets:

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

The study asked 2,275 children aged 11-17 about their experiences of abuse. 4.8% of 11- to 17-year-olds (7.0% of girls and 2.6% of boys) reported experiencing contact sexual abuse, as defined by the criminal law, at some point in their lives.

The figure does not include non-contact sexual abuse (such as flashing or saying sexual things). The proportion of children 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.

The study also asked 1,761 young adults aged 18–24 about their experiences of abuse during childhood. 11.3% of young adults (17.8% of women and 5.1% of men) reported experiencing contact sexual abuse before the age of 18. 24.1% of 18- to 24-year-olds had experienced any form of sexual abuse, including non-contact abuse, by the age of 18.

This study is still the only large-scale research study in the UK to ask children, rather than adults, about their experiences of maltreatment. It is the findings from this age group which the NSPCC uses when talking about the prevalence of abuse, as it best represents the experiences of children themselves.

(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.

The Crime Survey for England and Wales in 2019 asked a representative sample of adults aged 18-74 about their experiences of child sexual abuse, including peer abuse, before the age of 16.

- 7.5% of adults aged 18- to 74-years experienced sexual abuse before the age of 16-years (3.5% of men and 11.5% of women).
- 6.0% experienced contact sexual abuse and 3.2% experienced non-contact sexual abuse.

The European Agency for Fundamental Rights' 'Violence Against Women' survey 2014 asked a sample of around 1,500 women in the UK 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.

These two studies asked different questions of different cohorts to the NSPCC's Radford study, so are not directly comparable.

- The NSPCC study includes experiences of sexual abuse before the age of 18 and includes abuse by both adults and peers. It includes responses from both young adults recollecting childhood experiences of abuse and from children reporting experiences of abuse.
- The Crime survey for England and Wales includes experiences of sexual abuse only before the age of 16. It only includes responses from adults recollecting childhood experiences of abuse.
- The Violence against women survey includes experiences of sexual abuse only before the age of 15, only against girls, and only perpetrated by adults. It only includes responses from women recollecting childhood experiences of abuse.

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: Radford, 2011; ONS, 2020 and European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014)

## Concerns around sexual abuse have been identified for over 2,400 (3.9%) 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 record a wide variety of concerns. On average two or three concerns are recorded per child.

	<b>England 31 March 2022</b>	<b>N. Ireland 31 March 2022</b>	<b>Scotland 31 July 2022</b>	<b>Wales 31 March 2022</b>	<b>UK 2022</b>
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	1,930	130	N/A	80	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	128	N/A	20	N/A
Total number of children who were the subject of a CPP/on a CPR where sexual abuse was a concern	1,930	258	122	100	2,410
Proportion of all children who were the subject of a CPP/on a CPR where sexual abuse was a concern	4%	11%	6%	4%	4%

(Sources: DfE, 2023; DoHNI, 2023; Scottish Government, 2023; Welsh Government, 2023)

## Over one-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 people 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.

	<b>Number of sexual offences against children (2022/23)</b>	<b>Rate of sexual offences per 10,000 children (2022/23)</b>	<b>Proportion of all sexual offences that are against children (2022/23)</b>
England (offences against under 16s)	59,502	56.3	33%
Northern Ireland (offences against under 18s)	2,324	53.2	55%
Scotland (offences against under 16s) <sup>1</sup>	4,661	51.1	32%
Wales (offences against under 16s)	3,731	67.9	37%

(Sources: Home Office, 2023b; PSNI, 2023; Scottish Government, 2023)

<sup>1</sup> Rate and proportion figures for Scotland were calculated using 2021 mid-year population estimates, as this is the most current population figure for Scotland at the time of this publication

Police in England and Wales can also “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. Experimental statistics for the year ending March 2022, the most recent data available, showed that in England 79,894 and in Wales 3,729 sexual offences were flagged as child sexual abuse in 2021/22.

(Source: ONS, 2022)

More recent analysis by the Home Office Data Hub also suggests that a disproportionate number of sexual offences in England and Wales are perpetrated against 16- to 17-year-olds. In 2022/23, 9.2% of recorded sexual offences against women and girls were against 16- to 17-year-olds, despite them only making up 2.1% of the total female population. 6.0% of all sexual offences against boys and men were against 16-17 year olds, despite them only making up 2.4% of the total male population.

(Source: ONS, 2023a)

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

Data shows that the number and rate of police recorded sexual offences against children have increased in the last five years, although numbers and rates in England, Scotland, and Wales all went down slightly in 2022/23 compared with the previous year. Offences are recorded in the year they were reported to the police, not in the year they were committed.

	Police recorded sexual offences			
	2017/18		2022/23	
	Number	Rate per 10,000	Number	Rate per 10,000
England (U16)	54,202	51.0	59,502	56.3
N. Ireland (U18)	1,931	44.2	2,324	53.2
Scotland (U16)	4,347	47.4	4,661	51.1
Wales (U16)	4,187	74.9	3,731	67.9

(Sources: Home Office, 2023b; PSNI, 2023; Scottish Government, 2022)

Factors which have been identified as potential drivers of this rise, include:

- 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
- rising use of the internet making it easier for potential sexual offenders to meet and abuse children.

(Sources: ONS, 2023a; Bentley et al, 2018)

### 19% 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).

- In 2022/23 there were 12,111 child sexual offences that were flagged as 'online crime' in England and Wales. This was 19% of all child sexual offences.<sup>2</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, 2023b)

<sup>2</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.

## The police recorded over 17,000 child sexual exploitation related crimes in England and Wales in 2021/22

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is a type of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity.

(Department for Education, 2017; NIdirect, 2018; Scottish Government, 2020; Wales Safeguarding Procedures Project Board, 2019)

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 any 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. Experimental statistics for the year ending March 2022, the most recent data available, showed that the police in England and Wales flagged 17,486 offences as child sexual exploitation.

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

(Source: ONS, 2023b)

### **Over 1,100 children were trafficked for sexual exploitation last year**

In 2022 the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) received a total of 16,938 referrals of potential victims of trafficking. 7,019 (41%) were children under the age of 18.

1,117 (16%) of the children who were believed to have been trafficked were trafficked for sexual exploitation, or multiple forms of exploitation including sexual exploitation. The exploitation type of 913 (13%) 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. If a potential victim of trafficking is under 18, or may be under 18, an NRM referral must be made.

These figures are likely to be under-estimates due to the difficulties in recognising and understanding that individuals have been trafficked.

(Source: Home Office, 2023a)

### **There were over 6,000 counselling sessions with children and young people who talked to Childline in 2022/23 about sexual abuse**

Childline is the UK's free 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 2022/23 there were a total of 195,542 Childline counselling sessions. 6,085 were about sexual abuse, making it the 9th most discussed concern.

(Source: NSPCC data)

### **Over 7,000 contacts to the NSPCC's helpline in 2022/23 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 2022/23 the NSPCC's helpline responded to a total of 59,282 contacts from people who were concerned about a child's welfare. 7,225 contacts related to concerns about sexual abuse, making it the 4th most discussed concern.

(Source: NSPCC data)

## What does the data tell us about 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 2023 girls were more likely to be the subject of a child protection plan for sexual abuse than boys.

Female	% Female	Male	% Male
1,070	57%	790	42%

(Source: DfE, 2023)

### 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 under 11-years-old and 2,275 children 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 children (Finkelhor et al, 2005).

Overall, recent sexual abuse (in the year previous to the survey) 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%

(Source: Radford et al, 2011)

## What does the data tell us about perpetrators of sexual abuse?

### Over 90% of children who experience contact sexual abuse were abused by someone they knew

The Radford (2011) study asked children 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-old. 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.

Because these figures relate to contact sexual abuse they do not reflect the experiences of children and young people sexually abused online. At the time of the study online sexual abuse was only just beginning to emerge as a topic, with only a minority of children and young people owning a personal device which they used to access the internet (Ofcom, 2009).

Data is not available on what proportion of children and young people who experienced non-contact sexual abuse knew the perpetrator in person. It is likely that the rise of online abuse will have led to an increase in the number of children abused by someone they do not know in person.

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

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 (Hackett, 2014). 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.

A more recent study conducted by the Centre of Child Sexual Abuse highlighted that although there are no accurate prevalence figures on the full spectrum of harmful sexual behaviours, available data suggests that under-18s are responsible for a significant proportion of child sexual abuse (McNeish and Scott, 2023).

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