

Statistics briefing: harmful sexual behaviour

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

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Introduction

This briefing introduces research data around harmful sexual behaviour (HSB). Statistics can help professionals and the organisations they work for make evidence-based decisions about how best to meet the needs of children who display HSB.

What does the data tell us?

- There are no accurate figures on the full spectrum of harmful sexual behaviour.
- However, available data suggests around a third of child sexual abuse is by other children or young people.
- There is some cross-over between online and offline HSB and between child sexual exploitation and HSB.

- HSB is most commonly identified in adolescent boys, but girls and younger children can also exhibit HSB.
- A significant proportion of children who display HSB also have a learning disability or autism.
- The majority of children who display HSB have themselves experienced trauma, including abuse or neglect.
- The majority of children and young people displaying HSB do not become sexual offenders as adults.
- Young people who display HSB often experience other emotional, behavioural and peer-related difficulties.

What is harmful sexual behaviour?

The NSPCC defines harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) as sexual behaviours expressed by children and young people under the age of 18 years old that are developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful towards self or others, or be abusive towards another child, young person or adult (Hackett, 2014; Hackett, Branigan and Holmes, 2019).

Problematic sexual behaviour (PSB) is developmentally inappropriate or socially unexpected sexualised behaviour which doesn't have an overt element of victimisation or abuse.

Peer-on-peer sexual abuse is a form of HSB where sexual abuse takes place between children of a similar age or stage of development.

Child-on-child sexual abuse is a form of HSB that takes place between children of any age or stage of development.

Sibling sexual behaviour can range from developmentally appropriate or expected behaviours through to behaviours that fall under the category of harmful sexual behaviour (Yates, 2023). Harmful sibling sexual behaviour is believed to be the most common and long-lasting form of all intra-familial abuse (King-Hill et al, 2023; King-Hill and McCartan, 2024).

There is no universally agreed definition of what harmful sexual behaviour is. Definitions change between studies, disciplines, cultures and over time. This makes comparisons between studies problematic.

➤ [Read more about Problematic and harmful sexual behaviour](#)

What data is available?

There are no officially published statistics on the prevalence of harmful sexual behaviour (HSB), its causes or the characteristics of young people who display this behaviour. However, researchers have attempted to estimate the scale and the nature of HSB.

Areas of research include:

- scale of the issue
- data from NSPCC services on HSB
- technology assisted HSB
- the link between HSB and child sexual exploitation
- characteristics of young people who display harmful sexual behaviour
- children who display HSB's own experiences of abuse
- recidivism
- wider behavioural problems.

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"> ✓ Estimate the proportion of child sexual abuse that is by other children and young people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Definitively state the scale of the Issue
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Identify some of the most common characteristics of children known to display have harmful sexual behaviour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Conclude that only/all children with these characteristics display harmful sexual behaviour
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Identify the common adverse experiences that children known to display harmful sexual behaviour are likely to have experienced 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Conclude that children who have had adverse experiences will go on to display harmful sexual behaviour

What does the data tell us about the scale of the issue?

We do not know the true number of children and young people affected by harmful sexual behaviour (HSB). HSB covers a wide range of behaviours, many of which do not come to the attention of authorities. However, some attempts to estimate the prevalence of HSB have been made using data from children's self-reported

experiences of sexual abuse by other children and young people, and services which work with children who display HSB.

Available data suggests 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 three-quarters of sexual abuse is by other children and young people (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.

- Reviewing the pattern of criminal statistics over a period of a decade, Hackett (2004) estimated that between one-fifth and one-third of all child sexual abuse in the UK is by other children and adolescents.
- Research by Vizard found that children and young people account for approximately a quarter of all convictions for sexual offences (Vizard, 2004) and that 30-50% of sexual abuse is by adolescents (Vizard et al, 2007).
- Erooga and Masson (2006) found that harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) constituted one-third of all sexual abuse coming to the attention of the professional system in the UK.
- Radford et al's 2011 study of child maltreatment in the UK found that 65.9% of contact sexual abuse reported by under 18-year-olds was carried out by other children and young people under the age of 18.

Since Hackett's overview was published further sources of evidence have demonstrated that a significant proportion of child sexual abuse is by children:

- Gewirtz-Meydan and Finkelhor's 2020 study of a representative sample of 0- to 17-year-olds in the USA found that other children and young people were responsible for 76.7% of recorded sexual abuse and assault offences against boys and 70.1% of recorded sexual abuse and assault offences against girls.

- When a child is referred to children’s social care services, an assessment is carried out to identify if the child is in need of services. At the end of the assessment social workers record any factors relevant to the case. Data for England shows that, in 2023, child-on-child sexual abuse was recorded as a factor at the end of 13,100 assessments by local authorities in England; whilst adult-on-child sexual abuse was recorded as a factor at the end of 18,810 assessments (DfE, 2023).

In 2022/23 Childline delivered 602 counselling sessions about child-on-child sexual abuse

- In 2022/23, Childline delivered 602 counselling sessions about child-on-child sexual abuse.
- In 92% of these, the exact relationship between the young people was known. In 47 of these counselling sessions (9%), young people said they had been abused by a current partner and in 64 sessions (12%) they said they had been abused by an ex-partner. In 128 sessions (23%), they told us about being abused by a friend, and in 313 sessions (57%) the relationship was recorded as ‘other’.

(Source: NSPCC data, retrieved 2024)

In 2022/23 the NSPCC Helpline responded to 1,651 contacts from adults who were concerned about child-on-child sexual abuse or children displaying harmful sexual behaviour

In 2022/23, the NSPCC Helpline responded to 1,593 child welfare contacts where the person contacting was worried about children displaying sexually harmful behaviour. There were 217 contacts where the adult was concerned about child-on-child sexual abuse (online or offline). Both child-on-child sexual abuse and harmful & problematic sexual behaviour are recorded as sub-concerns, meaning there may be an overlap between the two categories, as more than one sub-concern can be applied.

(Source: NSPCC data, retrieved 2024)

What does the data tell us about online harmful sexual behaviour?

A number of research studies have looked at the prevalence and nature of technology assisted harmful sexual behaviour (TA-HSB). As with 'offline' HSB, TA-HSB encompasses a range of behaviours and there is no universally agreed definition of what it involves. This makes comparisons across studies problematic. Some key findings from the research are set out below.

Young people engage in a range of technology assisted harmful sexual behaviour

The NSPCC's conducted a systematic search for research about TA-HSB published between 2000 and 2015 (Belton & Hollis, 2016). Belton and Hollis's review identified a number of forms of technology assisted harmful sexual behaviour (TA-HSB).

- Four studies identified within the literature review focused on young males and young adults (from 12.4 to 20 years) accessing and distributing indecent images of children (IIOC) (Moultrie, 2006; Stevens et al, 2013; Aebi et al, 2014; Seto et al, 2015).
- One study showed young people's involvement in grooming (Shannon, 2008).
- Two other studies showed how young people sexually solicited other children and young people online (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2013; and Mitchell et al, 2014).

Since Belton and Hollis conducted their review of the evidence, further research has been published.

3% of a representative sample of 12-to 17-year-old U.S. students surveyed in 2016 said they had taken part in "sextortion" (where a person threatens to disseminate

intimate, explicit or embarrassing images of a sexual nature without consent, usually for the purpose of gaining something, such as additional images, sexual acts or money) (Patchin and Hinduja, 2020).

A significant minority of indecent images of children are created and shared by young people themselves

The term indecent images of children (IIOC) relates to images depicting child abuse images, from erotic posing to violent sexual acts.

In 2023, the Internet Watch Foundation confirmed 275,652 webpages contained child sexual abuse imagery. 287 of these webpages were hosted in the United Kingdom. Each webpage could contain one, tens, hundreds or even thousands of individual child sexual abuse images or videos. Of the 275,652 webpages, 92% (254,071) were assessed as containing 'self-generated' imagery.

It's a criminal offence to create or share explicit images of a child. However, the law is intended to protect children, not to criminalise them. If a young person is reported to the police for 'sexting' (sharing a sexual message and/or a naked or semi-naked image, video or text message with another person) the police will make a record but depending on the circumstances they may decide not to take any formal action.

Studies identified in a review of the literature by Belton and Hollis (2016) estimated that between 3 and 15% of IIOC offences are carried out by other young people.

Findings included:

- Carr's 2004 New Zealand study of child abuse image cases found that of the 106 identified cases which came to the attention of the police, 15 involved a young person under the age of 18 sharing IIOC (14%). The most common age of young people in the study was 17

- Wolak et al's 2011 study found that 5% of those arrested for possessing IIOC in the USA in 2006 were under 18 years, and 18% were aged 18–25.

Since then, further research includes a review of the literature conducted in 2017 by Walker and Sleath, which found a broad prevalence range of revenge pornography and the non-consensual sharing of sexually explicit media of 6.8%–30% for boys, and 1.8%–18% for girls.

A significant minority of children and young people have viewed violent pornography and/or illegal pornography

Belton and Hollis's 2016 literature review also identified evidence that a significant minority of children and young people have viewed violent and/or illegal pornography. Findings from the studies included:

- In a survey of 2,880 Croatian children and young people aged 10–16, around 4% reported receiving images containing violence in addition to nudity and sexual activity, and 1% received sexual images involving children (Flander et al, 2009).
- Seto et al's (2015) representative sample of 17- to 20-year-old males found that 4% had ever viewed child pornography
- Sabina, Wolak & Finkelhor (2008) found that, prior to the age of 18, 17.9% of the men and 10.2% of the women in their survey reported viewing pornography that depicted rape or sexual violence, 15.1% of men and 8.9% of women reported viewing sexual pictures of children and 31.8% men and 17.7% women reported viewing bestiality.

There is a small amount of cross-over between online and offline harmful sexual behaviour

Three studies identified in Belton and Hollis's 2016 literature review looked at the overlap between viewing indecent images of children (IIOC) and contact harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) among young people (Aebi et al, 2014; Stevens et al, 2013 & Moultrie, 2006). The findings suggested some level of overlap between the two behaviours although this relationship was small and varied between studies.

- Aebi et al (2014) found that six of the 168 young people in their sample with a contact offence also had a conviction for the possession or distribution of illegal pornography (3.6%). Two of the 96 young people convicted for either viewing IIOC or for offences related to illegal pornography reoffended with a contact offence (2.1%).
- Stevens et al (2013) found that one of 184 (0.5%) young people with convictions for contact sexual offences reoffended with an image-related offence. None of those viewing IIOC crossed-over to contact HSB.
- Moultrie (2006) found that two of the seven young people referred for the possession and/or distribution of IIOC in their sample had displayed other HSB, which included contact child sexual abuse and taking indecent pictures of children in the community. There were also a further three young people who were later found to be engaging in problematic or harmful behaviours in the community (such as following children or using recording equipment in the community).

Later research by the NSPCC (Hollis & Belton, 2017) found the children referred to the NSPCC for support for HSB were often involved in both online and offline HSB:

- 46% of all the children and young people who were assessed for the NSPCC's harmful sexual behaviour programme 'Turn the Page' displayed some form of TA-HSB, including 7% who only displayed TA-HSB with no offline HSB.
- The study also found that intentionally viewing pornography before the age of 13, or accessing exploitative or violent pornography between the ages of 13 and 17, may act as a trigger for in-person harmful sexual behaviour. Among the cases where the order of the offline HSB and TA-HSB could be established half of the young males in this group started off by viewing pornography and then progressed to offline HSB.

What does the data tell us about harmful sexual behaviour and child sexual exploitation?

Research suggests there is an overlap between harmful sexual behaviour and child sexual exploitation

Hackett and Smith (2018) explored 14 cases known to a child sexual exploitation (CSE) team over a 24-month period where the young person responsible was under the age of 18 at the point of their harmful or exploitative sexual behaviours.

Typically, the young people were involved in multiple, and in some cases escalating, harmful sexual behaviours. HSB towards teenage peers was preceded in only three cases by sexual abuse of pre-pubescent children. Twelve of the young people had long-standing nonsexual offending histories including theft, burglary, criminal damage and general antisocial behaviours. For all the young people HSB appeared to be more directed towards peers as part of a broader catalogue of non-sexual offending.

The researchers concluded that "it has been difficult to separate the young people's behaviours meaningfully and neatly into categories of CSE and HSB. this perhaps

reflects the present inadequacy of using distinct sets of language and concepts (CSE and HSB) and service frameworks to respond to the problem of transgressive sexual behaviour in adolescence”.

What does the data tell us about characteristics of children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviour?

Most harmful sexual behaviour is displayed by boys

The vast majority of children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) are male, even taking into account the likelihood that abuse by girls is underreported.

- Taylor’s 2003 study looked at 227 children and young people living in a West Midlands city in the UK who were the subjects of child protection strategy meetings due to concerns around harmful sexual behaviour between November 1993 and December 1999. 92% (208) of the young people were male and 8% (19) were female.
- Vizard et al’s 2007 study analysed data relating to young people with sexually abusive behaviour who were referred to the Young Abusers Project in the UK over the period 1992-2003. It found that, of the 280 children and young people for whom there was sufficient data, 256 (91%) were male and 24 (9%) were female.
- Finkelhor, Ormrod and Chaffin’s 2009 research looked at data from the USA’s National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) about 13,471 young people who committed sex offences against children in 2004. It found that 93% of the young people were male and 7% were female.
- Hackett et al’s 2013 study analysed case files of 700 5 to 28-year-olds

first referred to HSB intervention services in the UK between 1992 and 2000. 676 (97%) of children and young people referred were male and 24 (3%) female.

- Moodle's 2021 research found in a sample of 97 children with documented HSB in the United Kingdom, 89% of the sample were male.

The majority of children who display harmful sexual behaviour are adolescents

Research suggests that adolescence is the peak time for the occurrence of harmful sexual behaviour (HSB).

- Taylor's 2003 study of 227 children and young people in the West Midlands found that the age at which young people were first reported as displaying inappropriate sexual behaviours ranged from 4 to 16, with a mode of 13, a mean of 11.5 and a median of 12. Children aged 10 or younger were responsible for 34% of all incidents.
- The age range of children and young people receiving treatment for HSB in Vizard et al's 2007 study was 5- to 21-years-old. The mean age of the sample at the time of assessment was 13.9. The majority (81%) were aged 11-17 years at assessment. 14% were under the age of 10.
- Finkelhor, Ormrod and Chaffin's 2009 research, based on 13,471 young people who had committed sex offences against children, found that 38% were between the ages of 12 and 14 and 46% were between the ages of 15 and 17. 16% were younger than 12.
- Hackett et al's 2013 study found that the most common age at referral for HSB was 15, though one-third of all referrals related to children aged 13 or under. The mean age at referral was 14 and the modal age was 15.
- Finkelhor, Turner and Colburn's 2022 research into prevalence and characteristics of online and technology-facilitated sexual abuse against children

and youth found that under 18-year-olds made up a considerable proportion of those responsible. They found, where the age was known, that 35%-52% were under 18-years-olds.

A significant proportion of children with harmful sexual behaviour have a learning disability

The term learning disability is not clearly defined and is used in different ways by professionals in different disciplines, making it hard to give a precise figure for the number of children who display harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) who had a learning disability. However, a number of researchers have attempted to analyse case files to get an estimate of the proportion.

- Hackett et al (2013) read through case files of children who displayed HSB recording any information that indicated the presence or absence of a learning disability. In 38% (241) of cases where information about disability was noted the young person was identified as having a learning disability. In a further 62% (392) of cases the young person had no cognitive impairment.
- Between 2002 and 2003, Hackett, Masson and Phillips collected data, via a survey, from 186 services working with children and young people with HSB in the UK and Republic of Ireland. Among the 111 youth offending teams (YOTs) that responded, 53% (47) estimated that up to 25% of the young people they had worked with had a mild-to-moderate learning disability, and a further 18% (16 teams) reported even higher proportions.
- Moodle's 2021 research found that in their sample of 98 children who displayed harmful sexual behaviour, 14% had been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and a further 16% had suspected ASD; 23% had been diagnosed with a learning disability, and a further 12% had a suspected learning disability that might need additional assessment.

What does the data tell us about adverse childhood experiences and harmful sexual behaviour?

The majority of children who display harmful sexual behaviour have themselves experienced trauma, including abuse or neglect

Research studies into children who display harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) are often quite small. However, most do find that children who display HSB have also experienced trauma, including abuse or neglect. Hackett's 2016 review of the literature identified a number of studies looking into this issue, which is set out below alongside more recent findings.

- Hackett et al's 2013 study looked at the experiences of 700 children and young people who had been referred to nine UK services for HSB over a 9 year period. They found two-thirds were known to have experienced at least one form of abuse or trauma, including physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, severe neglect, parental rejection, family breakdown and conflict, domestic violence or parental drug and alcohol abuse.
- Vizard et al (2007) found that 92% of their sample had experienced some form of abuse or had been exposed to neglect or domestic violence.
- A study of 76 children displaying sexual behaviour problems and their parents (Tougas et al, 2016) found that, according to the parents, almost three quarters (71%) of the children from the sample had been neglected, approximately two out of three had been abused psychologically (63%) or physically (63%), and more than half (53%) had been victims of sexual abuse.
- Barra et al (2018) analysed data from the case files of 687 adolescents convicted of sexual offences between January 2007 and September 2014. The research found that around two-thirds (66.5%) of adolescents were highly

likely to have experienced several adverse childhood experiences (parental abuse or neglect, peer abuse, bullying or exposure to family violence) before their first sexual assault that led to a conviction.

- Hall and Moser (2018) looked at data from the files of 120 adolescents who had received residential and/or intensive outpatient treatment for HSB at a treatment facility in rural Appalachia between 2003 and 2014. 97% of the adolescents had at least one adverse childhood experience.
- A review by Malvaso et al (2020) indicated that the prevalence of prior experience of child sexual abuse in children and young people with problematic and harmful sexual behaviour ranged from 26-92%.

What does the data tell us about recidivism?

Young people convicted of sexual offences are less likely than the average for all young people with convictions to commit a further offence

- Ministry of Justice (2023) records show that the proven reoffending rate for young people who were convicted of or cautioned for a sexual offence in England and Wales in October–December 2021 was 7.1%. This compares with an overall reoffending rate for young people of 32.5%.
- In their meta-analysis of 18 studies, McCann and Lussier (2008) found that sexual offence recidivism ranged from 1.6% to 29.9%. In contrast, the general recidivism rate for young people was, on average, 53%.

(Sources: Ministry of Justice, 2023; McCann and Lussier, 2008)

Recidivism rates of online and/or offline harmful sexual behaviour among young people who view indecent images of children are low

Findings from two studies (Aebi et al, 2014; Stevens et al, 2013) with young people found that a small proportion of young people who view indecent images of children

(IIOC) online are known to repeat the behaviour, rates among this group are lower than young people with offline harmful sexual behaviour (HSB).

- In a follow-up study of around 2.95 years (ranging between nine months and 6.41 years), Aebi et al (2014) found that only one of the 54 young people experienced a relapse in viewing IIOC (1.9%). Among the 64 young people convicted of a contact child sexual offence, three sexually reoffended (4.7%).
- In Stevens et al's (2013) study, there was a sexual reoffending rate of 7% among their sample of young people referred to a treatment programme displaying varying types of HSB over ten years. Of the six young people who viewed IIOC in the sample, none had a relapse during the follow-up (mean period of four years and six months).

The majority of children and young people displaying harmful sexual behaviour do not become sexual offenders as adults

- Research by Nisbet et al (2004) examined risk and recidivism in a sample of 303 Australian adolescents convicted of sexual offences. As adults, 25 (9%) came to the attention of the police for further alleged sexual offences.
- Hargreaves and Francis (2014) analysed data on men who had committed a first sexual offence under the age of 21 using the England and Wales Offenders Index. They found that, after 35 years, an estimated 13% of these young people had been reconvicted for a sexual offence.
- An examination of the Philadelphia birth cohort longitudinal data by Zimring et al (2009) found that no girls who have been convicted for a sexual offence had committed a further sexual offence between the ages of 18 and 26. One in ten boys convicted for a sexual offence had committed a further sexual offence in their first eight years of adulthood.
- A recent systematic review of 78 studies by Malvaso et al (2020) found "strong evidence" that sexual recidivism rates amongst adolescents are "quite low", with one study recording a recidivism rate of 8.3%. However, research

indicates that timely interventions and successful completion of treatment programmes are crucial to low recidivism.

What does the data tell us about wider behavioural problems?

Young people who display harmful sexual behaviour often experience other emotional, behavioural and peer related difficulties

Joyal, Carpentier and Martin (2016) conducted a study of 351 young males assessed for contact sexual offences in Canada between 1992 and 2002. They compared the histories of young people whose harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) was directed at peers or adults with those whose HSB was directed at younger children. Their research found that children whose HSB was directed towards peers or adult were more likely to be involved in general antisocial behaviour. For example, 36.1% of young people whose HSB involved peers or adults had prior criminal history compared to 12.3% of young people whose HSB involved younger children. Young people whose HSB involved younger children were more likely to have poor social skills. For example, 73% of young people whose HSB was directed at younger children reported experiencing social isolation or rejection compared to 24.6% of young people whose HSB was directed at peers or adults.

Cale et al's 2016 longitudinal study of 217 young people charged with at least one sexual offence in Australia between 2001 and 2009 found that those who had been displaying HSB regularly and over a long period of time seemed to have first been involved in an escalating sequence of non-sexual offences. The average number of charges in adolescence for the sample was 19.6 charges. 55.3% had ever been charged for a non-violent crime and 38.7% had been charged for a violent, non-sexual crime.

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