

Improving understanding of the scale and nature of child sexual abuse

Briefing

July 2017



Introduction

There has been increasing awareness of child sexual abuse (CSA) and its impact on victims and survivors in recent years. High profile cases have brought greater public and political attention, as well as changes to practice. Knowledge and understanding have improved, but there is still too much that remains unknown about the sexual abuse of children and young people in England and Wales. There are gaps and weaknesses in fundamental data: duration and frequency of abuse; contexts and locations in which it takes place; and basic profile information about victims and perpetrators. Measurement of this form of abuse is challenging, but improvement is essential if we are to tackle the problem more effectively.

This issue is core to the purpose of the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse. The first step in this long-term strand of work is an analysis of what we do and do not currently know from existing prevalence studies and administrative data¹. A scoping report has been produced in partnership with London Metropolitan University, and informed by two expert workshops. This briefing summarises key points and sets out next steps in working towards better and comparative data.

What we know...

The following findings are drawn from the current evidence base:

...about victims and survivors

- Prevalence studies for England and Wales suggest that some 15% of girls and 5% of boys experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of 16.
- The methods used and the number of questions asked affect estimates; at the higher end international estimates reach 30% for girls and 23% for boys.
- Girls and young women form a much higher proportion of identified victims of CSA and CSE, although it is clear that a large number of boys also suffer abuse.
- The rates are significantly lower, although less easily calculated, for repeated penetrative abuse. This is more commonly experienced by girls and young women than by boys and young men.
- Most children and young people do not tell anyone at the time abuse is taking place, and many wait until they are adults.

...about perpetrators and offending

- The most serious and repeated offences are more likely to be committed by known persons, with family members being more common for girls and young women and authority figures for boys and young men.
- Males form the vast majority of perpetrators.
- Child abuse images are being identified in increasing numbers, and there is an increase in

¹ Prevalence studies survey random samples of the wider population, whereas administrative data is essentially case management information on cases that come to the attention of agencies.

successful prosecutions.

- Around a quarter of CSA offences investigated by police result in a charge or summons, and around three quarters of CSA offences prosecuted end with a conviction.
- Rates of attrition through the criminal justice system vary by offences: image offences, sexual grooming and child abuse through CSE have the highest rates of charging and conviction.
- Online is a new context for CSA and CSE, and is generating new forms of abuse which are difficult to track accurately.

...about the data

- The methodology used in prevalence studies affects the levels of reporting generated: for example, how many questions are asked and whether abuse by peers is asked about.
- There are complex and changing patterns of identification and reporting, with the number of children on protection plans for CSA reducing in the long term whilst the number of crimes recorded by the police has increased significantly in recent years:
 - Police recorded CSA offences tripled between 2004/5 and 2015/16².
 - The number of children subject to a child protection plan for sexual abuse in England has reduced from 6,400 to 2,970 between 1993/4 and 2015/16, and in Wales from 331 to 120. The actual scale of known child sexual abuse dealt with by children's services remains unknown, because only one primary concern relating to a child can be recorded and, in addition, it cannot be changed if sexual abuse emerges later in the process.
- There are considerable regional variations across administrative data:
 - 12 police force areas recorded fewer than three CSA offences per 1,000 of the child population in 2015/16, whilst two recorded 15 or more.
 - Five local authorities identified no children needing protection on grounds of sexual abuse in 2015/16, whilst 12 local authorities recorded six or more children per 10,000.
- Child sexual exploitation is increasingly being identified by police, and at risk children and young people are being reported by children's services. However, it is not possible to distinguish between children and young people experiencing CSE and those who are at risk.
- Much CSE remains invisible in administrative data because it is recorded under CSA, so the scale remains unknown.

The gaps

- We do not know if CSA is increasing or decreasing, because:
 - It is not possible to determine whether an increase in reporting is the result of more of the 'hidden' abuse becoming visible or because there is an actual increase.
 - Non-recent CSA is included in criminal justice data.
- The profiles of victims and perpetrators, apart from gender, are not consistently recorded.
- There is no accurate measure of how many victims are being identified within criminal justice data.

² Police recorded crime includes non-recent offences, estimated at around 20% for sexual offences, although how this proportion has changed is not known.

- The patterns of and contexts for abuse – such as duration and frequency over time, and the relationship between victims and perpetrators – are not well established.
- Data on perpetrators does not identify if they were single, multiple or serial offenders.
- No general population prevalence studies have been undertaken on CSE, and we do not yet have a way to distinguish those at risk from those who have been exploited within administrative data.
- How far ‘online’ is a context for abuse and how far there are specific online forms of abuse is yet to be accurately mapped.
- Current data does not differentiate between abuse that is reported by victims or their supporters and abuse that is identified by professionals/agencies.

The challenge

Measuring child sexual abuse is complex:

- Different methodological approaches (scope, sample and framing) in prevalence studies hinder comparisons.
- Many studies are one off, so trends over time cannot be discerned.
- Most CSA remains hidden and is never reported to, or uncovered by, an official agency.
- Many survivors only report in adulthood, and we do not know how this rate of disclosure has changed over time.
- Data is not collected on the same basis across different agencies: police collect on offences, the Crown Prosecution Service and Ministry of Justice on defendants, and children’s services on children.
- What is and is not recorded reflects the needs, understanding and priorities of agencies, which vary.
- Which cases come to the attention of agencies is affected by wider social awareness and by policy priorities.
- Changing definitions make tracing trends over time difficult.

The case for improvement

Our understanding of CSA has improved, but the scoping study highlights the lack of a comprehensive picture and an inability to monitor changes over time. Better and comparative data are crucial underpinning components in the fight against CSA and, ultimately, can help to protect children.

- Comprehensive and comparative data can inform the development of approaches to the prevention, disruption and identification of abuse.
- Identification of changing patterns of abuse, for example in relation to online or other contexts, can help equip agencies with the right information and tools.
- Robust information can help to better determine the appropriate allocation of resources.
- Accurate data enables better assessment of the effectiveness of changes to policy and practice.

Next steps and recommendations

Achieving better and comparative data is a long-term aim; however, there are some concrete actions that will start to address the gaps and improve the current position.

1. The UK Government should commit to commissioning a regular CSA prevalence study, under the auspices of the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

Existing prevalence studies have contributed significantly to our understanding, but the scoping report identified a number of gaps.

Scope: There are differing views as to whether such a study should be included in a broader survey (for example, in relation to child abuse and neglect). Whilst appreciating the arguments for a wider scope, we believe there is a strong case for a specialist CSA prevalence survey, if we are to successfully address the knowledge gaps identified earlier. The study should be comprehensive and improve on previous prevalence measurement. It should include CSA and CSE; online abuse; duration/frequency of abuse; and potential perpetration.

Sample: We would propose a random sample of adults, with a booster sample of young people to get the closest to current experiences.

Frequency: It is important that the study is repeated, in order to enable comparisons over time. It is proposed that the study is carried out once a decade, whilst retaining questions in the Crime Survey for England and Wales in the intervening years. This frequency mirrors practice in the USA and would limit the cost (estimated at several million pounds) to only once every 10 years.

As the recognised statistical institute of the UK, the ONS is well-placed to carry out this work and to maintain an ongoing commitment over multiple decades. Its data also has official statistics status.

- ***The Centre will contribute expertise and work with the ONS to develop survey methodology.***

2. Organisations carrying out surveys and longitudinal cohort studies on linked issues should consider including a module on CSA.

It is recognised that there are likely to be studies that could include consideration of CSA as part of a broader scope, for example mental health. It would be invaluable to have a consistently used set of CSA questions across these different studies to enable comparison.

- ***The Centre will convene a group of experts to develop a set of core ‘best practice’ questions for a CSA module, drawing on the learning about methodology identified in the scoping report.***

3. The Centre will work with relevant agencies in local areas to improve the consistent recording of core administrative data about CSA.

As highlighted in the scoping study, there are significant weaknesses in basic information, including: core profile information about victims and perpetrators; the context and locations in which the abuse takes place; and distinguishing those at risk from those who have been abused/exploited.

- ***The Centre has produced a draft data collection template to address some of the gaps and challenges. We are seeking local agencies to pilot this template, so that it can be tested, refined and the challenges of and solutions to improved data collection better understood.***

4. The Centre will work with relevant agencies to better understand the reasons for local/regional variation in the recording of CSA.

The analysis of administrative data shows significant regional variations in the recording of CSA by local authority children's services and police forces. It is not possible to determine whether these variations are due to differences in incidence or in identification and recording. This is a significant gap in knowledge, with implications for policy and practice.

- ***The Centre will explore regional variations in more depth, working in partnership with relevant local agencies including the police and children's services.***

The full scoping report and infographics can be found on our website: www.csacentre.org.uk