

Centre of
expertise
on child
sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse in 2020/21: Trends in official data

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About the author

Kairika Karsna is a senior research and evaluation officer at the CSA Centre. Her work focuses on improving understanding on the scale and nature of child sexual abuse in England and Wales.

About the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA Centre)

Our overall aim is to reduce the impact of child sexual abuse through improved prevention and better response, so that children can live free from the threat and harm of sexual abuse.

We are a multi-disciplinary team, funded by the Home Office, hosted by Barnardo's and working closely with key partners from academic institutions, local authorities, health, education, police and the voluntary sector.

Our aims are to:

- ▶ increase the priority given to child sexual abuse, by improving understanding of its scale and nature
- ▶ improve identification of and response to all children and young people who have experienced sexual abuse
- ▶ enable more effective disruption and prevention of child sexual abuse, through better understanding of sexually abusive behaviour/perpetration.

We seek to bring about these changes by:

- ▶ producing and sharing information about the scale and nature of, and response to, child sexual abuse
- ▶ addressing gaps in knowledge through sharing research and evidence
- ▶ developing a multi-agency Child Sexual Abuse Response Pathway and associated resources
- ▶ providing training and support for professionals and researchers working in the field
- ▶ engaging with and influencing policy.

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Executive summary

Understanding the scale and nature of child sexual abuse is key to improving responses to it. With this report, we at the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA Centre) continue a series of publications providing professionals and decision-makers with up-to-date evidence on child sexual abuse in England and Wales. This review focuses on the *recorded* cases of child sexual abuse that professionals responded to in 2020/21, drawing on the latest available evidence from the official data released by child protection, criminal justice and health agencies in England and Wales.

It should be noted that agency data relates to only a small minority of child sexual abuse that occurs in society. We estimate that at least 15% of girls and 5% of boys are sexually abused before the age of 16; the number of child sexual abuse cases recorded in official agency data and summarised in this report is far below these estimates of scale. (For the latest survey evidence on prevalence, see our 2021 report *The Scale and Nature of Child Sexual Abuse: Review of Evidence* at www.csacentre.org.uk/documents/scale-nature-review-evidence-0621/.) Nevertheless, agency data is a valuable resource, not least because it is collected according to the same nationally agreed definitions: this makes it possible to monitor how the identification of and response to child sexual abuse has changed over time, and how local authorities, police forces and sexual assault referral centres currently differ in identification, detection and response.

Child protection data in 2020/21

Across the year, local authority children's services in England recorded concerns about child sexual abuse in 29,640 assessments of children, and about child sexual exploitation (which, despite being a form of child sexual abuse, is treated separately in such assessments) in 16,830 assessments. The percentage of assessments recording a risk of child sexual abuse or child sexual exploitation has declined slightly in recent years, and stood at 9% of total assessments in 2020/21.

Although there is no reason to believe that the prevalence of child sexual abuse differs significantly between different regions of England and Wales, local authorities varied considerably in their identification of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation in these assessments. While two local authorities identified no children for whom they had concerns about sexual abuse, five local authorities identified more than 70 for every 10,000 children living in the area. The highest rates of identification were found in the regions of the North East and of Yorkshire and the Humber, while London councils tended to have lower rates. There was less regional difference in the recording of child sexual exploitation as a factor in assessments, suggesting a more consistent approach which is likely to be linked to resources, training and the prioritisation of sexual exploitation over the past 10 years.



There is no reason to think that the prevalence of child sexual abuse differs between regions, but local authorities varied widely in their identification of it



While no overall information is publicly available on the actions taken following such assessments, detailed data is published on the reasons for placing children on child protection plans in England, or on the child protection register in Wales. This shows that just 2,450 children in England – approximately one-twentieth of the number whose initial assessments recorded child sexual abuse or exploitation concerns – were placed on child protection plans under the category of sexual abuse (which includes cases of child sexual exploitation) in 2020/21. Although the overall number of new child protection plans has fallen slightly, the decline in plans under the category of sexual abuse has been steeper; a reduction of 6% in 2020/21, following a 12% reduction the previous year. In total, 500 fewer children were placed on child protection plans in 2020/21 because of sexual abuse than two years earlier, and the proportion of protection plans recording sexual abuse concerns fell to a new low of less than 4%. In Wales, 221 (6%) of all child protection registrations were made under the category of sexual abuse, sometimes alongside other forms of abuse/neglect.

The demographic profile of children placed on child protection plans because of sexual abuse remained similar to previous years. They were more likely to be female than male; tended to be older than those placed on child protection plans for other reasons; and, compared with the population of children attending state schools and nurseries, were more likely to be White and less likely to be from Asian backgrounds.

As with the recording of sexual abuse concerns in assessments of children, there was considerable regional variation in the placement of children on protection plans or the child protection register. A third of local authorities in England – including the majority of those in Inner London – placed five children or fewer on a plan under the category of sexual abuse, while the highest rates were recorded in the West Midlands and Yorkshire and the Humber regions. Placements as a proportion of the local child population were higher on average in Wales than in England, although more than two-fifths of Welsh local authorities placed fewer than two children per 10,000 child population on the register because of sexual abuse.

Police recorded child sexual offences in 2020/21

Police forces in England and Wales recorded 89,200 identifiable child sexual abuse offences (including offences involving child sexual abuse images) during the year, slightly more than in 2019/20. More than one-third of these were image offences, a further one-third related to rape or sexual assault, and the remainder related to sexual activity, sexual grooming and abuse through sexual exploitation. Compared to the previous year, there were significant falls in the numbers of recorded sexual offences committed by people in positions of trust, sexual activity offences, and offences of rape or a sexual assault against a male child. Child sexual abuse image offences rose by 18%, the largest single-year increase since 2003/04.

Police forces differed threefold in the rate of recorded child sexual abuse offences relative to the size of their child population. Rates tended to be lowest in London and the South East, while the North East, the North West and Yorkshire and Humberside were the regions with the highest average recording rates.

One in seven police investigations ended in the suspect being charged, summonsed, cautioned or given ‘diversionary or intervention activity’. Almost two-thirds were closed owing to evidential difficulties of some form. Charges were more likely for offences of sexual exploitation and sexual grooming, and least likely for offences relating to sexual activity and rape.

Over the past seven years, there has been a sharp decline in the proportion of child sexual abuse offence investigations ending in a charge, from nearly one-third to just 10% in 2018/19, before increasing to 12% in the current year.

Some police forces recorded three times as many child sexual abuse offences, relative to the size of the local child population, as others did

Court proceedings in 2020

In the year to December 2020, court proceedings were brought against 6,943 defendants for child sexual abuse offences, and there were 4,649 convictions. Prosecutions increased by 9%, as a result of courts' prioritisation of proceedings related to serious offences. Two-thirds of prosecutions ended with a conviction: a drop from three-quarters in the previous year. The conviction ratio was highest for child sexual abuse image offences and lowest for rape offences.

More than one-third of defendants found guilty received an immediate custodial sentence, and a further one-third received a suspended sentence. Immediate custodial sentences were less likely for image and sexual grooming offences and for offenders aged under 18.

Compared to previous years, there was a drop in the prosecution of under-18s, who comprised just 3% of defendants. Defendants were predominantly male (98%), as in previous years. Among prosecutions where the ethnic profile of the defendants was recorded, this was broadly similar to the wider population in England and Wales.

Children attending sexual assault referral centres in 2020/21

Sexual assault referral centres (SARCs) in England saw 7,244 children during the year, 20% more than in the previous year. Half of these were aged 14–17, and five out of six were female. The vast majority were White British, with Asian children accounting for the smallest proportion of SARC contacts in comparison with their share of England's school-age population.

While the majority of children continued to be seen face-to-face, two-fifths – a significantly higher number than in 2019/20 – were seen remotely. This is likely to be linked to COVID-19 related restrictions to face-to-face contact, and resulted in an overall increase in English SARCs' contacts with children during the year. The reach of SARCs varied widely across the seven health regions, with London having the lowest and South West the highest reach among under-18s.

Referrals to SARCs were most likely to come from the police (two-thirds) or children's services (one-quarter).

Conclusions

There continues to be a large – and growing – gap between the estimates of prevalence of child sexual abuse in England and Wales and what is recorded in official data. While the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have had little visible effect on the level of child sexual abuse recorded in official data, the long-term downward trend in child protection figures, and in contact offences reported to the police, is of major concern. Additionally, there is an urgent need for local leaders to address the large geographical variation in the identification of child sexual abuse, so that where children live does not affect how likely it is that their abuse is identified, detected or responded to.



There is an urgent need for local leaders to address the large geographical variation in the identification of child sexual abuse



1. Introduction

Understanding the scale and nature of child sexual abuse is key to improving responses to it. Establishing how many children are being (or are at risk of being) sexually abused, and how many of these children and the perpetrators of abuse are identified by professionals, is key to understanding how effective agencies are in identifying child sexual abuse. With this report, we at the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA Centre) continue a series of publications providing professionals and decision-makers with up-to-date evidence on the scale and nature of child sexual abuse in England and Wales.

This review focuses on the *recorded* cases of child sexual abuse that professionals responded to in 2020/21. We draw on the latest available evidence from official data released by child protection, criminal justice and health agencies. This includes information from local authority children's services on the number of children's assessments recording a risk of sexual abuse (including sexual exploitation), and the number of child protection plans (or, in Wales, placements on the child protection register) recording sexual abuse concerns. The criminal justice data includes statistics on child sexual abuse-related offences recorded by the police, and on the defendants prosecuted and convicted for these offences. The health data relates to children having contact with sexual assault referral centres.

Monitoring trends in official agency data is important. Changes in this data over time, and variations between geographical areas, can be tracked because the data is collected according to the same nationally agreed definitions. It is therefore possible to monitor how the identification of and response to child sexual abuse has changed, and how local authorities, police forces and sexual assault referral centres differ in their identification, detection and response to child sexual abuse.

However, official agency data also has its limitations:

- ▶ The data is collected and recorded primarily for the purpose of individual case management, so the choice of information recorded reflects agencies' needs, understanding and priorities.
- ▶ The accuracy of recorded data can vary. Agencies prioritising their response to child sexual abuse, and scrutinising their data, are likely to return more accurate results than those placing less priority on child sexual abuse. The extent to which data is scrutinised and quality assured can vary from area to area and from year to year.
- ▶ Any changes over time in agency data are unlikely to be caused solely by changes in the level of child sexual abuse taking place: they may also be the result of changes in professionals' awareness, understanding and confidence to identify and respond to child sexual abuse. Priorities set at local or national level can increase or decrease the resources available to tackle sexual abuse, and what comes to professionals' attention may be affected by competing priorities and the level of wider societal awareness. As a result, the data can be skewed in different directions at different times.

Changes over time in agency data may reflect changes in professionals' understanding and confidence in relation to child sexual abuse

For these reasons, agency data cannot be the basis for understanding the nature or the scale of child sexual abuse in society. Sexual abuse is a particularly hidden form of child abuse: only a small minority of children who are sexually abused come to a professional's attention at the time the abuse is taking place, and fewer yet are referred to child protection services or reported to the police (Office for National Statistics, 2020a; Radford et al, 2011). The best available evidence on the scale and nature of child sexual abuse comes not from agency records but from self-report surveys which ask a representative sample of the population anonymously about their experiences of abuse. Such surveys show that far more children are being sexually abused than are identified by professionals and recorded in agency data systems. For an overview of the latest evidence from surveys, see our report *The Scale and Nature of Child Sexual Abuse: Review of Evidence* (Karsna and Kelly, 2021).

The year covered in this report – from April 2020 to March 2021 – started and ended with nationwide lockdowns, when schools, nurseries, youth clubs and other places frequented by children were closed for most children to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many children could attend school for only a few months, and even then their experience of school may have been further disrupted by local outbreaks. Children's ability to build trusting relationships with their teachers and other adults at school – and with other adults such as sports coaches, religious leaders and family friends – was disrupted, and professionals who typically visit children in their homes (e.g. midwives, health visitors, social workers) mostly worked remotely. It was widely expected that these disruptions would make it harder for any abuse to be noticed and addressed by professionals (Garstang et al, 2020). Furthermore, concerns were raised that there might be an increase in child sexual abuse committed in the home or online as children and those looking to abuse them were spending increasing amounts of time at home (Romanou and Belton, 2020; Internet Watch Foundation, 2021).

While this report highlights noticeable fluctuations in the long-term trends within agency data, we urge caution in interpreting such fluctuations as evidence of change – or lack of change – in the prevalence of child sexual abuse caused by the lockdowns. It will take more evidence, and different sources of data, to build a picture of the pandemic's impact on the scale and nature of child sexual abuse in England and Wales.

Please note that the word 'child' is used in this report to refer to anyone under the age of 18.

1.1 Structure of the report

The remaining chapters of this report are structured as follows:

- ▶ Chapter 2 gives a brief overview of the evidence on the gap between the prevalence of child sexual abuse and agency-recorded cases.
- ▶ Chapter 3 summarises the data from the child protection system – the Child in Need Census (covering children in England) published by the Department for Education, and the Performance and Improvement Framework for Social Services published by the Welsh Government.
- ▶ Chapter 4 brings together evidence of child sexual abuse dealt with by the criminal justice agencies – the police recorded crime statistics in England and Wales published by the Home Office, and the court statistics released by the Ministry of Justice.
- ▶ Chapter 5 presents information about children referred to England's 47 sexual assault referral centres, recorded by NHS England in the Sexual Assault Referral Centre Indicators of Performance (SARCIP) dataset.
- ▶ The final chapter draws conclusions from the data and highlights the gaps in knowledge.

2. Setting the context: the gap between prevalence of child sexual abuse and agency-recorded cases

Far more children are sexually abused than come to the attention of official agencies. Based on the available survey evidence, we estimate that at least 15% of girls and young women and 5% of boys and young men in England and Wales are sexually abused before the age of 16 (Karsna and Kelly, 2021). At a conservative estimate, the number of children abused in a single year is around 500,000.¹

Child sexual abuse: prevalence and agency statistics

When we talk about the **prevalence** of child sexual abuse in this report, we mean the proportion of children in the population who are sexually abused, estimated using anonymous self-report surveys of representative samples of the population. Even with anonymity, the stigma surrounding child sexual abuse makes it likely that some people will not report their experiences of abuse in a survey.

Agency statistics in this report relate to the cases of suspected or identified child sexual abuse that are referred to local authority children's services or sexual assault referral centres, or reported to or detected by the police. Because child sexual abuse is significantly under-reported and under identified, the number of cases of child sexual abuse in agency data is much lower than estimates of prevalence from the survey data.

In its latest assessment of the scale of child sexual abuse offending, the National Crime Agency estimated that between 550,000 and 850,000 individuals in the UK posed "varying degrees of sexual risk to children" online or offline (NCA, 2021), with this figure skewed towards online offending.

The number of cases of child sexual abuse recorded in official agency data, as summarised in this report, is far below these estimates of scale (see Figure 1). This is because very few children are able to recognise and tell someone about their abuse (Allnock et al, 2019). Sexually abused children are more likely to exhibit signs that something is wrong than to tell someone verbally about their abuse. Yet professionals across the multi-agency workforce continue to rely heavily on children to disclose sexual abuse verbally (Ofsted et al, 2020).

In 2018/19, the Crime Survey for England and Wales, conducted on behalf of the Office for National Statistics, asked adults about their experiences of child maltreatment. Around two-thirds of respondents describing sexual abuse before the age of 16 said they had not told anyone about their abuse at the time (ONS, 2020b: Table 22). When respondents had told someone, this had been much more likely to be a member of their family than a professional. Only one in 15 cases of contact sexual abuse and one in seven cases of non-contact sexual abuse had been reported to the police at the time. Teachers had been told about just one in 30 cases of contact sexual abuse and one in 20 cases of non-contact sexual abuse. Other professionals (e.g. doctors, therapists, those working in victim support organisations) had been told even less frequently² (ONS, 2020b: Table 23).

1. The figure is calculated by using single-year child sexual abuse prevalence estimates from the NSPCC 2009 child maltreatment study for age groups 0–11 and 12–17 (Radford et al, 2011) and the Office for National Statistics 2020 population estimates (ONS, 2021).

2. The survey did not ask about the involvement of social workers.

The most frequently cited reasons for not having told anyone included embarrassment and humiliation, fear of not being believed, a belief that nothing would change as a consequence of telling, and fear of further violence as a result of telling (ONS, 2020b: Table 25). While some respondents with experience of child sexual abuse had spoken about their abuse later in life, one in five had never done so before taking part in the survey (ONS, 2020b: Table 18).

An NSPCC survey of children and young adults found that sexual abuse committed by other children was less likely to be disclosed than abuse committed by adults: five out of six respondents abused by another child had not told anyone about it prior to responding to the survey (Radford et al, 2011).

It is therefore evident that official agency data can provide only a very partial understanding of the scale of sexual abuse, and potentially a skewed picture of its nature. It is also clear that most sexual abuse of children will continue to be missed by agencies unless professionals become better at recognising the potential signs and indicators of sexual abuse, and of sexually abusive behaviour in another individual (Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse, 2021), rather than waiting until the child tells someone about their abuse.



Agencies will continue to miss most sexual abuse of children unless professionals become better at recognising the potential signs and indicators



Figure 1. The scale of child sexual abuse compared with agencies' identification of it



Source: Home Office (2021b); Department for Education (2021a); Radford et al (2011); Office for National Statistics (2021). Numbers rounded to the nearest hundred/thousand. * Includes assessments identifying risk of child sexual exploitation.

3. Local authority children's services

This chapter provides an overview of the cases of child sexual abuse recorded in the child protection system, using data published by the Department for Education (for cases in England) and the Welsh Government. As outlined in Chapter 2, only a small minority of children come to the attention of child protection professionals at the time of the abuse..

These sources provide only partial information on child sexual abuse responded to by local authority children's services:

- ▶ In England, but not in Wales,³ data is published on the 'factors' identified when assessing the needs of each child referred to children's services: these include 'child sexual abuse' and 'child sexual exploitation' as separate categories of need.
- ▶ No information is published in either nation about actions taken after the assessment.
- ▶ In both England and Wales, local authorities release statistics on the primary reason why children are made the subject of a child protection plan (or placed on the child protection register in Wales); this is a long-standing time series published since the early 1990s. The primary reasons include four categories of abuse – emotional, physical, sexual, and neglect – with a fifth category to denote that the child is at risk of multiple forms of abuse.
- ▶ No data is published about sexual abuse concerns relating to children who receive any other response from local authority children's services (e.g. children supported through a 'child in need' plan in England, or 'receiving care and support' in Wales, or 'looked-after' children) or are referred to 'early help'. These children represent the vast majority of those supported by children's services.

Placements on child protection plans and the child protection register provide only a limited understanding of sexual abuse dealt with by local authority children's services, for the following reasons:

- ▶ A child is placed on a protection plan or the register only under certain circumstances (see box on next page). Of the 597,760 children referred to children's services in England in 2020/21, only around one in nine (63,830) were made the subject of child protection plans under any category of abuse or neglect (Department for Education, 2021a: Tables A1 and D2).⁴
- ▶ Even where a child is placed on a protection plan or the register and there are concerns that they are being sexually abused, it is likely that another category of abuse will be recorded on the plan/register. Research by the Office of the Children's Commissioner (2015) found that, among children who had been sexually abused according to police data, more were recorded by children's services under the categories of neglect (32%) or emotional abuse (29%) than under sexual abuse (20%). The study found that social workers considered neglect to be a "more straightforward" designation than sexual abuse.

No data is published about sexual abuse concerns relating to children who are supported through 'early help' or 'child in need' plans, or placed in care

3. Social services are a devolved responsibility, whereas policing and criminal justice systems are not; consequently, there are differences between social services data gathering and reporting in Wales and in England.

4. Equivalent 2020/21 data for Wales was not available at the time of this report's publication.

- Children frequently experience multiple forms of abuse, but local authorities' data recording systems typically require a single primary category of abuse to be selected and recorded when placing a child on a protection plan or the register. A 'multiple' category is used in a small minority of cases in England and Wales, and its use varies widely (Bywaters et al, 2017). While the Welsh Government publishes a breakdown of the forms of abuse under this multiple category, in England any sexual abuse concerns recorded under the multiple category are not visible in the published data.

Many children experience multiple forms of abuse, but typically only one 'primary' abuse category can be entered on local authorities' systems

The role of local authority children's services in responding to concerns about child sexual abuse

Local authority children's services receive referrals about concerns of child sexual abuse from other organisations and the general public.

- If initial enquiries indicate that the concerns do not require statutory involvement, the case is either closed or passed on for possible 'early help' support.
- If initial enquiries suggest that statutory involvement is necessary, children's services take a lead on assessing whether a child is 'in need' of further support ('in need of care and support' in Wales) or – if the child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm – requires protection. The assessments determine the actions needed to safeguard the child and promote their welfare.

Early help is offered to children in families where there are concerns about early signs of abuse or neglect. The interventions offered as 'early help' address the concerns through advice and guidance by a wide range of professionals.

A child is assessed as **in need** if it is unlikely that they can achieve or maintain a reasonable level of health and development without support, which the local authority is required to provide, or if they are disabled.

A child in need plan is developed, outlining services to the child and their family, and is reviewed regularly.

Where assessments find that a child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm, a **child protection enquiry** is conducted. The child's circumstances and needs are discussed at an initial multi-agency child protection conference, which may agree that the child be placed on a **child protection plan** (or the **child protection register** in Wales) if they are at *continuing* risk of significant harm because of neglect or abuse (including sexual abuse) but are considered safe to remain with their family. Social workers and other professionals develop a child protection plan (or a care and support protection plan in Wales), which involves direct work with the child and support for the family.

If the assessments conclude that a child cannot safely remain living with their family, the child is taken into local authority care and may be placed with relatives or a foster/adoptive family, moved into a residential children's home, etc. These children are referred to as '**looked-after children**' in the legislation.

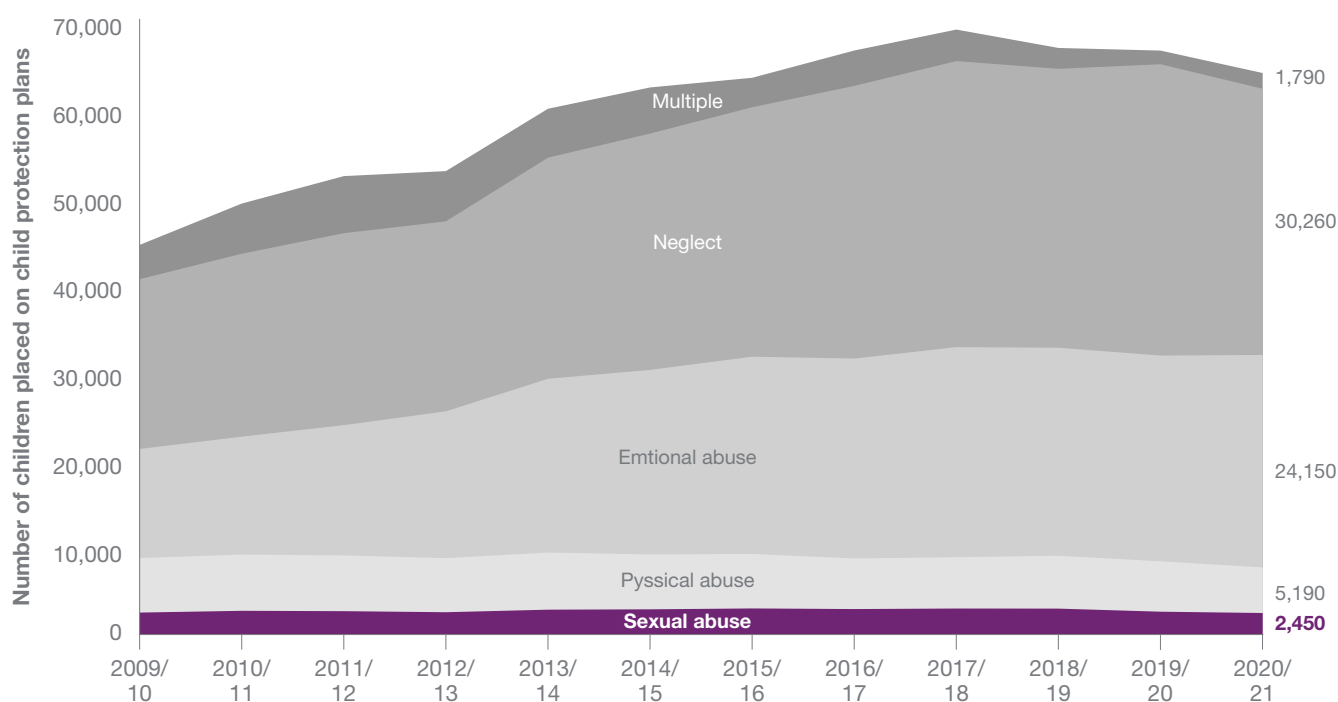
Sources: Department for Education (2018); Welsh Government (2020).

Despite these limitations, monitoring recorded cases of child sexual abuse visible in child protection data gives insight into the changing patterns of identification and recording of child sexual abuse in local authority children's services, and also some information about local authority response to it. This data, when compared to the estimates of prevalence, can support local and national leaders in understanding the gap between the underlying need and their current response to child sexual abuse.

3.1 Sexual abuse recorded in child protection plans

In England during 2020/21, there was a 6% decline in the number of children placed on child protection plans under the primary category of sexual abuse, from 2,600 in 2019/20 to 2,450 (see Figure 2). This followed a 12% decline in the previous year, meaning that the number of children placed on child protection plans because of sexual abuse fell by 500 over two years. Even though the overall number of child protection placements per year has declined slightly since 2017/18 following years of substantial increases, in 2019/20 sexual abuse was the reason for fewer than 4% of these placements for the first time – and the proportion declined further in 2020/21.

Figure 2. Children placed on child protection plans per year, by category of abuse, 2009/10–2020/21, England

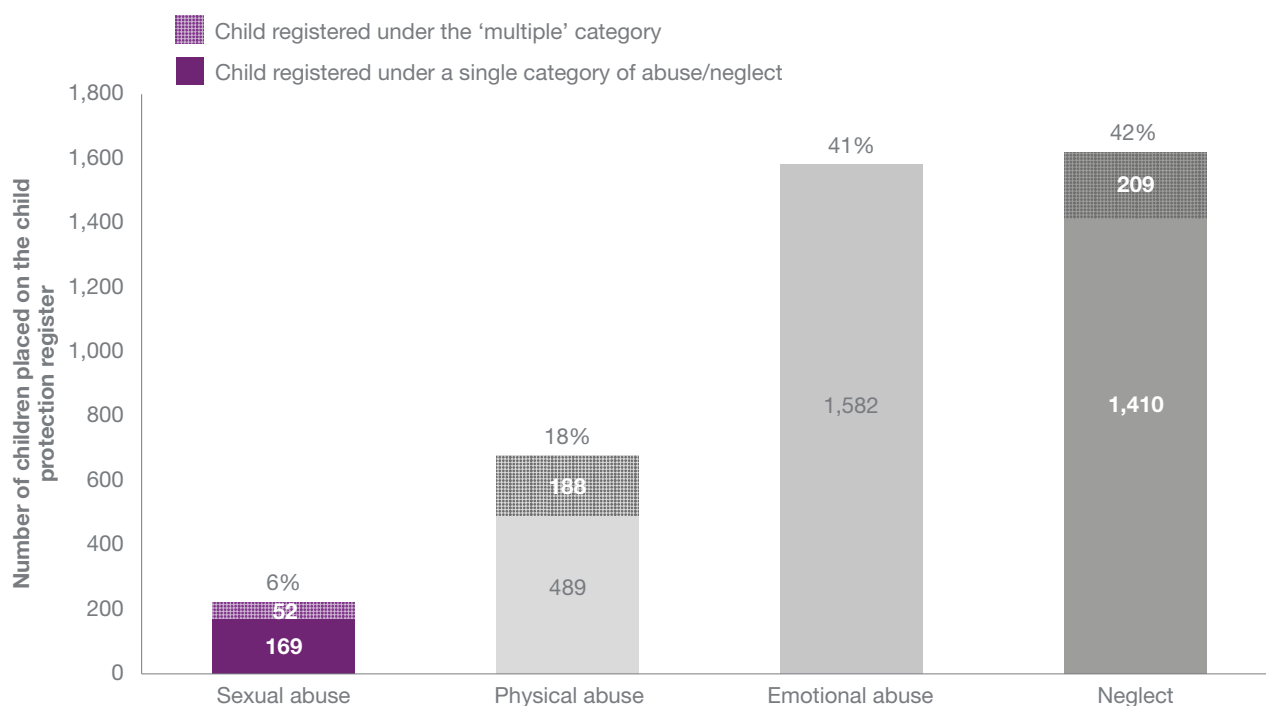


Source: Department for Education (2021a: Table D2, years ending 31 March 2021 and 2012; Table 19, year ending 31 March 2011; Table 15, year ending 31 March 2010). If a child was in the child protection system more than once during the year, each incidence is recorded. A data confidence indicator was used for years 2009/10–2014/15, very few local authorities were considered to provide low-quality data.

In Wales, 2020/21 was the first year for which whole-year statistics on child protection registrations were published. (Previously the Welsh Government had published only ‘snapshot’ figures showing the number of children on the register as at 31 March each year; these figures for 2020/21 were not available at the time of this report’s publication, so comparisons with previous years are not possible here.⁵) A total of 169 children were placed on the child protection register under the primary category of sexual abuse in 2020/21; this represents 4% of the 3,868 registrations in that year. Sexual abuse was a concern for a further 52 children registered under the ‘multiple’ category; this brings the total proportion of sexual abuse cases to 6% (see Figure 3).

The relatively low number of child protection placements/registrations related to sexual abuse, and the downward trend in them, are not unique to England and Wales: in an international study, Jud et al (2016) found sexual abuse to be generally the least commonly recorded form of child maltreatment in administrative data, featuring in between 3% and 9% of child abuse cases. They noted a significant drop in the USA and other high-income countries since the 1990s. Lonne et al (2021) noted the same shift in high-income countries’ administrative data, from primarily physical and sexual maltreatment to neglect and emotional maltreatment, attributing this to greater community awareness of the latter categories of abuse.

Figure 3. Children placed on the child protection register, by category of abuse, 2020/21, Wales



Source: Welsh Government (2021). Percentages total more than 100% because some children were placed on the register for multiple reasons.

5. The equivalent data for 2019/20 is not available either; it was not collected by the Welsh Government, for reasons related to the COVID-19 pandemic. ‘Snapshot’ data up to 2018/19, published in Karsna and Kelly (2021), shows a similar trend to the England data presented in Figure 2.

3.2 Characteristics of children on protection plans under the category of sexual abuse in England

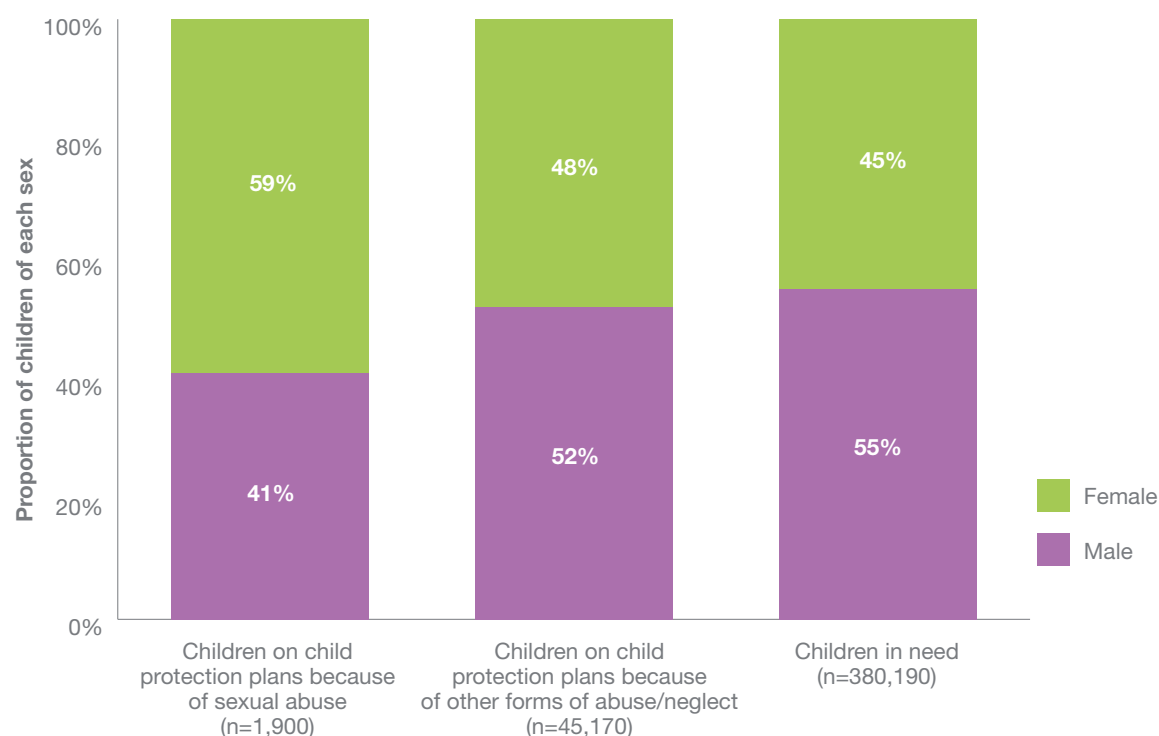
Official data is available on the demographic details – sex, age and ethnicity – of children recorded in England’s child protection system as of 31 March each year. At the time of this report’s publication, equivalent data about children on Wales’s child protection register as of 31 March 2021 was unavailable.

3.2.1 Sex

On 31 March 2021, girls accounted for three-fifths (59%) of children in England on child protection plans under the primary category of sexual abuse. In comparison, just over half of the children on child protection plans under other categories of abuse, and of children in need, were male (see Figure 4).

The proportion of boys on child protection plans under the category of sexual abuse has increased slightly in recent years – it was 38% in 2019 – and is considerably higher than the level of sexual abuse of boys indicated in prevalence surveys or in other agencies’ data.⁶ The reasons behind this are unclear.

Figure 4. Children on child protection plans and children in need at 31 March 2021, by sex, England



Source: Department for Education (2021a: Tables A4 and A5, year ending 31 March 2021). Chart excludes a small number of children whose sex was not recorded.

6. In the latest Crime Survey for England and Wales childhood maltreatment module, 23% of respondents who reported being sexually abused in childhood were male (Office for National Statistics, 2020b: Table 1). In data from 33 (out of 43) police forces for 2018/19, 20% of recorded rapes of children were committed against boys, as were 21% of other recorded sexual offences against children (ONS, 2020b: Table 34). Only 15% of under 18s attending sexual assault referral centre (SARCs) in England in 2020/21 were male – see Chapter 5.

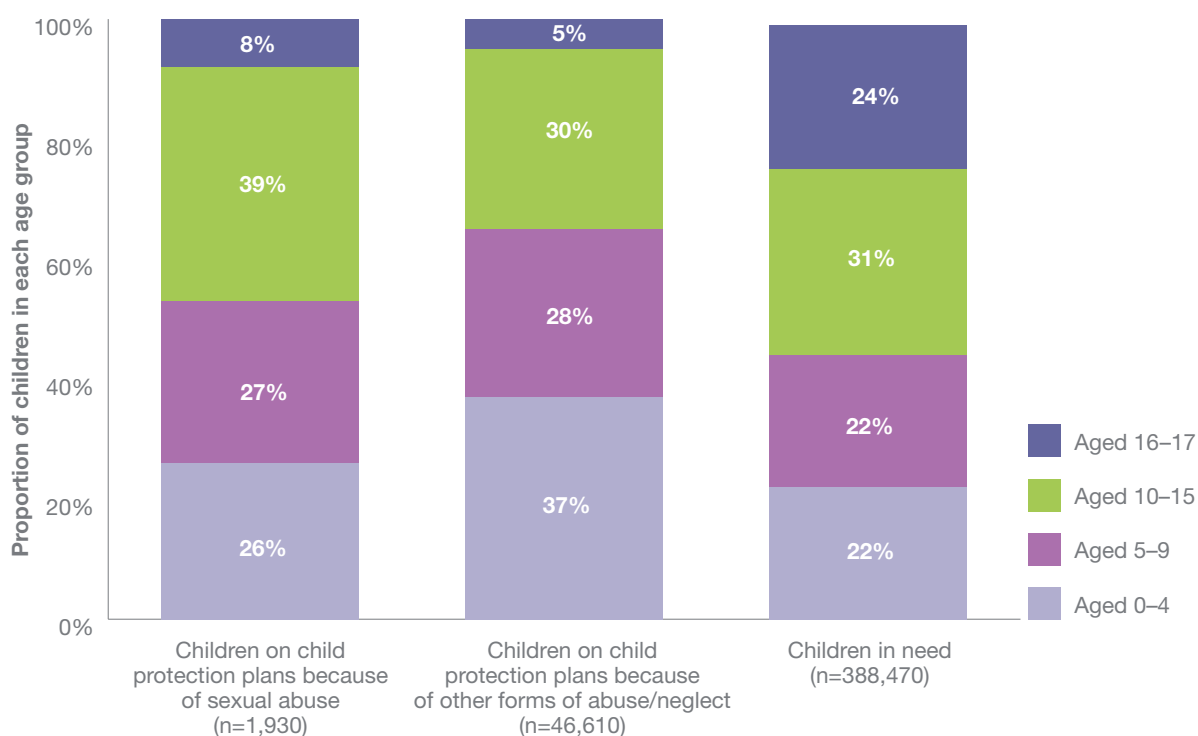
3.2.2 Age

Compared with those on a protection plan because of other forms of abuse or neglect, children who were the subject of a child protection plan in England on 31 March 2021 under the category of sexual abuse were less likely to be aged under five and more likely to be over 10 years old (see Figure 5). Almost half (47%) were aged 10 and over, compared to a third (35%) of children placed on a child protection plan due to other forms of abuse. Recent years have seen little change in the age profile of children made the subject of a child protection plan under the category of sexual abuse.

The difficulty of identifying the sexual abuse of younger children, particularly those who are pre-verbal, has been noted in research (Vrolijk-Bosschaart et al, 2017).

The difficulty of identifying the sexual abuse of younger children, particularly those who are pre-verbal, has been noted in research

Figure 5. Children on child protection plans and children in need at 31 March 2021, by age, England



Source: Department for Education (2021a: Tables A4 and A5, year ending 31 March 2021). Chart excludes a small number of children whose age was not recorded.

3.2.3 Ethnicity

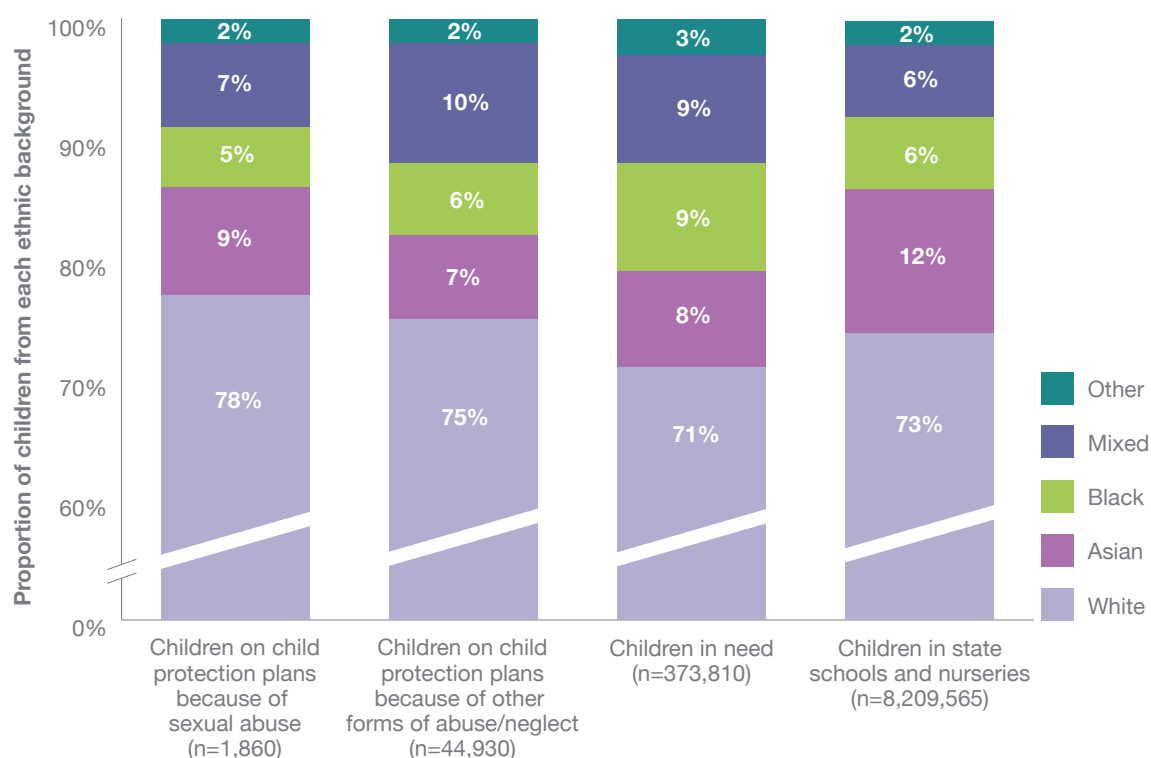
Compared to the population of children attending English state schools and nurseries, children on child protection plans in England under the category of sexual abuse on 31 March 2021 were more likely to be from White (British or 'other') backgrounds (see Figure 6).

More than three-quarters (78%) of children who were the subject of a child protection plan under the category of sexual abuse were White; this proportion was higher than among children placed on a child protection plan due to other forms of abuse (75%) and among children in need (71%). Children of Asian backgrounds were generally under-represented: while they accounted for 12% of children in state nurseries and schools in 2020/21, they made up only 9% of children on child protection plans because of sexual abuse, 7% of children on plans under other abuse categories, and 8% of children in need.

Research has highlighted the difficulties that professionals face in identifying sexual abuse and acting on concerns about children from minority ethnic backgrounds (Ali et al, 2021; Rodger et al, 2020), while also concluding that the likelihood of being sexually abused does not vary significantly between ethnic groups (Bebbington et al, 2011).

Research has highlighted difficulties in identifying sexual abuse and acting on concerns about children from minority ethnic backgrounds

Figure 6. Children on child protection plans and children in need at 31 March 2021, by ethnicity, England



Sources: Department for Education (2021a: Tables A4 and A5, year ending 31 March 2021); Department for Education (2021b: 'Pupil characteristics - Ethnicity and Language' table – figures as at 31 January 2021). Chart excludes a small number of children whose ethnicity was not recorded.

3.3 Children at risk of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation in England

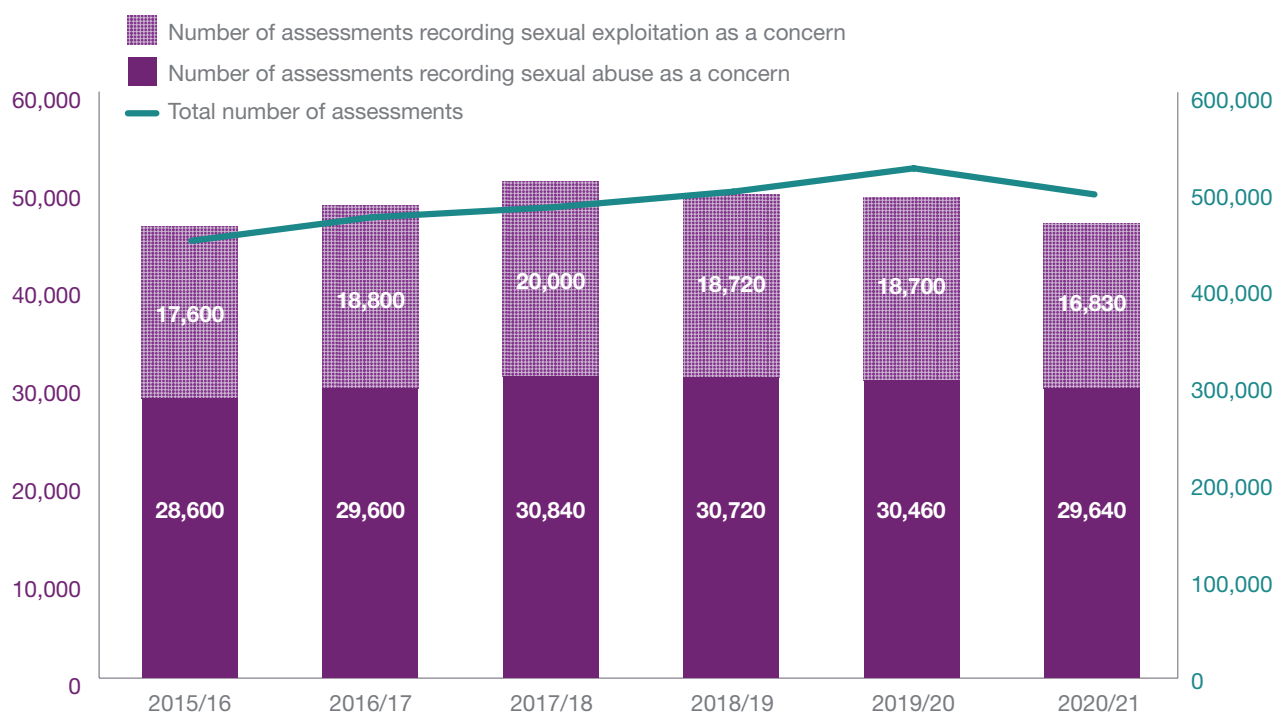
Since 2014/15, the Department for Education has annually published a list of factors identified in the assessments of children who are referred to local authority children's services in England; in this list, sexual exploitation is recorded separately from sexual abuse.⁷ Where multiple risks are identified, all factors are recorded. Since 2015/16 the list has included data from all local authorities in England, enabling comparisons over time to be made.

In 2020/21, the single 'sexual abuse' category was replaced with two new categories: 'sexual abuse: adult on child' and 'sexual abuse: child on child'. While most local authorities used these new categories either in part or for the full year, 29 continued to use the old single 'sexual abuse' category. The analysis below adds up all concerns of sexual abuse recorded under those three categories.

Figure 7 shows (in green) the overall annual number of local authority child assessments, which increased steadily before falling slightly in 2020/21, and (in purple) the numbers of these assessments-recording the risk of child sexual abuse or exploitation, both of which have decreased every year since 2017/18. While sexual abuse has been recorded in 6% of assessments and sexual exploitation in 3%–4% of assessments throughout this period, these proportions have decreased since 2017/18; the fall in recorded sexual exploitation concerns accounts for most of this decrease.

Of the 29,640 assessments recording concerns of child sexual abuse in 2020/21, 19,850 recorded information about the age of those committing the abuse. Adult-perpetrated abuse featured in fewer than two-thirds (63%, n=12,460) of those assessments.

Figure 7. Child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation identified during assessments by local authority children's services, 2015/16–2020/21, England



Source: Department for Education (2021a: Table C3, years ending 31 March 2021, 2017 and 2016). Multiple risks could be recorded. Chart excludes assessments where no specific risks were recorded.

7. It is unclear whether some local authorities include children at risk of child sexual exploitation also within the count of children at risk of child sexual abuse. However, research has shown that social workers tend to categorise intra-familial child sexual abuse as 'child sexual abuse' and extra-familial child sexual abuse as 'child sexual exploitation' (see e.g. Roberts, 2020; Tregidga and Lovett, 2021).

3.4 Local variation

3.4.1 Child protection plans or registrations in England and Wales

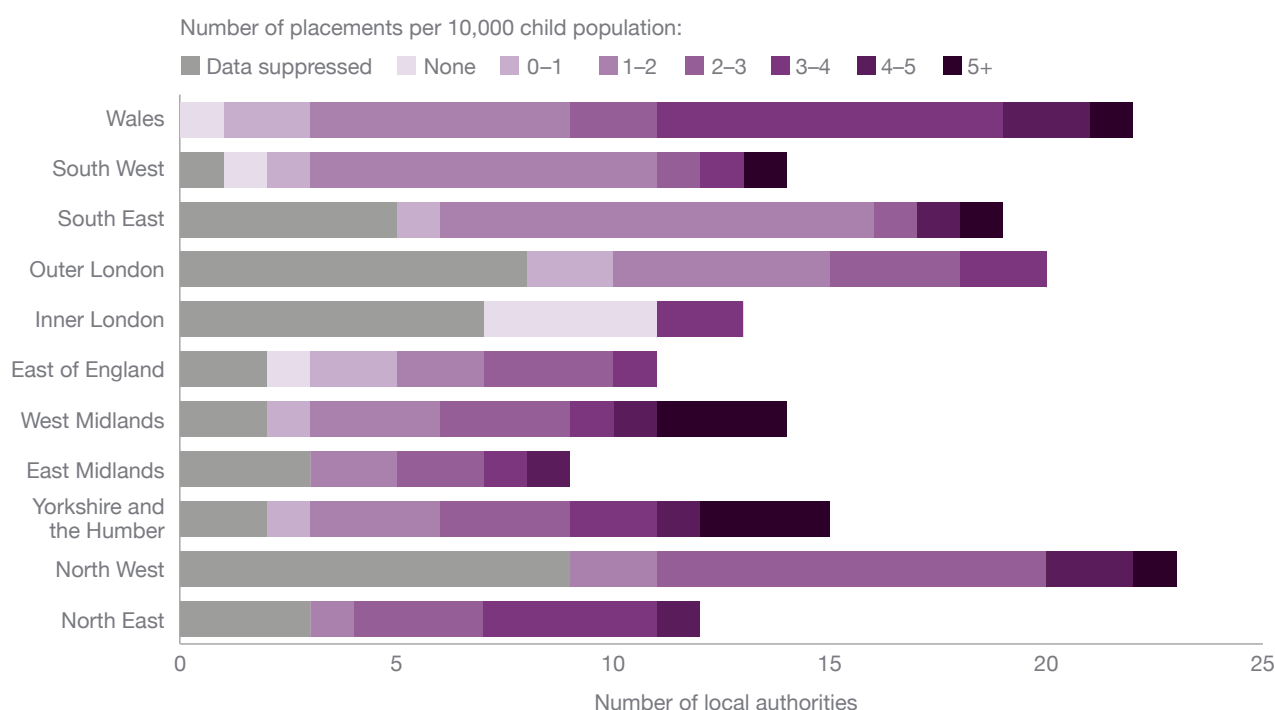
As previous editions of this report (e.g. Karsna and Kelly, 2021) have shown, there are significant differences in the levels of sexual abuse recorded in local authorities' child protection data across England and Wales.

For each local authority in England and Wales, Figure 8 presents the number of children made the subject of child protection plans or placed on the child protection register because of sexual abuse, as a proportion of the local child population. A darker shade of purple indicates that a local authority has placed a greater proportion of local children on protection plans or the register because of sexual abuse.

In 2020/21 six local authorities in England placed no children on child protection plans because of sexual abuse, and a further 42 English local authorities each placed between one and five children in total (shown in grey as 'data suppressed' in Figure 8).⁸ Consequently, a third (48 out of 150) of local authorities in England placed very few or no children on child protection plans under the category of sexual abuse. Another 44 local authorities placed fewer than two children per 10,000 child population on plans in that category.

In half of the local authorities in Wales (11 out of 22), no more than five children in total were placed on the child protection register under the category of sexual abuse. Nine Welsh local authorities placed fewer than two children per 10,000 child population on the register because of sexual abuse.

Figure 8. Number of children per 10,000 local child population placed by local authorities on child protection plans or the child protection register under the category of sexual abuse, by region, 2020/21, England and Wales



Sources: Department for Education (2021a: Table D2); Welsh Government (2021); Office for National Statistics (2021). In Wales, only child protection registrations under the primary category of sexual abuse are counted, in order to make the data comparable to England's. Population figures (aged 0-17) are mid-year estimates.

Data from an English local authority is 'suppressed' if the local authority placed between one and five children in total on child protection plans under the category of sexual abuse during the year. In most such cases in 2020/21, the local authority would fall into the '0-1 per 10,000 child population' category. Even in the extreme case where every local authority with suppressed data made five children the subject of child protection plans because of sexual abuse, there would be 24 local authorities in the '0-1' group, 15 in the '1-2' group, two in the '2-3' group and one small local authority in the '5+' group.

8. In local authorities whose data is suppressed, the rate of child protection plan placements per 10,000 local child population is generally low; see the Figure 8 footnote for details.

At the other end of the spectrum, 10 local authorities in England and Wales placed between five and nine children per 10,000 local child population on child protection plans or the register because of sexual abuse.

There were marked regional differences in England: in 11 of the 13 Inner London local authorities, five children or fewer were made the subject of child protection plans because of sexual abuse, while the same was true in only two of the 14 local authorities in the West Midlands and South West, and two of the 15 in Yorkshire and the Humber. Six out of the 10 local authorities with the highest rate of placements were in the West Midlands or in Yorkshire and the Humber. The wide variety of shades of purple in each bar of Figure 8 indicates a high degree of variation within as well as between regions.

Placement rates under the category of sexual abuse were slightly higher in Wales than in England – half of Welsh local authorities placed more than three children per 10,000 child population on the register for this reason, compared to one in five local authorities in England – although there was considerable variation between local authorities. The overall rate of child sexual abuse related protection plans was lower in England (2.0 for every 10,000 children) than the rate of equivalent registrations in Wales (2.7 per 10,000 children).

Research has found rates of placements on child protection plans to be higher in areas with greater deprivation, although this association is weakest for sexual abuse protection plans (Bywaters et al, 2017).

3.4.2 Assessments naming child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation in England

Figure 9 shows that there are also wide regional variations in the proportion of the local child population for whom assessments by the local authority identify a risk of child sexual abuse. (This data is not available for local authorities in Wales.) As in Figure 8, a darker shade of purple indicates more assessments identifying this risk.

In 2020/21, two English local authorities identified no children for whom they had concerns about sexual abuse, while five local authorities identified child sexual abuse concerns in more than 70 assessments for every 10,000 children living in the area. Regional analysis shows that higher rates of identification were primarily recorded in the Yorkshire and the Humber and North East regions, while London councils tended to record lower than the average numbers of assessments identifying child sexual abuse as a concern. Nevertheless, the range of shades of purple within most bars of Figure 9 indicates considerable variation between the local authorities in most regions.

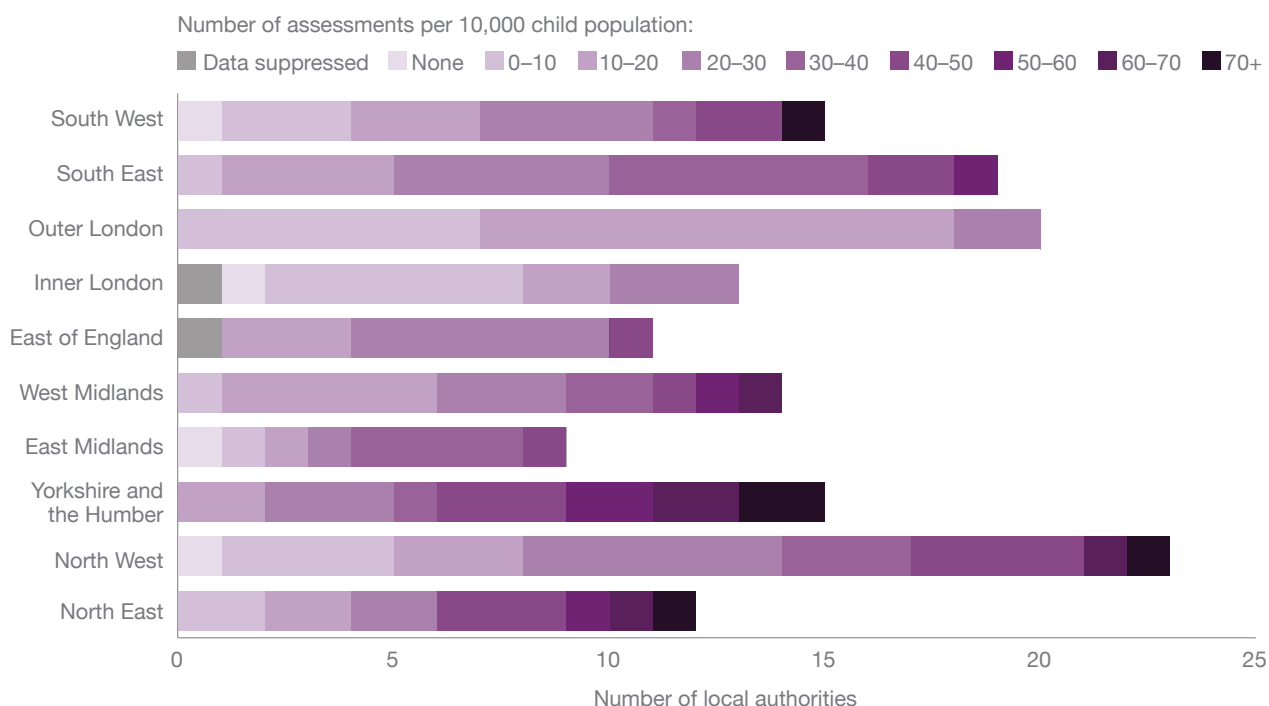
There was less difference in relation to recording sexual exploitation as a concern, as shown by a narrower range of shades of purple (both within and between regions) in Figure 10: in 2020/21, close to half (45%) of all England's local authorities recorded between 10 and 20 children at risk of sexual exploitation for every 10,000 children. If local authorities are taking a more consistent approach to identifying sexual exploitation than other forms of child sexual abuse, this is likely to be linked to training and resources that have followed years of prioritising child sexual exploitation.



Local authorities appeared to be taking a more consistent approach to identifying sexual exploitation than other forms of child sexual abuse



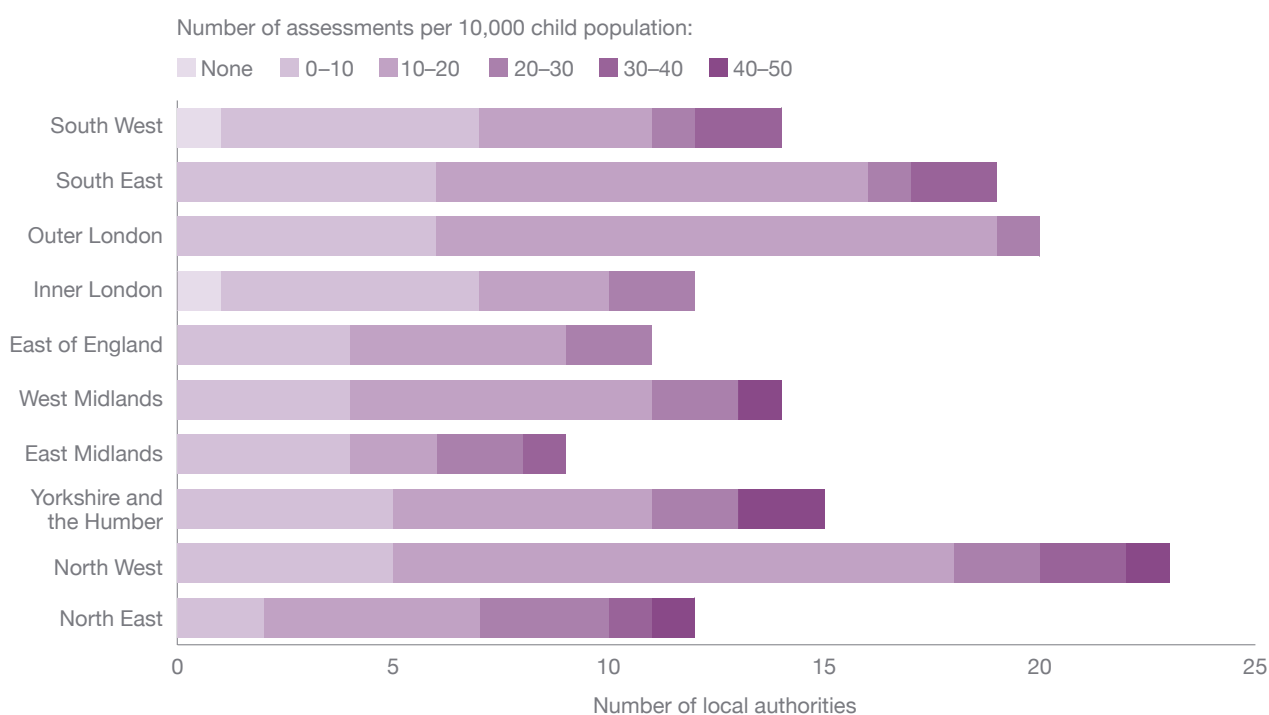
Figure 9. Number of local authority assessments per 10,000 local child population recording children as at risk of sexual abuse, by region, 2020/21, England



Sources: Department for Education (2021a: Table C3); Office for National Statistics (2021). Where a child is assessed more than once, all assessments are counted. Children can be identified as in need under multiple categories. Population figures (aged 0–17) are mid-year estimates.

Data from a local authority is 'suppressed' if the local authority recorded a risk of sexual abuse in between one and five child assessments in total during the year. In one of the two local authorities whose data was suppressed in 2020/21, the rate of assessments per 10,000 local child population would be in the '0–10' range; the other (small) local authority would be in the '0–10' or '10–20' category.

Figure 10. Number of local authority assessments per 10,000 local child population recording children as at risk of sexual exploitation, by region, 2020/21, England



Sources: Department for Education (2021a: Table C3); Office for National Statistics (2021). Where a child is assessed more than once, all assessments are counted. Children can be identified as in need under multiple categories. Population figures (aged 0–17) are mid-year estimates.

4. Data from criminal justice agencies

This chapter draws on publicly available data on police-recorded sexual offences against children published by the Home Office,⁹ and data released by the Ministry of Justice¹⁰ on defendants prosecuted for child sexual abuse offences (see also Appendix 1).

The role of the police in responding to child sexual abuse

In any local area, the police are one of the three safeguarding partners (alongside local authority children's services and the clinical commissioning group) which are responsible for the safeguarding and welfare of children. Their active participation in children's safeguarding procedures locally includes taking part in child protection enquiries and attending strategy meetings which determine the safeguarding action needed to keep a child safe.

The police also have a role in cases of emergency where a child may need to be removed immediately from their home and placed under police protection.

The police investigate, detect and disrupt child sexual abuse offences that are reported, referred or uncovered in their area. After an investigation, the police and the Crown Prosecution Service decide whether to charge anyone with a criminal offence. If a charging decision is made, the suspect is prosecuted.

Source: Department for Education (2018).

4.1 Police recorded crime statistics

In 2020/21, a total of 89,200 identifiable¹¹ child sexual abuse offences were recorded by the police in England and Wales. More than one-third (35%) of these were offences involving sexual abuse images, almost one-third (31%) involved rape of or sexual assault against a child, and the remainder related to sexual activity with a child, sexual grooming and abuse through sexual exploitation (see Table 1).

The four police forces in Wales recorded 5,097 child sexual abuse offences, and England's 39 forces recorded 84,072. Relative to child population, Welsh forces recorded more child sexual abuse offences (9.1 offences per 1,000 children aged 0–15) than forces in England (7.7 offences per 1,000 children).

4.1.1 Trends over time

Figure 11 shows that, following significant increases in police-recorded child sexual abuse offences between 2012/13 and 2018/19,¹² the recording of most contact child sexual abuse offence types has decreased. This decline accelerated in 2020/21: there were significant falls in the recorded number of child sexual offences committed by a person in a position of trust (–22%), sexual activity with a child under 16 (–15%) and rape of or a sexual assault of against a male child (–13%). At the same time, child sexual abuse image offences continued to rise, with 2020/21 seeing the largest single-year increase (18%) since 2003/04.

9. Published police data uses offence classifications set out in the Home Office Counting Rules (Home Office, 2021a). These classifications are based on the legislation contained in the Sexual Offences Act 2003.

10. The Ministry of Justice publishes information on defendants prosecuted, cautioned, convicted and sentenced, by the type of offence. These classifications differ slightly from those used in published police data, but also draw on the Sexual Offences Act 2003.

11. Not all sexual offences against children are visible in publicly available data; see Appendix 1.

12. The Office for National Statistics (2018a) attributed the increase to better recording of these offences as well as victims' greater willingness to come forward.

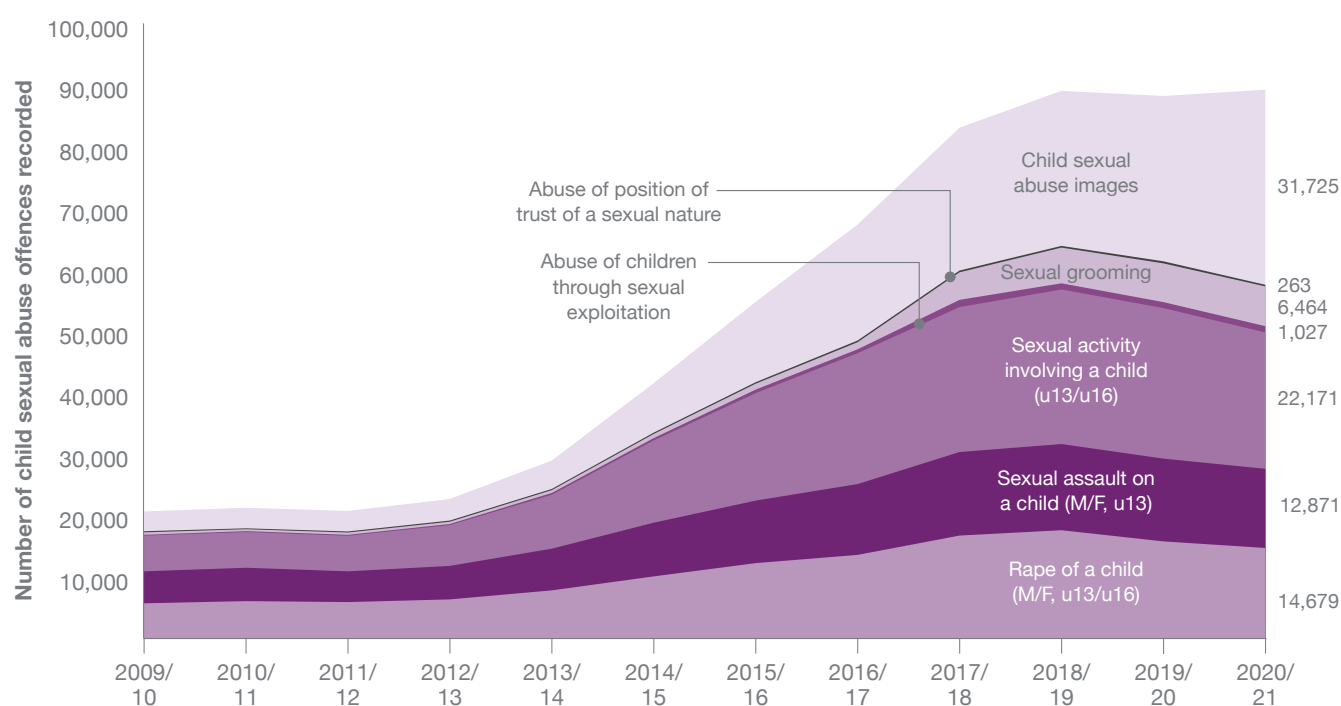
Table 1. Identifiable child sexual abuse offences recorded in England and Wales, 2020/21

Offence category	Number in England	Number in Wales	Total in England and Wales*
Rape of a female child under 13	4,825	268	5,094
Rape of a male child under 13	1,991	118	2,110
Rape of a female child under 16	6,321	290	6,616
Rape of a male child under 16	811	46	859
Sexual assault on a female child under 13	8,992	573	9,570
Sexual assault on a male child under 13	3,097	203	3,301
Sexual activity involving a child under 13	8,735	712	9,447
Sexual activity involving a child under 16	11,904	818	12,724
Abuse of children through sexual exploitation	1,013	14	1,027
Abuse of position of trust of a sexual nature	257	5	263
Sexual grooming	6,127	332	6,464
Child sexual abuse image offences**	29,999	1,718	31,725
Total	84,072	5,097	89,200

Source: Home Office (2021b: 'Police recorded crime open data Police Force Area tables from year ending March 2013 onwards', Table 2020–21).

* The total for England and Wales includes offences recorded by the British Transport Police; these offences are not included in the figures for England or for Wales because the British Transport Police operates across geographical boundaries.

** Includes offences classified as 'obscene publications'; a small proportion of these images do not involve children.

Figure 11. Number and type of child sexual abuse offences recorded per year, 2009/10–2020/21, England and Wales

Source: Home Office (2021b: 'Police recorded crime open data Police Force Area tables from year ending March 2013 onwards'; 'Police recorded crime open data Police Force Area tables from March 2008 to March 2012'). Police-recorded crime includes non-recent offences.

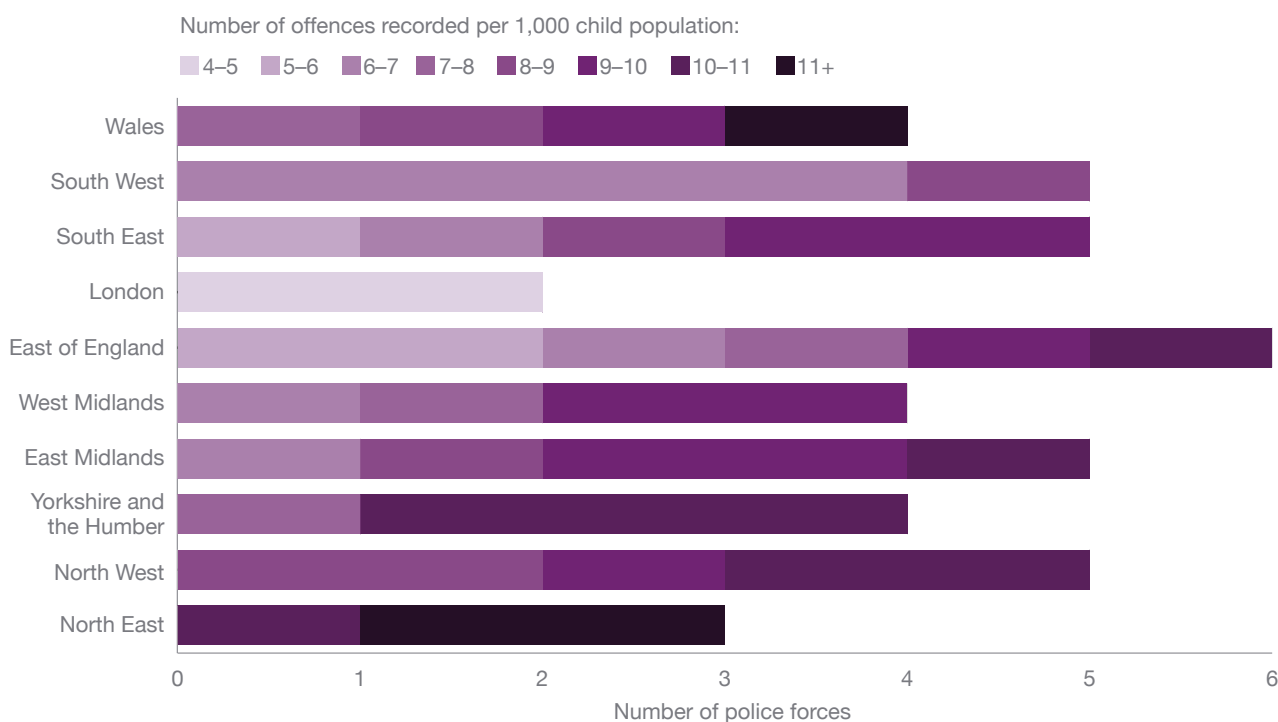
The police do not regularly publish data on the demographics of victims or suspects, although the Office for National Statistics does sometimes release experimental statistics based on data submitted by police forces to the Home Office Data Hub; such statistics have not been published for 2020/21. For a summary of what is known about victims and suspects from the most recent police data, see Karsna and Kelly (2021).

4.1.2 Local patterns

The general trends mask regional variation in the direction and extent of change in 2020/21: the overall number of recorded child sexual abuse offences increased in 19 police forces, decreased in the same number of forces, and there was no change in the remaining five forces.

Differences in the number of police-recorded child sexual abuse offences relative to the local child population, highlighted in previous editions of this report (e.g. Karsna and Kelly, 2021), remained prominent in 2020/21. Figure 12 shows that, in 2020/21, some police forces recorded as few as four child sexual abuse offences per 1,000 child population (aged 0–15) while others recorded three times as many; these are shown respectively as light and dark shades of purple. Regional differences were also noticeable: London and South East police forces tended to have lower rates of offences per child population and North East, North West and Yorkshire and Humberside higher.

Figure 12. Number of child sexual abuse offences recorded by police forces per 1,000 child population, by region, 2020/21, England and Wales



Source: Home Office (2021b: 'Police recorded crime open data Police Force Area tables from year ending March 2013 onwards', Table 2020–21); Office for National Statistics (2021). Police-recorded crime includes non-recent offences. British Transport Police data excluded. Population figures (ages 0–17) are mid-year estimates.

4.1.3 Investigation outcomes

Table 2 shows that, in 2020/21, one in nine investigations (11%) reaching an outcome ended in a suspect being charged or summonsed. A suspect was cautioned or a community resolution was reached in a further 2% of cases, and 1% concluded with a 'diversionary, educational or intervention activity'. Almost two-thirds of cases (65%) were closed because of some form of evidential difficulties; this includes cases where the victim did not support action (23%). One in 20 investigations (5%) were closed because the Crown Prosecution Service decided that prosecution was not in the public interest, and one in 10 (10%) because the police decided it was not in the public interest to continue the investigation; this latter outcome, introduced in 2015/16, was designed to reduce the criminalisation of under-18s in relation to reports to the police concerning "youth produced sexual imagery" (Home Office, 2016a).

The seven years' worth of data since the new framework for the police to record investigation outcomes was introduced (Home Office, 2016b) shows that there has been a sharp decline in the proportion of child sexual abuse investigations ending in a charge or a summons – from nearly one-third (32%) in 2014/15 to just 10% in 2018/19, followed by a slight increase to 12% in 2020/21 (see Figure 13). Additionally, the number of cases resolved out-of-court has fallen from 5% to 2%. In the same period, a much higher proportion of investigations have been closed owing to some form of evidential difficulties, up from 53% to 69%.

The Office for National Statistics suggests that the decline in the charge rate may be attributable in part to the substantial increase in recorded sexual offences (against both adults and children) and the increasing complexity of these cases (ONS, 2018a).

Outcomes of police investigations: definitions of key outcomes

In April 2013, the Home Office introduced a new outcomes framework for police forces to record outcomes of their investigations. The aim was to provide greater transparency on how crimes are dealt with by the police. The outcomes most commonly used for child sexual abuse offences are defined as follows:

Charge/summons. A person has been charged or summonsed for the crime.

Caution. An offender has been cautioned by the police.

Community resolution. A community resolution has been applied in accordance with guidance from the College of Policing (2020).

Not in public interest (Crown Prosecution Service decision). The Crown Prosecution Service, by virtue of its powers under the Criminal Justice Act 2003, decides not to prosecute or authorise any other formal action.

Further investigation not in the public interest (police decision). The police decide that further investigation resulting from the crime report, which could provide evidence sufficient to support formal action being taken against the suspect, is not in the public interest.

Evidential difficulties: suspect not identified, victim does not support further action. The crime is confirmed but the victim declines or is unable to support further police action to identify the offender.

Evidential difficulties: suspect identified, victim supports action. The crime is confirmed and the victim supports police action but evidential difficulties prevent further action. This includes cases where the suspect has been circulated as wanted but cannot be traced, and the crime is finalised pending further action.

Investigation complete – no suspect identified. The crime has been investigated as far as reasonably possible and the case is closed pending further investigative opportunities becoming available.

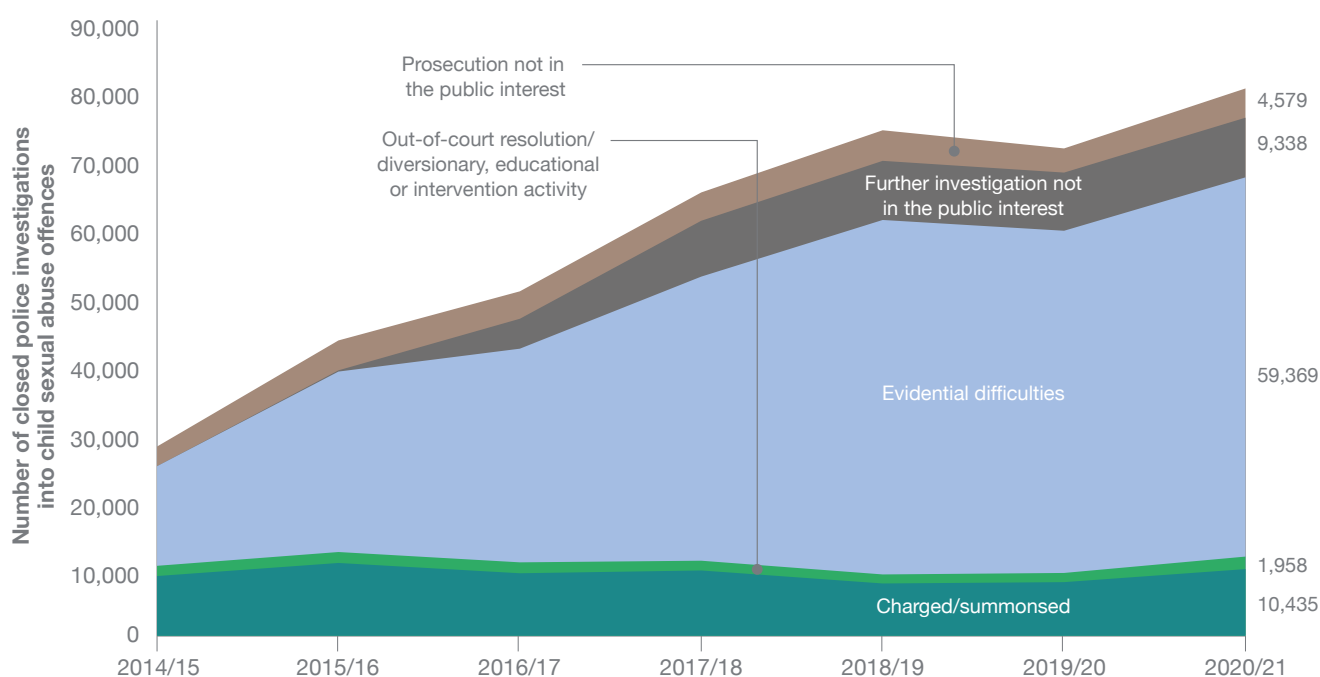
Source: Home Office (2016b).

Table 2. Child sexual abuse offences by outcome in England and in Wales, 2020/21

Outcome category	England	Wales	England and Wales*
Charged/summonsed	12%	10%	11%
Out-of-court resolution (formal): Cautioned	1%	1%	1%
Out-of-court resolution (informal): Community resolution	0%	0%	1%
Diversionary, educational or intervention activity	1%	0%	1%
Prosecution prevented or deemed not in the public interest: Crown Prosecution Service decision	5%	7%	5%
Further investigation not in the public interest: police decision	10%	12%	10%
Insufficient evidence (suspect identified, victim supports action)	24%	26%	24%
Insufficient evidence (victim does not support action)	23%	24%	23%
Investigation complete – no suspect identified	18%	16%	18%
Responsibility for further investigation transferred to another body	6%	3%	6%
Base number (offences)	84,118	5,628	90,790

Source: Home Office (2021b: 'Crime Outcomes open data, year ending March 2021'). Police-recorded crime includes non-recent cases.

* The total for England and Wales includes offences recorded by the British Transport Police; these offences are not included in the figures for England or for Wales because the British Transport Police operates across geographical boundaries.

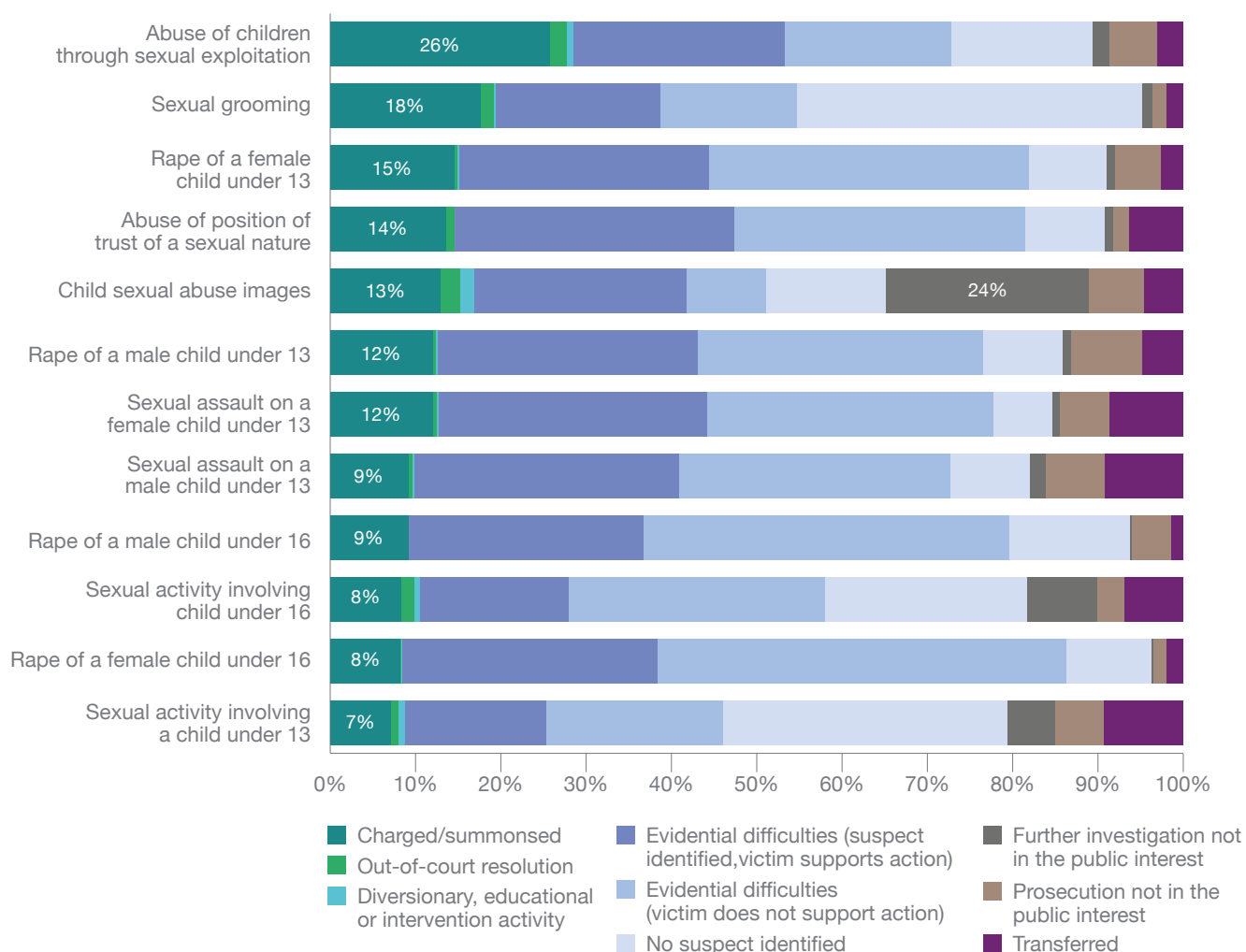
Figure 13. Crime outcomes for child sexual abuse offences in England and Wales, 2014/15–2020/21

Source: Home Office (2021b: 'Crime Outcomes open data, years ending March 2015–2021'). Excludes transferred cases. Police-recorded crime includes non-recent cases. The 'Further investigation not in the public interest' category was introduced in 2015/16.

While the charge rate has declined for every offence type, the overall rate masks considerable variation between offence types. Figure 14 shows that investigations relating to 'abuse through sexual exploitation' had the highest charge rate in 2020/21: one-quarter (26%) ended in a charge or summons. Investigations related to sexual activity offences and rape offences against under-16s had the lowest charge rates, of between 7% and 9%. This variation has been relatively consistent over the years, suggesting that charges are more likely to be brought when material evidence is available (e.g. on electronic devices) so that prosecution does not depend solely on the victim's account.

One notable aspect of the data is the relatively high proportion of child sexual abuse image offence investigations concluding with a police decision that further investigation is not in the public interest: almost one-quarter (24%) of such investigations were ended for this reason in 2020/21, a proportion that has remained relatively consistent since this outcome began to be recorded in 2015/16. This outcome was intended to reduce the criminalisation of young people in cases where reports to police related to images (see above), although 6%–8% of sexual activity investigations were also concluded with this outcome in 2020/21.

Figure 14. Crime outcomes by child sexual abuse offence category in England and Wales, 2020/21



Source: Home Office (2021b: 'Crime Outcomes open data, year ending March 2021'). Police-recorded crime includes non-recent cases.

4.2 Court proceedings

In the year to December 2020, court proceedings involved 6,943 defendants proceeded against for child sexual abuse-related offences; 4,649 of these individuals were convicted. Notably, the number of proceedings related to child sexual abuse increased by 9% compared to 2019, against a backdrop of an overall 30% decline in prosecutions owing to the impact of the pandemic. Following the first lockdown in March 2020, the courts prioritised more serious offences which were most likely to lead to a custodial sentence; these included a large proportion of sexual offences. The Ministry of Justice therefore cautions that the 2020 figures reflect the impact of the pandemic and subsequent prioritisation, rather than a continuation of long-term trends (Ministry of Justice, 2021a).

Prosecution of child sexual abuse offences

During a police investigation, the police can ask specialist prosecutors from the Crown Prosecution Service for early advice. After the investigation, the police and the Crown Prosecution Service decide whether to charge anyone with a criminal offence. If they decide to do so, the suspect(s) are prosecuted.

If a defendant pleads guilty to the offence they are charged with, the case proceeds directly to sentencing. If they plead not guilty, the case proceeds to a criminal trial. Depending on the seriousness of the offence, the case may be heard in the Magistrate's Court (where a magistrate determines the defendant's guilt) or the Crown Court (where the decision is made by a jury). If the defendant is convicted of the crime, the judge or magistrate decides what sentence should be given.

Sources: Crown Prosecution Service (2020); Home Office (2019).

Following the first lockdown in 2020, the courts prioritised more serious offences which were most likely to lead to a custodial sentence

A 'conviction ratio' can be calculated by dividing the number of convictions by the number of prosecutions for each offence category in a given year. This data is indicative, as cases are not actually tracked through to outcome; it is possible for the number of concluded cases (and convictions) in a given year to exceed the number of new prosecutions, so that the conviction ratio is over 100%.

In 2020, the overall conviction ratio for prosecutions related to child sexual abuse was 67%: a decrease from 76% in the previous year. Despite this decline, the conviction ratio for child sexual abuse related offences was higher than for sexual offences against adults (53%, down from 68% in 2019). It is notable that there is significant variation in the conviction ratio for different groups of child sexual abuse offence: rape offences had the lowest conviction ratio (30%) and child sexual abuse image offences the highest (89%) in 2020 (see Table 3).

The conviction ratio for child sexual abuse prosecutions fell from 76% to 67%, but was higher than the ratio for sexual offences against adults (53%)

Table 3. Defendants prosecuted and convicted, by child sexual abuse offence category, England and Wales, 2020

Offence category	Prosecutions in 2020	Convictions in 2020	Conviction ratio
Rape of a female child under 13	296	106	36%
Rape of a male child under 13	91	21	23%
Rape of a female child under 16	504	141	28%
Rape of a male child under 16	56	16	29%
<i>Total rape prosecutions</i>	<i>947</i>	<i>284</i>	<i>30%</i>
Sexual assault of a female child under 13	910	299	33%
Sexual assault of a male child under 13	77	30	39%
<i>Total sexual assault prosecutions</i>	<i>987</i>	<i>329</i>	<i>33%</i>
Sexual activity involving a child under 13	512	247	48%
Sexual activity involving a child under 16	961	609	63%
<i>Total sexual activity prosecutions</i>	<i>1,473</i>	<i>856</i>	<i>58%</i>
Familial sexual offences with a child aged under 13*	18	14	78%
Familial sexual offences with a child aged 13–17*	44	26	59%
<i>Total familial sexual offence prosecutions*</i>	<i>62</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>65%</i>
Taking, permitting to be taken or making, distributing or publishing indecent photographs or pseudo photographs of children	2,422	2,167	89%
Possession of indecent photograph of a child	227	195	86%
Possession of prohibited images of children	17	23	135%
<i>Total child sexual abuse image prosecutions</i>	<i>2,666</i>	<i>2,385</i>	<i>89%</i>
Sexual grooming	533	564	106%
Child abuse through child sexual exploitation	247	154	62%
Abuse of position of trust of a sexual nature	15	7	47%
Possession of a paedophile manual	1	1	100%
Gross indecency with children (historical offence)	12	29	242%
<i>Total other child sexual abuse offence prosecutions</i>	<i>808</i>	<i>755</i>	<i>93%</i>
Total	6,943	4,649	67%

Source: Ministry of Justice (2021b). Includes defendants proceeded against for non-recent offences.

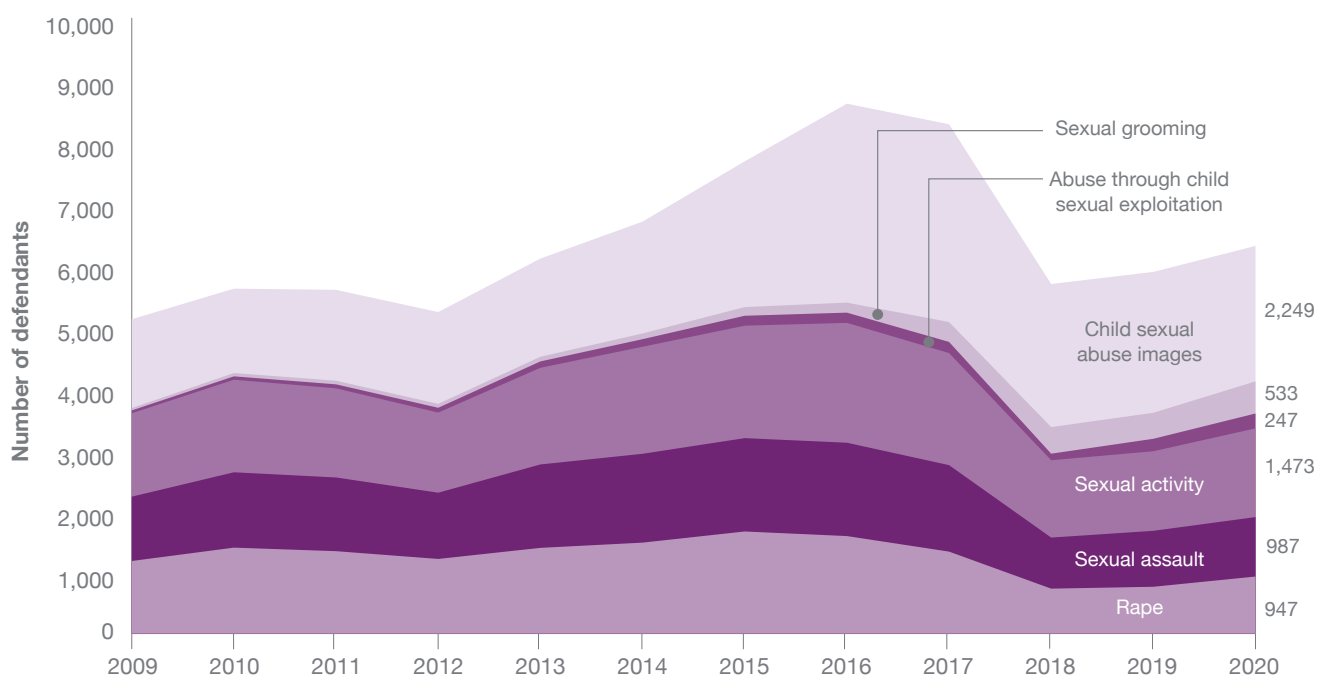
* The Ministry of Justice publishes familial sexual activity offences separately from other offences involving sexual activity with a child.

4.2.1 Trends over time

Figure 15 presents the number of defendants proceeded against for different child sexual abuse offences over a 15-year period. After a substantial rise in prosecutions for most of these offences between 2012 and 2016, the numbers fell sharply in 2017 and 2018 before recovering modestly in 2019. In 2020, there was a continued increase in the number of defendants proceeded against for child sexual abuse offences, particularly rape (+22% compared to 2019) and sexual grooming (+23%) offences, but a small fall in the prosecutions of child sexual abuse image offences. This, as the Ministry of Justice noted, is reflective of the prioritisation of prosecutions during the pandemic:

“Latest short-term trends are mostly reflective of the impact of the pandemic on court processes and prioritisation rather than a continuation of the longer-term series... [F]ollowing the sharp falls in overall prosecutions and convictions immediately following the March 2020 ‘lockdown’, these have since recovered... Indictable offences have recovered faster than summary offences, reflecting the prioritisation of cases that were likely to result in a custodial sentence.” (Ministry of Justice, 2021a:2)

Figure 15. Number of defendants proceeded against for child sexual abuse offences, by offence group, 2009–2020, England and Wales



Source: Ministry of Justice (2021b). Includes defendants proceeded against for non-recent offences. Excludes offences – gross indecency/indecent assault (historical offences), abuse of a position of trust, and familial sexual offences – for which consistently fewer than 150 defendants per year have been proceeded against. Because of data recording issues, figures for female defendants prosecuted for ‘sexual activity with a child’ offences were not included in the Court Proceedings Database prior to 2015.

4.2.2 Characteristics of defendants: age

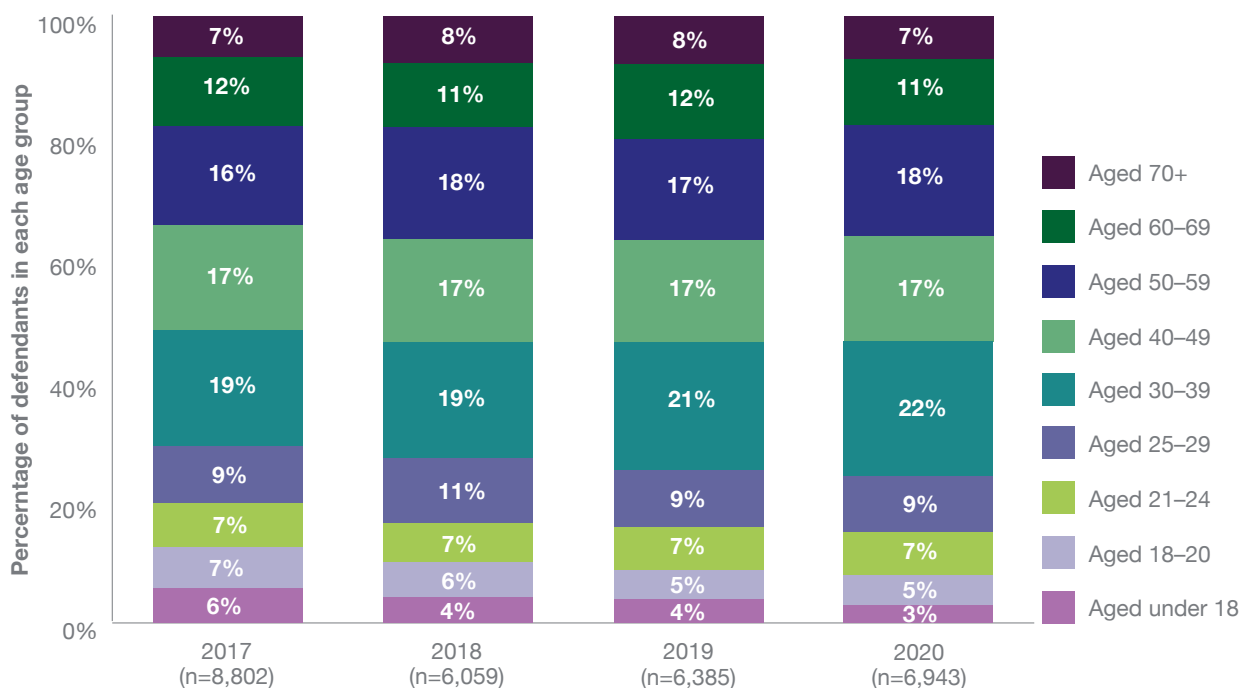
Figure 16 shows that, since 2017 (the first year for which detailed information on defendants' ages was published), the proportion of under-18s prosecuted for child sexual abuse offences has halved from 6% (494) to just 3% (198). This is part of a longer trend: the rate also halved between 2005 and 2016, from 12% to 6% (Karsna and Kelly, 2021). Rape charges made up more than a third (37%, n=74) of prosecutions of under-18s for child sexual abuse offences in 2020, compared to one in seven (14%, n=947) of such prosecutions across all defendant age groups; under-18s are less likely than adults to be prosecuted for lesser child sexual abuse offences.

The age distribution of adult defendants prosecuted for child sexual abuse offences is relatively equally spread across the 10-year age bands up to 59 and then drops for older age groups. This pattern is consistent across the four years for which a more detailed breakdown of the age of defendants has been published.

Guilty verdicts were least likely for the oldest (70+) and youngest (10-15) age groups, at 46% and 52% respectively; among defendants aged 15-69, 69% were found guilty.

Rape charges made up a third of child sexual abuse offence prosecutions of under-18s; prosecutions for lesser offences are less likely in this age group

Figure 16. Defendants proceeded against for child sexual abuse offences, by age, 2017–2020, England and Wales



Source: Ministry of Justice (2021b). Includes defendants proceeded against for non-recent offences.

4.2.3 Characteristics of defendants: sex

In 2020, 113 female defendants were proceeded against for child sexual abuse offences, representing just 2% of defendants whose sex was recorded (6,803). They were most frequently prosecuted for offences relating to sexual activity with a child under 13 (n=28) or with a child under 16 (n=25).

The highest female-to-male ratio of defendants was for the offence of 'abuse of position of trust', although absolute numbers were low: of the 15 defendants prosecuted for this offence in 2020, one-fifth (three) were female. In contrast, females were the subject of only 14 (0.6%) of 2,249 prosecutions for child sexual abuse image offences, and three (8%) of 355 sexual grooming prosecutions.

A total of 38 female defendants (34% of the total) were found guilty in 2020; for male defendants, the number was 4,580 (68%). The lower likelihood of a guilty verdict may be related to the different offence profile of males and females, with males more commonly prosecuted for sexual grooming and image offences which are more likely to result in a conviction.

Among defendants proceeded against for child sexual abuse offences, just 2% of those whose sex was recorded were female

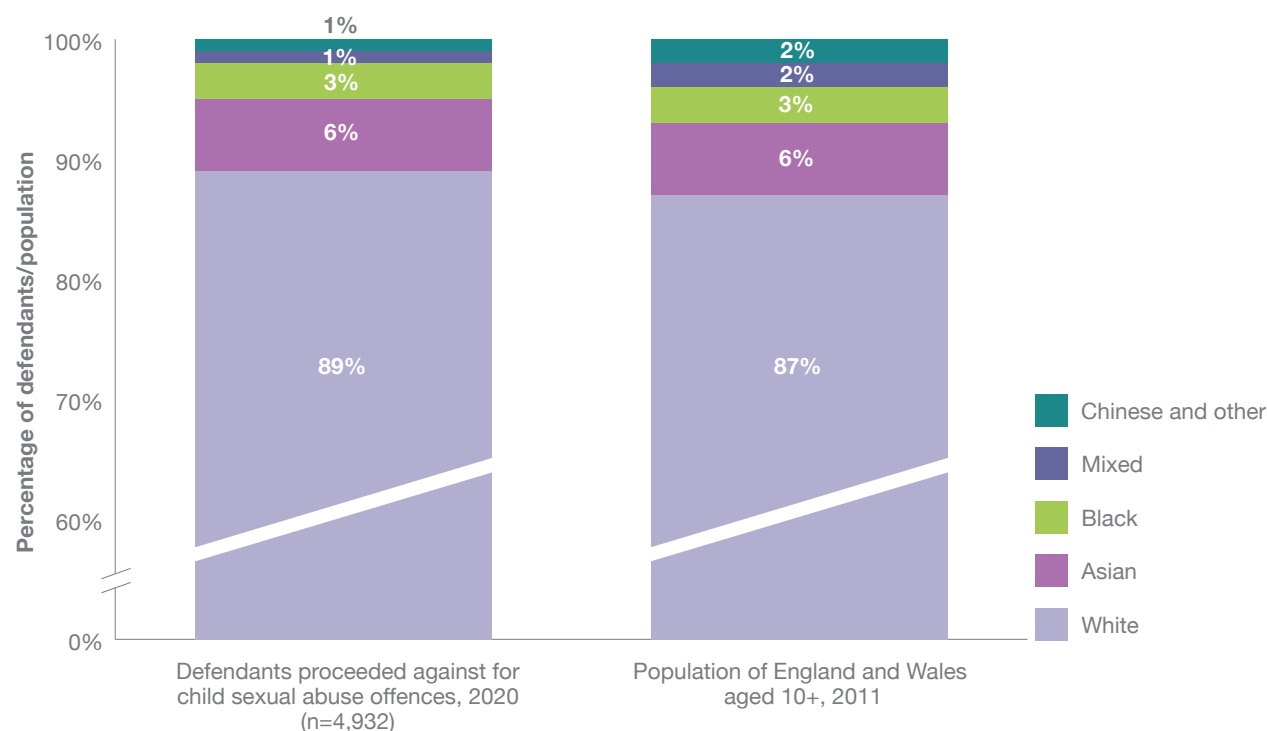
4.2.4 Characteristics of defendants: ethnicity

In the records of defendants prosecuted for child sexual abuse offences in 2020, the defendant's broad ethnic background was recorded in 71% (n=4,932) of cases. Among these individuals, the vast majority were White (89%, n=4,404); 6% (n=281) were Asian, 3% (n=144) were Black, 1% (n=59) were from mixed ethnic backgrounds, and 1% (n=44) were from "other" ethnic backgrounds. These proportions were broadly in line with the latest available population statistics for England and Wales (see Figure 17).

The conviction ratio varied according to defendants' ethnicity, ranging from 45% for Black defendants to 72% for White defendants. This is likely to be related to the offences for which people from different ethnic backgrounds are prosecuted: White British defendants were more likely to be prosecuted for image offences than any other ethnic group, and these offences were more likely to result in a conviction.

White defendants, who were more likely than any other ethnic group to be prosecuted for image offences, had the highest conviction ratio (72%)

Figure 17. Proportion of defendants proceeded against for child sexual abuse offences and the general population, by broad ethnic group, 2020, England and Wales



Sources: Ministry of Justice (2021b); Office for National Statistics (2018b). Includes defendants proceeded against for non-recent offences. Excludes defendants whose ethnicity was not recorded.

4.2.5 Sentences for child sexual abuse offences

In 2020, more than one-third (37%; n=1,615) of defendants who were found guilty of child sexual abuse offences received an immediate custodial sentence, another one-third (33%, n=1,434) received a suspended sentence, and one-quarter (25%, n=1,070) received a community sentence. Among under-18s found guilty, the vast majority (87%, n=120) received a community sentence (e.g. unpaid work, treatment or curfew; the details of the community sentences imposed are not available).

Defendants sentenced for child sexual abuse image offences and sexual grooming offences were the least likely to receive an immediate custodial sentence – one in five did so – with suspended and community sentences being more common. Immediate custodial sentences were far more common for contact offences (see Figure 18). The average length of custodial sentence for offences related to child sexual abuse was four years and one month: this average varied from 18 months for the abuse of trust offences to almost 11 years for rape offences.

Average custodial sentences for child sexual abuse ranged from 18 months for ‘abuse of trust’ offences to almost 11 years for rape offences

Disposals given in court

When an offender is convicted, the judge or magistrate will decide on the sentence according to the seriousness of the offence.

Immediate custody. Adults aged over 21 will be sentenced to imprisonment, adults aged 18–20 will be sentenced to detention in a young offender institution.

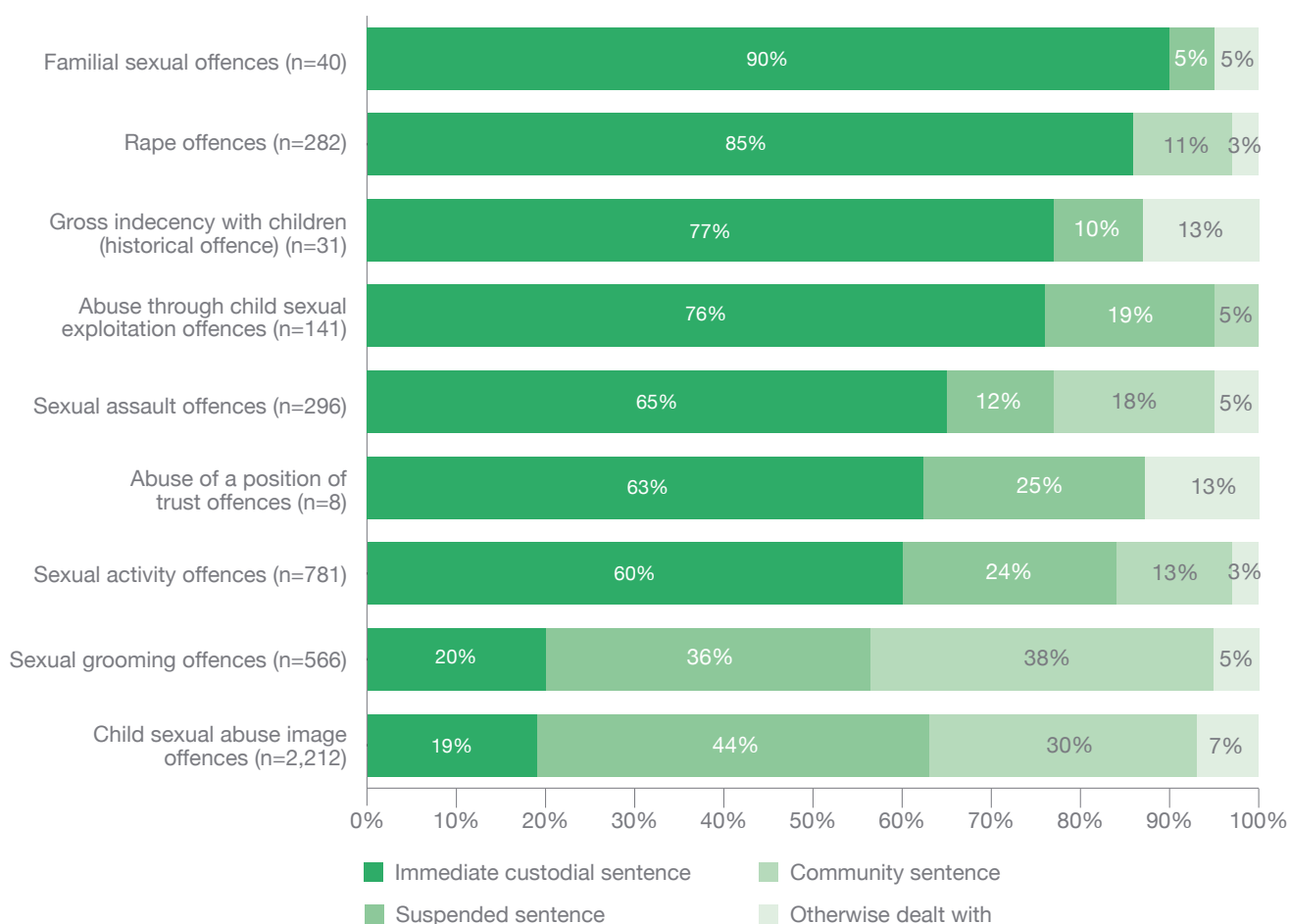
Suspended sentence. A custodial sentence of 12 months or less can be suspended while the offender undertakes certain requirements in the community. If the offender breaches the requirements, the custodial sentence will be given effect.

Community sentence. A community order can include one or more of the following: unpaid work, an activity or programme designed to reduce the likelihood of reoffending, a requirement not to engage in a prohibited activity, a curfew, residence only where a probation officer allows, mental health treatment, drug rehabilitation, an alcohol treatment or abstinence programme, supervision, a requirement to go to a police-run 'attendance centre' on specified days/times, and foreign travel prohibition.

Otherwise dealt with. This category includes orders that do not fall within any of the major sentencing categories (e.g. hospital orders, confiscation orders and compensation orders).

Source: Ministry of Justice (2021c).

Figure 18. Sentences imposed on convicted defendants for child sexual abuse offences, by type of sentence, 2020, England and Wales



Source: Ministry of Justice (2021b). Includes defendants proceeded against for non-recent offences.

5. Sexual assault referral centres in England

No official data on health agencies' response to child sexual abuse is published in England and Wales. One of the few consistently recorded and collated health datasets, managed by NHS England, is the Sexual Assault Referral Centre Indicators of Performance (SARCIP), which collects data from all 47 sexual assault referral centres (SARCs) in England about the children they have seen.

SARCIP, which is not published, includes information about the demographic details of these children (their age, gender and ethnicity), and the sources of referrals (NHS England, 2020). Wales, which has eight further SARCs, does not collate such data centrally.

What are sexual assault referral centres?

A SARC is a designated space for medical examinations following a suspicion or disclosure of a sexual assault. As well as seeking evidence of abuse and assessing the child's general health and wellbeing, SARCs signpost to other supportive professionals such as independent sexual violence advisers and counsellors; some SARCs provide an integrated service with these professionals on site.

Thus, besides potentially providing supportive evidence of abuse, a forensic medical examination can contribute to supporting the child or young person's physical and mental health needs.

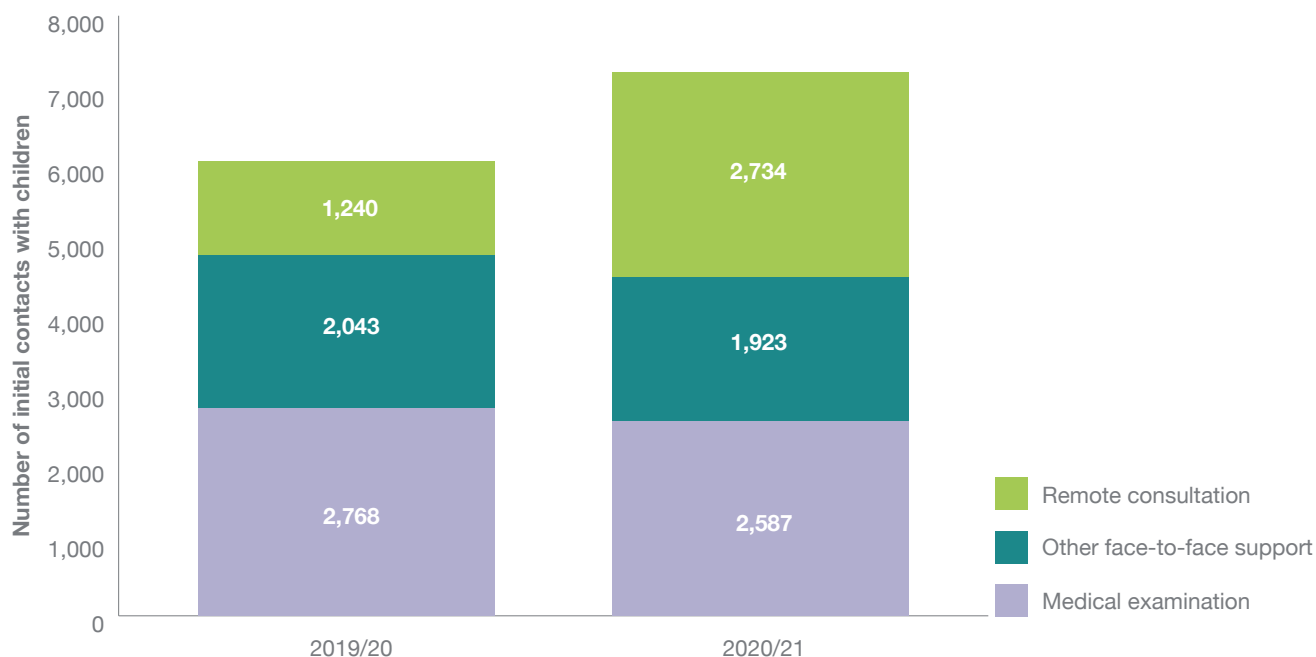
Source: Cutland (2019).

5.1 Reach of sexual assault referral centres

The 47 SARCs in England recorded a total of 7,244 initial contacts with under-18s in 2020/21; this is an increase of 20% from the previous year, when SARCs were in contact with 6,051 children (see Figure 19). Medical examinations made up just over one-third of these contacts, and a further one-quarter involved other forms of face-to-face support; overall, there was only a small decrease in the number of in-person initial contacts with under-18s during a year dominated by COVID-19 lockdowns. The remaining contacts were remotely delivered consultations,¹³ which more than doubled in 2020/21 following a smaller increase the previous year. The use of remote consultations varied widely across England's seven health regions, ranging from 11% to 63% of all contacts with under-18s in each region.

Remotely delivered initial consultations with children more than doubled in 2020/21, following a smaller increase the previous year

13. Remotely delivered consultations may involve telephone calls or other modes of communication; this category excludes contact involving only signposting or basic advice (NHS England, 2020).

Figure 19. SARC's initial contacts with under-18s, 2019/20 and 2020/21, England

Source: NHS England (2022).

Comparing the number of under-18s seen by the SARCs in each region with that region's child population, substantial differences are evident in SARCs' reach – ranging from three initial consultations with under-18s per 10,000 child population in London to more than 10 in the South West (see Figure 20). London also had the lowest rates for children attending for medical examinations in England, and the South West had the highest.

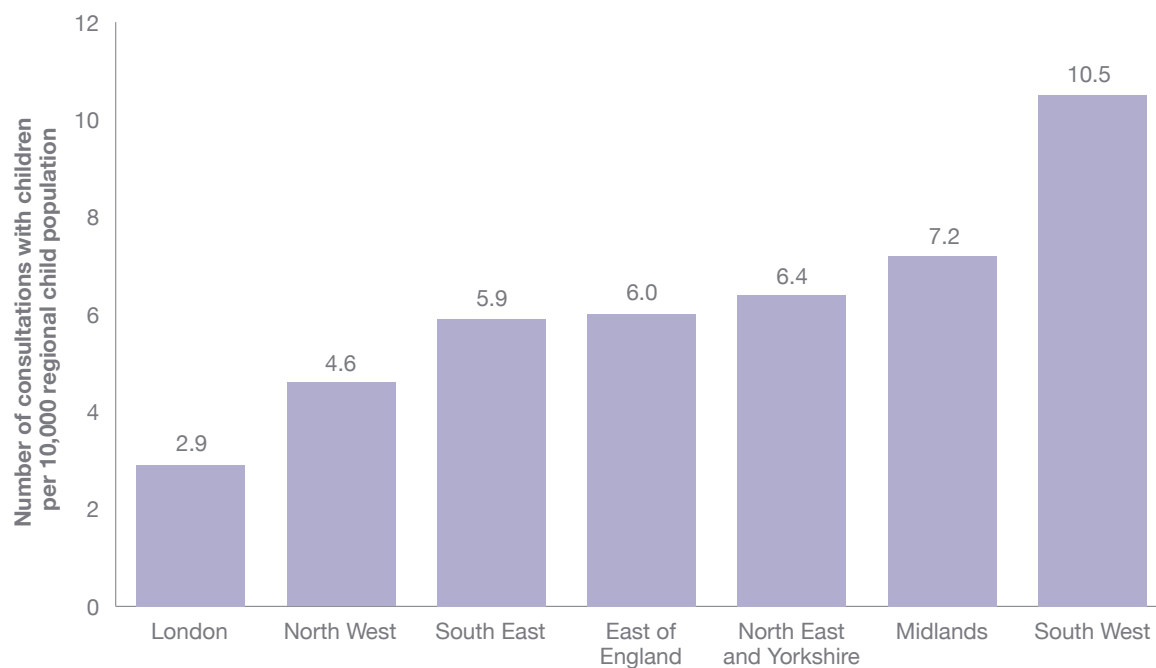
SARCIP contains data on the gender of 5,087 children attending consultations at England's SARCs in 2020/21. As in the previous year, five in six (84%, $n=4,276$) of these children were female. Comparisons with other statutory data indicate that SARCs reach a lower proportion of males than do local authorities or police forces (see section 3.2.1).

Figure 21 shows that, as in 2019/20, the ages of children at the time of their contact with a SARC in England had a bimodal distribution, with a small peak in the 3–4 age group and a much higher peak between the ages of 14 and 17. Overall, children aged 14–17 accounted for half (49%, $n=2,479$) of all consultations with the 5,083 under-18s whose age was recorded. The age profile of children at the time of their first consultation was broadly similar across all the regions of England except London, where nearly two thirds (64%) of children seen by SARCs were aged 14–17.

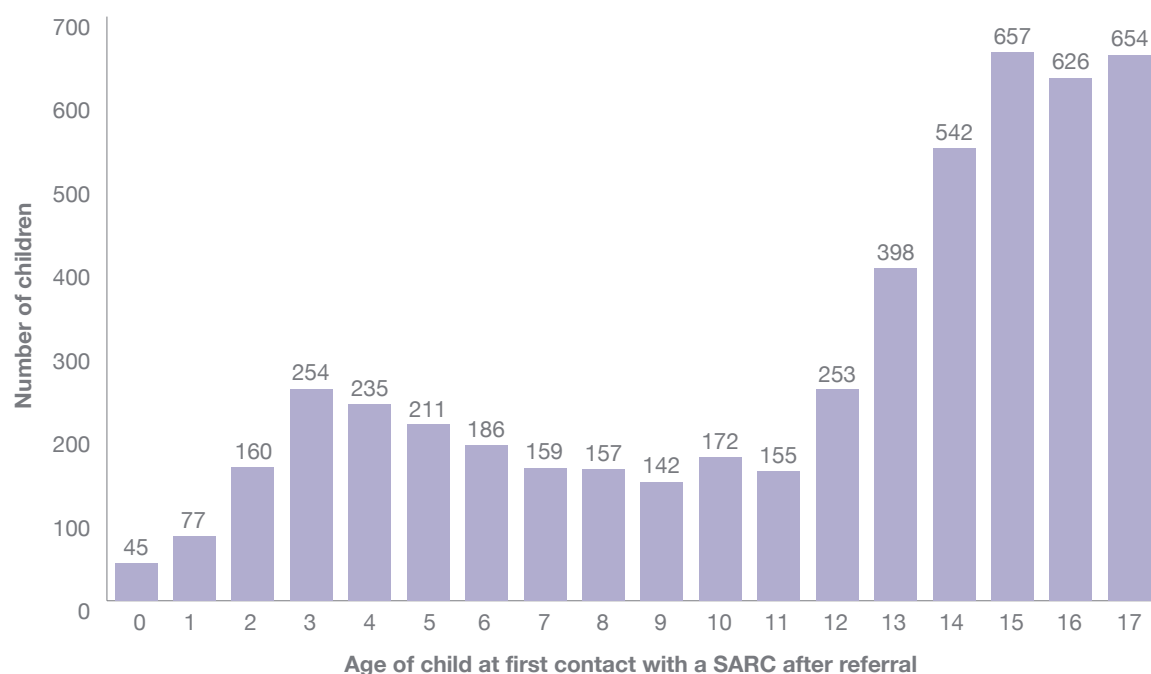


SARCs reach a lower proportion of boys than police forces and local authorities do: just one child in six attending a consultation was male



Figure 20. Initial consultations with SARCs per 10,000 child population, by region, 2020/21, England

Sources: NHS England (2022); Office for National Statistics (2021).

Figure 21. Under-18s making initial contact with SARCs, by age, 2020/21, England

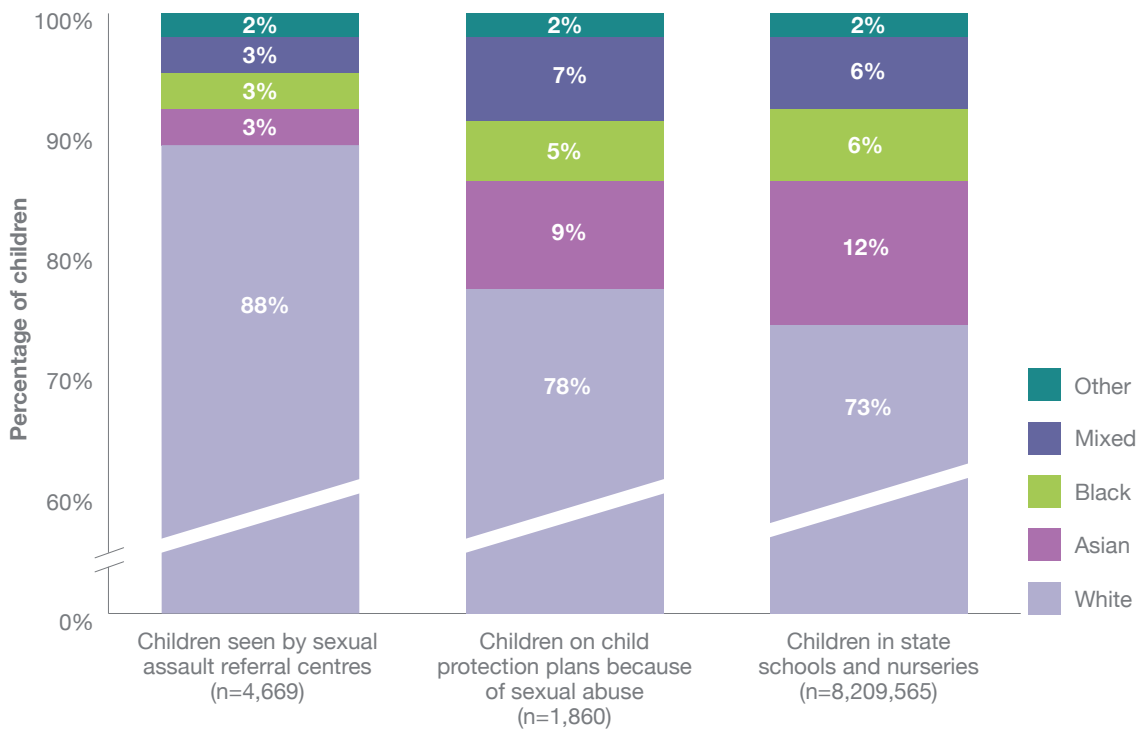
Source: NHS England (2022). Excludes children whose age was not stated.

Data on the ethnicity of 4,669 under-18s was recorded on SARCIP. A large majority (84%, n=3,917) of these were children from White British backgrounds, and 4% were with children from other White backgrounds (see Figure 22). Overall, only 12% of children seen by SARCs were from Black, Asian, mixed or other ethnic backgrounds, compared with 22% of children placed by local authorities on child protection plans because of sexual abuse concerns (see section 3.2.3). Children from Asian backgrounds, who comprise 12% of England's state school population (Department for Education, 2021b), accounted for just 3% (n=135) of SARC attendees.

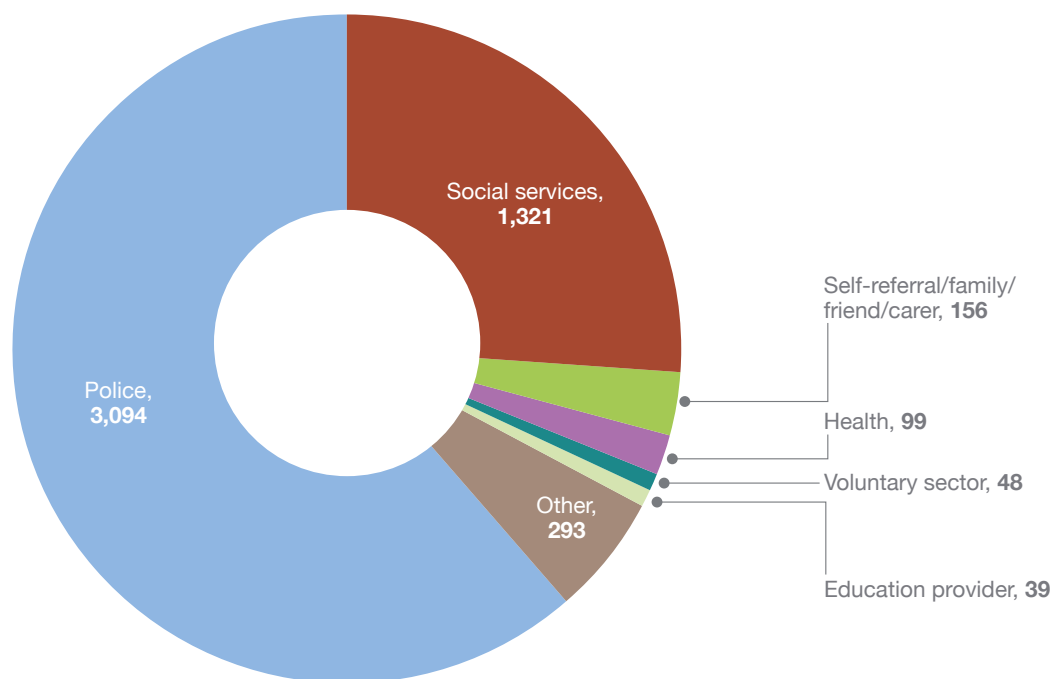
5.2 Sources of referrals

SARCIP is the only centrally stored dataset to include data on the sources of referrals to SARCs. Among the 5,085 cases for which this information was recorded, two-fifths of contacts with under-18s were made following a referral from the police, and one-quarter came from local authority children's services (see Figure 23). Health services accounted for just 2% of referrals, and education providers and the voluntary sector for 1% each. Self-referrals or referrals from family and friends accounted for 4% of the total, with 6% coming from other sources.

Figure 22. Under-18s making initial contact with SARCs, by ethnic background, 2020/21, England



Sources: NHS England (2022); Department for Education (2021a: Table A5, year ending 31 March 2021); Department for Education (2021b: 'Pupil characteristics – Ethnicity and Language' table – figures as at 31 January 2021). Excludes children whose ethnicity was not stated.

Figure 23. Sources of referrals of under-18s to SARCs, 2020/21, England

Source: NHS England (2022). 'Health' includes Accident & Emergency departments, GPs, and genitourinary medicine/contraception and sexual health clinics.

6. Conclusions

This report set out to describe annual trends in child sexual abuse recorded in the child protection, health and criminal justice systems in England and Wales in 2020/21. Important issues we have highlighted in previous years about this data remained prominent in 2020/21:

- Far more children are sexually abused than are identified by the child protection and criminal justice systems in England and Wales. There continues to be a large gap between estimates of prevalence – that at least one in 10 children are sexually abused before the age 16 – and the numbers recorded in official data.
- The number of children recorded in the child protection system under child sexual abuse concerns has continued to decrease steadily, while child sexual abuse offences reported to the police have stabilised at a much higher level.
- When the police investigate child sexual abuse offences, the proportion of investigations resulting in a charge or summons remains low: a defendant was charged/summonsed in only one in nine child sexual abuse offence investigations in 2020/21, with contact offences having even lower charge rates. Two-thirds of defendants were convicted in 2020/21, compared with three-quarters a year earlier.
- Where children live continues to affect how likely it is that their abuse will be identified and responded to. Variations between levels of child sexual abuse recorded in different local authority and police force areas are significant, and require local analysis and response.

The year summarised in this report was significant in the level of disruption children experienced – in their schooling, and in their relationships with professionals within both universal and specialist services. We paid special attention to any trends that might suggest changes in the prevalence or visibility of child sexual abuse during a period dominated by school closures and lockdowns. The following conclusions can be drawn:

- Despite closures of schools and childcare settings, local authority children's services and police forces continued to identify child sexual abuse on broadly the same scale as in previous years. While we conclude that the vast majority of sexually abused children continue to be missed by professionals, the data does not suggest that this worsened in 2020/21. Fears that national lockdowns would further reduce the visibility of child sexual abuse are, therefore, not yet borne out in the official data.
- There was, however, a small reduction in the number of concerns of sexual abuse recorded in published child protection data. Decreases occurred in the numbers of children's assessments naming child sexual abuse or child sexual exploitation, and in the (already very low) number of children placed on child protection plans because of sexual abuse: the overall number of new child protection plans in England fell slightly, but the decline in plans under the category of sexual abuse was steeper.

Although the overall number of new child protection plans fell slightly, there was a steeper decline in plans under the category of sexual abuse

- Police-recorded child sexual abuse offences remained at a similar overall level to the previous year, but there were some changes in the types of offence recorded. The police recorded 18% more child sexual abuse image offences than in 2019/20 – the highest single-year increase since 2003/04 – but there was a decline in the number of contact child sexual offences recorded. The increase in child sexual abuse image offences recorded could be linked to a rise in the number of offences occurring during lockdowns, or to an increase in the reporting/detection of such offences due to higher societal awareness of the issue.
- More defendants were prosecuted for child sexual abuse offences in 2020 than in the previous year. This reflects the courts' prioritisation of more serious offences most likely to lead to a custodial sentence, following a significant fall in prosecutions during the early months of the pandemic.

It is important to bear in mind that most children in England and Wales were kept at home for a large proportion of the year covered in this report, and were thus less visible to services/agencies; any impact on the identification of child sexual abuse following their return to schools and childcare settings from March 2021 would not be covered in this report. While the full picture is yet to emerge, early signs in police data suggest that there were significant increases in the recording of child sexual abuse offences between April and September 2021 (Office for National Statistics, 2022).

The police recorded 18% more child sexual abuse image offences than in the previous year – the highest single-year increase since 2003/04

Any impact on the identification of child sexual abuse following children's return to schools from March 2021 would not be covered in this report

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Note: Sources of data for the charts and tables are marked in bold.

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Appendix 1: Data definitions

Police recorded crime

Police data is published by the Home Office according to offence classifications in the Home Office Counting Rules (Home Office, 2021a). These classifications are based on the legislation contained within the Sexual Offences Act 2003.

The following limitations and considerations apply to police data:

- ▶ The police record crime on a 'per victim' basis, and in publicly available data only one offence is recorded for each victim-offender relationship. Where a series of offences are reported all at the same time (between the same victim and offender), the only offence recorded will be the most serious offence reported. For example, if a victim reports that they have been raped several times by the same suspect, one offence of rape will be recorded (Home Office, 2021a).¹⁴
- ▶ Some offences of child sexual abuse are not identifiable in the publicly available data, because they are recorded under categories that also include adult victims (e.g. rape of a male/female over 16, incest, trafficking, abduction, exposure or voyeurism). The precise number of these offences that are committed against children (i.e. under-18s) cannot be calculated because the age of the victim is not published, but experimental data from 33 police forces in 2018/19 indicates that at least 10,594 offences against under-18s – 14% of all recorded child sexual abuse offences – were recorded under these categories in that year (Office for National Statistics, 2020b: Table 32).¹⁵
- ▶ Offences are recorded in the year in which they are reported to the police, rather than the year in which they were committed. It is not possible to establish the proportion of current and non-recent offences from publicly available data, although the Office for National Statistics sometimes publishes its analysis of the share of non-recent offences: among child sexual abuse offences reported to the police in 2018/19, it calculated that around one-third (34%) had taken place at least a year earlier (ONS, 2020b: Table 37).
- ▶ Some reports of rape made to the police are recorded initially as 'incidents'. Following assessment and initial investigation, they may remain recorded as incidents rather than offences. In 2018/19, police records include at least 471 such incidents against children in England and Wales which were not recorded as offences because the victim could not be traced or confirmed (ONS, 2020b: Table 33).¹⁶
- ▶ Data relating to offences of possessing or making indecent images of children (child sexual abuse image offences) is published under the overarching category of 'obscene publications'. Although the recorded crime statistics for this category do not differentiate between images of children and adults, prosecution data from the Ministry of Justice suggests that the vast majority involve images of children: out of 2,753 defendants who were proceeded against on charges of indecent image offences in 2020, 97% (n=2,666) were prosecuted for offences relating to images of children (Ministry of Justice, 2021b).

14. Offences committed prior to May 2004, when the Sexual Offences Act 2003 became law, are recorded for statistical purposes under the categories of offence in the new legislation.

15. The figures are based on 39 (out of 43) police forces and only for offences where the victim's age was recorded. The data is designated as experimental to 'highlight that they are based on an emerging collection' (ONS, 2020b).

16. The figures are based on 33 police forces and are designated as experimental (ONS, 2020b).

Police recorded crime data does not currently meet the required standard to be designated as National Statistics, although it is believed that compliance with that standard has improved in recent years (Office for National Statistics, 2018a). Since 2014, when a review found that up to 26% of sexual offences reported to the police were not being recorded as crimes (HM Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2014), improvements have been made. All seven police forces inspected by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services in 2020 – the latest year in which the quality of recording of sexual offences was inspected – were observed to have a good standard of recording such offences, according to inspection reports published on its website. While the assessment of recording standards includes sexual offences against children, is not possible to judge whether these findings fully reflect the recording accuracy of child sexual abuse offences.

Ministry of Justice

The Ministry of Justice collates data on court proceedings from court administrative systems. It publishes information on the numbers and characteristics of defendants prosecuted, cautioned, convicted and sentenced, by the type of offence; this data is designated as National Statistics. For the year ending in December 2020, no data on the number of cautions given has yet been published.¹⁷

The following considerations apply to the data:

- ▶ Data on prosecutions is recorded about the principal offence for which each defendant is dealt with; if a defendant is proceeded against for multiple offences, only the principal offence is counted (Ministry of Justice, 2021b).
- ▶ Data on convictions is based on the ‘final’ offence or conviction: if a defendant is proceeded against for a more serious offence, but it then convicted of a lesser offence, the lesser offence is recorded (Office for National Statistics, 2018a). Where a defendant is found guilty of two or more offences, data on the conviction is recorded for the offence carrying the heaviest penalty (Ministry of Justice, 2021b).
- ▶ Not all child sexual abuse offences are identifiable in the publicly available data; some are recorded under other, mainly adult-related offence categories (e.g. rape of a male/female over 16, exposure or voyeurism). It is not possible to estimate how many offences are excluded from the data for this reason.
- ▶ The Ministry of Justice records non-recent offences under the offence categories that were applicable at the time of the offence. As a result, a small number of offences are recorded under the historical offence of ‘gross indecency with children’.
- ▶ Data is recorded according to calendar years (January to December).

17. Owing to the pandemic, a decision was made to minimise non-essential travel by analysts to access this data.


The logo features a stylized, low-poly geometric pattern in shades of purple, blue, and green. The text 'Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse' is written in white, bold, sans-serif font, stacked in four lines.

Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse

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The photograph on the cover was taken using actors and does not depict an actual situation.

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