

Centre of
expertise
on child
sexual abuse



Ariennir yn Rhannol gan
Lywodraeth Cymru
Part Funded by
Welsh Government

Uncovering the scale of child sexual abuse in social care records

Wales study

November 2018

csacentre.org.uk

1. Introduction

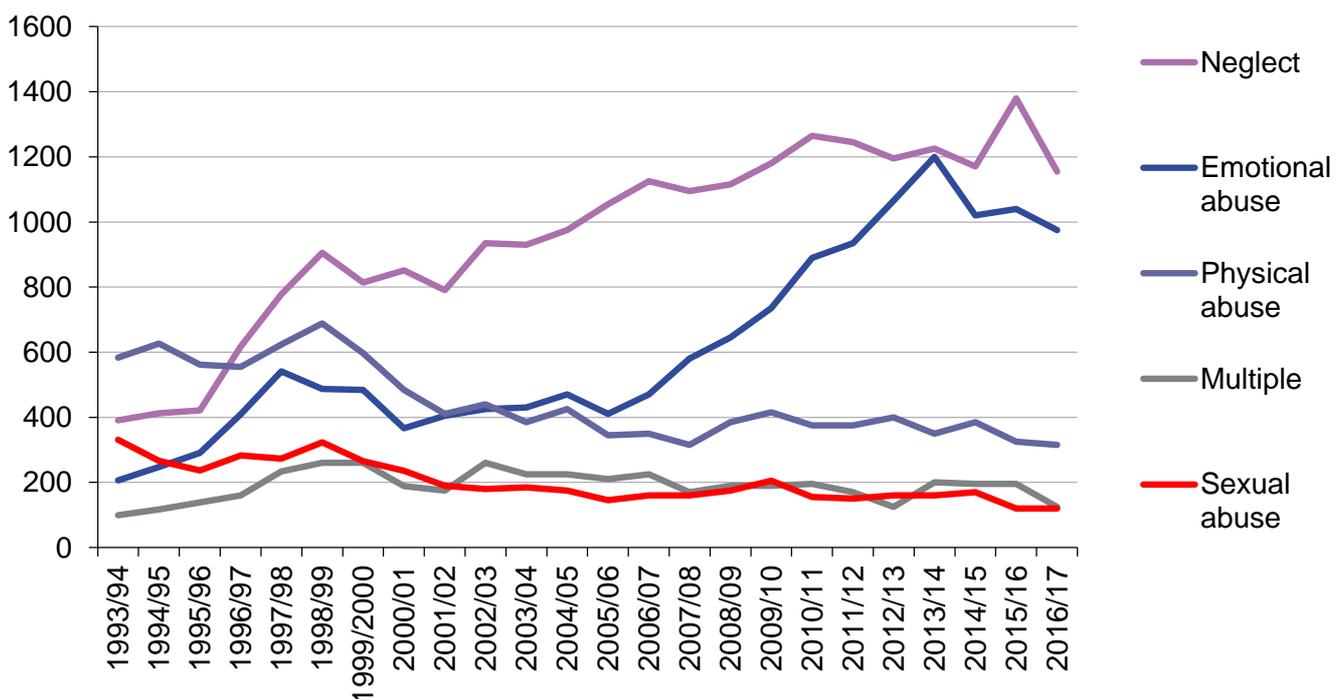
The Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA Centre) aims to create a future where children are free from the threat and harm of sexual abuse, by radically improving how we prevent and respond to the issue through really understanding its causes, scope, scale and impact. Improving understanding on the scale and nature of child sexual abuse (CSA) is an important aspect of the centre’s work.

The CSA Centre, with **support from the Welsh Government**, is carrying out research to improve the understanding of the scale of CSA from social care records. The project will improve the estimate of known CSA cases dealt with by social care services, and will provide recommendations on how to improve the recording of and support provided to children for whom CSA may be a concern. **We are currently looking for local authorities interested in participating in this research.**

Why are we developing this research? The number of children on the child protection register in Wales for reasons of sexual abuse alone has **decreased from 331 in 1993/94 to 120 in 2016/17**. During the same period, the total number of children on the register almost doubled. As a result, **while 21% of children on the child protection register in 1993/94 were there solely for reasons of child abuse, by 2016/17 the proportion had fallen to 4%**. There is a consensus of opinion that **the child protection register figures are not an accurate reflection of the incidence of sexual abuse** dealt with by local authorities but there is currently a lack of evidence to support this argument.

Why is this important? Without more accurate figures it is difficult to respond to sexual abuse, and to develop and commission services that meet victims’ needs. Better data helps to build a more comprehensive picture of abuse locally and nationally, identify gaps, and provide better services to victims by helping to **determine the appropriate allocation of resources**. Offering children the right support when there are concerns about sexual abuse or sexually harmful behaviour is likely to mediate risks to longer-term mental health and other difficulties, so it is important to identify how social services are responding to CSA concerns.

Children on the child protection register in Wales by category of abuse



Source: Children in Need Census, Welsh Government, all figures are as at 31 March. From 2017/18 this census is referred to as the Children Receiving Care and Support Census.

2. What does the study involve?

A researcher will be commissioned to carry out **audits of a sample of children's case files across different teams**, to identify whether CSA was a concern at any point in the assessment, planning or work. The number of audited case files will depend on the size of the local authority. Most of the research **will be undertaken using electronic files and will be based on the chronology** to start with; paper records will be consulted only if electronic records refer to them for relevant information. The researcher will also investigate a snapshot of cases referred to social services because of CSA concerns, and will record the outcomes of these referrals.

The researcher **will spend approximately 10–15 days in each local authority** and will need access to the local authority data systems during this time. The CSA Centre will support the development of confidentiality agreements, and the research proposal will be scrutinised by our research ethics committee.

In addition, **CSA Centre staff will spend a day interviewing team manager(s) and social work staff** in each participating local authority, to capture how CSA services are structured, and what practitioners think of the recording and supporting of children with CSA concerns.

Our research follows the ethical principles of the Social Research Association, and we comply with the General Data Protection Regulation. The staff feedback and children's records will only be recorded and reported anonymously.

What issues does the research address?

Practitioners cite several reasons why child protection register figures do not capture the full scale of CSA in local authority caseloads:

- The category first used when a child or young person is placed on the register is likely to remain as the main risk throughout their time with services, even if other risks such as sexual abuse are identified later.
- The recording of additional or changing categories is sporadic in practice.
- A significant number of children at risk of sexual abuse, particularly those at risk of sexual exploitation, are not on the child protection register because the abuse is from people outside the family.
- Social workers address sexual abuse in other parts of the service, such as early help services.

Our research will test these arguments through case file audit to interrogate the following:

- How does practice and recording differ in different local authority areas?
- What proportion of children for whom CSA concern has been raised are 'hidden' in other categories of abuse (neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse)?
- Do these children recorded under other categories of abuse receive any intervention for CSA?
- What are the reasons for children to be recorded under other categories of abuse, when CSA has been highlighted as a concern?
- What happens to children who are referred but for whom concerns do not meet the child protection plan thresholds?
- What happens to children who are referred but for whom concerns do not meet thresholds for children receiving care and support?

3. Can your local authority take part?

We are looking for two local authorities in Wales that are interested in participating in this research and that meet the following criteria:

- **They have staff available to support the work of the researcher during the fieldwork (10–15 days)** with basic tasks such as providing paper records when required and supporting the navigation of electronic records as and when required.
- **They are able to release staff for interviews and/or focus groups (1–2 hours)**; research with staff can be flexible and use existing meetings to collect information.
- **The electronic records are relatively well kept** (but do not need to be perfect), particularly the chronologies.

Each local area will **benefit from the research findings** to support its local evidence base, and the **CSA Centre can provide advice on how to improve services and recording systems following the fieldwork**. The research will be undertaken in confidence and reported on anonymously. We encourage local authorities to get in touch with us if they have any questions about this research.

What are the benefits for local authorities to take part?

Each participating local authority will develop a better understanding of:

- how to improve services to children for whom CSA is a concern
- the scale of known incidence of CSA in their local authority area, and the proportion of children who are hidden in other categories of abuse
- the strengths and weaknesses of their current recording practices for CSA
- the impact of current recording practices on the interventions and services that children receive
- how their recording practices and services compare to the other local authority participating in the research.

Both local authorities could use the research findings to:

- improve response to children at risk of CSA
- determine the appropriate allocation of resources;
- improve recording practices for CSA
- inform training and development of staff
- demonstrate a good understanding of the scale of CSA, and the recording practices and interventions in reports and inspections

The CSA Centre will provide a day of support to each participating local authority to discuss the implications of the findings and clarify the next steps.

4. Next steps

If you are interested in participating in this research, please **contact Kairika Karsna, Senior Research and Evaluation Officer at the CSA Centre**, by email: kairika.karsna@csacentre.org.uk. You are also welcome to discuss the research informally with **Matthew Sedgebeer, our Practice Improvement Advisor in Wales**, by email: matthew.sedgebeer@csacentre.org.uk.

The fieldwork will be undertaken **between December 2018 and February 2019**. The report will be published in May 2019.

This research forms an important part of the CSA Centre's research into the scale and nature of child sexual abuse in England and Wales. More information about this programme of work can be found [on our website](#).

How will the research findings be used?

The CSA Centre will inform all local authorities in Wales, their partners and the Welsh Government about the (anonymised) findings, to enable wider learning about the scale of known CSA cases in social care records, how children are supported, and how they are recorded in the system.

We will also use the findings to:

- develop a method for similar audits that could be repeated in other areas of Wales; both local authorities participating in the current research will receive the findings free or charge, while those wishing to participate later will need to cover the CSA Centre's costs of conducting the audits
- use the findings to take forward its research programme on the scale and nature of CSA and its work to improve practice
- formulate recommendations to inform policy and practice in England and Wales.