

Centre of
expertise
on child
sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse in 2021/22: Trends in official data

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About the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse

The CSA Centre's 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 and hosted by Barnardo's, working closely with key partners from academic institutions, local authorities, health, education, police and the voluntary sector. We aim 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
- ▶ providing training and support for professionals and researchers working in the field
- ▶ engaging with and influencing policy.
- ▶ For more information on our work, please visit our website:
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Executive summary

Understanding the scale and nature of child sexual abuse is key to improving responses to it. This report continues the CSA Centre's series of publications providing professionals and decision-makers with up-to-date evidence and analysis of 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 identified and responded to in 2021/22, drawing on the latest available evidence from the official data released by child protection, criminal justice and health agencies in England and Wales.

It is important to recognise that agency data relates to only a small minority of the child sexual abuse that occurs in our society. We estimate that at least one in 10 children in England and Wales 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 <https://doi.org/10.47117/OBKC1345>.)

Nevertheless, agency data is a valuable resource, not least because it is collected according to 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 it differs between local authorities, police forces and sexual assault referral centres.

Child protection data in 2021/22

Across the year, local authority children's services in England recorded concerns about child sexual abuse in 33,990 assessments of children; this is a 15% increase on the previous year (contrasted with a rise of only 3% in the total number of assessments), and represents the highest level of identified concerns of child sexual abuse since 2014/15 when this information started to be collected. Two-fifths of these assessments concerned sexual abuse by a child. Concerns about child sexual exploitation (which, despite being a form of child sexual abuse, is treated separately in such assessments) were recorded in 16,330 assessments, continuing a slow but steady decrease over the past four years. Combined, one in 10 assessments undertaken by local authorities in England recorded a concern about some form of child sexual abuse. While this data is not available in Wales, information about reports of exploitation to Welsh local authorities showed that 932 children were identified as at risk of sexual exploitation in 2021/22, slightly fewer than in the previous year.



In 2021/22, one in 10 child assessments undertaken by local authorities in England recorded a concern about some form of sexual abuse.




Although there is no evidence to suggest 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 concerns in these assessments. This suggests that children receive a different response to their sexual abuse according to where they live. While five local authorities did not record any concerns about the sexual abuse of children over the entire year, seven local authorities recorded such concerns about more than 70 children for every 10,000 children living in the area. The highest identification rates were in the regions of the North East and Yorkshire and the Humber, while local authorities in London and the East of England tended to have lower rates. There was less local and regional difference in the identification of child sexual exploitation concerns in assessments, suggesting a more consistent approach which may be linked to the level of resources, training and the prioritisation given to child sexual exploitation over the past 10 years.


While no overall information is publicly available on the actions taken following such assessments, data is published on the primary reasons for placing children on child protection plans in England, or on the child protection register in Wales. It shows that 2,520 children in England – equating to one in 20 of those whose initial assessments recorded child sexual abuse or exploitation concerns – were placed on child protection plans under the primary category of sexual abuse (which includes child sexual exploitation) in 2021/22. As in the previous year, this represented just 4% of the total number of children placed on child protection plans. In Wales, 127 children were registered under the primary category of sexual abuse, and a further 63 were registered for multiple reasons including sexual abuse. While in England there was a small (3%) increase on the previous year in the number of children placed on child protection plans because of sexual abuse, in Wales the number of child protection registrations fell by 14%.

The demographic profile of children on child protection plans or placed on the register because of concerns of sexual abuse, remained similar to previous years. These children were predominantly female, and tended to be older than those placed on child protection plans for other reasons. In England, compared with the population of children attending state schools and nurseries, they were less likely to be from Black, Asian or mixed ethnic backgrounds; ethnicity data was not published in Wales.

As with the recording of sexual abuse concerns in child assessments, there was considerable variation across local authorities in the number of children placed on protection plans or the child protection register. Seven local authorities in England and Wales placed no children on protection plans or the register because of concerns of sexual abuse. The lowest rates were typically seen in the East of England and London, while local authorities in the North East and Yorkshire and the Humber tended to have higher rates. Rates in Wales were comparable to those in England.



2,520 children were placed on child protection plans under the category of sexual abuse – just 4% of the total number of child protection plans.



Police recorded child sexual offences in 2021/22

Police forces in England and Wales recorded 103,055 child sexual abuse offences during the year, 15% more than in the previous year. This was the first time that the figure exceeded 100,000. One-third of these offences involved child sexual abuse images, another third related to rape or sexual assault of a child, and the remainder related to abuse through sexual exploitation, grooming and sexual activity with a child. Compared to the previous year, particularly large increases were seen in the number of recorded rape and sexual assault offences, both of which rose by over one-quarter.

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, Yorkshire and the Humber, and Wales had the highest average rates.

During the year, 94,646 police investigations into child sexual abuse offences were concluded; a suspect was charged or summonsed in 10,232 (11%) of these, and a further 4% ended with a caution or a 'diversionary or intervention activity'. The number of suspects charged/summonsed, as well as the proportion of investigations ending in a charge/summons, was slightly lower than in the previous year. Almost two-thirds of investigations were closed because of evidential difficulties of some form, as in 2020/21. Charges were more likely for offences of sexual exploitation and sexual grooming, and least likely for offences relating to sexual activity and rape, as in previous years.

Investigations of sexual offences took considerable time: the median time from recording a sexual offence to concluding the investigation with an outcome was 62 days, and 261 days – nearly four times as long – when the outcome was a charge or summons. For rape offences, the median length of an investigation resulting in a charge or summons was 467 days – well over a year.

Court proceedings in 2021

In the year to December 2021, court proceedings were brought against 7,389 defendants for child sexual abuse offences, 6% more than in the previous year. There were 6,134 convictions, resulting in a 'conviction ratio' of 83% – the highest since 2018, likely to be driven at least in part by a rise in prosecutions for sexual abuse image offences (which are more likely than contact offences to result in a conviction).

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

Defendants were predominantly male (98%), as in previous years. Almost nine in 10 (89%) were White, compared with the 82% of the population of England and Wales. This may be related to the overall under-identification of child sexual abuse in minority ethnic communities, and the fact that White British defendants were more likely than any other ethnic group to be prosecuted for offences with a greater likelihood of prosecution.

On average in 2021, child sexual abuse offences (excluding image offences) took just under a year – 353 days – to go from the suspect being charged to the case reaching a conclusion in the Crown Court. This is 100 days longer than in the previous year, and the Ministry of Justice has attributed the increase to the backlog caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Child sexual abuse image offences took half the time (175 days), and saw no change compared to 2020.

Combining the police and prosecution data on timescales shows that, for many child sexual abuse offences, there was typically a wait of nearly two years between reporting the abuse to the police and the case concluding in court – and rape offences took significantly longer.



Police forces in England and Wales recorded 103,055 child sexual abuse offences – the highest-ever level, and a rise of 15% on the previous year.



Children attending sexual assault referral centres in 2021/22

Sexual assault referral centres (SARCs) in England had initial contact with 8,213 children during the year, 13% more than in the previous year. Two thirds of these children were aged 13–17, and five out of six were female. The vast majority were White British; Asian children accounted for the smallest proportion of children seen by SARCs in comparison with their share of England's school-age population.

While face-to-face remained SARCs' most common form of contact with children, nearly half of first contacts – a significantly higher number than in previous years – took place remotely. This suggests that measures taken during COVID-19 to overcome the restrictions in face-to-face contact have been sustained post-pandemic. The reach of SARCs to under-18s varied widely across the seven health regions, with London and the East of England having the lowest number of first contacts relative to the regional child population, and the Midlands and the South West having the highest.

Focus on data improvement in 2022

During 2022, four significant reviews made recommendations about improvements to the collection, analysis and use of data in order to improve services' ability to make decisions, which have relevance to agencies' response to child sexual abuse. Two focused on improvements required in children's social care: the final report of the independent review of children's social care and the national review into the deaths of Arthur Labinjo Hughes and Star Hobson. One focused on the police response to sexual offences: the interim report of Operation Soteria Bluestone, set up to respond to the findings of the UK Government's end-to-end rape review. The fourth looked at child sexual abuse data across agencies: the final report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse.

We note that there are significant overlaps in these reports' analysis of key issues and proposed solutions to agency data improvement. They all include proposals to improve the quality and consistency of data that is collected by different agencies and better use of it in operational and strategic decision making. Three focus on the need to overhaul data systems used by professionals. The CSA Centre's previous work in developing and piloting a recommended 'core dataset' (see www.csacentre.org.uk/our-research/the-scale-and-nature-of-csa/improving-agency-records/) could inform how these recommendations are taken forward nationally in relation to child sexual abuse.



Four significant reviews in 2022 made proposals to improve the quality and the use of data that is collected by different agencies.



Conclusions

2021/22 saw a 15% rise in the identification of child sexual abuse by police and children's services, and referrals to SARCs also increased. This increase in identification of child sexual abuse concerns is likely to be the result of a combination of factors, including heightened awareness of concerns following campaigns such as Everyone's Invited; increased focus on risks of hidden harms during COVID-19 lockdowns; and greater priority given to identifying these concerns as children became visible to services again post lockdowns. Regardless of the rise in identification, there continues to be a large gap between the estimates of prevalence of child sexual abuse in England and Wales and the levels of identification and response recorded in official data.

Concerningly, the rise in the number of recorded child sexual abuse offences was accompanied by a significant increase in the time it took for investigations and prosecutions to proceed through the criminal justice system. Further, large geographical variation in the identification of and response to child sexual abuse remained prominent in 2021/22. There is an urgent need for local and national leaders to address these issues.

This report is the sixth in a series of CSA Centre reports reviewing the annual trends in available official data on child sexual abuse. Over this period, the limitations of the data available have remained persistent. The four major reviews of child protection and criminal justice in 2022 have created an opportunity for cross-government improvements to official data and drives to improve data quality, consistency and comparability across agencies.

There has been a significant increase in the time taken for investigations/prosecutions to proceed through the criminal justice system.

1. Introduction

Understanding the scale and nature of child sexual abuse is key to improving responses to it. This report continues the series of publications produced by the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA Centre) to provide professionals and decision-makers with up-to-date evidence and analysis of 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 identified and responded to in 2021/22. 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 children placed on child protection plans (or, in Wales, on the child protection register) under the primary category of sexual abuse. The criminal justice data includes statistics on offences related to child sexual abuse which were recorded by the police, and on the defendants prosecuted and convicted for these offences. For the first time, we have also included data on the timescales for investigating and prosecuting child sexual abuse offences. The health data relates to children having contact with sexual assault referral centres.

Monitoring trends in official agency data is important, because this 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 over time – and how local authorities, police forces and sexual assault referral centres differ in their identification and detection of child sexual abuse, and their response to it.

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 by changes in the level of child sexual abuse taking place: they are more likely to be the result of changes in societal awareness, and in professionals' understanding and confidence to identify and respond to child sexual abuse. Priorities set at local or national level may 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.

In this report, for the first time we have included data on the timescales for investigating and prosecuting child sexual abuse offences.

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 Karsna and Kelly (2021).

The year covered in this report followed a year of disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The report therefore pays particular attention to any signs of the pandemic's impact on the identification of and response to child sexual abuse. But while it highlights noticeable changes in agency data, we urge caution in attributing these to any changes in the prevalence of child sexual abuse caused by lockdowns. It will take different sources of evidence – including survey data – to build a picture of the pandemic's impact on the scale and nature of child sexual abuse.

In addition to summarising data trends in 2021/22, this report highlights significant developments in reviewing child protection and criminal justice systems in 2022: the final report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (Jay et al, 2022), the final report of the independent review of children's social care (MacAlister, 2022), the national review into the deaths of Arthur Labinjo Hughes and Star Hobson (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2022), and the interim report from Operation Soteria Bluestone (Stanko, 2022) with findings from its research into the police response to rape and sexual offences. As the recommendations made by these reviews are likely to influence developments in how child sexual abuse is responded to in England and Wales, we outline their findings relating to data improvement.

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 and the Crown Prosecution Service.
- ▶ 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.
- ▶ Chapter 6 reflects on the data recommendations from four major reviews of the child protection and criminal justice systems (see above), all of which concluded in 2022, and their implications for responses to child sexual abuse.
- ▶ The final chapter draws conclusions from the data and highlights gaps in knowledge.



The best available evidence on the scale and nature of child sexual abuse comes not from agency records but from self-report surveys.



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 official agencies' attention. Based on the available survey evidence, we estimate that at least one in 10 children 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 refer to 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.

The volume 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, in part, because 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 – and 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 (ONS), asked adults about their experiences of child maltreatment. Around two-thirds of respondents describing experiences of 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 mid-2021 population estimates (Office for National Statistics, 2022a).

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 (Glinski, 2021), rather than waiting until the child tells someone about their abuse.



Professionals need to become better at recognising potential signs and indicators of sexual abuse, rather than waiting for children to tell about it.



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



Sources: Home Office (2022a); Department for Education (2022a); Welsh Government (2022b); Radford et al (2011); Office for National Statistics (2022a). 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 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 experiencing sexual abuse come to the attention of child protection professionals at the time of the abuse. And published local authority data provides only partial information about children who do receive a response from children's services:

- ▶ In England, 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. In Wales, equivalent data on assessments is not collated, but data is published on the number of children referred to local authorities where child sexual exploitation is a factor.³
- ▶ No information is published in either nation about actions taken after assessments or referrals.
- ▶ When a child is made the subject of a child protection plan (in England) or placed on the child protection register (in Wales); the local authority records the 'primary' reason for this on its data collection system. There are four main categories – emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect – with a fifth category to denote that the child is at risk of multiple forms of abuse. Local authorities in both England and Wales release annual statistics on these primary reasons for placing children on child protection plans/the register; this is a time series published since the early 1990s.

- ▶ 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, as a child is placed on a protection plan or the register only under certain circumstances (see box on next page). Of the 650,270 referrals to children's services in England in 2021/22, fewer than 10% (64,400) were made the subject of child protection plans under any category of abuse or neglect (Department for Education, 2022a: Tables A1 and D2).⁴

Even where a child is placed on a child protection plan or the child protection register and there are concerns that they are being sexually abused, it is likely that a different primary 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.

Even when there are concerns of sexual abuse, it is likely that a different primary category of abuse will be recorded on the child's protection plan.

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 data for Wales is not published.

Furthermore, although many children experience multiple forms of abuse, children are rarely recorded under the ‘multiple’ abuse category on their plan or the register; the use of this category varies widely between local authorities (Bywaters et al, 2017). While the Welsh Government publishes a breakdown of the forms of abuse within this multiple category, in England any sexual abuse concerns recorded under the multiple category are not visible in the published data.

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

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. Initial enquiries, in consultation with other professionals, may lead to one of the following outcomes:

- ▶ An **Early help assessment** may take place if the child is not currently at risk of sexual abuse but is identified as being vulnerable to possible abuse or neglect. A range of professionals may be involved in providing advice, guidance and support to the child and their family.
- ▶ A **multi-agency assessment** (Section 17 statutory assessment) may take place, where children’s services take a lead on assessing whether the child is ‘in need’ of care and support. 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.

- ▶ A **child protection enquiry and assessment** (Section 47 statutory assessment), led by children’s services, may take place to determine whether the child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm. Children are placed on a child protection plan (in England) or the child protection register (in Wales) if they are at continuing risk of significant harm because of neglect or abuse (including sexual abuse) and require a multi-agency response to manage that risk. Social workers and other professionals develop a child protection plan (in England) or a care and support protection plan (in Wales), which involves direct work with the family to support them in reducing the risk to the child.

If the assessment concludes that the child cannot safely live with their family or relatives, they are taken into local authority care, either with the consent of their parent(s) or through care proceedings. Children are usually placed with a foster family but on occasions may need the support of a residential children’s home. These children are referred to as ‘looked-after children’ in the legislation.

Sources: Department for Education (2018); Welsh Government (2020); Children Act 1989.

3.1 Children considered at risk of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation in England, and of sexual exploitation in Wales

3.1.1 Assessments in England

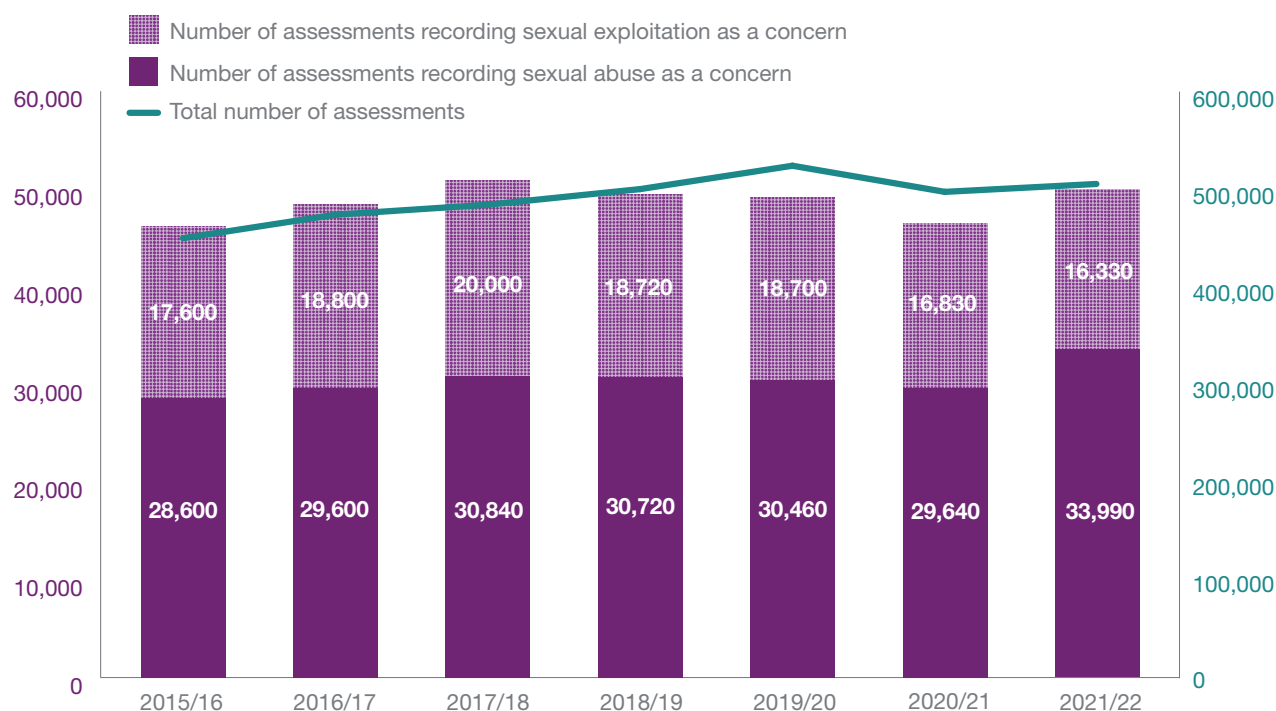
The Department for Education publishes a list of “factors” identified in the assessments of children who are referred to or seek help from local authority children’s services in England; in this list, sexual exploitation is recorded separately from sexual abuse.⁵ Where multiple factors are identified, all are recorded.

Figure 2 shows that 2021/22 saw an increase in both the overall number of local authority assessments (in green) and the number of these assessments which recorded child sexual abuse (in purple).

Assessments recording child sexual abuse concerns increased by 15%, to their highest level (and their highest proportion of all assessments, at 7%) since this information was first published in 2015. In contrast, the number of assessments recording child sexual exploitation concerns declined again in 2021/22, having fallen each year since 2017/18; such concerns featured in just 3% of all assessments during 2021/22.

Other forms of abuse and neglect featured more frequently during 2021/22: one in five assessments (102,900) recorded concerns of emotional abuse; one in six (82,950) noted concerns of neglect; and one in seven (69,260) recorded physical abuse concerns. Data on concerns of child *criminal* exploitation was published for the first time in 2021/22, and showed that these concerns were recorded in 10,140 assessments.

Figure 2. Child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation identified during assessments by local authority children’s services, 2015/16–2021/22, England



Source: Department for Education (2022a: Table C3, years ending 31 March 2022, 2017 and 2016). Multiple risks could be recorded. Total number of assessments excludes assessments where no specific risks were recorded.

5. It is unlikely that local authorities include children at risk of child sexual exploitation also within the count of children at risk of child sexual abuse. The initial guidance (Department for Education, 2015) and a subsequent update focusing on assessment factors (Department for Education, 2021) treated the two as separate issues and did not instruct double counting. Furthermore, 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).

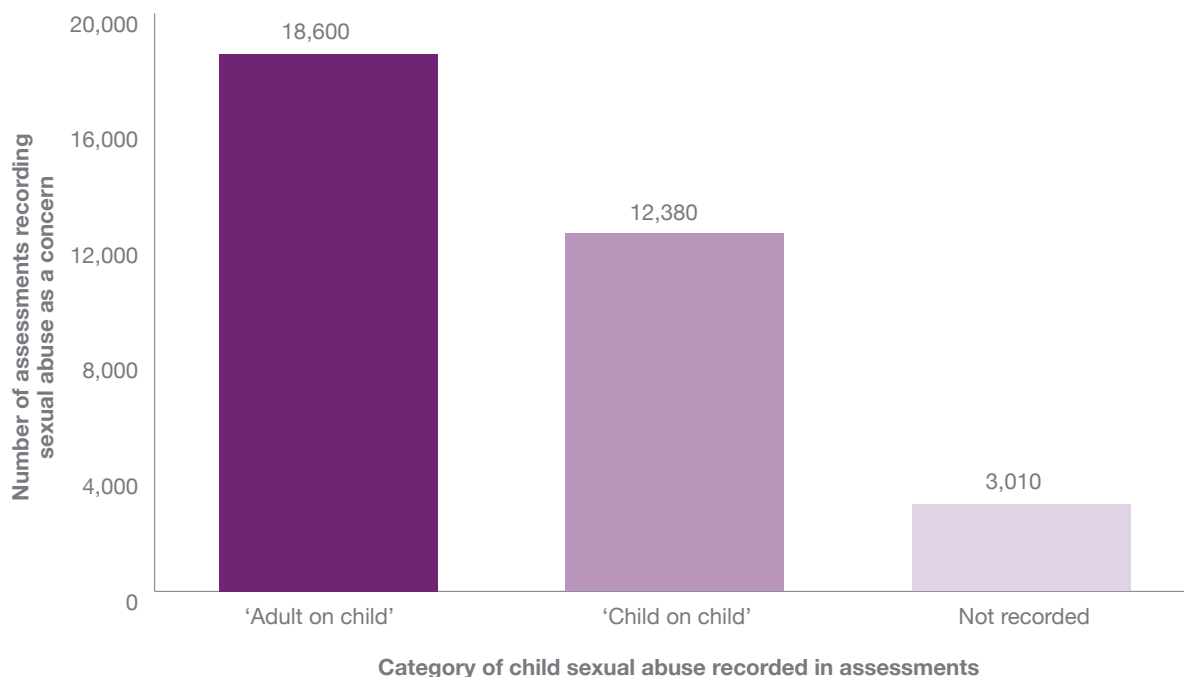
The ‘sexual abuse’ category in assessments was further divided in 2020/21 into two new categories: ‘sexual abuse: adult on child’ and ‘sexual abuse: child on child’. Guidance stated that the latter needed to include assessments both of victims *and of children who had sexually harmed another child*, as “children who harm will also be in need of support” (Department for Education, 2021:12).

In 2021/22 most local authorities were using these new categories, which accounted for 91% of the data submitted on sexual abuse concerns. Where the new categories were used, around two-fifths of concerns of child sexual abuse recorded in assessments related to abuse by a child, and three-fifths involved sexual abuse by an adult – see Figure 3. It is not clear to what extent concerns of ‘child on child’ sexual abuse involved assessing both (or all) children involved in the potential abuse – the child(ren) who were harmed and the child(ren) who harmed. It is likely that the 12,380 assessments of ‘child on child’ sexual abuse include some cases where the same incident or episode of abuse was recorded in the assessments of more than one child.

3.1.2 Reports to local authorities in Wales

In Wales, data has been published since 2020/21 on the number of children referred to local authorities owing to concerns of some form of exploitation: sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation, and/or trafficking. In 2021/22, 932 children were reported to local authorities in Wales because of concerns of sexual exploitation; this is slightly lower than in the previous year, when 966 children were referred for the same reason. Notably, it is also lower than the number of children (1,012) referred in 2021/22 because of concerns of criminal exploitation (Welsh Government, 2022a); in contrast, assessments of children by English local authorities the same year identified sexual exploitation concerns far more often than concerns about criminal exploitation (see section 3.1.1).

Figure 3. Child sexual abuse identified during assessments by local authority children’s services, by perpetrator, 2021/22, England



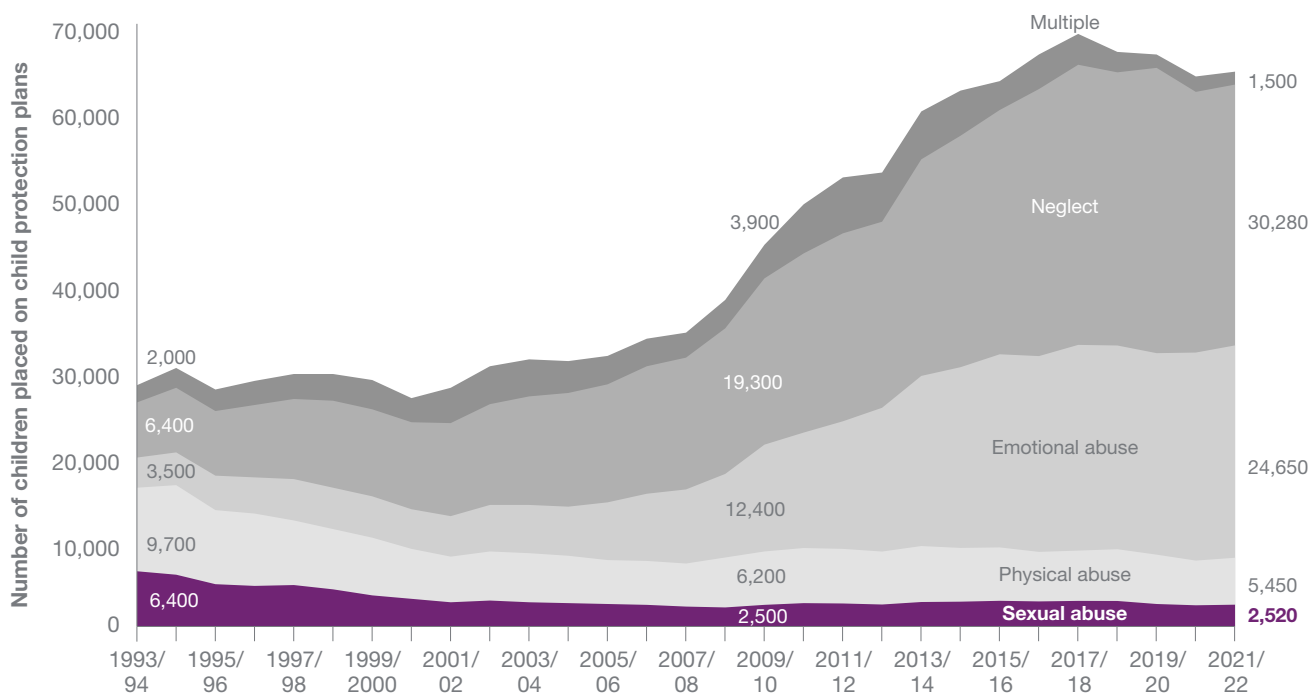
Source: Department for Education (2022a: Table C3, year ending 31 March 2022). Excludes data recorded under the generic ‘child sexual abuse’ category.

3.2 Sexual abuse recorded in child protection plans

Compared with the previous year, 2021/22 saw a 3% increase (to 2,520) in the number of children placed on child protection plans in England under the primary category of sexual abuse (which includes child sexual exploitation); see Figure 4. This did not change the overall picture of sexual abuse accounting for a declining share of child protection plans over the past three decades: while the overall number of new plans in 2021/22 was 20,000 higher than in 2009/10, the number of plans related to sexual abuse was practically unchanged. As in 2020/21, sexual abuse was the primary reason for fewer than 4% of all child protection plans.

Furthermore, the number of children placed on child protection plans under the primary category of sexual abuse equated to only one in 20 of the children whose initial assessments recorded sexual abuse or exploitation as concerns in 2021/22. The difference was far smaller for other categories of abuse and neglect: the number of assessments identifying neglect as a concern was only three times higher than the number of child protection plans under the same category; for emotional abuse there was a fourfold difference; and the ratio was 13:1 for physical abuse.

Figure 4. Children placed on child protection plans per year, by category of abuse, 2009/10–2021/22, England



Source: Department for Education (2022a: Table D2, years ending 31 March 2021 and 2012; Table 19, year ending 31 March 2011; Table 15, year ending 31 March 2010). Pre-2010 data is archived at: <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130411081546/https://www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/statistics/statistics-by-topic/childrenandfamilies/safeguarding>

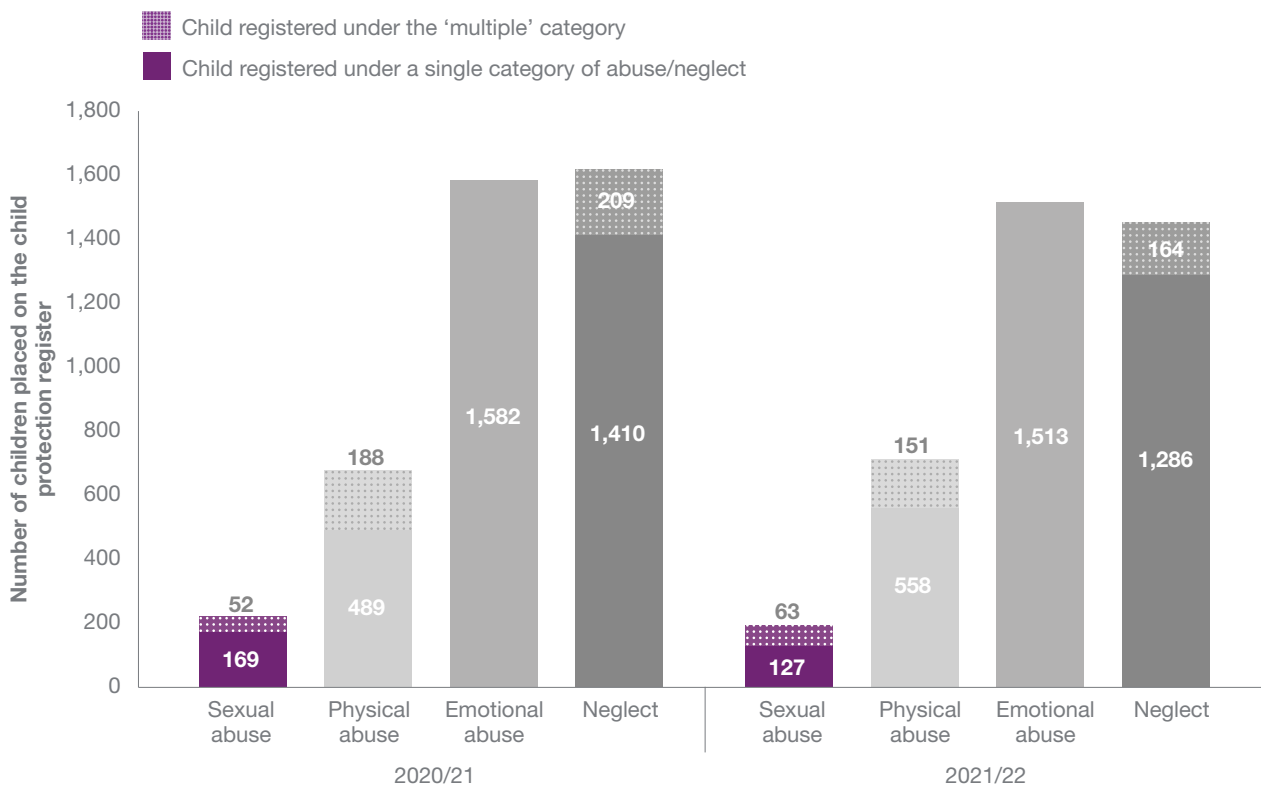
If a child was in the child protection system more than once during a year, each incidence was recorded. Child-level (more detailed) information has been collected since 2009/10. A data confidence indicator was used for years 2008/09–2014/15, very few local authorities were considered to provide low-quality data.

In Wales, the number of children placed on the child protection register under the primary category of sexual abuse fell by one-quarter (to 127) between 2020/21 and 2021/22, from 169 to 127.⁶ There was a small increase in the number of children registered under the 'multiple' category where sexual abuse was one of the reasons, up from 52 children in 2021/22 to 63 in 2021/22. Nevertheless, the combined number of child protection registrations recording child sexual abuse concerns fell from 221 children in 2020/21 to 190 in 2021/22.

This means that sexual abuse was recorded as a concern in a little over 5% of the 3,670 child protection registrations in 2021/22 (see Figure 5). Focusing solely on those children registered under the primary category of sexual abuse (i.e. excluding those in the 'multiple' category where there were sexual abuse concerns) they made up fewer than 4% of all registrations, as in England.

The relatively low numbers of child protection plans/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 5. Children placed on the child protection register, by category of abuse, 2021/22, Wales



Source: Welsh Government (2022b). Percentages total more than 100% because some children were placed on the register for multiple reasons.

6. The collection of this data in Wales changed in 2020/21, when whole-year statistics on child protection registrations started to be published instead of 'snapshot' figures showing the number of children on the register as at 31 March each year. For longitudinal data up to 2018/19, showing 'snapshot' figures, see Karsna and Kelly (2021); that longitudinal data shows a similar trend to the England data presented in Figure 2 of this report.

3.3 Characteristics of children on protection plans or the child protection register under the category of sexual abuse

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, giving a snapshot of the profile of children on the child protection plan at a single point.

In Wales, the only equivalent data for 2021/22 related to the age of children placed on the child protection register during the year.

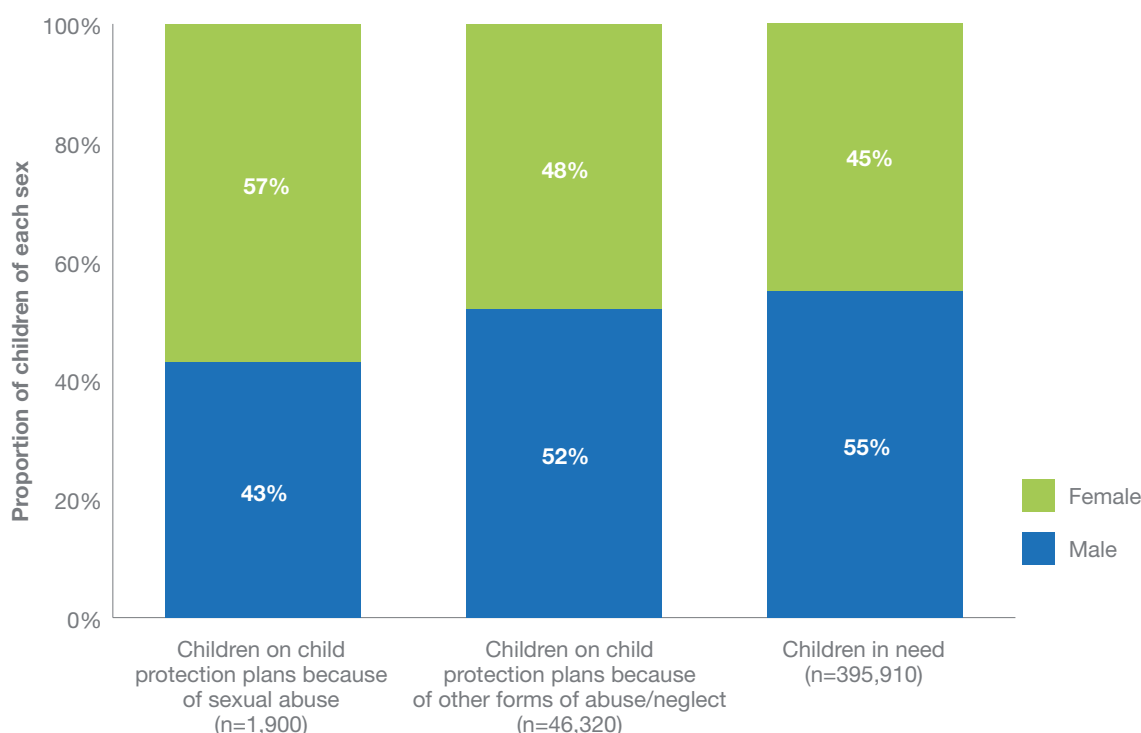
3.3.1 Sex

In England, girls accounted for 57% of children on child protection plans under the primary category of sexual abuse on 31 March 2022. In comparison, over half of the children on child protection plans under other categories of abuse, and of children in need, were male (see Figure 6).

The proportion of boys on child protection plans under the category of sexual abuse has risen in recent years – it was 38% in 2019 – and is twice as high as the level of sexual abuse of boys indicated in prevalence surveys or in police data.⁷ The reasons for this are unclear.

At the time of this report’s publication, the latest available Wales data – from 2020/21 – showed a lower proportion of boys (35%) and a higher share of girls (65%) on the child protection register because of sexual abuse, compared to England (Welsh Government, 2022c).

Figure 6. Children on child protection plans and children in need at 31 March 2022, by sex, England



Source: Department for Education (2022a: Tables A4 and A5, year ending 31 March 2022). Chart excludes a small number of children whose sex was not recorded.

7. 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).

3.3.2 Age

Compared with those on a protection plan because of other forms of abuse or neglect, children in England who were the subject of a child protection plan under the category of sexual abuse on 31 March were less likely to be aged under five and more likely to be over 10 years old (see Figure 7).

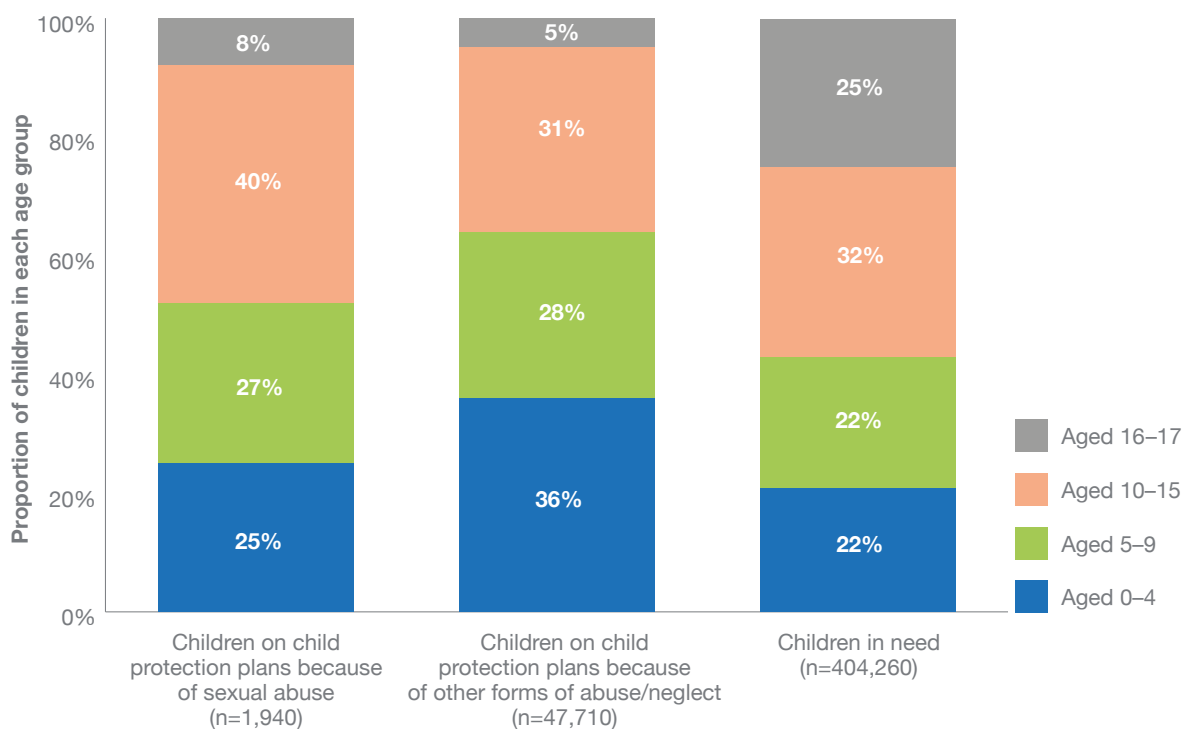
In Wales across the year 2021/22, the 127 children placed on the child protection register under the primary category of sexual abuse had a broadly similar age profile, but were even more likely to be aged 10+: 24% were 0–4, 23% were 5–9, 46% were 10–15 and 8% were 16–17.

Recent years have seen little change in the age profile of children made the subject of a child protection plan in England 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).

Recent years have seen little change in the profile of children made the subject of a child protection plan under the category of sexual abuse.

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 (2022a: Tables A4 and A5, year ending 31 March 2022). Chart excludes a small number of children whose age was not recorded.

3.3.3 Ethnicity

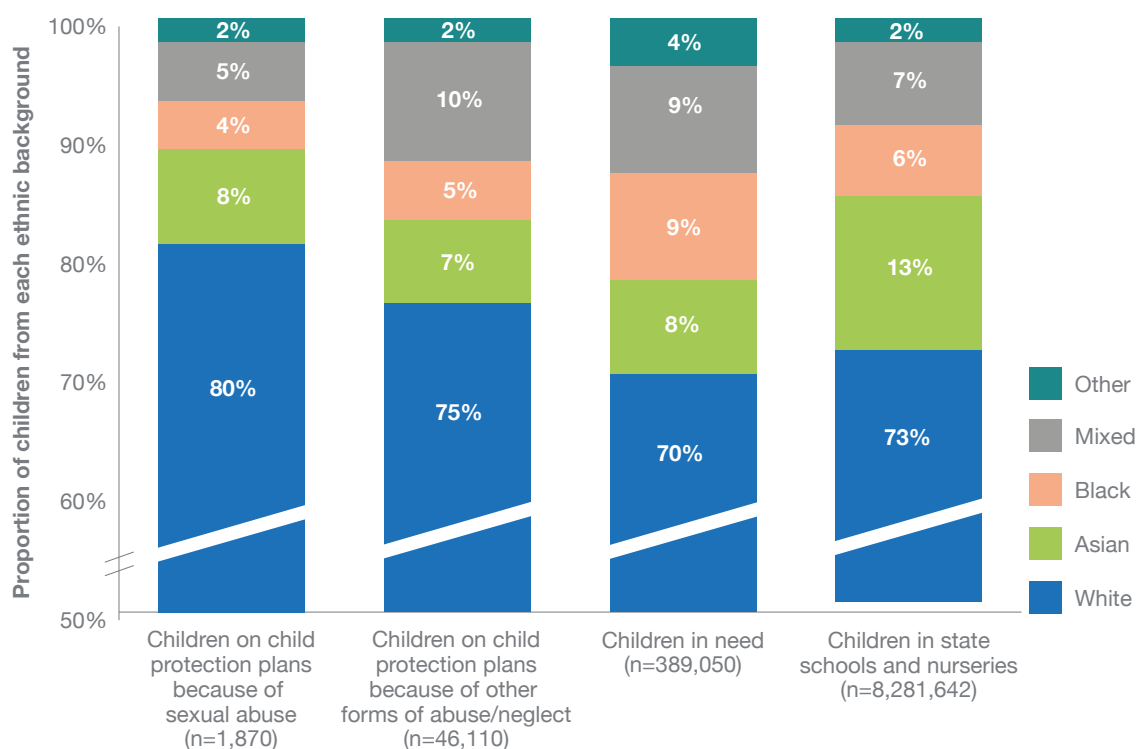
Children on child protection plans in England under the primary category of sexual abuse on 31 March were more likely to be from White (British or 'White other') backgrounds than the population of children attending English state schools and nurseries (see Figure 8). The Welsh Government does not publish data on the ethnicity of children on the child protection register.

Children from Black, Asian and mixed ethnic backgrounds were under-identified for support through child protection plans under the category of sexual abuse, compared with the school and nursery population.

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).

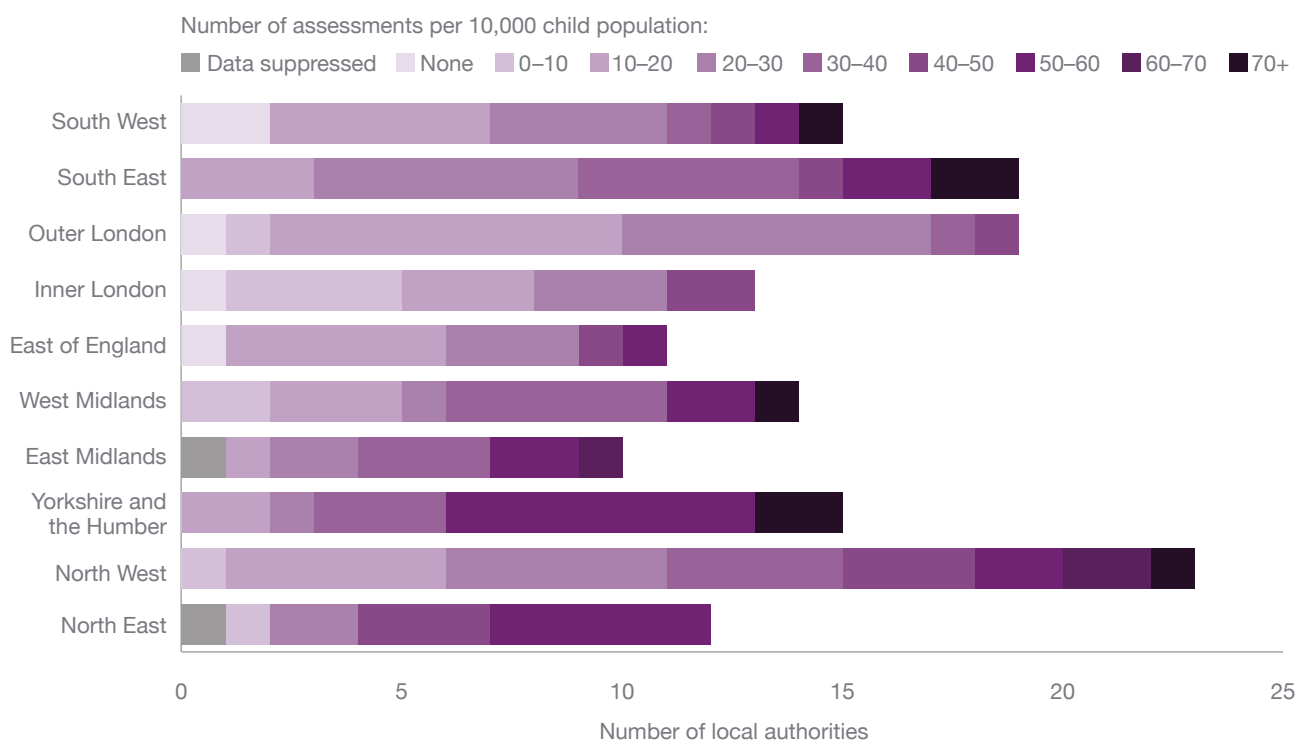
Compared with the general population, children on protection plans because of sexual abuse were more likely to be from White backgrounds.

Figure 8. Children on child protection plans and children in need at 31 March 2022, by ethnicity, England



Sources: Department for Education (2022a: Tables A4 and A5, year ending 31 March 2021); Department for Education (2022b: 'Pupil characteristics – ethnicity and language'). Chart excludes a small number of children whose ethnicity was not recorded.

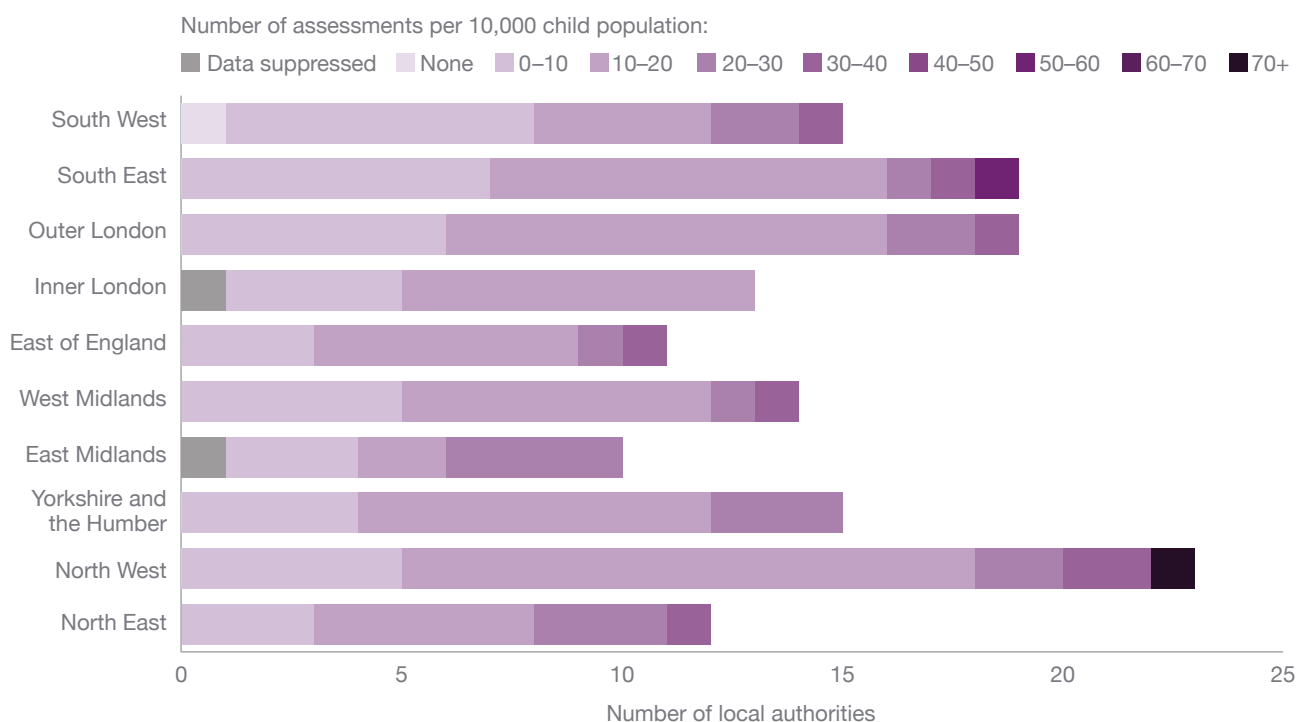
Figure 9. Number of local authority assessments per 10,000 local child population recording children as at risk of sexual abuse, by region, 2021/22, England



Sources: Department for Education (2022a: Table C3); Office for National Statistics (2022a). 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 Hackney local authority is missing.

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 both local authorities whose data was suppressed in 2021/22, the rate of assessments per 10,000 local child population would be in the '0–10' range.

Figure 10. Number of local authority assessments per 10,000 local child population recording children as at risk of sexual exploitation, by region, 2021/22, England



Sources: Department for Education (2022a: Table C3); Office for National Statistics (2022a). 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 Hackney local authority is missing.

3.4 Local variation

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

Figure 9 shows that, within England, there are wide regional variations in the proportion of the local child population assessed by the local authority to be at risk of child sexual abuse. (This data is not available for local authorities in Wales.) A darker shade of purple indicates more assessments identifying this risk relative to local child population.

In 2021/22, five English local authorities identified no children about whom there were sexual abuse concerns, while seven local authorities identified such concerns in more than 70 assessments for every 10,000 children living in the area. Higher rates of identification were primarily recorded in the Yorkshire and the Humber and North East regions, while local authorities in London and the East of England tended to record lower-than-average numbers of assessments identifying 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 all regions.

There was less variation in relation to the recording of sexual exploitation as a concern, as shown by a narrower range of shades of purple (both within and between regions) in Figure 10: in 2021/22, close to half (48%) 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 the identification of and response to child sexual exploitation.


3.4.2 Child protection plans or registrations in England and Wales

As previous editions of this report (e.g. Karsna and Kelly, 2021) have highlighted, 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 11 presents the number of children placed on child protection plans or the child protection register because of sexual abuse, as a proportion of the local child population. As above, the 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 2021/22 five local authorities in England placed no children on child protection plans under the primary category of sexual abuse, and a further 40 placed fewer than two children per 10,000 child population. In nearly a third of English local authorities (47 out of 151), the information was 'suppressed' (shown as grey in Figure 11), meaning that they each placed between one and five children in total on child protection plans because of sexual abuse; this too generally signifies a low level of child protection plans as a proportion of the child population. Taken together, more than three-fifths (92 out of 151) of local authorities in England placed no or very few children on child protection plans because of sexual abuse.

Two of Wales's 22 local authorities placed no children on the child protection register under the primary category of sexual abuse during 2021/22, and a further 14 placed fewer than two children per 10,000 child population – meaning that barely a quarter of local authorities in Wales placed more than two children per 10,000 child population on the register because of sexual abuse.



Seven English local authorities identified sexual abuse concerns in more than 70 assessments per 10,000 children in the local area.



When registrations for multiple reasons including sexual abuse are included, half (11) of local authorities in Wales placed more than two children per 10,000 child population on the register because of sexual abuse.

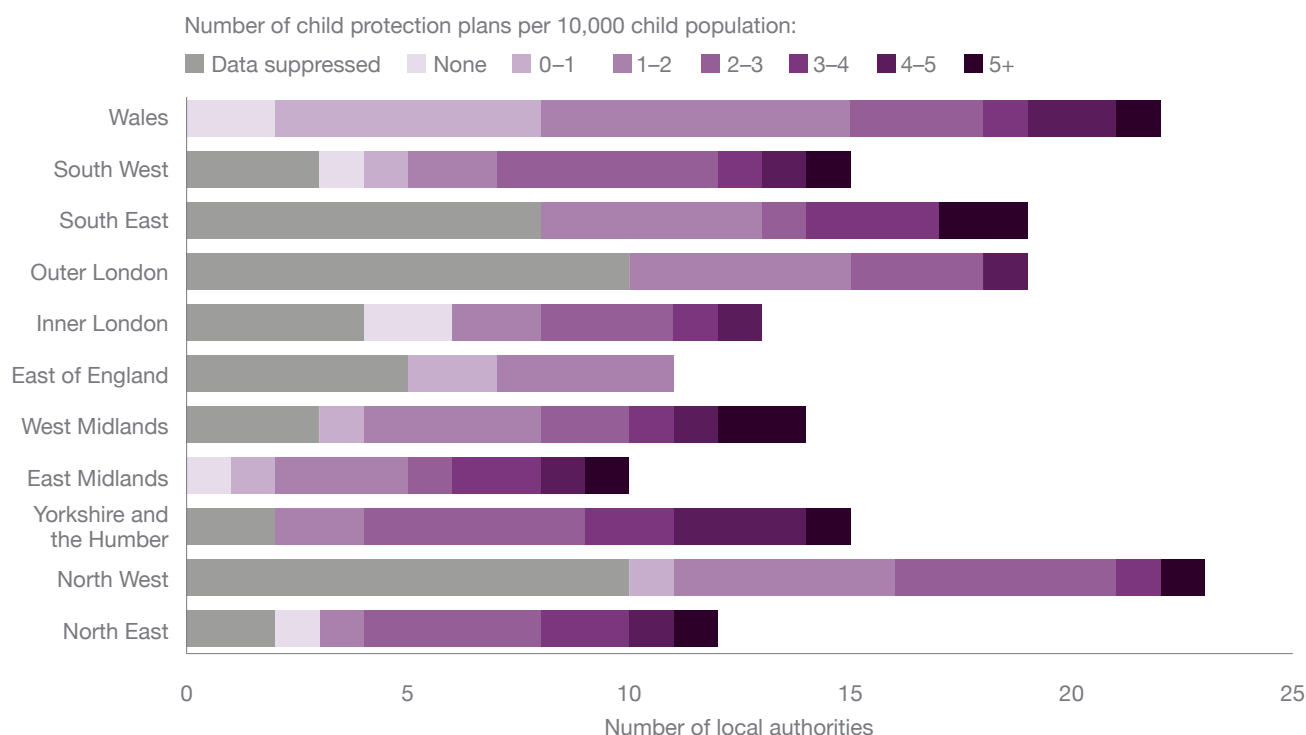
Across England and Wales, 10 local authorities placed between five and 11 children per 10,000 local child population on child protection plans or the register because of sexual abuse.

There were marked regional differences: nearly all local authorities in the East of England and Outer London recorded low numbers of child protection plans for sexual abuse per 10,000 child population. There were more local authorities with higher rates in the West Midlands and in Yorkshire and the Humber. The wide variety of shades of purple in each bar of Figure 11 indicates a high degree of variation within each region, as well as between regions.

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

Significant differences remain, within and between regions, in the levels of sexual abuse recorded in local authorities' child protection data.

Figure 11. 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 (2022a: Table D2); Welsh Government (2022b); Office for National Statistics (2022a). 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 Hackney local authority is missing.

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 2021/22, 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 23 local authorities in the '0–1' group, 22 in the '1–2' group, and two in the '2–3' group.

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,⁸ and data released by the Ministry of Justice⁹ and Crown Prosecution Service on defendants prosecuted for child sexual abuse offences (see also Appendix 1).

4.1 Police-recorded crime statistics

In 2021/22, a total of 103,055 identifiable¹⁰ child sexual abuse offences were recorded by the police in England and Wales. One-third (34%) of these were offences involving sexual abuse images, another third (34%) 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).

Table 1. Identifiable child sexual abuse offences recorded in England and Wales, 2021/22

Offence category	Number in England	Number in Wales	Total in England and Wales*
Rape of a female child under 13	5,624	328	5,956
Rape of a male child under 13	2,186	143	2,330
Rape of a female child under 16	9,092	427	9,526
Rape of a male child under 16	927	52	980
Sexual assault on a female child under 13	11,554	776	12,348
Sexual assault on a male child under 13	3,568	213	3,790
Sexual activity involving a child under 13	9,905	666	10,571
Sexual activity involving a child under 16	12,812	948	13,767
Abuse of children through sexual exploitation	1,217	10	1,227
Abuse of position of trust of a sexual nature	274	15	289
Sexual grooming	6,591	373	6,964
Child sexual abuse image offences**	33,208	2,088	35,307
Total	96,958	6,039	103,055

Source: Home Office (2022a: 'Police recorded crime open data Police Force Area tables from year ending March 2013 onwards', Table 2021–22). Updated October 2022.

* 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.

** These offences are classified as 'obscene publications' in police data; a small proportion of such offences do not involve images of children.

8. Published police data uses offence classifications set out in the *Home Office Counting Rules* (Home Office, 2022b). These classifications are based on the Sexual Offences Act 2003.

9. 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.

10. Not all sexual offences against children are visible in publicly available data (see Appendix 1); as a result, the true level of some child sexual abuse offences may be higher than the figures stated in this section. The figures are updated quarterly and may change in subsequent releases.

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 investigate, detect and disrupt child sexual abuse offences that are reported, referred or uncovered in their area. This could be following a report to the police, through attending an incident where officers identify issues that may indicate child sexual abuse, or where child sexual abuse images have been uncovered. The attending officer will gather information and evidence for the purposes of safeguarding the child as well as detecting any crimes.

At the beginning of any investigation, the police's priority is to ensure that the child is protected from further harm. They have a role in cases of emergency where a child must be removed immediately from their home and placed under police protection. Officers making decisions about a child need to take the child's views into account.

Where child sexual abuse has been reported or identified, police officers and staff should establish as much detail as possible to support a thorough investigation.

After an investigation, the police and the Crown Prosecution Service decide whether to charge a suspect or suspects with a criminal offence. If a decision to charge is made, the process of prosecution begins.

When a suspect has received a qualifying caution or sentence for a sexual offence against a child, they are required to register with the police and are entered on the Sex Offenders Register. The police have a role in monitoring people on the register, to minimise their risk to children.

Sources: Department for Education (2018), College of Policing (2022), College of Policing (2020a).

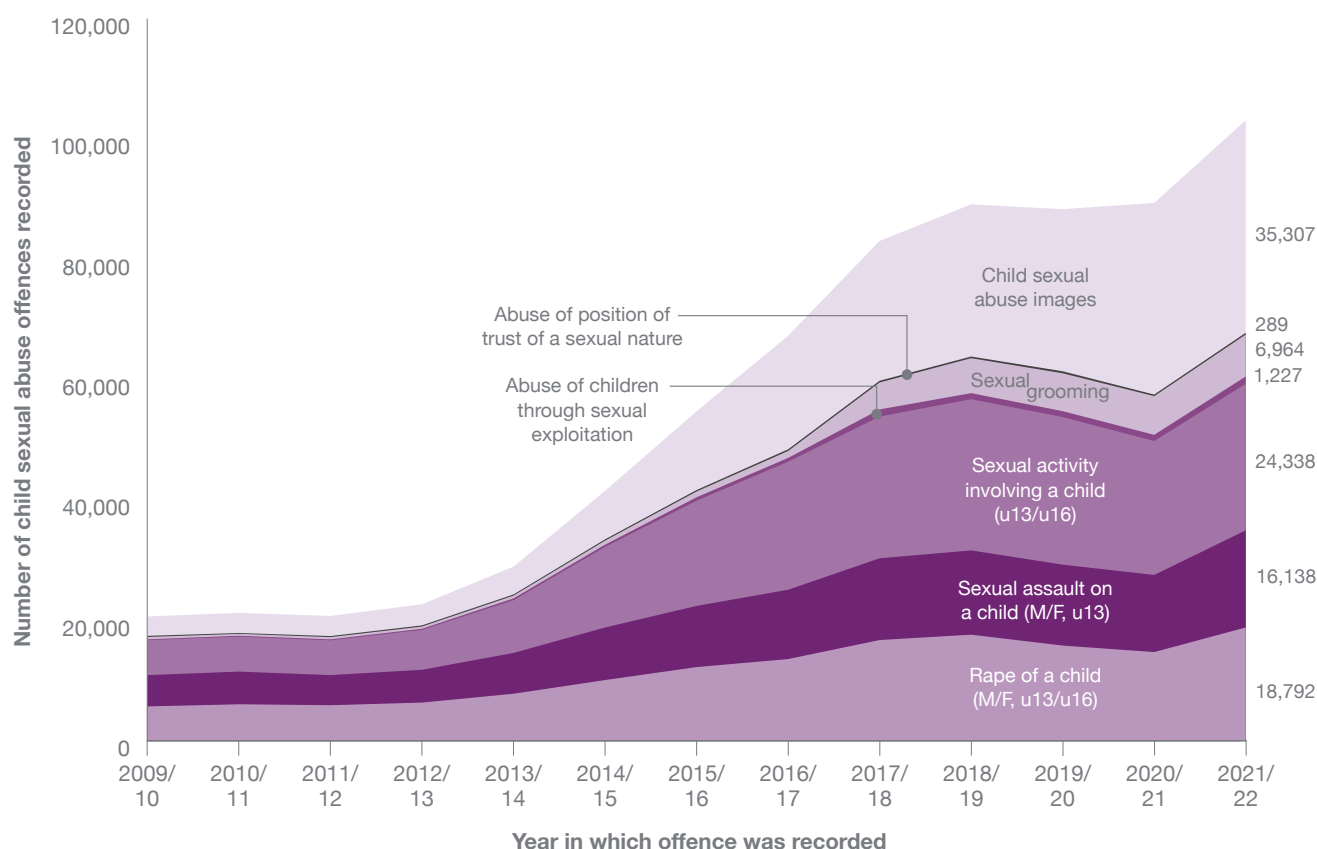
The four police forces in Wales recorded just over 6,000 child sexual abuse offences, and England's 39 forces recorded close to 97,000. Relative to the child population, Welsh forces recorded more child sexual abuse offences (11 offences per 1,000 children aged 0–15)¹¹ than forces in England (9.25 offences per 1,000 children).

4.1.1 Trends over time

There was a significant increase in police-recorded child sexual abuse offences in 2021/22. The overall number of these offences increased by 15%, to its highest level ever recorded in England and Wales (see Figure 12). Particularly steep increases were noticeable in offences relating to the rape of a child under 16 (+28%) and sexual assault offences against under-13s (+27%). While the overall increase was not as high as the yearly increases between 2013/14 and 2017/18, which the Office for National Statistics (2018a) attributed to better recording of these offences as well as victims' greater willingness to come forward, it was the highest recorded in four years.

11. Comparison is made with the child population aged 0–15 because most child sexual abuse offences in publicly available data exclude 16–17 year olds (see Table 1).

Figure 12. Number and type of child sexual abuse offences recorded per year, 2009/10–2021/22, England and Wales



Source: Home Office (2022a: '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. Child sexual abuse image offences are classified as 'obscene publications' in police data. Updated October 2022.

A similar trend occurred in the recording of sexual offences against children aged over 16 and adults. Recorded offences of rape (against over 16s and adults) increased by 25% and of sexual assault (against over-13s and adults) by 60%.

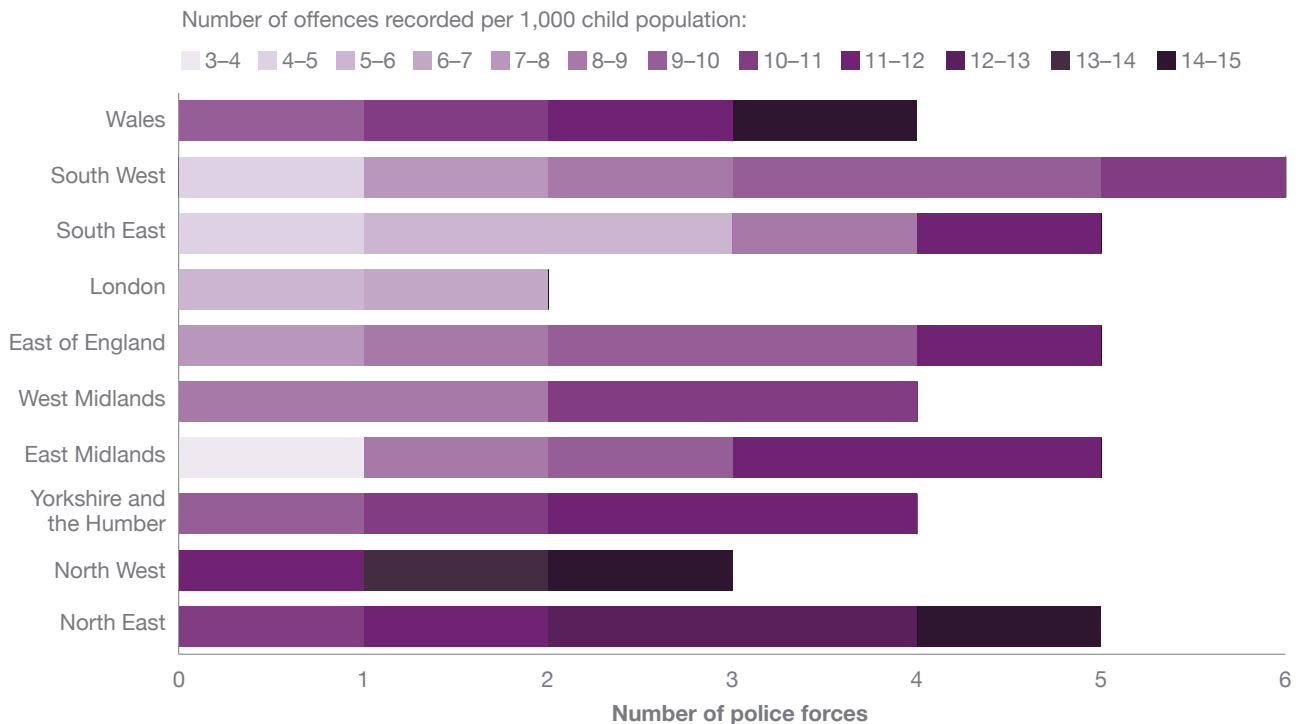
Although the police do not regularly publish data on the demographics of victims or suspects, the Office for National Statistics does sometimes release experimental statistics based on data submitted by police forces to the Home Office Data Hub; such statistics have not been published for 2021/22, however. For a summary of what is known about victims and suspects from recent police data, see Karsna and Kelly (2021).

4.1.2 Local patterns

The increase in recorded child sexual abuse offences was almost universal: only two police forces recorded fewer offences in 2021/22 than in the previous year while 41 recorded more.

Nevertheless, there remained wide variation 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), in 2021/22. Figure 13 shows that some police forces recorded as few as four child sexual abuse offences per 1,000 child population (aged 0–15) while others recorded more than three times as many; these are shown respectively as light and dark shades of purple. Regional differences were also noticeable: most forces in London and the South East had lower rates of recorded offences, while those in the North East, the North West, Yorkshire and the Humber, and Wales had higher rates.

Figure 13. Number of child sexual abuse offences recorded by police forces per 1,000 child population, by region, 2021/22, England and Wales



Sources: Home Office (2022a: 'Police recorded crime open data Police Force Area tables from year ending March 2013 onwards', Table 2021–22); Office for National Statistics (2022b). Police-recorded crime includes non-recent offences. British Transport Police data excluded. Population figures (ages 0–15) are estimated from the 2021 Census.

4.1.3 Investigation outcomes

Table 2 shows that, in 2021/22, police concluded their investigation of 94,646 child sexual abuse offences, of which 10,232 (11%) resulted in a suspect being charged/summonsed. A suspect was cautioned or a community resolution was reached in a further 2% of cases, and 2% concluded with a 'diversionary, educational or intervention activity'.

Prosecution was prevented in 3% of cases: this includes offences where the suspect was under the age of criminal responsibility, was too ill or had died.

In a small number of cases (2%), it was decided that a prosecution would not be in the public interest. A larger number (10%) ended because the police decided it was not in the public interest to continue the investigation. This 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). Nearly a quarter (24%) of child sexual abuse image investigations in 2021/22 concluded with this outcome, suggesting the involvement of under-18s in these offences (see also Figure 15 below).

Nearly two-thirds of all investigations (65%) were closed because of some form of evidential difficulty; most of these were investigations where a suspect could not be identified and/or the victim did not support action.

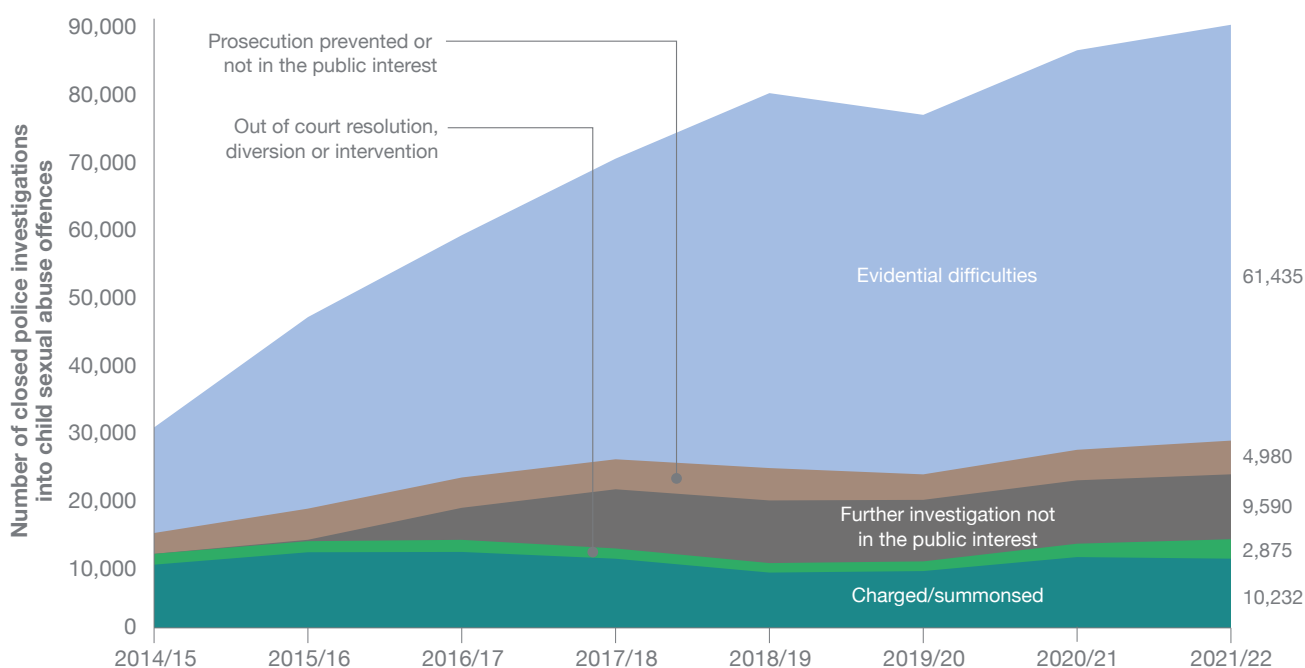
Table 2. Child sexual abuse offences by outcome in England and in Wales, 2020/21

Outcome category	England	Wales	England and Wales*
Charged/summonsed	11%	10%	11%
Out-of-court resolution (formal): Cautioned	1%	0%	1%
Out-of-court resolution (informal): Community resolution	1%	0%	1%
Diversory, educational or intervention activity	2%	1%	2%
Prosecution not in the public interest: Crown Prosecution Service decision or police decision	2%	5%	2%
Further investigation not in the public interest: police decision	10%	13%	10%
Prosecution prevented: suspect died or too ill	1%	1%	1%
Prosecution prevented: suspect under age	2%	3%	2%
Insufficient evidence (suspect identified, victim supports action)	23%	23%	23%
Insufficient evidence (suspect identified, victim does not support action)	18%	19%	18%
Insufficient evidence (suspect not identified, victim does not support action)	8%	6%	8%
Investigation complete – no suspect identified	16%	14%	16%
Responsibility for further investigation transferred to another body	6%	4%	6%
Base number (offences)	88,653	5,943	94,646

Source: Home Office (2022a: 'Crime Outcomes open data, year ending March 2022'). Police-recorded crime includes non-recent cases. Updated in October 2022.

* 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 14. Crime outcomes for child sexual abuse offences in England and Wales, 2014/15–2021/22



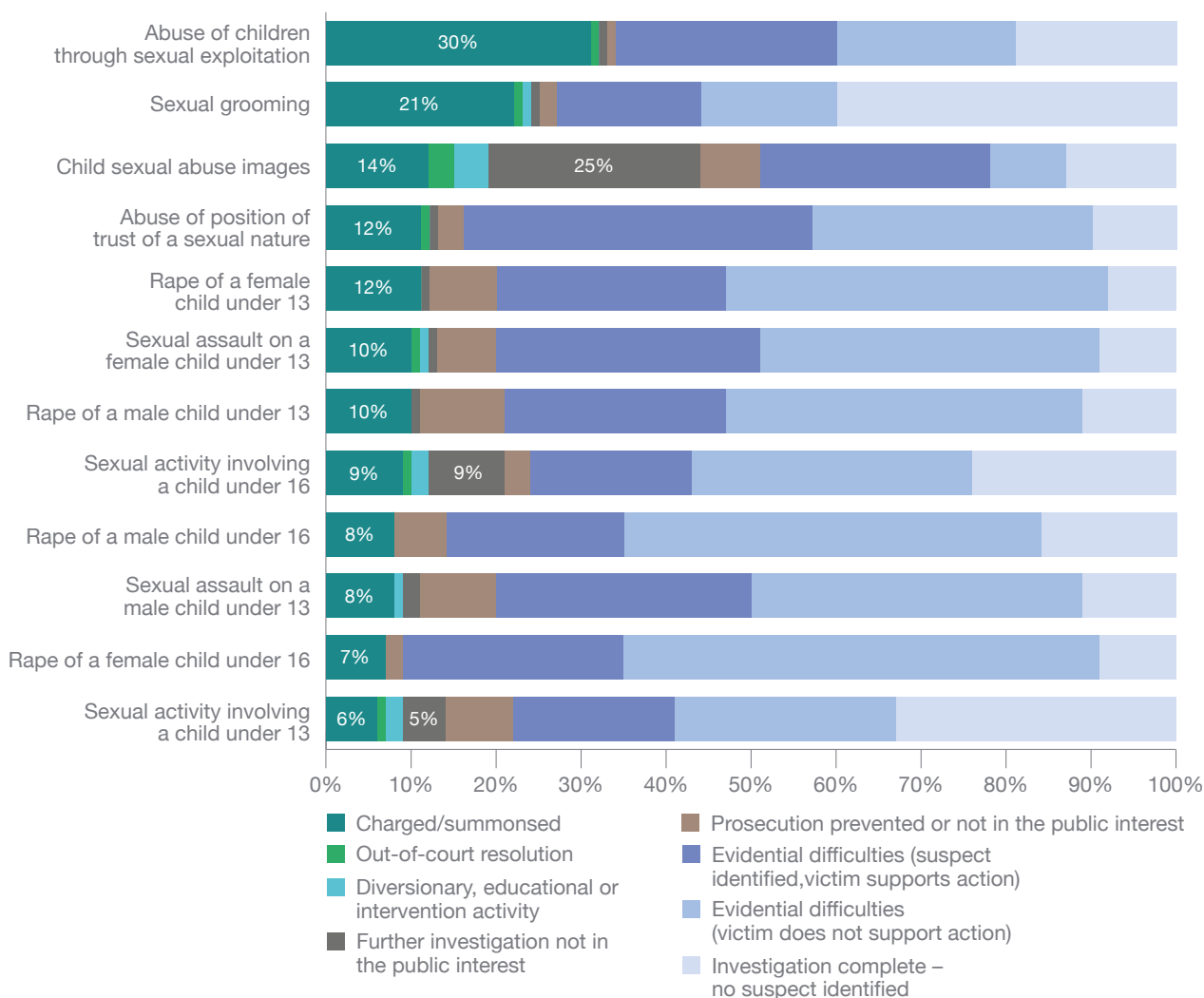
Source: Home Office (2022a: 'Crime Outcomes open data, years ending March 2015–2022'). Updated in October 2022. Excludes transferred cases. Police-recorded crime includes non-recent cases. The 'Further investigation not in the public interest' category was introduced in 2015/16.

The eight years' worth of data since the new framework for the police to record investigation outcomes was introduced (Home Office, 2016b) shows that, against the backdrop of a large increase in the number of offences dealt with by the police, the number of investigations ending with a charge, a summons, an out-of-court resolution or a diversion has remained flat (see Figure 14). During the same period, the number of cases closing because of evidential difficulties has increased fourfold. As a result, the proportion of investigations ending with a charge or summons has dropped from nearly one-third (32%) in 2014/15 to one-ninth (11%) in 2021/22.

The Office for National Statistics (2018a) has suggested 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. It is also likely to be attributable to the increasing use of the recently introduced outcome "further investigation not in the public interest" for suspects aged under 18.

Investigation outcomes vary considerably by the type of child sexual abuse offence. Figure 15 shows that one in three (32%) investigations relating to 'abuse through sexual exploitation' ended with either a charge, a summons, an out of court resolution or a diversionary activity in 2021/22. These outcomes were also seen in almost one in four (23%) investigations into sexual grooming and one in five (20%) investigations into sexual grooming and one in five (20%) investigations into child sexual abuse image offences.

Figure 15. Crime outcomes by child sexual abuse offence category in England and Wales, 2021/22



Source: Home Office (2022a: 'Crime Outcomes open data, year ending March 2022'). Updated October 2022. Police-recorded crime includes non-recent cases. Excludes transferred cases. Child sexual abuse image offences are classified as 'obscene publications' in police data.

Offences relating to sexual activity, sexual assault and rape were far less likely to result in one of these outcomes; in each of these eight offence categories, between 76% and 91% of investigations were closed owing to evidential difficulties of some sort. These findings have 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 in four investigations into child sexual abuse image offences concluded with a police decision that further investigation was not in the public interest: this proportion 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. The same outcome was applied in a significant minority of investigations into sexual activity offences (5%–9%), suggesting the involvement of under-18s in these offences.

Outcomes of police investigations: definitions of key outcomes

In April 2013, the Home Office introduced a new framework for police forces to record the 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 is applied in accordance with guidance from the College of Policing (2020b).

Prosecution not in the 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.

Not Prosecution not in the public interest (police decision). The police decide that formal action against the offender is not in the public interest.

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.

Prosecution prevented – suspect under age. A named suspect is identified but is below the age of criminal responsibility.

Prosecution prevented – suspect too ill.

A named suspect is identified but is too ill (physical or mental health) to prosecute.

Prosecution prevented – suspect dead.

A named suspect is identified but is dead.

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.

Evidential difficulties: suspect identified, victim does not support further action:

A named suspect is identified but the victim does not support (or has withdrawn support from) police 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.

Diversionary, educational or intervention activity, resulting from the crime report, has been undertaken and it is not in the public interest to take any further action. This is a new outcome introduced in April 2019, and its use is voluntary for police forces.

Sources: Home Office (2016b); Home Office (2022c).

4.1.4 Time taken to investigate and charge sexual offences

The Home Office publishes information about the median number of days taken for an outcome to be assigned to a recorded offence on police data systems (Home Office, 2022c). However, this data is available only for sexual offences overall and for rape offences separately, and it is not broken down by whether the victim was a child or an adult. The data shows that, in 2021/22, sexual offences overall took a median of 62 days to progress from recording of the offence to an outcome; and rape offences took 94 days (Home Office, 2022c: Table 3.1).

Investigations that resulted in a charge or summons took far longer. The median time from recording a sexual offence to charging a suspect was 261 days, and for rape offences it was 467 days – a year and three months. In comparison, it took just 31 days for a diversionary activity to be recorded as an outcome of a sexual offence investigation, and 69 days for a rape investigation to be concluded with a diversionary activity (Home Office, 2022c: Table 3.3).

4.2 Legal decisions

In 2022 the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) started to publish data on:

- ▶ the number of child sexual abuse cases passed from the police to its central or regional divisions for legal decisions on whether to charge the offence, take no further action or recommend an out-of-court disposal
- ▶ the timeliness of charging decisions.

This data shows that, in 2021/22, the CPS recorded legal decisions relating to 5,542 individuals suspected of child sexual abuse offences (Crown Prosecution Service, 2022, Table AR5). In 83% of these cases (4,578), a decision was made to charge the defendant.

On average it took 108 days – around three-and-a-half months – from the first submission by the police for the charging decision to be issued (Crown Prosecution Service, 2022, Table AR5)



On average in 2021/22, it took 108 days from the police's first submission of a child sexual abuse offence for the CPS to issue a charging decision.



4.3 Court proceedings

In the year to December 2021, 7,389 defendants were proceeded against in court for offences related to child sexual abuse, and 6,134 defendants were convicted (Ministry of Justice, 2022a).

While this represented a 6% increase in the number of court proceedings brought in relation to child sexual abuse compared to 2020, the overall number of court proceedings brought for all offences rose by 16%. That overall rise was attributed by the Ministry of Justice (2022b) to the criminal justice system's continued recovery following a steep decline in 2020 caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Because serious offences had been prioritised first, leading to a sharp rise in prosecutions of child sexual abuse offences in 2020 (see Figure 16 below), it is likely that in 2021 the criminal justice system moved on to the backlog of crimes less likely to result in a custodial sentence. The Ministry of Justice viewed the trends in 2021 as partly reflecting the pandemic response but also continuing the trends that were apparent prior to the pandemic.

4.3.1 Conviction ratio

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 2021, the overall conviction ratio for prosecutions related to child sexual abuse was 83%; this was its highest level since 2018, and represented a significant increase from 67% the previous year. This increase may be related to the relatively higher proportion of court proceedings relating to child sexual abuse image offences (see Figure 16 below), which are more likely to end with a conviction than contact offences (see Table 3).

There was significant variation between different groups of child sexual abuse offence: sexual activity and rape offences had far lower conviction ratios (44% and 47% respectively) than child sexual abuse image offences (97%) in 2021 (see Table 3).

The conviction ratio for sexual offences against children over 16 and adults in 2021 was lower at 68%, but this too was an increase on 54% in the previous year.

Prosecution of child sexual abuse offences

After completing their investigation, the police decide whether there is enough evidence to present the case to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). The police may already have consulted the CPS at earlier stages of the investigation, including seeking early advice on avenues to be pursued in the investigation before charge.

If the police think that the case meets the statutory tests for prosecution – that the evidence is sufficient for there to be a realistic prospect of conviction, and that a prosecution is in the public interest – they will pass the case to the CPS. The CPS will then make its own decision on whether the case meets the statutory tests. If the police and the CPS decide the tests are met, the suspect(s) will be charged with a criminal offence and 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 in a court. 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).

Table 3. Defendants prosecuted and convicted, by child sexual abuse offence category, England and Wales, 2021

Offence category	Prosecutions in 2021	Convictions in 2021	Conviction ratio
Rape of a female child under 13	283	147	52%
Rape of a male child under 13	76	40	53%
Rape of a female child under 16	540	237	44%
Rape of a male child under 16	47	24	51%
<i>Total rape prosecutions</i>	<i>946</i>	<i>448</i>	<i>47%</i>
Sexual assault of a female child under 13	863	356	41%
Sexual assault of a male child under 13	63	53	84%
<i>Total sexual assault prosecutions</i>	<i>926</i>	<i>409</i>	<i>44%</i>
Sexual activity involving a child under 13	531	396	75%
Sexual activity involving a child under 16	991	855	86%
<i>Total sexual activity prosecutions</i>	<i>1,522</i>	<i>1,251</i>	<i>82%</i>
Familial sexual offences with a child aged under 13*	16	9	56%
Familial sexual offences with a child aged 13–17*	55	48	87%
<i>Total familial sexual offence prosecutions*</i>	<i>71</i>	<i>57</i>	<i>80%</i>
Taking, permitting to be taken or making, distributing or publishing indecent photographs or pseudo photographs of children	2,819	2,723	97%
Possession of indecent photograph of a child	295	273	93%
Possession of prohibited images of children	55	63	115%
<i>Total child sexual abuse image prosecutions</i>	<i>3,169</i>	<i>3,059</i>	<i>97%</i>
Sexual grooming	499	677	136%
Child abuse through child sexual exploitation	232	180	78%
Abuse of position of trust of a sexual nature	12	13	108%
Possession of a paedophile manual	1	3	300%
Gross indecency with children (historical offence)	11	37	336%
<i>Total other child sexual abuse offence prosecutions</i>	<i>755</i>	<i>910</i>	<i>121%</i>
Total	7,389	6,134	83%

Source: Ministry of Justice (2022a). Includes defendants proceeded against for non-recent offences.

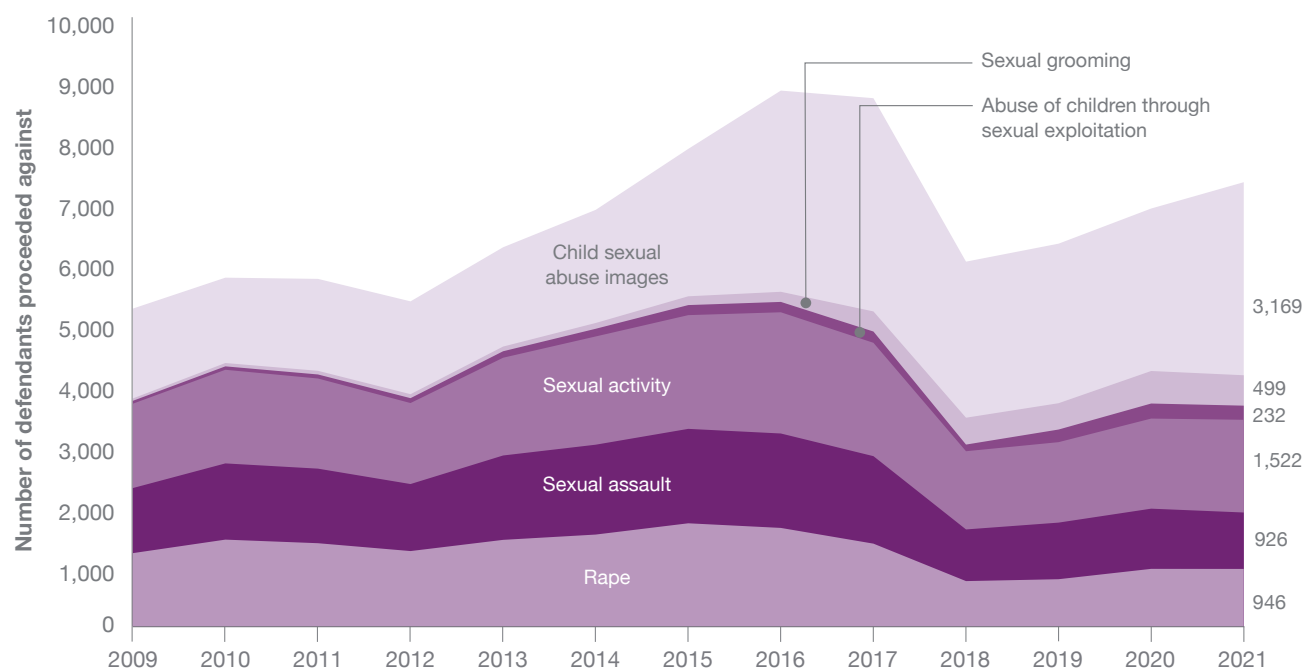
* The Ministry of Justice publishes familial sexual activity offences separately from other offences involving sexual activity with a child.

4.3.2 Trends over time

Figure 16 shows that the annual number of defendants proceeded against for child sexual abuse offences has recovered following a sharp fall during 2017 and 2018, although in 2021 it remained below its peak of 2016.

While 2021 saw an increase on the previous year in the overall number of defendants proceeded against, this was largely attributable to the increase in the prosecutions of child sexual abuse image offences (+19%); levels remained similar to those in 2020 across all other offence categories.

Figure 16. Number of defendants proceeded against for child sexual abuse offences, by offence group, 2009–2021, England and Wales



Source: Ministry of Justice (2022a). Includes defendants proceeded against for non-recent offences. Excludes offences – gross indecency/indecent assault (historical offences), abuse of a position of trust, and familial child 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.

4.3.3 Characteristics of defendants: sex

In 2021, 106 female defendants were proceeded against for child sexual abuse offences, representing just 1.5% of the 7,217 defendants whose sex was recorded. Females were most frequently prosecuted for offences relating to sexual activity with a child under 16 (26 defendants) or with a child under 13 (17), and for image offences (22). Males were most likely to be prosecuted for image offences (3,076 defendants), sexual activity with a child under 16 (941) and sexual assault against a child under 13 (893). Overall, 43% of all prosecutions of males for child sexual abuse offences related to child sexual abuse images.

The highest female-to-male ratio of defendants by far was for the offence of ‘abuse of position of trust’, although absolute numbers were low: of the 12 defendants prosecuted for this offence in 2021, half (six) were female. In contrast, females consistently accounted for 2% or less of prosecutions for most other offences. For example, females were the subject of only 13 (1%) prosecutions for sexual assault and four (1%) sexual grooming prosecutions.

A total of 70 female defendants – two-thirds of those proceeded against – were found guilty in 2021. In comparison, 84% (6,003) of male defendants were convicted. This may be explained by 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.

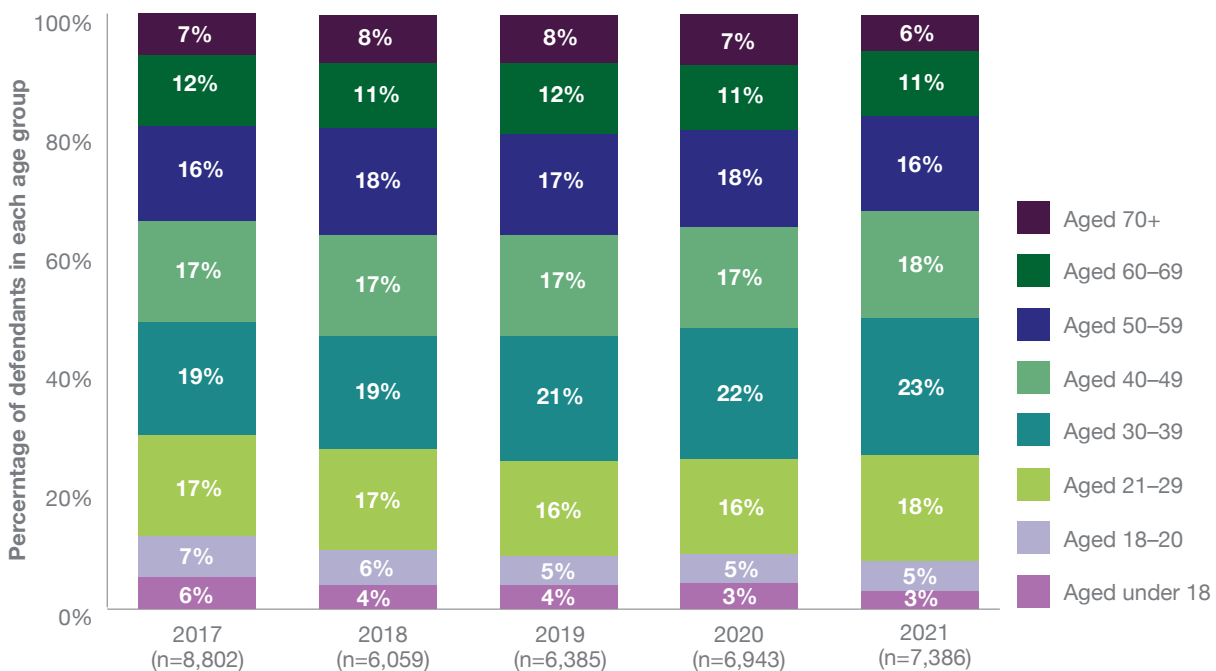
4.3.4 Characteristics of defendants: age

Figure 17 shows that, since 2017 (the first year for which detailed information on defendants' ages was published), under-18s have accounted for an ever-decreasing proportion of defendants prosecuted for child sexual abuse offences; in 2021, they represented just 3% (197) of defendants. This is part of a longer trend: the proportion also halved between 2005 and 2016, from 12% to 6% (Karsna and Kelly, 2021). Rape charges made up a third (64) of prosecutions of under-18s for child sexual abuse offences in 2021, compared to just under one in seven (946) of such prosecutions across all defendant age groups.

In 2021, the age distribution of adult defendants prosecuted for child sexual abuse offences was spread relatively evenly across the 10-year age bands up to 59 and then drops for older age groups. This pattern has been broadly consistent across the 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 65% and 63% respectively; among defendants aged 15–69, 84% were found guilty (Ministry of Justice, 2022a).

Figure 17. Defendants proceeded against for child sexual abuse offences, by age, 2017–2021, England and Wales



Source: Ministry of Justice (2022a). Includes defendants proceeded against for non-recent offences.

Only 197 defendants prosecuted for child sexual offences were aged under 18, but a third of them were prosecuted on rape charges.

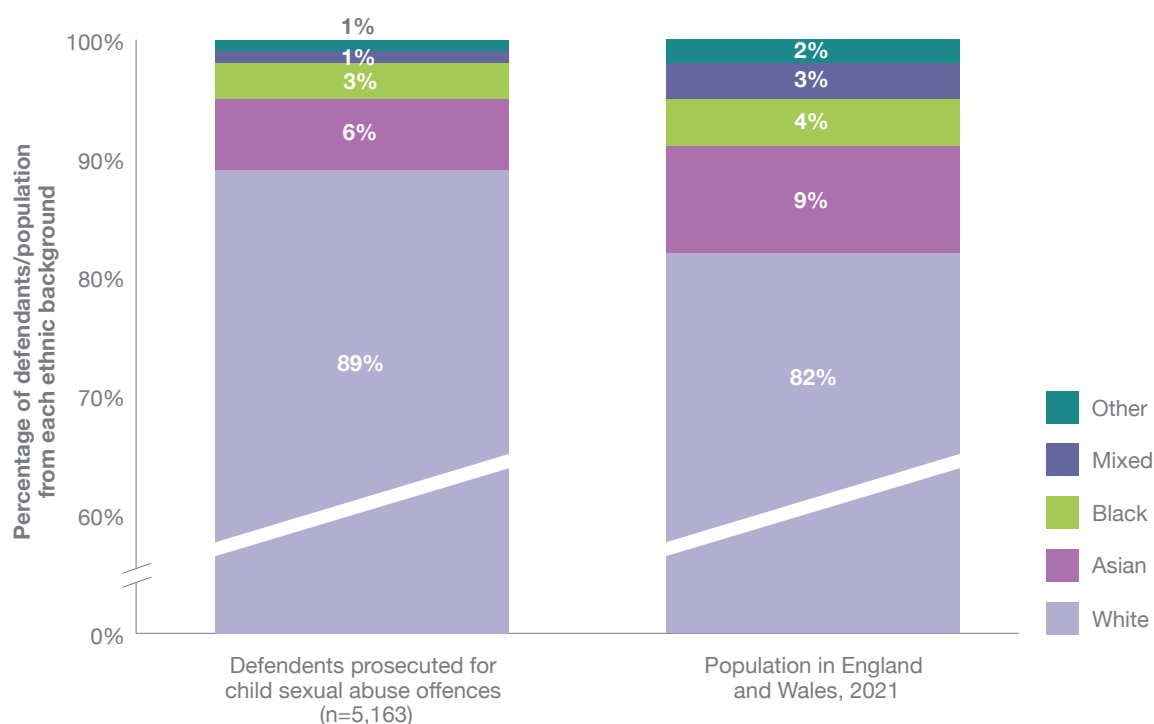
4.3.5 Characteristics of defendants: ethnicity

In the records of defendants prosecuted for child sexual abuse offences in 2021, their broad ethnic background was recorded in 70% (5,163) of cases. Among these individuals, almost nine in 10 (4,573) were White – a higher proportion than in the general population of England and Wales (see Figure 18). This is likely to be related to the overall under-identification of child sexual abuse in minority ethnic communities, and to the fact that White British defendants were more likely than any other ethnic group to be prosecuted for image offences – which accounted for more than two-fifths of child sexual abuse prosecutions in 2021 (see Figure 16 above).

The conviction ratio ranged from 62% for Asian defendants to 88% for White defendants. This too is likely to be related to the offences for which people from different ethnic backgrounds were prosecuted: image offences were more likely than most other child sexual abuse offences to result in a conviction (see Table 3 above).

High conviction rates for White defendants may reflect the fact that people from different ethnic groups tend to be prosecuted for different offences.

Figure 18. Proportion of defendants proceeded against for child sexual abuse offences and the general population, by broad ethnic group, 2021, England and Wales



Source: Ministry of Justice (2022a); Office for National Statistics (2022c). Includes defendants proceeded against for non-recent offences. Excludes defendants whose ethnicity was not recorded. People of Chinese ethnic group included under Asian. 'Other' includes Arab.

4.3.6 Sentences for child sexual abuse offences

In 2021, two-fifths (39%; 2,459) of defendants who were found guilty of child sexual abuse offences received an immediate custodial sentence, more than one-third (36%; 2,251) received a suspended sentence, and one-fifth (20%; 1,281) received a community sentence. Among under-18s found guilty, the vast majority (89%; 136) received a community sentence (e.g. unpaid work, treatment or curfew; the details of the community sentences imposed are not available).

Figure 19 shows that, in 2021, defendants sentenced for child sexual abuse image offences and sexual grooming offences were the least likely to receive an immediate custodial sentence – only around one in five – with suspended sentences being most common. Immediate custodial sentences were far more common for contact offences. The average length of a custodial sentence for child sexual abuse offences was five years and four months: this average varied from 19 months for sexual grooming offences just over 11 years for rape offences. In 2020, the average sentence length was six months shorter.

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.

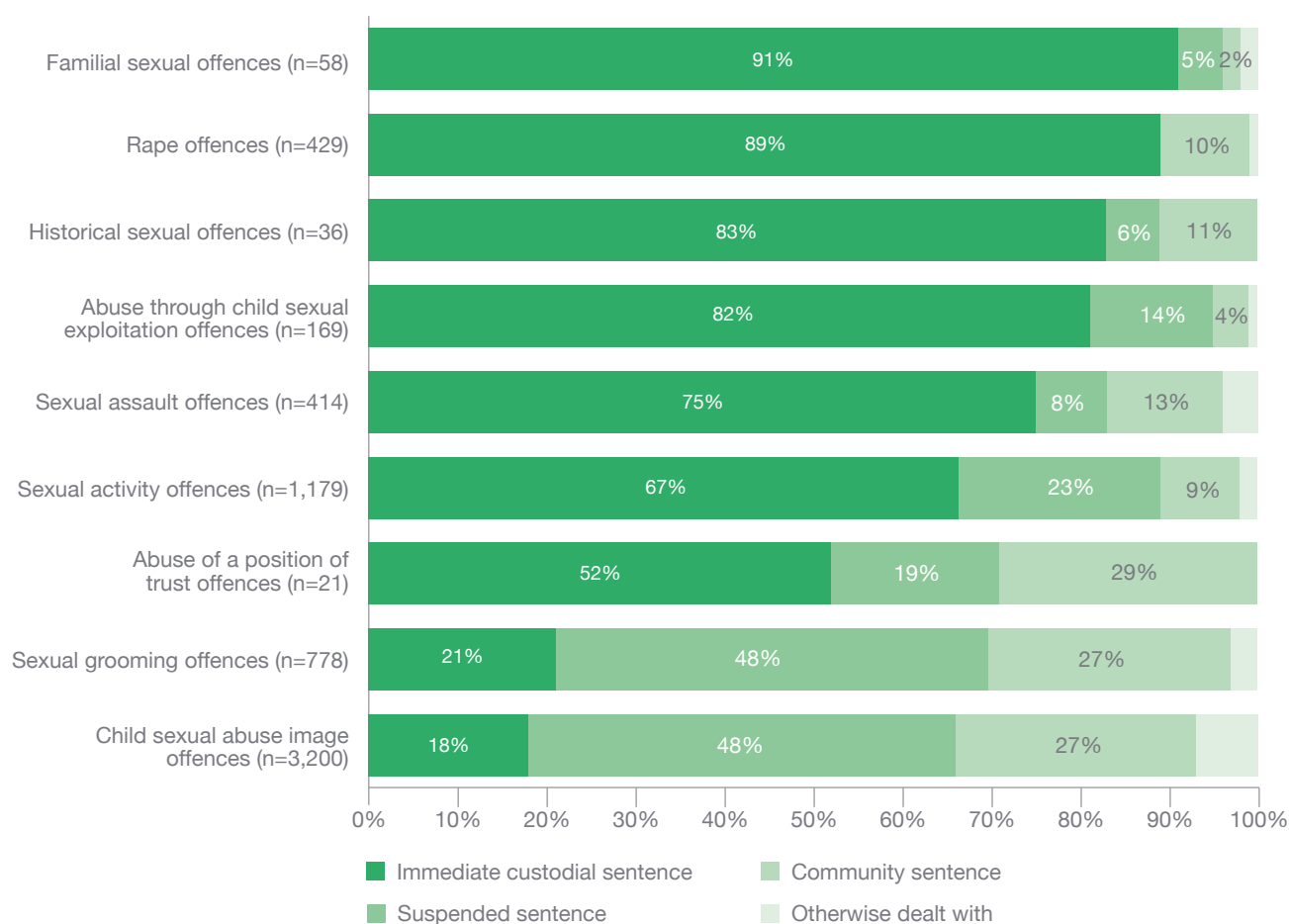
Community sentence. A community order can include one or more of the following: unpaid work, an activity or programme designed to reduce the likelihood of reoffending, a requirement not to engage in a prohibited activity, a curfew, residence only where a probation officer allows, mental health treatment, 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).

Sources: Ministry of Justice (2021).

The average custodial sentence for child sexual abuse offences was five years and four months – six months longer than in 2020.

Figure 19. Sentences imposed on convicted defendants for child sexual abuse offences, by type of sentence, 2021, England and Wales



Source: Ministry of Justice (2022a). Includes defendants proceeded against for non-recent offences.

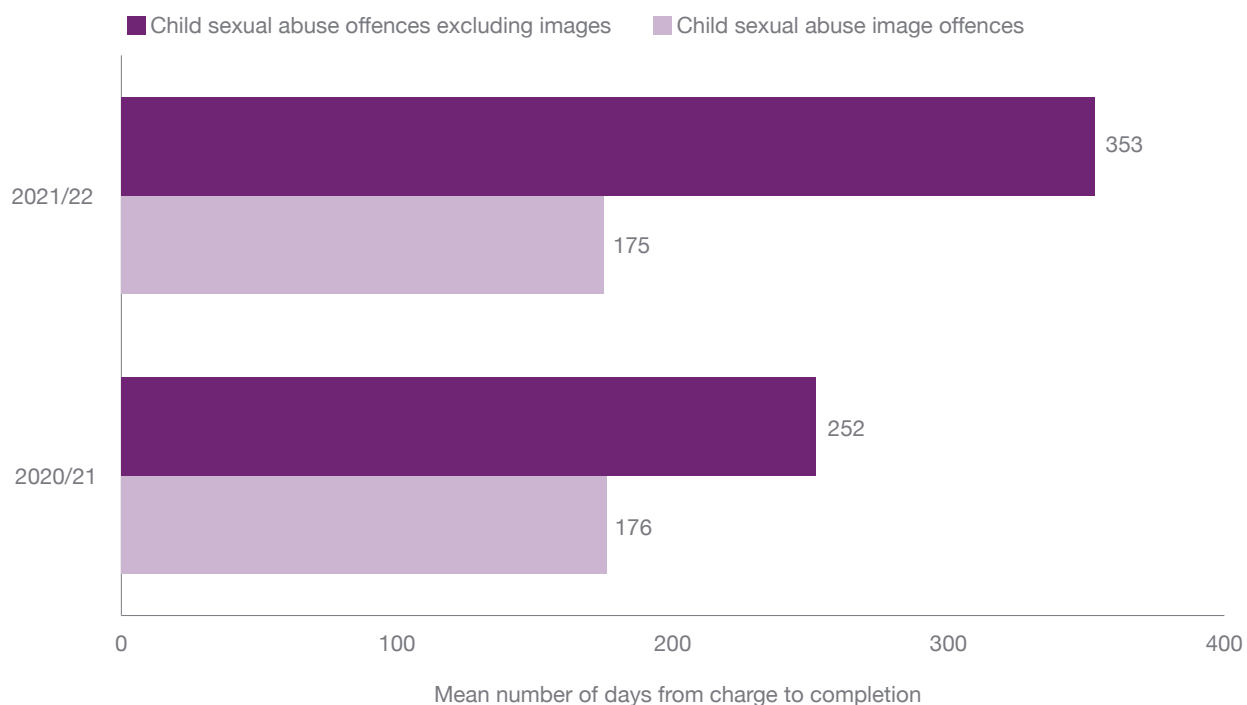
4.3.7 Time taken to prosecute child sexual abuse offences

Information on child sexual abuse related prosecution timescales is not in the public domain, but data for 2020/21 and 2021/22 was made available by the Ministry of Justice for this report. Figure 20 shows a significant increase in the time taken to prosecute the majority of child sexual abuse offences¹² in the Crown Court in 2021/22: it took on average 353 days – nearly a year – to proceed from a charge to completion in court. Compared to the previous year, the timescales lengthened by 101 days, or more than three months. Child sexual image prosecution took on average far less time – 175 days, or just under six months – to complete at court in 2021/22; this was similar to the previous year.

The Ministry of Justice has attributed the increased timescales to the backlog caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and has taken measures to support the capacity of courts to reduce prosecution timescales; these include continuing some of the additional ‘Nightingale’ courtrooms that were opened in 2021, and opening two further ‘super court rooms’ (Ministry of Justice, 2022c).

12. Including rape, sexual assault, sexual activity with child, abuse through sexual exploitation, grooming and abuse of trust offences.

Figure 20. Mean prosecution timescales from charge to completion in the Crown Court, by type of offence, 2020/21 and 2021/22, England and Wales



Source: Ministry of Justice (2022d). Child sexual abuse offences excluding image offences: $n=2,480$ (2020/21) and $3,276$ (2021/22). Child sexual abuse image offences: $n=1,732$ (2020/21) and $1,960$ (2021/22). Excludes prosecutions for which timescales were not recorded. Includes defendants proceeded against for non-recent offences.

The Ministry of Justice has attributed the increased prosecution timescales to the backlog caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

5. Sexual assault referral centres in England

Apart from the data released to the CSA Centre for this report, no official data on health agencies' response to child sexual abuse is regularly 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); this collects data from all 47 sexual assault referral centres (SARCs) in England about the children with whom they have been in contact. It includes these children's demographic details – age, gender and ethnicity – and the sources of referrals (NHS England, 2020a).¹³

What are sexual assault referral centres?

A sexual assault referral centre (SARC) is a designated space for medical examinations to take place following a suspicion or disclosure of a sexual assault. In any situation where the sexual abuse of a child is suspected or has been disclosed, a medical examination should be considered.

A medical examination may offer the opportunity to look for supportive evidence and gather forensic samples, but it also allows for a holistic conversation and assessment of the child's general wellbeing and health needs. 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.

Source: Cutland (2019).

5.1 Reach of sexual assault referral centres

The 47 SARCs in England recorded a total of 8,213 initial contacts with under-18s in 2021/22; this is a 13% increase on the previous year (see Figure 21). Medical examinations made up one-third (34%) of these contacts, as in 2020/21.

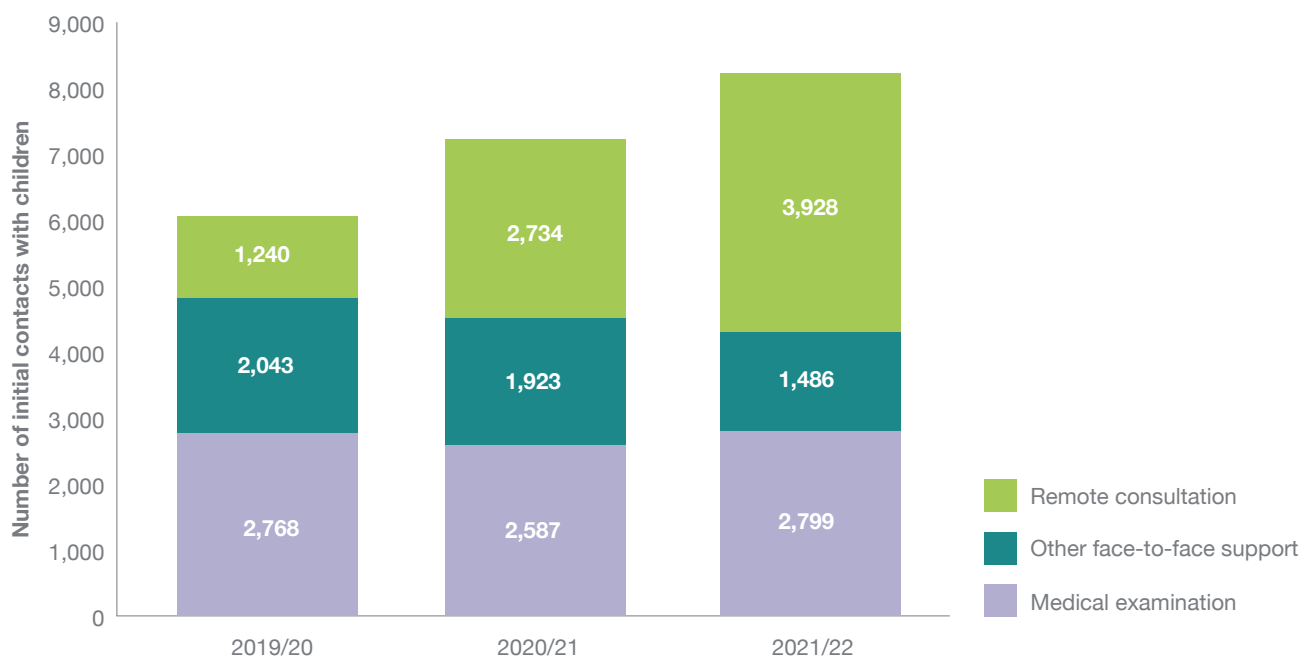
The overall increase was almost entirely attributable to a substantial rise in remotely delivered consultations,¹⁴ which formed an increasingly significant way of contact between SARCs and children: just under half (48%) of all contacts happened remotely in 2021/22, up from one in five only two years earlier. There was a corresponding overall decline in face-to-face support sessions not involving a medical examination, which accounted for fewer than one in five (18%) contacts with children in 2021/22, down from one-third two years ago.

The use of remote consultations varied widely across England's seven health regions, accounting for between 10% and 73% of all contacts with under-18s in each region. Face to face support sessions not involving a medical examination ranged regionally from 7% to 33% of contacts.

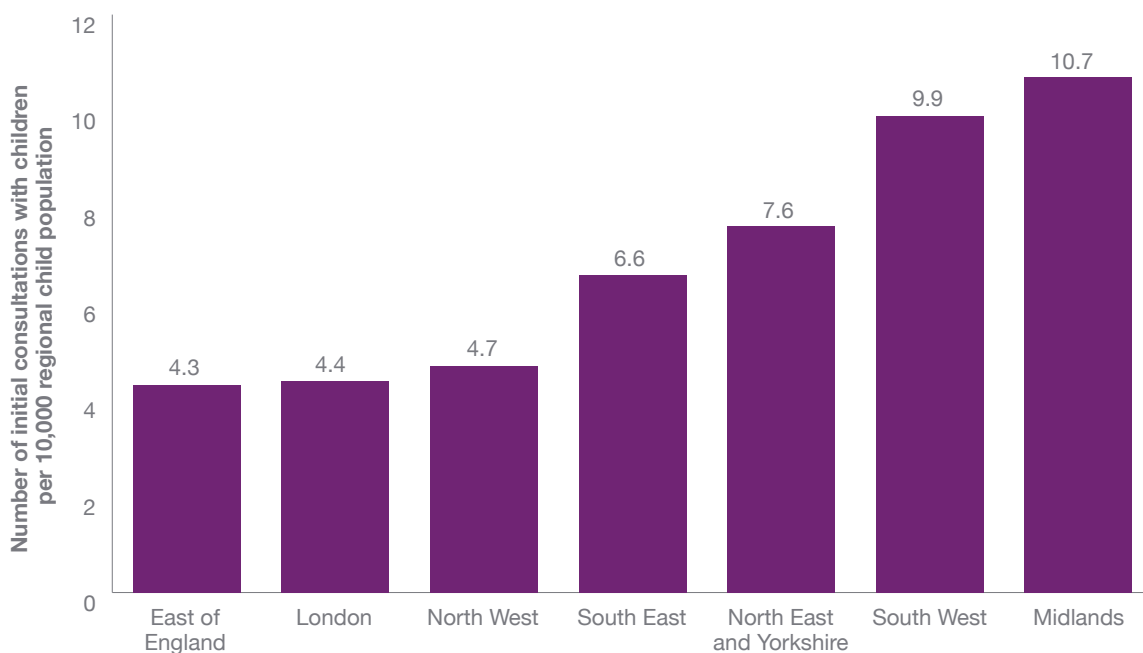
The number of remotely delivered consultations rose substantially, but their use varied widely across England's seven health regions.

13. Wales has eight further SARCs but does not collate such data centrally.

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

Figure 21. SARCs' initial contacts with under-18s, 2019/20–2021/22, England

Source: NHS England (2022a, 2022b, 2020b).

Figure 22. Initial consultations with SARCs per 10,000 child population, by region, 2021/22, England

Source: NHS England (2022a); Office for National Statistics (2022a). Population figures (aged 0–17) are mid-year estimates.

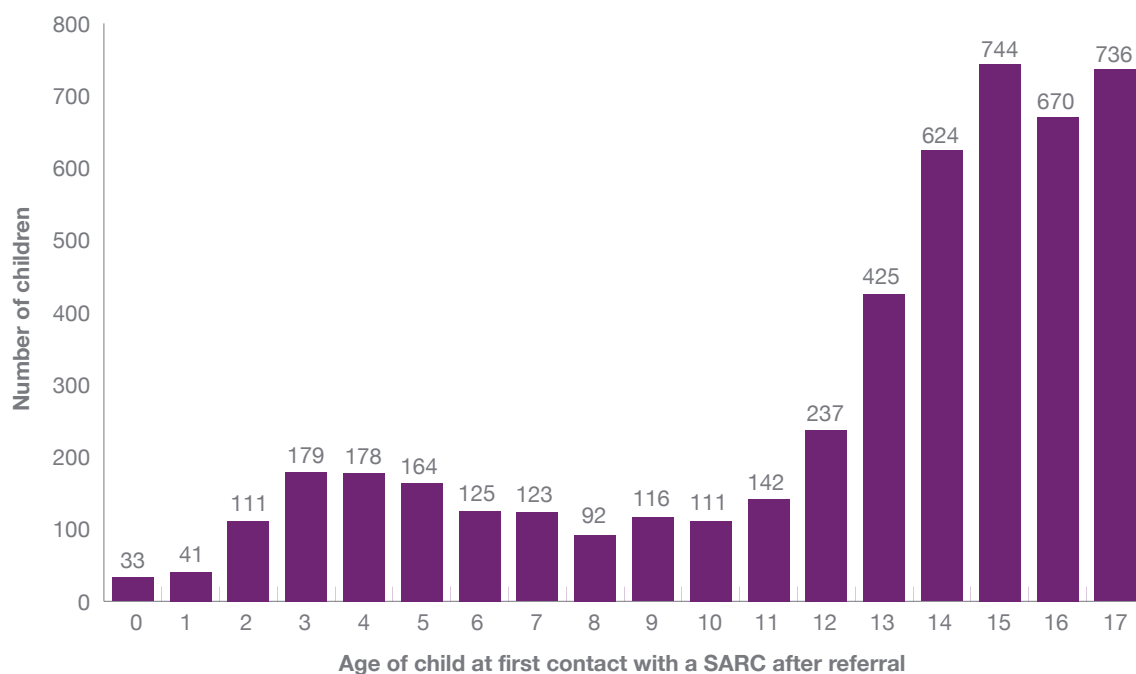
Comparing the number of under-18s seen by the SARCs in each region with that region's child population, substantial differences are evident in SARCs' reach. Consultations with under-18s ranged from four per 10,000 child population in London and the East of England to nearly 11 per 10,000 child population in the Midlands (see Figure 22). Compared to last year, the consultations ratio increased in the Midlands (+49%) and London (+50%), but decreased in the East of England (-28%).

Seven out of eight (87%) children who were in contact with SARC's were female. Comparisons with other statutory data indicate that SARCs reach a far lower proportion of boys than local authorities or police forces (see section 3.3.1). The gender profile of children seen by SARCs in 2021/22 was relatively consistent across the regions, and similar to the previous two years.

Figure 23 shows that, as in the previous two years, 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 3–5 age group and a much higher peak between the ages of 13 and 17. Overall, children aged 13–17 accounted for two-thirds (66%) of all consultations with under-18s. The age profile of children at the time of their first consultation was broadly similar across all the regions of England.

The Midlands and London saw the largest increases in the number of SARC consultations with under-18s as a proportion of the regional child population.

Figure 23. Under-18s making initial contact with SARCs, by age, 2021/22, England

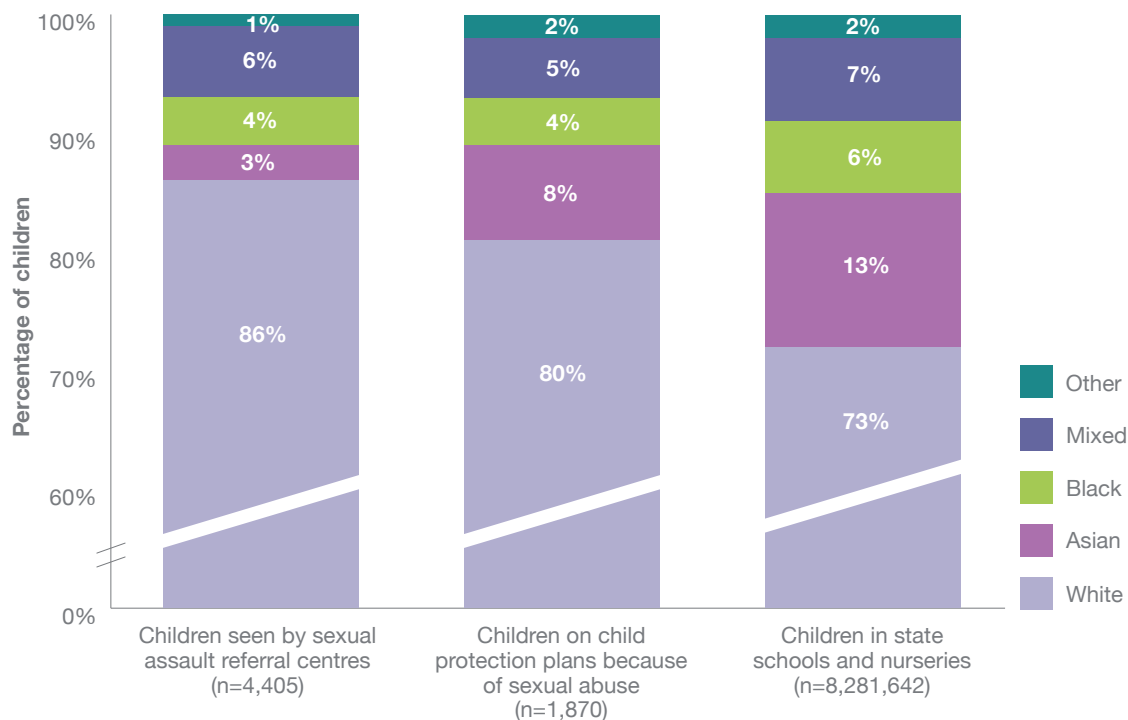


Sources: NHS England (2022a). Excludes children whose age was not stated.

A large majority (82%) of children in contact with SARCs in 2021/22 were from White British backgrounds, and 4% were from other White backgrounds (see Figure 24). Overall, only 14% of children in contact with SARCs were from Black, Asian, mixed or other ethnic backgrounds, far below the proportion of children from these backgrounds in state schools and nurseries (27%) and supported by local authority children's services through child protection plans because of sexual abuse (19%). Children from Asian backgrounds, who comprise 13% of England's state school population (Department for Education, 2022b), accounted for just 3% of SARC attendees. SARCs' under-reach to children from minority ethnic backgrounds, and in particular to Asian children, has been consistent across the three years for which this data is available.

SARCs' under-reach to children from minority ethnic backgrounds has been consistent across the past three years.

Figure 24. Under-18s making initial contact with SARCs, by ethnic background, 2021/22, England

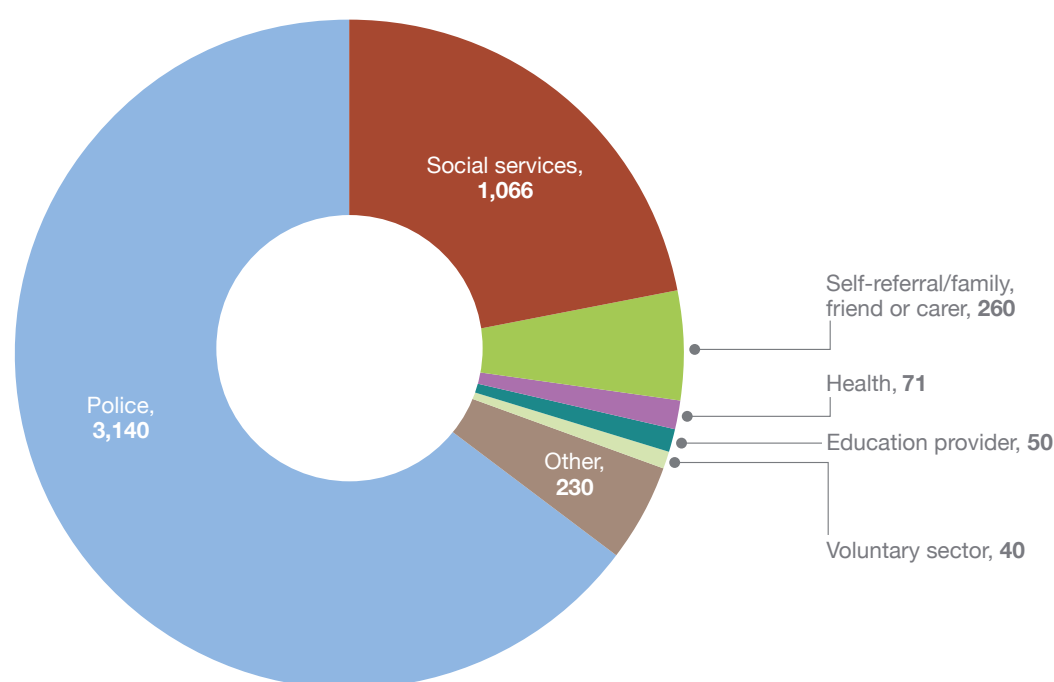


Sources: NHS England (2022a); Department for Education (2022a: Table A5, year ending 31 March 2022); Department for Education (2022b: 'Pupil characteristics – ethnicity and language'). Excludes children whose ethnicity was not stated.

5.2 Sources of referrals

SARCIP is the only centrally stored dataset to include data on the sources of referrals to a service. Following the pattern from the previous two years, police accounted for by far the highest share of referrals: two-thirds of contacts with under-18s were made following a referral from the police (see Figure 25). Just over one in five (22%) referrals came from local authority children's services. All other agency referrals – health, education or voluntary sector – accounted for just 1% each. Self-referrals or referrals from family and friends accounted for 5% of the total, and another 5% came from other sources.

Figure 25. Sources of referrals of under-18s to SARCs, 2021/22, England



Source: NHS England (2022a). 'Health' includes Accident & Emergency departments, GPs, and genitourinary medicine/contraception and sexual health clinics. Excludes cases where this information was not provided.

6. Data improvements recommended by independent reviews in 2022

During 2022, four significant reviews made recommendations for improvements to the collection, analysis and use of child sexual abuse and wider child protection data in order to improve service responses. In February 2023 the UK Government published a strategy and consultation in response to two of these reviews. This chapter considers the implications of the reviews' recommendations, and the Government response, for agencies.

The four reviews were:

- ▶ the final report of the independent review of children's social care (MacAlister, 2022), set up in 2021 as a fundamental review of the children's social care system in England
- ▶ the review by the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel into the deaths of Arthur Labinjo Hughes and Star Hobson (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2022), with findings relevant to children's services in England
- ▶ the final report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (Jay et al, 2022), established in 2015 to consider the extent to which institutions had failed in their duty of care to protect children from sexual abuse in England and Wales, the extent to which those failings had since been addressed, and further action needed
- ▶ the interim report from Operation Soteria Bluestone (Stanko, 2022), a co-produced academic-police research and improvement programme set up in response to the UK Government's End-to-End Rape Review in England and Wales to improve the criminal justice responses to adult rape (HM Government, 2021).

6.1 Data recommendations from the four reviews

6.1.1 *The independent review of children's social care*

In May 2022, the independent review of children's social care concluded with a final report (MacAlister, 2022). Although none of its 80 recommendations refers specifically to child sexual abuse, many have potential implications for the collection and use of child sexual abuse data by local authority children's services.

- ▶ The review called for the Department for Education to develop a proactive strategy for the better use of data in children's social care. It noted that, although local authorities gather large amounts of data for annual returns to national government, insufficient use is made of this to inform local and national decision-making. It recommended a full review of national data collection to avoid duplication, minimise burden to local authorities, and ensure the data collected is more meaningful. The review highlighted a lack of data collection on "perpetrators of abuse and extra familial harms" and a need for greater focus on regional variation; both issues have been raised consistently by the CSA Centre in relation to child sexual abuse.
- ▶ The review noted that the market for local case management systems was "not functioning effectively", with 152 local authorities individually commissioning two major data system providers. It highlighted "financial underspend" on data systems and a lack of knowledge about how to procure systems that meet local areas' needs. It called for national efforts to "reimagine" these systems in order to reduce the time spent recording information, and to make data analysis more automatic so it supports decision-making on individual and strategic levels.

6.1.2 The national review into the murders of Arthur Labinjo Hughes and Star Hobson

Also published in May 2022, the report of the review into the circumstances leading to the tragic deaths of Arthur Labinjo Hughes and Star Hobson (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2022) made eight recommendations, with one specifically focusing on data:

- ▶ Like the independent review of children's social care, this review noted that there was "huge scope" for better use of data and technological solutions in child protection, and an urgent need to upgrade the digital landscape. It recommended that the Secretary of State for Education convene a task and finish group of data and technological experts to answer the question: "How can we transform our use of data to better protect children?", and to report back to the Secretary of State with findings on the scale, pace and nature of change required.

UK Government response

In response to these two reviews, the UK Government has published a strategy and consultation as "the first step towards achieving once in a generation reform" of children's social care. The *Stable Homes, Built on Love* strategy (Department for Education, 2023) sets out a two-year programme across six "pillars of reform".

Pillar 6 outlines plans for a "system that continuously learns and improves, and makes better use of evidence and data". Related actions include the creation of a Children's Social Care Dashboard alongside a national outcomes framework; a data strategy to be published by the end of 2023; and a revised local authority funding formula for children and young people's services based on needs.

A consultation on the strategy is open until 11 May 2023.

6.1.3 The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse


October 2022 saw the conclusion of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA). Its final report (Jay et al, 2022) drew on findings from throughout the Inquiry and made 20 recommendations for reform.

The report reflected on the difficulties in measuring the scale and nature of child sexual abuse. It concluded that the lack of reliable prevalence data on child sexual abuse in England and Wales impeded the ability of agencies and society more generally to prevent and respond appropriately to such abuse.


Regarding agency data, IICSA highlighted issues similar to the findings from the independent review of children's social care. It highlighted problems with the detail, consistency and comparability of collected data, suggesting that this impeded agencies' ability to make the best strategic and operational decisions for protecting children from child sexual abuse.

The report highlighted two specific issues regarding agency data on child sexual abuse:

- ▶ Agencies' operational data cannot be brought together in a way that aids the overall understanding of the problem and response, because agencies collect data in disparate ways that are not comparable.
- ▶ While agencies may have operational intelligence or risk assessment information about the circumstances in which child sexual abuse has reportedly taken place, this information is not recorded in a way that can be measured.



The final IICSA report endorsed the development of a 'single core dataset' for social care and criminal justice agencies.



The first of 20 recommendations in the report focused on the need to improve agency data, and endorsed the development of a “single core dataset” for social care and criminal justice agencies, which would enable agencies to record information consistently about the victims and perpetrators of child sexual abuse and the settings and contexts in which such abuse occurs:

“The Inquiry recommends that the UK government and the Welsh Government improve data collected by children’s social care and criminal justice agencies concerning child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation by the introduction of one single core data set covering both England and Wales.

In order to facilitate this, these agencies should produce consistent and compatible data about child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation which includes:

- *the characteristics of victims and alleged perpetrators of child sexual abuse, including age, sex and ethnicity;*
- *factors that make victims more vulnerable to child sexual abuse or exploitation; and*
- *the settings and contexts in which child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation occur.*

Data concerning child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation should be compiled and published on a regular basis. This should be capable of being collated nationally as well as at regional or local levels.” (Jay et al, 2022:148)

6.1.4 Operation Soteria Bluestone

In December 2022, Operation Soteria Bluestone published its interim report (Stanko, 2022), summarising findings from its first year of research in four police force areas. During the second year, the ambition is for these findings to enable a “wholesale transformation” in the way police respond to rape and other sexual offences through the development of a National Operating Model.

The interim report highlighted significant issues concerning the way the four police forces recorded and made use of data on rape and other sexual offences:

- A significant number of records were missing, or contained incorrectly entered data and incorrectly applied investigation outcome codes. In one force, 62% of sexual offence records lacked information on the victim–suspect relationship; in another, a similar proportion missed information on the victim’s ethnicity. Other characteristics, such as disability, were rarely recorded systematically. Suspect data was frequently incomplete, including in cases where suspects were known.
- Valuable information about offences and investigations was held in narrative logs or attachments rather than in structured, searchable fields, and was therefore much harder to analyse systematically. All four police forces had multiple data systems in use and poor links between them; IT systems were “not designed” to support strategic analysis.
- Not enough priority was given to data quality and consistency. The review found a lack of guidance for officers on how to enter data in case records, and a lack of supervision and monitoring of how and whether data had been entered. In addition, lack of resources and heavy workloads contributed to poor-quality and inconsistent data.

The review recommended a better use of force-level data analysis, with the aspiration that police forces would become “data-led, smart organisations”. It noted that “[t]he need for police forces to understand their data on ... recorded rape and other sexual offences is a fundamental principle in the emerging National Operating Model”.

6.2 What do these four reports mean for data improvements?

6.2.1 A cross-departmental response to child sexual abuse and child protection data improvements

Despite focusing on different agencies and subject areas, the four reports highlighted similar issues: all four found that limitations in the current collection and use of data were impeding strategic and operational responses. This focus of attention provides an opportunity to secure meaningful improvements in the wider child protection and criminal justice system, including a transformation in the collection and use of data to improve prevention of and response to child sexual abuse.

Responding to the recommendations set out in the four reports falls to different government departments: while the Department for Education has responded to the independent review of children's social care and the review by the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, the Home Office is responsible for responding to the IICSA report and also leads on the actions from Operation Soteria Bluestone. The high level of consistency in the findings on data presents an opportunity for a cross-government response.

Without cross-government and cross-agency coordination and collaboration on shaping the responses to these recommendations, there is a risk of perpetuating the inconsistent, patchy and out-of-date data landscape that provides only a partial and limited understanding of agencies' identification of and response to child sexual abuse in England and Wales.

The four reports make overlapping recommendations, which have implications for the capacity of statutory agencies and individual professionals to make better decisions about how to prevent, protect children from and respond to child sexual abuse.

Two key gaps are repeated: the absence of up-to-date prevalence data on child sexual abuse (as highlighted in IICSA's final report), and the need for improvements to the data collected by agencies (including the analysis and use of that data, a consistent theme across all four reviews).

6.2.2 Prevalence survey

The absence of a regular national prevalence survey of child sexual abuse continues to hamper response to that abuse. Without a national prevalence survey, strategic decisions on prioritisation are being made with no clear understanding of the current scale and nature of child sexual abuse in England and Wales. As we stated in our 2021 assessment of the scale and nature of child sexual abuse (Karsna and Kelly, 2021), a commitment is needed from the UK Government to a regular national survey of child sexual abuse.

6.2.3 Agency data improvements

Since its inception, the CSA Centre has highlighted the need for, and the benefits to be realised from, improvements to the quality and consistency of child sexual abuse data. More consistent and comparable data is a crucial underpinning component in tackling child sexual abuse and, ultimately, protecting children:

- ▶ Consistent, comprehensive and comparable data can inform the development of approaches to the prevention, disruption and identification of abuse. Understanding the extent of child sexual abuse, who is affected by it, and where and when it happens, is crucial for the development of responses and services that are appropriate to need.
- ▶ Identification of changing patterns of abuse – in relation to online or other contexts, for example – can help equip agencies with the right information and tools. Being able to identify changes in incidence and emerging risks to different groups of children makes it possible for services to respond to these changes.
- ▶ Robust information can help to determine the most appropriate allocation of resources.

All four of the reviews above highlight the need to improve the collection and use of data within child protection and criminal justice systems. In its response to two of the reviews (Department for Education, 2023), the UK Government has committed to publishing a data strategy by the end of 2023, setting out a long-term plan for transforming data in children's social care.

The CSA Centre has previously undertaken considerable work to scope out what a core dataset could look like and how it could be implemented (see box, right). This material has been published and is available to any agency or local area that wishes to consider improvements to the consistency and usability of the data it collects. Our research has found that much of the data which is desirable and highlighted by some of the reviews above is often collected in narrative form in case files – but it is not currently in extractable form and does not use consistent definitions within agencies, let alone across agencies. There is scope and potential to make significant improvements to the data collected and its use.

Although some individual agencies recognise the gaps and inconsistencies in their data and would like to make improvements, the costs of making changes to data systems locally can be considerable. This, too, was highlighted in the reviews. Such development work requires prioritisation and allocation of resources: both staff time and costs. The cost of amending the data systems used by statutory agencies on an individual basis mean that the necessary improvements will only be met with leadership from central government agencies, mandating improvements and additions to the core data currently collected.

It is necessary and appropriate that different agencies collect and report on different information about concerns and incidence of child sexual abuse, yet great strides would be made if common definitions and categories were used and if more use was made of the information that is collected by agencies and yet not stored in extractable form. In addition, as this report has demonstrated, official data is currently available from children's services, criminal justice agencies and (to an extent) from sexual assault referral centres in health, yet no use is made of the data that could be collected from education settings – where most children spend significant amounts of time. Yet no review has highlighted the need to involve education and health agencies in the development of improved data collection on child sexual abuse.

The CSA Centre core dataset

In 2017, the CSA Centre convened a national expert working group to support the development of its first scoping report on measuring the scale and nature of child sexual abuse. To improve the quality and consistency of the data on child sexual abuse that organisations collect in the delivery of their services, professionals providing expert input to this working group suggested that the CSA Centre should develop a 'core dataset': a recommended list of information that organisations responding to child sexual abuse should be collecting. The professionals suggested that the core dataset should include data on the victim, the suspected perpetrator, the context of the abuse, and the service response.

In response to this recommendation, the CSA Centre developed and piloted the CSA 'data collection template' – a set of core items of data which all organisations responding to child sexual abuse are recommended to collect. The template also sets out how the data should be categorised, so that information can be recorded systematically and then extracted from data systems and reported in a standard format.

A practical guide to using the data collection template to help agencies improve their data on child sexual abuse (Karsna, 2019) is available at:

<https://doi.org/10.47117/CIVS9676>



Some agencies recognise the gaps and inconsistencies in their data, but the costs of changing data systems locally can be considerable.



7. Conclusions

The year 2021/22 saw some increases in the volume of child sexual abuse identified by agencies:

- ▶ For the first time ever, police recorded more than 100,000 child sexual abuse offences in England and Wales. This increase was noticeable across most types of child sexual abuse offences, including rape, sexual assault and image offences. The number of defendants prosecuted for child sexual abuse offences also increased.
- ▶ Local authorities in England identified sexual abuse as a concern in nearly 34,000 assessments of children – the highest level since the introduction of this dataset in 2014/15. Around one in 10 assessments recorded either child sexual abuse or child sexual exploitation concerns.
- ▶ The number of under-18s who received a consultation from a sexual assault referral centre in England also reached its highest point since this data was made available three years ago: more than 8,200 initial contacts with children were recorded in 2021/22.

In our view, the increase in identification of child sexual abuse concerns is likely to be the result of a combination of factors, including heightened awareness of concerns following campaigns such as Everyone's Invited (Ferguson, 2021), increased focus on risks of hidden harms during COVID-19 lockdowns; and greater priority given to identifying these concerns as children became visible to services again post lockdowns.

While this represents a positive step towards greater identification of child sexual abuse, it remains the case that far more children are sexually abused in England and Wales than are identified by the child protection and criminal justice systems. There continues to be a large gap between estimates of prevalence – that at least one in 10 children are sexually abused before the age of 16 – and the numbers recorded in official data.

There remains a concerning element of 'postcode lottery' in agencies' activity: where children live affects how likely it is that their sexual abuse will be identified and responded to. Variations in levels of child sexual abuse recorded in different local authority and police force areas are significant. Regional variation, and the need to understand the underlying reasons for it, were also highlighted in the two major reviews that published in 2022: the first focusing on the police response to sexual offences (Stanko, 2022) and the second on reviewing children's social care (MacAlister, 2022). It is important that the momentum created by these reviews is sustained to better understand this concerning variation through local analysis and response.

There is a concerning element of 'postcode lottery': where a child lives affects how likely it is that their sexual abuse will be identified and responded to.

As more cases of child sexual abuse have been identified, the time taken to investigate and prosecute these offences has increased. In 2021/22 the median time for the police to reach a charging decision following a report of sexual abuse was 261 days – eight-and-a-half months. It then took a further 353 days – nearly a year – on average for an offence involving contact child sexual abuse to reach a conclusion in the Crown Court. This means there was typically a wait of nearly two years between reporting child sexual abuse to the police and the case concluding in court. Better use of data has enabled clearer analysis of blockages in adult rape cases (Stanko, 2022, Lovett, et al, 2022). Similar efforts urgently need to be made to improve timeliness in child sexual abuse cases.

This report is the sixth in a series of CSA Centre reports reviewing the annual trends in available official data on child sexual abuse. Over this period, the limitations of the data available have remained frustratingly persistent. As highlighted in Chapter 6, four major reviews of child protection and criminal justice have included a significant focus on data collection and use. All have also highlighted the untapped potential for improving agencies' strategic and operational understanding of issues pertinent to child sexual abuse, and the barriers presented by the current availability of data.

The absence of a regular national prevalence survey of child sexual abuse continues to be a glaring omission in the ability to tackle child sexual abuse at a national level. The need for a regular national prevalence survey with a specific focus on child sexual abuse has been acknowledged across the sector for over a decade; without it we are making strategic, prioritisation decisions without a clear understanding of the scale and nature of child sexual abuse in England and Wales today. As we stated in our 2021 update of the scale and nature of child sexual abuse (Karsna and Kelly, 2021), a commitment is needed from the UK Government to a regular national survey of child sexual abuse. This remains a priority.

Improving data, and thus improving our knowledge and understanding of the scale and nature of child sexual abuse, is dependent on three key actions:

- ▶ the implementation of a regular prevalence survey of child sexual abuse in England and Wales;
- ▶ centrally determined and resourced cross-government improvements to what is collected in official data, and drives to improve data quality, consistency and comparability across agencies that respond to child sexual abuse;
- ▶ the provision of enhanced training and support, pre- and post-qualification, for all professionals working with children, so they have the knowledge and confidence they need to better protect children by identifying and responding to concerns of child sexual abuse and recording them appropriately in data systems.

Better use of data has enabled analysis of police blockages in investigating adult rape cases; similar efforts must be made in relation to child sexual abuse.

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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, 2022b) and relates to offences recorded for a 12-month period from April to March. 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, 2022b).¹⁵
- ▶ 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).¹⁶
- ▶ 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: it has calculated that around one-third (34%) of child sexual abuse offences reported to the police in 2018/19 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 included 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).¹⁷
- ▶ 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 3,264 defendants who were proceeded against on charges of indecent image offences in 2021, 97% (3,169) were prosecuted in relation to images of children (Ministry of Justice, 2022a).

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

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

17. The figures were based on 33 police forces and were 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. The figures are released for calendar years (January to December).

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 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, 2022a).
- ▶ 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, 2022a).
- ▶ Not all child sexual abuse prosecutions and convictions 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).

The logo features a square with a geometric, low-poly pattern in shades of blue, purple, 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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