

Centre of
expertise
on child
sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse in 2022/23: Trends in official data

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

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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Contents

Executive summary	5
1. Introduction	10
1.1 Structure of the report.....	11
2. Setting the context: the gap between prevalence of child sexual abuse and agency-recorded cases	12
3. Local authority children’s services	14
3.1 Concerns of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation identified by children’s services in England	16
3.2 Sexual abuse recorded in child protection plans	18
3.3 Characteristics of children on protection plans under the category of sexual abuse in England	19
3.3.1 Sex	19
3.3.2 Age.....	20
3.3.3 Ethnicity.....	20
3.4 Local variation	21
3.4.1 Assessments naming child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation in England	21
3.4.2 Child protection plans in England.....	21
4. Data from criminal justice agencies	24
4.1 Police-recorded crime statistics	24
4.1.1 Trends over time	25
4.1.2 Local patterns.....	26
4.1.3 Ages of victims of sexual offences recorded by the police	26
4.1.4 Investigation outcomes	29
4.1.5 Time taken to investigate and charge sexual offences.....	33
4.2 Legal decisions.....	34

4.3	Court proceedings	34
4.3.1	Conviction ratio	34
4.3.2	Trends over time	36
4.3.3	Characteristics of defendants: sex	36
4.3.4	Characteristics of defendants: age.....	37
4.3.5	Characteristics of defendants: ethnicity.....	38
4.3.6	Sentences for child sexual abuse offences.....	39
4.3.7	Time taken to prosecute child sexual abuse offences.....	39
5.	Sexual assault referral centres in England and Wales.....	41
5.1	Reach of sexual assault referral centres.....	41
5.2	Sources of referrals	44
6.	Improving understanding of the scale and nature of child sexual abuse	45
6.1	Understanding prevalence.....	45
6.2	Improvements to agency data.....	46
6.3	Data on the provision of support services for victims/survivors of child sexual abuse	47
7.	Conclusions	48
	References	50
	Appendix 1: Data definitions.....	54
	Police-recorded crime.....	54
	Ministry of Justice	55

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 2022/23, 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 www.csacentre.org.uk/app/uploads/2023/09/Scale-and-nature-review-of-evidence-2021.pdf.)

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 2022/23

Across the year, local authority children's services in England recorded concerns about child sexual abuse in 33,760 assessments of children; this is 1% fewer than in 2021/22. Two-fifths of these recorded concerns related to harmful sexual behaviour by a child. Concerns about child sexual exploitation (which, despite being a form of child sexual abuse, is treated separately in these assessments) were recorded in 15,020 assessments: an 8% decrease on the previous year. There has been a steady decline in the number of assessments recording child sexual exploitation concerns, with nearly 5,000 fewer in 2022/23 than five years earlier. Combined, one in 10 assessments undertaken by local authorities in England recorded a concern about some form of child sexual abuse.



One in 10 child assessments undertaken by English local authorities recorded concerns 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, different local authorities' assessments varied considerably in their identification of child sexual abuse concerns – suggesting that children receive a different response to their sexual abuse according to where they live. While four local authorities did not record any concerns about the sexual abuse of children over the entire year, 10 local authorities recorded such concerns about more than 70 children for every 10,000 children living in the area. All local authorities in London and the East of England tended to have low rates of identification, but every other region had a high degree of variation in rates between local authorities. There was less local and regional difference in assessments' identification of child sexual exploitation concerns, suggesting a more consistent approach.

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. It shows that 2,290 children in England – 9% fewer than in the previous year – were placed on child protection plans under the category of sexual abuse in 2022/23. This is the lowest number in 14 years, and the second lowest in the 29 years this data has been published; it equates to fewer than one in 20 of children whose initial assessments recorded child sexual abuse or exploitation concerns. The 9% decline occurred against the backdrop of a minor 1% decrease in the overall number of children placed on child protection plans in 2022/23. Child sexual abuse was the reason for just 3.6% of all new child protection plans, the lowest proportion ever recorded.

No information about children's services' identification of, or response to, child sexual abuse in Wales was published in time to be included in this report.

The demographic profile of children on child protection plans because of sexual abuse concerns remained similar to previous years. These children tended to be older than those placed on child protection plans for other reasons, and three-fifths were girls. Compared with the population of children attending state schools and nurseries in England, they were less likely to be of Black or Asian heritage.

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. Two-thirds of the 152 local authorities in England placed no or very few children on child protection plans because of sexual abuse concerns, and just seven local authorities placed five or more children per 10,000 child population. The lowest rates were typically seen in London, while every other region had considerable variation.



In England, 2,290 children were placed on child protection plans because of sexual abuse concerns – the lowest number in 14 years.



Police-recorded child sexual offences in 2022/23

Police forces in England and Wales recorded 105,286 child sexual abuse offences during the year, 2% more than in the previous year. This small overall rise was entirely driven by a 14% increase in the recording of child sexual abuse image offences.

Police forces differed more than threefold in the rate of recorded child sexual abuse offences relative to the size of their child population. These 'recorded offence rates' tended to be lowest in the South East, while the North West, Yorkshire and Humberside, the North East and Wales had the highest rates on average.

During the year, 100,379 police investigations into child sexual abuse offences were concluded – almost 6,000 more than in the previous year. A suspect was charged or summonsed in 11,416 (11%) of these, and a further 3,640 (4%) ended with a caution, a community resolution or a 'diversionary or intervention activity'. The number of suspects charged/summonsed increased in line with the overall rise in concluded investigations, so that the proportion of investigations ending with a charge remained at 11%. Almost two-thirds of investigations were closed because of evidential difficulties of some form, as in previous years. Continuing a long-term trend, charges were more likely for offences of sexual exploitation and sexual grooming, and least likely for offences relating to sexual activity and rape.

Investigations of sexual offences took longer than any other offences to conclude. The median time from recording a sexual offence to the investigation reaching an outcome was 72 days – and when the outcome was a charge or summons, the median time was almost four times as long at 271 days. Both median times were 10 days longer than in 2021/22. For rape offences, the median length of an investigation resulting in a charge or summons was 421 days – well over a year. The Crown Prosecution Service took an average (mean) time of 114 days to reach a legal decision on whether to charge individuals suspected of child sexual abuse offences.

In 2022/23, new data was released on the ages of victims of sexual offences in police records. This data showed that children were disproportionately affected by sexual abuse. Girls aged under 18 accounted for 37% of all female victims of sexual offences, while making up just 19% of the population, while 40% of male victims but 21% of the male population were aged under 18.



Under-18s make up one-fifth of the population in England and Wales, but two-fifths of victims of recorded sexual offences.



Court proceedings in 2022

In the year to December 2022, court proceedings were brought against 8,024 defendants for child sexual abuse offences, 6% more than in the previous year. The number of prosecutions increased across all offence categories apart from child sexual abuse image offences, where prosecutions fell by 2%.

There were 6,517 convictions, resulting in a prosecution-to-conviction ratio of 81%. This ratio varied widely between different offence categories, from just 49% for rape prosecutions to 90% for child sexual abuse image prosecutions.

Two-fifths of defendants found guilty were given an immediate custodial sentence, and 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 (99%) and aged over 18 (97%), as in previous years. Five in six (83%) were White British, a higher proportion than in the general population of England and Wales (75%). This is likely to be related to the overall under-identification of child sexual abuse in minority ethnic communities.

There was a significant difference in the court timescales between prosecutions for child sexual abuse image offences and for other child sexual abuse prosecutions. While the average (mean) time to proceed from a charge to completion in the Crown Court for image offences was 170 days, it was nearly twice as long – 331 days – for all other child sexual abuse offences.

Combining the police and prosecution data on timescales shows an overall wait time of almost two years between child sexual abuse being reported to the police and the case concluding in court – and a significantly longer wait time in relation to rape offences.

Children attending sexual assault referral centres in 2022/23

Sexual assault referral centres (SARCs) in England had initial contact with 8,465 children during the year, 3% more than in 2021/22. In Wales (where this data was available for the first time), 1,036 children were supported by SARCs, bringing the total across England and Wales to 9,501 children.

Just over half (52%) of the children supported by SARCs in England 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 nursery and school population. Demographic details for children supported by SARCs in Wales were not available.

For the first time, more than half (59%) of all first contacts with children in England took place remotely rather than in person. The number of remote first contacts has risen nearly fourfold in as many years. This suggests that measures taken during COVID-19 to overcome the restrictions in face-to-face contact have become embedded post-pandemic. The reach of SARCs to under-18s varied widely across the regions in England and Wales, with SARCs in Wales having almost six times as many first contacts relative to the regional child population as those in London did.



For child sexual abuse offences other than image offences, it took 331 days on average to proceed from a charge to completion.



Improving understanding of the scale and nature of child sexual abuse

Since last year's edition of this report was published, there have been some developments around the collection and use of official data relating to child sexual abuse: both its prevalence and the identification of and response to it.

The UK Government has committed to piloting a national survey of child maltreatment which will include questions relating to child sexual abuse. It is important that the UK Government continues to prioritise this vital work, and that the survey is carried out as soon as possible.

The National Policing Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme has published its first in-depth analysis of child sexual abuse offences recorded by the police, providing new insights into the types of offence recorded, the people who committed them, and the victims.

As part of a national programme aimed at transforming the police response to rape and serious sexual offences, new national operating models for the investigation and prosecution of rape and serious sexual offences have been announced. However, although children are disproportionately likely to be victims of sexual offences, it is not clear whether explicit consideration will be given to the needs of child victims.

The Department for Education has published a new Children's Social Care Data and Digital Strategy, but there is limited detail on how this will support improved understanding around the identification of and response to child sexual abuse.

Following the CSA Centre's publication of findings from the most comprehensive study to date of child sexual abuse support services in England and Wales, the Ministry of Justice has funded us to repeat the study in 2024/25. In addition, we are developing a 'data hub' which will make local and regional prevalence estimates and agency data available to local policymakers, commissioners and funders, and a directory of child sexual abuse support services.

Conclusions

In 2022/23 the overall levels of *identification* of child sexual abuse by official agencies were broadly similar to the previous year, while trends in agencies' *response* remained difficult to assess.

Concerningly, there was a significant fall in the number of children placed on child protection plans in England under the primary category of child sexual abuse, continuing a long-term downward trend. The 2,290 children placed on protection plans under this category equated to only 5% of the children across England whose initial assessments recorded sexual abuse or sexual exploitation as concerns in 2022/23. Information is not collected at national level on the response (if any) by children's services to the remaining 95%.

Similarly, information is lacking about the multi-agency response to safeguarding children in the 85% of cases where a police investigation does not conclude with a charge, community resolution or diversionary activity.

There remains a 'postcode lottery' in agencies' activity: where children live affects how likely it is that their sexual abuse will be identified and responded to.

All of this highlights the urgent need across government for official data to include more information about agencies' response to child sexual abuse, and for data quality, consistency and comparability across agencies to be improved.



There remains a 'postcode lottery': where children live affects the likelihood that their sexual abuse will be identified and responded to.



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 2022/23. 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. Information is also given on the timescales for investigating and prosecuting child sexual abuse offences. The health data relates to children having contact with sexual assault referral centres in England and, for the first time, in Wales.

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.

This review draws on the latest evidence from official data released by child protection, criminal justice and health agencies.

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 professionals' 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).

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 (SARCs), recorded by NHS England in the Sexual Assault Referral Centre Indicators of Performance (SARCIP) dataset. For the first time, it also includes the number of children supported by the eight SARCs in Wales.
- ▶ Chapter 6 reflects on recent developments in relation to understanding the scale and nature of child sexual abuse.
- ▶ The final chapter draws conclusions from the data and highlights gaps in knowledge.



Only a small minority of sexually abused children come to professionals' attention at the time the abuse is taking place.



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 is sexually abused before the age of 16 (Karsna and Kelly, 2021). At a conservative estimate, the number of children sexually 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 talk about their experiences of abuse in a survey.

Agency statistics in this report relate to the cases of suspected or identified child sexual abuse that were referred to local authority children's services or sexual assault referral centres, reported to or detected by the police, and/or dealt with by criminal courts, in 2022/23. 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, and if they do tell anyone it is very unlikely to be a professional (Allnock and Kiff, 2023, 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. It found that childhood sexual abuse was as prevalent as childhood physical abuse, and only slightly less prevalent than emotional abuse or witnessing domestic abuse (ONS, 2020b: Tables 1 and 2).

Among that survey's respondents describing experiences of sexual abuse before the age of 16, around two-thirds 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 mid-2022 population estimates (Office for National Statistics, 2023a).

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 harmful sexual behaviour 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.



Agencies will continue to miss most child sexual abuse unless professionals can better recognise the potential signs and indicators.



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



Sources: Home Office (2023a); Department for Education (2023a); Radford et al (2011); Office for National Statistics (2023a). 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 in England, using data published by the Department for Education. No information on Welsh children's services and their identification of or response to child sexual abuse in 2022/23 was available at the time of this report's publication.

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.
- ▶ No information is published about actions taken after assessments or referrals.
- ▶ When a child is made the subject of a child protection plan; 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 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, 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 only under certain circumstances (see box on next page). Of the 640,430 referrals to children's services in England in 2022/23, fewer than 10% (63,870) were made the subject of child protection plans under any category of abuse or neglect (Department for Education, 2023a: Tables A1 and D2).

Even where a child is placed on a child protection plan 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. 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, because of the challenge they felt they would face in substantiating sexual abuse concerns without a direct disclosure from the child.

There is no data on children who receive any response other than a protection plan after sexual abuse concerns are identified.

Furthermore, although many children experience multiple forms of abuse, children are rarely recorded under the ‘multiple’ abuse category on their protection plan; the use of this category varies widely between local authorities (Bywaters et al, 2017). 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 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 the child protection plan, 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 (2023); Children Act 1989.



Even when concerns of sexual abuse arise, a child’s protection plan is likely to record a different primary category of abuse.



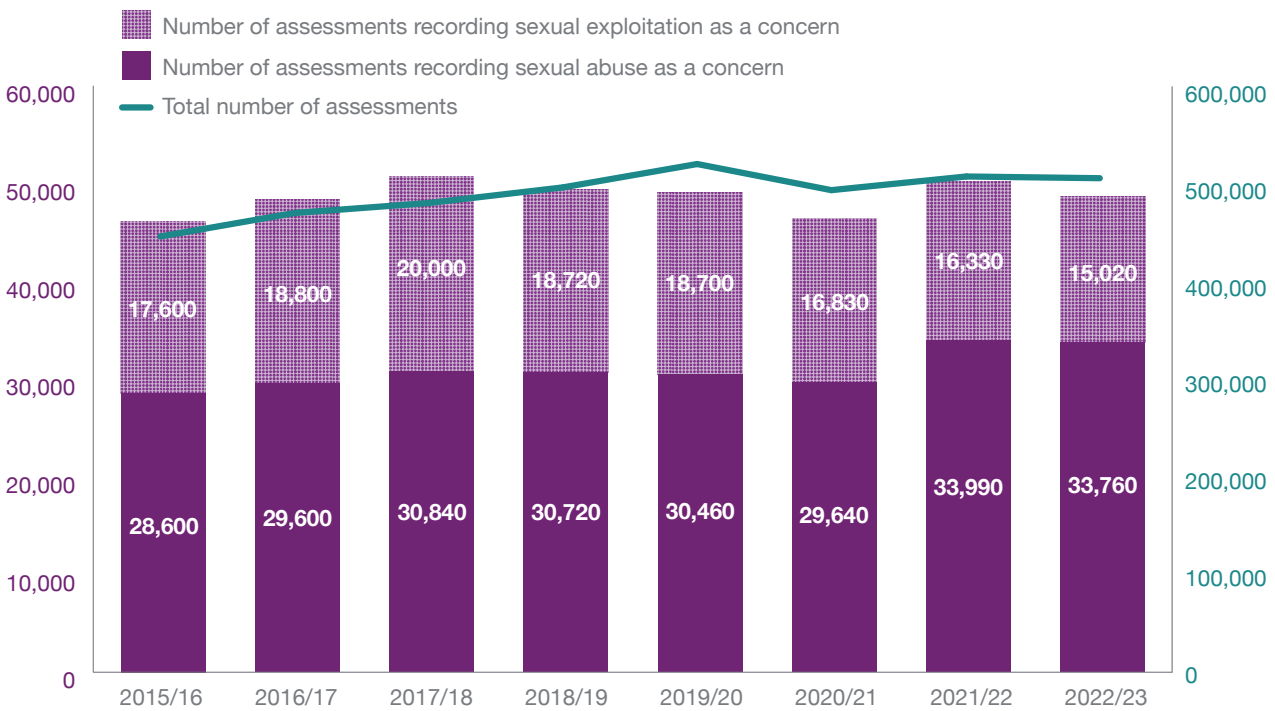
3.1 Concerns of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation identified by children’s services in England

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.³ Where multiple factors are identified, all are recorded.

Assessments recording child sexual abuse concerns decreased by 1%, but remained higher than the levels recorded at any time before 2021/22; as a proportion of all assessments, they stayed at 7%. The number of assessments recording child sexual exploitation concerns declined by 8% in 2022/23, having fallen each year since 2017/18: there were nearly 5,000 fewer assessments noting child sexual exploitation concerns than five years earlier, and such concerns featured in just 3% of all assessments during 2022/23.

Figure 2 shows that the overall number of local authority assessments (in green) remained stable in 2022/23, while there was a small decrease in the overall number of assessments that recorded child sexual abuse or sexual exploitation concerns (in purple).

Figure 2. Child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation identified during assessments by local authority children’s services, 2015/16–2022/23, England



Source: Department for Education (2023a: Table C3, years ending 31 March 2023, 2017 and 2016). Multiple risks could be recorded. Total number of assessments excludes assessments where no specific risks were recorded.

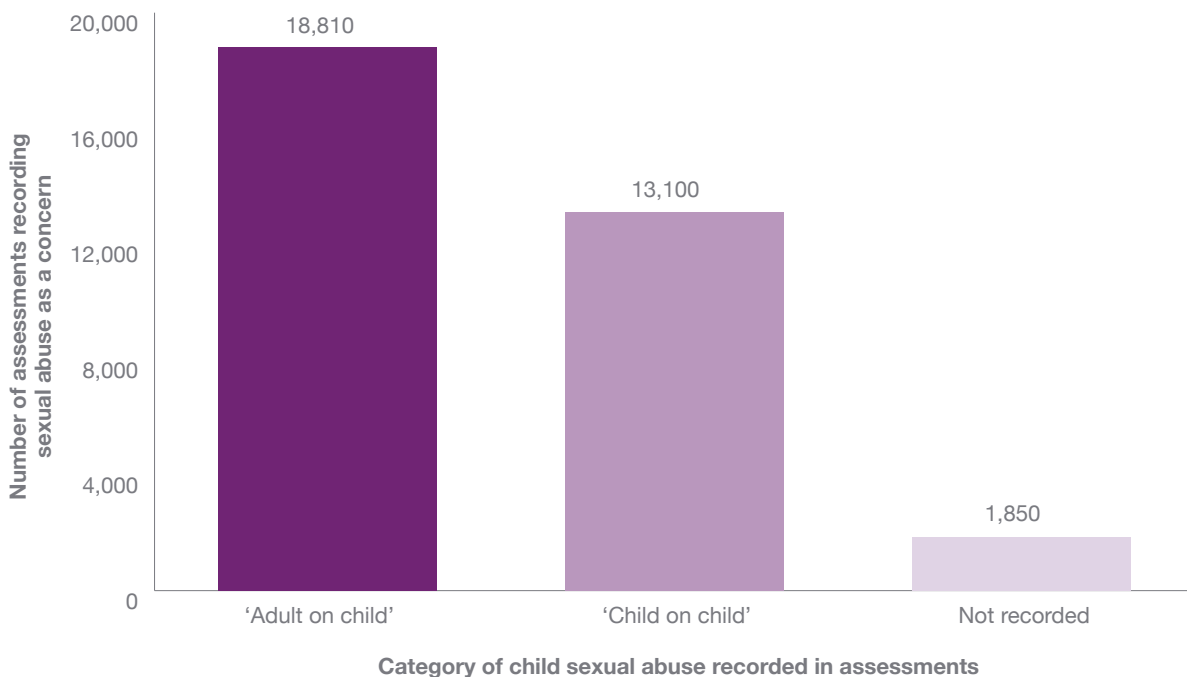
3. It is unlikely that local authorities include children at risk of child sexual exploitation also within the count of children at risk of child sexual abuse. The initial guidance (Department for Education, 2015) and a subsequent update focusing on assessment factors (Department for Education, 2021) 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).

Other forms of abuse and neglect featured more frequently, even though research has found that they are barely more prevalent than child sexual abuse (see Chapter 2): one in five assessments recorded concerns of emotional abuse (99,630), and one in six noted concerns of neglect (82,260) or physical abuse (73,920). Concerns of child criminal exploitation, which were introduced into the data collection statistics in 2021/22, featured in 14,420 assessments – over 40% more than in the previous year.

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 category 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).

By 2022/23 most local authorities were using these new categories, which accounted for 95% 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. These proportions have remained stable since they were first introduced three years earlier. 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 13,100 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.

Figure 3. Child sexual abuse identified during assessments by local authority children’s services, by age of perpetrator, 2022/23, England



Source: Department for Education (2023a: Table C3, year ending 31 March 2023).

3.2 Sexual abuse recorded in child protection plans

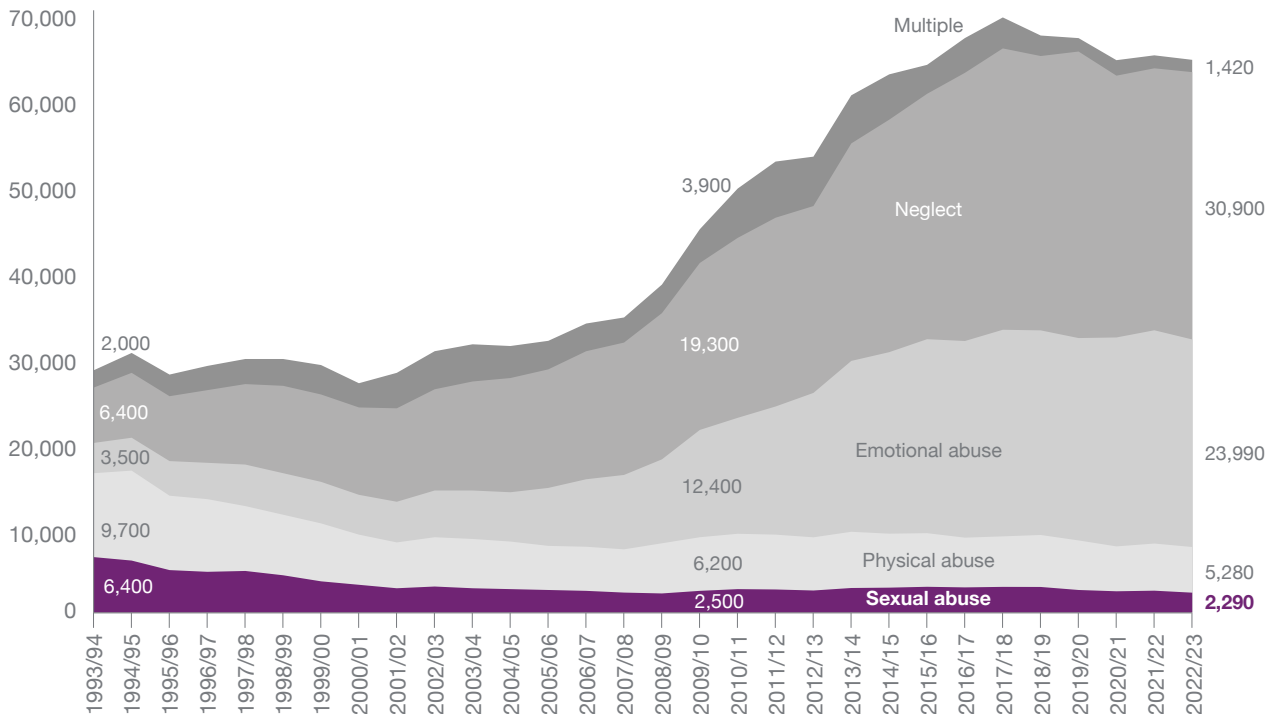
Compared with the previous year, 2022/23 saw a significant 9% decrease in the number of children placed on child protection plans in England under the primary category of sexual abuse (which includes cases of child sexual exploitation), to its lowest level in 14 years (see Figure 4). Just 2,290 children were placed on the child protection plan primarily due to sexual abuse: this is the second lowest figure recorded in the 29 years this data has been published.

This fall is consistent with 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 have increased significantly since the early 2000s, the number of plans related to sexual abuse has gradually fallen. In fact, as a proportion of all child protection plans, those related to sexual abuse were at their lowest recorded level (3.6% of the total) in 2022/23.

Furthermore, the number of children placed on child protection plans under the primary category of sexual abuse equated to only 5% of the children whose initial assessments recorded sexual abuse or sexual exploitation as concerns in 2022/23. The number of child protection plans as a proportion of assessments was larger for other categories of abuse and neglect: 7% for physical abuse, 24% for emotional abuse, and 38% for neglect.

Although information about the number of children placed on the child protection register because of sexual abuse in Wales in 2022/23 was not published in time to be included in this report, trends in previous years have shown a similar decline in child protection registrations under the primary category of sexual abuse (see e.g. Karsna and Paige, 2023).

Figure 4. Children placed on child protection plans per year, by category of abuse, 1993/94–2022/23, England



Source: Department for Education (2023a: 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.

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.

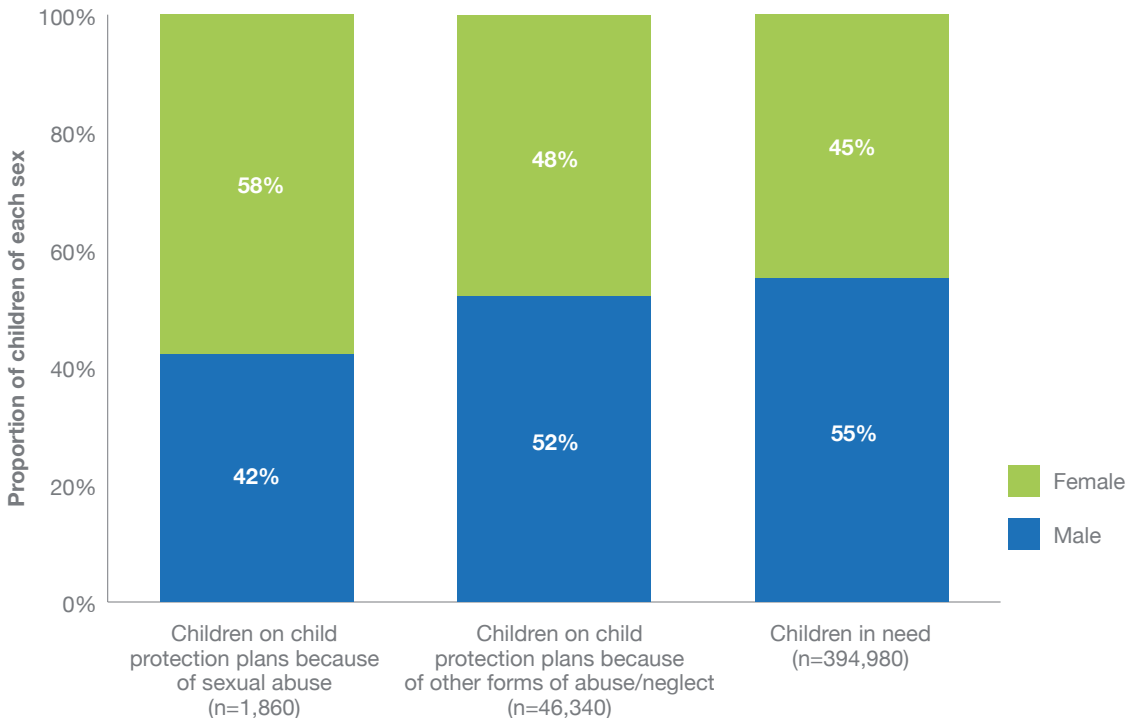
3.3 Characteristics of children on protection plans under the category of sexual abuse in England

Official data is available on the demographic details – sex, age and ethnicity – of children recorded in England's child protection system as of 31 March each year, giving a snapshot of the profile of children on the child protection plan at a single point.

3.3.1 Sex

Girls accounted for 58% of children on child protection plans under the primary category of sexual abuse on 31 March 2023. In comparison, fewer than half (48%) of the children on child protection plans under other categories of abuse, and of children in need (45%), were female (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Children on child protection plans and children in need at 31 March 2023, by sex, England



Source: Department for Education (2023a: Tables A4 and A5, year ending 31 March 2023). Chart excludes a small number of children whose sex was not recorded.

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.⁴ The reasons for this are unclear.

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 2023 were less likely to be aged under five and more likely to be over 10 years old (see Figure 6).

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

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

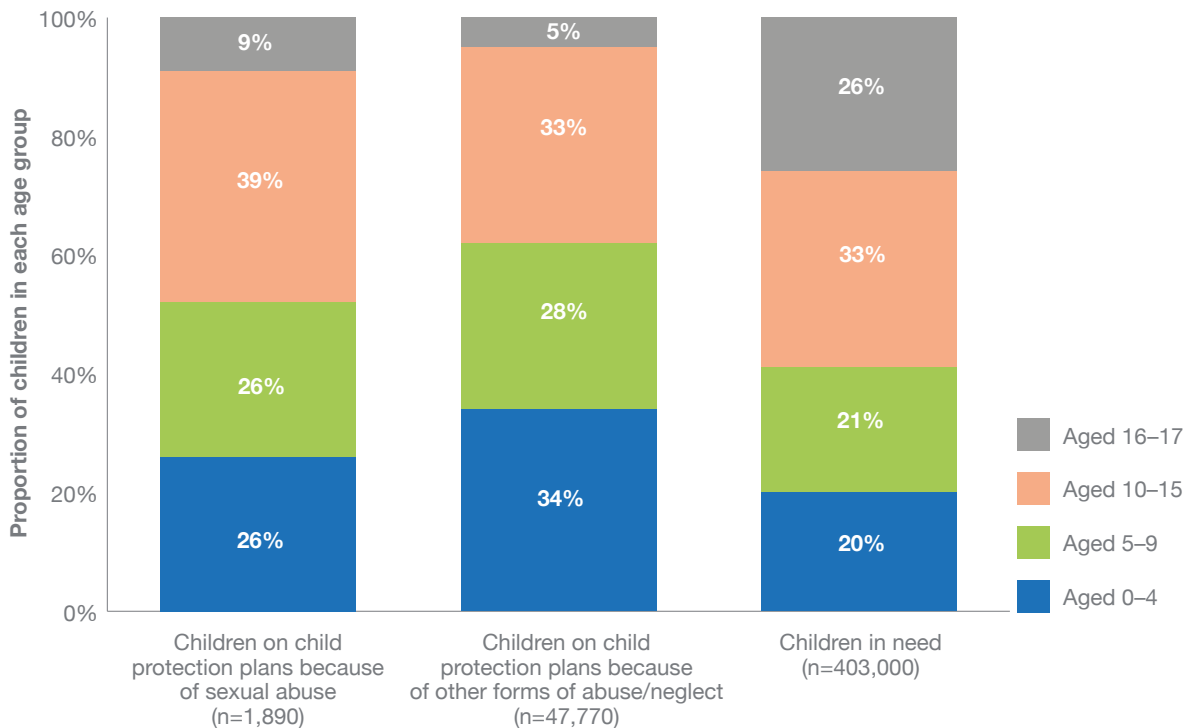
3.3.3 Ethnicity

Children on child protection plans under the primary category of sexual abuse on 31 March 2023 were more likely to be from White (White British or ‘White other’) backgrounds than the population of children attending English state schools and nurseries, or than the children placed on child protection plans for other reasons (see Figure 7).

While 13% of children attending state schools and nurseries were from Asian backgrounds, only 8% of children placed on child protection plans because of sexual abuse were Asian; similarly, Black children made up 6% of the state school and nursery population but 3% of children placed on child protection plans because of sexual abuse.

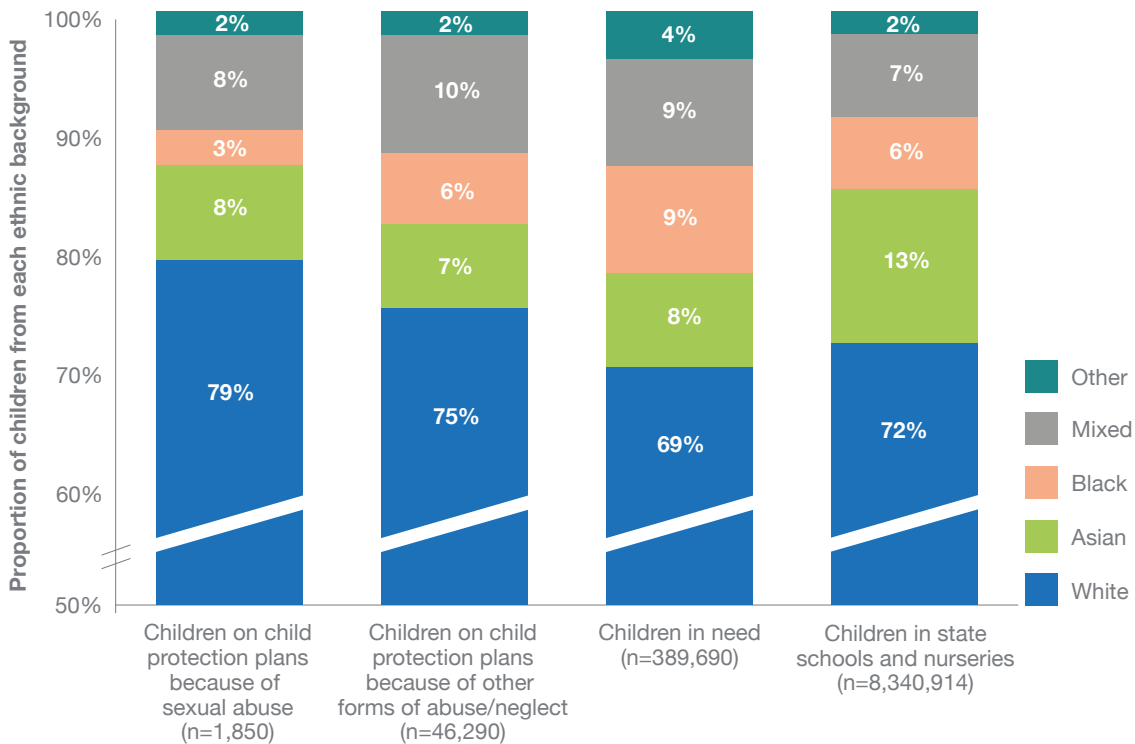
Research has highlighted the difficulties that professionals face in identifying sexual abuse and acting on concerns about children from minority ethnic backgrounds (Ali et al, 2021; Rodger et al, 2020), while also concluding that the likelihood of being sexually abused does not vary significantly between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

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



Source: Department for Education (2023a: Tables A4 and A5, year ending 31 March 2023). Chart excludes a small number of children whose age was not recorded.

4 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).

Figure 7. Children on child protection plans and children in need at 31 March 2023, by ethnicity, England

Source: Department for Education (2023a: Tables A4 and A5, year ending 31 March 2023); Department for Education (2023b: 'Pupil characteristics – ethnicity and language'). Chart excludes a small number of children whose ethnicity was not recorded.

3.4 Local variation

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

Figure 8 shows that there are wide regional variations in the proportion of the local child population assessed by local authorities to be at risk of child sexual abuse. A darker shade of purple indicates more assessments identifying this risk relative to local child population.

In 2022/23, four English local authorities did not identify sexual abuse concerns in the assessments of any children, while 10 local authorities identified such concerns in more than 70 assessments for every 10,000 children living in the area. Local authorities with higher rates of identification were found in all regions apart from London and the East of England; the average identification rates in those two regions were lower than in the rest of England. Nevertheless, the range of shades of purple within every bar of Figure 8 indicates considerable variation between the local authorities in all regions.

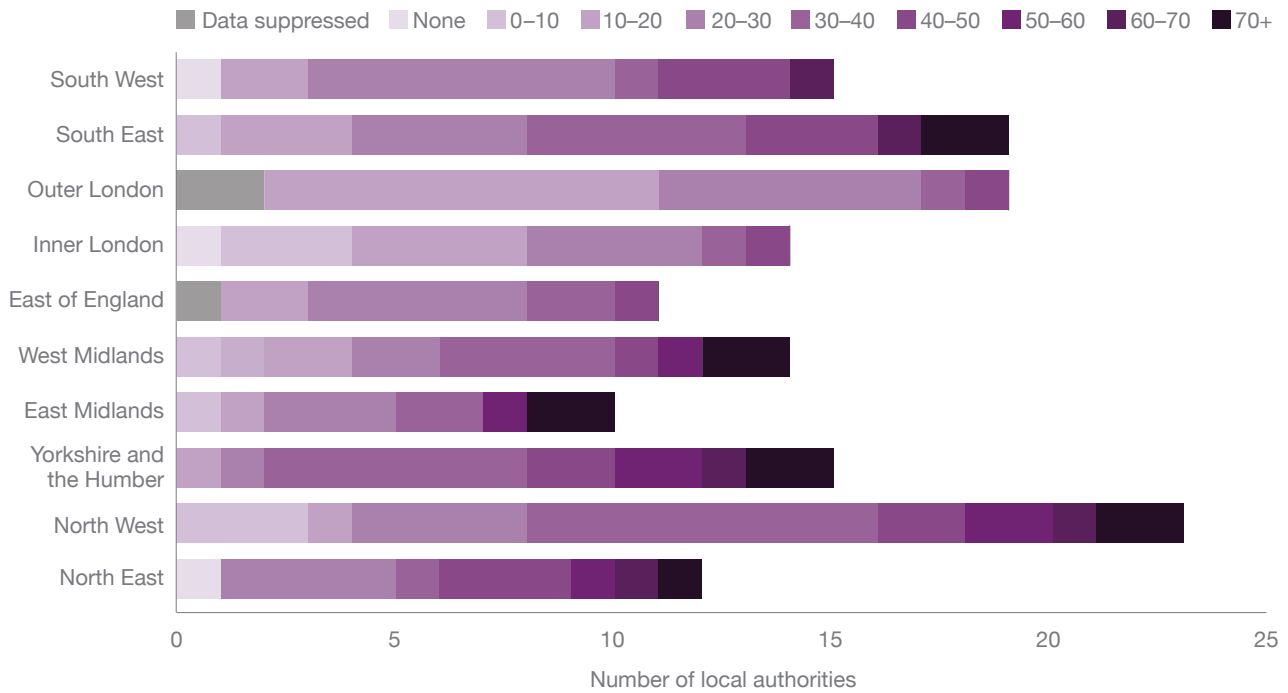
There was less variation in relation to the recording of sexual exploitation as a concern, as shown by a narrower range of shades of purple (both within and between regions) in Figure 9: in 2022/23, close to half (44%) of all England's local authorities recorded between 10 and 20 children at risk of sexual exploitation for every 10,000 children.

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.

For each local authority in England, Figure 10 presents the number of children placed on child protection plans because of sexual abuse, as a proportion of the local child population. As above, the darker shade of purple indicates that a greater proportion of local children have been placed on protection plans because of sexual abuse.

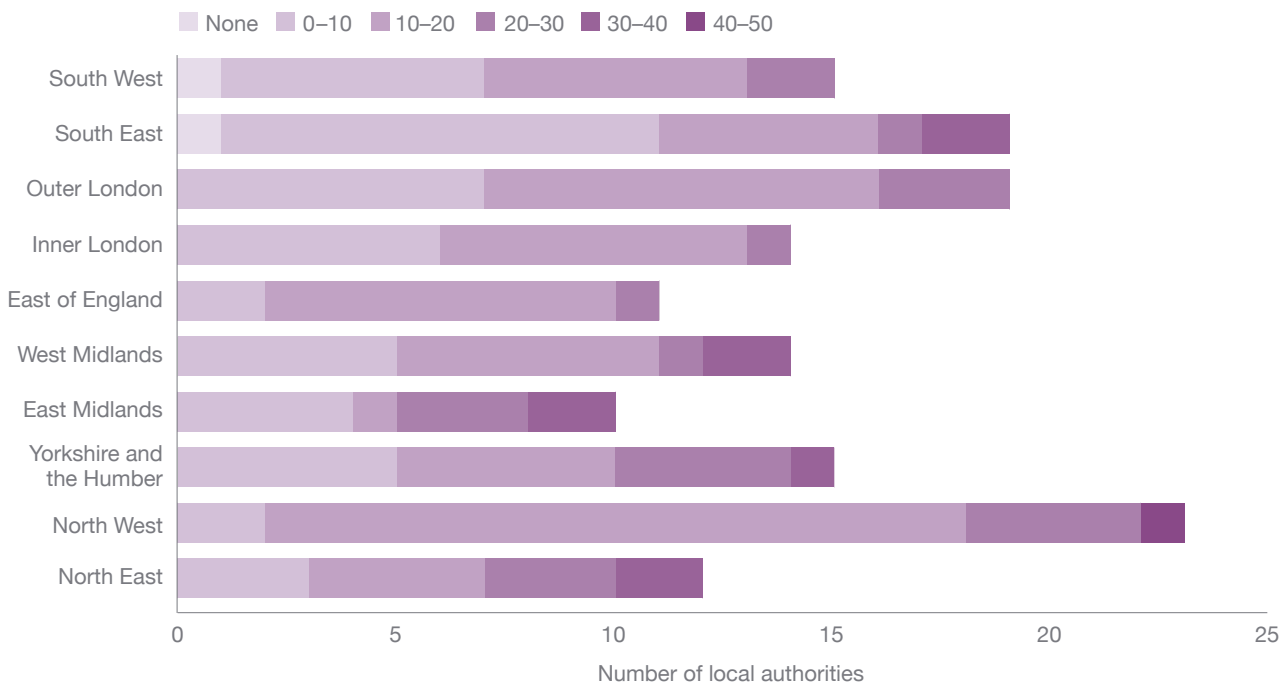
Figure 8. Number of local authority assessments per 10,000 local child population recording children as at risk of sexual abuse, by region, 2022/23, England



Sources: Department for Education (2023a: Table C3); Office for National Statistics (2023a). Where a child is assessed more than once, all assessments are counted. Children can be identified as in need under multiple categories. Population figures (aged 0–17) are mid-year estimates.

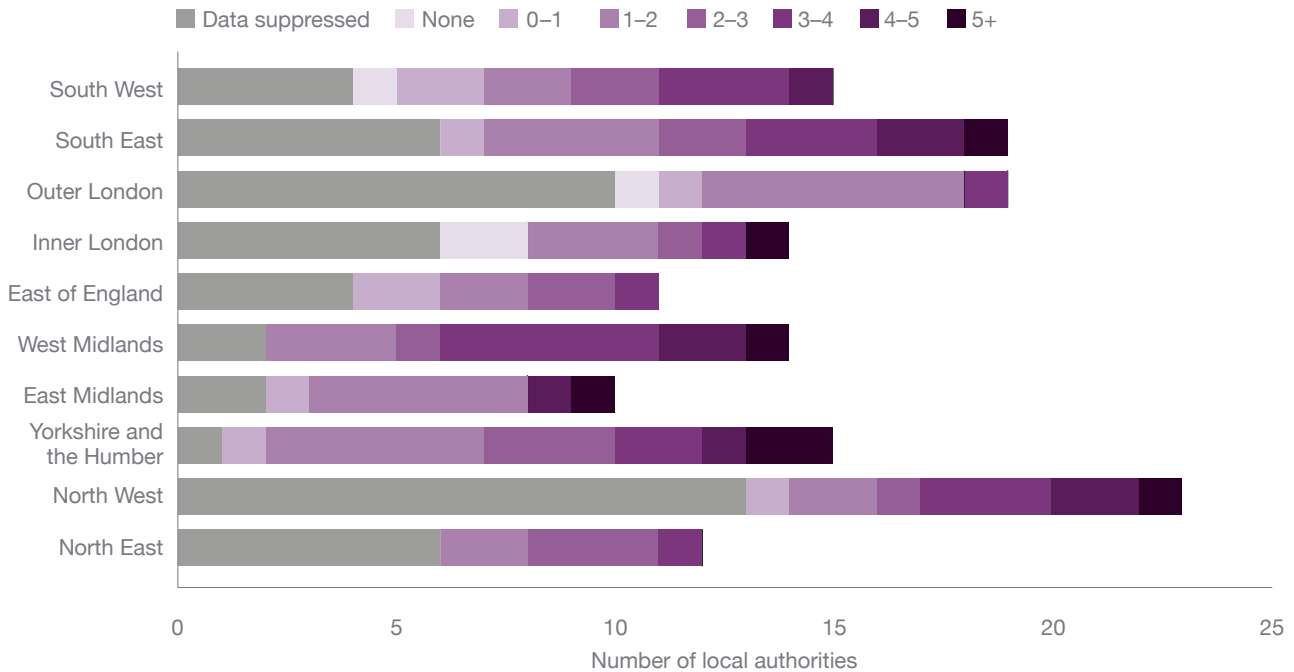
Data from a local authority is ‘suppressed’ if the local authority recorded a risk of sexual abuse in between one and five child assessments in total during the year. In all three local authorities whose data was suppressed in 2022/23, the rate of assessments per 10,000 local child population would be in the ‘0–10’ range.

Figure 9. Number of local authority assessments per 10,000 local child population recording children as at risk of sexual exploitation, by region, 2022/23, England



Sources: Department for Education (2023a: Table C3); Office for National Statistics (2023a). 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.

Figure 10. Number of children per 10,000 local child population placed by local authorities on child protection plans under the category of sexual abuse, by region, 2022/23, England



Sources: Department for Education (2023a: Table D2); Office for National Statistics (2023a).

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 2022/23, 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 28 local authorities in the '0-1' group, 22 in the '1-2' group, three in the '2-3' group and one in the '5+' group.

In 2022/23, four local authorities placed no children on child protection plans under the primary category of sexual abuse, and a further 43 placed fewer than two children per 10,000 child population. In a third of English local authorities (54 out of 152), the information was 'suppressed' (shown as grey in Figure 10), meaning that 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, these figures indicate that two-thirds (101 out of 152) of local authorities in England placed no or very few children on child protection plans because of sexual abuse. In contrast, just seven local authorities across England placed between five and 11 children per 10,000 local child population on child protection plans because of sexual abuse.

There were marked inter- and intra-regional differences: the wide variety of shades of purple in each bar of Figure 10 indicates a high degree of variation in all 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).



Two-thirds of English local authorities placed no or very few children on child protection plans because of sexual abuse.



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,⁵ and data released by the Ministry of Justice⁶ and the Crown Prosecution Service on defendants prosecuted for child sexual abuse offences (see also Appendix 1).

4.1 Police-recorded crime statistics

In 2022/23, a total of 105,286 identifiable⁷ child sexual abuse offences were recorded by the police in England and Wales (see Table 1).

Table 1. Identifiable child sexual abuse offences recorded in England and Wales, 2022/23

Offence category	Number in England	Number in Wales	Total in England and Wales*
Rape of a female child under 13	5,141	273	5,417
Rape of a male child under 13	1,987	127	2,114
Rape of a female child under 16	8,970	414	9,397
Rape of a male child under 16	816	53	873
Sexual assault on a female child under 13	10,922	667	11,623
Sexual assault on a male child under 13	3,704	251	3,960
Sexual activity involving a child under 13	9,141	665	9,808
Sexual activity involving a child under 16	12,542	883	13,427
Abuse of children through sexual exploitation	1,119	28	1,147
Abuse of position of trust of a sexual nature	254	13	267
Sexual grooming	6,378	403	6,781
Child sexual abuse image offences**	38,352	2,116	40,472
Total	99,326	5,893	105,286

Source: Home Office (2023a: 'Police recorded crime open data Police Force Area tables from year ending March 2013 onwards', Table 2022–23). Updated October 2023.

* 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 proportion of such offences do not involve images of children.

- Published police data uses offence classifications set out in the *Home Office Counting Rules* (Home Office, 2022). These classifications are based on the Sexual Offences Act 2003.
- 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.
- 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 is 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 NHS integrated care board) 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 possible.

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 (2023), College of Policing (2022), College of Policing (2020a).

The four police forces in Wales recorded nearly 6,000 child sexual abuse offences, and England's 39 forces recorded close to 100,000. Relative to the child population, Welsh forces recorded more child sexual abuse offences (10.7 offences per 1,000 children aged 0–15)⁸ than forces in England (9.4 offences per 1,000 children).

4.1.1 Trends over time

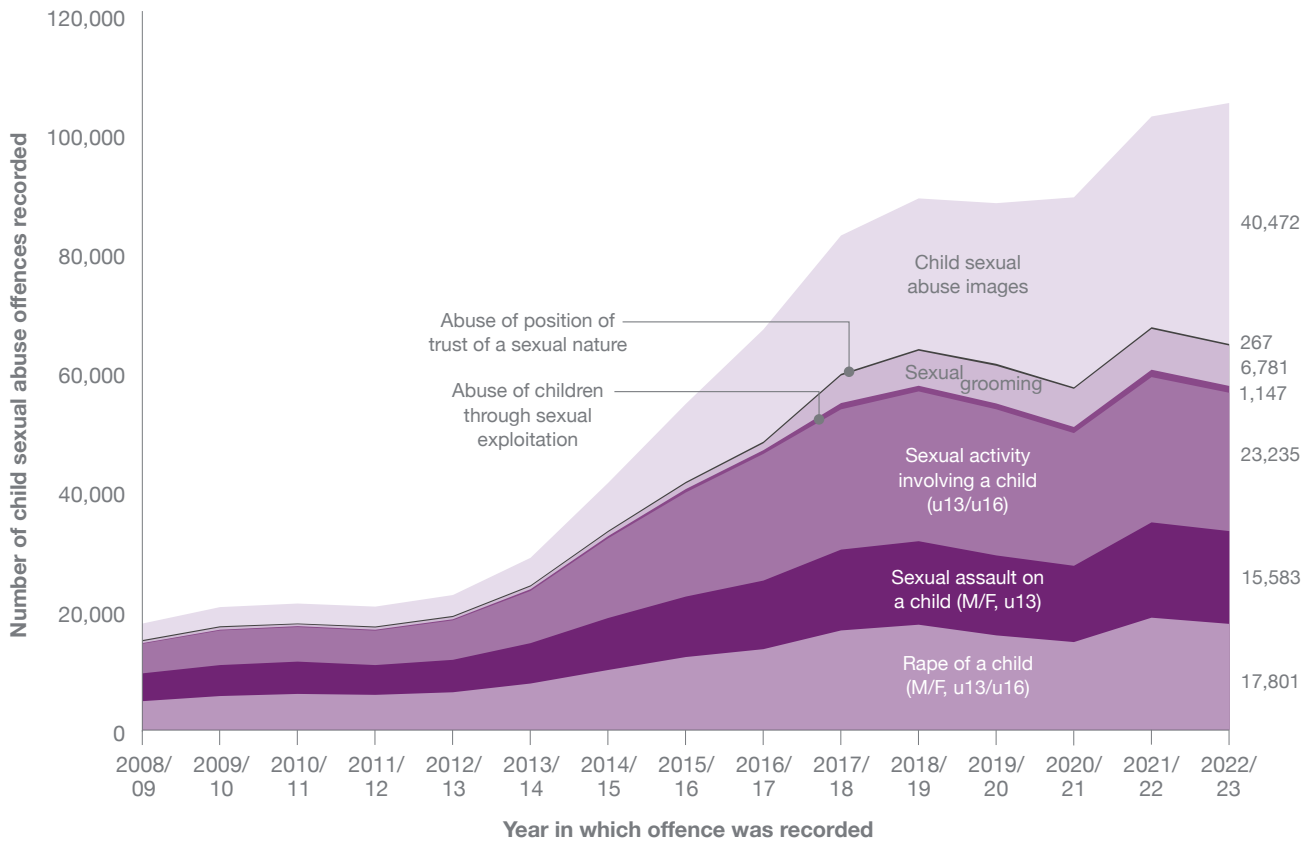
As Figure 11 shows, there was a small (2%) increase in the overall number of police-recorded child sexual abuse offences in 2022/23. This rise was entirely the result of a significant growth in the recording of child sexual abuse image offences, which increased by 14% to the highest number ever recorded in England and Wales (40,472).

The recording of all other child sexual abuse offences fell from their 2021/22 levels; the steepest decreases were in the recording of sexual exploitation (–7%) and rape offences (–6%), the latter of which had seen a sharp increase the previous year.

Alongside the modest rise in child sexual abuse offences, sexual offences against children over 16 and adults increased by 3%. Both increases were lower than the 5% overall growth in recorded crime (Home Office, 2023b).

8. 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 11. Number and type of child sexual abuse offences recorded per year, 2009/10–2022/23, England and Wales



Source: Home Office (2023a: ‘Police recorded crime open data Police Force Area tables from year ending March 2013 to year ending March 2023’; ‘Police recorded crime open data Police Force Area tables from March 2008 to March 2012’). Updated October 2023. Police-recorded crime includes non-recent offences. Child sexual abuse image offences are classified as ‘obscene publications’ in police data; a proportion of such offences do not involve images of children.

4.1.2 Local patterns

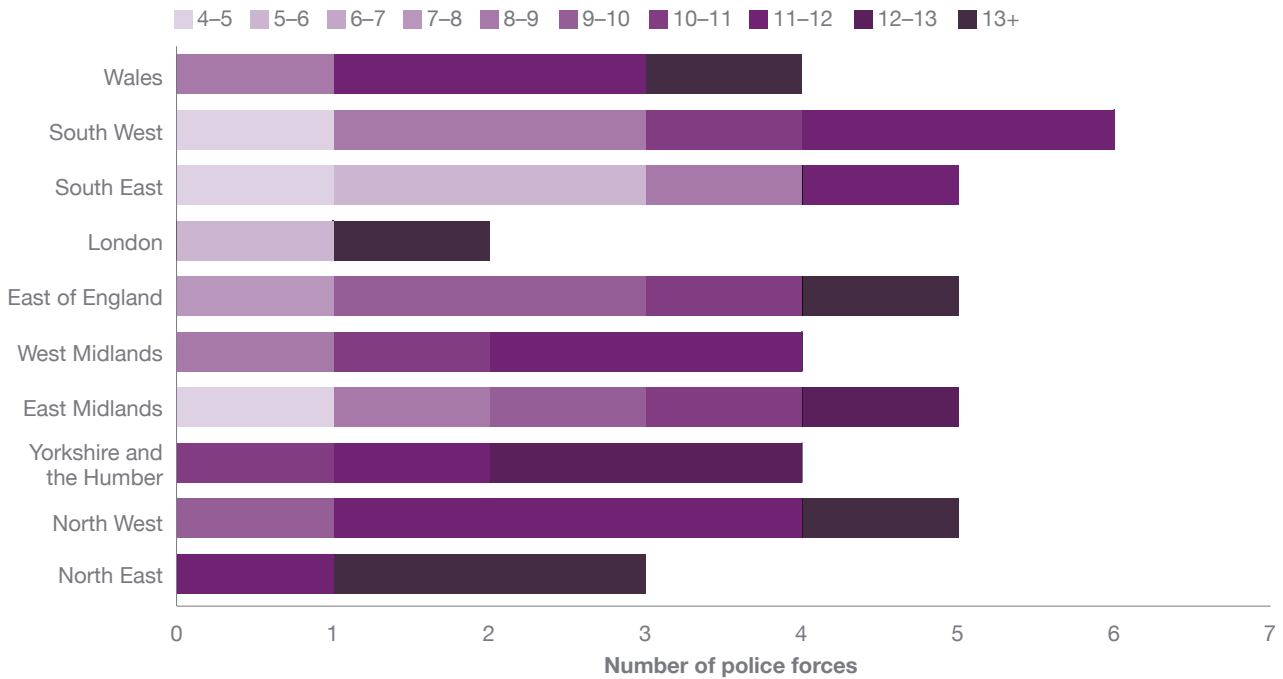
Compared to the previous year, when almost all of the 43 police forces in England and Wales increased their recording of child sexual abuse offences, the local patterns of change were more mixed in 2022/23: one-third of police forces (15) recorded fewer child sexual abuse offences than in 2021/22, three-fifths (25) recorded more offences, and three saw no change.

There also 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 Bromley, 2023). Figure 12 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: forces in the South East had the lowest rates on average, while those in the North West, Yorkshire and Humberside, the North East and Wales had the highest rates, suggesting higher levels of identification.

4.1.3 Ages of victims of sexual offences recorded by the police

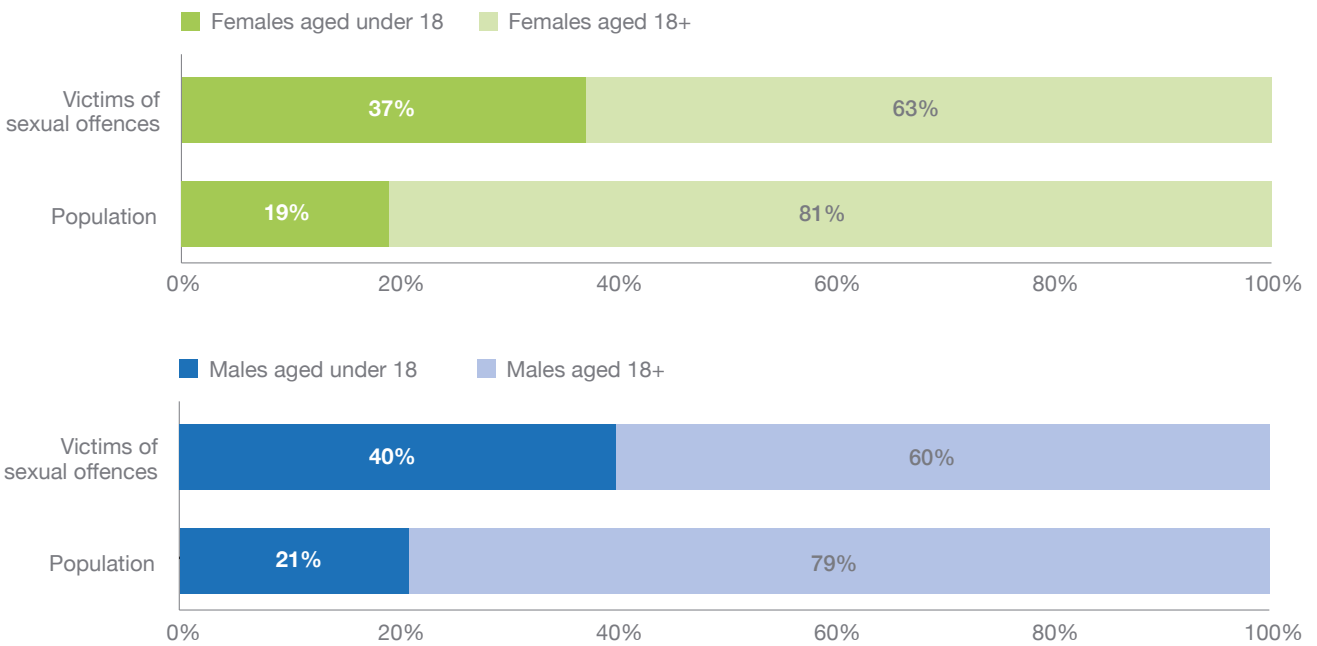
Although the police do not regularly publish data on the demographics of victims or suspects, the Office for National Statistics does sometimes release experimental statistics based on data submitted by police forces to the Home Office Data Hub. In 2022/23, data was released on the ages of victims of sexual offences recorded by the police in 2021/22, based on data from two-thirds (30) of the police forces in England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2023b). This data excludes child sexual abuse image offences. Figure 13 shows that, although children make up only one-fifth of the male and female populations, they accounted for two-fifths of victims of sexual offences.

Figure 12. Number of child sexual abuse offences recorded by police forces per 1,000 child population, by region, 2022/23, England and Wales



Sources: Home Office (2023a: 'Police recorded crime open data Police Force Area tables from year ending March 2013 to year ending March 2023', Table 2022-23); Office for National Statistics (2023a). Police-recorded crime includes non-recent offences. British Transport Police data excluded. Population figures (ages 0-15) are mid-year estimates.

Figure 13. Proportion of female and male population and victims of sexual offences recorded in the police data, by age, England and Wales, 2021/22



Source: Office for National Statistics (2023b: Sexual offences prevalence and victim characteristics, England and Wales, Worksheet 20). Excludes child sexual abuse image offences.

Child sexual abuse offences recorded by the police in 2022

In January 2024, the National Policing Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme (VKPP) published its first detailed analysis of the characteristics of suspects and victims of child sexual abuse offences and the context in which this abuse occurred, as recorded in police data systems in 2022. This report offers a more complete analysis of data on sexual offences against children than is possible through publicly available information.

The report uncovered important data on the context in which recorded offences took place:

- ▶ Acquaintances (36%), strangers (20%) and victims' partners/ex-partners (13%) were the people most frequently suspected of child sexual abuse. These findings broadly reflect the latest survey findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales.
- ▶ A third of child sexual abuse offences recorded by the police in 2022 occurred in the family environment, with a parent (9%), a sibling (6%) or another family member/friend of the family (6%) recorded most frequently as the suspects.
- ▶ There was no information about the extent of offences committed by people in a position of trust, which was the fourth most common relationship type described in the Crime Survey for England and Wales.

As the VKPP report noted, police-recorded sexual offences and the Crime Survey for England and Wales are both likely to over-represent contexts that most closely reflect the public perception of a crime (e.g. sexual assault by a stranger) and under-represent child sexual abuse in the family environment.

Information on the characteristics of victims and suspects showed that:

- ▶ Five out of six suspects (82%) were male, and a similar majority of victims (79%) were female; this reflects the findings from survey and other administrative data.
- ▶ An even larger majority (87%) of victims were from White ethnic backgrounds. This is far higher than the 72% of children attending state schools and nurseries who are White (see Figure 23). Children from all minority ethnic backgrounds were under-represented, but Asian children were the least likely to come to the police's attention: only 4% of recorded victims were of Asian heritage, compared to 13% of children in the school/nursery population. As Figure 23 shows, these findings broadly reflect the patterns recorded in other agency data.
- ▶ The report did not publish an overall breakdown of suspects' ethnicity, but across various contexts (online, intra-familial, group-based, offences by under-18s) a large majority (between 76% and 91%) of suspects were White.
- ▶ The most common age of both victims and suspects was 14.

Regarding investigations where the suspect was aged under 18:

- ▶ There had been an increase in under-18s recorded as suspects in child sexual abuse offence investigations. In 2022, over half (52%) of all recorded child sexual abuse offences involved another child as a suspect, compared to one-third involving other under-18s in a previous analysis.
- ▶ The report also noted that under-18s were recorded as suspects in police data for behaviours "*which may be 'experimental' but also those with 'aggravated' features*", suggesting that investigations involving suspects in this age group covered a spectrum of behaviours from normative to abusive. These investigations most commonly related to sexual assault, rape and child sexual abuse image offences.
- ▶ Suspects aged under 18 were predominantly acquaintances (41%) or partners/ex-partners (22%) of the victim.

Regarding child sexual abuse in online contexts:

- ▶ One-third of child sexual abuse offences were flagged by the police as ‘online’ offences. The report noted that this was likely to be an underestimate, owing to inconsistent application of this flag in police data systems.
- ▶ Both victims and suspects were most commonly aged 12–15. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of people suspected of recorded online offences were under-18s.

Regarding reporting to the police, the report highlighted that:

- ▶ Overall, just over three-quarters (76%) of offences were reported within a year. However, for intra-familial child sexual abuse offences this was less likely: for these offences, the average (mean) time between offence and reporting to police was 17 years.
- ▶ The analysis of the patterns of reporting showed a reduction in police reports relating to child sexual abuse during weekends and school holidays.

It is important to highlight that some data fields used in the analysis were not consistently recorded – for example, barely a third (35%) of child sexual abuse offences had a record of the victim–perpetrator relationship, and ethnicity data on suspects was also largely missing.

Sources: VKPP (2024); Office for National Statistics (2020).

4.1.4 Investigation outcomes

Table 2 shows that, in 2022/23, police concluded their investigation of 100,379 child sexual abuse offences – almost 6,000 more than in the previous year – of which 11,416 (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 (1%), it was decided – by the police or the Crown Prosecution Service – 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 (known as ‘Outcome 21’), introduced in 2015/16, was designed to reduce the criminalisation of under-18s in situations where the police receive reports of “youth produced sexual imagery” which involve the consensual sharing by children of self-generated images (Home Office, 2016a). Nearly a quarter (24%) of child sexual abuse image investigations in 2022/23 concluded with this outcome (see also Figure 15 below).

Nearly two-thirds of all investigations – 63,659 cases – were closed because of some form of evidential difficulty.

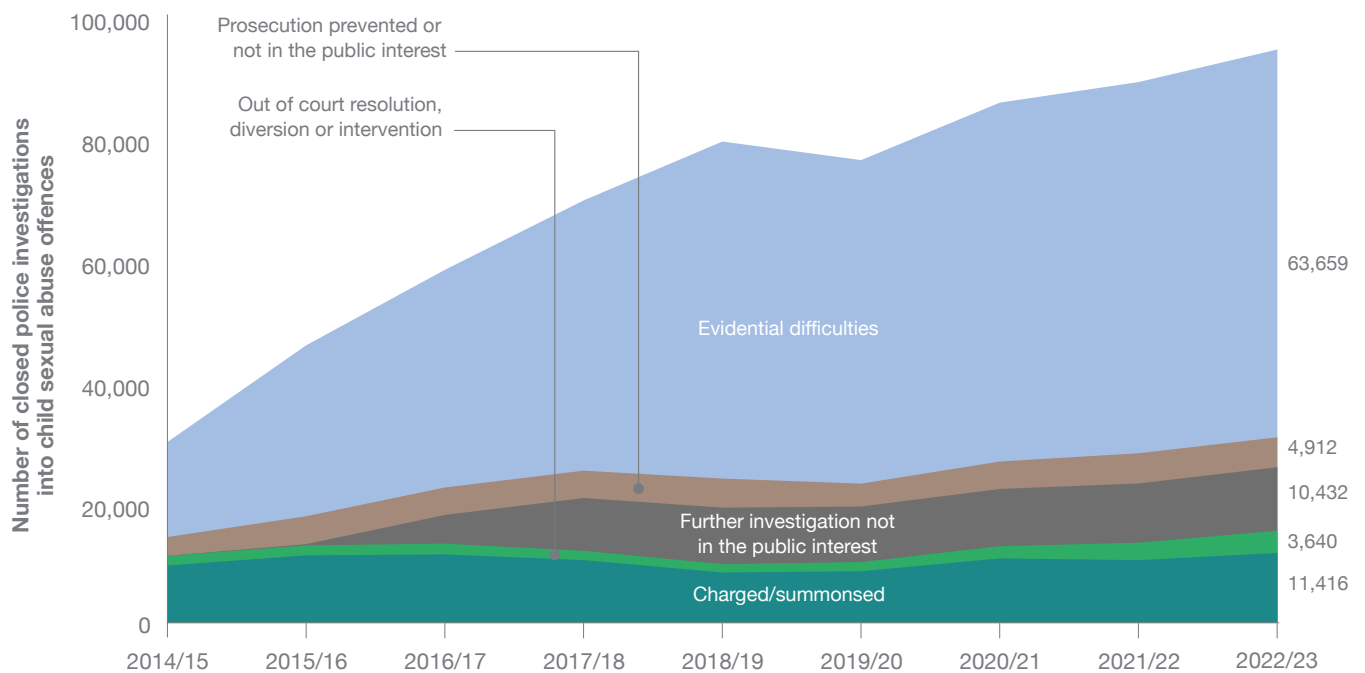
Table 2. Child sexual abuse offences by outcome in England and in Wales, 2022/23

Outcome category	England	Wales	England and Wales*
Charged/summonsed	11%	11%	11%
Out-of-court resolution (formal): Cautioned	1%	1%	1%
Out-of-court resolution (informal): Community resolution	1%	0%	1%
Diversions, educational or intervention activity	2%	1%	2%
Prosecution not in the public interest: Crown Prosecution Service decision or police decision	1%	4%	1%
Further investigation not in the public interest: police decision	10%	11%	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)	24%	23%	24%
Insufficient evidence (suspect identified, victim does not support action)	18%	17%	18%
Insufficient evidence (suspect not identified, victim does not support action)	7%	6%	7%
Investigation complete – no suspect identified	15%	15%	15%
Responsibility for further investigation transferred to another body	6%	5%	6%
Base number (offences)	96,133	5,383	100,379

Source: Home Office (2023a: ‘Crime Outcomes in England and Wales open data, year ending March 2023’). Police-recorded crime includes non-recent cases. Updated in October 2023.

* 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, 2014/15–2022/23



Source: Home Office (2023a: ‘Crime Outcomes open data, years ending March 2015–2023’). Updated in October 2023. 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 nine years' worth of data since the new framework for the police to record investigation outcomes was introduced (see box below) 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 one-third (32%) in 2014/15 to one-ninth (11%).

The Office for National Statistics (2018) 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. Some of the decline is also the result of increasing use of the outcome "Further investigation not in the public interest" for suspects aged under 18.

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 (2023b).

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.

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 (2022).

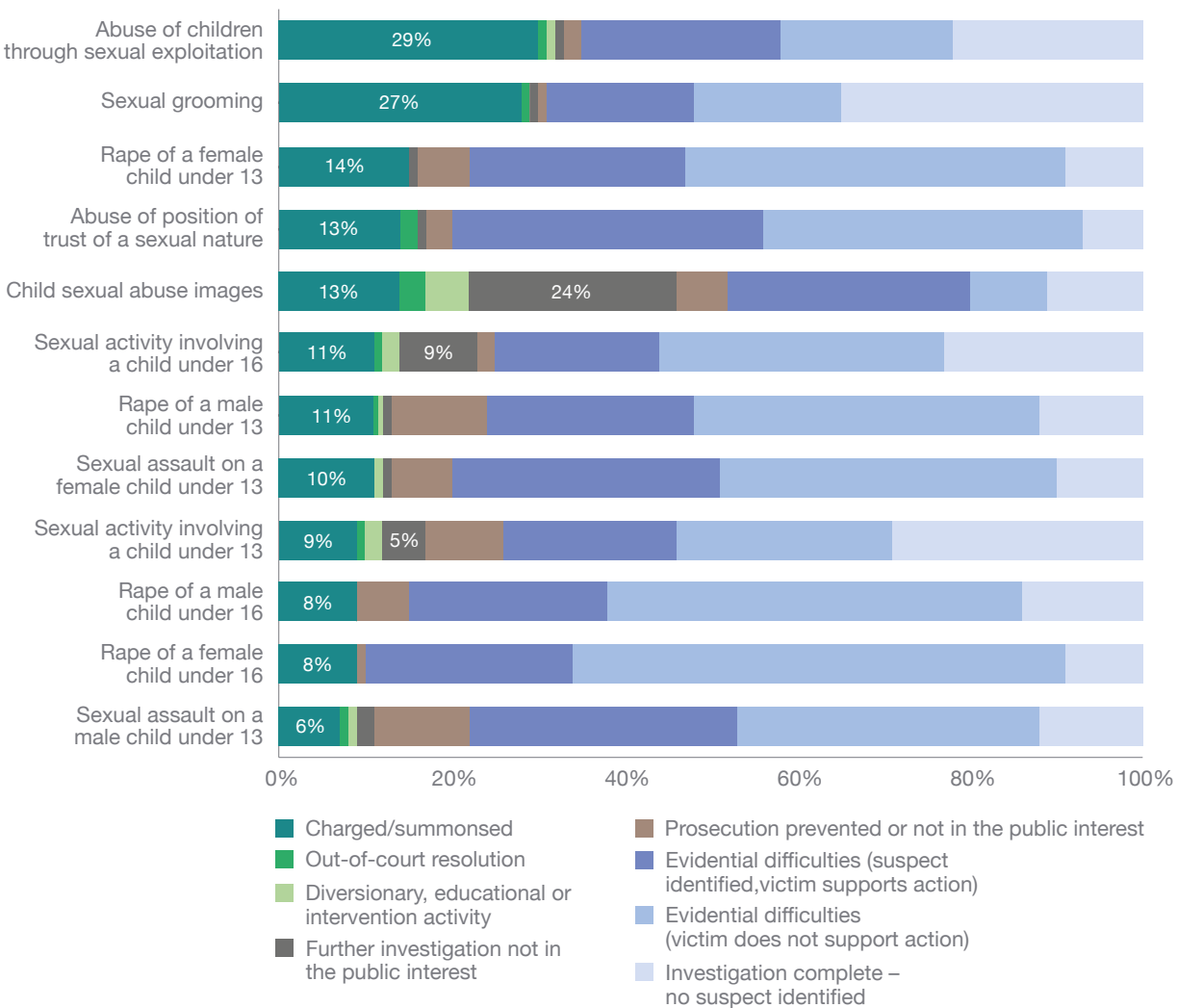
Investigation outcomes vary considerably by the type of child sexual abuse offence. Figure 15 shows that almost a third of investigations relating to ‘abuse through sexual exploitation’ (31%) and sexual grooming (29%) ended with either a charge, a summons, an out of court resolution or a diversionary activity in 2022/23. These outcomes were also seen in one-fifth (20%) of investigations into child sexual abuse image offences.

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 74% and 90% of the 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 (24%) 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. The same outcome was applied in a small number of investigations into sexual activity offences (5%–9%), suggesting the involvement of under-18s in these offences.

Figure 15. Crime outcomes by child sexual abuse offence category in England and Wales, 2022/23



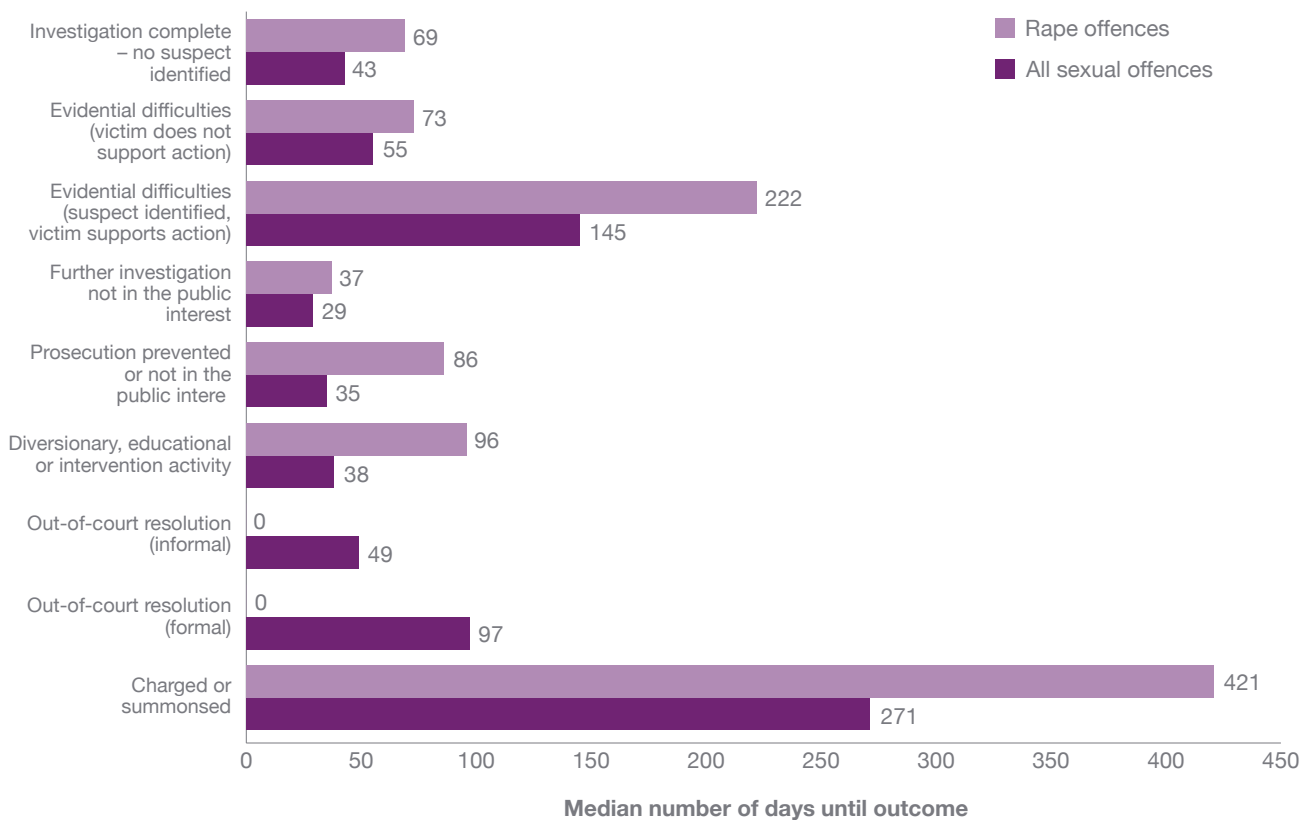
Source: Home Office (2023a: ‘Crime Outcomes in England and Wales open data, year ending March 2023’). Updated October 2023. Police-recorded crime includes non-recent cases. Excludes transferred cases. Child sexual abuse image offences are classified as ‘obscene publications’ in police data; a proportion of such offences do not involve images of children.

4.1.5 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 systems⁹ (Home Office, 2023b). However, this data is available only for sexual offences overall (i.e. excluding child sexual abuse image offences), and for rape offences specifically, and it is not broken down by whether the victim was a child or an adult. In 2022/23, sexual offences overall took a median of 72 days to progress from recording of the offence to an outcome; and rape offences took 104 days; in both cases this was 10 days longer than in the previous year (Home Office, 2023b: Table 3.1). Sexual offences overall had the longest investigation timescales of any offence groups: 42%, including 51% of rape investigations, took more than 100 days from the point of recording it for an outcome to be assigned (Home Office, 2023b: Table 3.2).

As Figure 16 shows, investigations resulting in a charge or summons took the longest to be concluded: the median time from recording a sexual offence to charging a suspect was 271 days, or nine months. The cases closed most quickly were those that were not taken forward because an investigation or prosecution was not in the public interest: the median was 35 days. Where evidential difficulties were the reason for closing the case, investigations that were supported by the victim took longer than those that were not – the median times were 145 days and 55 days respectively. Timescales were generally longer for rape offences: it took a median of 421 days – well over a year – to charge a suspect of a rape, and 86 days – nearly three months – to conclude that prosecution was not in the public interest. (Home Office, 2023b: Table 3.3).

Figure 16. Time taken for sexual offences against children and adults to receive an outcome, by type of outcome, 2022/23



Source: Home Office (2023b: 'Crime Outcomes in England and Wales: 2022 to 2023'). Updated July 2023. Excludes data from Devon and Cornwall police. Excludes sexual abuse image offences.

9. Data from Devon and Cornwall police force was not available and is excluded from this section (Home Office, 2023c).

4.2 Legal decisions

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

- ▶ the number of child sexual abuse cases passed to it by the police 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 2022/23, the CPS recorded legal decisions relating to 5,973 individuals suspected of child sexual abuse offences (CPS, 2023a: Table AR5). In 84% (5,001) of these cases, a decision was made to charge the defendant.

The average (mean) time from the police's first submission to the issuing of a charging decision was 114 days – six days longer than in 2021/22 (CPS, 2023a: Table AR5). There was considerable variation between CPS divisions, with the average ranging from 75 days in the North East to 192 days in the South East. The CPS's Central Casework Division, which deals with particularly complex cases, took 10 months – 310 days – on average to issue a decision.

Compared to the previous year, the number of legal decisions on charging rose by 8%.

4.3 Court proceedings

In the year to December 2022, 8,024 defendants were proceeded against in court for offences related to child sexual abuse, and 6,517 defendants were convicted (Ministry of Justice, 2024a).¹⁰

While this represented a 6% increase in the number of court proceedings brought in relation to child sexual abuse compared to 2021, it was smaller than the 10% rise in the overall number of court proceedings. The overall rise was attributed by the Ministry of Justice (2023a) to the criminal justice system's continued recovery following the COVID-19 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 more than 100%.

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 there is 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 (2023b); Home Office (2023c).

10. In January 2024, the Ministry of Justice revised its prosecution, conviction and sentencing figures from 2017 onwards, citing "more accurate and reliable methods for data processing" (MoJ, 2024b). As a result, these figures for 2017 onwards differ from those stated in previous editions of this report.

In 2022, the overall conviction ratio for prosecutions related to child sexual abuse was 81%.¹¹

There was significant variation between different groups of child sexual abuse offence: rape offences had the lowest conviction ratio (49%), while child sexual abuse image offences had the highest (90%) (see Table 3).

Table 3. Defendants prosecuted and convicted, by child sexual abuse offence category, England and Wales, 2022

Offence category	Prosecutions in 2022	Convictions in 2022	Conviction ratio
Rape of a female child under 13	320	217	68%
Rape of a male child under 13	64	49	77%
Rape of a female child under 16	645	242	38%
Rape of a male child under 16	50	25	50%
<i>Total rape prosecutions</i>	<i>1,079</i>	<i>533</i>	<i>49%</i>
Sexual assault of a female child under 13	891	584	66%
Sexual assault of a male child under 13	109	70	64%
<i>Total sexual assault prosecutions</i>	<i>1,000</i>	<i>654</i>	<i>65%</i>
Sexual activity involving a child under 13	578	478	83%
Sexual activity involving a child under 16	1,035	913	88%
<i>Total sexual activity prosecutions</i>	<i>1,613</i>	<i>1,391</i>	<i>86%</i>
Familial sexual offences with a child aged under 13*	18	7	39%
Familial sexual offences with a child aged 13–17*	63	44	70%
<i>Total familial sexual offence prosecutions*</i>	<i>81</i>	<i>51</i>	<i>63%</i>
Taking, permitting to be taken or making, distributing or publishing indecent photographs or pseudo photographs of children	2,990	2,693	90%
Possession of indecent photograph of a child	270	248	92%
Possession of prohibited images of children	45	42	93%
<i>Total child sexual abuse image prosecutions</i>	<i>3,305</i>	<i>2,983</i>	<i>90%</i>
Sexual grooming	638	647	101%
Child abuse through child sexual exploitation	277	222	80%
Abuse of position of trust of a sexual nature	20	20	100%
Possession of a paedophile manual	0	0	0%
Gross indecency with children (historical offence)	11	16	145%
<i>Total other child sexual abuse offence prosecutions</i>	<i>946</i>	<i>905</i>	<i>96%</i>
Total	8,024	6,517	81%

Source: Ministry of Justice (2024a). Includes defendants proceeded against for non-recent offences.

* These categories are visible in this table (but not in Table 1, Figure 11 or Figure 15) because, unlike police data (see Appendix 1), data published by the Ministry of Justice distinguishes between familial sexual offences against children and against adults.

11. A slightly higher conviction rate is given in the CPS data, which tracks individual cases from charge to conviction. Of the smaller number of child sexual abuse flagged prosecutions (4,684), 83% (3,896) ended with a conviction (see Crown Prosecution Service, 2023b: Table 3.3). The CPS data also provides reasons for non-convictions, showing that more than half (52%) were dismissed after trial, with the remaining including dropped prosecutions and cases where prosecution was prevented (Crown Prosecution Service, 2023b: Table 3.4).

4.3.2 Trends over time

Figure 17 shows that the annual number of defendants proceeded against for child sexual abuse offences continued to recover following a sharp fall in 2016–2018, although in 2022 it remained below its peak of 2016.

There were increases in prosecutions relating to all child sexual abuse offence types *except* child sexual abuse image offences, which fell by 2% (having risen by 29% in the previous year). The highest rises were in prosecutions for sexual grooming (+34%) and child sexual exploitation offences (+29%).¹²

4.3.3 Characteristics of defendants: sex

In 2022, 99 female defendants were proceeded against for child sexual abuse offences, representing just 1% of the 7,848 defendants whose sex was recorded.

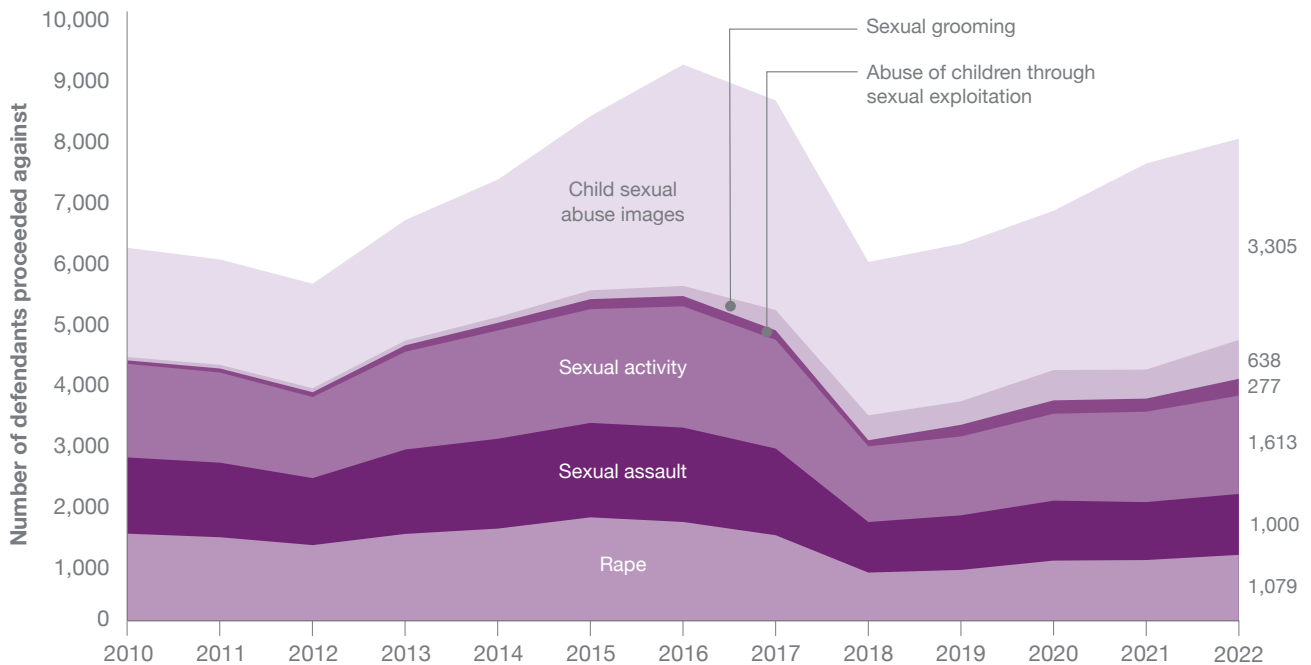
Nearly two-thirds (64%) of prosecutions of females were for offences relating to sexual activity with children (41) and image-based offences (22).

Males too were most likely to be prosecuted for child sexual abuse image (3,232) and sexual activity (1,533) offences; these two offence categories accounted for three-fifths (61%) of male prosecutions.

By far the highest female-to-male ratio of defendants was for the offence of ‘abuse of position of trust’, although absolute numbers were very low: of the 20 defendants prosecuted for this offence in 2022, two (10%) were female. For familial sexual offences, 5% of defendants (4 out of 80) were female. For other offences, females consistently accounted for no more than 2% of defendants.

Of the 99 females proceeded against, 84 (85%) were found guilty in 2022. The conviction rate among male defendants was slightly lower at 82% (6,365).

Figure 17. Number of defendants proceeded against for child sexual abuse offences, by offence group, 2009–2022, England and Wales



Source: Ministry of Justice (2024a). Includes defendants proceeded against for non-recent offences. Excludes offences – gross indecency (historical offence), abuse of a position of trust, and familial child sexual offences – for which consistently fewer than 150 defendants per year have been proceeded against.

12. A recent analysis of rape, sexual offence and the overall crown court proceedings shows that the decrease in child sexual abuse proceedings between 2016 and 2018 is a reflection of wider trends (see Thomas, 2023: Figure 3). However, while child sexual abuse proceedings started to recover in 2019, albeit slowly, the overall number of proceedings continued to fall, reaching its lowest point in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.3.4 Characteristics of defendants: age

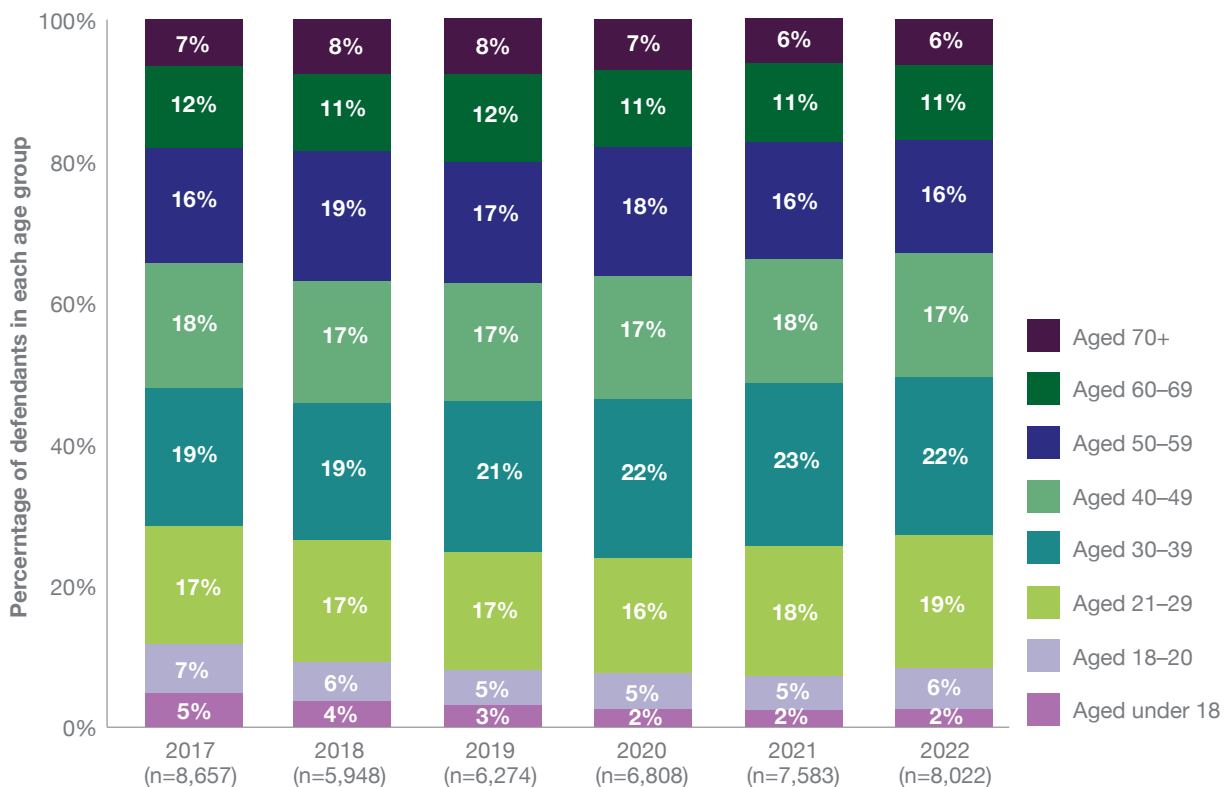
Figure 18 shows that, since 2017 (the first year for which detailed information on defendants' ages was published), under-18s have accounted for a smaller proportion of defendants prosecuted for child sexual abuse offences; in 2022, as in 2021, they represented just 2% (200) of defendants. This is part of a longer trend: the proportion halved between 2005 and 2016, from 12% to 6% (Karsna and Kelly, 2021).

Rape charges made up a third (68, 34%) of prosecutions of under-18s for child sexual abuse offences in 2022, compared to one in eight (1,079, 13%) of such prosecutions across all defendant age groups.

In 2022, 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 dropped 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 defendants aged under 21, 72% of whom were convicted. Among defendants aged 21 and over, 82% were found guilty (Ministry of Justice, 2024a).

Figure 18. Defendants proceeded against for child sexual abuse offences, by age, 2017–2022, England and Wales



Source: Ministry of Justice (2024a). Includes defendants proceeded against for non-recent offences.

4.3.5 Characteristics of defendants: ethnicity

In 2022, more detailed information than previously was published on the ethnicity of defendants. In the records of defendants prosecuted for child sexual abuse offences, their ethnic background was recorded in 74% (5,955) of cases. Among these individuals, five-sixths were White British (4,943) – a higher proportion than in the general population of England and Wales (see Table 4). This over-representation is likely to be related to the overall under-identification of child sexual abuse in minority ethnic communities.

The conviction ratio ranged from 62% for Black defendants to 83% for White defendants. This is likely to be related to the offences for which people from different ethnic backgrounds were prosecuted: image offences, which were more likely to be the reason for White defendants to be prosecuted, were more likely than most other child sexual abuse offences to result in a conviction (see Table 3 above).

Table 4. Proportion of defendants proceeded against for child sexual abuse offences and the general population, by ethnic group, England and Wales

Offence category	Defendants proceeded against for child sexual abuse offence (2022)	Population in England and Wales aged 10+ (2021)
White	88%	83%
White British	83%	75%
White Irish	0%	1%
Any other white background	4%	7%
Asian	7%	9%
Indian	1%	3%
Pakistani	2%	2%
Bangladeshi	1%	1%
Chinese	0%	1%
Any other Asian background	2%	2%
Black	3%	4%
African	1%	2%
Caribbean	1%	1%
Any other black background	1%	0%
Mixed or multiple	2%	2%
White and Asian	0%	1%
White and black African	0%	0%
White and black Caribbean	0%	1%
Any other mixed background	1%	1%
Any other ethnic background	1%	2%

Source: Ministry of Justice (2024a); Office for National Statistics (2023c). Includes defendants proceeded against for non-recent offences. Excludes defendants whose ethnicity was not recorded. 'Other' includes Arab.

4.3.6 Sentences for child sexual abuse offences

In 2022, nearly half (45%; 2,885) of defendants who were found guilty of child sexual abuse offences received an immediate custodial sentence, one-third (33%, 2,162) received a suspended sentence, and one-fifth (20%; 1,315) received a community sentence. Among under-18s found guilty, the vast majority (90%; 133) 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 2022, 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 did – 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: this average varied from 1.5 years for image possession offences to 12–13 years for rape 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 the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) made data for the three years from 2020/21 to 2022/23 available for this report (MoJ, 2023b). Figure 20 shows a significant difference in the court timescales between image prosecutions and all other child sexual abuse prosecutions. While it took on average (mean) 170 days – almost six months – to proceed from a charge to completion in the Crown Court for image offences, for all other child sexual abuse offences it took nearly twice as long: on average 331 days, or about 11 months.¹³

Further, while the average timescales for child sexual abuse image prosecutions remained stable, the average time taken to prosecute all other child sexual abuse offences increased in 2021/22 by nearly 100 days, from 252 to 350 days; despite a small reduction in the following year, it remained well above pre-COVID-19 levels in 2022/23. The MoJ has attributed the increased timescales to the backlog caused by the pandemic, and is addressing the backlog through measures including removal of the limit on the number of days the court can sit (MoJ, 2022).

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.

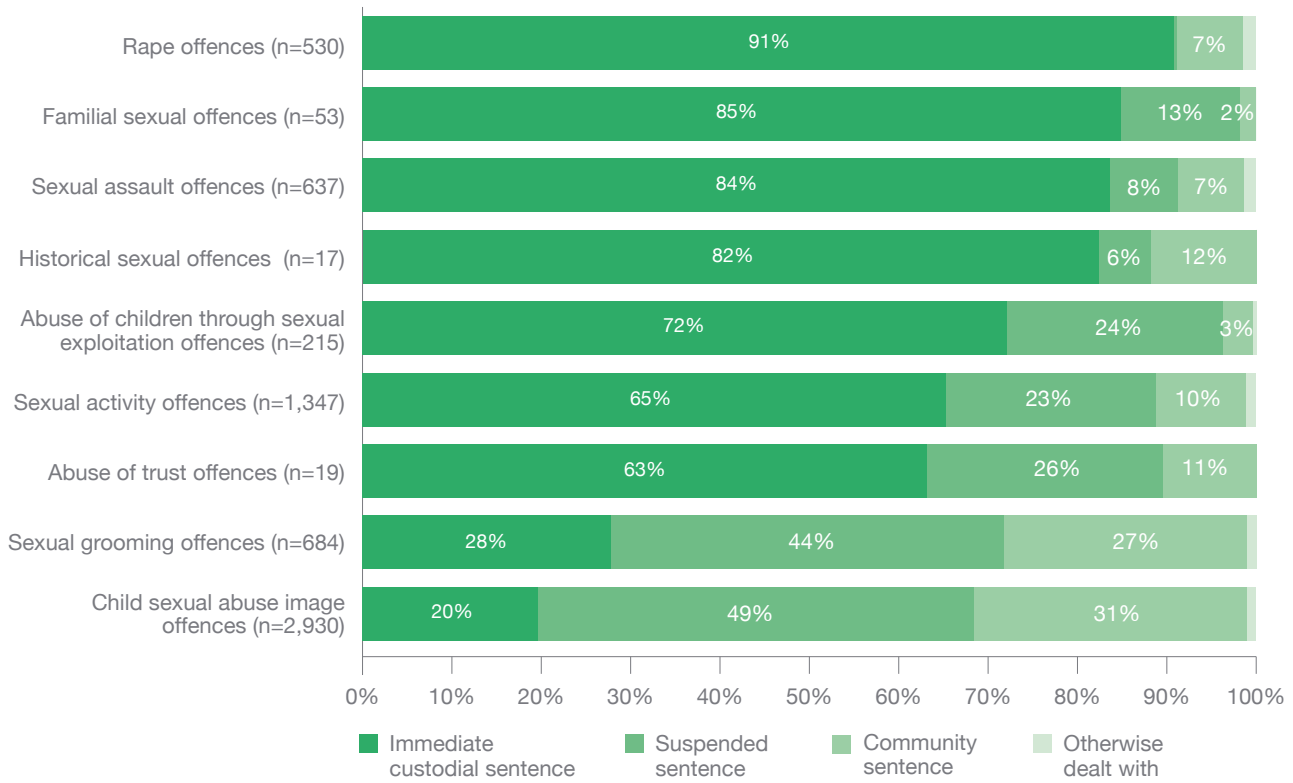
Community sentence. A community order can include one or more of the following: unpaid work, an activity or programme designed to reduce the likelihood of reoffending, a requirement not to engage in a prohibited activity, a curfew, residence only where a probation officer allows, mental health treatment,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

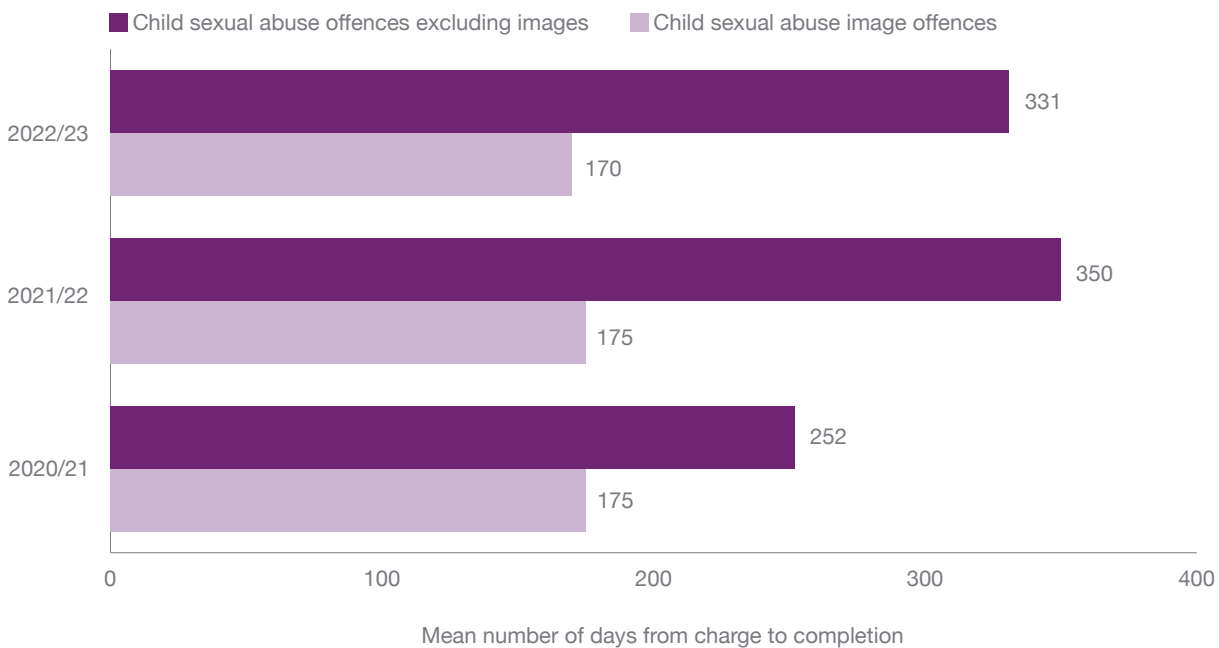
13. The *median* time for the completion of image offence prosecutions was 108 days, and for all other child sexual abuse prosecutions the median was 235.

Figure 19. Sentences imposed on convicted defendants for child sexual abuse offences, by type of sentence, 2022, England and Wales



Source: Ministry of Justice (2024a). Includes defendants proceeded against for non-recent offences.

Figure 20. Mean prosecution timescales from charge to completion in the Crown Court, by type of offence, 2020/21-2022/23, England and Wales



Source: Ministry of Justice (2023b). Child sexual abuse offences excluding image offences: n=2,450 (2020/21), 3,268 (2021/22) and 3,115 (2022/23). Child sexual abuse image offences: n=1,699 (2020/21), 1,963 (2021/22) and 2,055 (2022/23). Excludes prosecutions for which timescales were not recorded. Includes defendants proceeded against for non-recent offences.

5. Sexual assault referral centres in England and Wales

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).

NHS Wales has recently started to collect data centrally from the eight Welsh SARCs, and has provided information for this report on the number of children supported by those SARCs.

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 8,465 initial contacts with under-18s in 2022/23; this is a 3% increase on the previous year (see Figure 21). Medical examinations made up one-third of contacts; the number of children attending a SARC for a medical examination remained similar to the previous year.

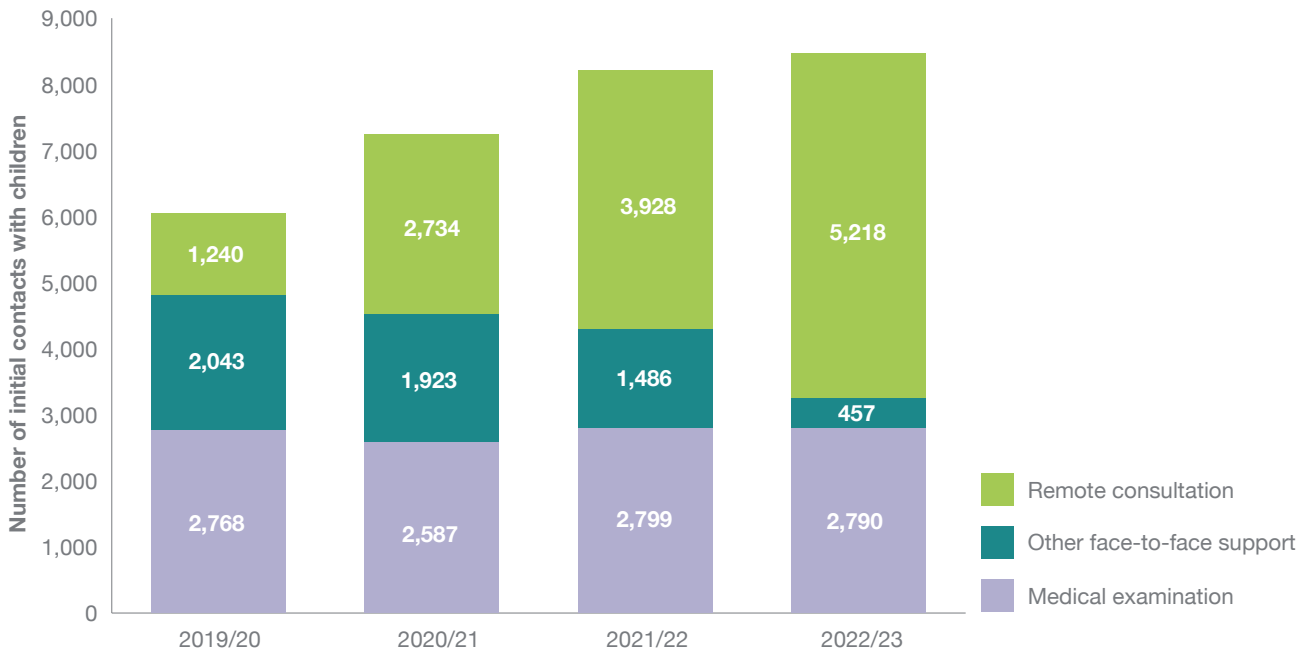
The overall increase was entirely attributable to a substantial rise in remotely delivered consultations,¹⁴ which rose by a third and formed an increasingly significant method of contact between SARCs and children: nearly two-thirds (62%) of contacts happened remotely in 2022/23, up from just one in five before the COVID-19 pandemic. There was a sharp fall in in-person support sessions not involving a medical examination, which accounted for just 5% of contacts with children in 2022/23 – down from one-third three years earlier.

The use of remote consultations varied widely across England's seven health regions, accounting for between 27% and 75% of all contacts with under-18s in each region. In-person support sessions not involving a medical examination ranged regionally from 1% to 37% of contacts.

In Wales the eight SARCs supported 1,036 under-18s; fewer than a quarter of these children (22%, 236) attended for a medical examination.

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, 2019/20–2022/23, England



Source: NHS England (2023, 2022, 2021, 2020b).

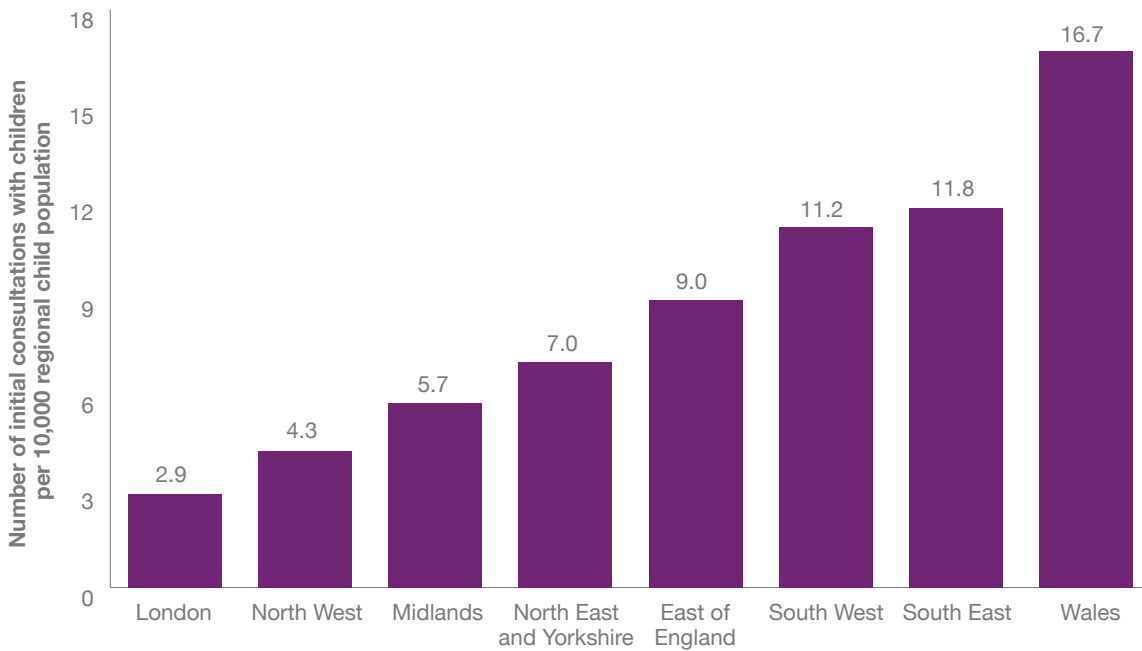
Combined data from England and Wales shows that, overall, 9,501 under-18s were supported by SARCs in 2022/23.

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. The number of consultations ranged from just under three per 10,000 child population in London to nearly 17 per 10,000 child population – almost six times as many – in Wales (see Figure 22).

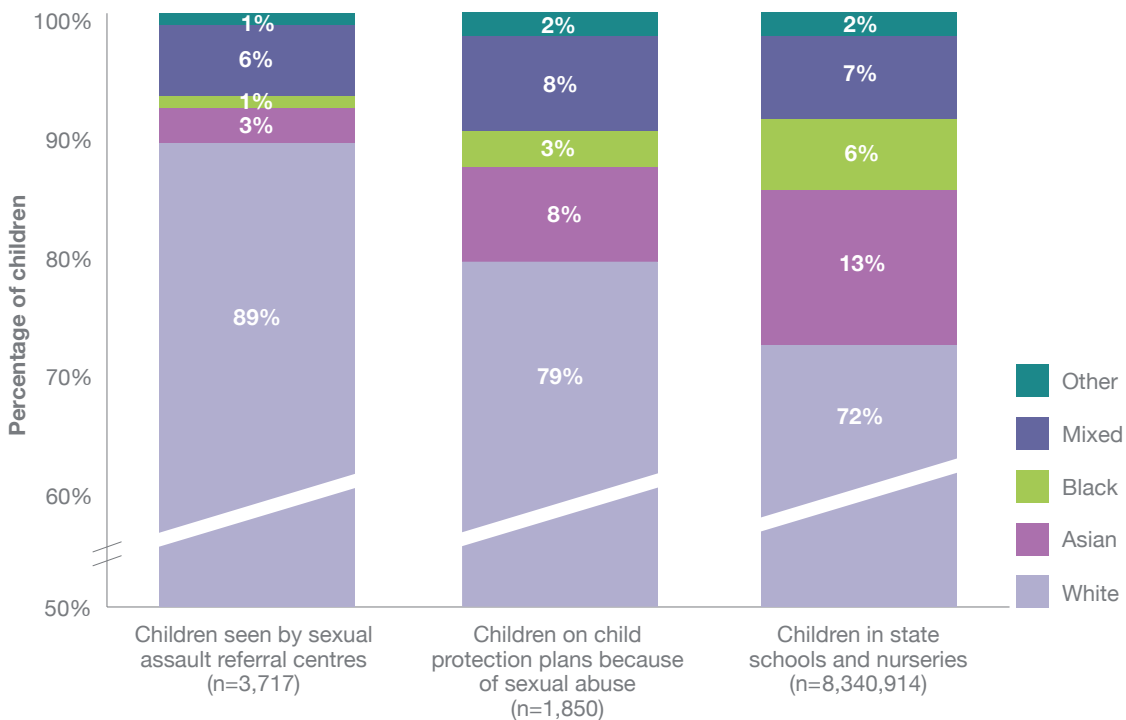
Five-sixths (83%) of children who were in contact with SARCs in England were female. Comparisons with other statutory data indicate that the proportion of boys in contact with SARCs was lower than the proportion supported by local authorities through child protection plans or coming to the attention of police forces as possible victims of sexual abuse (see section 3.3.1). The gender profile of children seen by SARCs in 2022/23 was relatively consistent across the regions, and similar to the previous three years.

Almost half (48%) of under-18s in contact with SARCs in England were aged 13 or younger at the time of their first consultation – an increase from 42% the previous year. The age profile of children at the time of their first consultation was broadly similar across all the regions of England.

Almost half of under-18s in contact with SARCs in England were aged 13 or younger at the time of their first consultation.

Figure 22. Initial consultations with SARCs per 10,000 child population, by region, 2022/23, England and Wales

Source: NHS England (2023); NHS Wales (2023); Office for National Statistics (2023a). Population figures (aged 0–17) are mid-year estimates.

Figure 23. Under-18s making initial contact with SARCs, by ethnic background, 2022/23, England

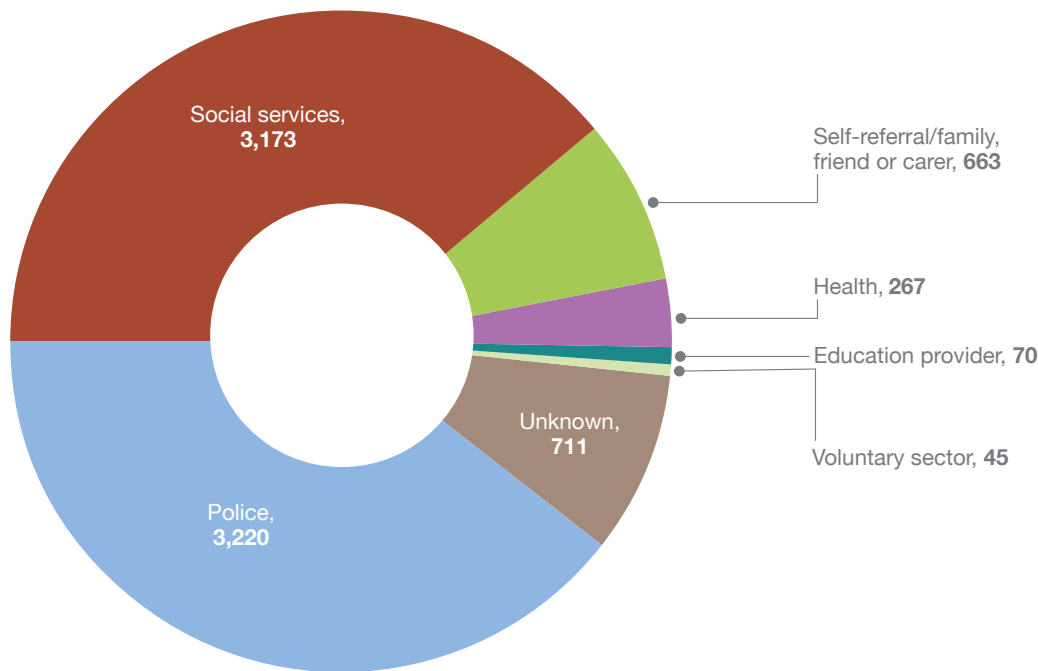
Sources: NHS England (2023); Department for Education (2023a: Table A5, year ending 31 March 2023); Department for Education (2023b: 'Pupil characteristics – ethnicity and language'). Excludes children for whom no ethnicity data was provided.

Fewer than half of English SARCs’ records of contacts with under-18s contained information on the child’s ethnicity. In those that did, a large majority (89%) of these children were White (see Figure 23). Overall, only 11% of children in contact with SARCs in England were from other ethnic backgrounds, far below the proportion of children from these backgrounds in state schools and nurseries (28%) and also lower than the proportion placed on child protection plans because of sexual abuse (21%). Children of Asian heritage, who comprise 13% of England’s state school and nursery population (Department for Education, 2023b), accounted for just 3% of SARC attendees. English SARCs’ under-reach to children from minority ethnic backgrounds, and in particular Asian children, has been consistent across the four years for which this data is available.

5.2 Sources of referrals

SARCIP is the only centrally stored dataset to include data on the sources of referrals to a service. In 2022/23, the police and local authority children’s services accounted for the highest share of referrals to SARCs in England (see Figure 24). Two-fifths (40%) of contacts with under-18s were made following a referral from the police, and a similar proportion (39%) came from children’s services. Referrals from children’s services increased almost threefold on the previous year, when 1,066 children had been referred by local authorities. All other agency referrals – health, education or voluntary sector – accounted for between 1% and 3% each. Self-referrals or referrals from family and friends accounted for 8% of the total, and in 10% of cases the referral source was not recorded.

Figure 24. Sources of referrals of under-18s to SARCs, 2022/23, England



Source: NHS England (2023). ‘Health’ includes Accident and Emergency departments, GPs, and genitourinary medicine/contraception and sexual health clinics. Excludes children for whom no information was provided.

6. Improving understanding of the scale and nature of child sexual abuse

As we review the latest trends in official data on the scale and nature of child sexual abuse, it is worth considering the progress that has been made in terms of improving the data we have and use about the prevalence of child sexual abuse, the identification of and response to it, and the priorities that remain.

In last year's report (Karsna and Bromley, 2023) we highlighted four significant reviews that had been published in the preceding 12 months (Jay et al, 2022; Stanko, 2022; MacAlister, 2022; Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2022); these all made recommendations for improving the collection, analysis and use of data on child sexual abuse, sexual offences or child protection more widely, in order to support improved service responses. It was clear that all four reviews found limitations in the current collection, quality and use of data, which were impeding strategic and operational responses.

It is important that the cross-government and cross-agency coordination and collaboration to respond to and address the issues raised across these reviews, and beyond, is maintained.

6.1 Understanding prevalence

In July 2017, the CSA Centre first highlighted the absence of a regular national prevalence survey of child sexual abuse, and the impact this has on civil society's ability to tackle and respond to child sexual abuse (Kelly and Karsna, 2017). As detailed in Chapter 2 of this report, far more children are sexually abused than come to official agencies' attention. Even if agency data about cases of identified child sexual abuse improves, it provides only a partial understanding of children's experiences of sexual 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 concluded in 2017, and 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 regularly measure the prevalence of child sexual abuse.



The UK Government has committed to a national survey of child maltreatment, which will include questions on child sexual abuse.



The UK Government has committed to piloting a national survey of child maltreatment which will include questions relating to child sexual abuse, adding to our understanding of current prevalence; the CSA Centre is working closely with the team leading this work, to ensure that the information captured is as comprehensive as possible. The national survey will provide important insights into children's current experiences of a range of forms of maltreatment, as well as capturing the whole-childhood experiences of young adults. It is important that the UK Government continues to prioritise this vital work, and that the survey is carried out as soon as possible.

6.2 Improvements to agency data

Policing

As highlighted in section 4.1.3, children are disproportionately likely to be victims of sexual offences: while they make up only 20% of the population in England and Wales, they account for 40% of all sexual offence victims. Yet efforts to improve responses, following the government's response to the End-to-End Rape Review (Ministry of Justice, 2021), appear to be focused exclusively on adult victims of sexual violence.

Operation Soteria Bluestone, a national research and change programme aimed at transforming the police response to rape and serious sexual offences, was set up in response to the Rape Review – and in July 2023 it was announced that new approaches would be rolled out across all 43 police forces and 14 Crown Prosecution Service areas in England and Wales.

Two new national operating models for the investigation and prosecution of rape and serious sexual offences (College of Policing, 2023c; Crown Prosecution Service, 2023c) were introduced, alongside a dedicated dashboard (Home Office et al, 2023) to monitor decision-making on these cases. Additionally, a commitment was made to train 2,000 extra police investigators in rape and sexual offences by April 2024.

However, it is not clear how much the national operating models or training will extend to child abuse investigation teams, or whether explicit consideration will be given to children's needs as victims and the investigation of child rape.

Another recent development has been the National Policing Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme's first in-depth analysis of child sexual abuse offences recorded by the police (VKPP, 2024). As highlighted in Chapter 4, this has provided new insights into the types of offence recorded in 2022, the people who committed them, and the victims.

Social care

In December last year, the Department for Education published its Children’s Social Care Data and Digital Strategy (DfE, 2023c). This sets out three strategic objectives which will provide the focus for work with the children’s social care sector through to 2025, in order “to begin building the foundations for transforming data and digital services”. The strategy’s ambition is to support sustainable change by:

- ▶ “Supporting strong data culture and leadership.
- ▶ Supporting systems and technology to meet sector need.
- ▶ Improving the data we collect, share, and use.”

This commitment is, of course, welcome, but the strategy has a broad focus and to date there is limited detail about how it will support improved understanding around the identification of and response to child sexual abuse. At present, the new data dashboard for children’s social care is set to contain only one reference to child sexual abuse, in the context of sexual exploitation outside the home (DfE, 2023d).

Wider agency data

Although there have been notable efforts to improve data collection in recent years, these have been limited to law enforcement and children’s social care. In last year’s report we highlighted the absence of publicly available data from health agencies (other than the data on sexual assault referral centres analysed in Chapter 5) and education settings. Further, there is very limited data available regarding the experience of victims of child sexual abuse offences within the criminal justice system: for example, the extent to which their rights within the Victims’ Code (Ministry of Justice, 2020) are met.

6.3 Data on the provision of support services for victims/survivors of child sexual abuse

In January 2024 the CSA Centre published *Support Matters*, presenting the findings from the most comprehensive study to date of child sexual abuse support services in England and Wales (Parkinson and Steele, 2024). Our research found just 468 services providing support to victims and survivors of child sexual abuse and their families, with waiting times for services for sexually abused children having more than doubled since 2015. On average, victims/survivors – both children and adults – were waiting six months for much-needed support, and one in nine support services had a waiting list of more than a year.

The Ministry of Justice has funded the CSA Centre to undertake a repeat of this study in 2024/25, which will provide important insight into changes in the landscape of support services. In addition, we are developing a ‘data hub’ which will make local and regional prevalence estimates and agency data available to local policymakers, commissioners and funders, and a directory of child sexual abuse support services.



Funded by the Ministry of Justice, in 2024/25 the CSA Centre will repeat its recent study of child sexual abuse support services.



7. Conclusions

In 2022/23 the overall levels of **identification** of child sexual abuse by official agencies remained broadly similar to the previous year. We observed:

- no overall change in the number of assessments recording either child sexual abuse or child sexual exploitation concerns in England
- a small increase (+2%) in the number of child sexual abuse offences recorded by the police in England and Wales
- a small increase (+3%) in the number of under 18s seen by SARCs in England.

In last year's report, covering 2021/22, we noted an overall 15% increase in the cases of child sexual abuse in children's services and police-recorded offences, and a 13% rise in the number of children seen by SARCs (Karsna and Bromley, 2023). These higher levels of identification were sustained in 2022/23, suggesting that this rise was not a temporary increase caused by higher levels of identification following COVID-19 lockdowns but a more general improvement in the identification of child sexual abuse by agencies.

The trends in the data available on official agencies' **response** to child sexual abuse were more mixed in 2022/23:

- Concerningly, there was a significant drop in the number of children placed on child protection plans under the category of child sexual abuse in England, continuing a long-term downward trend. The number of child protection plans under the primary category of sexual abuse fell to its lowest level in 14 years. Child sexual abuse was the reason for just 3.6% of all child protection plans, the lowest proportion ever recorded. The 2,290 children placed on child protection plans under the primary category of sexual abuse equated to only 5% of the children across England whose initial assessments recorded sexual abuse or sexual exploitation as concerns in 2022/23. Information is not collected at national level on the response (if any) by children's services to the remaining 95%.

- The number of suspects charged for child sexual abuse offences increased in line with the overall rise in the number of child sexual abuse investigations being concluded, so the proportion of investigations resulting in charges remained at 11%. The proportion of investigations concluding with a caution, community resolution, intervention or diversionary activity also remained stable at 4%.
- There is a lack of information about the multi-agency response to safeguarding children when the remaining 85% of police investigations conclude – usually because of evidential difficulties – with no further action by the police.
- The number of prosecutions for child sexual abuse offences increased by 6%, and the overall conviction ratio for prosecutions related to child sexual abuse was 81%.

Moreover, the data available on agencies' responses to child sexual abuse does not include any measure of those responses' *effectiveness* in protecting children.

Child sexual abuse was the primary reason for just 3.6% of all new child protection plans, the lowest proportion ever recorded.

As the criminal justice system responded to more cases of child sexual abuse, the time taken to investigate and prosecute these offences remained high in 2022/23. As in the previous year, there was a typical wait of nine months from reporting the offence to a suspect being charged, and a further 11 months from charge to the case concluding in court.

There also remains a concerning ‘postcode lottery’ in agencies’ activity: where children live affects how likely it is that their sexual abuse will be identified and responded to. The levels of child sexual abuse recorded in different local authority and police force areas still vary significantly, and local analysis and response are required to address this variation.

Over the past decade, tackling child sexual abuse has received much greater prioritisation at a national policy level – and yet there remains too wide a gap between the number of children being sexually abused and the identification of and response to those children by statutory agencies. As the testimonies of thousands of adult victims and survivors within the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse’s Truth Project (IICSA, 2022) demonstrated, the impact of not responding to abuse is long and deep-reaching.

Some progress has been made in improving professionals’ awareness and understanding of the scale and nature of child sexual abuse in order to improve practice. Yet the progress remains frustratingly siloed. In terms of official agency data, great strides would be made if common definitions and categories were used, making data more comparable, and if more use was made of the information that is already collected by agencies but is not stored in extractable form.

In an era of unprecedented data collection, it is crucial that choices are made to prioritise continued improvements in the recording and use of data about child sexual abuse. In particular, there is a need across government for official data to include more information about agencies’ response to that abuse. Only with better data on prevalence, identification and response can we properly inform actions to prevent child sexual abuse and respond effectively when it happens.



There is a lack of information about the multi-agency safeguarding response when the police take no further action after an investigation.



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

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Appendix 1: Data definitions

Police-recorded crime

Police data is published by the Home Office according to offence classifications in the *Home Office Counting Rules* (Home Office, 2022) 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, 2022).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, familial sexual offences, 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. For example, it 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

Offences are recorded in the year in which they are reported to the police, rather than the year in which they were committed.

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).

- ▶ 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 publicly available 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 of prosecutions relating to ‘obscene publications’ involve images of children: out of 3,402 defendants who were proceeded against on charges of indecent image offences in 2022, 97% (3,292) were prosecuted in relation to images of children (Ministry of Justice, 2023a). It is, however, possible that prosecutions are more likely for image offences involving children than those involving adults.

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, 2018). 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, 2023a).
- ▶ 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, 2018). 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, 2023a).
- ▶ 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 vertical rectangular background with a geometric, low-poly pattern. The colors transition from dark blue at the top to green at the bottom. The text is white and positioned on the left side of the rectangle.

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