

Centre of
expertise
on child
sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse in 2023/24: Trends in official data

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About the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse

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

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

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

We seek to bring about these changes by:

- ▶ producing and sharing information about the scale and nature of, and response to, child sexual abuse
- ▶ addressing gaps in knowledge through sharing research and evidence
- ▶ providing training and support for professionals and researchers working in the field
- ▶ engaging with and influencing policy.

For more information on our work, please visit our website:

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Executive summary

Understanding the scale and nature of child sexual abuse is key to improving responses to it. This report continues the CSA Centre's series of publications providing professionals and decision-makers with up-to-date evidence and analysis of official data on child sexual abuse in England and Wales. It focuses on the recorded cases of child sexual abuse that professionals identified and responded to in 2023/24, drawing on the latest available evidence from the 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 level of child sexual abuse 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/research-resources/research-evidence/scale-nature-of-abuse/the-scale-and-nature-of-child-sexual-abuse/.)

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. This data is now also available at a local level on the CSA Centre's Data Insights Hub (www.csacentre.org.uk/data-insights-hub), where data from individual local authorities and police forces can be viewed over time and compared to similar areas.

Child protection in England

In 2023/24 there was a decline in the overall identification of child sexual abuse by local authority children's services in England. Concerns about child sexual abuse or child sexual exploitation were recorded in 44,830 child needs assessments – the lowest number in nine years, and 8% fewer than in 2022/23.

This suggests that the increased identification of child sexual abuse concerns in needs assessments during 2021/22 and 2022/23, as noted in previous editions of this report, was temporary; it may have been linked to the higher priority given to uncovering possible harms in the home following the COVID-19 lockdowns.

There was barely any drop during the year in the overall number of needs assessments where any concerns about the child were recorded – but just one in 11 of those assessments recorded a concern about child sexual abuse or exploitation



Concerns about any form of sexual abuse were recorded in 44,830 child needs assessments – the lowest number in nine years.



Of the 30,970 assessments recording child sexual abuse concerns, two-fifths involved concerns related to harmful sexual behaviour by another child. Concerns about child sexual exploitation (which is treated separately from child sexual abuse in these assessments) were recorded in 13,860 assessments, continuing a decline of more than 6,000 over six years.

Different local authorities' needs assessments varied considerably in their identification of child sexual abuse concerns. Since there is no evidence to suggest that the prevalence of child sexual abuse differs significantly between the regions of England, this suggests that the response to sexually abused children depends on where they live. Five local authorities did not record any concerns about the sexual abuse of children over the entire year, but six others each recorded these concerns for more than six children per 1,000 children living in the area. Rates of identification/recording in London's local authorities tended to be low, while every other region had wide variations in rates between local authorities.

While no overall information is publicly available on the actions taken following needs assessments, data is published on the reasons for placing children on child protection plans. This shows that 2,160 children in England were placed on child protection plans under the category of sexual abuse in 2023/24 – a 6% decrease on the previous year, to the lowest number in the 30 years that this data has been published.

The overall number of new child protection plans fell by a more modest 3%, with child sexual abuse being the reason for just 3.5% of those plans – the lowest proportion ever recorded.

The demographic profile of children placed on child protection plans because of sexual abuse concerns remained similar to previous years. These children tended to be older than those placed on 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.

Across local authorities in England, there was considerable variation in the number of children placed on child protection plans because of sexual abuse concerns, but more than two-thirds of local authorities placed no or very few children on protection plans for that reason.

No information about children's services' identification of, or response to, child sexual abuse in Wales during 2023/24 was published in time to be included in this report. The data for 2022/23 (which was not available for inclusion in last year's report) is summarised in an appendix.



The number of children in England placed on child protection plans because of sexual abuse concerns fell to a record low of 2,160.



Police-recorded child sexual abuse offences

Police forces in England and Wales recorded 101,199 child sexual abuse offences during 2023/24 – 4% fewer than in the previous year. There were decreases in recorded offences of rape (-7%), sexual activity (-12%) and sexual exploitation (-14%) as well as a small decline in offences relating to child sexual abuse images (-3%), but the number of recorded grooming offences rose by 10% to the highest level ever recorded (7,365).

As with local authorities, police forces differed in their rates of recording child sexual abuse offences relative to the size of the local child population. These 'recorded offence rates' were lowest in the Metropolitan Police, Hertfordshire and Surrey, while Durham, Cleveland and Cumbria had the highest rates.

During the year, 104,828 police investigations into child sexual abuse offences were concluded. A suspect was charged or summonsed in 13,098 (12%) of these. This is the highest number of charges brought for child sexual abuse offences on record, and the highest charge rate in six years.

A further 3,867 police investigations (4% of the total) ended with a caution, a community resolution or a 'diversionary or intervention activity'. And as in previous years, around two-thirds of investigations were closed because of evidential difficulties of some form.

Also continuing a long-term pattern, charges were more likely to be brought for offences of sexual exploitation and sexual grooming, and least likely for offences relating to sexual assault and rape, although modest increases in charge rates were observed in the latter two. Charge rates in relation to sexual offences against adults have also been rising, following the introduction of the new national operating model for investigating (adult) rape and serious sexual offences; possibly this model and its new ways of working have also influenced the response to child rape and sexual assault.

Investigations of sexual offences (against children or adults) took longer than any other offences to conclude. The average (median) time from recording a sexual offence to the investigation reaching a conclusion was 73 days – and when it concluded with a charge or summons, the median time was almost four times as long at 277 days. For rape offences, the median length of an investigation resulting in a charge or summons was 423 days – well over a year. Within these investigation timescales, the Crown Prosecution Service took an average (mean) time of 123 days to reach a legal decision on whether to charge individuals suspected of child sexual abuse offences – this was nine days longer than in 2022/23.



The number of charges and summonses brought by the police for child sexual abuse offences – 13,098 – was the highest on record.



Court proceedings

In the year to December 2023, court proceedings were brought against 9,215 defendants for child sexual abuse offences – 15% more than in the previous year, and the second-highest number on record. The number of prosecutions increased across all offence categories apart from sexual exploitation offences, where prosecutions fell by 20%.

Defendants' ethnicity was recorded in 69% of cases. Where recorded, nine in ten were of White backgrounds, and White British people were over-represented in comparison with the general population of England and Wales. Defendants were predominantly male (99%) and aged over 18 (97%), as in previous years.

There were 7,371 convictions over the year, 13% more than in the previous year. The Crown Prosecution Service tracked more than 5,000 prosecutions flagged as involving child sexual abuse offences, and found that 81% ended with a conviction.

Overall, nearly half (44%) of defendants found guilty were given an immediate custodial sentence, 8% more than in 2022, and one-third received a suspended sentence. Immediate custodial sentences were less common for image and sexual grooming offences, and for offenders aged under 18.

In prosecutions for child sexual abuse image offences, the average (mean) time to proceed from a charge to completion in the Crown Court was 185 days. Prosecutions for other child sexual abuse offences took twice as long on average – just over a year (374 days), which was more than a month (37 days) longer than in the previous year.

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

Criminal justice pathways following a conviction

This year's report is the first to outline trends in data from the criminal justice system on people convicted of child sexual abuse offences. Some datasets do not differentiate between sexual abuse against children and against adults, but data on convictions consistently shows that about two-thirds of convictions for sexual offences relate to child sexual abuse.

People convicted of a sexual offence against a child (as well as some sexual offences against an adult) are automatically subject to sexual offender notification requirements and managed under Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA). The MAPPA population of individuals with sexual convictions increased by 52% between 2013/14 and 2023/24, by which time MAPPA had oversight of 70,052 people across England and Wales who were subject to sexual offender notification requirements. Depending on the sentence received, these people were supervised by the prison, probation and/or police services; the police were responsible for supervising about three-quarters of them.



One in eight people serving immediate custodial sentences in June 2023 were in prison for sexual offences against children.



The prison population of people convicted of child sexual abuse offences increased by 28% between June 2015 and June 2023. As of June 2023, 13% of the prison population with custodial sentences were in custody for sexual offences against children (9,017), compared to 7% (4,942) who had committed sexual offences against adults. They were most commonly serving sentences for rape (3,685) or sexual assault (2,048) of a child, while 522 were in prison for child sexual abuse image offences. In 2023/24, 1,115 people convicted of sexual offences commenced an accredited treatment programme in prison, and 1,094 completed one. The number of people serving custodial offences for sexual offences is projected to increase in the coming years, as the court system continues to recover from the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and longer sentences are imposed as a result of legislative and sentencing guideline changes.

In March 2024, the probation service was supervising a total of 4,332 people convicted of a sexual offence across England and Wales – 55% more than four years earlier.

The Ministry of Justice analysis of ‘proven reoffending’ shows that around 13% of people released from prison or receiving non-custodial sentences for sexual offences between October and December 2022 were convicted of a further offence within 18 months. Most of these were public order offences (22%), summary non-motoring (minor criminal) offences (17%), and further sexual offences (12%). Compared to the general patterns of reconviction for all people released from prison or given non-custodial sentences in the same period, people with sexual offence convictions were more likely to be convicted of public order and sexual offences in the subsequent 18 months.

Children attending sexual assault referral centres

Sexual assault referral centres (SARCs) in England had initial contact with 9,533 children during the year, and 1,021 children were supported by SARCs in Wales, bringing the total across England and Wales to 10,544 children. Just over half 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; children of Asian heritage accounted for the smallest proportion of children seen by SARCs in comparison with their share of the population.

Conclusions

This report highlights mixed patterns of change during 2023/24 in the identification and response to child sexual abuse in England and Wales. Concerningly, we saw a significant drop – to historic lows – in child protection data from local authority children’s services in England. More encouragingly, we saw small but positive changes in the outcomes from police investigations and courts: more suspects were charged and more prosecutions took place in relation to child sexual abuse offences, reversing some of the long-term trends in the criminal justice system. The timescales for achieving justice continued to increase, however, particularly within the court system.

Data on post-conviction arrangements reveals a system that is having to manage an increasing number of people convicted of child sexual abuse offences.

Along with the findings from the recent national review of child sexual abuse in the family environment, which highlighted significant and long-standing issues in statutory services’ responses to that abuse, this report underlines the need for system-wide change in how these agencies identify and respond to sexually abused children. Our analysis highlights the continued need for improvements in the detail, consistency and quality of agency data. We also continue to call for a national prevalence survey, so that strategic decisions can be made with a clear understanding of the current scale and nature of the sexual abuse of children in England and Wales.

In March 2024, the probation service was supervising 4,332 people convicted of a sexual offence – 55% more than four years earlier.

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.

Our review focuses on *recorded* data about the sexual abuse of children, as identified and responded to by child protection and criminal justice agencies in 2023/24, and draws on the latest available evidence from official data released by these agencies.

That official data includes information from English local authority children's services on the number of children's needs assessments recording a risk of sexual abuse (including sexual exploitation), and the number of children placed on child protection plans under the category of sexual abuse. The criminal justice data includes statistics on offences related to child sexual abuse which were recorded by the police in England and Wales, 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, and – for the first time this year – on what happens to people who are convicted of these offences.

Official agency data is collected according to nationally agreed definitions, making it possible to monitor how the identification of and response to child sexual abuse has changed over time and in response to changes in policy, practice and society. It also enables us to see how local authorities and police forces differ in their identification and detection of child sexual abuse, and their response to it. This data is now also available for exploration at a local level through the CSA Centre's Data Insights Hub (see box).

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 that are actively 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 sexual abuse perpetrated against children: 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. As a result, the data can be skewed in different directions at different times.

Agencies that are prioritising their response to child sexual abuse, and scrutinising their data, are likely to return more accurate results.

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 rest of this report is 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 data from the child protection system in England, as presented in the Child in Need Census published by the Department for Education.
- ▶ Chapter 4 brings together data on child sexual abuse dealt with by criminal justice agencies – the police-recorded crime statistics in England and Wales published by the Home Office, and court statistics released by the Ministry of Justice and the Crown Prosecution Service. For the first time, it also explores trends in data following conviction for sexual offences, covering both the prison population and people managed in the community (by the police or the probation service).
- ▶ Chapter 5 presents data, recorded by NHS England and NHS Wales, on children referred to sexual assault referral centres.
- ▶ The final chapter draws conclusions from the data.

Data Insights Hub

The data presented in this report is available at a local level through the Data Insights Hub, an interactive online dashboard developed by the CSA Centre.

Using the Data Insights Hub, you can:

- ▶ view trends in individual local authorities' data on recorded assessments relating to child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation (England), and on the number of child protection plans/registrations due to sexual abuse (England and Wales)
- ▶ view trends in individual police forces' data on recorded child sexual abuse offences, including in relation to child sexual abuse image offences (England and Wales)
- ▶ view trends in the number of children who are in contact with sexual assault referral centres in each integrated care board (England) or health board (Wales) area
- ▶ compare your local data on child sexual abuse to 'statistical neighbours' or 'most similar forces' (demographically similar local authorities/police forces) or regional neighbours (sexual assault referral centres) and the national average
- ▶ see the estimated scale of child sexual abuse in your local area, and compare this with the number of children coming to statutory agencies' attention
- ▶ see the partner agencies' data for your area.

To access the Data Insights Hub, visit www.csacentre.org.uk/data-insights-hub/

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 statutory 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. Therefore, although survey data provides the best available evidence on the scale of child sexual abuse, it is likely that some abuse remains unidentified in surveys.

Agency statistics in this report relate to data on the suspected or identified sexual abuse of children, where children have been referred to local authority children's services, or offences have been reported to or detected by the police and/or dealt with by criminal courts, in 2023/24. Because child sexual abuse is significantly under-identified and under-reported, the level of child sexual abuse recorded 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 sexually abused children are more likely to exhibit signs that something is wrong than to tell someone verbally about the abuse – and even if they do tell anyone, it is very unlikely to be a professional (Allnock and Kiff, 2023, Allnock et al, 2019). However, professionals across the multi-agency workforce continue to rely heavily on children to disclose sexual abuse verbally (Ofsted et al, 2020). Professionals are reluctant to ask about child sexual abuse, even when a child's behaviour indicates possible sexual abuse – and when children do tell someone and professionals become involved, they are not always equipped with the relevant training and guidance to take action (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2024).

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 physical abuse in childhood, 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 the abuse at the time (ONS, 2020b: Table 22). When respondents had told someone, they had been much more likely to tell 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-2023 population estimates (Office for National Statistics, 2024a).
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, and fear of further violence as a result of telling (ONS, 2020b: Table 25).

While some respondents who had been sexually abused in childhood said they had spoken about the 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 children were less likely to tell anyone about harmful sexual behaviour by other children than about 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 the abuse.



Professionals are reluctant to ask about child sexual abuse, even when a child's behaviour indicates possible sexual abuse.



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



Sources: Department for Education (2024a); Home Office (2024a); NHS England (2025); NHS Wales (2025); Radford et al (2011); Office for National Statistics (2024a). Numbers rounded to the nearest hundred/thousand. * Includes assessments identifying risk of child sexual exploitation.

3. Local authority children's services in England

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. Information on Welsh children's services in 2023/24 is scheduled for release after the publication of this report. Appendix A summarises data on the activity of Welsh children's services in 2022/23.

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 for England provides only limited information about children who do receive a response from children's services:

- ▶ 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. Factors are counted once within each 'episode of need', even if multiple assessments record the same concern; however, a factor may be counted more than once for the same child if that child has multiple episodes of need.
- ▶ No information is published about actions taken after assessments.
- ▶ When a child is made the subject of a child protection plan, the local authority records the 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 reasons for placing children on child protection plans. 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 about children 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 below). Of the 621,880 children referred to children's services in England in 2023/24, just 10% (62,110) were made the subject of child protection plans under any category of abuse or neglect (Department for Education, 2024a: Tables A1 and D2). Appendix B provides further detail on the inclusion and exclusion criteria of the data used in this chapter.

Even when a child is placed on a child protection plan and there are concerns that they are being sexually abused, it is often the case that a different category of abuse is recorded on the plan. Many professionals have not been given the knowledge and skills to identify and name concerns of child sexual abuse with confidence (Ofsted et al, 2020). One study 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%); 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 (Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2015).

Additionally, although sexual abuse often occurs alongside other forms of child abuse (Office for National Statistics, 2020a), 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). Sexual abuse concerns recorded under the multiple category are not visible in the published data for England.

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 the 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.

While data at national and regional level is presented in this chapter, data for individual local authorities can be further interrogated through the CSA Centre’s Data Insights Hub (see Chapter 1).

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:

- ▶ A **child protection enquiry** (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.
- ▶ 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.

- ▶ 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.

Following an assessment/enquiry, it may be decided that the child’s needs mean that another assessment/enquiry from the list above should be carried out.

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

The needs assessments referred to in section 3.1 of this report are multi-agency (Section 17) assessments.

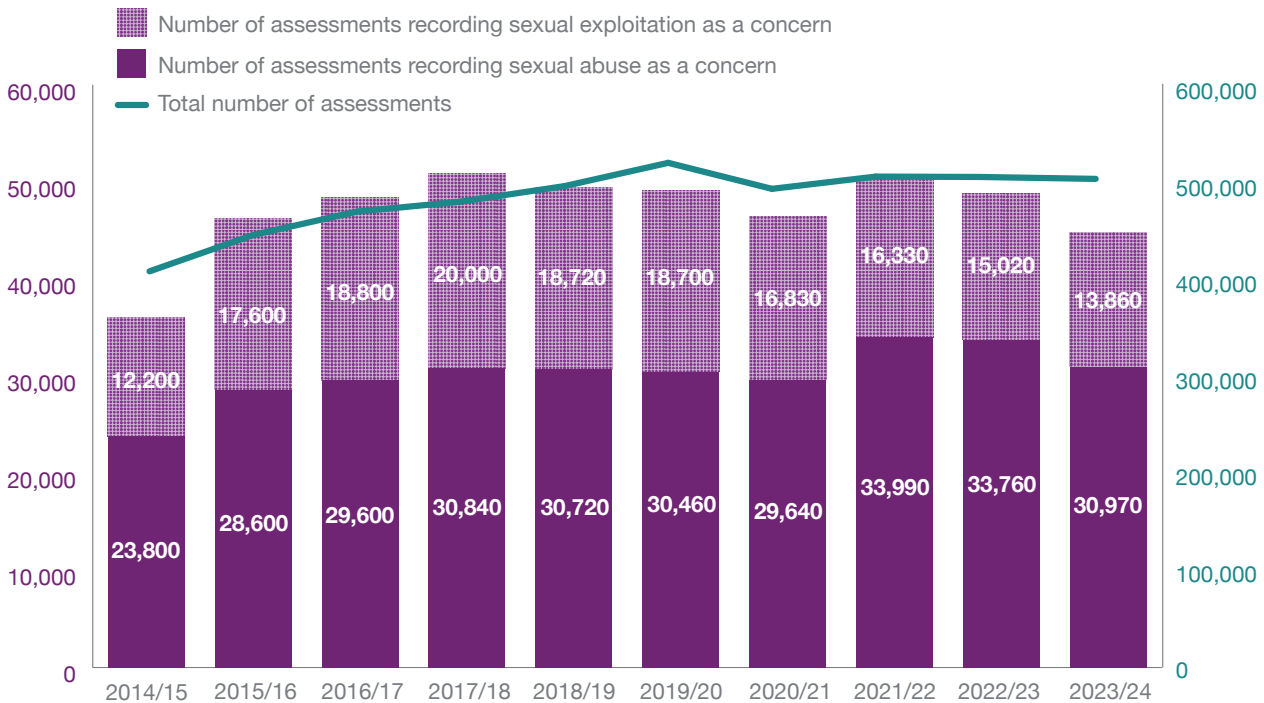
Sources: Department for Education (2023); Children Act 1989.

3.1 Children assessed as being at risk of sexual abuse or sexual exploitation

The Department for Education publishes a list of 36 ‘factors’ identified in the needs 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.

Figure 2 shows that there was a noticeable decrease in the number of needs assessments recording concerns about child sexual abuse (in light purple) or sexual exploitation (in dark purple) in 2023/24. Both figures fell by 8% compared to the previous year; the only factors to see larger decreases were gangs (-8%), alcohol misuse (-11%) and female genital mutilation (-18%). Meanwhile, the total number of needs assessments recording any concerns (shown in green in Figure 2) decreased by just 0.4%.

Figure 2. Child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation identified during assessments by local authority children’s services, 2015/16–2023/24, England



Source: Department for Education (2024a: Table C3); Department for Education (2018: Table C3); Department for Education (2017: Table C3); Department for Education (2016: Table C3). Multiple risks could be recorded in each assessment. Total number of assessments excludes assessments where no specific risks were recorded. In 2014/15, four local authorities did not return any data, and another 10 were assessed to have returned low-quality data.

3. It is unlikely that local authorities include children at risk of child sexual exploitation 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). However, if a child is considered at risk of sexual abuse both within and outside the family environment, an assessment will record both risk factors.

There were 44,830 needs assessments relating to child sexual abuse or child sexual exploitation concerns – the lowest number in nine years. This suggests that the increased identification of child sexual abuse concerns in 2021/22 and 2022/23 may have been temporary, resulting from the higher priority given to uncovering possible harms in the home following the COVID-19 lockdowns, rather than indicating a sustained change in the identification of child sexual abuse.

Concerns about child sexual abuse or exploitation were identified in just under 9% of all needs assessments identifying concerns. Child sexual abuse assessments fell by a percentage point to 6% of all assessments and those relating to sexual exploitation fell by half a percentage point, to below 3% of all assessments for the first time. The number of assessments identifying sexual exploitation in England has fallen every year since 2017/18, when there were 6,000 more of these assessments than in 2023/24.

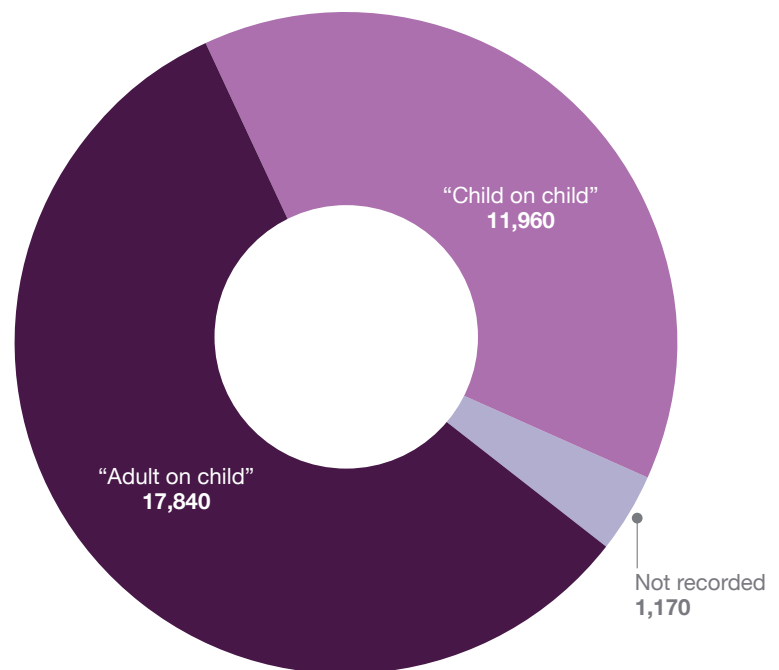
Other forms of abuse and neglect featured far more frequently in needs assessments, even though research has found that they are barely more prevalent than child sexual abuse (see Chapter 2): one in five assessments recorded concerns of emotional abuse (97,670), and one in six noted concerns of neglect (83,380) or physical abuse (75,600). Concerns of child criminal exploitation, which were introduced into the data collection statistics in 2021/22, featured in 15,750 assessments – exceeding the number of assessments recording sexual exploitation concerns for the first time.

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’ (i.e. abuse by another child aged under 18). Guidance stated that the latter category needed to be included in the needs assessments of both the victim(s) and any children involved in the abuse, as “children who harm will also be in need of support” (Department for Education, 2021:12).

In 2023/24 a very small number of local authorities continued to use the old single category, but 96% of the data was submitted according to the new categories. Where the new categories were used, two-fifths of concerns of child sexual abuse recorded in needs assessments related to abuse by another child, and three-fifths involved abuse by an adult – see Figure 3. These proportions have remained stable since they were first introduced four years earlier. It is not clear to what extent concerns of ‘child on child’ abuse involved assessing both (or all) children involved – the child(ren) who were harmed and the child(ren) who harmed. It is likely that the 11,960 assessments recording this as a concern include some where the same incident or episode of abuse was recorded in the assessments of multiple children.

There may be a small number of instances where an assessment of a child records abuse by an adult *and* abuse by another child.

Figure 3. Child sexual abuse identified during assessments by local authority children’s services, by age of perpetrator, 2023/24, England



Source: Department for Education (2024a: Table C3, year ending 31 March 2024).

3.2 Sexual abuse recorded in child protection plans

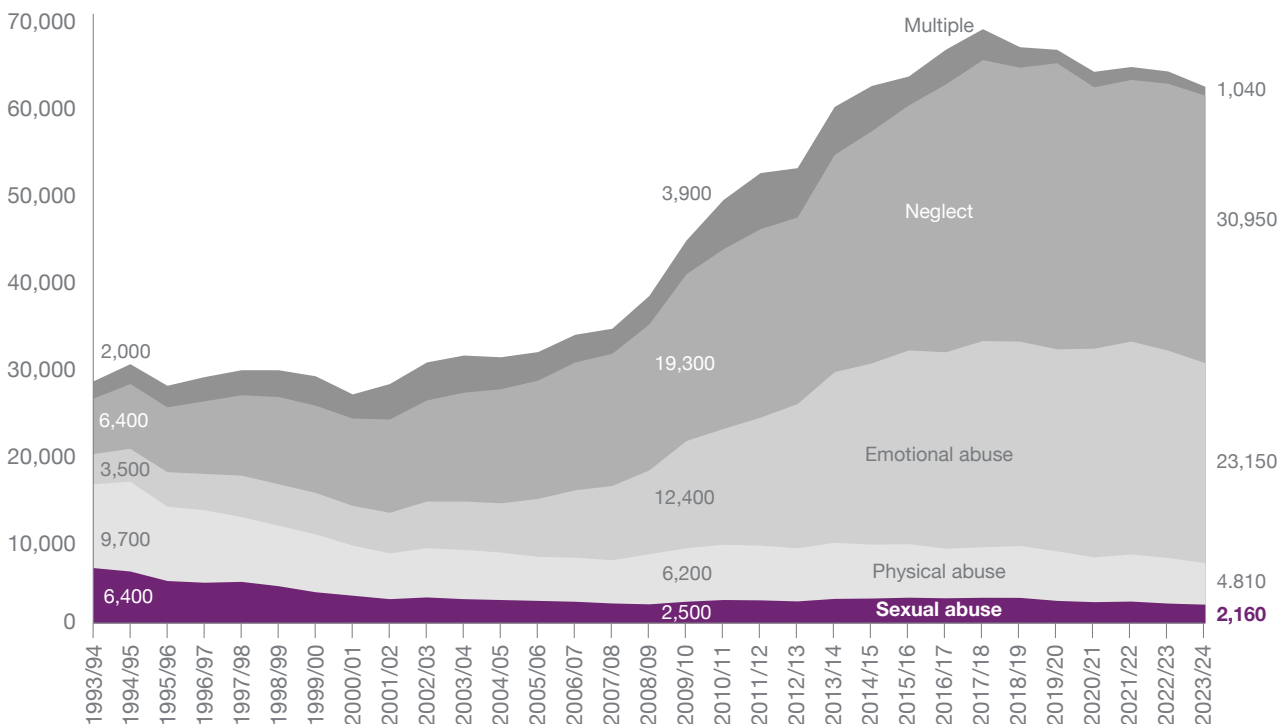
Just 2,160 children were placed on child protection plans under the category of sexual abuse (which, for child protection plans, includes child sexual exploitation) in 2023/24: the lowest figure recorded in the 30 years that this data has been published. This represents 3.5% of all new child protection plans, the lowest-ever proportion attributable to sexual abuse (see Figure 4).

The 6% decrease compared with the previous year continued the trend of sexual abuse accounting for an ever-declining share of child protection plans over the past three decades. While the overall number of new plans has increased significantly since the early 2000s, the number of new plans under the sexual abuse category has fallen.

The number of children placed on child protection plans under the category of sexual abuse equated to only 7% of the children whose initial assessments recorded sexual abuse or sexual exploitation as concerns in 2023/24. This is similar to the equivalent proportion for physical abuse (6%) but much lower than those of emotional abuse (for which the number of child protection plans equated to 24% of initial assessments) or neglect (37%).

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

Figure 4. Children placed on child protection plans per year, by category of abuse, 1993/94–2023/24, England



Source: Department for Education (2024a: Table D2); Department for Education (2012: Table D2); Department for Education (2011: Table 19); Department for Education (2010: Table 15). 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.

3.3 Characteristics of children on protection plans because of sexual abuse

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

3.3.1 Sex

Figure 5 shows that, as in previous years, girls accounted for three-fifths of children on child protection plans under the category of sexual abuse on 31 March 2024. In comparison, they accounted for fewer than half of children on child protection plans under other categories of abuse, and of children in need (see Figure 5).

It is notable that, at 41%, the proportion of boys on child protection plans under the category of sexual abuse was significantly higher than 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 protection plans because of other forms of abuse or neglect, children who were the subject of child protection plans under the category of sexual abuse on 31 March 2024 were less likely to be aged under five and more likely to be over 10 years old (see Figure 6) – this is consistent with the data in previous years. Nevertheless, children placed on child protection plans are noticeably younger than children recorded by the police as victims of sexual offences.⁵

3.3.3 Ethnicity

Children on child protection plans under the category of sexual abuse on 31 March 2024 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 14% of children attending state schools and nurseries were from Asian backgrounds, only 6% of children placed on child protection plans because of sexual abuse were Asian; similarly, Black children made up 7% of the state school and nursery population but 5% of children placed on child protection plans because of sexual abuse. Children of African, Asian and Caribbean heritage are similarly under-represented in police-recorded child sexual abuse offence data.⁶

Research has highlighted the difficulties that professionals face in identifying sexual abuse and acting on concerns about children from minority ethnic backgrounds (Dhaliwal, 2024; 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).

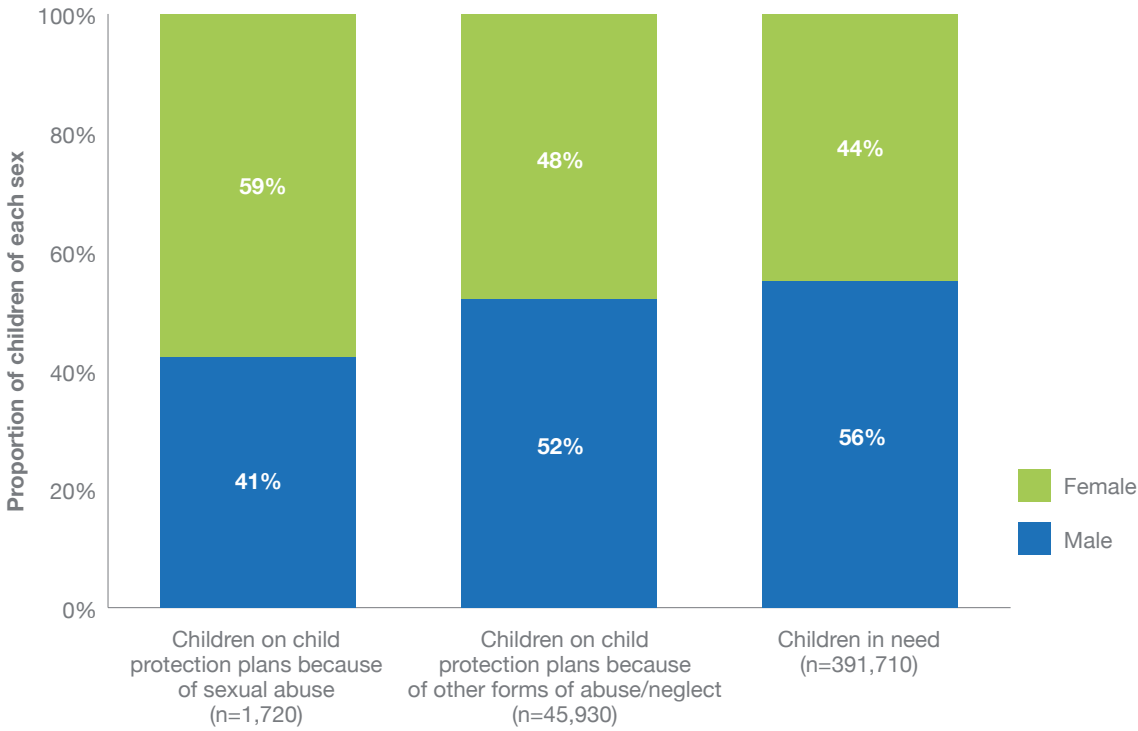


Children on child protection plans for sexual abuse are noticeably younger than those recorded by the police as victims of sexual offences.



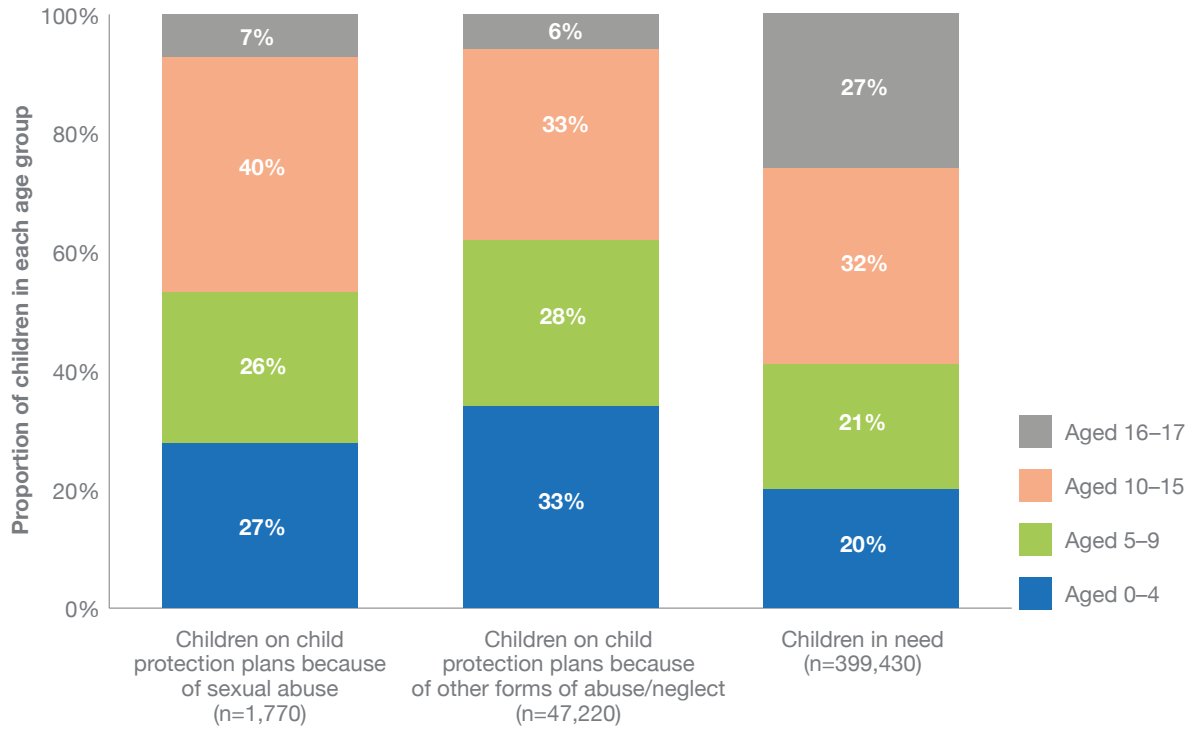
4. In the latest Crime Survey for England and Wales childhood maltreatment module, 23% of respondents who reported being sexually abused in childhood were male (Office for National Statistics, 2020b: Table 1). In the latest analysis of child victims of sexual offences recorded by the police in England and Wales (relating to 2022), 21% of those victims were male (Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme, 2024).
5. In 2022, only 21% of children recorded as victims of sexual offences by the police in England and Wales were aged under 10, and two-thirds were aged 10–15 (Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme, 2024).
6. In child sexual abuse offences recorded by the police in 2022, 4% of victims were of Asian heritage, 4% were Black and 3% were of mixed heritage; 2% were from other minority ethnic backgrounds (Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme, 2024).

Figure 5. Children on child protection plans and children in need at 31 March 2024, by sex, England

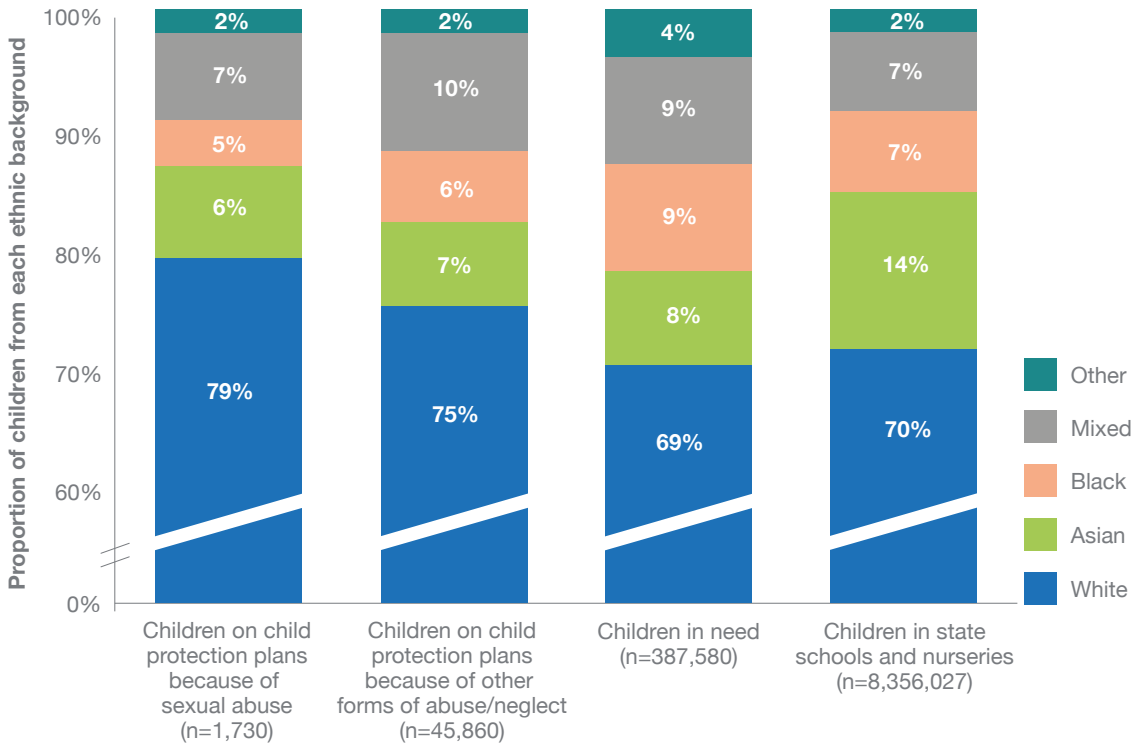


Source: Department for Education (2024a: Tables A4 and A5, year ending 31 March 2024). Chart excludes a small number of children whose sex was not recorded, and children on child protection plans under multiple categories.

Figure 6. Children on child protection plans and children in need at 31 March 2024, by age, England



Source: Department for Education (2024a: Tables A4 and A5, year ending 31 March 2024). Chart excludes a small number of children whose age was not recorded, and children on child protection plans under multiple categories.

Figure 7. Children on child protection plans and children in need at 31 March 2024, by ethnicity, England

Sources: Department for Education (2024a: Tables A4 and A5, year ending 31 March 2024); Department for Education (2024b: 'Pupil characteristics – number of pupils by ethnicity and language'). Chart excludes a small number of children whose ethnicity was not recorded, and children on child protection plans under multiple categories.

3.4 Local variation

As previous editions of this report have highlighted, there are significant differences in the levels of sexual abuse recorded in local authorities' child protection data across England. Since there is no evidence to suggest that the level of child sexual abuse taking place varies by geographical location, any variations in local authorities' data are likely to reflect differences in how they record and respond to child sexual abuse.

3.4.1 Assessments naming child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation

Figure 8 shows 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 needs assessments identifying this risk, relative to the local child population.

In 2023/24, five English local authorities did not identify sexual abuse concerns in the needs assessments of any children, and 14 local authorities identified these concerns in fewer than one assessment per 1,000 children living in the area. In contrast, six local authorities identified sexual abuse concerns in more than six assessments for every 1,000 children.

There was considerable variation between regions: more than half of the 14 local authorities in Yorkshire and the Humber, but only one of London's 33 local authorities, had a rate above four assessments identifying sexual abuse concerns for every 1,000 children in the area. And local authorities in the East of England and the West Midlands tended to have lower sexual abuse identification rates than those in the North West and East Midlands. Nevertheless, the range of shades of purple within every bar of Figure 8 indicates considerable variation between the local authorities in *all* regions.

Figure 8. Number of local authority assessments per 1,000 local child population recording children as at risk of sexual abuse, by region, 2023/24, England

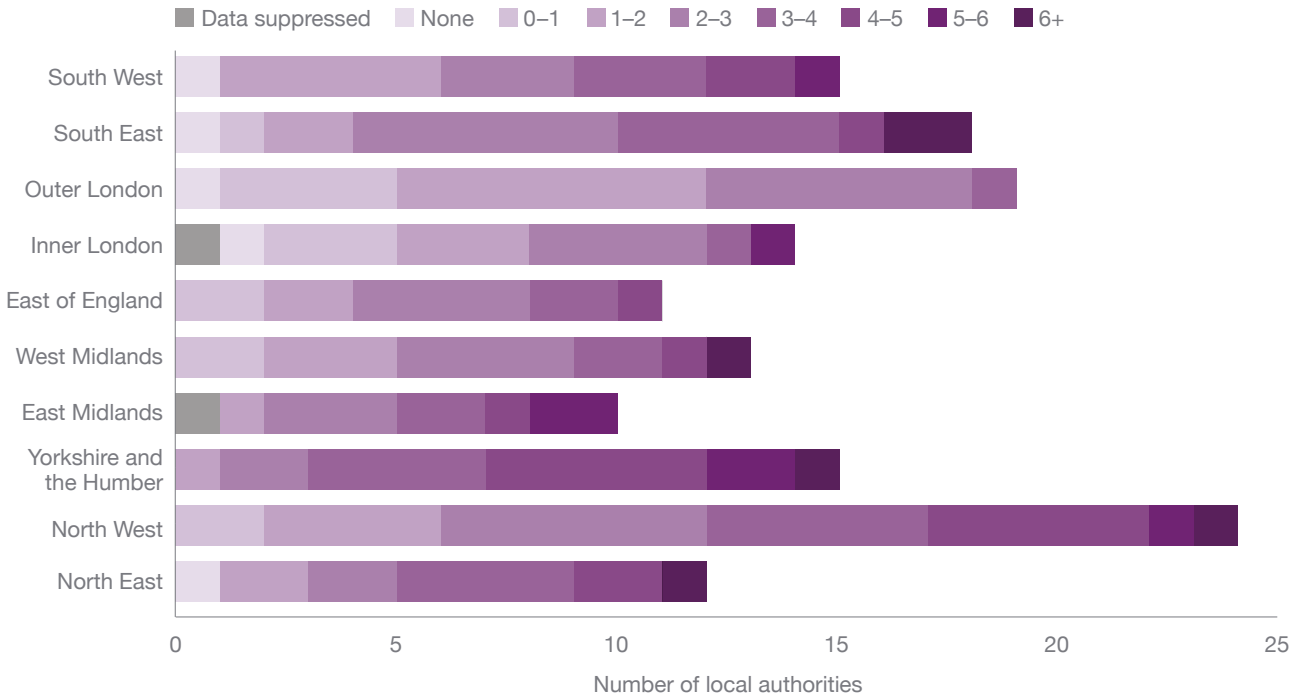
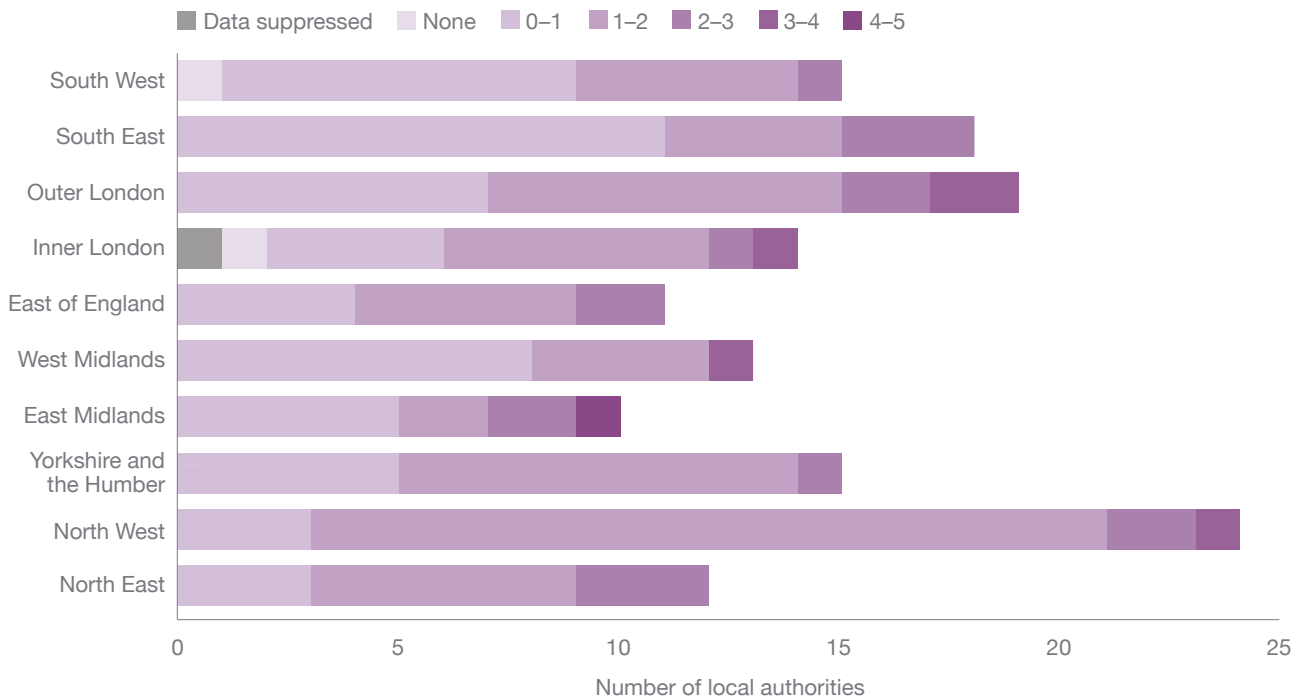


Figure 9. Number of local authority assessments per 1,000 local child population recording children as at risk of sexual exploitation, by region, 2023/24, England



Sources for Figures 8 and 9: Department for Education (2024a: Table C3, year ending 31 March 2024); Office for National Statistics (2024b). Where a child has multiple episodes of need with assessment information, all 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 both of the two local authorities whose ‘sexual abuse’ data was suppressed in 2023/24, and the one whose ‘sexual exploitation’ data was suppressed, the rate of assessments per 1,000 local child population would be in the ‘0–1’ range.

Two local authorities (in the South East and the West Midlands) did not provide data about assessments in 2023/24.

Previous years also saw wide variations both within and across regions. However, while in 2022/23 there had been 10 local authorities in England identifying sexual abuse concerns in more than seven needs assessments per 1,000 local child population, only three local authorities did so in 2023/24.

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 2023/24, close to half (44%) of all England's local authorities recorded between one and two children at risk of sexual exploitation for every 1,000 children living in the area. The variation observed was similar to that seen in 2022/23.

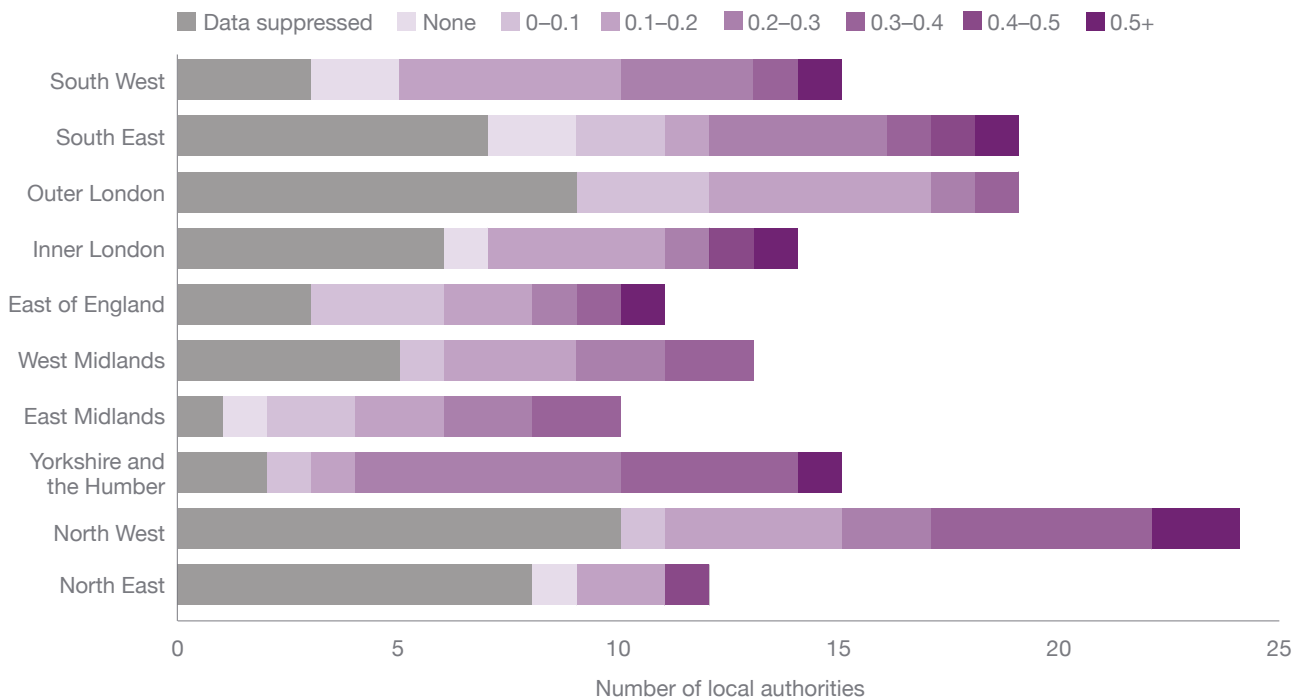
3.4.2 Child protection plans

It is harder to measure the variation in the number of children placed on child protection plans owing to sexual abuse as a proportion of the local child population: as in previous years, this data for 2023/24 was 'suppressed' (shown as grey in Figure 10) in around a third of English local authorities (54 out of the 152 that provided data). A figure cannot be calculated for these local authorities, although suppressed data generally signifies a low level of child protection plans as a proportion of the child population.

Of the other 98 local authorities, seven placed no children on child protection plans under the primary category of sexual abuse at all, and in 42 local authorities the rate was very low (below 0.2 per 1,000 children living in the area). Combining these with the local authorities whose data was suppressed shows that two-thirds (103 out of 152) of local authorities in England placed no or very few children on child protection plans because of sexual abuse.

The wide variety of shades of purple in each bar of Figure 10 indicates a high degree of variation in all regions.

Figure 10. Number of children per 1,000 local child population placed by local authorities on child protection plans under the category of sexual abuse, by region, 2023/24, England



Sources: Department for Education (2024a: Table D2, year ending 31 March 2024); Office for National Statistics (2024b).

Data from a 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 2023/24, the local authority would fall into the '0-0.1 per 1,000 child population' category. Even in the extreme case where every local authority with suppressed data made five children the subject of child protection plans because of sexual abuse, there would be 23 local authorities in the '0-0.1' group, 27 in the '0.1-0.2' group, and four in the '0.2-0.3' group.

One local authority in the West Midlands did not provide data on child protection plans.

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,⁷ and data released by the Ministry of Justice⁸ and the Crown Prosecution Service on defendants prosecuted for child sexual abuse offences. To understand the definitions and limitations of this data, see Appendix B.

4.1 Police-recorded crime statistics

Table 1 shows that, in 2023/24, a total of 101,199 identifiable⁹ child sexual abuse offences were recorded by the police in England and Wales.

Table 1. Identifiable child sexual abuse offences recorded in England and Wales, 2023/24

Offence category	Number in England	Number in Wales	Total in England and Wales*
Rape of a female child under 13	4,916	227	5,143
Rape of a male child under 13	1,991	110	2,101
Rape of a female child under 16	8,074	403	8,489
Rape of a male child under 16	735	43	779
Sexual assault on a female child under 13	10,661	682	11,368
Sexual assault on a male child under 13	4,087	291	4,386
Sexual activity involving a child under 13	7,637	446	8,084
Sexual activity involving a child under 16	11,789	740	12,541
Abuse of children through sexual exploitation	975	25	1,000
Abuse of position of trust of a sexual nature	291	12	303
Sexual grooming	6,784	581	7,365
Child sexual abuse image offences**	37,346	2,264	39,640
Total	95,286	5,824	101,199

Source: Home Office (2024a: Table 2023–24), updated October 2024.

* 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.

7. Published police data uses offence classifications set out in the Home Office Crime Recording Rules (Home Office, 2024b). These classifications are based on the Sexual Offences Act 2003.
8. 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.
9. Not all sexual offences against children are visible in publicly available data (see Appendix B); 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 four police forces in Wales recorded almost 6,000 child sexual abuse offences, and England's 39 forces recorded just over 95,000. Relative to the child population, Welsh forces recorded more child sexual abuse offences (10.6 offences per 1,000 children aged 0–15)¹⁰ than forces in England (9.0 offences per 1,000 children).

Just under one-third (31%) of child sexual abuse offences (excluding image offences) recorded in 2023/24 were non-recent¹¹ (Office for National Statistics, 2024c: Table F14). This proportion has decreased in recent years: in 2017/18, two-fifths (40%) of these recorded offences were non-recent.

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 person has received a qualifying caution or conviction for a sexual offence against a child, they are automatically subject to notification requirements in addition to any civil order, or custodial/ community sentence they receive. Notification requirements include registering personal information (such as name, date of birth, national insurance number, home address, passport and bank details) with the police. The police are responsible for monitoring and managing most people who are subject to notification requirements while living in the community (see section 4.4.1), to minimise their risk to children.

Sources: Department for Education (2023); Criminal Justice Act 2003; College of Policing (2022, 2023a); Sex Offenders Act (2003).

10. Comparison is made with the child population aged 0–15 because most child sexual abuse offences in publicly available data exclude offences against 16–17-year-olds (see Table 1). Population figures are drawn from official mid-2023 estimates (Office for National Statistics, 2024a).

11. An offence is designated as non-recent if the time between the offence and the recording of it was greater than a year (Office for National Statistics, 2024c).

4.1.1 Trends over time

As Figure 11 shows, there was an overall 4% decrease across England and Wales in the number of police-recorded child sexual abuse offences between 2022/23 and 2023/24. The steepest decreases were in recorded offences involving sexual exploitation (–14%) and sexual activity (–12%), followed by rape (–7%) and child sexual abuse image offences (–3%). The decrease was greater in Wales for some offence types, including rape (–11%) and sexual activity (–23%).

There was, however, a small increase of 1% in sexual assault offences (to 15,754), and more significant growth of 15% in the recording of abuse of position of trust offences (to 303).¹² The number of recorded sexual grooming offences rose by 10% (including a 51% increase in Wales) to its highest-ever figure of 7,365.

Alongside the modest overall fall in child sexual abuse offences, there was a 3% decrease in recorded sexual offences against children over 16 and adults; this was in line with the 3% decrease in all police recorded crime excluding fraud and computer misuse (Home Office, 2024a: Tables 2022–23 and 2023–24).

When do the police record an offence?

In England and Wales, the Home Office Crime Recording Rules provide the framework for classifying and counting crime. They state that an incident must be recorded as a crime within 24 hours “if, on the balance of probability, the circumstances amount to a crime defined by law ... and there is no credible evidence to the contrary immediately available” (Home Office, 2024b:7).

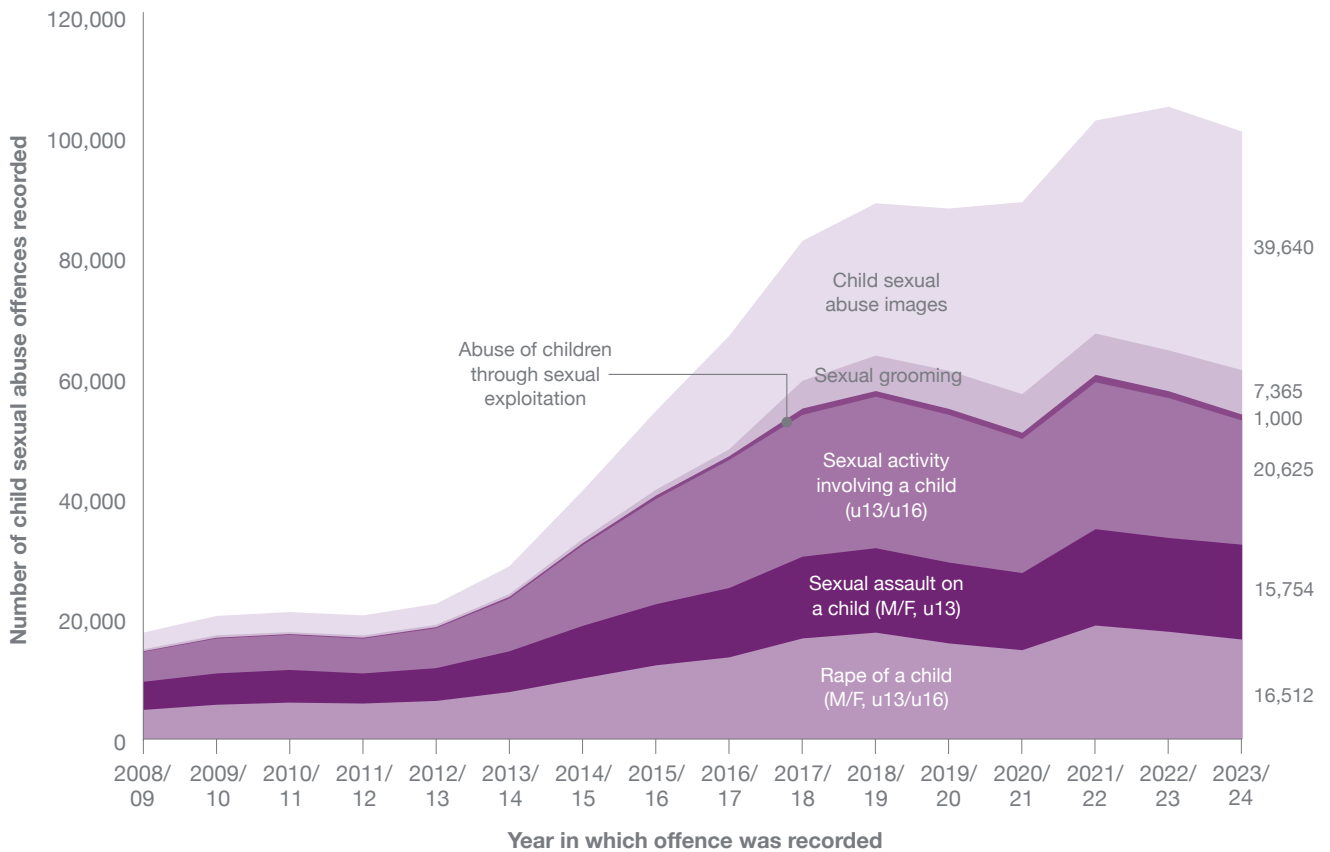
Recent research (Lovett et al, 2024) has highlighted that police-recorded serious sexual offences against adults have a range of sources, including a large number of reports from the public and other agencies. It has also raised questions about the recording accuracy of police investigation outcomes for sexual offences.

Lovett et al analysed a sample of 499 recorded offences against adults, across five police force areas, and found that two-fifths involved third-party reports or cases where the victim was ‘telling, not reporting’ a sexual offence (e.g. by mentioning a past sexual offence when reporting another crime, or in answering questions as part of a risk assessment process). In 124 cases, the police investigation was not supported by the victim from the outset.

Where a police record that an investigation has closed because of evidential difficulties, with the victim not supporting the investigation, this is typically interpreted as indicating that the victim reported the offence to the police but later withdrew their support (see e.g. Ministry of Justice, 2021a). But the research by Lovett et al shows that this interpretation is often wrong: in many cases, the victim had never consented to a police investigation but was subsequently recorded as being responsible for its closure.

While the research focused on sexual offences against adults, it included some examples involving non-recent child sexual abuse offences, and its findings are likely to be relevant to the recording of sexual offences against children (which is subject to the same recording rules). It highlights the importance of not treating every recorded offence as a crime reported by the victim/survivor themselves.

12. In 2022, the Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 extended the scope of position of trust offences to include situations where certain activities take place in a sporting or religious context (Home Office, 2022). This is likely to have contributed to the increased recording of these offences.

Figure 11. Number and type of child sexual abuse offences recorded per year, 2009/10–2023/24, England and Wales

Source: Home Office (2024a), updated October 2024; Home Office (2024c).

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.

Chart does not show 'Abuse of position of trust of a sexual nature' offences, no more than 336 of which have been recorded in any single year during this period.

Group-based offending recorded by the police

In November 2024, the Child Sexual Exploitation Taskforce (led by the Hydrant Programme, which supports police forces across child protection and abuse investigation issues) published an analysis of police-recorded, group-based child sexual abuse offences for the first time.

The report included offences recorded by the police across England and Wales during the 2023 calendar year, and showed that:

- ▶ overall, 3.7% (4,228) of police-recorded child sexual abuse offences involved more than one suspect offending together
- ▶ about a quarter (26%) of these offences took place in the family environment, one in six (17%) were offences classified as 'child sexual exploitation'; and one in 10 (9%) were considered institutional
- ▶ almost four-fifths of victims were girls (78%), and three-quarters of suspects were male (76%)
- ▶ information on (self-defined) ethnicity was available for only a third (34%) of suspects, with the proportions broadly reflecting the population aged 10+ in England and Wales (see Table 4 in section 4.3.5) – 83% were White, 7% were Asian, 5% were Black, 3% were of mixed ethnicity and 2% had 'other' ethnic backgrounds
- ▶ among the 47% of victims for whom self-defined ethnicity information was recorded, 85% were White, 3% were Asian, 4% were Black, 4% were of mixed ethnicity and 4% were from other ethnic backgrounds.

Source: Child Sexual Exploitation Taskforce (2024).

4.1.2 Local patterns

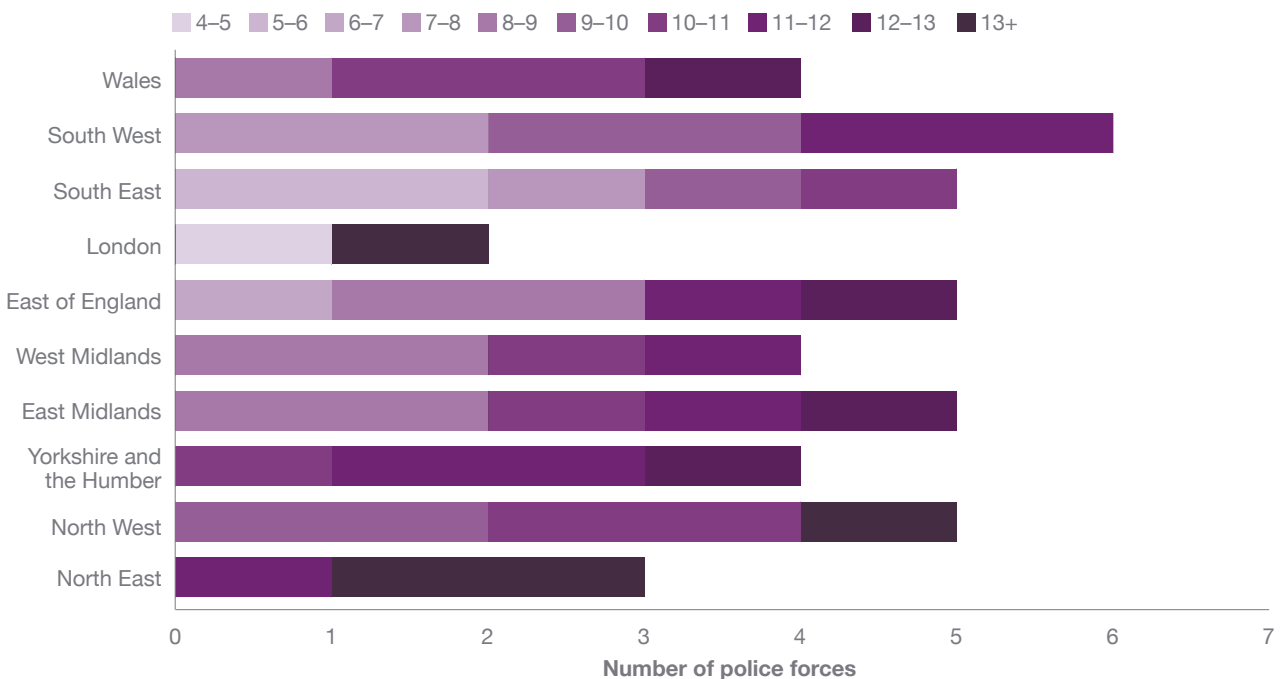
As Figure 12 shows, the 4% overall decrease in recorded offences of child sexual abuse was not uniform across the 43 police force areas in England and Wales: three-quarters (32) of police forces recorded fewer child sexual abuse offences than in 2022/23, but one quarter (11) recorded more.

As in previous years (see Karsna and Bromley, 2024), there was wide variation in the number of police-recorded child sexual abuse offences relative to the local child population. 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 five times as many; these are shown respectively as light and dark shades of purple. The Metropolitan Police and forces in Hertfordshire and Surrey had the lowest rates of recording, while those in Durham, Cleveland and Cumbria had the highest rates.

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. The latest release related to the ages of victims of sexual offences (excluding child sexual abuse image 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, 2023a). This data showed 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, 2023/24, England and Wales



Sources: Home Office (2024a: Table 2023–24), updated October 2024; Office for National Statistics (2024b). Police-recorded crime includes non-recent offences. British Transport Police data is excluded. Population figures (ages 0–15) are mid-year estimates.

4.1.4 Investigation outcomes

Table 2 shows that, in 2023/24, police concluded their investigation of 104,828 child sexual abuse offences, of which 13,098 (12%) resulted in a suspect being charged/summonsed – the highest proportion in five years, and a slight increase on the percentage resulting in a charge in 2022/23.

A suspect was cautioned or a community resolution was reached in a further 2% of cases, and 3% concluded with a ‘diversionary, educational or intervention activity’. Prosecution was prevented in 3% of cases because the suspect was under the age of criminal responsibility, was too ill or had died.

One in eight investigations (12%) ended because the police decided it was not in the public interest to continue the investigation. This outcome (known as ‘Outcome 21’) was introduced in 2015/16 to reduce the criminalisation of under-18s in situations where the police receive reports of “youth produced sexual imagery” which involve children’s consensual sharing of self-generated images (Home Office, 2016) – see also Figure 14 below.

In a further 1% of cases, the police or the Crown Prosecution Service decided that a prosecution would not be in the public interest.

Three-fifths of all investigations – 63,315 cases (60%) – were closed because of some form of evidential difficulty, and another 6% ended because responsibility for further investigation was transferred to another body.

Table 2. Child sexual abuse offences by outcome in England and in Wales, 2023/24

Outcome category	England	Wales	England and Wales*
Charged/summonsed	12%	14%	12%
Out-of-court resolution (formal): Cautioned	1%	0%	1%
Out-of-court resolution (informal): Community resolution	1%	0%	1%
Diversionary, educational or intervention activity	3%	1%	3%
Further investigation not in the public interest: police decision	12%	13%	12%
Prosecution prevented: suspect died or too ill	1%	1%	1%
Prosecution prevented: suspect under age	2%	4%	2%
Prosecution not in the public interest	1%	2%	1%
Insufficient evidence (suspect identified, victim supports action)	24%	24%	24%
Insufficient evidence (suspect identified, victim does not support action)	16%	14%	16%
Insufficient evidence (suspect not identified, victim does not support action)	6%	6%	6%
Investigation complete – no suspect identified	15%	15%	15%
Responsibility for further investigation transferred to another body	6%	4%	6%
Other reasons**	0%	2%	0%
Base number (offences)	99,105	5,651	104,828

Source: Home Office (2024d: ‘Crime Outcomes in England and Wales Open Data, April 2023 to March 2024’), updated October 2024. Police-recorded crime includes non-recent cases.

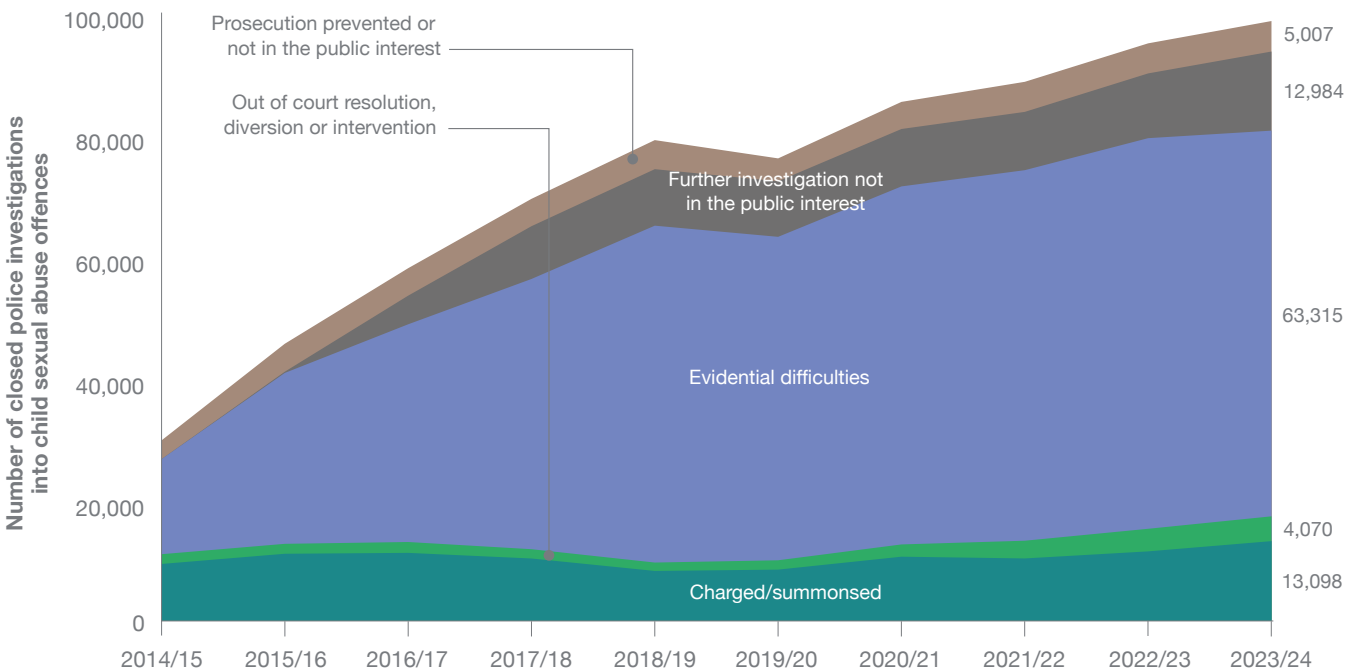
* The total for England and Wales includes offences recorded by the British Transport Police; these offences are not included in the figures for England or for Wales because the British Transport Police operates across geographical boundaries.

** Other reasons include the following outcome categories: a) Prosecution prevented: victim/key witness dead/too ill; b) Penalty Notices for Disorder; c) Prosecution time limit expired; d) Taken into consideration; and e) Not in the public interest.

Since the new framework for the police to record investigation outcomes was introduced (see box on next page), nine years' worth of data has been published. This 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 remained broadly flat until 2021/22 – since when there have been small incremental increases, leading to the highest-ever number of charges brought for child sexual abuse offences (13,098) in 2023/24 (see Figure 13). The proportion of investigations resulting in a charge reached 12% in 2023/24, its highest in five years. In contrast, the number of cases being closed because of evidential difficulties – which had increased more than fourfold between 2014/15 and 2022/23 – fell by 1% in 2023/24.

A similar overall trend is visible in the number and the rate of charges brought for sexual offences against children over 16 and adults: the charge rate¹³ for these offences increased by one percentage point (to 8% of all concluded investigations) as the number of investigations resulting in a charge rose to 9,576. A recent inspection report into nine police forces' approaches to adult rape and serious sexual offences concluded that they had prioritised their response to these investigations under the new national operating model (College of Policing, 2023b) introduced through Operation Soteria;¹⁴ the monitoring of outcomes, including charge rates, had made a difference (HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services, 2024). It may be that a focus on improving the charge rates of offences against adults has also improved investigation outcomes for sexual offences against children.

Figure 13. Crime outcomes for child sexual abuse offences in England and Wales, 2014/15–2023/24



Source: Home Office (2024d), updated October 2024. Police-recorded crime includes non-recent cases. Excludes transferred cases. The 'Further investigation not in the public interest' category was introduced in 2015/16.

13. The charge rate is calculated by dividing the number of charges by the total number of investigations concluded (excluding investigations closed because they were transferred to another police force for investigation).
 14. Operation Soteria is a programme that aims to transform how the police handle rape and other serious sexual offences against adults – see Stanko (2022).

Definitions of police investigation 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 (2023c).

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.

Diversionsary, 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 (2024b; 2025).

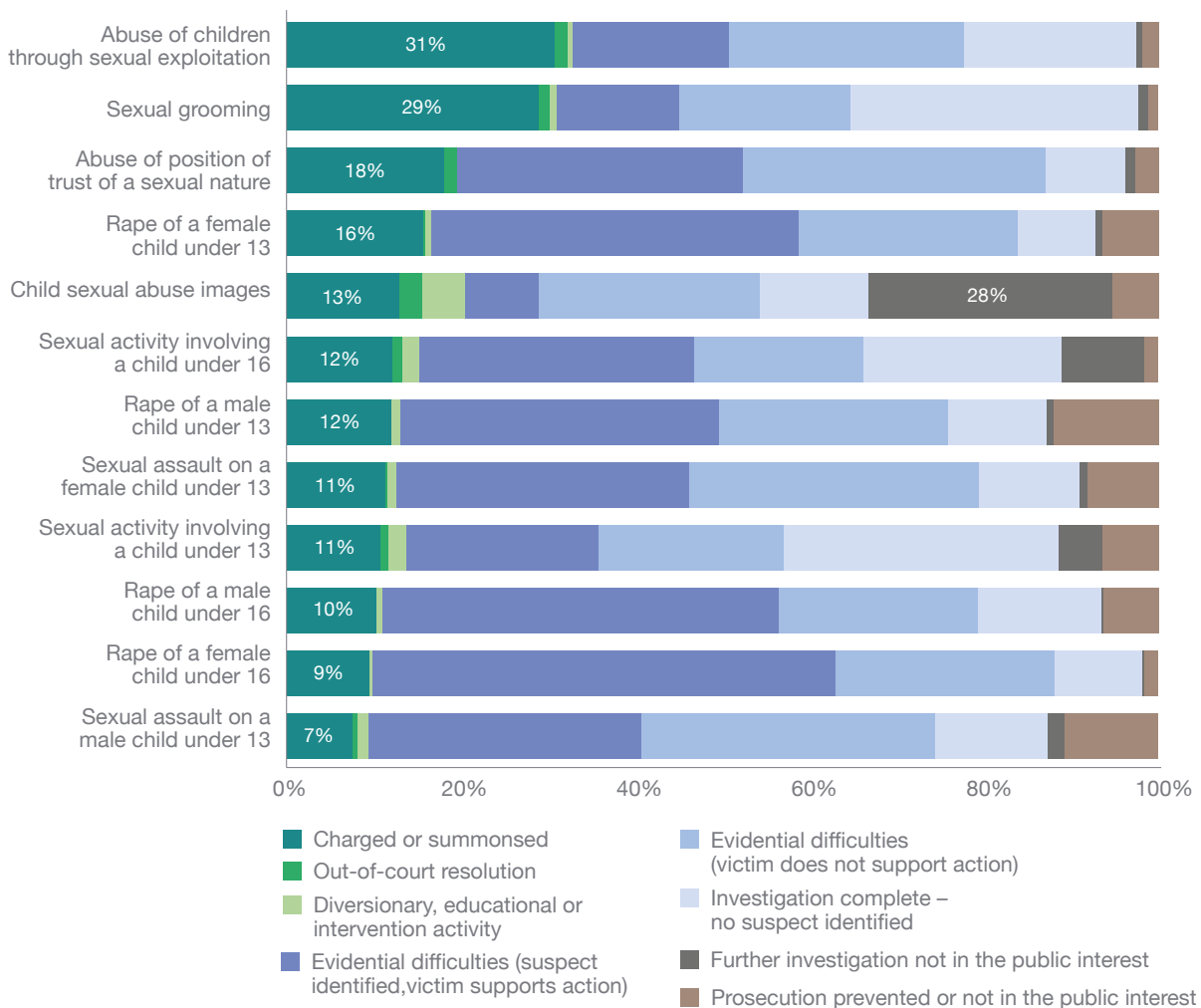
Investigation outcomes vary considerably by the type of child sexual abuse offence. Figure 14 shows that a third of investigations relating to either ‘abuse through sexual exploitation’ (33%) or sexual grooming (31%) ended with a charge, a summons, an out of court resolution or a diversionsary activity in 2023/24. Those outcomes were also seen in one-fifth (20%) of investigations into child sexual abuse image offences.

The eight offence categories relating to sexual activity, sexual assault and rape were far less likely to result in one of the above outcomes; in each of these eight categories, between 74% and 88% of the investigations were closed because of 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 rely so heavily on the victim’s account.

More than a quarter (28%) of 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 proportion of investigations into sexual activity offences (10% of offences where the victim was aged under 16, and 5% where they were under 13), suggesting that under-18s were involved in these offences.

While most longitudinal trends have remained broadly similar, the last two years of data have shown small but visible increases in some charge rates: for offences of rape against children under 13 and under 16 (from 9% in 2021/22 to 12% in 2023/24); for offences relating to sexual activity with a child (from 8% to 12%); and for sexual grooming offences (from 21% to 29%). During the same period, charge rates for sexual offences against children over 16 and adults also improved, including for rape (from 4% in 2021/22 to 6% in 2023/24), sexual assault (from 6% to 8%), and indecent exposure (from 11% to 13%) (Home Office, 2024d). Again, this may indicate that the new national operating model for (adult) rape and serious sexual offences (see above) is starting to have an impact.

Figure 14. Crime outcomes by child sexual abuse offence category in England and Wales, 2023/24



Source: Home Office (2024d: ‘Crime Outcomes in England and Wales Open Data, April 2023 to March 2024’), updated October 2024. 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 data on the median number of days taken for an outcome to be assigned to a recorded offence on police data systems.¹⁵ However, this data is available only for ‘sexual offences overall’ (excluding child sexual abuse image offences), and also for rape offences specifically; it is not broken down by whether the victim was a child or an adult.

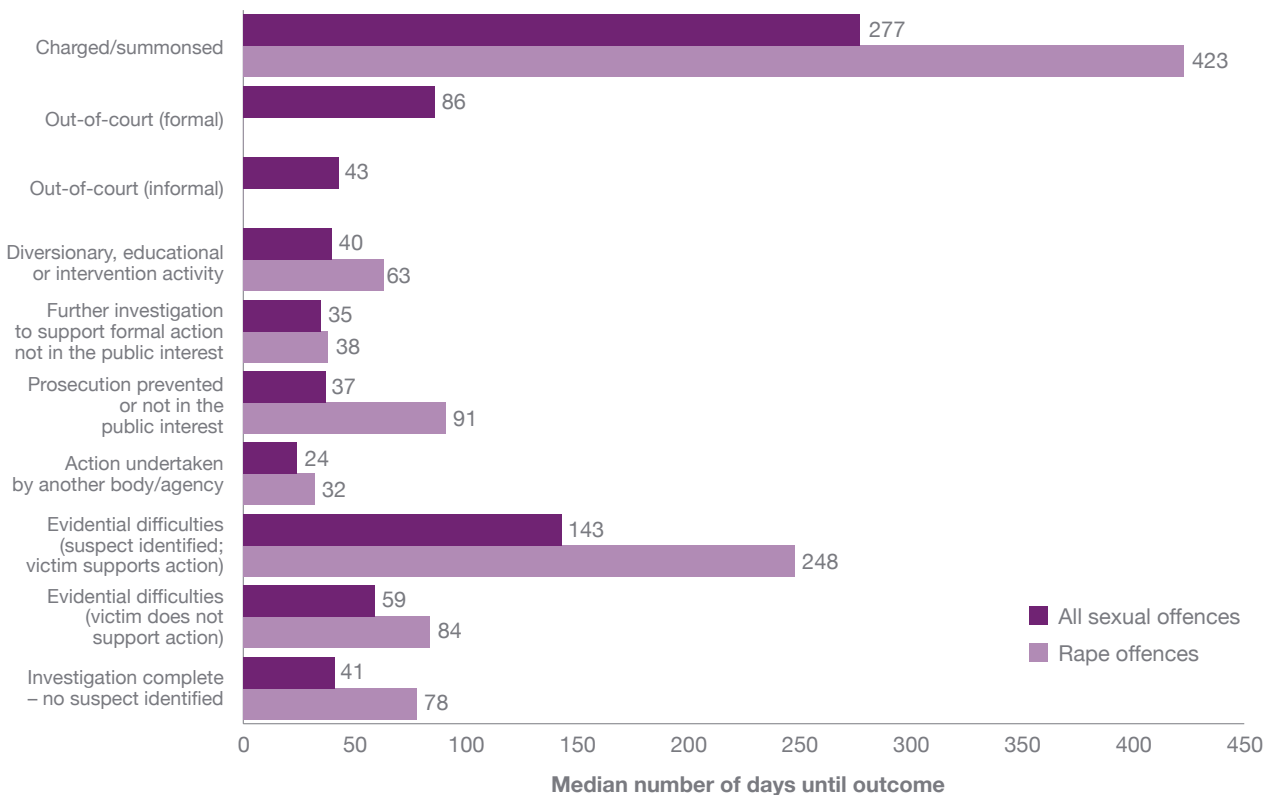
In 2023/24, sexual offences overall took a median of 73 days to progress from recording of the offence to an outcome (one day longer than the previous year); the median for rape offences was 120 days (16 days longer than in 2022/23) (Home Office, 2024e: Figure 3.1).

As in previous years, sexual offences overall had the longest investigation timescales of all offence groups: 42% of investigations into these offences, and 54% of rape investigations, took more than 100 days to be assigned an outcome (Home Office, 2024e: Table 3.8).

As Figure 15 shows, investigations resulting in a charge or summons took the longest to be concluded: the median time from recording a sexual offence (other than image offences) to charging a suspect was 277 days, or nine months. The cases closed most quickly were those that were not taken forward because action was undertaken by another body/ agency:¹⁶ the median for these was 24 days. Where a police investigation was supported by the victim but the case was closed because of evidential difficulties, the median time to closure was nearly five months (143 days); where the victim was recorded as not supporting an investigation, the median time for the case to be closed because of evidential difficulties was 59 days.

Timescales were generally longer for rape offences: it took a median of 423 days – well over a year – to charge a suspect with rape, and 91 days – three months – for the police or the Crown Prosecution Service to conclude that prosecution was not in the public interest.

Figure 15. Time taken for police investigations into sexual offences (against children or adults) to reach an outcome, by type of outcome, 2023/24



Source: Home Office (2024e: Table 3.3), updated July 2024. Excludes data from Devon and Cornwall, Humberside, West Midlands and Greater Manchester police forces. Excludes sexual abuse image offences.

15. Data from Devon and Cornwall, Humberside, West Midlands and Greater Manchester police forces was not available and is excluded from this section (Home Office, 2024e).

16. This is known as ‘Outcome 20’, and covers situations where more appropriate diversionary action is undertaken (through youth services or schools, for example), rather than a criminal justice intervention.

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.

In 2023/24, the CPS recorded legal decisions relating to 6,392 individuals suspected of child sexual abuse offences (CPS, 2024a: Table 4.3); this was 7% more than in the previous year. In 85% (5,405) 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 123 days (CPS, 2024a: Table 4.3) – nine days longer than in 2022/23. There was wide variation between CPS divisions, with the average ranging from 53 days in London South to 202 days in the South East. The CPS's Central Casework Division, which deals with particularly complex cases, took 19 months – 556 days – on average to issue a decision, almost double the time taken a year earlier.

4.3 Court proceedings

4.3.1 Prosecutions and convictions

In the year to December 2023, 9,215 defendants were proceeded against in court for offences related to child sexual abuse, and 7,371 defendants were convicted (Ministry of Justice, 2024a). In both cases, this was a considerable increase on the previous year.

As Table 3 shows, almost half (44%) of convictions for child sexual abuse offences in 2023 were for offences involving child sexual abuse imagery. The number of convictions for the rape or sexual assault of a child were well below the number of prosecutions brought for those offences in any recent single year.

A basic 'conviction ratio' can be calculated by dividing the number of convictions by the number of prosecutions in a given year. This data is indicative and should be treated with caution, as cases are not actually tracked through to outcome in this data; 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%. In 2023, the overall conviction ratio for prosecutions related to child sexual abuse was 80% (Ministry of Justice, 2024a).

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). Where defendants are aged under 18, they are tried for most offences in the Magistrate's Court sitting as a youth court. If the defendant in a criminal trial is convicted of the offence, the judge or magistrate decides what sentence should be given.

Sources: Crown Prosecution Service (2023b); Home Office (2023c).

A near-identical conviction rate is found in data from the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), which does track individual cases from charge to conviction. Of the 5,463 'child sexual abuse flagged' prosecutions that were tracked in 2023/24, 81% (4,438) ended with a conviction (CPS, 2024b: Table 3.4).

The CPS data also contains information on the reasons for non-conviction, showing that more than half (53%) of the tracked prosecutions resulted in an acquittal/dismissal after or during a trial, with the remainder including dropped prosecutions and cases where prosecution was prevented (CPS, 2024b: Table 3.5).

Table 3. Defendants prosecuted and convicted, by child sexual abuse offence category, England and Wales, 2023

Offence category	Prosecutions in 2023	Convictions in 2023
Rape of a female child under 13	451	266
Rape of a male child under 13	79	57
Rape of a female child under 16	764	323
Rape of a male child under 16	71	24
<i>Total rape prosecutions/convictions</i>	<i>1,365</i>	<i>670</i>
Sexual assault of a female child under 13	1066	610
Sexual assault of a male child under 13	147	81
<i>Total sexual assault prosecutions/convictions</i>	<i>1,213</i>	<i>691</i>
Sexual activity involving a child under 13	717	570
Sexual activity involving a child under 16	1,158	989
<i>Total sexual activity prosecutions/convictions</i>	<i>1,875</i>	<i>1,559</i>
Familial sexual offences with a child aged under 13*	10	9
Familial sexual offences with a child aged 13–17*	76	69
<i>Total familial sexual offence prosecutions/convictions*</i>	<i>86</i>	<i>78</i>
Taking, permitting to be taken or making, distributing or publishing indecent photographs or pseudo photographs of children	3,213	2,914
Possession of indecent photograph of a child	276	246
Possession of prohibited images of children	60	63
<i>Total child sexual abuse image prosecutions/convictions</i>	<i>3,549</i>	<i>3,223</i>
Sexual grooming	858	900
Child abuse through child sexual exploitation	219	210
Abuse of position of trust of a sexual nature	25	15
Possession of a paedophile manual	1	0
Gross indecency with children (historical offence)	24	25
<i>Total other child sexual abuse offence prosecutions/convictions</i>	<i>1,127</i>	<i>1,150</i>
Total	9,215	7,371

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 14) because, unlike police data (see Appendix B), data published by the Ministry of Justice distinguishes between familial sexual offences against children and against adults.

4.3.2 Trends over time

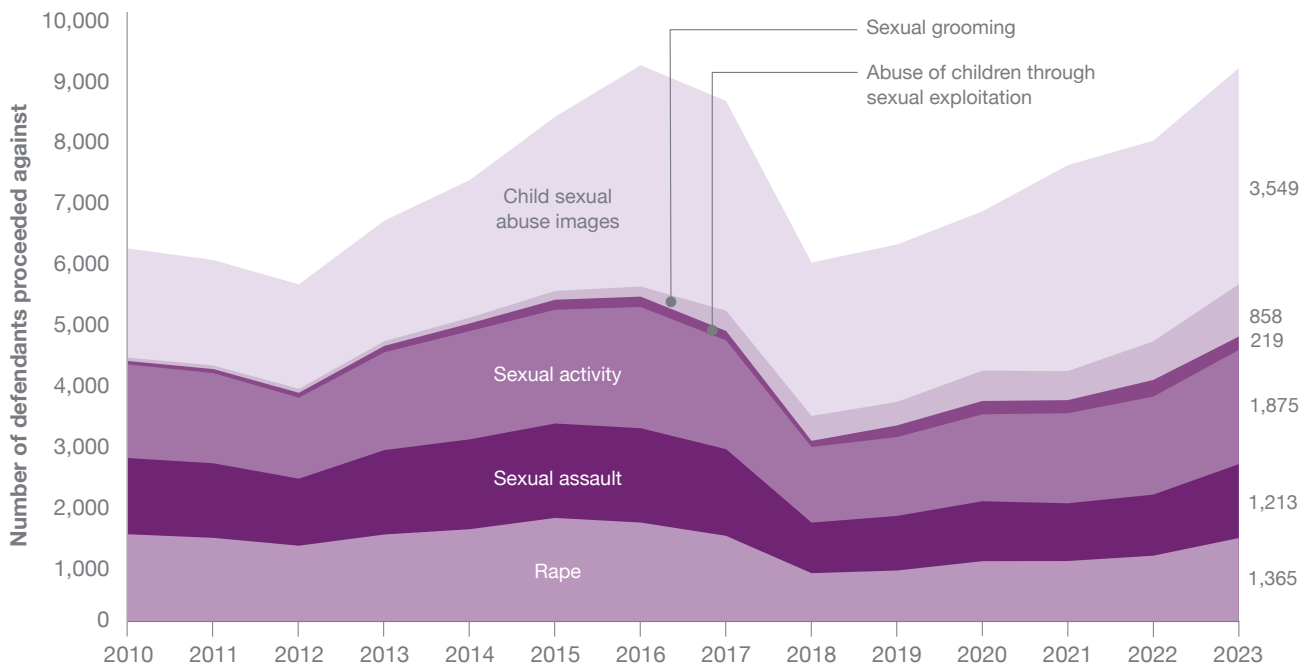
Figure 16 shows that in 2023 the annual number of defendants proceeded against for child sexual abuse offences increased by 15% from 2022, to its second-highest number in almost 20 years, only slightly below the peak of 2016.¹⁷ In contrast, prosecutions for all sexual offences (excluding image offences) rose by 23% in the fifth consecutive increase since 2018 (Ministry of Justice, 2024a). Improved police recording of sexual offences may explain this increase (Office for National Statistics, 2023b).

The overall number of court proceedings for all offences rose by a more modest 8% from 2022 to 2023. While the number of people formally dealt with by the criminal justice system for any offence remained 7% lower than in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic (Ministry of Justice, 2024a), the number of court proceedings for child sexual offences was 47% greater than in 2019.

There were increases in prosecutions relating to all child sexual abuse offence types except abuse through child sexual exploitation, which fell by 20% (having risen by 27% in the previous year). The highest rises were in prosecutions for gross indecency (140%), sexual grooming (35%), and rape (27%).

The number of defendants who were convicted of child sexual abuse offences in 2023 (7,371) was also at its highest level since 2016, and 13% above the 2022 level (Ministry of Justice, 2024a).

Figure 16. Number of defendants proceeded against for child sexual abuse offences, by offence group, 2010–2023, 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.

17. A recent analysis of rape, sexual offence and the overall Crown Court proceedings showed that the decrease in child sexual abuse proceedings between 2016 and 2018 reflected wider trends (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.

4.3.3 Characteristics of defendants: sex

The overwhelming majority of defendants were male in 2023. While there was a 26% increase in the number of female defendants proceeded against for child sexual abuse offences compared to 2022, they still represented just 1% (122) of the 8,961 defendants whose sex was recorded (Ministry of Justice, 2024a).

Three quarters of prosecutions (75%) of females were for offences related to sexual activity with children (38), child sexual abuse images (27) or sexual assault (27). Males too were most likely to be prosecuted for child sexual abuse image (3,420) and sexual activity (1,789) offences; together, these two offence categories accounted for three-fifths (59%) of male prosecutions, while the offences of rape (1,312) and sexual assault (1,154) combined accounted for just over a quarter (28%).

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 25 defendants prosecuted for this offence in 2023, almost a quarter (6, 24%) were female. Compared to 2022, the female-to-male ratio slightly increased for historical offences of gross indecency, familial sexual offences, and abuse through child sexual exploitation: from 10% to 13% (3 out of 24) of defendants for gross indecency were female, as well as from 5% to 7% (6 out of 86) for familial offences and from 1% to 4% (8 out of 214) for child sexual exploitation. For all other offences, females consistently accounted for no more than 2% of defendants.

In 2023, 122 females were proceeded against, and 83 females were found guilty; among males, there were 8,839 prosecutions and 7,166 convictions.

4.3.4 Characteristics of defendants: age

Figure 17 shows that under-18s accounted for 3% (297) of defendants prosecuted for child sexual abuse offences in 2023; this proportion was 0.7 percentage points higher than the 2022 figure, but it has changed little since 2017 (the first year for which detailed information on defendants’ ages was published) (Ministry of Justice, 2024a).

As in previous years, the next-smallest groups were 18–20-year-olds (6%) and 70+ (7%), while nearly a quarter (23%) of defendants were aged 30–39.

The breakdown by age group of defendants convicted of child sexual abuse offences was similar.

While the number of defendants prosecuted in each age range increased in 2023, most of the increase was among those aged 20–39.

A third (96, 32%) of child sexual abuse prosecutions of under-18s, and a quarter (144) of prosecutions of 18–20-year-olds, were for rape in 2023; overall, however, rape accounted for one in seven (1,365, 15%) prosecutions for child sexual abuse offences.

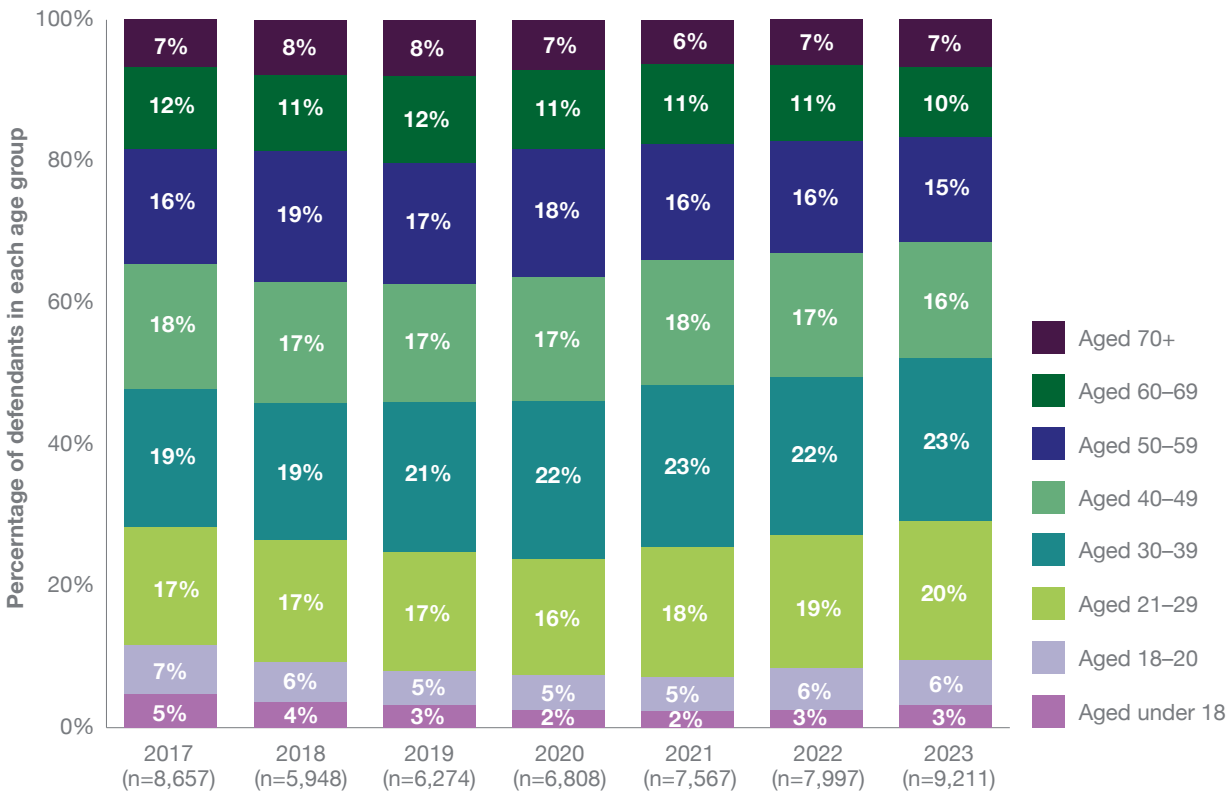
In all age groups, child sexual abuse image offences were the most prosecuted offence type. Nearly half (47%) of defendants aged 18–24 were prosecuted for these offences, which also accounted for more than a third of prosecutions in every other age group except defendants aged 70+ (of whom 29% were prosecuted for image offences).



In all defendant age groups, and particularly 18–24-year-olds, image offences were the most prosecuted type of child sexual abuse offence.



Figure 17. Defendants proceeded against for child sexual abuse offences, by age, 2017–2023, England and Wales



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

4.3.5 Characteristics of defendants: ethnicity

The ethnic background of defendants prosecuted for child sexual abuse offences was recorded in 69% (6,356) of cases in 2023 (Ministry of Justice, 2024a). Among these individuals, nine-tenths were White (5,731); across all other ethnicities, there was a much lower proportion than in the general population of England and Wales (see Table 4). This is likely to be related to the under-identification of child sexual abuse in minority ethnic communities.

There was a near-identical pattern of ethnic backgrounds, where this information was recorded, among defendants *convicted* in 2023.

4.3.6 Sentences for child sexual abuse offences

In 2023, nearly half (44%; 3,108) of defendants who were found guilty of child sexual abuse offences received an immediate custodial sentence. This number was 8% higher than in the previous year, although it does not match the custody peak reached in 2017 when 3,597 defendants were immediately imprisoned. Another third (34%, 2,370) received a suspended sentence, and just over one-fifth (21%; 1,493) received a community sentence. Among under-18s found guilty, the vast majority (91%; 198) received a community sentence (e.g. unpaid work, treatment or curfew; the details of the community sentences imposed are not available) and 6% (13) received an immediate custodial sentence (Ministry of Justice, 2024a).

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

Ethnicity	Defendants proceeded against for child sexual abuse offence (2023)	Population in England and Wales aged 10+ (2021)
White	90%	83%
White British	87%	75%
White Irish	0%	1%
Any other white background	3%	7%
Asian	5%	9%
Indian	1%	3%
Pakistani	2%	2%
Bangladeshi	1%	1%
Chinese	0%	1%
Any other Asian background	1%	2%
Black	2%	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	1%	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. 'Any other ethnic background' includes Arab.

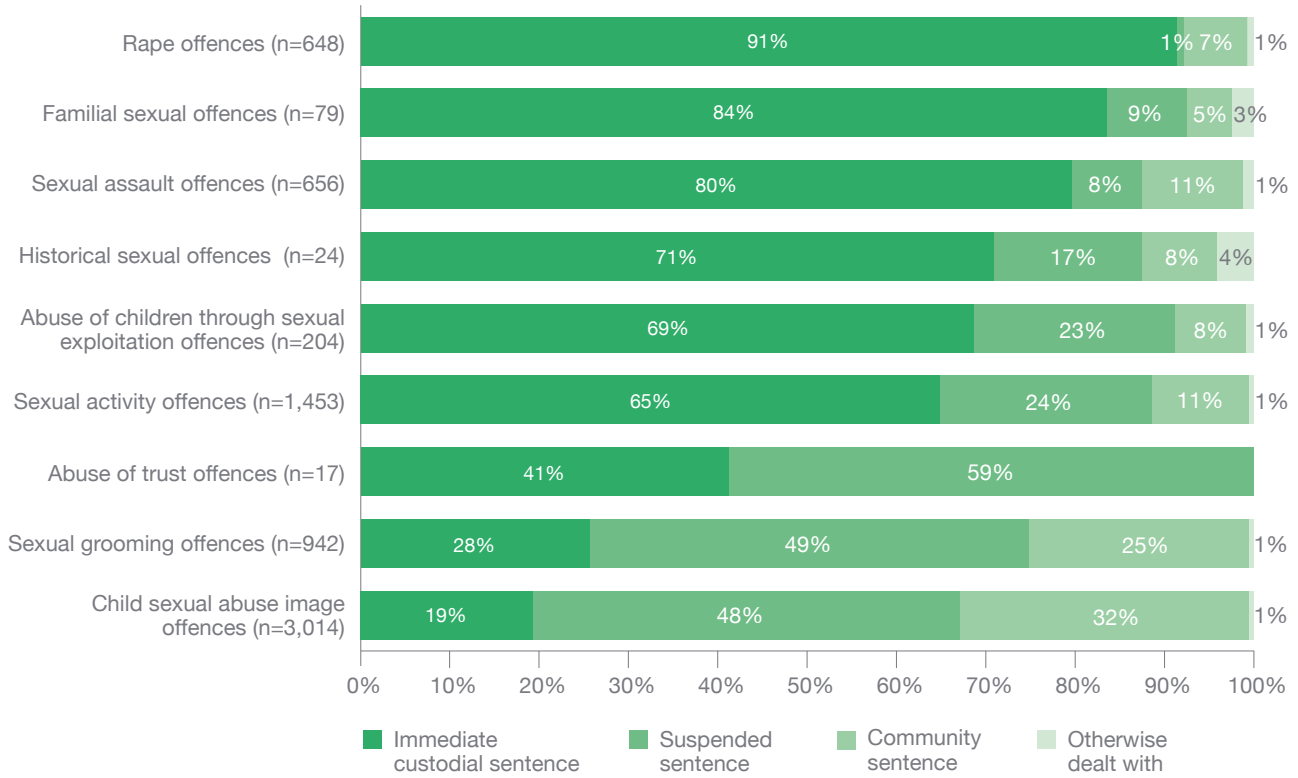
Figure 18 shows that, in 2023, suspended sentences appeared to be most common in relation to child sexual abuse image offences, sexual grooming and abuse of trust offences. Immediate custodial sentences were far more commonly imposed for contact offences. The average length of a custodial sentence for child sexual abuse offences was 62.1 months, or more than five years: this average varied from just over one year for image offences to 10–13 years for rape offences.



The average custodial sentence for child sexual abuse offences was a little over five years, and 10–13 years for rape offences.

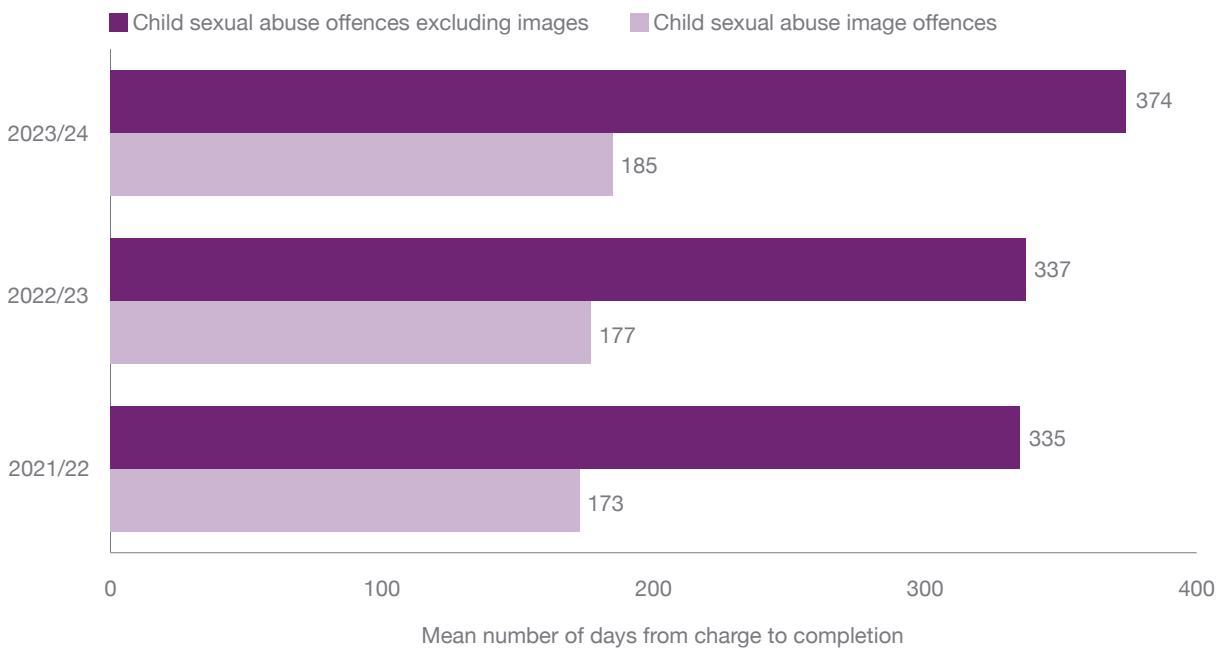


Figure 18. Sentences imposed on convicted defendants for child sexual abuse offences, by type of sentence, 2023, England and Wales



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

Figure 19. Mean prosecution timescales from charge to completion in the Crown Court, by type of offence, 2021/22–2023/24, England and Wales



Source: Ministry of Justice (2024b). Child sexual abuse offences excluding image offences: n=3,504 (2021/22), 3,525 (2022/23) and 4,148 (2023/24). Child sexual abuse image offences: n=3,231 (2021/22), 2,976 (2022/23) and 3,223 (2023/24). Excludes prosecutions for which timescales were not recorded. Includes defendants proceeded against for non-recent offences.

4.3.7 Time taken to prosecute child sexual abuse offences

Information on prosecution timescales related to child sexual abuse is not in the public domain, but the Ministry of Justice made data for the three years from 2021/22 to 2023/24 available for this report (Ministry of Justice, 2024b).¹⁸ Figure 19 shows that there remained a considerable difference in timescales between image prosecutions and all other child sexual abuse prosecutions. On average (mean) it took 185 days – six months – to proceed from a charge to completion in the Crown Court for image offences – but the average timescale for all other child sexual abuse offences was twice as long, at 374 days or just over a year.¹⁹

Further, while the average timescales for child sexual abuse image prosecutions remained relatively stable (having increased by 8 days on average from 2022/23), the average time taken to prosecute all other child sexual abuse offences increased by 37 days. The Ministry of Justice has attributed the increased timescales to the backlog caused by closures and limitations implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and has been addressing this by increasing the number of days per year that the Crown Court can sit (Ministry of Justice, 2024c).

Sentencing

Once an individual is found guilty or pleads guilty, the sentencing process begins.* Judges and magistrates must keep the five purposes of sentencing in mind:

- a) punish the individual
- b) reduce crime
- c) reform and rehabilitate the individual
- d) protect the public
- e) make the individual give something back (to the victim/society).

The judge or magistrate will decide on the sentence according to the seriousness of the offence, following sentencing guidelines and making use of expert assessments.

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 24 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.

* At the time of writing this report, the Sentencing Bill was progressing through the House of Commons. It makes a provision about the sentencing of those convicted of murder or sexual offences; about the suspension of custodial sentences; and the release of people from prison including release on licence.

Community sentence. A community order must 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, exclusion from specific geographical areas, residence only where a probation officer allows, mental health treatment, drug rehabilitation, an alcohol treatment or abstinence programme, supervision, a requirement to go to an ‘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).

More than 50 sexual offences have definitive sentencing guidelines, with custodial sentences varying from six months to life, and community sentences between six months and three years.

Sources: Ministry of Justice (2021b); Sentencing Council (2013; 2022).

18. The 2023/24 figures given here only include data to the end of December 2023. This was the latest period available, as the subsequent Criminal Court Statistics release was postponed for further quality assurance following concerns about the quality of key data inputs (Ministry of Justice, 2024b).

19. The *median* time for the completion of image offence prosecutions was 114 days, and for all other child sexual abuse prosecutions the median was 260.

4.4 Criminal justice pathways following a conviction

This section explores what happens for defendants who have been found guilty or pleaded guilty in court.

For the year 2023/24, it presents data on adults (aged 18 years and above) convicted of child sexual abuse offences who were serving prison sentences, and adults convicted of sexual offences who were managed by HM Prison & Probation Service (HMPPS) or the police as part of Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA). This data is collated by the Ministry of Justice.

What happens if a defendant is convicted?

If an individual is given an **immediate custodial sentence**, they are usually taken directly into custody and escorted to a prison; the choice of prison is based on a risk assessment and security classification.

- ▶ For sentences longer than 12 months, they may be eligible for parole after serving half of the sentence. Parole is determined by assessments of behaviour, rehabilitation progress and ongoing risk to the public.
- ▶ When the sentence is completed or the individual is granted parole, they are released from prison and are subject to licence conditions (see Parole Board, 2022) and/or notification requirements, which include being supervised by a probation and/or police professional.

If the individual receives a **suspended prison sentence**, they will complete their custodial sentence in the community and engage in rehabilitation interventions while being supervised by a probation officer. A suspended prison sentence may be between 14 days and two years. If they do not comply with the conditions of their suspended sentence, they can be sent to prison to complete the remainder of the sentence, or resented at court.

Anyone who receives a **short** prison sentence and is due to be released on/close to the end of their sentence will be allocated a supervising probation officer before release. This is to develop a post-release plan and ensure that appropriate support is in place. People convicted of a sexual offence against a child, will in addition, be automatically subject to **sexual offender notification requirements** which extend beyond the prison sentence (see section 4.4.1).

If the offence does not meet the threshold for a prison sentence, and/or the judge deems that the individual can be managed safely in the community, a **community order** can be mandated for between six months and three years. The individual will need to report to their probation officer at designated times throughout the life of the order. A community order will include specific conditions or requirements which aim to manage and reduce risk while also supervising effective rehabilitation; the probation officer will carry out regular risk assessments (including home visits) and develop risk management plans to support this. If the individual does not adhere to these conditions/requirements, they may be returned to court.

All professionals (police, prison and probation) involved in the management of people with sexual convictions, both in prison and on community sentences, work together to protect the public and ensure that the sentence ordered by the court is properly enforced.

Sources: Sentencing Council (2013, 2022, 2024); HMPPS (2024).

4.4.1 People subject to Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements

The Criminal Justice Act 2003 established MAPPA to strengthen public protection responses to serious sexual and violent offenders in every police force/criminal justice area within England and Wales. MAPPA requires local criminal justice agencies and other bodies to work together in partnership to deal with these people.

Under MAPPA the police and the probation and prison services are known as the Responsible Authorities and are mandated to come together in each local area. Other agencies with a duty to co-operate include the Youth Offending Team, the local authority (education, social services and health functions), NHS England, and local housing authorities.

People subject to MAPPA will be supervised by different agencies depending on where they are in or after their sentence. While they are in prison, prison professionals will act as the lead agency and supervise their period of custody; probation professionals will lead while they are on probation. If their time in prison and on probation is complete but they are still subject to notification requirements, the police become the lead agency. Many people are required to notify for life.

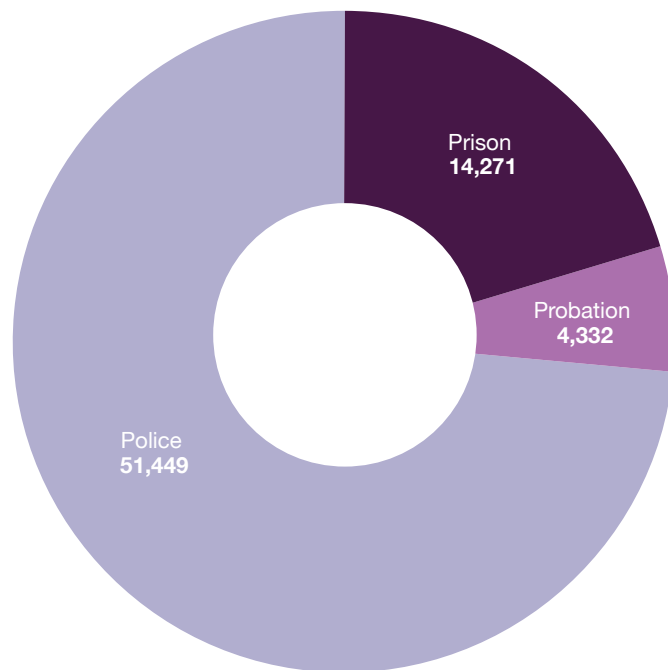
Figure 20 shows that, in March 2024, three-quarters (74%) of people classified as MAPPA Category 1 (i.e. convicted of sexual offences and subject to notification requirements – see box) were under police supervision, with most of the remainder being in prison (20%).

The Category 1 population includes people who have committed sexual offences against adults and/or children. Separate data on convictions suggests that most of these offences are against children: between 2013 and 2023, there were 64,738 convictions relating to child sexual abuse offences (63%) and 37,449 convictions relating to sexual offences against adults²⁰ (37%) (Ministry of Justice, 2024a).

In March 2024, 70,052 people – 75% of the total MAPPA population of 93,436 – were classified as Category 1. Nearly all of them (69,618, 99%) were managed at Level 1 (that is, by one lead agency); of the remaining 1%, 384 were managed at Level 2 (under multi-agency arrangements), and 50 at Level 3 (more complex cases requiring involvement of senior management) (Ministry of Justice, 2024d: Table 1).

The population of people managed by MAPPA has grown steadily over the last decade; this is mainly the result of a 54% increase in the number of people managed at Category 1 (see Figure 21).

Figure 20. People subject to sexual offender notification requirements (MAPPA Category 1) as of 31 March 2024, by lead agency, England and Wales



Source: Ministry of Justice (2024d: Table 1); Ministry of Justice (2024e: Table 1.A.6); Ministry of Justice (2024h: Table 6.7).

20. This number will include some convictions for offences in which children were sexually abused, because older children are included in 'adult' offence categories for offences of rape (if they are aged 16–17) and sexual assault (if they are aged 13–17). Other offences (e.g. indecent exposure, trafficking for sexual exploitation) do not differentiate between child and adult victims. The exact number of children included within sexual offences in adult categories is not visible in published data and not known.

Figure 21. People subject to sexual offender notification requirements and managed at different levels as of 31 March, 2014–2024, England and Wales



Source: Ministry of Justice (2024d: Table 1). Chart does not show Level 3; no more than 57 people have been managed at this level in any of these annual ‘snapshots’.

Civil orders applied to people subject to MAPPA

The police are responsible for enforcing several civil orders and notification requirements used to manage and monitor people with sexual convictions or those deemed at risk of causing sexual harm (College of Policing, 2024). These include but are not limited to:

- ▶ A **Sexual Offender Prevention Order or Sexual Harm Prevention Order (SOPO/SHPO)** places specific restrictive conditions or positive obligations on someone convicted of a sexual offence, to prevent harmful behaviour. SOPOs have been replaced by SHPOs (under the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014) but remain enforceable.
- ▶ A **Sexual Risk Order (SRO)** has specific restrictive conditions or positive obligations, to prevent the harmful behaviour of any individual who is considered to pose a risk of sexual harm but has not been cautioned for or convicted of an offence.
- ▶ A **Notification Order (NO)** requires people who have been convicted of sexual offences overseas to notify the UK police and become subject to notification requirements on their return to the UK.
- ▶ **Foreign Travel Order/Restrictions (FTO/R)** are incorporated into SOPO/SHPOs; they may prohibit travel to certain countries or to all countries outside the UK.

There were 6,093 SOPOs/SHPOs imposed in 2023/24, 8% more than in 2022/23, while the number of NOs decreased by 9% to 125 (Ministry of Justice, 2024d: Table 6).



In 2023/24, 3% of people in MAPPA Category 1 were cautioned or convicted for a breach of the notification requirements.



Breaching any prohibition is a criminal offence, with a maximum penalty of five years' imprisonment. In 2023/24, 2,375 (3%) of the 70,052 people in MAPPA Category 1 were cautioned or convicted for a breach of the notification requirement (Ministry of Justice, 2024d: Tables 1 and 5a).

In 2023/24, 73 of the 4,332 people supervised by the probation service under Category 1 were convicted for a Serious Further Offence,²¹ and a further 43 were charged and awaiting an outcome (Ministry of Justice, 2024d: Table 9b). The number of people who committed further serious sexual and violent offences while under MAPPA supervision by the police is not publicly available.

4.4.2 People in prison for sexual offences

The prison estate across England and Wales consists of 123 prisons. Data on the specific offences for which people are serving prison sentences is available only as a snapshot at 30 June each year.

In June 2023, prisons across England and Wales held 85,851 people in total, of which 69,747 were serving an immediate custodial sentence (Ministry of Justice, 2024e: Tables 1.A.1 and 1.A.6).

MAPPA categories and levels

MAPPA's primary function is to manage people in the following four categories:

- Category 1: Subject to sexual offender notification requirements.
- Category 2: Violent offender or other sexual offender.
- Category 3: Other dangerous offender.
- Category 4: Terrorist or terrorist risk offender.

Anyone convicted of a child sexual offence is classified under Category 1; they become subject to sexual offender notification requirements when they receive a qualifying caution or conviction for an offence listed in Schedule 3 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003.* This also applies to people convicted or cautioned abroad, as if they had been convicted or cautioned of the equivalent offence in the UK.

* Offences covered by this category include some sexual offences against adults (e.g., rape and indecent/sexual assault) and all sexual offences against children. A small number of sexual offences do not meet the threshold for notification requirements; people convicted of these offences are allocated to Category 2.

Notification requirements include registering personal information (such as name, date of birth, national insurance number, home address, passport and bank details) with the police, within a specific time frame, after sentencing or release from prison. The police monitor and manage people subject to notification requirements and living in the community, to minimise their risk to others.

MAPPA agencies agree whether a person is managed by one lead agency (Level 1), by a multi-agency approach (Level 2), or by senior managers because the risk requires them to authorise additional resources (Level 3). Most MAPPA cases are in Category 1 and are managed at Level 1.

Risk and management levels can change and must be regularly reviewed.

Sources: Sentencing Council (2013, 2022, 2024); HMPPS (2024).

21. Any offence of murder or manslaughter, or other specified offence involving loss of life, rape, a terror-related offence or a sexual offence against a child under 13 years of age, committed while subject to probation order/licence conditions, is an automatic Serious Further Offence; other offences can also qualify as a Serious Further Offence if a person was assessed as high or very high risk when they offended (HMPPS, 2021a).

The number of people in prison serving an immediate custodial sentence for any sexual offence (including child sexual abuse offences) was 13,959 in June 2023²² – one in five of the total prison population under an immediate custodial sentence. Two-thirds of this group (9,017), and 13% of that total population, were in prison for sexual offences against children²³ (Ministry of Justice, 2024e: Tables 1.A.8 and 1.A.14).

Figure 22 shows that, in June 2023, the number of people serving custodial sentences for child sexual abuse offences was at its highest level since 2015, having risen by 8% since the previous June. The total prison population under immediate custodial sentences was 5% higher than a year earlier.

The number of people in prison is projected to continue to increase (Ministry of Justice, 2024f), for reasons including:

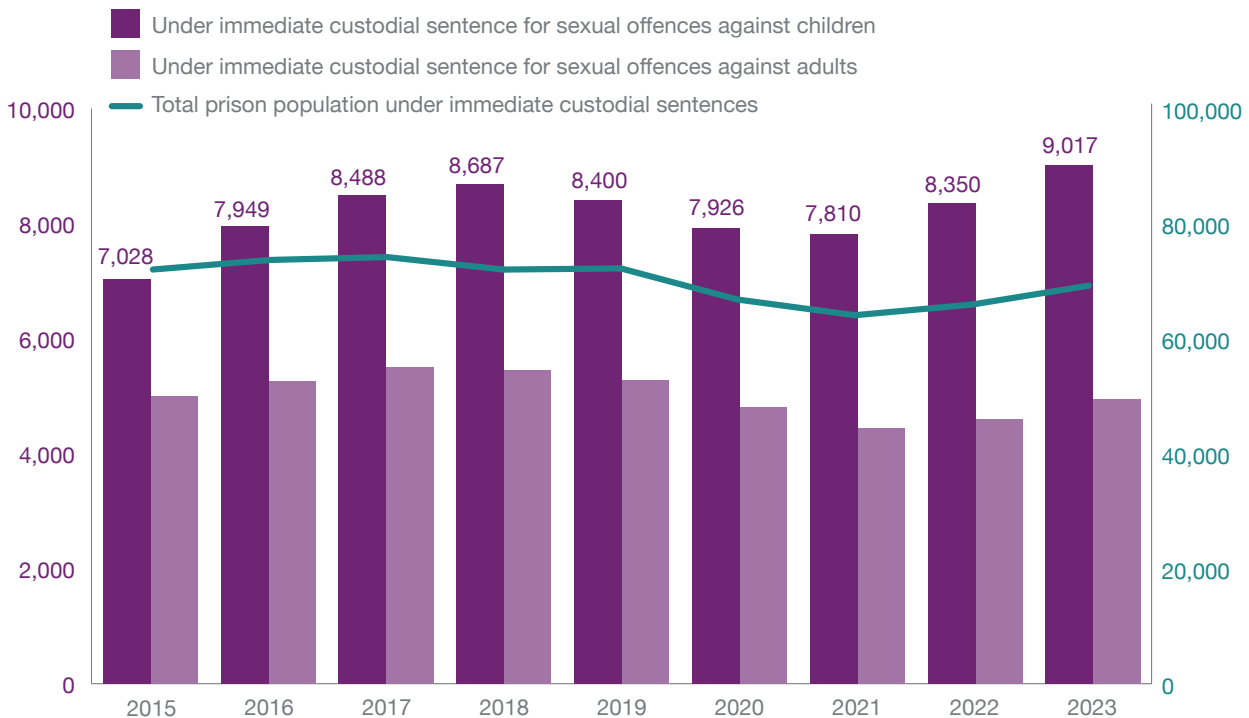
- the processing of outstanding court cases disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic

- changes to sentences as a result of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 and The Release of Prisoners Order 2020 – for people given a standard determinate sentence for a sexual offence, these changes increase the custody time from four to seven years.

Other factors that may result in more people being imprisoned specifically for child sexual offences include:

- the revised sentencing guidelines for sexual offences against a child (Sentencing Council, 2022) – these allow judges/magistrates to consider the intended sexual harm to a child even in cases where no actual child exists or no sexual activity has taken place (in police ‘sting’ operations, for example)
- the likely responses from the Crown Prosecution Service and the police to rape victims, including through the new national operating model (College of Policing, 2023b).

Figure 22. Prison population under immediate custodial sentences for sexual offences against children and adults as of 30 June, 2015–2023, England and Wales



Source: Ministry of Justice (2024e: Tables 1.A.6, 1.A.8 and 1.A.14).

22. This figure does not include those on remand (untried, unsentenced).

23. As noted above, children may be sexually abused under some categories of ‘sexual offences against adults’; as a result, the true number here will have been more than 9,017.

Among people under immediate custodial sentences in June 2023 for sexual offences against children, 41% had been convicted of the rape of a child (3,685), and 45% of sexual assault against a child aged under 13 or sexual activity involving a child under 16 (4,089) – see Table 5.

A further 6% (522) were in prison for ‘obscene publications’, including abusive images of children; as Table 3 in section 4.3.1 shows, 44% of all convictions in 2023 (3,223 out of 7,371) related to child sexual abuse image offences.

Table 5. Prison population under immediate custodial sentences for child sexual offences at 30 June 2023, by sex and offence, England and Wales

Offence category	Female	Male	Total
Rape of a female child under 13	9	1,746	1,755
Rape of a female child under 16	9	1,425	1,434
Rape of a male child under 13	0	341	341
Rape of a male child under 16	1	154	155
<i>Total rape offences</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>3,666</i>	<i>3,685</i>
Sexual assault of a female child under 13	27	1,860	1887
Sexual assault of a male child under 13	6	155	161
<i>Total sexual assault offences</i>	<i>33</i>	<i>2,015</i>	<i>2,048</i>
Sexual activity involving a child under 13	26	829	855
Sexual activity involving a child under 16	19	1,167	1186
<i>Total sexual activity offences</i>	<i>45</i>	<i>1,996</i>	<i>2,041</i>
Obscene publications including indecent photographs of children	1	521	522
Sexual grooming	1	248	249
<i>Total image and grooming offences</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>769</i>	<i>771</i>
Abuse of children through sexual exploitation	14	367	381
Abuse of position of trust of a sexual nature	2	15	17
Gross indecency with children (historical offence)	1	73	74
<i>Total other child sexual abuse offences</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>455</i>	<i>472</i>
Total	116	8,901	9,017

Source: Ministry of Justice (2024e: Tables 1.A.8 and 1.A.14).

People in prison receiving offender behaviour programmes

Several accredited offender behaviour programmes are available across the prison estate, delivered by HMPPS – see box.

In the year 2023/24, 1,115 people in prison commenced a sexual offending behaviour programme, almost reaching pre-pandemic levels (1,154 in 2018/19); they accounted for 21% of all offending behaviour programme commencements in custody in 2023/24, having accounted for 20% five years earlier (Ministry of Justice, 2024g. Table 3.1). And 1,094 people in prison completed a sexual offending behaviour programme (compared with 1,114 in 2019), again representing around one-fifth (22%) of all programme completions in custody (Ministry of Justice, 2024g. Table 3.2).

Despite this, access to sexual offender behaviour programmes in prison is limited, with a lack of prison spaces and resource; compared with other people in prison, those convicted of sexual offences report having less access to these programmes (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales, 2024).

In 2023/24, 1,115 people commenced sexual offending behaviour programmes in prison, but access to these programmes is limited.

Sexual offending behaviour programmes

Offender behaviour programmes that target people convicted of sexual offences aim to address thoughts, attitudes and behaviours that contribute to sexual reoffending. Programmes adopt a strengths-based approach, employ cognitive-behavioural techniques, and are underpinned by research evidence supporting their effectiveness in reducing reoffending – they follow the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model, where:

- ▶ **“risk”** means that resources should be allocated according to risk – the higher the risk to people, the greater the intervention
- ▶ **“need”** means that programmes should target and attempt to address factors known to be related to reoffending
- ▶ **“responsivity”** means they should respond to individuals’ learning style, motivation and personal circumstances (considering ability, disability, preference, culture etc).

While many programmes are group-based, one-to-one sessions can also reinforce learning. Programmes promote pro-social attitudes, future-oriented goals, and skills to prevent further offending, such as:

- ▶ problem-solving
- ▶ perspective-taking
- ▶ relationship management
- ▶ self-regulation
- ▶ skills for intimacy, healthy sex
- ▶ strengthening pro-social identity
- ▶ planning for an offence-free life.

Several accredited offending behaviour programmes are available in prisons and community settings; they are available to men aged 18 or over with one or more convictions for sexual offences, if they are assessed as medium risk or above. Some examples of these programmes are listed on the next page.

Programmes available in prison

Horizon. For adult men of medium risk and above who have been convicted of a sexual offence; 34 group and individual sessions.

Kaizen. For high or very high risk adult men who have been convicted of a sexual, intimate partner violence (IPV) or general violent offence; 80 (+/-20%) group and individual sessions.

New Me Strengths (NMS). For adult men who have learning disabilities or learning challenges, have been assessed as being medium risk or above, and have been convicted of any offence; 38 group and individual sessions.

Becoming New Me + (BNM+). For high or very high risk adult men who have learning disabilities or challenges and have been convicted of a sexual, IPV or general violent offence; 92 group and individual sessions.

Healthy Sex Programme (HSP). A one-to-one programme for adult men who have a conviction for a sexual offence or an offence with a sexual element, have strong offence-related sexual interests, and have completed Horizon, Kaizen, NMS or BNM+; 12–30 hours. Suitable for individuals with learning disabilities and challenges.

Democratic Therapeutic Community Model (DTC). A 24/7 therapeutic environment for people with complex psychological and emotional needs, likely to meet the criteria for a diagnosis of 'personality disorder'. Part of the Offender Personality Disorder Pathway.

Therapeutic Communities Plus (TC+).

Group and creative psychotherapies in a 24/7 living-learning environment, for people who are eligible for but unable to participate in mainstream DTC owing to mild to moderate learning disability. Part of the Offender Personality Disorder Pathway.

Programmes available in the community

Horizon. For adult men of medium risk and above who have been convicted of a sexual offence; 34 group and individual sessions.

iHorizon. A version of Horizon for men whose sexual offending is 'internet only' (i.e. involving the possession, downloading and/or distribution of indecent images); 26 group and individual sessions.

New Me Strengths (NMS). For adult men who have learning disabilities or learning challenges, have been assessed as being medium risk or above, and have been convicted of any offence; 38 group and individual sessions.

Living as New Me (LNM). An accredited skills maintenance (booster) programme for people who have completed NMS or BNM+ and may require further support; minimum of five sessions.

New Me MOT. A toolkit of exercises aligned to programmes and used by supervisors to support people who completed any accredited programme in maintaining changes and learning.

Sources: HMPPS (2021b); Ministry of Justice/HMPPS (2022); Ministry of Justice (2022a).

4.4.3 People managed by the probation service

The probation service is divided into 12 regions across England and Wales, with boundaries aligned to police force and local authority area borders. As of March 2024, it was supervising 238,993 people pre- and post-release from prison (Ministry of Justice, 2024h: Table 6.6). Only 2% (4,332) had a conviction for a sexual offence: 2,087 of them were on a community order, and 2,245 had a suspended sentence (Ministry of Justice, 2024h, Table 6.7), but these numbers were respectively 91% and 29% higher than in March 2020 (see Figure 23).

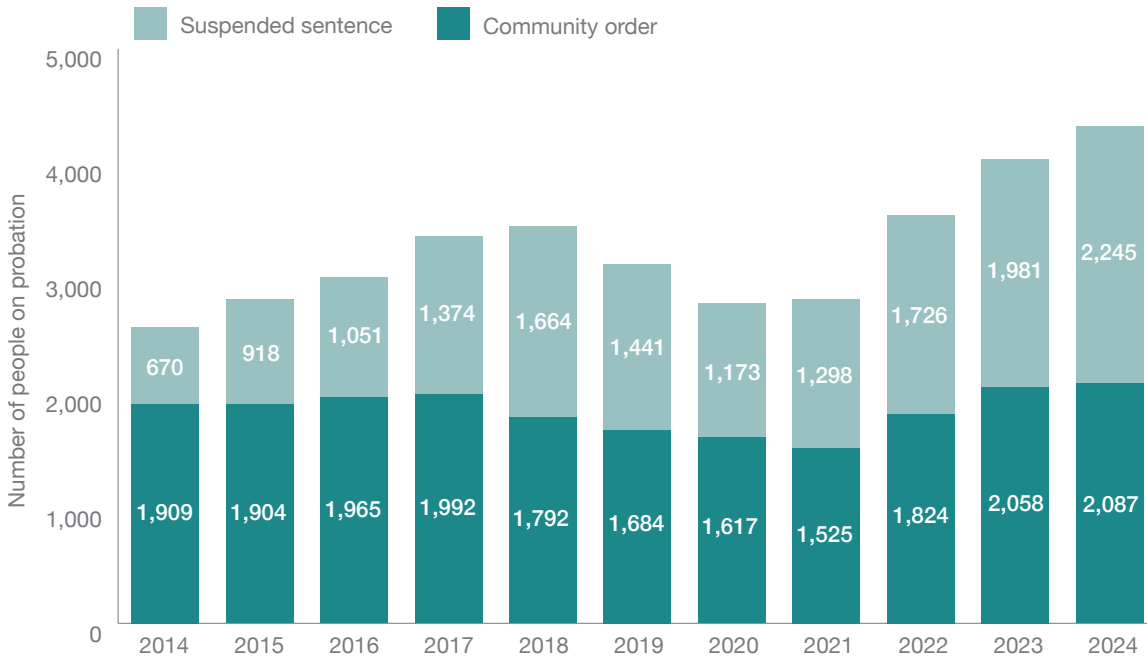
Data available for people on probation following a sexual offence is not broken down by offences against adults and children. However, it is likely that about two-thirds of them have been convicted of child sexual abuse offences: in 2023, 3,863 out of 6,014 community orders and suspended sentences for sexual offences (64%) were related to offences against children²⁴ (Ministry of Justice, 2024a).

Reconvictions for sexual offences

The Ministry of Justice publishes the ‘proven reoffending rate’ for adults (aged 18+) who are convicted or cautioned for a further offence within 18 months of having been released from custody or received a non-custodial sentence or a reprimand.²⁵ Within this data it is possible to track those whose original conviction was for a sexual offence against adults or children.

The proven reoffending rate is acknowledged to underestimate the true level of reoffending, because not all crimes are detected – and even if a crime is detected, it may not be recorded on the Police National Computer (Ministry of Justice, 2024i). Further, the time taken for recorded sexual offences to reach a charging decision and come to court makes it likely that many people who reoffend are not reconvicted within the 18-month period used for the analysis.²⁶

Figure 23. People on probation under suspended sentences or community orders for sexual offences (against children or adults) as of 31 March, 2017–2024, England and Wales



Source: Ministry of Justice (2024h: Table 6.7); Ministry of Justice (2023: Table 6.7); Ministry of Justice (2022b: Table 4.7); Ministry of Justice (2021c: Table 4.7); Ministry of Justice (2020: Table 4.7); Ministry of Justice (2019: Table 4.7); Ministry of Justice (2018: Table 4.8); Ministry of Justice (2017: Table 4.8); Ministry of Justice (2016: Table 4.8); Ministry of Justice (2015: Table 4.8).

24. As noted above, the figures for sexual offences against adults also include some children.

25. To be included in this figure, the further offence must also have been recorded within 12 months of the release, non-custodial sentence or reprimand date.

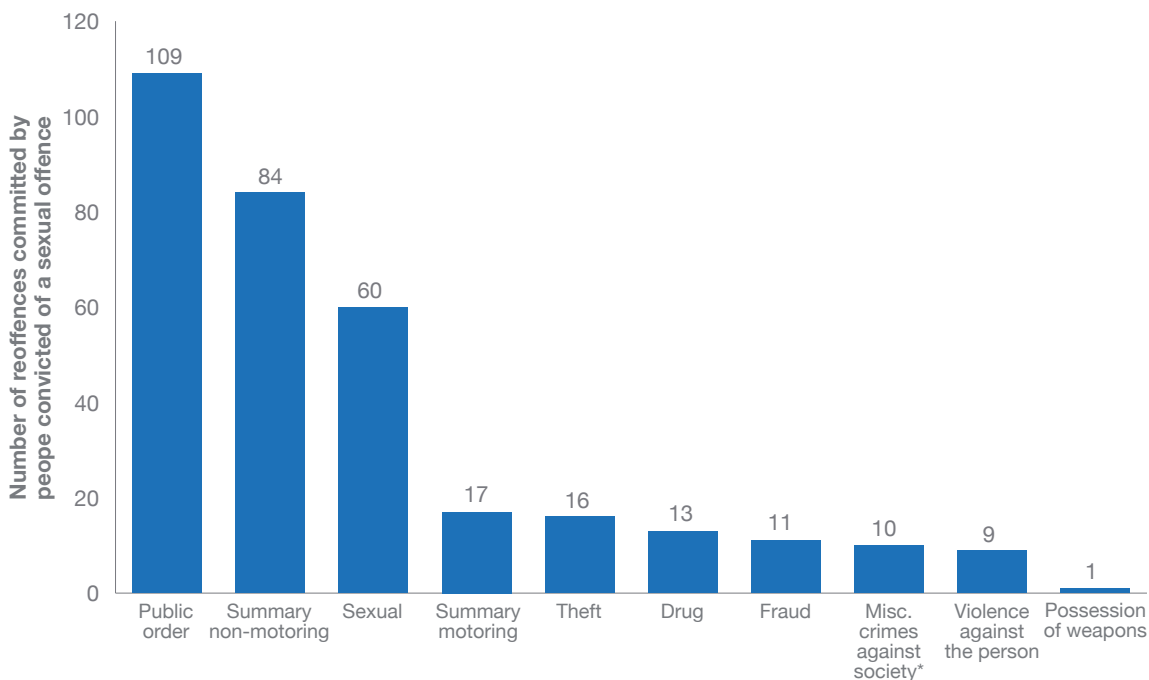
26. In 2023/24, it took an average of nine months for a police investigation into a sexual offence to result in a charge (see Figure 15) and a further year for a contact child sexual abuse offence prosecution to reach completion in the Crown Court (see Figure 19).

This data is published quarterly, with the most recent publication tracking people who were released or received non-custodial sentences/reprimands in October–December 2022. Of the 1,375 adults in this cohort who had been convicted of a sexual offence, 13% (178) were convicted of any further offence within 18 months (Ministry of Justice 2024j, Table A4a); this was the lowest rate of any offence group, and is consistent across recent years. Figure 24 shows that, of the 506 ‘reoffences’ for which these 178 people were convicted, 60 (12%) were sexual reoffences (excluding child sexual abuse image offences); more common types of reoffending were public order offences (109, 22%) and summary non-motoring offences²⁷ (84, 17%).

A further 270 sexual reoffences were committed by people whose original conviction had been for a non-sexual offence: 72 of these were committed by people who had originally committed a summary non-motoring offence, and 48 by those previously convicted for a public order offence (Ministry of Justice, 2024j; Table B4).

While the method used to measure proven reoffending has been rigorously tested, a longer follow-up period than 18 months is needed for people convicted of sexual offences. Longer follow-up studies show higher sexual reoffending rates (Lussier et al, 2024).

Figure 24. Subsequent offences for which people were convicted within 18 months of having been released or receiving a non-custodial sentence for an initial sexual offence between October and December 2022, by type of subsequent offence, England and Wales



Source: Ministry of Justice (2024j; Table B4); 176 offences in the ‘other’ category are excluded because of data quality issues (Ministry of Justice, 2024j).

* Miscellaneous crimes against society include child sexual abuse image offences, but the exact number of these image offences is not visible in published data.

27. These are offences such as minor criminal damage or minor assaults; they are considered less serious, and are dealt with by the Magistrate’s courts.

Offender behaviour programmes

People serving community sentences for sexual offences may be mandated to take part in an accredited sexual offender behaviour programme; these programmes adhere to the same principles as those delivered in prisons (see box in section 4.4.2). In 2023/24, 65% of accredited programmes and other targeted interventions for people convicted of sexual offences were completed, against a 70% annual target for the probation service (Ministry of Justice, 2024k).

The probation service achieved 65% completion of targeted interventions in the community for people convicted of sexual offences.

Probation service

The probation service is responsible for the sentence management of people on probation across England and Wales. Its priority is to protect the public through the effective rehabilitation of people on probation, by reducing the causes which contribute to their offending and by enabling them to turn their lives around.

People on probation are supervised by probation practitioners through various community-based options as sanctioned by the courts. Community sentences can take the form of a suspended prison sentence, a period on licence following release from prison, or a standalone community sentence.

Depending on probation practitioners' assessment of each individual's needs, as well as the severity of the offence and the likelihood of reoffending, multiple requirements may be added to a sentence. According to the Criminal Justice Act 2003, judges and magistrates have access to 12 options, at least one of which must be included as part of the community supervision: unpaid work, rehabilitation activity, accredited programmes, prohibited activity, curfew, exclusion, residence requirement, foreign travel prohibition, mental health treatment, drug rehabilitation, alcohol treatment, and alcohol abstinence and monitoring.

For those with sexual convictions, additional conditions and work can be added to a community sentence.

- Polygraph testing can be imposed as a licence condition on people who are on licence after serving at least 12 months in prison for a sexual offence, if they are assessed as posing a high or very high risk of reoffending and harm. A polygraph examination records an individual's physiological responses to a small number of targeted questions, which are interpreted to determine whether the individual has responded to questions in a truthful or deceptive manner; it can support effective management of the individual, by monitoring their compliance with their other licence conditions.
- Maps for Change is a one-to-one resource for probation practitioners to use with men aged 18+ who have been convicted of a sexual offence and assessed as low risk while living in the community. The work helps the structure of supervision, and its primary focus is to strengthen protective factors in a way that supports an individual's ability to lead a meaningful life. It can also be used with men who are medium to high risk and have not completed an accredited programme.

Sources: Ministry of Justice/HMPPS (2024); HMPPS (2021b).

5. Sexual assault referral centres 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, 2020).

NHS Wales has also 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 9,533 initial contacts with under-18s in 2023/24, 0.4% more than in the previous year²⁸ (see Figure 25). Medical examinations made up more than a quarter (28%) of all contacts: this is a smaller proportion than at any time in the previous four years, and also the lowest annual number of medical examinations during this period.

Notably, there was a substantial rise in remotely delivered consultations:²⁹ nearly two-thirds (65%) of contacts happened remotely in 2023/24, up from one in five in 2021/22. This increase coincided with a sharp fall in in-person support sessions not involving a medical examination, which accounted for just 3% of contacts with children in 2023/24 – down from nearly a half two years earlier.

In Wales, the eight SARCs supported 1,021 under-18s, similar to last year's figure (NHS Wales, 2025). Combined data from England and Wales shows that, overall, 10,544 under-18s were supported by SARCs in 2023/24.

Half of under-18s supported by SARCs in England were aged 13 or under at the time of their first consultation, with one in six aged 0–5.

28. The SARC figures for 2022/23 have been revised by NHS England and differ from what was published in last year's edition of this report (Karsna and Bromley, 2024).

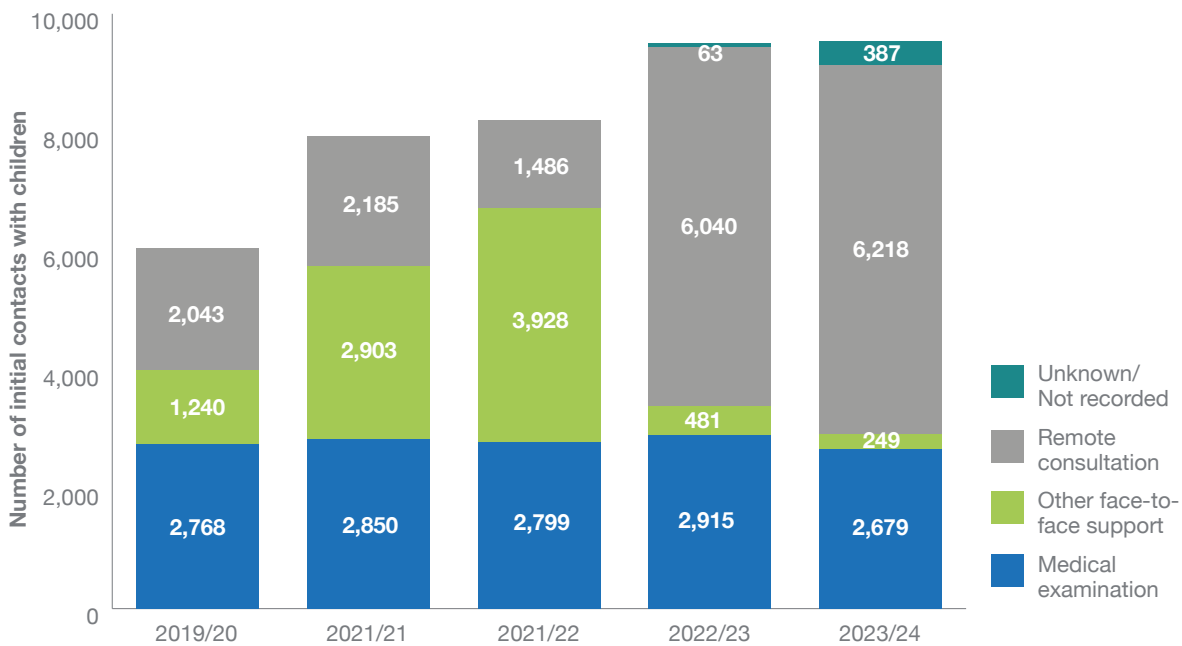
29. Remotely delivered consultations may involve telephone calls or other modes of communication; this category excludes contact involving only signposting or basic advice (NHS England, 2020a).

Five-sixths (82%) of children who were in contact with SARCs in England were female (NHS England, 2025). 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 male/female ratio of children seen by SARCs in 2023/24 was similar to that in the previous three years.

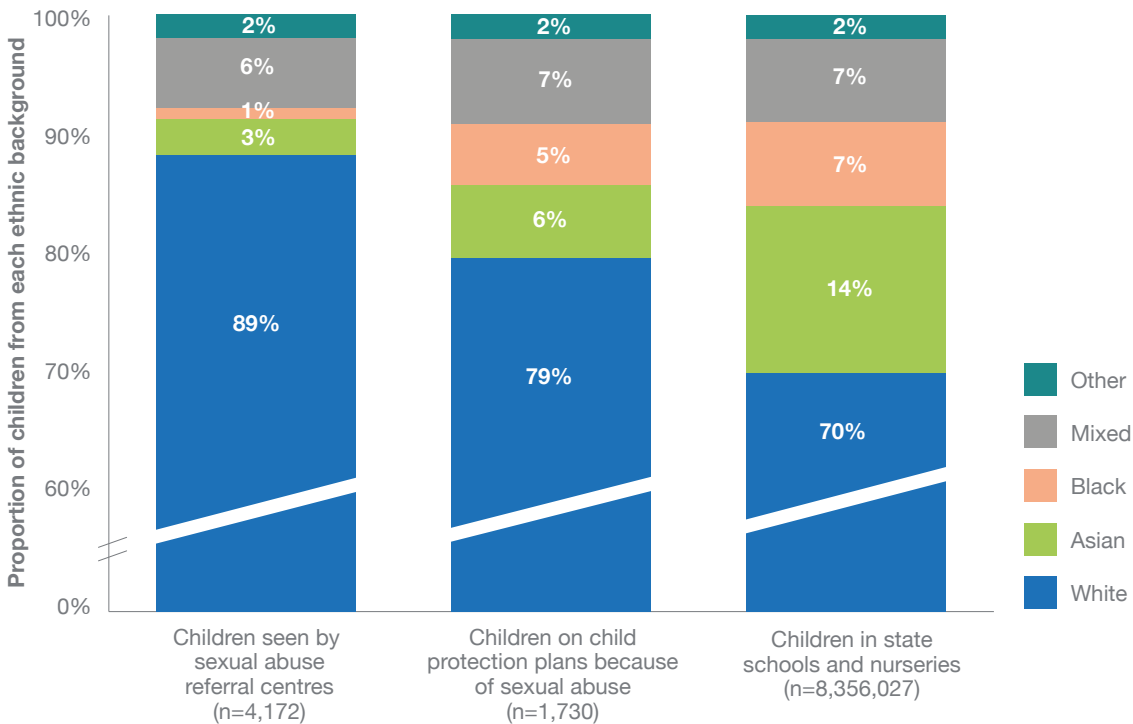
One-sixth (16%) of children supported by a SARC in England were aged five or under at the time of their first consultation, and another sixth (16%) were 6–10 years old; nearly a fifth (19%) were aged 11–13 and nearly a half (49%) were aged 14–17 (NHS England, 2025). This age profile was, again, similar to that in the previous year.

Fewer than half of English SARCs’ records of contacts with under-18s contained information on the child’s ethnicity. In those that did, Figure 26 shows that a large majority (89%) of these children were White. 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 (30%) and also lower than the proportion placed on child protection plans because of sexual abuse (20%). Children of Asian heritage, who comprise 14% of England’s state school and nursery population (Department for Education, 2024b), accounted for just 3% of SARC attendees. English SARCs’ under-reach to children from minority ethnic backgrounds, and those of Asian heritage in particular, has been consistent across the five years for which this data is available.

Figure 25. SARCs’ initial contacts with under-18s, 2019/20–2023/24, England



Source: NHS England (2025).

Figure 26. Under-18s making initial contact with SARCs, by ethnic background, 2023/24, England

Sources: NHS England (2025); Department for Education (2024a: Table A5, year ending 31 March 2024); Department for Education (2024b: 'Pupil characteristics – ethnicity and language'). Chart excludes children for whom no ethnicity data was provided, and children on child protection plans under multiple categories.

5.2 Sources of referrals

SARCIP is the only centrally stored dataset to include data on the sources of referrals to a service. In 2023/24, the police and local authority children's services continued to make up the highest share of referrals to SARCs in England (NHS England, 2025). One-third (35%) of contacts with under-18s were made following a referral from the police, and more than two-fifths (43%) came from children's services. Referrals from children's services have almost quadrupled in the past two years, from 1,066 in 2021/22 to 4,096 in 2023/24. All other agency referrals – from health, education or the voluntary sector – accounted for between 1% and 3% each. Nearly one in 10 (9%) were self-referrals or referrals from family and friends.

One-third of SARCs' contacts with under-18s were made following a police referral, and over two-fifths came from children's services.

6. Conclusions

This report highlights mixed patterns of change that took place in 2023/24. On the one hand, more people were charged with and convicted of child sexual abuse offences. On the other, local authorities identified and named child sexual abuse in fewer assessments, and the number of children placed on child protection plans because of sexual abuse fell to a record low.

Although there was a small decrease in the number of child sexual abuse offences recorded by the police (in line with police-recorded crime overall), **the number of charges brought for child sexual abuse offences rose to its highest level on record** in 2023/24. There were also fewer investigations that were closed because of evidential difficulties. The number of recorded prosecutions of child sexual abuse offences increased by 15% on the previous year, and convictions by 13%, each reaching their second-highest level in almost 20 years. However, the average time taken for police investigations to result in a charge (277 days from recording the offence), and for prosecutions to reach completion in court (374 days from a charge), continued to rise.

For the first time, this year's report presents trends in data from criminal justice agencies responsible for the management and supervision of people convicted of child sexual offences, *post criminal conviction*; this provides a broader picture of the criminal justice response to child sexual abuse.

Anyone convicted of a sexual offence against children – whether they receive an immediate prison sentence, a suspended sentence or a community sentence – is automatically subject to sexual offender notification requirements. Overall, there was a **52% increase in the number of people subject to sexual offender notification requirements over 10 years**, with 55,781 people managed in the community as of 31 March 2024 following a conviction for a sexual offence (against adults or children).

There has been a similar picture in prisons: the population of people serving immediate custodial sentences specifically for *child* sexual offences increased by 28% between June 2015 and June 2023, to 9,017 people. Overall, in June 2023, **13% of people serving custodial sentences in prison in England and Wales had been convicted of child sexual offences.**

However, the positive trends in the criminal justice response were not matched in the child protection data from local authority children's services in England.³⁰ In 2023/24, **the number of children whose needs assessments identified and named concerns of child sexual abuse or child sexual exploitation fell to its lowest level in nine years**, with an **8% drop across both categories of concern**. In addition, the number of children placed on a child protection plan because of sexual abuse concerns continued its long-term downward trend, falling by 6% to its lowest level on record.

The positive trends in the criminal justice response were not matched in the child protection data from local authority children's services.

30. Data for 2023/24 from local authority children's services in Wales was not available at the time of this report's publication.

6.1 Implications for practice

These numbers cannot be separated from the people who create them and the culture within which they work. The official data we have analysed is the product of practitioners identifying and recording concerns. However, to identify concerns, practitioners need to understand child sexual abuse and the signs and indicators which signal that it may be occurring. To record that concern, practitioners need the confidence to name it and address it.

The recent national review of child sexual abuse in the family environment (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2024) made a clear recommendation that the UK Government should take the necessary steps to improve the skills, knowledge and capabilities of practitioners and managers in child protection and safeguarding roles. Alongside the review's findings, which highlighted significant and long-standing issues in how children's services respond to child sexual abuse, our report underlines **the need for system-wide change in how sexually abused children are identified and responded to by statutory safeguarding agencies.**

The national review also called for **a national strategic plan**, which should include **better use of data** to improve the response to concerns of child sexual abuse. Indeed, as the UK Government prepares to respond to recommendations of both the Independent Inquiry on Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) and the national review, an opportunity is presented to address long-standing issues in this data.

Additionally, **more detail is needed** in the official data that is recorded, collected and published. Much of the available data on the criminal justice trajectories of people with sexual offence convictions covers *all* sexual offences (whether against adults or against children). While information at the point of conviction is disaggregated (and suggests that about two-thirds of this population have been convicted of sexual offences against children), more detailed data across the system is essential to inform prevention responses. It will help enhance practitioner knowledge, provide a shared understanding of people who sexually abuse children this population, and improve the allocation of resources when responding to concerns of child sexual abuse.

Agencies must also **improve the consistency of data recording**, so that multi-agency information can be used locally and nationally to drive the prevention, identification and response to child sexual abuse. For this to happen, all agencies need to use common categories to record basic information about child sexual abuse – including about the context in which sexual abuse occurs. For example, there is no consistently recorded information about the relationship between children who are sexually abused and those who abuse them, meaning that agencies cannot use their data to gain any understanding about the contexts in which the abuse they identify has occurred. The CSA Centre's practical guide *Improving Your Data on Child Sexual Abuse* (Karsna, 2023) provides recommended categories that support the improvements of agency data systems.

The above improvements are essential to understand how sexual abuse is identified and responded to, but – as detailed in Chapter 2 of this report – we know that far more children are sexually abused than come to statutory 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.**

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). 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. It has committed to an initial, small-scale pilot of a national survey of child maltreatment in 2024, but has not yet committed to a full pilot and survey. Only **a well-designed representative survey that includes young adults**, who can report on their experiences of sexual abuse across their whole childhoods, **can bring about a clear understanding of the scale and nature of child sexual abuse in England and Wales.**

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

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Appendix A: Data from local authority children's services in Wales for 2022/23

Last year's edition of this report (Karsna and Bromley, 2024) covered the year 2022/23, and included data on child sexual abuse recorded in England's child protection system for that year, but the equivalent data for Wales was not available at the time of that report's publication. This appendix presents that data, as published by the Welsh Government.

As outlined in the introduction to Chapter 3, published local authority data provides only partial information about children who receive a response from children's services:

- ▶ In Wales, data is published on 'reports' (i.e. concerns) relating to child exploitation, including sexual exploitation, as recorded in a strategy meeting for a particular child.³¹ No information is published about strategy meetings relating to any other form of child sexual abuse, and no data is published about actions taken after the strategy meeting.
- ▶ When a child is placed on the child protection register (the equivalent of being made the subject of a child protection plan in England), the local authority records the reason(s) for this on its data collection system; annual statistics detailing these reasons have been published since the early 1990s. However, in 2020/21 the Welsh Government introduced a new data collection framework for these statistics (Welsh Government, 2021b), which prevents comparisons with earlier years. 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. Unlike in England, the published statistics in Wales do show the concerns recorded under this 'multiple' category.
- ▶ 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 'receiving care and support' in Wales who are not on the child protection register, or 'looked-after' children) or who are referred to 'early help'. These children represent the vast majority of those supported by children's services, as a child is placed on the register only under certain circumstances (see box in Chapter 3). There were 17,515 children receiving care and support on 31 March 2023, but only 2,540 of them were on the child protection register for any reason on the same date (Welsh Government, 2024a: 'Children receiving care and support by local authority and age group'/'Children receiving care and support on the Child Protection Register by local authority, category of abuse and gender'). Appendix B provides further detail on the inclusion and exclusion criteria of data used in this chapter.

In 2022/23, the number of children in Wales who had a strategy meeting because of sexual exploitation concerns rose to 1,139.

31. Following a report to local authority children's services, if initial checks conclude that there is a reasonable cause to suspect that a child is at risk of significant harm, a strategy meeting is held to determine whether further investigation should be initiated, and how this should be undertaken (Welsh Government, 2021a).

A1. Reports of sexual exploitation to local authorities

Since 2020/21, the Welsh Government has published data on the number of children reported to local authorities where a strategy meeting was held owing to concerns of some form of exploitation: sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation, and/or trafficking.

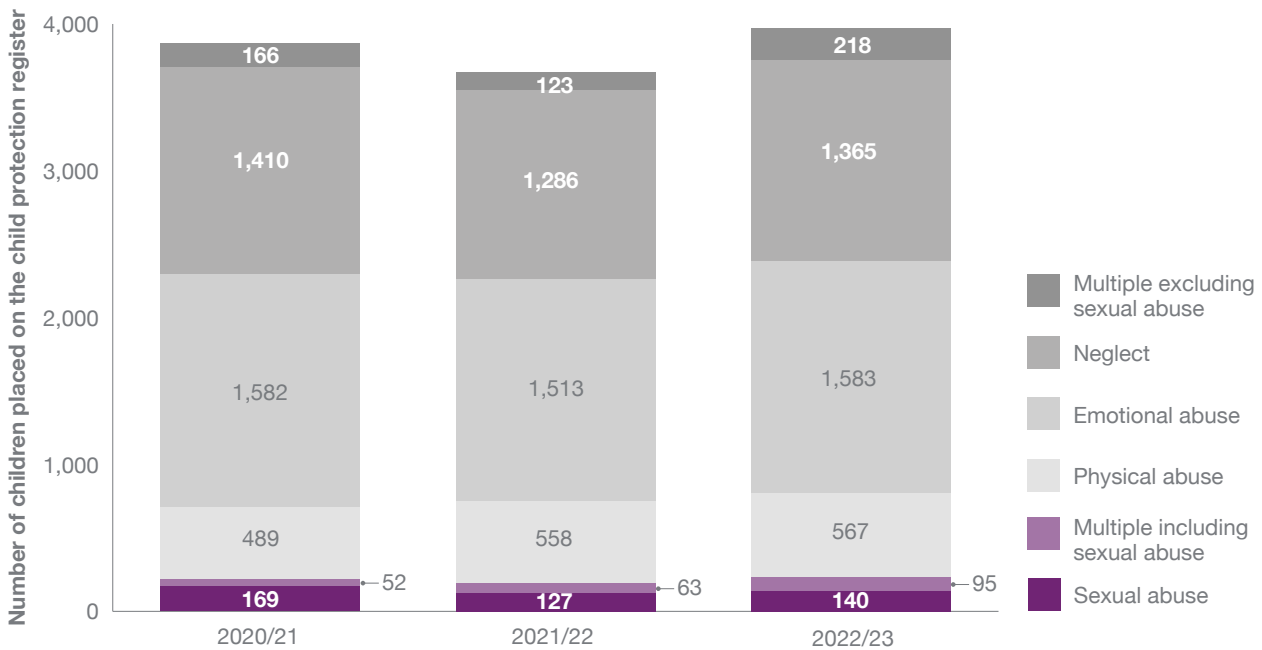
In 2022/23, 1,139 children in Wales had a strategy meeting because of concerns of sexual exploitation; this is higher than in 2021/22 and 2020/21, when concerns of sexual exploitation were recorded for 932 and 966 children respectively (Welsh Government, 2024a: ‘Number of children reported during the year where child exploitation was a factor, by local authority’). The number of children for whom criminal exploitation concerns were reported (1,072) was slightly lower, as it was in England in 2022/23 (see Karsna and Bromley, 2024, section 3.1).

A2. Children placed on the child protection register

As Figure A1 shows, the number of children placed on the child protection register under the single category of sexual abuse increased by 10% between 2021/22 and 2022/23, from 127 to 140. There was also a 50% increase in the number of children registered under the ‘multiple’ category where sexual abuse was one of the reasons, up from 63 children to 95.

The combined number of children on the register because of sexual abuse concerns therefore increased by a quarter, from 190 children in 2021/22 to 235 in 2022/23. This is the highest recorded number in the three years that this data has been collected,³² and means that sexual abuse was recorded as a concern in 6% of the 3,968 child protection registrations in 2022/23.

Figure A1. Children placed on the child protection register, by category of abuse, 2020/21–2022/23, Wales



Source: Welsh Government (2024a: ‘Children placed on the child protection register during the year, by local authority, category of abuse and age’).

32. The collection of this data in Wales changed in 2020/21 with the introduction of the Performance and Improvement Framework for Social Services (Welsh Government, 2021b). This led to whole-year statistics on child protection registrations being published, instead of ‘snapshot’ figures showing the number of children on the register as at 31 March each year. Longitudinal data based on snapshot figures up to 2018/19 – presented in Karsna and Kelly (2021), Figure 21 – shows a similar trend to the England data presented in Figure 4 of this report.

Focusing solely on those children registered under the single category of sexual abuse (i.e. excluding those in the ‘multiple’ category where there were sexual abuse concerns), sexual abuse was the reason for 3.5% of all registrations, similar to the figure for England (3.6%) in 2022/23 – see Karsna and Bromley (2024), section 3.2.

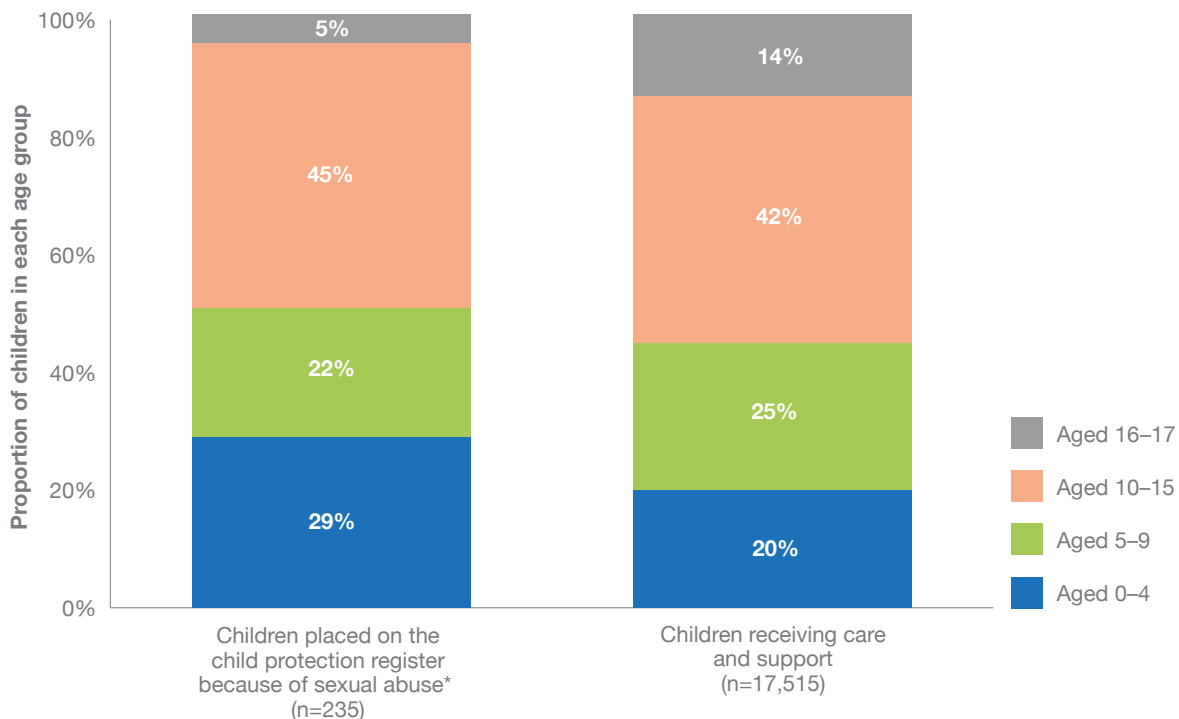
Some data is published on the characteristics of children placed on the child protection register in Wales: data relating to the sex of children on the child protection register presents a snapshot as of 31 March each year (as in England), but information on children’s ages relates to all children who were on the child protection register during the year. No data on the ethnicity of children placed on the child protection register is published.

A2.1 Sex

On 31 March 2023, girls accounted for 63% of children on the child protection register under the single category of sexual abuse (Welsh Government, 2024a: ‘Children receiving care and support on the Child Protection Register by local authority, category of abuse and gender’). This is a higher proportion than in England, where 58% of children on child protection plans on that date were female – see Karsna and Bromley (2024), section 3.3.1.

When children placed on the register because of multiple concerns including sexual abuse are added, the proportion is the same: girls accounted for 63% of children on the register because of sexual abuse (possibly alongside other concerns). In comparison, fewer than half (49%) of the children on child protection plans under other categories of abuse, and of children in need (45%), were female.

Figure A2. Children on the child protection register because of sexual abuse and children receiving care and support, by age, 2022/23, Wales



Source: Welsh Government (2024a: ‘Children placed on the child protection register during the year, by local authority, category of abuse and age’/‘Children receiving care and support by local authority and age group’).

* Includes children placed on the register under the single category of sexual abuse, and under the ‘multiple concerns’ category where those concerns included sexual abuse.

A2.2 Age

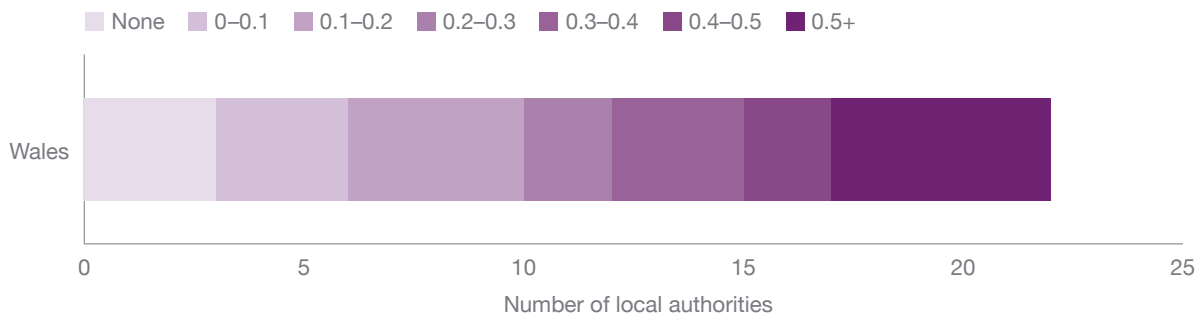
Across 2022/23, almost one-third of children on the child protection register because of sexual abuse (possibly alongside other concerns) were under five years old, with slightly fewer aged 5–9 and almost half aged 10–15 (see Figure A2). This was broadly similar to the age profile of children receiving care and support over the year.

There is no directly comparable data for England, but a snapshot of children on child protection plans as at 31 March 2023 showed a slightly different age profile: 26% were aged 0–4, 26% aged 5–9, 39% aged 10–15, and 9% aged 16–17.

A3. Local variation

Figure A3 shows that, as in England (see Karsna and Bromley, 2024, section 3.4.2), there were significant differences between Welsh local authorities in the number of children placed on the child protection register because of sexual abuse (possibly alongside other concerns). In three local authorities, no child was placed on the child protection register because of sexual abuse across the year, and in another three local authorities there were very few such children (below 0.1 placements for every 1,000 children living in the area). On the other hand, in five local authorities the number of children placed on the register exceeded 0.5 per 1,000 local child population.

Figure A3. Number of children per 1,000 local child population placed by local authorities on the child protection register because of sexual abuse, 2022/23



Source: Welsh Government (2024a: ‘Children receiving care and support on the Child Protection Register by local authority, category of abuse and gender’); Office for National Statistics (2024b). Includes children placed on the register under the single category of sexual abuse, and under the ‘multiple concerns’ category where those concerns included sexual abuse.

Girls accounted for 63% of children on the child protection register because of sexual abuse – a higher proportion than in England.

Appendix B. Data definitions

B1. Local authority safeguarding data

England

The safeguarding data used in Chapter 3 is released by the Department for Education's annual children in need census (Department for Education, 2024a), and relates to information provided by local authorities for the 12-month period from April 2023 to March 2024. The data published in the children in need census is subject to detailed guidance, validation and quality assurance checks, and is designated as National Statistics by the UK Statistics Authority (Department for Education, 2024c).

Needs assessments recording factors of child sexual abuse or child sexual exploitation

During the needs assessment (Section 17 statutory assessment) of any child referred to children's services, 'factors' are identified relating to the child's needs. Section 3.1 of our report draws on cases where either 'child sexual abuse' or 'child sexual exploitation' is among those factors (Department for Education, 2024a: Table C3).

The following definitions and limitations apply to this data:

- ▶ The factors recorded are those identified during a needs assessment and considered relevant by social workers. Most children have more than one factor recorded for each episode of need (Department for Education, 2024a: Table C3). Sexual abuse or sexual exploitation are recorded as factors if social workers have concerns that services may be required, or that the child may be at risk of harm from child sexual abuse or sexual exploitation (Department for Education, 2015). Within a single episode of need, each factor recorded is counted once.
- ▶ To be recorded in the data, a factor must be an issue of concern at the time of the assessment. For example, if a child was sexually abused in earlier childhood but is considered to be safe at the time of the assessment, and not to require any services in relation to sexual abuse, sexual abuse is not recorded as a factor (Department for Education, 2021).
- ▶ The data has been collected since 2014 and has been published at local authority level since 2015. There can be differences in local authorities' recording practices, so the data should be treated with a degree of caution. Local authorities have been encouraged to report all relevant factors identified during assessments; this may account for some increases in recent years, and should be taken into consideration when assessing time series of assessment factor data (Department for Education, 2024c).
- ▶ No information is published about actions taken after the assessment.

To be recorded in the official data on child needs assessments, a factor must be an issue of concern at the time of the assessment.

Child protection plans: sexual abuse

A child becomes the subject of a child protection plan if they are assessed as being at risk of harm at an initial child protection conference. The data used in section 3.2 relates to the number of child protection plans started in the year 2023/24 where sexual abuse was the primary recorded category (Department for Education, 2024a: Table D2). Sexual abuse is one of the four primary categories of child protection plans; the others are physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect, with a fifth category to denote that the child is at risk of multiple forms of abuse/neglect.

The following definitions and limitations apply to this data:

- ▶ If a child is made the subject of more than one child protection plan during the year, each new plan is counted in the data (Department for Education, 2024c).
- ▶ To be included in the data, a child protection plan must have been started during the data collection period: a child placed on a child protection plan prior to the start of the year is excluded, even if they remain on the plan throughout that year (Department for Education, 2024c).
- ▶ Where risks of sexual abuse are considered for unborn children, these are included in the data (Department for Education, 2024c).

Wales

The safeguarding data for Wales presented in Appendix A is published by the Welsh Government as part of its Performance and Improvement Framework for Social Services (Welsh Government, 2021b), and covers the 12-month period from April 2022 to March 2023. (The data for the year 2023/24 is due to be published in March 2025 and so was unavailable for this report.) Local authorities are given detailed guidance on how to submit this information, with the aim of ensuring consistency between local authorities (Welsh Government, 2024b).

Children referred to local authorities: sexual exploitation

Data is collected on the number of children reported to local authorities during the year where child sexual exploitation was considered to be a factor.

The following definitions and limitations apply to this data:

- ▶ It counts the total number of children who had strategy meetings that concluded during the year, where there was a reasonable cause to suspect that the child was at risk of child sexual exploitation (Welsh Government, 2024b).
- ▶ These include strategy meetings for children who had an active care and support plan at the time the meeting was held (open cases), as well as those who did not have an active care and support plan (new cases) (Welsh Government, 2024b).
- ▶ Any strategy meetings that were not concluded in the collection year, regardless of whether they were started in that year, are excluded (Welsh Government, 2024b).

Child protection register: sexual abuse

The child protection register lists all children in a local authority area who are suffering or likely to suffer significant harm and are currently the subject of a care and support protection plan. Appendix A presents data on the number of children on the child protection register during 2022/23, if they were registered under the categories of sexual abuse; physical and sexual abuse (multiple); neglect and sexual abuse (multiple), or neglect, physical and sexual abuse (multiple) (Welsh Government, 2024b).

The following definitions and limitations apply to this data:

- ▶ Where a child was registered more than once in the year, each registration is included in the data (Welsh Government, 2024b).
- ▶ Decisions to register unborn children at birth are included in the data, even if they remained unborn at the end of the collection period (Welsh Government, 2024b).
- ▶ Data is available on children who were added to the child protection register during the year, and those who had been placed on the register previously and remained on it during the year (Welsh Government, 2024b).

B2. Police-recorded crime

Police data is published by the Home Office according to offence classifications in the Home Office Crime Recording Rules (Home Office, 2024b), 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, 2024b).³³
- ▶ 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).³⁴

33. 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.

34. 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' (Office for National Statistics, 2020b).

- ▶ 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 (Office for National Statistics, 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 (Office for National Statistics, 2020b: Table 33).³⁵
- ▶ 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 3,651 defendants who were proceeded against on charges of indecent image offences in 2023, 97% (3,549) were prosecuted in relation to images of children (Ministry of Justice, 2024a). It is possible, however, that prosecutions are more likely for image offences involving children than those involving adults.
- ▶ Owing to the nature of the data, a recorded crime can subsequently be deleted if it is transferred to another police force area or cancelled. The annual figures presented in section 4.1 of this report may therefore change in subsequent data releases, although the scale of such changes is usually minor.

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, Office for Statistics Regulation, 2024). 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 (HMICFR) 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. However, in its most recent assessment of crime recording, the Office for Statistics Regulation (2024) cautioned that, due to HMICFR inspections, force crime registrars have become reluctant to authorise the cancellation of certain crimes, and that this can lead to over-recording of crime; this issue was also raised regarding rape offences specifically by Operation Soteria (Stanko, 2022; Lovett et al, 2024).



Police-recorded crime data does not currently meet the required standard to be designated as National Statistics.



35. The figures were based on 33 police forces and were designated as experimental (Office for National Statistics, 2020b).

Outcomes of police-recorded crime

The definitions used in the outcomes framework are outlined in section 4.1.4, drawing on Home Office guidance (Home Office, 2024b). The rates of outcomes for an individual offence are calculated as a proportion of the total number of outcomes for that offence that were concluded (“outcomes for investigations closed in the quarter”) in the four quarters from April to March. The Home Office quality-assures this data; if any anomalies or errors are identified, a report is returned to the relevant force for validation or correction (Home Office, 2025).

Recent research has raised concerns about the accuracy with which outcomes of investigations into sexual offences against adults are recorded by different police forces in England and Wales. This research highlighted that a significant proportion of offences where the police takes no further action are recorded under outcomes that do not accurately reflect the actual reasons for closing the investigation (Lovett et al, 2024). It is likely that similar issues are present in the recorded outcomes of investigations relating to sexual offences against children.

B3. Crown Prosecution Service

The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) releases its own quarterly data on the number of proceedings and prosecution outcomes. This data is not designated as official statistics, and therefore our report draws on official data published by the Ministry of Justice.

Data from the CPS is limited to volume and timescales relating to legal decisions on whether to charge an offence, take no further action or recommend an out-of-court disposal. The following definitions and limitations apply to this data:

- ▶ Child sexual abuse offences are identified through a ‘monitoring flag’ within the CPS case management system. This data is dependent on staff identifying and correctly applying the relevant flag (Crown Prosecution Service, 2024a), and this data is therefore likely to under-estimate the true number of child sexual abuse cases dealt with by the CPS.
- ▶ The figures are subject to change as more information comes to light (Crown Prosecution Service, 2024a).



Recent research has raised concerns about the accuracy with which the police record outcomes of investigations into sexual offences.



B4. Ministry of Justice

Court data

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).

Offender management data

The Ministry of Justice also collates data on offender management. Across England and Wales, prison and probation offender management statistics are based on two types of data: one that represents a caseload ‘snapshot’ at a specific point in time (e.g. 30 June prison population caseload), and a second, that measures all activity within a time period (e.g. proven reoffending data).

Prison

Annual statistics relating to the prison population are reported as a snapshot taken on 30 June, to avoid any seasonality issues that affect the prison population around Christmas or Easter. Information about people in prison is held at individual prison establishments on the prison IT system (Prison-NOMIS). For the Ministry of Justice publications, this data is directly extracted from Prison-NOMIS (Ministry of Justice, 2024).

The following definitions and limitations apply to this data:

- ▶ The prison population includes people not yet convicted e.g. they are on remand (awaiting trial/verdict and or sentence) (Ministry of Justice, 2024).
- ▶ When identifying people in prison for sexual offences against children, the offence classification does not clearly distinguish offences against adults from those against children. For example, offences of exposure and voyeurism, sexual assault of a male or female over 13, and sexual activity with or rape of a male or female aged 16 or over, include child victims. The figures presented in this report are therefore underestimates.
- ▶ For the purpose of offence classification and counting, the most serious crime takes precedence where the person is convicted of multiple offences (Home Office, 2024b).

Probation

The case management system (Delius), used by the seven former National Probation Service divisions, transitioned in June 2021 to a single national case management system (nDelius) covering the 12 new probation service regions. Individual data on the number of people supervised by the Probation Service is submitted to the Ministry of Justice by each region (Ministry of Justice, 2024l).

The following definitions and limitations apply to this data:

- ▶ The number of people supervised on the probation caseload is submitted at the end of each quarter as a snapshot figure at the end of the relevant month. Figures reported in our report represent a snapshot figure as of 31 March each year.
- ▶ While individual level data includes offence type, the published probation data (including proven reoffending data) does not disaggregate sexual offences against children and adults.
- ▶ Statistics on proven reoffending are designated as Accredited Official Statistics, and data to inform the calculations are drawn from various administrative data systems, including from prisons, the Police National Computer, the probation service and courts. A proven reoffence refers to an offence committed in a one-year follow-up period that resulted in a court conviction or caution in this time period, or a further six-month waiting period (to allow time for cases to progress through the courts). Offences that constitute a breach of a court order are not counted as these are not considered to be new offences (Ministry of Justice, 2024i).
- ▶ Data on proven reoffending is published with a time lag of 24 months. This time lag allows for a one-year follow-up period and six months to process through the courts, plus a further six months for data validation, quality assurance and publication (Ministry of Justice, 2024i). For example, one-year reoffending results for the October to December 2022 quarterly cohort was published in October 2024.
- ▶ Determining true sexual reoffending is difficult. Official records of sexual reoffending underestimate actual reoffending levels. The Ministry of Justice's data on proven reoffending only includes people convicted at court or receiving some other form of criminal justice sanction within a relatively short follow-up period.

Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements

Data on people subject to sexual offender notification requirements (Ministry of Justice, 2024d) is published as part of the annual MAPPAs report, and relates to a 12-month period from April to March each year. This data is designated as National Statistics by the UK Statistics Authority (Ministry of Justice, 2024m).

The following definitions and limitations apply to this data:

- ▶ The data is drawn from MAPPAs areas' local administrative IT systems (Ministry of Justice, 2024m). This data cannot be disaggregated by detailed offence type, i.e. sexual offences against a child or against an adult.
- ▶ The data is subject to change following publication, as areas may correct their data.
- ▶ Data on Serious Further Offences only covers people supervised by the probation service – a very small subset of the MAPPAs population. Data on people who reoffend while subject to MAPPAs and managed by the police is not published.
- ▶ The MAPPAs annual report's published data on people managed through MAPPAs is not broken down by lead agency (i.e. police, the probation service or the prison service).

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

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