

Centre of
expertise
on child
sexual abuse

The scale and nature of child sexual abuse: Review of evidence

Incorporating trends in official data from 2024/25

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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:

www.csacentre.org.uk

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Executive summary

This report brings together the latest evidence on the scale and nature of child sexual abuse in England and Wales. It presents a detailed analysis of data from the most recent childhood abuse module of the Crime Survey for England and Wales (conducted in the year ending 2024), our annual analysis of official data for 2024/25, and an overview of recent international developments in measuring the prevalence of child sexual abuse victimisation and perpetration.

In light of the latest research, we now estimate that:

- ▶ at least 20% of girls and 10% of boys in England and Wales – around one in six children overall – are sexually abused during childhood
- ▶ every year, at least 500,000 children are the victims of ‘in-person’ contact child sexual abuse in England and Wales – with many more experiencing sexual abuse that is non-contact and/or takes place solely online
- ▶ among children in England and Wales who are abused or neglected in childhood, one in three experience sexual abuse (mostly alongside other forms of abuse or neglect).

The scale of child sexual abuse

The childhood abuse module within the Crime Survey for England and Wales provides the most up-to-date data on the scale and nature of child sexual abuse. Compared with previous editions, the 2024 module presented a more comprehensive measure of child sexual abuse, by including for the first time experiences of child sexual abuse up to the age of 18 rather than 16; improving questions on child sexual abuse in online contexts, and capturing data on the scale of sexual abuse committed by other children.

Overall, it is estimated that 9.1% of the adult population of England and Wales – 4.3 million people – had been sexually abused in childhood. This could have been ‘contact’ abuse – being penetrated or touched in a sexual way, or being made to penetrate or touch oneself – and/or ‘non-contact’ abuse such as indecent exposure or being made to look at sexual images. The proportion of women reporting experiences of child sexual abuse in the survey (13.9%) was more than three times higher than the proportion of men doing so (4.1%). Note, however, that the survey respondents were adults of all ages, so the childhood abuse they reported had occurred over many decades.

The youngest respondents – those aged 18–24, who had been children most recently – were the most likely to say they had been sexually abused in childhood: 13.1% overall did so, or 21.7% of women and 4.5% of men. Nearly one in five (18.1%) female respondents aged 18–24 said they had experienced non-contact sexual abuse, including in online contexts, during childhood.

The most recent international review of the scale of child sexual abuse estimated that nearly one in four adult women and one in six adult men in Northern Europe (the British Isles, the Nordic countries and the Baltic states) have been sexually abused as children. These figures are higher than found in previous meta-analyses.

The youngest respondents to the Crime Survey for England and Wales were the most likely to say they had been sexually abused in childhood

Drawing on data from the youngest respondents to the Crime Survey for England and Wales, and on the Northern Europe findings from the latest global systematic review, we estimate that around **20% of girls and 10% of boys in England and Wales are sexually abused during childhood.**

Understanding *annual* prevalence is important for policymakers and decision-makers addressing child sexual abuse. Based on surveys with children (or the parents of younger children), the same global systematic review estimated that 3.4% of boys and 5.2% of girls overall in Northern Europe had experienced 'in-person' contact sexual abuse in the past year, with older children more likely than younger ones to have been recently abused. Applying these percentages to the latest child population figures by age, we estimate that, **every year, at least 500,000 children in England and Wales experience in-person contact child sexual abuse.** This figure considerably understates the *overall* scale of child sexual abuse, because it omits abuse in online contexts and in-person non-contact abuse.

International research shows that estimates of child sexual abuse prevalence increase substantially if they include abuse in online contexts: in one study, the inclusion of questions about online abuse increased overall prevalence rates by more than half. This demonstrates the importance of capturing the full range of abusive experiences in surveys.

The scale of child sexual abuse perpetration

Research determining the true prevalence of child sexual abuse perpetration remains underdeveloped and methodologically challenging. Because official records only capture abuse that comes to the attention of agencies and meets legal thresholds, they reflect patterns of criminal justice activity rather than the true scale of offending. The available evidence suggests that between 1% and 2% of adult males are convicted of a sexual offence (not necessarily against children) at some point in their lives, but this provides no insight into the number of people who sexually abuse children and remain undetected.

Recent evidence from self-report surveys suggests that child sexual abuse perpetration is more common than official records suggest. An international meta-analysis of studies within the general population found that 4.5% of adults reported having committed contact sexual abuse against children of any age, and 6.5% said they had committed non-contact child sexual abuse. The authors of the meta-analysis estimated that 1.5% of adults have engaged in contact sexual offending against children aged under 13; across England and Wales, this would equate to approximately 735,000 adults.

The evidence also shows the importance of distinguishing between sexual interest in children and sexually abusive behaviour. Sexual interest and sexual offending are not synonymous, and perpetrator populations are diverse. Non-contact abuse appears to be more common than contact abuse, while sexual abuse by women and children, group-based offending and online behaviours remain under-researched.



A recent international meta-analysis estimated that 1.5% of adults have engaged in contact sexual offending against under-13s



Who is affected by child sexual abuse?

Overall, 29% of respondents to the 2024 Crime Survey for England and Wales – equivalent to 13.6 million adults across England and Wales – said they had experienced some form of childhood abuse or neglect. And 9% said they had experienced child *sexual* abuse.

Their responses showed that child sexual abuse often occurs in the context of other forms of abuse or neglect: just 31% of respondents who had been sexually abused in childhood said this was the *only* form of abuse or neglect they had experienced. Three-fifths (60%) said they had also been emotionally abused – and nearly a quarter (23%) had experienced emotional abuse, physical abuse *and* parental neglect in childhood, in addition to sexual abuse.

Respondents who had experienced other adverse childhood experiences were disproportionately likely to say that they had also been sexually abused as children, although the survey did not explore whether the abuse had occurred before, after or alongside those experiences. Two-fifths (40%) of respondents who had lived in a care or foster home said they had been sexually abused at some point in their childhood, as did 34% of those who had experienced neglect, 33% of those who had lived with someone with alcohol or drug issues, and 33% of those who had had a long-term mental health condition or disability during childhood.

One in six (17%) disabled respondents reported experiencing child sexual abuse, compared with one in 13 (8%) non-disabled respondents. The difference was greatest in relation to reported rape or penetrative abuse.

There were also marked differences by sexual orientation and gender identity. One-third of respondents (34%) who were bisexual at the time of the survey said they had been sexually abused in childhood, compared to 16% and 8% respectively of those who were gay/lesbian or heterosexual. And a quarter (26%) of respondents who said their gender identity was different from their sex registered at birth had been victims of child sexual abuse.

Who sexually abuses children, and where does the abuse happen?

In the 2024 Crime Survey for England and Wales, the vast majority (91%) of respondents who had been sexually abused in childhood said they had been abused solely by males; abuse solely by females was reported by 5%, and 4% said both males and females had sexually abused them. Men were more likely than women to report having been abused solely by females: among those who had been raped or experienced penetrative abuse in boyhood, a quarter said that this had involved females only.

For the first time, the Crime Survey for England and Wales published information about whether the people who had sexually abused respondents were adults or other children. Two-fifths (40%) of respondents who had been sexually abused in childhood said this had involved other children under the age of 18, and 70% said it had involved adults. Men were more likely than women to report that other children had been involved; this was the case for 65% of male respondents who had been raped or experienced penetrative abuse.

Where respondents specified their relationship (if any) to the people who had sexually abused them in childhood, 14% identified a friend, 11% a friend of the family, 8% another relative, and another 8% a neighbour. Then-current and previous boyfriends/girlfriends/partners were identified by 8% and 7% of these respondents respectively, while a third (33%) said a stranger had been involved, mainly in relation to non-contact abuse. A higher proportion of male respondents (12%) than female respondents (4%) said they had been sexually abused by someone in a position of trust, while abuse by a current or previous partner was more commonly described by female respondents (9% and 8% respectively) than by male respondents (2% and 2%).

Child sexual abuse in the respondent's own home or someone else's was common, particularly in relation to rape or penetrative abuse :39% and 55% respectively of respondents who had experienced this category of abuse said it had happened in these locations. Among respondents who had experienced non-contact abuse, 34% said it had happened in a public place and 14% said it had been online.

Telling someone about the abuse

Most respondents to the 2024 Crime Survey for England and Wales who had been sexually abused in childhood – 71% of men and 53% of women – said they had not told anyone about it at the time. If they had told someone, this had usually been a person they had known personally: 27% of women and 16% of men had told a family member or relative, while 19% and 12% respectively had told a friend. Only 9% of female respondents and 4% of male respondents had told the police at the time, and even fewer had told other people in positions of authority.

The most common reason for not telling anyone had been embarrassment, humiliation or shame, reported by 50% of female respondents and 48% of male respondents who had told no one. Other common reasons had included fear of not being believed, reported by 29% of women and 23% of men; self-blame, reported by 29% and 17% respectively; and not knowing the abuse was wrong, reported by 19% and 24% respectively.

Self-blame had been particularly common among those who had told no one after experienced rape or penetrative abuse, with 48% of female respondents and 31% of male respondents saying they had thought the abuse was their fault.

Only 6% of respondents said someone in an official position had become aware of the abuse without the respondent telling them. This indicates that the professional response to sexual abuse depended overwhelmingly on the victim's verbal disclosure, despite clear evidence that most children do not tell anyone about sexual abuse at the time.

Identification and response by local authority children's services

Data on local authority children's services captures only a small proportion of children affected by sexual abuse. Official data relating to Wales's local authorities in 2024/25 had not been released at the time of this report's publication – but in England, a total of 43,890 needs assessments recorded concerns of sexual abuse or sexual exploitation (treated as separate categories in these assessments) during the year. This was the lowest number in a decade. Child sexual abuse was recorded as a concern in 31,490 assessments (2% more than in the previous year), but only 12,400 recorded child sexual exploitation concerns (11% fewer). This continued a downward trend in the number of assessments identifying sexual exploitation every year since 2017/18.

Among assessments recording child sexual abuse concerns in 2024/25, two-fifths related to abuse by another child and three-fifths to abuse by an adult. Where an assessment recorded 'child on child' sexual abuse as a concern, the official data does not show which child the assessment relates to; some incidents of children's harmful sexual behaviour may be recorded in multiple assessments.

Only 2,190 children in England were made the subject of a child protection plan under the initial category of sexual abuse in 2024/25. This was a slight increase (of just 30 plans) on the previous year, but still the second-lowest number recorded in the 32 years for which the data has been published. Sexual abuse accounted for 3.5% of all new child protection plans, the joint lowest proportion on record.



In England during 2024/25, 43,890 needs assessments recorded concerns of sexual abuse or exploitation – the lowest number in a decade



The number of children made the subject of a child protection plan under the category of sexual abuse equated to only 5% of the 43,890 needs assessments recording sexual abuse or sexual exploitation concerns. Child protection plans under the categories of physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect equated to 6%, 24% and 34% of needs assessments respectively.

As in previous years, there was wide variation across England in the number of assessments identifying child sexual abuse or exploitation concerns relative to the local child population. Yorkshire and the Humber had higher identification rates than London, the East of England, the South West and the South East, but there is no evidence to suggest that child sexual abuse is any less prevalent in those areas. Fifteen local authorities identified sexual abuse concerns in fewer than one needs assessment per 1,000 children living in the area.

In separate research into needs assessments conducted during the year, social workers said they felt sexual abuse can get lost in the context of multiple other issues around the child or the family, and some described the recording of child sexual abuse as being ‘disclosure-led’ – suggesting that social workers lacked confidence to record child sexual abuse in the context of partial information or behavioural clues, despite strong survey evidence that verbal disclosure is unlikely.

Child sexual abuse offences recorded by the police

In England and Wales during 2024/25, the police recorded 103,547 identifiable child sexual abuse offences: 2% more than in 2023/24. Child sexual abuse image offences were the largest category, rising by 6% on the previous year to 42,017 offences.

Looking at police-recorded sexual offences overall, the largest increases were seen in exposure and voyeurism offences (against adults or children), which rose by 29%. Both offence categories include new offence types that were introduced in the Online Safety Act 2023.

As with the data from local authority children’s services, there was wide regional variation in the number of child sexual abuse offences recorded relative to the local child population: police forces in the North East had relatively higher recording rates than those in London, Hertfordshire and the South East.

Among *all* sexual offences where the victim’s age was recorded in police data systems, 40% of female victims and 58% of male victims were aged under 18 at the time of the offence. Since only 21% of the population in England and Wales is aged under 18, this suggests that children are disproportionately likely to be the victims of sexual offences recorded by the police.

Across the year, 98,726 police investigations into child sexual abuse offences were concluded. Of these, 14% resulted in a charge or summons, 1% in a caution or community resolution, and 3% in diversionary or other intervention activity. Another 13% were ended because further investigation was not considered to be in the public interest, and 58% were closed because of evidential difficulties. The number resulting in a charge or summons reached its highest recorded level, at 14,042; while there was a 10% fall in those closing because of evidential difficulties.



Among all sexual offences where the police recorded the victim’s age, 58% of male victims and 40% of female victims were aged under 18



As in previous years, the proportion of investigations ending in a charge varied by offence type: two-fifths of sexual exploitation offences and around one-third of grooming offences resulted in a charge or summons, with lower proportions for rape, sexual assault and sexual activity offences.

Investigation timescales remained long. Across sexual offences against both adults and children (but excluding image offences), the median length of a police investigation was 65 days – and 103 days for rape offences. Sexual offence investigations resulting in a charge or summons took a median of 275 days (and 434 days for rape offences) to reach that point.

Of the defendants convicted of child sexual abuse offences, 41% received immediate custody, 38% a suspended sentence, and 21% a community sentence; 91% of under-18s were given community sentences. Custodial sentences averaged 64.4 months, with longer terms for contact offences such as rape.

The average prosecution time for child sexual abuse offences (other than image offences) in the Crown Court continued its rise since the COVID-19 court closures, from 252 days in 2020/21 to 375 days in 2024/25; average times for image offence fell slightly from the 2023/24 level to 182 days, seven more than in 2020/21.

Court proceedings

The number of defendants proceeded against for offences related to child sexual abuse increased by 17% in 2024 to 10,791 – a 20-year high – while the number being convicted rose by 13% to 8,388. Child sexual abuse image offences accounted for two-fifths (42%) of prosecutions for child sexual abuse offences, and almost half (46%) of convictions, while grooming offence prosecutions accounted for more than double the proportion than they had seven years earlier.

In keeping with annual trends, almost all (99%) defendants in 2024 for child sexual abuse offences were male; defendants of both sexes were mostly prosecuted for image offences and sexual activity offences. This pattern was reflected in convictions. Defendants in their 20s and 30s make up the largest share of child sexual abuse prosecutions, while under 18s account for a small and declining proportion. Among the nearly-three-quarters of defendants whose ethnicity was recorded, 90% were White, with substantially lower proportions from other ethnic groups; this may reflect under identification or under-recording of abuse within minority ethnic communities.



The number of defendants proceeded against for offences related to child sexual abuse rose by 17% in 2024 to a 20-year high



Criminal justice pathways following a conviction

The population of people subject to Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) under Category 1 – individuals convicted of sexual offences (against adults or children) and subject to notification requirements – rose for the 10th consecutive year to 73,049 as of 31 March 2025, 48% more than a decade earlier. On the same date, 73% of MAPPA Category 1 individuals were under police supervision, 20% were in prison, and 7% were managed by the probation service.

During 2024/25, 7,221 Sexual Offender Prevention Orders and Sexual Harm Prevention Orders were imposed: up 19% on the 2023/24 figure, and 86% more than in 2015/16. The number of Notification Orders – imposed on people convicted of sexual offences abroad – saw a 6% increase but remained below 2022/23 levels.

The number of people imprisoned for child sexual abuse offences as of June 2024 was 32% higher than a decade earlier, while the total prison population had remained static. At least one in every eight people serving immediate custodial sentences was in prison for a sexual offence against children: of these, 41% had been convicted of rape and 46% of sexual assault or sexual activity, with only 6% serving sentences for image offences.

During the year, 1,089 people in prison started a sexual offending behaviour programme; this was slightly fewer than in the previous year and still below pre-pandemic levels, but it represented 20% of all starts on general offending programmes. Programme completions remained stable at 1,098, around 22% of all completions, with Horizon remaining the most commonly completed programme.

As of March 2025, the number of people with convictions for sexual offences (against adults or children) who were managed by the probation service was 14% higher than in a year earlier. Among adults convicted of sexual offences who had been released from prison or given a non-custodial sentence in late 2023, 18% had been convicted of another offence within 18 months – but only 5% of these reoffences were sexual. However, this official recidivism rate is likely to underestimate the true level of reoffending.

Conclusion

In the 2021 edition of this review we estimated, on the basis of the available evidence at the time, that around one in ten children in England and Wales – 15% of girls and 5% of boys – are sexually abused before the age of 16. In light of the latest evidence, we now estimate that 20% of girls and 10% of boys in England and Wales are sexually abused during childhood, up to the age of 18.

The estimates are higher because the measurement improved; child sexual abuse in online contexts has become visible in adult self-report surveys; and there is likely to be more awareness of child sexual abuse, and less stigma around it, among young people.

We call for the identification of and response to child sexual abuse to be given greater priority, in order to reduce the gap between the estimated prevalence of child sexual abuse and the number of victims identified by statutory agencies. This requires the workforce to have more knowledge, skills and confidence in identifying and responding to child sexual abuse, so that they can recognise and act on emotional, behavioural and physical indicators that a child may be sexually abused.

A dedicated survey of older children and young adults is also needed to understand better the *current* scale and nature of child sexual abuse – particularly in light of the higher prevalence of child sexual abuse reported by the younger respondents to the 2024 Crime Survey for England and Wales. We call for Government funding for the Office for National Statistics to undertake the survey that it has developed.



In June 2024, the number of people serving prison sentences for child sexual abuse offences was 32% higher than a decade earlier



1. Introduction

A key aim of the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA Centre) is to increase understanding and awareness of the scale and nature of child sexual abuse in England and Wales. This report brings together the latest evidence on this topic from surveys and statutory agency records.

The first edition of the report, published as a scoping exercise in 2017, identified significant gaps in knowledge and understanding (Kelly and Karsna, 2017). Since then, the CSA Centre has produced annual updates of the trends in official agency data, as well as an updated review of wider evidence (Karsna and Kelly, 2021). It has also conducted or commissioned a range of research to fill some of the knowledge gaps identified in the original scoping review (Radford, 2018; Christie and Karsna, 2019; Roberts, 2020; Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse in collaboration with the Centre for Abuse and Trauma Studies, 2020; Karsna, 2023; Dhaliwal, 2024). And it has developed a Data Insight Hub, providing access to agency data and estimates of prevalence of child sexual abuse at local level (see box below).

This report presents a new update on the evidence base relating to the scale and nature of child sexual abuse. It includes a detailed analysis of data from the most recent childhood abuse module of the Crime Survey for England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2025a), our annual analysis of official data, and an overview of recent global developments in measuring the prevalence of child sexual abuse victimisation and perpetration.

The report is structured as follows:

- ▶ Chapter 2 outlines the key findings on the scale and nature of child sexual abuse from the childhood abuse module within the 2024 Crime Survey for England and Wales.
- ▶ Chapter 3 explores what is known about the prevalence of child sexual abuse from international reviews and research exploring the experiences of people who have been sexually abused in childhood.
- ▶ Chapter 4 looks at international research into the prevalence of child sexual abuse perpetration, aimed principally at estimating the proportion of adult males who have sexually abused and/or have a sexual interest in children.
- ▶ Chapter 5 brings together official statistics on child protection published by the Department for Education in England, including the Children in Need census for England. (Data for Wales was not available at the time of this review's publication.)
- ▶ Chapter 6 focuses on official data relating to the criminal justice system – police-recorded crime and outcome data released by the Home Office, and Criminal Justice System Statistics published by the Ministry of Justice and the Crown Prosecution Service.
- ▶ Chapter 7 draws conclusions from the analysis.

Since 2017, the CSA Centre has worked to address gaps in understanding around the scale and nature of child sexual abuse

Data Insights Hub

The official data presented at national level in Chapters 5 and 6 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. Crime Survey for England and Wales

A version of the ‘experiences of abuse during childhood’ module, which includes questions about child sexual abuse, has been included in the Crime Survey for England and Wales three times (Office for National Statistics, 2016a; 2020a; 2025a). This chapter summarises the findings from the most recent edition, which was conducted in the year ending March 2024.

As with earlier editions, the latest childhood abuse module was completed by a randomly selected representative sample of around 25,000 adults living in England and Wales, who responded to the questions privately on a tablet computer (Office for National Statistics, 2026). This unusually large sample size makes it possible to examine patterns of abuse among smaller population groups (including analysis by disability, sexual orientation and gender identity) that is not possible in smaller-scale surveys.

However, the survey does not provide evidence about the *current* scale or nature of child sexual abuse. The data relates to abuse that happened in childhood to adult respondents of all ages; this means that the abuse described occurred over many decades, so the data cannot be used to track changes in the scale or nature of child sexual abuse over time.

*Note: In this chapter we say that respondents ‘reported’ abuse or other experiences if they said **in the survey** that they had had those experiences during childhood. It does **not** mean that respondents had reported the experiences to statutory agencies or anyone else, either during childhood or subsequently; as section 2.5 indicates, most respondents reporting childhood sexual abuse in the survey said they had not told anyone about it at the time.*

2.1 What did the childhood abuse module ask about?

Sources for this section: Office for National Statistics (2025a; 2025b; 2020a; 2020b; 2020c).

The 2024 edition of the childhood abuse module asked respondents about four forms of child abuse and neglect. In addition to sexual abuse, these were:

- ▶ emotional abuse (such as being called names, humiliated or isolated) by any adult – the survey did not ask about the duration of any abusive behaviour, so the responses covered both persistent emotional maltreatment and isolated incidents
- ▶ physical abuse (such as being slapped, hit, pushed or choked) by any adult (including persistent behaviour or single incidents)
- ▶ neglect by a parent/caregiver, which covered not meeting the child’s specific needs in relation to food, clothing, shelter, supervision, safety and emotional wellbeing.

For each of these forms of abuse, a single follow-up question asked about who committed the abuse.

The 2024 survey’s childhood abuse module was completed by a randomly selected representative sample of around 25,000 adults

The module asked about three categories of sexual abuse, which could have been committed by anyone – adults or children – as a single incident or a pattern of longer-term behaviour:

- ▶ non-contact abuse, with questions about indecent exposure and being made to watch or listen to sexual acts or look at sexual images
- ▶ contact (non-penetrative) abuse, with questions about being touched or made to touch sexually
- ▶ rape or assault by penetration (including attempts), with questions about penetration of the vagina, anus or mouth by a penis, another body part or an object.

More detailed follow-up questions were asked in relation to sexual abuse; These related to the age and sex of the person(s) who abused; the respondent's age when the abuse first happened and when it last took place; and where it happened. A separate section asked respondents who (if anyone) they told about their sexual abuse at the time or later; whether anyone found out about it without them telling; and any reasons they had for not telling about it.

For more information about the module's methodology, including the exact questions asked, see Appendix A.

2.1.1 Changes from previous editions of the childhood abuse module

While the previous editions only covered abusive experiences up to the age 16, the 2024 edition of the module included abuse up to age 18, covering the entirety of childhood for the first time.

The following additions were made to the questions about sexual abuse:

- ▶ Sexual conversations' and being made to 'expose yourself' were included in the list of potential acts of non-contact sexual abuse.
- ▶ Being made to 'touch your own body in a sexual way' was included in the list of potential acts of contact sexual abuse.
- ▶ Being made 'to penetrate someone else' with an object or penis was added to the list of penetrative abuse.

There were substantial revisions in how emotional abuse was asked about in 2024, with the addition of statements to measure the extent of emotional abuse including:

- ▶ 'said things that made you feel bad about yourself'
- ▶ 'called you names'
- ▶ 'humiliated you'
- ▶ 'broke, damaged, or ruined anything to upset or frighten you'
- ▶ 'isolated you'.

Some statements from 2019 were removed: 'told you that you were not loved'; 'told you that they wished you had never been born', 'repeatedly belittled you to the extent that you felt worthless' and 'neglected you emotionally'.

Small changes were made to the questions about physical abuse, with 'poisoned you' added to the list of potential physically abusive acts.

There had been no questions on neglect in the previous editions; a new section of the module in 2024 covered parental neglect.

A section in the previous edition, about witnessing domestic abuse as a child, was removed.

These changes to the module, rather than any change in the prevalence of abuse, are likely to account in large part for any differences between the findings from earlier editions and the 2024 edition in relation to the scale and nature of different forms of child abuse.



In the 2024 survey, being made to 'touch your own body in a sexual way' was included as a form of contact sexual abuse for the first time



2.2 The overall scale of child sexual abuse and its links to other forms of child abuse, adversity and neglect

2.2.1 Scale of child sexual abuse and other forms of abuse and neglect

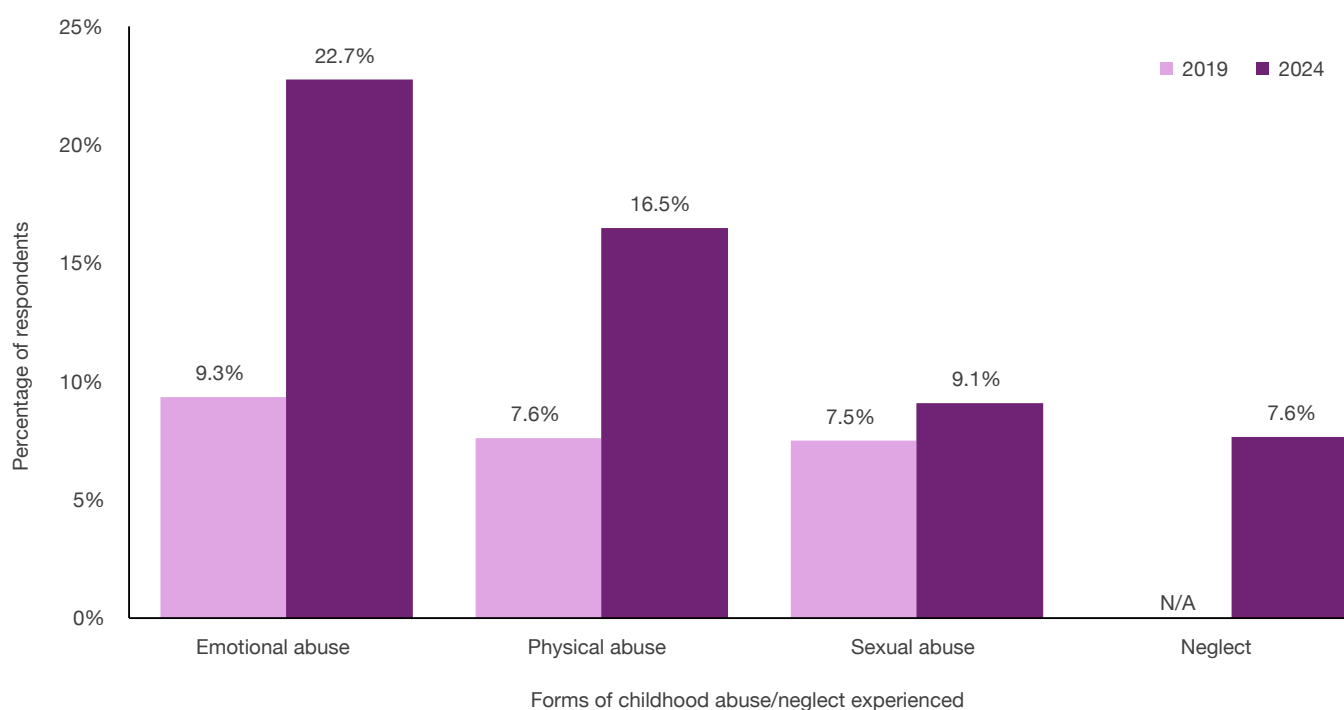
As **Figure 1** shows, the 2024 survey estimated that 9.1% of adults in England and Wales – 4.3 million people – had been sexually abused in childhood (Office for National Statistics, 2025b, Tables 7 and 8). This was 1.6 percentage points higher than in the 2019 edition of the survey.

There were greater increases in the estimated scale of physical and emotional abuse in childhood, compared with 2019 (when neglect had not been included in the survey).

All of these increases are likely to be the result of the changes made to the survey questions, and the inclusion of abuse at ages 16–17 (see section 2.1).¹

Changes to the survey questions, and the inclusion of abuse at ages 16–17, are likely to have caused the apparent rises in prevalence

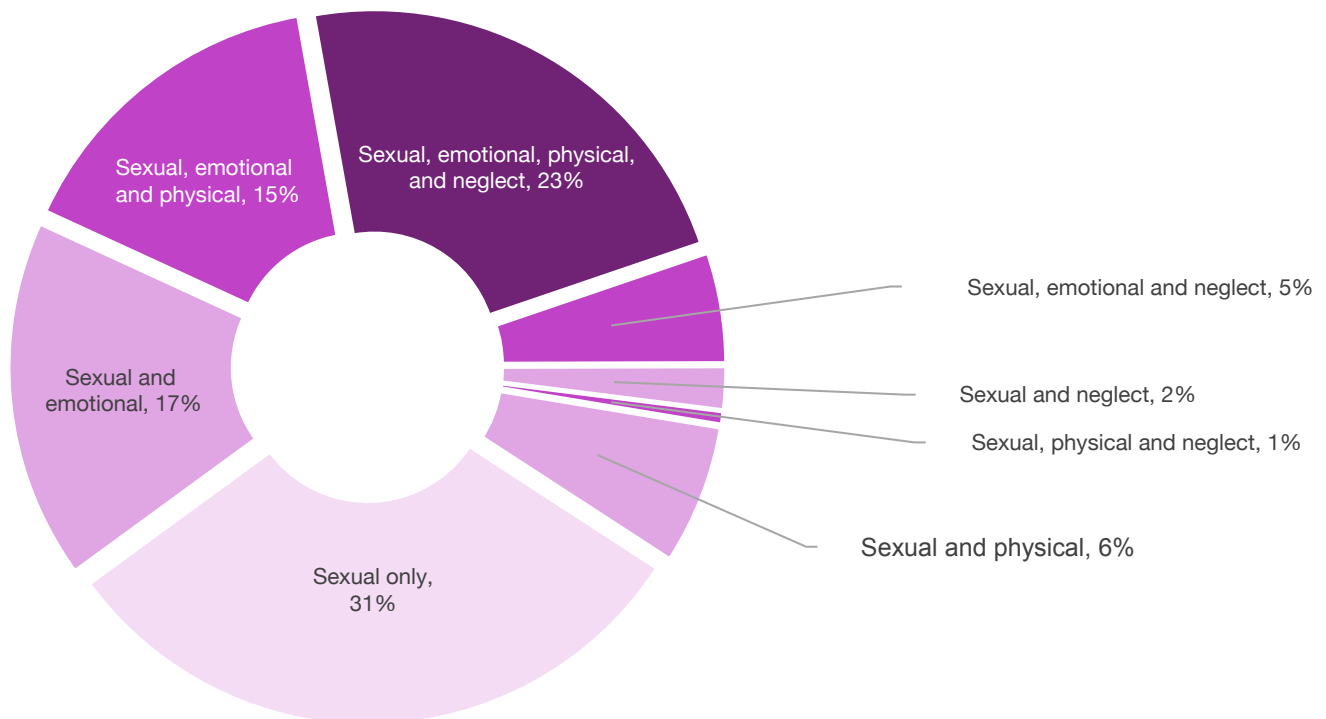
Figure 1. Overall levels of childhood abuse or neglect reported by respondents to the 2019 and 2024 Crime Surveys for England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics (2025b, Table 7); Office for National Statistics (2020b, Table 2). Respondents could say they had been affected by more than one form of abuse. The sample sizes were 24,899 in 2019 and 23,332 in 2024, but the percentages relate only to respondents who said they had or had not experienced each form of abuse/neglect; 'Don't know' and 'Don't wish to answer' responses to the different questions have been excluded.

1. The estimated prevalence of emotional abuse more than doubled, with by changes in the survey questions appearing to change the types of emotionally abusive experiences that were captured, from predominantly parental abuse in 2019 to abuse within a wider range of relationships in 2024. In 2019, 45% of respondents reporting emotional abuse in childhood had said this was by their mother; and 41% had said it was by their father; in 2024, these percentages were 29% and 26% respectively, while 21% of respondents reporting emotional abuse said it was by a friend (up from 11% in 2019) and 16% said it was by a stranger (previously 5%) (Office for National Statistics, 2025b, Table 16; 2020c, Table 11).

Figure 2. Other forms of abuse or neglect experienced in childhood by respondents to the 2024 Crime Survey for England and Wales reporting childhood sexual abuse



Source: Office for National Statistics (2025b, Table 9). The rates presented in the original table have been converted to percentages of respondents who were affected by child sexual abuse – those affected only by other forms of abuse have been excluded. The sample size, of respondents answering this question who had been sexually abused in childhood, was approximately 1,690; ‘Don’t know’ and ‘Don’t wish to answer’ responses to the different questions have been excluded.

Overall, 29% of the survey respondents – equating to 13.6 million adults across England and Wales – said they had been affected by some form(s) of childhood abuse or neglect (Office for National Statistics, 2025b, Tables 7 and 8). And of these respondents, nearly one-third (31%) said this had included child sexual abuse (Office for National Statistics, 2025b, Table 9).

Looking separately at the three categories of child sexual abuse asked about in the survey, penetrative sexual abuse had affected 2.5% of all respondents – equivalent to 1.2 million adults in England and Wales. A little over 6% of respondents – equivalent to around three million adults – had experienced other forms of contact sexual abuse, with a similar number reporting non-contact sexual abuse (Office for National Statistics 2025b, Tables 7 and 8).

Child sexual abuse was frequently found to occur in the context of other forms of child maltreatment: as **Figure 2** shows, fewer than one in three respondents who had been sexually abused in childhood (31%) said this was the *only* form of child abuse or neglect they had experienced, while three-fifths (60%) said they had also been emotionally abused – with nearly a quarter (23%) saying they had been subjected to emotional abuse, physical abuse *and* parental neglect in childhood, in addition to sexual abuse.



Of the respondents who had experienced some form(s) of childhood abuse or neglect, a third said this had included sexual abuse



2.2.2 Child sexual abuse and other adverse childhood experiences

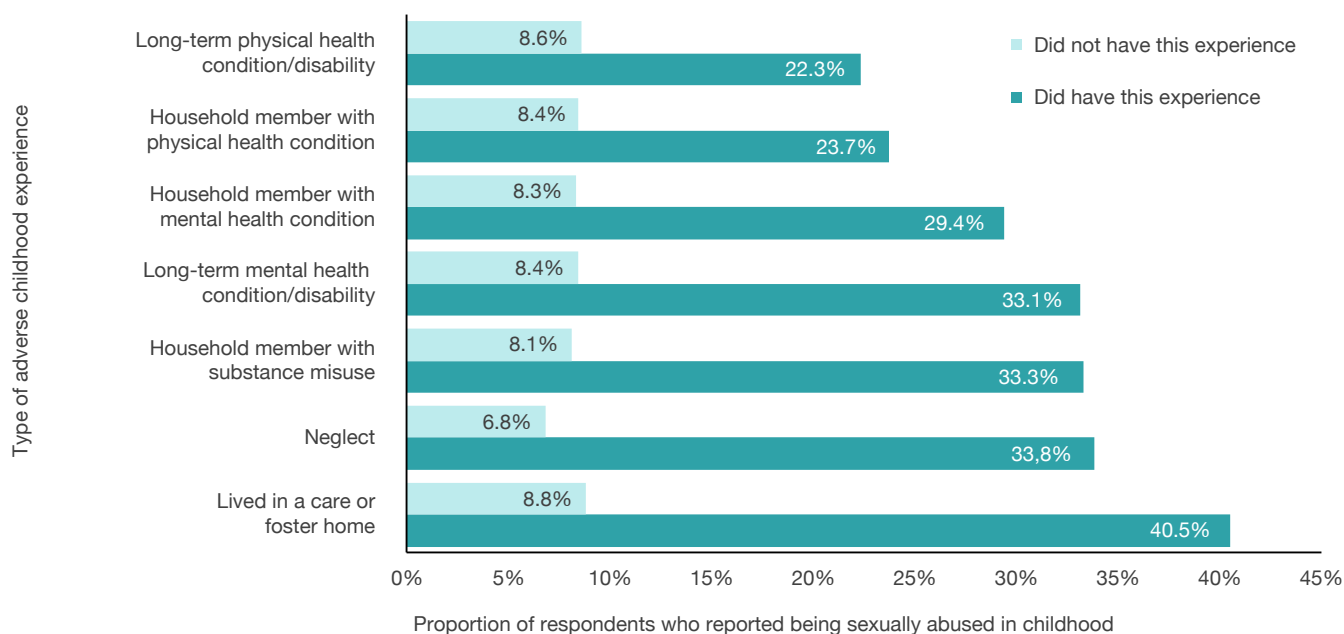
In addition to questions about child abuse and neglect, the survey asked respondents about other adverse childhood experiences. These included being taken into care, experiencing physical neglect, having a physical or a mental health condition or disability during childhood, and living with someone affected by physical or mental health difficulties or problematic use of alcohol or drugs.

The questions asked do not allow analysis of whether the adverse childhood experiences preceded, coincided with or followed sexual abuse. For example, it is likely that many respondents who had been sexually abused were subsequently placed in care, or experienced mental health difficulties because of their abuse – and that others were sexually abused after being placed in care, or while experiencing mental health issues. The analysis below explores associations between adverse childhood experiences and child sexual abuse, but the data cannot show cause and effect between the two.

Figure 3 shows that respondents who said they were sexually abused in childhood were disproportionately likely to report having had any of the above adverse childhood experiences.³ For example, two-fifths of respondents who had lived in a care or foster home as a child said that they had been sexually abused, as did one-third of those who had experienced neglect or had lived with someone who had alcohol or drug issues. Respondents who had been physically disabled or had a mental health disability during childhood also had much higher rates of childhood sexual abuse than respondents overall.

The proportions of respondents who had spent time in care or experienced childhood neglect and had also been sexually abused in childhood was nearly five times as large as the proportions who had experienced child sexual abuse but *not* had those other experiences.

Figure 3. Levels of child sexual abuse reported by respondents to the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2024, by presence or absence of other adverse childhood experiences



Source: Office for National Statistics (2025b, Tables 12 and 14). Sample size: 17,769 for neglect, 22,070 for other adverse childhood experiences; 'Don't know' and 'Don't wish to answer' responses to the different questions have been excluded.

2. When comparing findings between different groups in this chapter, we report only on findings that were statistically significant. Significance was tested using a standard z-test adjusted for survey design; differences between groups were considered statistically significant where the difference was large relative to the uncertainty ($z > 1.96$), indicating it was unlikely to have occurred by chance.

Of the three different categories of child sexual abuse asked about in the survey, the ‘rape and penetrative abuse’ category was most closely associated with other adverse childhood experiences. For example, 24.4% of respondents who had been placed in care as a child had been subjected to rape or penetrative abuse in childhood, compared to 2.3% of those who had not been in care (Office for National Statistics, 2025b, Table 22).

The associations between childhood adversity and other forms of child abuse and neglect were equally strong: 79.2% of respondents who had lived in care or foster homes had experienced at least one form of child abuse or neglect, for instance (Office for National Statistics, 2025b, Table 12).

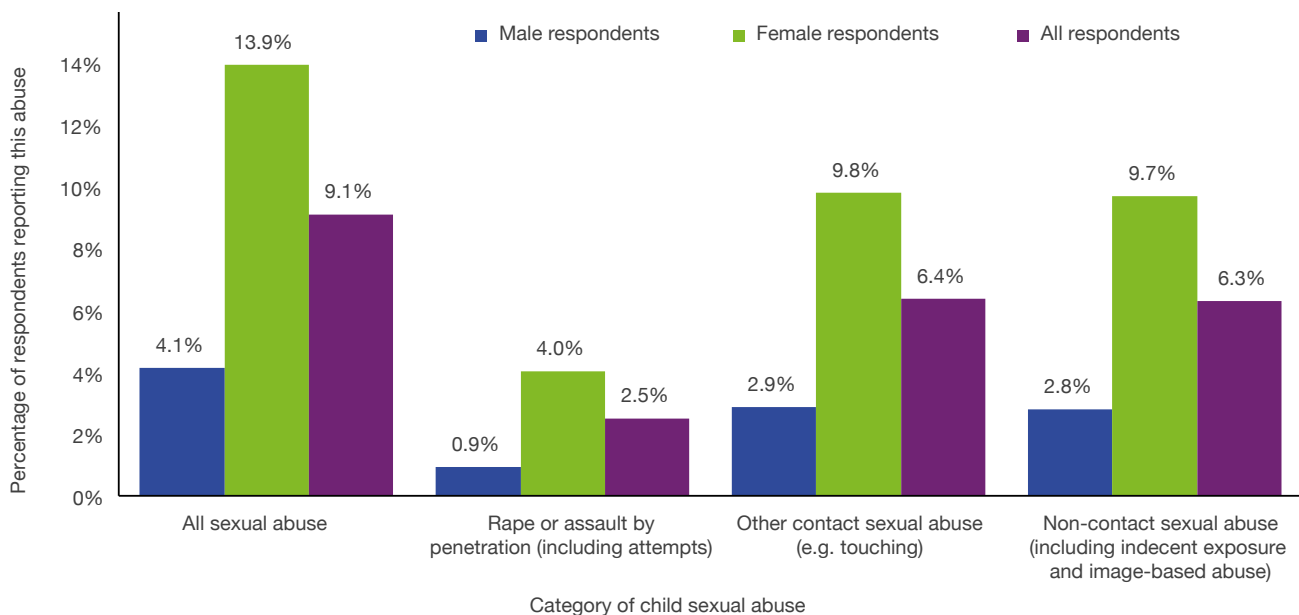
2.3 Characteristics of respondents who had been sexually abused during childhood

The childhood abuse module within the Crime Survey for England and Wales collects data on a large number of respondent characteristics, which – combined with the large sample of around 25,000 respondents – gives a unique opportunity to explore how the prevalence of child sexual abuse correlates with different characteristics. Note that the survey questions capture the respondents’ characteristics at the time of the survey, not in childhood.

2.3.1 Sex

Figure 4 shows that, across all three categories of child sexual abuse, the proportion of female respondents saying in the 2024 survey that they had been sexually abused in childhood was well over three times the proportion of male respondents who did so. The same pattern was seen in the 2019 survey (Office for National Statistics, 2020b, Table 2).

Figure 4. Levels of child sexual abuse reported by respondents to the 2024 Crime Survey for England and Wales, by respondent’s sex and category of abuse



Source: Office for National Statistics (2025b, Table 7). Respondents could have been affected by more than one form of child sexual abuse. The sample size was approximately 23,332 – it varies slightly between forms of sexual abuse because “Don’t know” and “Don’t wish to answer” responses to the different questions have been excluded.

For other forms of child abuse or neglect, the differences in the levels of abuse reported by males and female respondents in 2024 were much smaller (Office for National Statistics 2025b, Table 7).

The 2024 survey estimated that 949,000 men and 3,318,000 women in England and Wales – representing 22% and 78% respectively of the total – had been sexually abused in childhood (Office for National Statistics 2025b, Table 8).

2.3.2 Age

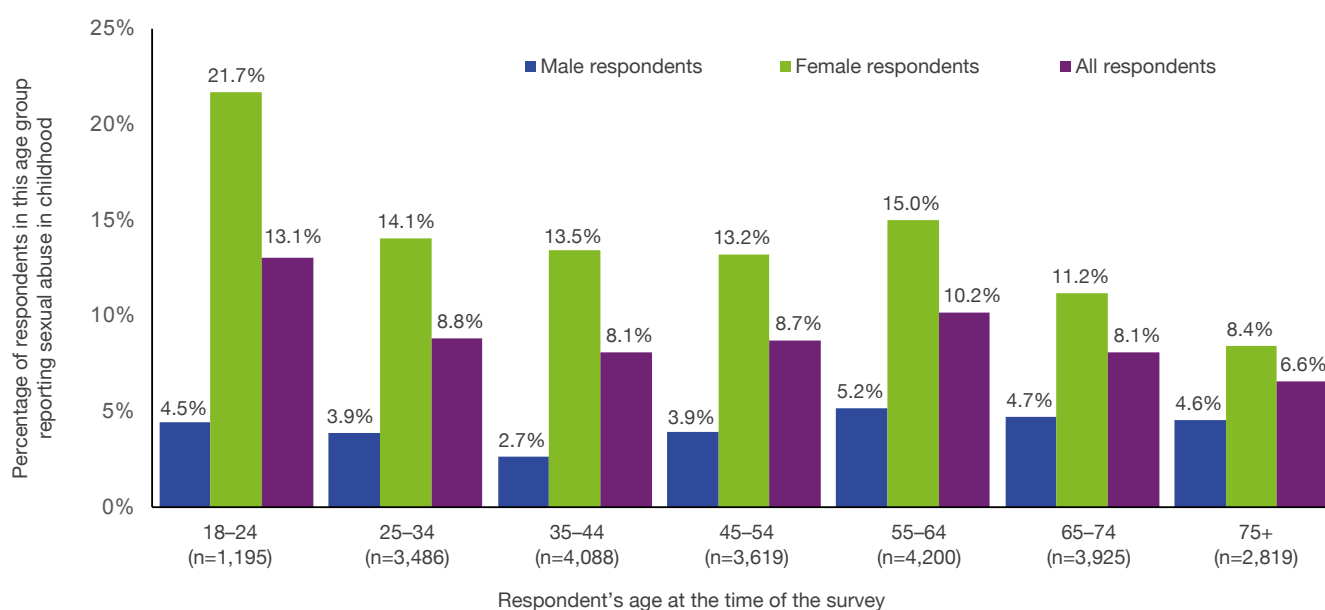
The respondents most likely to report childhood sexual abuse in the survey were the youngest: adults aged 18–24. Figure 5 shows that 13.1% of respondents aged 18–24 said they had been sexually abused during childhood, compared to the overall rate of 9.1% among all respondents. The respondents aged 18–24 who reported sexual abuse in childhood were overwhelmingly female, however; among male respondents, there was a more even spread of reporting across the age range.

In contrast, the previous two editions of this survey (Office for National Statistics 2020b, Table 5; Office for National Statistics, 2016b, Table A4a) had found that, across both sexes, respondents aged 45+ were more likely than younger ones to say that had been sexually abused in childhood – with particularly low levels of reporting among young men.

These findings suggest that the prevalence of child sexual abuse may be increasing in England and Wales, and particularly among girls – or it may be that the younger generation have become more willing to share their experiences of sexual abuse in a survey.

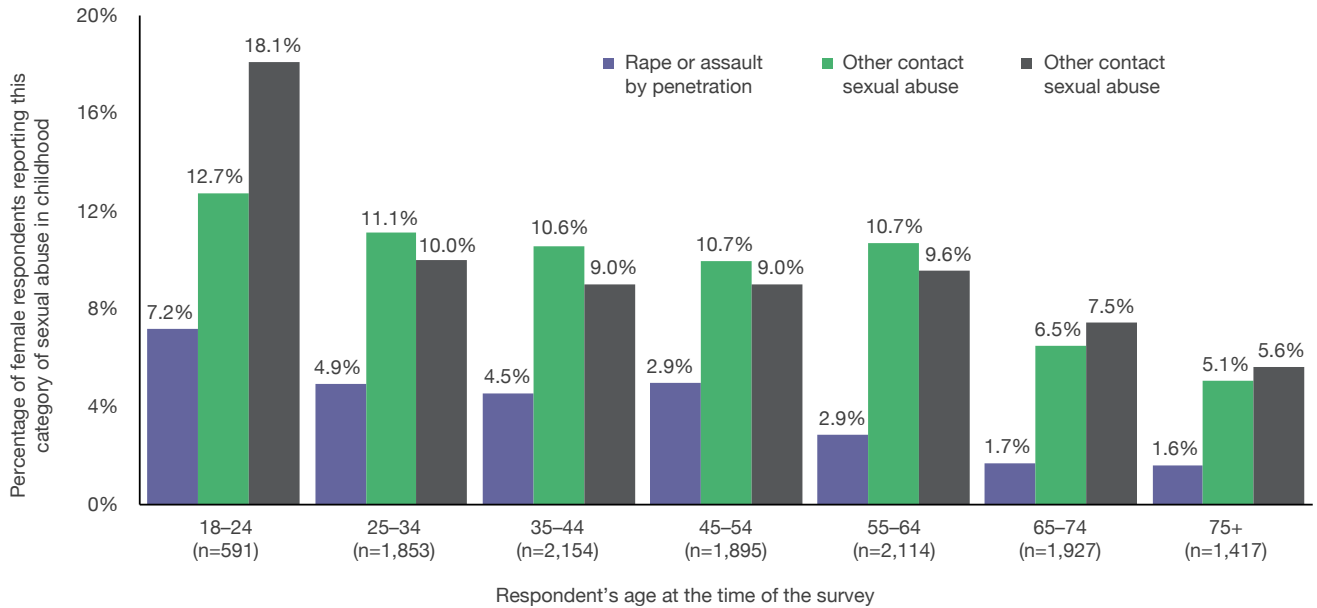
It may be that the prevalence of child sexual abuse is rising – or that young people have become more willing to share their experiences in a survey

Figure 5. Levels of child sexual abuse reported by respondents to the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2024, by age of respondent



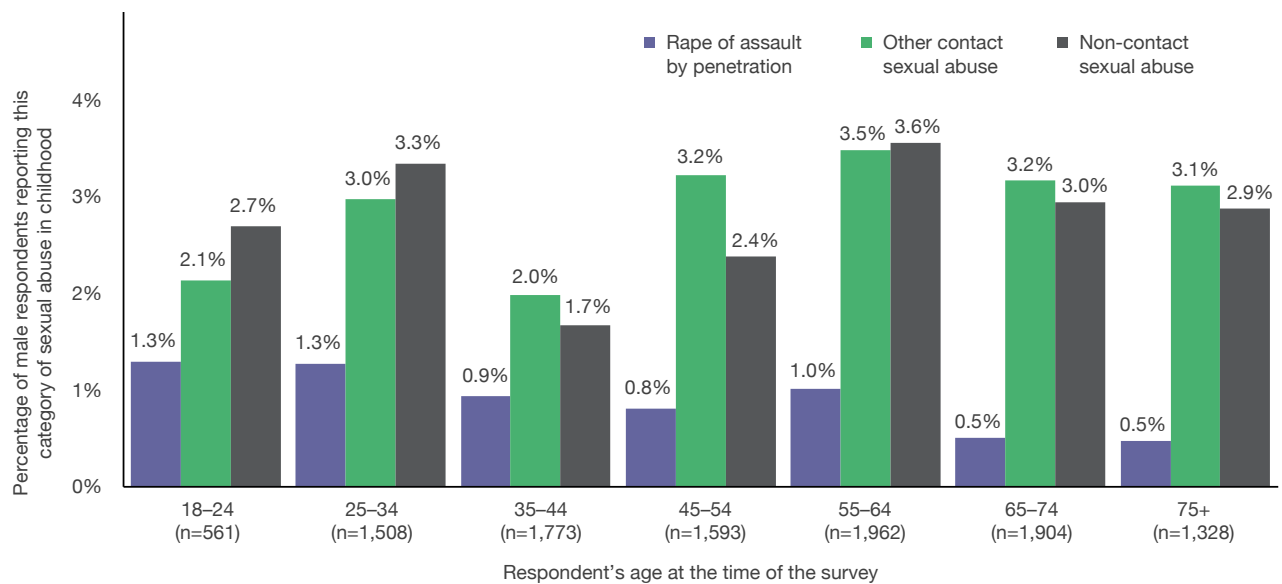
Source: Office for National Statistics (2025b, Table 10). “Don’t know” and “Don’t wish to answer” responses have been excluded.

Figure 6. Levels of different categories of child sexual abuse reported by female respondents to the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2024, by age group



Source: Office for National Statistics (2025b, Table 20). "Don't know" and "Don't wish to answer" responses have been excluded.

Figure 7. Levels of different categories of child sexual abuse reported by male respondents to the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2024, by age group



Source: Office for National Statistics (2025b, Table 20). "Don't know" and "Don't wish to answer" responses have been excluded.

3. Respondents were considered to have a disability if they had any long-standing illness, disability or impairment which caused them difficulty with day-to-day activities (Office for National Statistics, 2025b, Note 19).

Figure 6 shows that, among female respondents, each of the three categories of child sexual abuse was most commonly reported in the survey by the youngest age group. But by far the largest age differential among females was seen in the levels of non-contact sexual abuse: nearly one in five women aged 18–24 said they had experienced non-contact child sexual abuse (such as image-based abuse or indecent exposure), compared with one in 10 of those aged 25–34, and rates declined further among older age groups. This may indicate that the youngest female respondents, whose childhoods coincided with the widespread adoption of smartphones and tablets among children in England and Wales, have been more exposed than earlier generations to non-contact forms of sexual abuse.

Figure 7 shows that the levels of different forms of child sexual abuse reported by male respondents were broadly similar across the age range, with no statistically significant difference between different age groups.

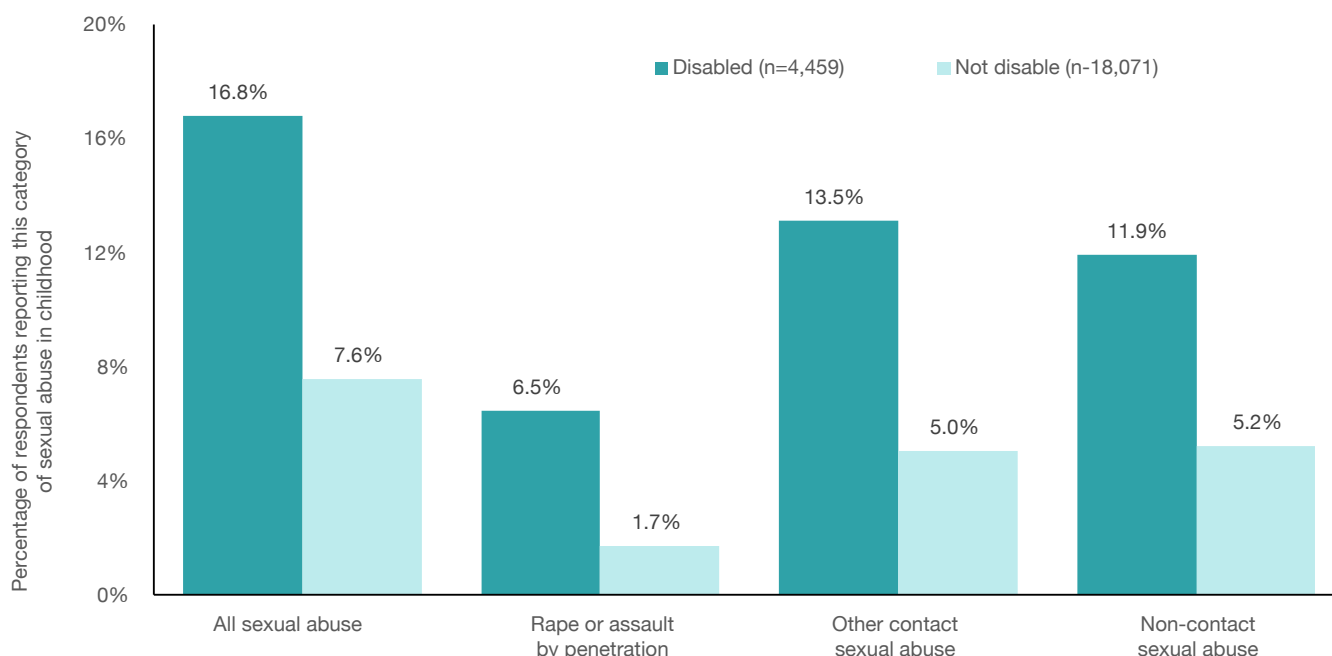
2.3.3 Disability

There was also a clear association in 2024 between disability and child sexual abuse.

Figure 8 shows that, among respondents who were disabled³ at the time of the survey, one in six said they had been sexually abused in childhood – making them more than twice as likely as non-disabled respondents to report sexual abuse in the survey. The survey did not record, however, whether their disabilities had been present in childhood or had developed in adulthood (possibly as a result of the abuse).

This is consistent with other research which has found disabled children to be at higher risk of sexual abuse (e.g. Jones et al, 2012), and with the results from previous editions of the Crime Survey for England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2020b, Table 5).

Figure 8. Levels of child sexual abuse reported by respondents to the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2024, by current disability status



Source: Office for National Statistics (2025b, Table 20). “Don’t know” and “Don’t wish to answer” responses have been excluded.

3. Respondents were considered to have a disability if they had any long-standing illness, disability or impairment which caused them difficulty with day-to-day activities (Office for National Statistics, 2025b, Note 19).

Disabled respondents were more likely than non-disabled respondents to report all forms of childhood abuse and neglect in the survey, but the greatest relative differences between disabled and non-disabled respondents were seen in their experiences of sexual abuse and neglect (Office for National Statistics, 2025b, Table 7).

As Figure 8 shows, disabled respondents had experienced higher levels of all three categories of child sexual abuse, but the largest proportional difference was in the rates of rape or penetrative abuse.

2.3.4 Sexual orientation

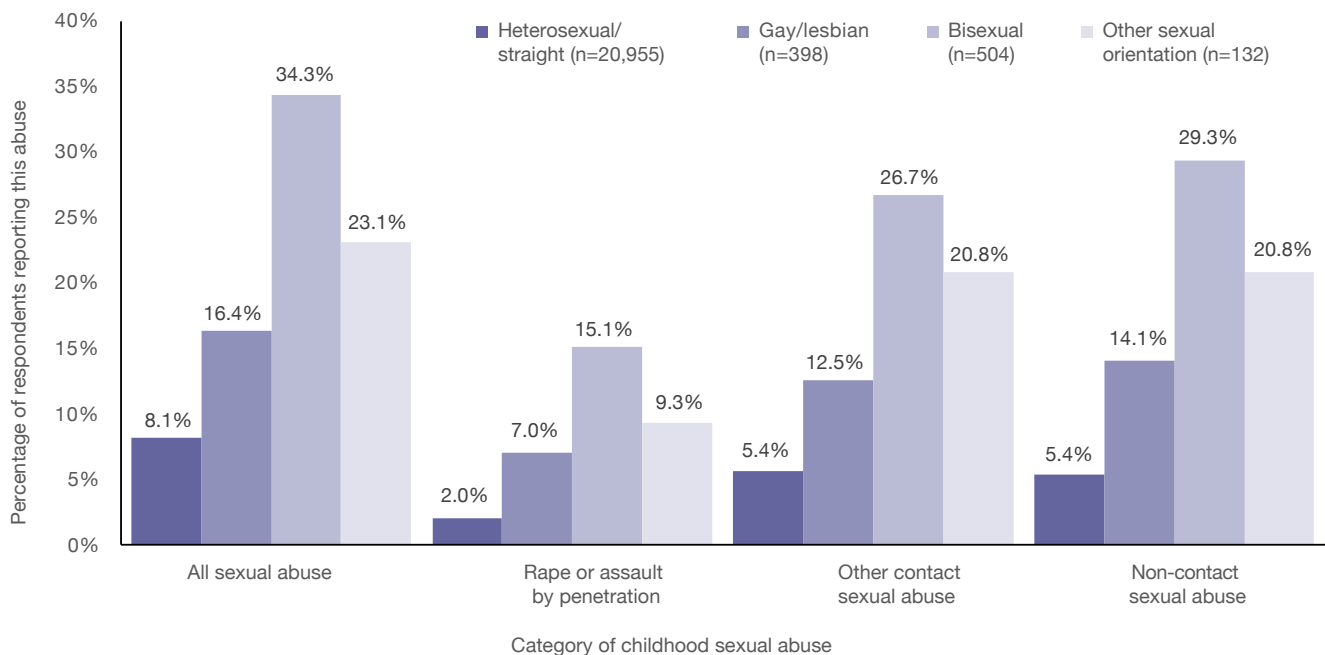
Figure 9 shows that respondents who were heterosexual at the time of the survey were less likely than gay, lesbian or bisexual respondents, and those with other sexual orientations, to say they had been sexually abused in childhood. The group most likely to report childhood sexual abuse in the survey were bisexual respondents, one-third of whom did so.

These differentials are broadly consistent with the results from the 2019 Crime Survey for England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2020b, Table 5), as well as studies conducted in the USA (e.g. Sweet and Welles, 2012; Lehavot et al, 2012; Balsam et al, 2005).

Other forms of child abuse and neglect were also reported much less commonly by heterosexual respondents than those with different sexual orientations (Office for National Statistics, 2025b, Table 10).

Figure 9 also shows that the relative differences in reporting rates were similar across all three categories of child sexual abuse, but were greatest for rape and penetrative abuse.

Figure 9. Levels of child sexual abuse reported by respondents to the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2024, by current sexual orientation



Source: Office for National Statistics (2025b, Table 20). "Don't know" and "Don't wish to answer" responses have been excluded.

4. Gender identity was measured by a question about whether the respondent's gender identity was the same as registered at birth or different (see Office for National Statistics, 2025b, Note 21). The question has featured in the Crime Survey for England and Wales since 2022 (Crime Survey for England and Wales, 2026).

Figure 10. Levels of child sexual abuse reported by respondents to the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2024, by current gender identity



Source: Office for National Statistics (2025b, Table 20). “Don’t know” and “Don’t wish to answer” responses have been excluded.

2.3.5 Gender identity

For the first time, the 2024 Crime Survey for England and Wales provided information about experiences of child sexual abuse among respondents whose gender identity did not match their sex at the time of the survey.⁴ **Figure 10** shows that these respondents were much more likely to say they had been sexually abused in childhood. They were more likely to have experienced all forms of childhood abuse than those who did not have a gender identity different from their sex, but the relative differences between the two groups were largest for neglect and for child sexual abuse (Office for National Statistics, 2025b, Table 10) – and especially for rape or penetrative abuse.

2.3.6 Ethnicity and religion

A smaller proportion of respondents from Asian (3.3%) and Black (6.1%) ethnic backgrounds said that they had been sexually abused in childhood, compared with White (9.8%) and mixed ethnic heritage (14.7%) respondents (Office for National Statistics 2025b, Table 10). A similar pattern was visible in the 2019 Crime Survey for England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2020b, Table 5).

Similarly, Hindu and Muslim respondents had significantly lower reported rates of sexual abuse in the survey (2.2% and 2.2%) than Christian (8.1%), Jewish (5.6%), Sikh (3.0%) and Buddhist (11.5%) respondents and those with no religion (11.0%) (Office for National Statistics, 2025b, Table 10).

However, qualitative research suggests that people of minority ethnic backgrounds and certain religions may face greater stigma and pressure to remain silent about their experiences of abuse (Dhaliwal, 2024; Ali et al, 2021). In addition, a separate mental health focused survey found that the likelihood of being sexually abused does not vary significantly with ethnic group in England (Bebbington et al, 2011).

This suggests that the lower rates reported by respondents from some ethnic and religious groups in the Crime Survey for England and Wales may be influenced by differences in willingness to report experiences of sexual abuse, rather than lower levels of sexual victimisation.

2.3.7 Socioeconomic characteristics

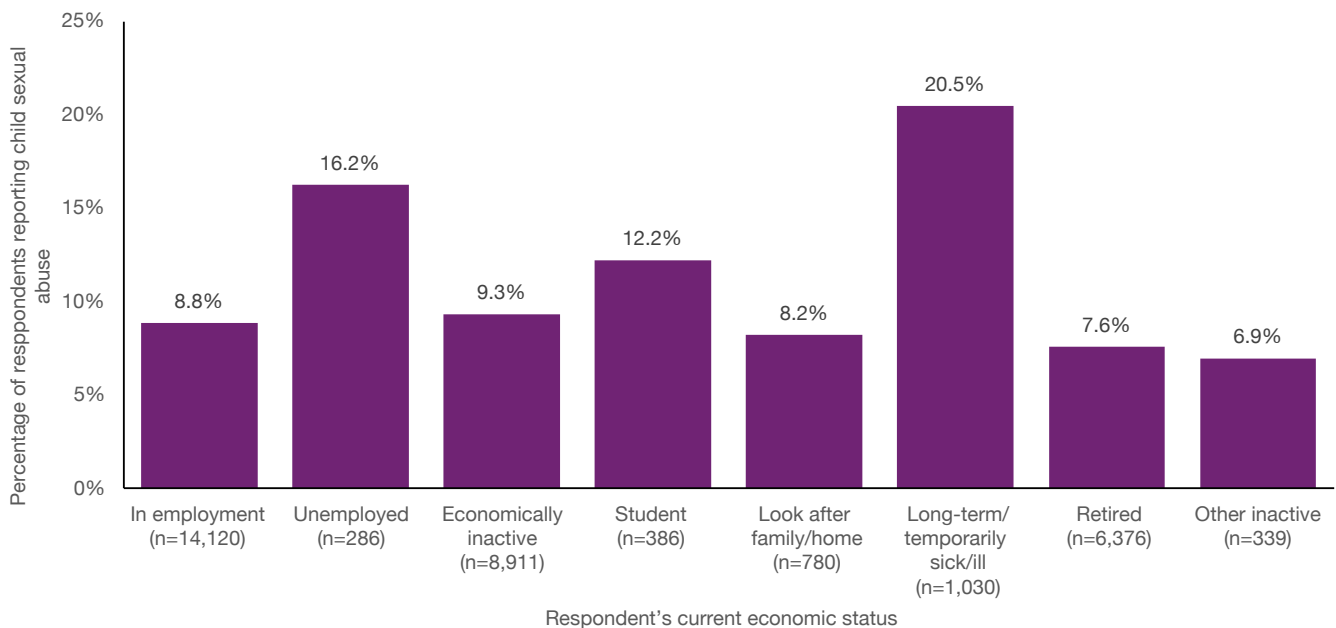
Respondents who were unemployed or unable to work because of temporary or long-term illness at the time of the survey reported significantly higher rates of child sexual abuse than those who were employed, retired or economically inactive for other reasons – see **Figure 11**. One in six unemployed respondents, and one in five who were ill, said that they had been sexually abused during childhood.

Similar trends were seen across other forms of child abuse and neglect, with the highest rates consistently reported by these two groups (Office for National Statistics 2025b, Table 10). This may suggest the potential impact of child abuse overall on people's employment prospects and wider health (see also Vera-Gray, 2023).

Respondents who were single parents with children aged under 16 at the time of the survey reported significantly higher rates of childhood sexual abuse (14.5%) than those who did not live with children (9.2%) or were in two-parent households (8.4%); a similar pattern was found across all forms of child abuse and neglect, and in the previous Crime Survey for England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2025b, Table 11; Office for National Statistics, 2020b, Table 6).

However, the reported rates of child sexual abuse in the survey did *not* vary significantly according to the respondent's current household income, whether they owned or rented their home, or their accommodation type (e.g. detached house, flat) – and there was little difference in the levels of reported sexual abuse by the index of deprivation of the local area where respondents lived (Office for National Statistics, 2025b, Table 11). This suggests that child sexual abuse affects all socioeconomic groups and is prevalent across all sections of the society.

Figure 11. Levels of child sexual abuse reported by respondents to the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2024, by current economic status



Source: Office for National Statistics (2025b, Table 10). "Don't know" and "Don't wish to answer" responses have been excluded.

2.4 Characteristics of the people by whom respondents had been sexually abused in childhood

This section explores the characteristics of people reported in the survey to have sexually abused respondents during childhood. The 2024 survey collected information about their sex, their age (whether they were over or under 18), and their relationship to the respondent at the time when the abuse took place.

2.4.1 Sex

Respondents who had been sexually abused in childhood were asked about the sex of the person or people who had abused them. Their responses could relate to abuse involving a single person or multiple people, and could refer to one incident or abuse occurring over a longer period of time; the survey did not distinguish between these.

Among those respondents, the vast majority described sexual abuse by male(s) only; sexual abuse by female(s) was rarely described, as was sexual abuse involving both male(s) and female(s) – see **Figure 12**. These findings are consistent with both the 2019 Crime Survey for England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2020d, Table 13) and wider research evidence (e.g. Finkelhor, 2025).

Figures 13 and 14 show that sexual abuse solely by females was much more frequently reported in the survey by male respondents than by female respondents. In particular, a quarter of men who had suffered rape or penetrative sexual abuse said this abuse had been committed by female(s) only. A higher rate of sexual abuse of boys by females has also been found in surveys from other countries (e.g. Bourke et al, 2014; Scurich, 2023; Gerke et al, 2020).

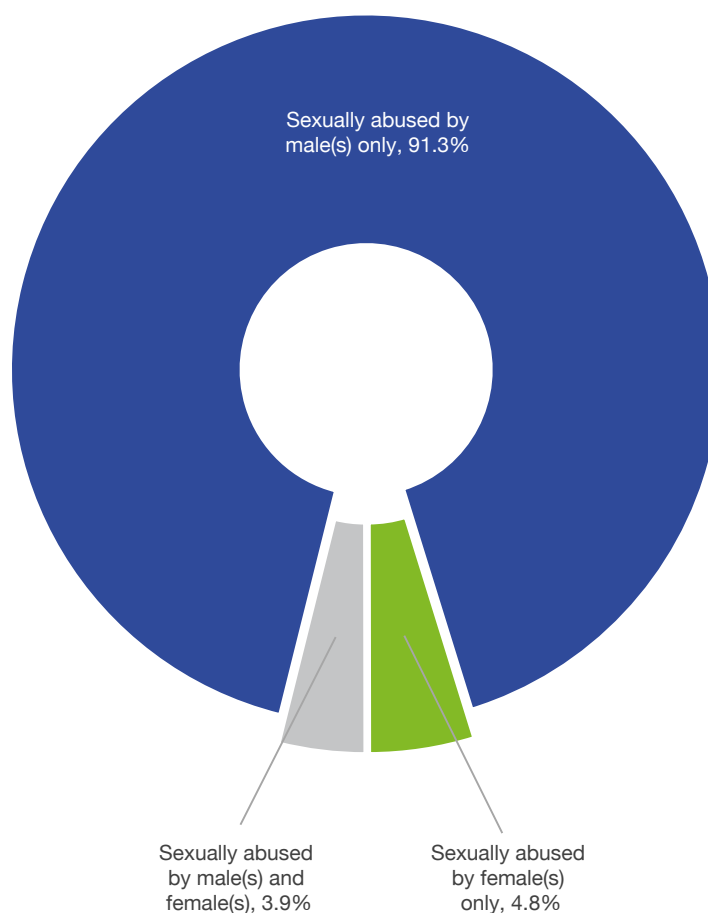
In contrast, the overwhelming majority of female respondents – at least 19 out of every 20 – who had experienced any category of sexual abuse in childhood said they had been abused by male(s) only.

2.4.2 Age

For the first time, the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2024 published information about whether the people who had sexually abused them were adults or were themselves children under the age of 18 at the time of the abuse.

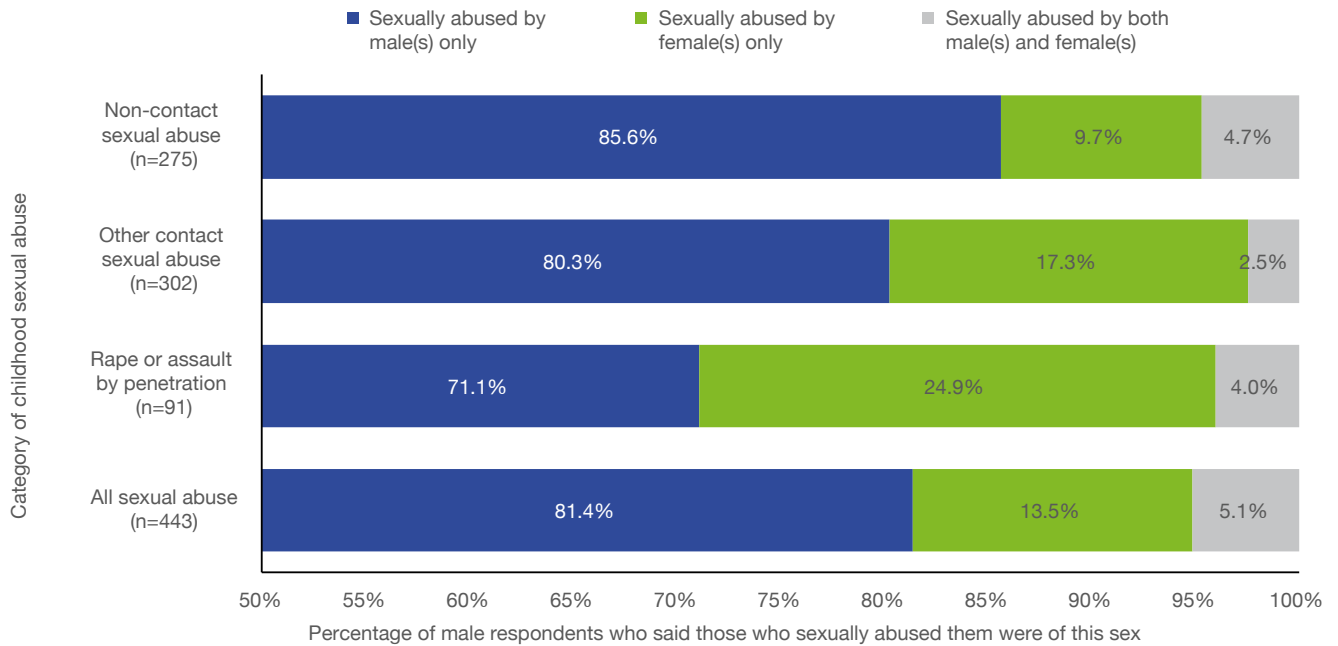
As with the question on those people's sex, respondents were asked to consider all incidents of sexual abuse they had experienced. Their responses could therefore refer to abuse involving a single person or multiple people, occurring either in one incident or across different episodes of abuse.

Figure 12. Sex of the people who had sexually abused respondents to the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2024 in childhood



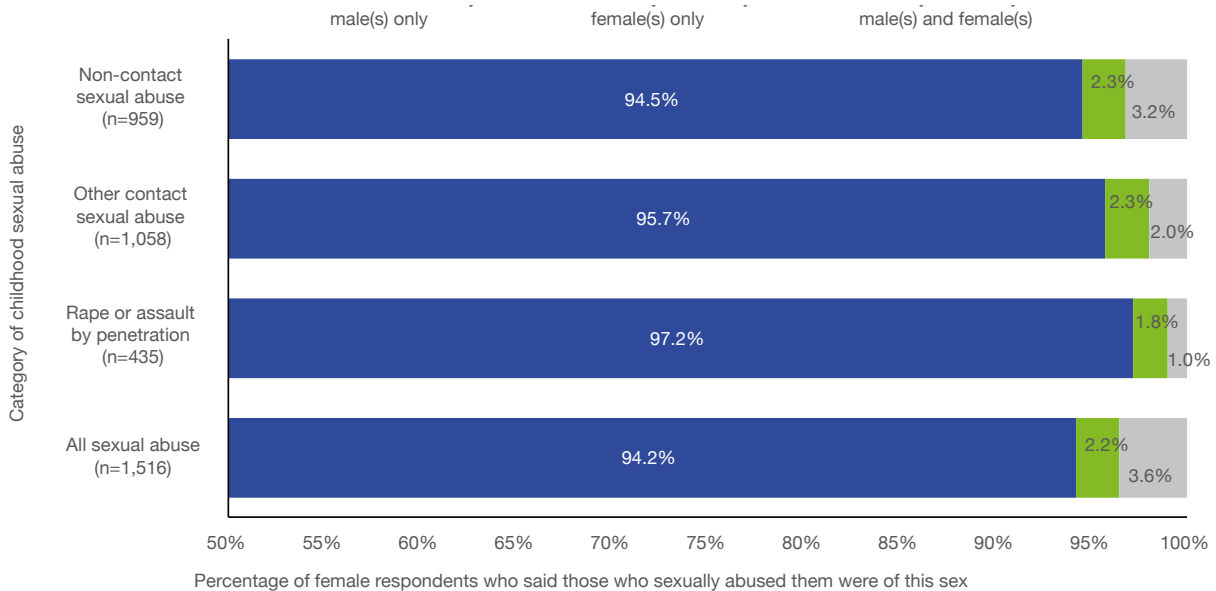
Source: Office for National Statistics (2025b, Table 19). Sample size = 1,959. "Don't know" and "Don't wish to answer" responses have been excluded

Figure 13. Sex of the people who had sexually abused male respondents to the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2024 in childhood, by category of sexual abuse



Source: Office for National Statistics (2025b, Table 19). "Don't know" and "Don't wish to answer" responses have been excluded.

Figure 14. Sex of the people who had sexually abused female respondents to the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2024 in childhood, by category of sexual abuse

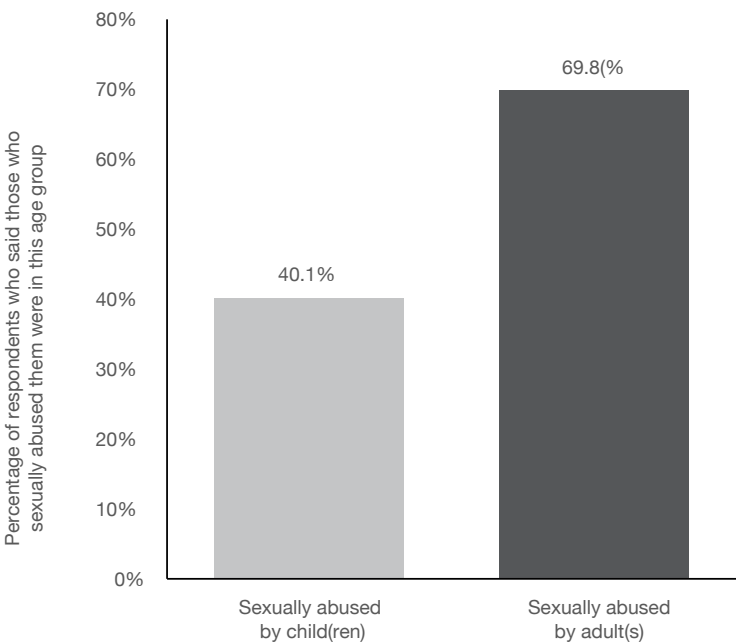


Source: Office for National Statistics (2025b, Table 19). "Don't know" and "Don't wish to answer" responses have been excluded.

Figure 15 shows that two-fifths of respondents affected by sexual abuse said this abuse had involved another child or children under the age of 18 (possibly alongside an adult or adults), while more than two-thirds said that the abuse involved an adult or adults (possibly alongside a child or children). nt or across different episodes of abuse

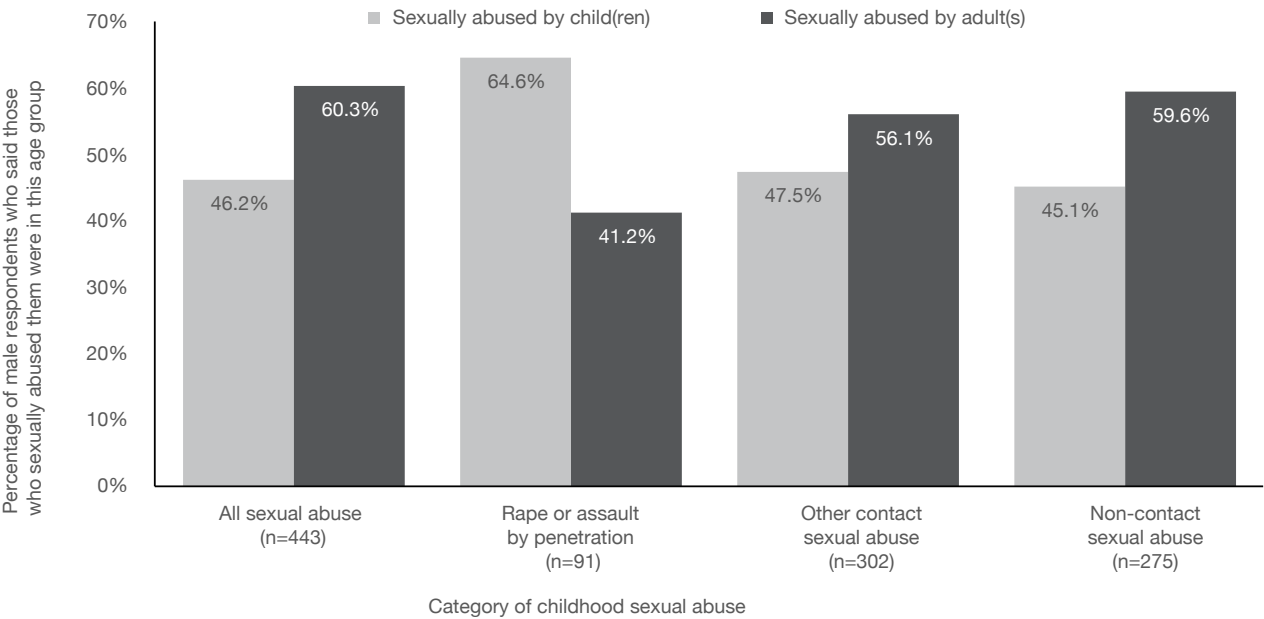
Figures 16 and 17 show that men were significantly more likely than women to say that other children had been involved in their sexual abuse. Where the abuse involved rape or penetration, nearly two-thirds of male respondents but fewer than two-fifths of female respondents said another child had been involved.

Figure 15. Age of the people who had sexually abused respondents to the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2024 in childhood



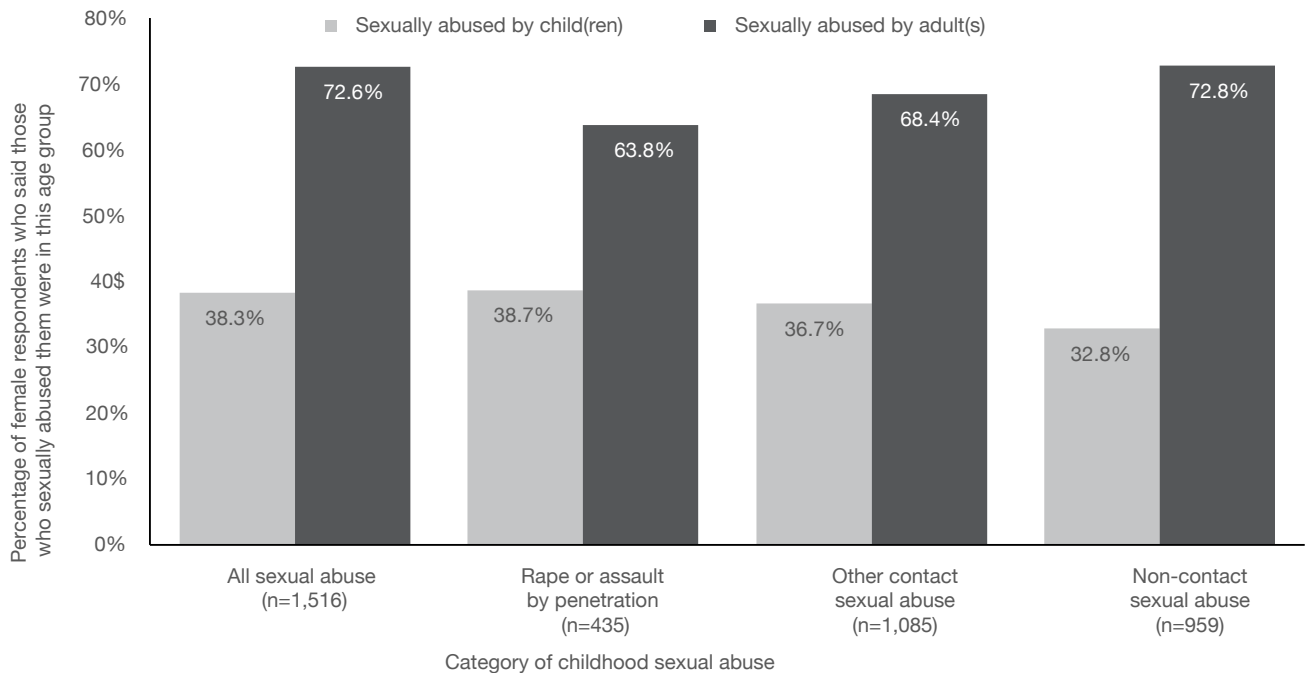
Source: Office for National Statistics (2025b, Table 19). Sample size = 1,959. “Don’t know” and “Don’t wish to answer” responses have been excluded. Percentages sum to more than 100% because respondents could choose both response options.

Figure 16. Age of the people who had sexually abused male respondents to the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2024 in childhood, by category of sexual abuse



Source: Office for National Statistics (2025b, Table 19). “Don’t know” and “Don’t wish to answer” responses have been excluded. Percentages sum to more than 100% because respondents could choose both response options.

Figure 17. Age of the people who had sexually abused female respondents to the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2024 in childhood, by category of sexual abuse



Source: Office for National Statistics (2025b, Table 19). "Don't know" and "Don't wish to answer" responses have been excluded. Percentages sum to more than 100% because respondents could choose both response options.

2.4.3 Respondents' relationship to the people who had sexually abused them

Respondents were also asked about their relationship to the person or people who had sexually abused them during childhood.

Table 1 lists the different relationship categories. One-third of respondents said a stranger had been involved in the abuse: stranger abuse was mainly associated with non-contact abuse (e.g. image-based abuse or indecent exposure), as shown in Figures 18 and 19 below. Among those known to the respondent, friends and family friends were most commonly identified as the people who had sexually abused them.

Table 1 also shows that, among respondents saying they had been sexually abused by other children, more than a quarter reported that their friend or friends had been involved. Family friends and previous intimate partners were each identified by one in nine respondents, with slightly lower numbers identifying current partners, brothers/stepbrothers, other relatives and neighbours.

Adults who sexually abused were significantly more often identified as friends of the family than as friends of the respondent. In the intrafamilial context, the majority of respondents identified their father/stepfather, their mother's partner and relatives outside the immediate family as having been involved in their abuse.

Among respondents who had been sexually abused by other children, more than a quarter said their friend or friends had been involved

Table 1. Relationship between respondents to the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2024 and the people who sexually abused them in childhood

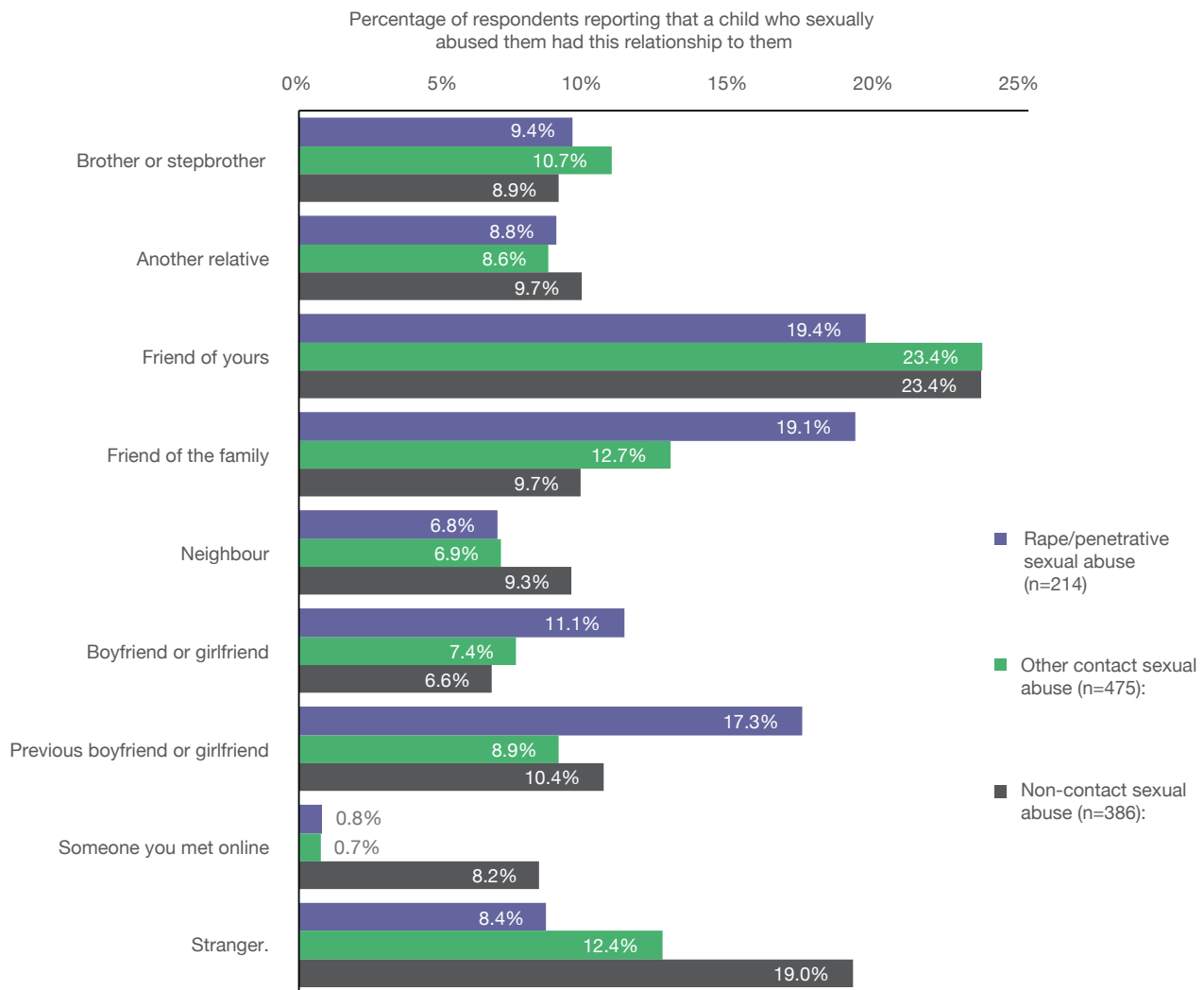
Relationship to respondent	Percentage of respondents who were sexually abused by someone in this category		
	Sexually abused by child(ren)	Sexually abused by adult(s)	Overall
Father	1.4%	5.2%	3.8%
Mother	N/A	1.7%	1.3%
Mother's partner	0.8%	6.5%	4.4%
Father's partner	N/A	0.3%	0.3%
Brother or stepbrother	8.6%	1.5%	4.2%
Sister or stepsister	0.8%	0.3%	0.5%
Grandparent	N/A	2.2%	2.1%
Another relative	8.5%	8.8%	8.4%
Friend of yours	26.1%	7.6%	14.1%
Friend of the family	11.3%	10.9%	11.0%
Neighbour	7.6%	8.3%	8.2%
Boyfriend or girlfriend or partner or date	9.0%	5.3%	6.6%
Previous boyfriend or girlfriend or partner	11.1%	5.8%	7.5%
Carer or guardian	N/A	0.9%	0.9%
Person in position of trust or authority	2.4%	8.1%	6.0%
Someone you met online	5.3%	4.5%	5.4%
Stranger	18.5%	38.4%	33.2%
Someone else	25.1%	10.6%	16.5%

Source: Office for National Statistics (2025b, Tables 16–18). Sample size = 2,023. “Don’t know” and “Don’t wish to answer” responses have been excluded. Percentages sum to more than 100% because respondents could identify more than one relationship with the people who had sexually abused them. ‘N/A’ denotes figures that were suppressed by the Office for National Statistics owing to disclosure constraints.

Where respondents said they had been sexually abused by other children, **Figure 18** shows how different children were associated with different categories of sexual abuse. Rape or penetrative abuse was commonly committed by family friends or by someone with whom the respondent was or had been in an intimate relationship, while one-fifth of respondents reporting non-contact sexual abuse by a child said it had been by a stranger. In contrast, friends of the respondent were commonly reported as being involved in all three categories of sexual abuse – as, to a lesser extent, were children within the respondent’s family. Children who the respondent had met online were associated almost exclusively with non-contact abuse across different episodes of abuse.

Among respondents who had been sexually abused by adults, **Figure 19** shows that almost half of those reporting non-contact abuse said a stranger had been involved. In contrast, rape or penetrative abuse was more commonly associated with known relationships, particularly within early intimate relationships (involving a partner or ex-partner), and within the family environment (including by family friends, father figures and other relatives). Other contact sexual abuse (e.g. touching) by adults was commonly said to have been committed by strangers, family friends, non-parental adults in the family network, and people in positions of trust.

Figure 18. Relationship between respondents to the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2024 and the child(ren) who had sexually abused them in childhood, by category of sexual abuse

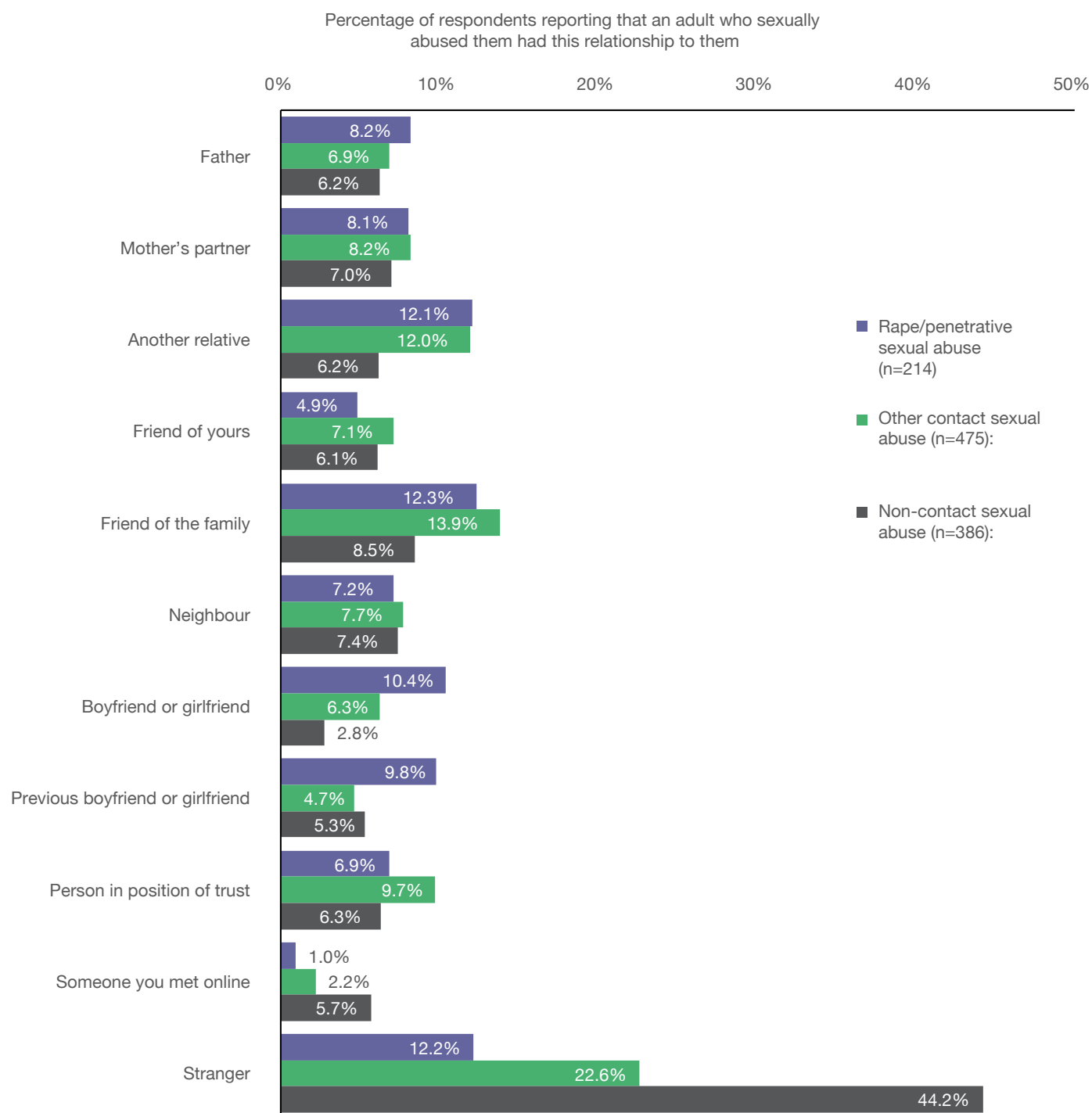


Source: Office for National Statistics (2025b, Table 17). “Don’t know” and “Don’t wish to answer” responses have been excluded. The chart does not show relationship types that were present in the abuse of fewer than 2% of respondents (father, mother, mother’s partner, sister/stepsister, and a person in position of trust). Percentages can sum to more than 100% because respondents could identify more than one relationship with the people who had sexually abused them.

Respondents of different sexes tended to have had different relationships with the people who sexually abused them, as can be seen in **Figure 20**. Consistent with findings from the previous editions of the Crime Survey for England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2020d, Table 12b), men were significantly more likely than women to say they had been abused by a person in a position of trust or authority. Female respondents more commonly reported abuse occurring in intimate relationships, or by relatives outside their immediate family.

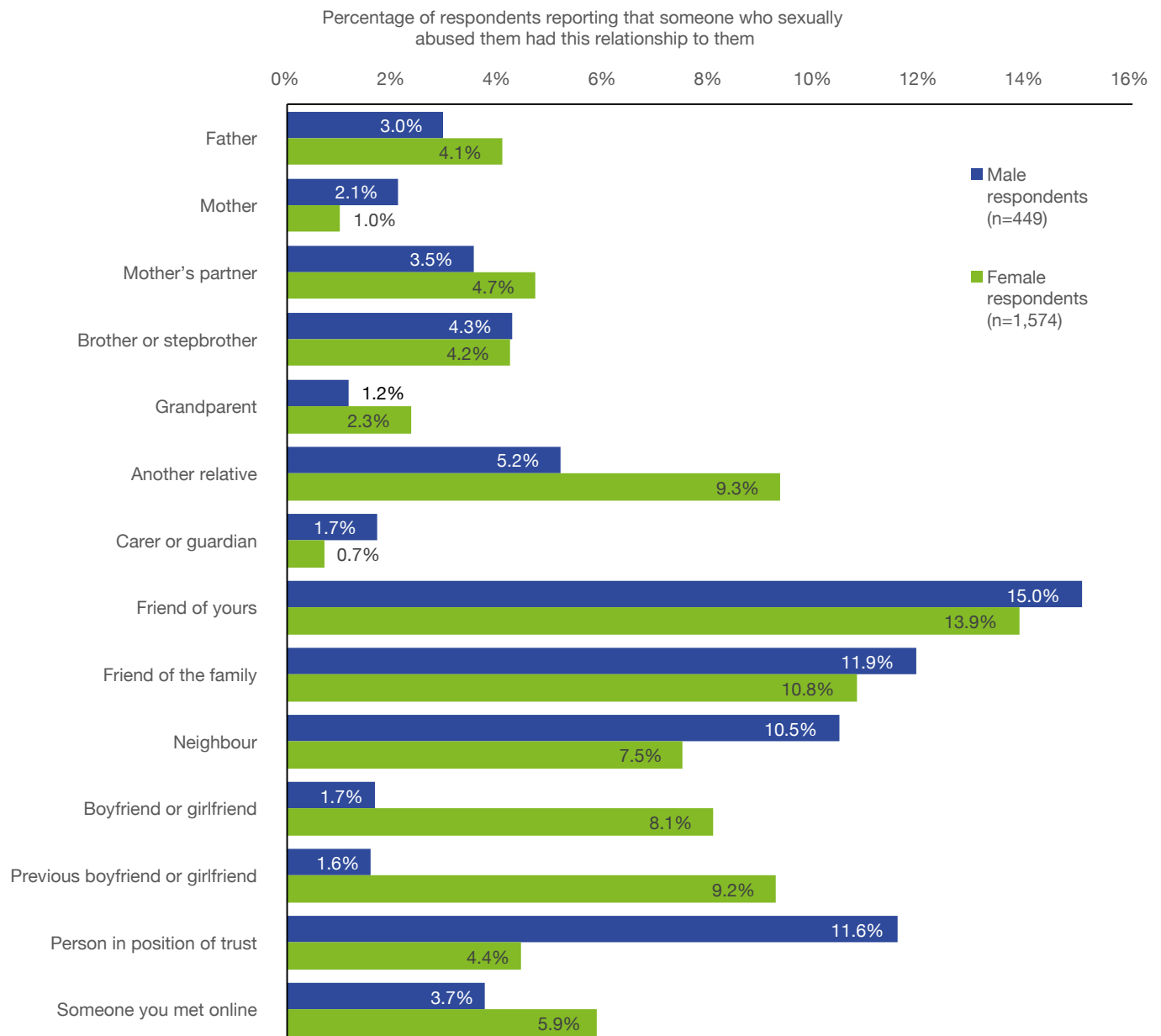
These differences are consistent with findings from other research (e.g. Mathews et al, 2024). Nevertheless, abuse by a friend was the most common reported context in which both male and female respondents had been abused by people known to them. In addition to the categories shown in Figure 20, more than a third of female respondents (35.4%), and a quarter of male respondents (25.5%), said they had been sexually abused in childhood by a stranger.

Figure 19. Relationship between respondents to the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2024 and the adult(s) who had sexually abused them in childhood, by category of sexual abuse



Source: Office for National Statistics (2025b, Table 18). "Don't know" and "Don't wish to answer" responses have been excluded. The chart does not show relationship types that were present in the abuse of fewer than 3% of respondents (mother, father's partner, sister/step-sister, grandparent, parent/guardian). Percentages can sum to more than 100% because respondents could identify more than one relationship with the people who had sexually abused them.

Figure 20. Relationship between respondents to the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2024 and the people who sexually abused them, by sex of the respondent



Source: Office for National Statistics (2025b, Table 16). "Don't know" and "Don't wish to answer" responses have been excluded. The chart does not show relationship types that were present in the abuse of fewer than 2% of respondents (mother, father's partner, and sister/stepmother) and unknown relationships (stranger, someone you met online, other). Percentages can sum to more than 100 because respondents could identify more than one relationship with the people who had sexually abused them.

More than a third of women reporting sexual abuse in childhood, and a quarter of men, said they had been abused by a stranger

2.5 Details of the sexual abuse and what happened afterwards

2.5.1 Age at which the sexual abuse started

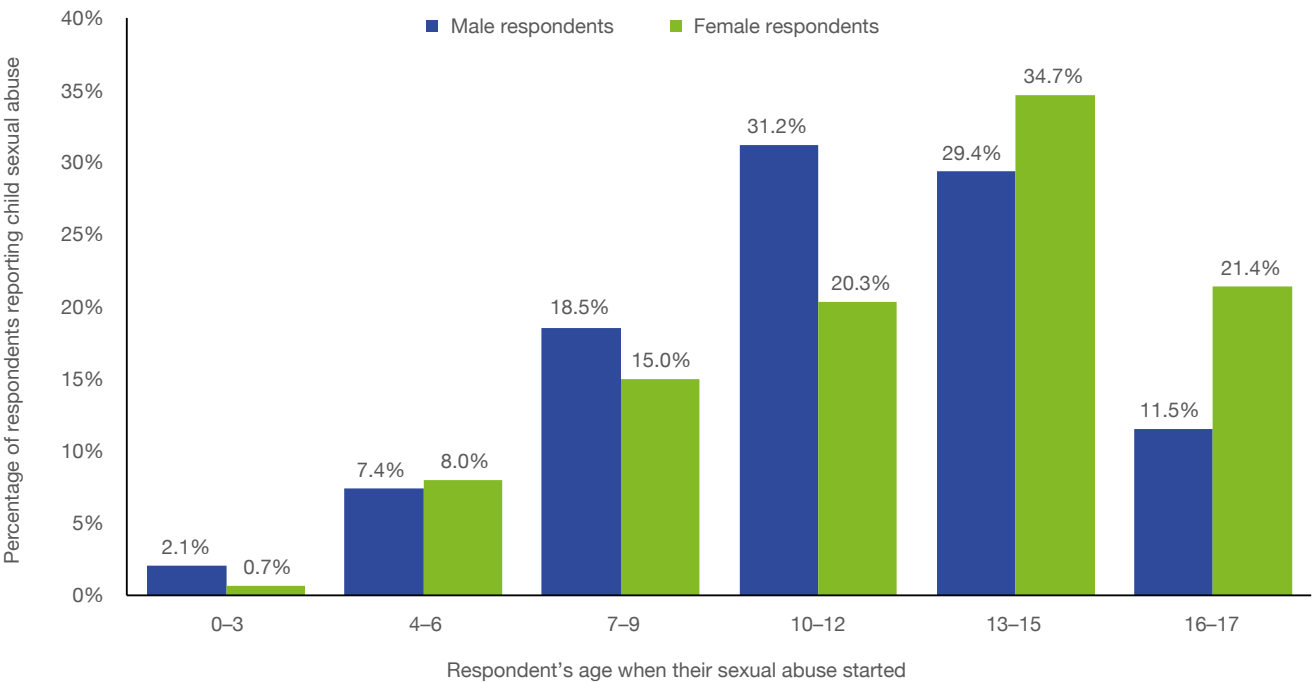
Figure 21 shows that, among male respondents reporting sexual abuse during childhood in the survey, half said the abuse began between the ages of seven and 12. For female respondents, the onset of sexual abuse was more likely to occur later: a third said it happened when they were aged 7–12, and another third when they were 13–15. For the first time, the Crime Survey for England and Wales asked about child sexual abuse beginning at ages 16–17; this was the case for more than one-fifth of female respondents, and one in nine males.

2.5.2 Where the sexual abuse took place

As **Figure 22** shows, most respondents reporting sexual abuse during childhood in the survey said that it had happened in their own home or someone else’s home; these locations were particularly common in cases of penetrative abuse or rape. Among those reporting non-contact abuse, one-third said it had occurred in a public place (likely relating to instances of indecent exposure), and one in seven said it had been online.

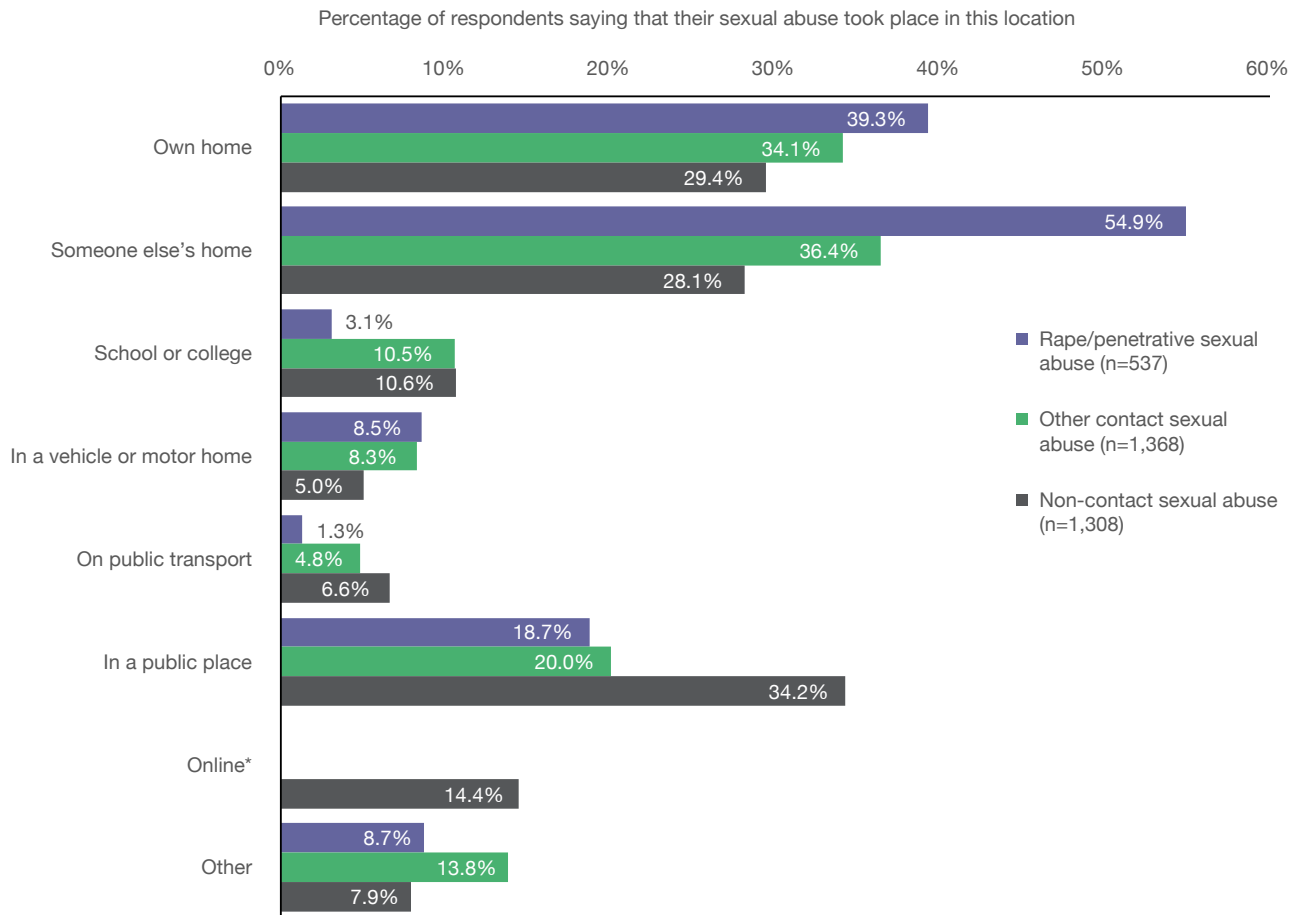
Note that respondents who had experienced any form of contact sexual abuse, which might for example include being made to touch themselves, were not given the option of specifying that their abuse had happened online.

Figure 21. Age at which respondents to the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2024 were first sexually abused, by sex of the respondent



Source: Office for National Statistics (2025b, Table 25). Sample size = 1,586. “Don’t know” and “Don’t wish to answer” responses have been excluded.

Figure 22. Locations of sexual abuse reported by respondents to the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2024, by category of sexual abuse



Source: Office for National Statistics (2025b, Table 26). Sample size = 1,586. "Don't know" and "Don't wish to answer" responses have been excluded. Locations that appeared in fewer than 2% of responses (care/foster home, hospital or doctor's surgery) have been excluded. Percentages can sum to more than 100% because respondents could name multiple locations.

* 'Online' was deemed a 'not applicable' answer for categories of sexual abuse other than non-contact.

2.5.3 Who was told or found out about the abuse

The final section of the childhood abuse module focused on whether the respondents affected by child sexual abuse told anyone about their abuse at the time, who they told, and whether other people found out about the abuse anyway.

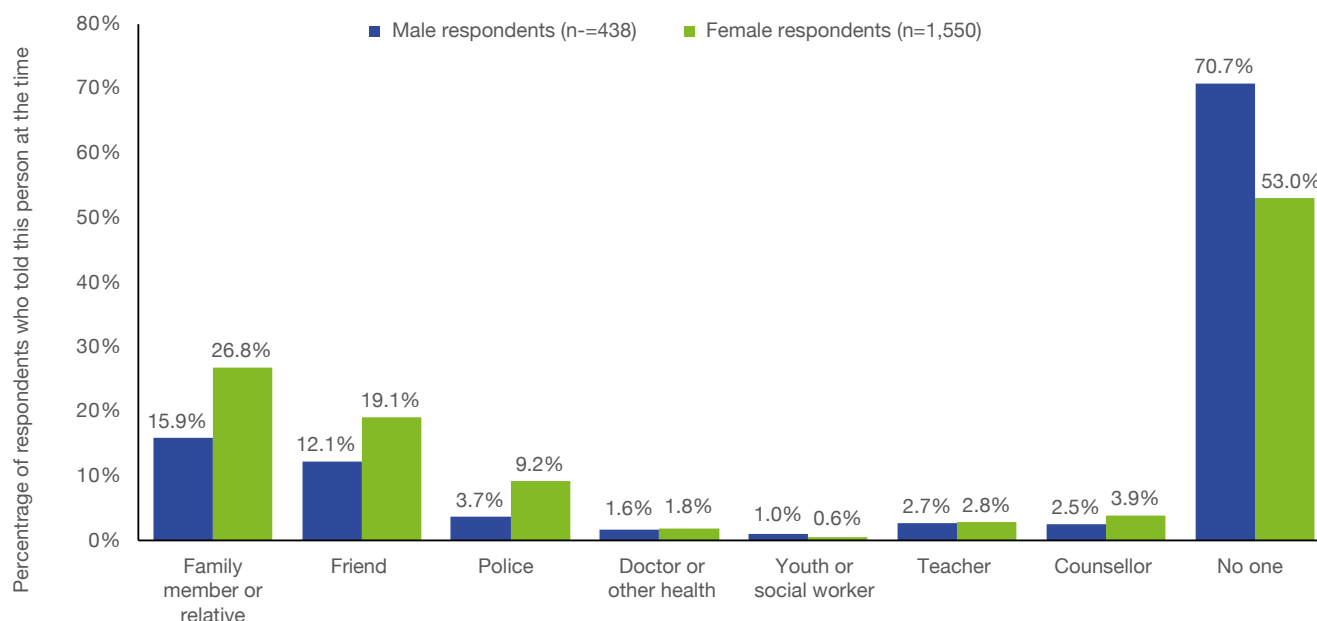
Figure 23 shows that more than half of the female respondents and over two-thirds of male respondents told no one about their sexual abuse at the time. If someone was told, this was unlikely to be anyone in a position of authority: more than a quarter of women and one in six men told a family member, while one-fifth of women and one in eight men told a friend.

The authority figures most commonly told at the time were the police: a little under one in 10 female respondents, but far fewer male respondents, said they had done so.

These findings are consistent with findings from research that children are rarely able to verbally tell someone about their sexual abuse (Allnock } et al, 2019).

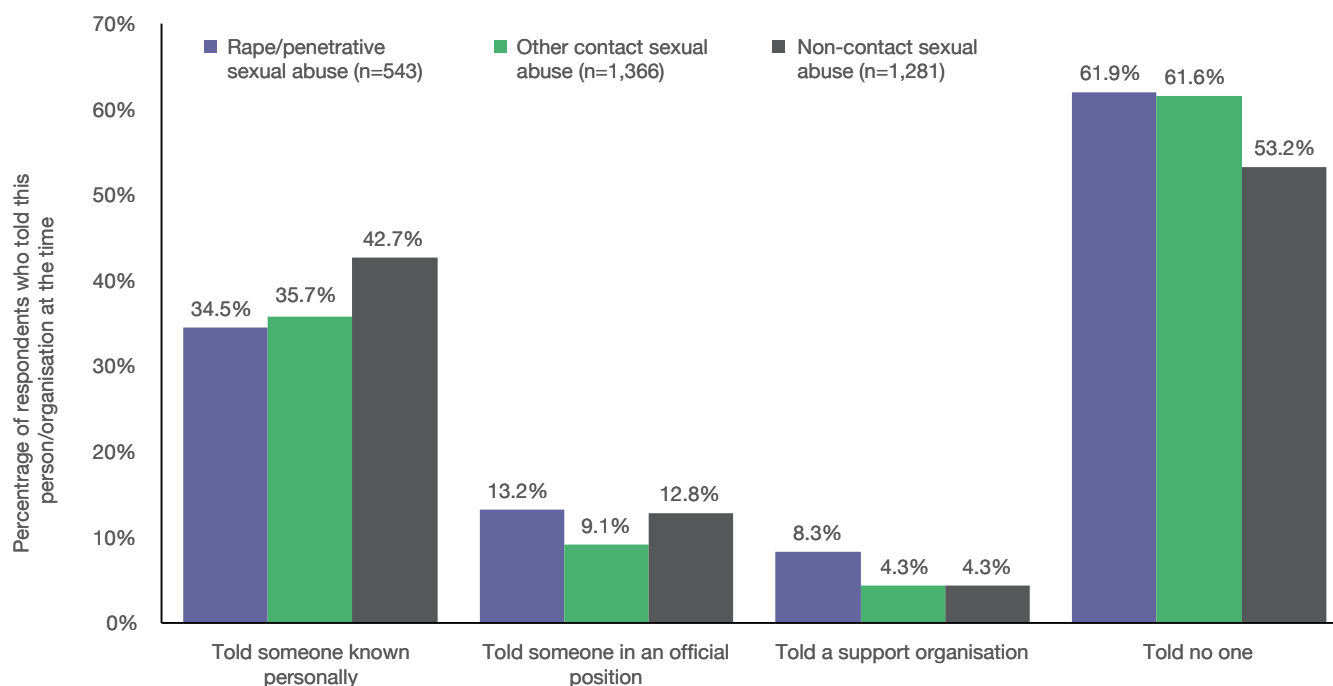
Figure 24 shows that respondents who had experienced non-contact sexual abuse in childhood were the most likely to have told someone (usually someone they knew personally) about it at the time, but fewer than half of them had told anyone. More than three-fifths of those who had suffered any form of contact abuse had told no-one – but respondents were slightly more likely to have told a professional (either a person in an official position or a support organisation) if they had experienced rape or penetrative abuse compared with other types of contact sexual abuse.

Figure 23. People who respondents to the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2024 told about their sexual abuse at the time, by sex of the respondent



Source: Office for National Statistics (2025b, Table 27). “Don’t know” and “Don’t wish to answer” responses have been excluded. Response options for personal connections that were selected by fewer than 3% of respondents were excluded from the graph (partner/boyfriend/girlfriend, another pupil at my school and a neighbour). “Other” has also been excluded. Respondents could tell more than one person, therefore percentages add up to more than 100.

Figure 24. People who respondents to the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2024 told about their sexual abuse at the time, by category of sexual abuse



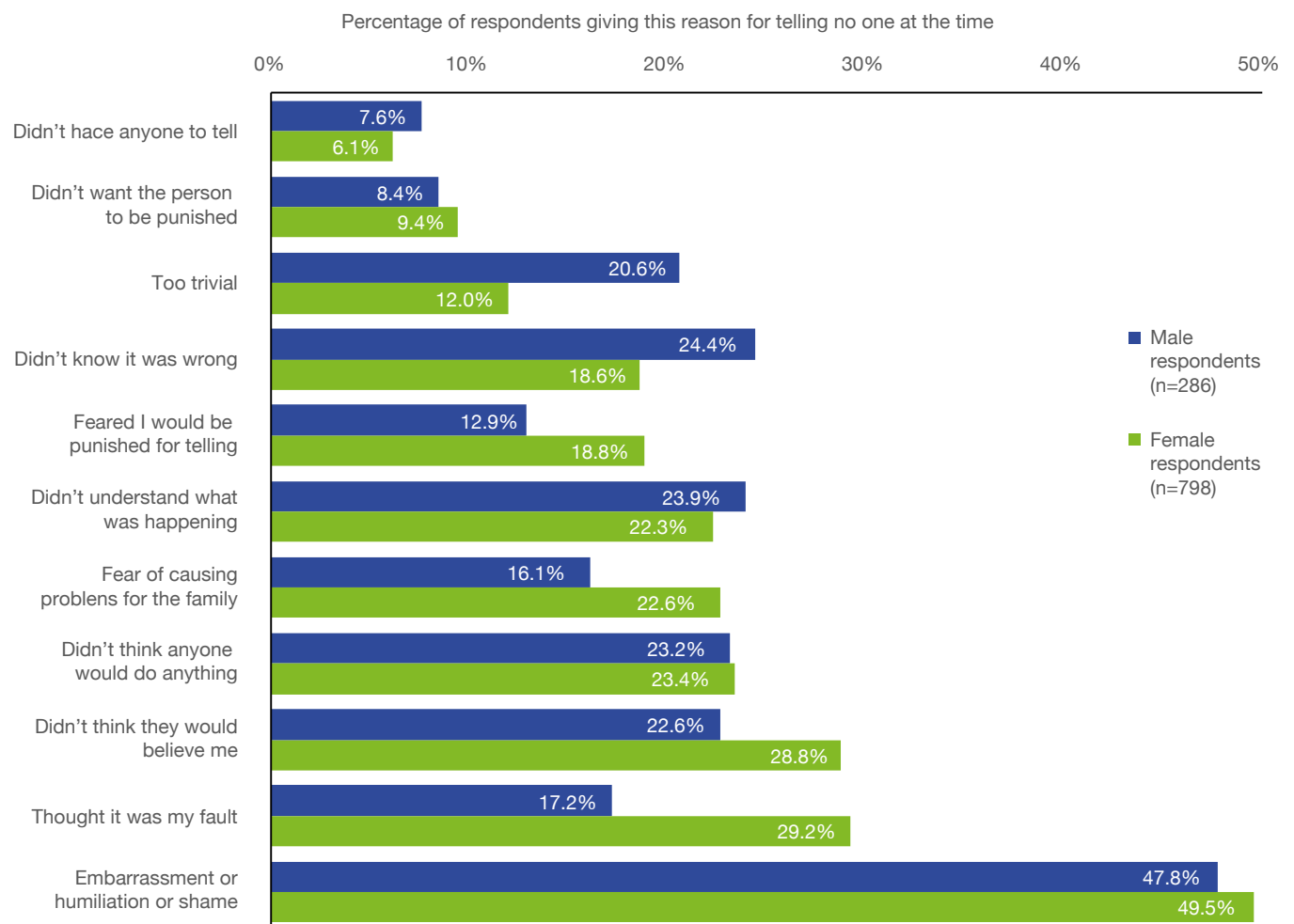
Source: Office for National Statistics (2025b, Table 27). “Don’t know” and “Don’t wish to answer” responses have been excluded. “Other” has been excluded from the graph. Respondents could tell more than one person, therefore percentages add up to more than 100.

The most common reasons for not telling anyone about the abuse involved feelings of embarrassment, humiliation and shame, along with the fear of not being believed and feelings of self-blame; as **Figure 25** shows, female respondents were also likely to have felt self-blame and feared not being believed, while male respondents more often had not realised that the abuse was wrong or had thought it too trivial to tell anyone about.

Self-blame had been particularly common among respondents who had experienced rape or penetrative sexual abuse: nearly half of female respondents (47.8%) and one-third of males (31.0%) who had told no-one said they had felt the abuse was their fault (Office for National Statistics, 2025b, Table 28).

More than a quarter (28.5%) of respondents who had been sexually abused in childhood said someone had become aware of the abuse even though they had not told that person about it (Office for National Statistics, 2025b, Table 30). One in eight (12.7%) said this had been a family member, with a similar number (12.1%) said it was a friend. Only a small minority (5.8%) said that someone in an official position – most commonly the police or a teacher – had become aware of the abuse without the respondent telling them.

Figure 25. Reasons why respondents to the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2024 had not told anyone about their sexual abuse at the time, by sex of the respondent

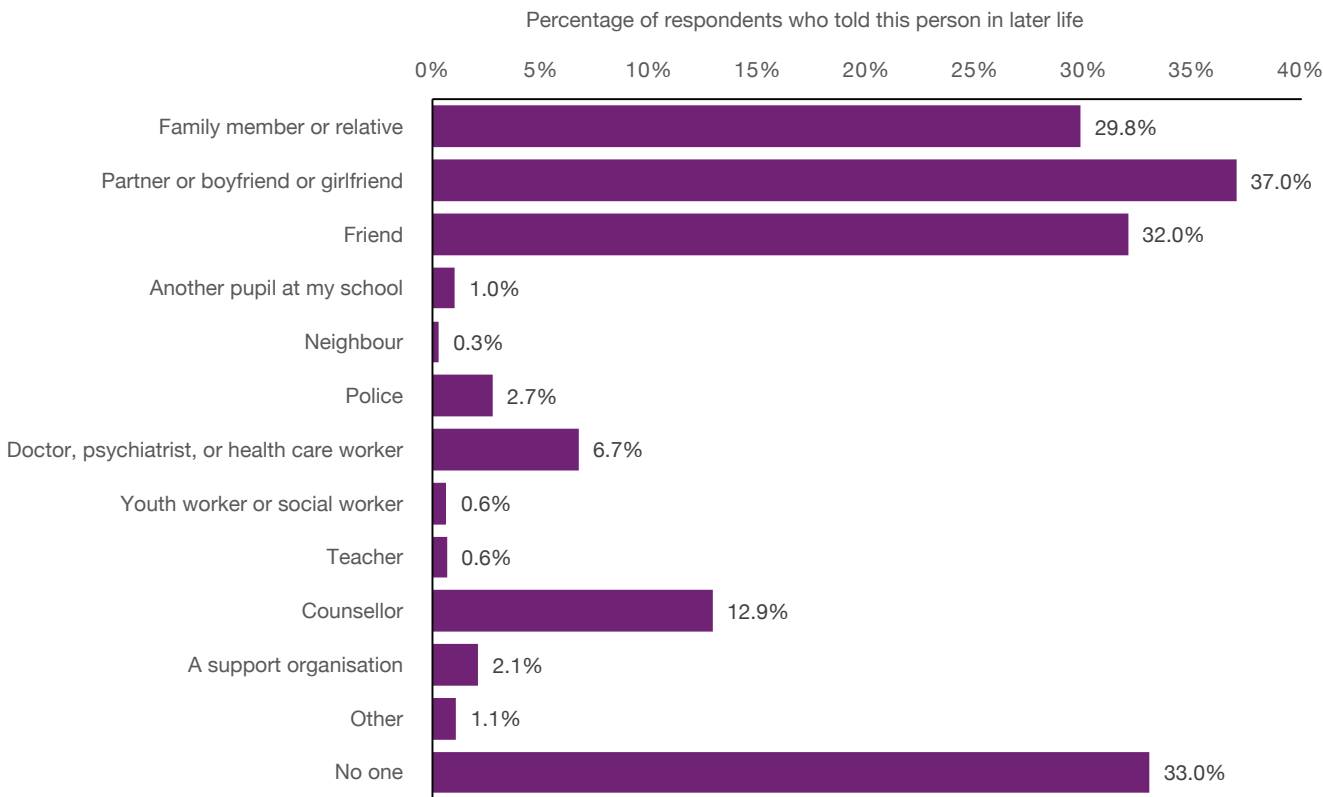


Source: Office for National Statistics (2025b, Table 28). "Don't know" and "Don't wish to answer" responses have been excluded. Response options selected by fewer than 1% of respondents (didn't trust children's services, dislike or fear of police or courts, police did not come when called) were excluded from the graph. "Other" has been excluded. Respondents could give multiple reasons, therefore percentages add up to more than 100.

This indicates that the professional response to sexual abuse depended overwhelmingly on the victim’s verbal disclosure of it, without which professionals could or did not identify possible signs and indicators that the child was being sexually abused. Research has consistently shown that most children do not disclose their abuse verbally but communicate their distress in other ways; practitioners should not wait for the child to tell before taking action (Glinski, 2021).

Finally, respondents were asked whether they had told anyone later in life about their sexual abuse. Two-thirds of respondents (67.0%) said they had done, with significantly more having told a counsellor or support organisation (13.3%) than someone in an official position (9.1%); as **Figure 26** shows, this was most commonly a doctor or another health care worker rather than the police or other practitioner, but far greater numbers had told their partner, a friend or a family member. As with telling people at the time of the abuse, male respondents were significantly less likely than female respondents to have told anyone later in life: more than two-fifths of male respondents (42.4%) had told no-one, compared to under one-third (30.2%) of female respondents (Office for National Statistics, 2025b, Table 31).

Figure 26. People who respondents to the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2024 told about their sexual abuse in later life



Source: Office for National Statistics (2025b, Table 31). Sample size = 1,926. “Don’t know” and “Don’t wish to answer” responses have been excluded. “Other” has also been excluded. Respondents could tell more than one person, therefore percentages add up to more than 100.

3. Overview of recent international research into the prevalence of child sexual abuse

Research into the prevalence of child sexual abuse has its origins in a groundbreaking study by Finkelhor (1979), with research in many countries following in the 1980s and 1990s. While there was a subsequent decline in the volume of research, innovations in methods continued; these were exemplified by the Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland study (McGee et al, 2002), and the subsequent Sexual Violence Survey (Central Statistics Office, 2023), which explored sexual violence in both childhood and adulthood, and by studies involving young people (e.g. Finkelhor et al, 2014; Radford et al, 2011). In more recent years, efforts have been made to define and measure child sexual abuse occurring in online contexts, and to understand how this affects the overall prevalence of child sexual abuse (Finkelhor et al, 2024).

This chapter provides an overview of the latest global developments in the measurement of child sexual abuse.

A separate body of research has sought to develop methods to measure the scale of *perpetration* of child sexual abuse, drawing on various methods to overcome the hidden nature of child sexual abuse perpetration. Findings from this body of research are summarised in Chapter 4.

3.1 Prevalence estimates for child sexual abuse, excluding online abuse

In the late 2000s and early 2010s, several meta-analyses⁵ were undertaken to bring together survey findings from multiple countries and understand the prevalence of child sexual abuse internationally (e.g. Stoltenborgh et al, 2011; Pereda et al, 2009; Barth et al, 2013). All reached broadly similar conclusions, estimating that approximately 15%–18% of girls and 8% of boys are sexually abused (see Karsna and Kelly, 2021).

The latest, and to date the most comprehensive, systematic review by Fang et al (2026) found that more recently undertaken surveys have produced higher estimates of the scale of child sexual abuse. Drawing on findings from 1,412 studies conducted between 2010 and 2024 across 147 countries and reported in six languages (English, Spanish, French, Chinese, Russian and Arabic), it concluded that, globally, about 20.1% of women and 16.8% of men have been sexually abused in childhood. The study excluded child sexual abuse in online contexts from its scope.

A comprehensive systematic review found that more recent surveys have produced higher estimates of the scale of child sexual abuse

5. A meta-analysis is a statistical analysis which combines the results of multiple studies addressing the same research question, in order to come to a conclusion about a body of research.

Table 2. Estimates of the prevalence of ‘in-person’ child sexual abuse, Northern European region and worldwide figures

Measure	Contact child sexual abuse only* (%)		Any child sexual abuse** (%)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Child sexual abuse across childhood: Northern Europe	10.2%	15.2%	16.7%	24.0%
Child sexual abuse across childhood: World	10.0%	12.4%	16.8%	20.1%
Child sexual abuse in the past year: Northern Europe	3.4%	5.2%	5.8%	8.7%
Child sexual abuse in the past year: World	2.8%	3.7%	4.9%	6.2%

Source: Fang et al 2026 (Table 3; Supplementary materials, Appendices 5 and 6).

* Contact child sexual abuse, referred to as contact sexual violence against children, included rape and sexual assault.

** Child sexual abuse was referred to as sexual violence against children and defined as any deliberate, unwanted and non-essential sexual act, whether completed or attempted, involving either contact or non-contact, that is perpetrated against a child. **This definition excludes acts of sexual exploitation and abuse occurring in an online context.**

In addition to global figures, the review also provided estimates for the six regions and 18 ‘sub-regions’ of the world. For Northern Europe, which includes England and Wales, it estimated that just under a quarter of adult women (24.0%) and one in six adult men (16.7%) had been sexually abused ‘in person’ during childhood – see **Table 2**. The review provided a separate estimate for in-person *contact* child sexual abuse: this was estimated to have been experienced by 15.2% of women and 10.2% of men in Northern Europe. The estimates for the sexual abuse of boys in Northern Europe were broadly similar to the global figures, but the sexual abuse of girls was found to be more common (by 3.9 percentage points) in Northern Europe than globally.

The review also provided ‘past-year’ estimates for in-person child sexual abuse, drawing on surveys which asked children (or their parents if the children were considered too young to take part themselves) about any sexual abuse experienced during the year preceding the survey. Drawing on those studies, it estimated that in Northern Europe, 5.8% of boys and 8.7% of girls had experienced any form of sexual abuse (excluding online) in the past year. Table 2 shows that, for both sexes, the past-year estimates for Northern Europe were higher than the global figures.

The review highlighted that the prevalence of past-year child sexual abuse increased with age and was highest in the 14–17 age group. It estimated that, in Northern Europe, about 1.6% of boys and 2.5% of girls aged 0–9 would be sexually abused in a single year, compared with 12.3% of boys and 18.1% of girls aged 14–17. Focusing on contact sexual abuse only, **Table 3** shows that 0.9% of boys and 2.5% of girls aged 0–9, but 7.4% of girls and 11.2% of boys aged 14–17, had been abused in the past-year. Applying these rates to the latest population estimates (Office for National Statistics, 2025c) would suggest that, every year, at least 500,000 children in England and Wales experience contact sexual abuse.

However, estimates for the youngest age group (0–9s) are likely to have been obtained from surveys with parents, mirroring the methodology of Radford et al (2011) in the UK. Comparing the results from the self-report survey of adults about their experiences of childhood abuse in the Crime Survey for England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2025a) with the findings from the parent-report element of Radford et al (2011) indicates that the parent reports provided lower estimates of child sexual abuse in comparable age groups.⁷ It is likely that other surveys of similar design also underestimating the levels of sexual abuse of young children.

6. The Northern Europe sub-region comprised Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Guernsey, Iceland, Ireland, the Isle of Man, Jersey, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Sweden and the UK.

7. The study by Radford et al (2011) involved computer-assisted self-interviews completed by 2,160 parents of under-11s, 2,275 older children aged 11–17 (with additional input from their parents), and 1,761 young adults aged 18–24. Details of the study's methodology and findings are provided in the previous edition of this report (Karsna and Kelly, 2021: Appendix 1 and section 3.4).

Table 3. Estimated prevalence of overall and contact ‘in-person’ child sexual abuse by age of victim, past-year estimates, Northern Europe

Age group	Contact child sexual abuse only* (%)		Any child sexual abuse** (%)	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
0–9	0.9%	1.4%	1.6%	2.5%
10–13	5.1%	7.8%	8.6%	12.9%
14–17	7.4%	11.2%	12.3%	18.1%

Source: Fang et al 2026 (Table 3; Supplementary materials, Appendices 5 and 6).

* Contact child sexual abuse, referred to as contact sexual violence against children, included rape and sexual assault.

** Child sexual abuse was referred to as sexual violence against children and defined as any deliberate, unwanted and non-essential sexual act, whether completed or attempted, involving either contact or non-contact, that is perpetrated against a child. **This definition excludes acts of sexual exploitation and abuse occurring in an online context.**

3.2 Prevalence estimates for online child sexual abuse

3.2.1 How abuse in online contexts affects the overall prevalence of child sexual abuse

Several surveys have attempted to measure forms of child sexual abuse occurring in online contexts (e.g. Gamez-Guadix et al, 2022; Walsh et al, 2025) but the US-based survey by Finkelhor et al (2022, 2024) was the first to measure how the inclusion of online abuse could influence the overall prevalence rates of child sexual abuse. Asking young adults aged 18–28 about sexual abuse that had occurred before the age of 18, they found that including questions about abuse in online contexts increased the overall prevalence of child sexual abuse by more than half, from 13.5% to 21.7%. The rate for female respondents rose from 19.8% to 31.6%; and for males from 6.2% to 10.8%.

Presented with a list of nine sexually abusive experiences which take place in online contexts, 15.6% of respondents (23.3% of women and 7.6% of men) reported experiencing any of these; ‘non-consensual image sharing’ was the most prevalent of them, having affected 4.9% of the respondents.

3.2.2 The prevalence of child sexual abuse in online contexts

Debate is ongoing on the types of online encounter that should be deemed sexual abuse in the online space (Finkelhor et al, 2024), with various studies tending to focus on a small number of specific activities occurring online. Understanding of the overall prevalence of child sexual abuse in online contexts is therefore limited. The fast-paced development of technology and social media, and children’s access to it, also makes it difficult for research to capture changing trends. This section explores the systematic reviews that have attempted to produce estimates of prevalence of sexual abuse occurring in online contexts.

Focusing on two specific aspects of this abuse, a systematic review by Madigan et al (2018) explored the scale of children’s ‘online solicitation’ (being asked, encouraged, or pressured online to engage in sexual activities or conversations) and unwanted exposure to sexual material online. It estimated that 20.3% of children aged 12–16 had been unwillingly exposed to sexual material online, and 11.5% had been solicited online. The estimates were drawn from research published up to 2016, and so did not account for any subsequent technological developments.

The most comprehensive global systematic review exploring the prevalence and nature of child sexual abuse in online contexts (Fry et al, 2025) involved a meta-analysis whose design mirrored that of Fang et al (2026). Drawing on representative surveys, it included 123 studies published in six languages between 2010 and 2023 (reporting on research undertaken between 2006 and 2021) and defined four sub-categories of child sexual abuse in online contexts – see Table 4. It found that, globally, 8.1% of the children surveyed had been sexually abused in an online context in the year preceding their participation in the survey, and estimated that 16.6% of adults had experienced child sexual abuse in an online context during their childhood.

Table 4 presents the global ‘lifetime’ estimates of prevalence of child sexual abuse for male and female respondents, showing that ‘online solicitation’ was the most common form of online abuse for both sexes (experienced by 9.8% of boys and 17.2% of girls), while non-consensual image taking/sharing and unwanted exposure to pornographic materials appeared to affect a fairly small proportion of children overall (4.0%).

Where sufficient data was available, the estimates for Western Europe (which includes England and Wales) were higher than the global figures: 20.8% of children were estimated to experience online solicitation; and 6.9% to experience non-consensual image taking/sharing or unwanted exposure to pornographic materials. The other two forms of online child sexual abuse were lacking data to draw conclusions for Western Europe.

It is important to note that even this recent study did not include any research conducted after 2021; and so does not represent research data from recent years when the pace of change in young people’s online engagement has continued post-COVID.

An estimated 21% of children in Western Europe have experienced online solicitation (such as unwanted sexting or pressure to share images)

Table 4. Categories of online child sexual abuse and global lifetime prevalence estimates for boys and girls

Measure		Prevalence estimates		
	Description	Boys	Girls	Overall
Online solicitation	Online grooming, harassment, pressure to share images, unwanted, or pressured sexting, unwanted sexual talk, including abuse by adults or other children	9.8%	17.2%	11.5%
Non-consensual taking, sharing or exposure to sexual images or videos	Non-consensual images taken or distributed by an adult or another child (including ‘deep fake’ material). Unwanted exposure to pornographic content	3.3%	2.3%	4.0%
Online sexual exploitation	Sexual talk, images, or other sexual activity for payment	N/A	N/A	7.3%
Sexual extortion	Threatening to share intimate images or videos unless a child complies with demands such as money, or additional sexual activities.	3.3%	4.7%	5.1%

Source: Fry et al (2025, Tables 1 and 3).

3.3 What does the latest research on the prevalence of child sexual abuse tell us?

- ▶ The estimates of prevalence of child sexual abuse globally are higher than previous research had found: the most recent systematic review estimated a higher prevalence than previous meta-analyses from the mid-2010s. The review, which excluded child sexual abuse in an online context, estimated that nearly one in four adult women and one in six adult men in Northern Europe (the British Isles, the Nordic countries and the Baltic states) had been sexually abused in childhood. One in six women and one in 10 men were estimated to have experienced contact child sexual abuse.
- ▶ Drawing on this evidence and the prevalence of child sexual abuse among the youngest respondents to the 2024 Crime Survey for England and Wales (see section 2.3), we estimate that 20% of girls and 10% of boys in England and Wales are sexually abused before the age of 18.
- ▶ Single-year prevalence estimates are important for policymakers and decision-makers to understand the scale of hidden abuse and allocate resources. According to the latest available data for past-year child sexual abuse from Fang et al (2026); we can estimate that, every year, 500,000 children in England and Wales experience contact sexual abuse. If other forms of child sexual abuse (including those in online contexts) were included, this would significantly increase the estimate.
- ▶ Including questions about child sexual abuse in online contexts significantly increases the overall prevalence rates, as illustrated by a recent study from the USA – but types of sexual abuse committed online are developing, while many studies focus on specific aspects of online harm and so do not provide a full picture.
- ▶ However, the prevalence of child sexual abuse in online contexts remains difficult to estimate, owing to the different ways in which it is measured in different surveys and the fast pace of change which is difficult to capture in retrospective surveys.

The scale of child sexual abuse in online contexts is difficult to estimate, partly because of the fast pace of change in that abuse

4. Research into the prevalence of child sexual abuse perpetration

Research into the prevalence of child sexual abuse perpetration – investigating the people who sexually abuse children or pose a risk of doing so, and the types of abuse they may commit – is essential for policy and practice. It helps with the allocation of appropriate resources across criminal justice agencies so they can better detect, disrupt, respond to and prevent child sexual abuse – and it supports efforts to identify people at risk of sexually abusing children and stop the harm before it occurs. Routine collection of estimated prevalence enables the effectiveness of policy and practice interventions to be measured.

Research into perpetration prevalence remains an underdeveloped and methodologically challenging area. Studies are far less common than those examining the prevalence of victimisation. Since our 2021 review of the evidence, however, some important general population surveys, cross-national datasets and research into online offending research have emerged, each helping us to develop a clearer picture of the scale and nature of child sexual abuse perpetration.

4.1 Challenges in estimating prevalence

Traditionally, the scale and nature of child sexual abuse perpetration have been examined through victimisation surveys, self-report data from forensic and clinical populations, and official records and data (Bouchard and Lussier, 2015), but each of these approaches presents challenges when used in isolation. For example:

- ▶ Victimisation surveys, such as those described in Chapters 2 and 3, do not fully capture patterns of offending, reliably distinguish multiple offences carried out by the same individual, or detail the motivations or risks associated with offending (Bouchard and Lussier, 2015).
- ▶ Official data, such as police records and convictions, only captures cases that come to the attention of official agencies and meet legal thresholds – it therefore reflects patterns of criminal justice activity rather than the true scale of offending (Lussier et al, 2024). While people convicted of sexual offending have been extensively studied, they are ‘the tip of the iceberg’ of people who are sexually abusing children.
- ▶ Self-report studies are vulnerable to social desirability bias given the highly stigmatised nature of child sexual abuse; furthermore, participants are often sampled from forensic or clinical populations, limiting generalisation of the studies’ findings (Gomes et al, 2019).

Anonymised self-report studies of community samples do, however, offer promise in estimating more accurate prevalence rates, as they capture people living in the general population who have not been detected by criminal justice agencies but may pose a risk of perpetration (Whitten et al, 2026).

To better understand the prevalence of child sexual abuse, studies have traditionally focused on understanding the prevalence of (a) sexual interest in children, (b) sexual behaviours towards children, or (c) both. It is often assumed that all people who sexually abuse children are also sexually interested in them, and vice versa, but this is incorrect, the two groups are not identical (Seto, 2009). However, understanding the prevalence of sexual interest in children is important because it is a risk factor for subsequent child sexual offending (Mann et al, 2010; Seto et al, 2023).

4.2 Official data and studies using forensic and clinical samples

A substantial body of evidence based on official data has been vital to helping develop an understanding of the risk of first-time and repeated sexual offending in Western populations. Understanding recidivism rates, however, requires context including how recidivism is defined, the follow-up period measured and the type of offence included (Lussier et al, 2024).

Recidivism rates for sexual offending based on official data are usually lower than for general reoffending. General offending recidivism rates are high; in many countries, at least one in five people have been found to reoffend within two years of receiving a sentence or being released from prison, and the UK figure is 43% (Yukhnenko et al, 2023). In contrast, a study across Canada, the USA, England and Wales found that between 5% and 15% of men convicted of a sexual offence will commit another sexual offence within the next five years (Harris and Hanson, 2004). This means that, in a sample of 100 men convicted of a sexual offence, at least 85 of these men will not go on to be reconvicted of a further sexual offence, but up to 15 will. The longer that people live in the community offence free (that is not being detected), the lower the rate of recidivism, even among those who initially present with a high risk of recidivism; it appears that most people, once detected, desist from further sexual offending (Hanson et al, 2014).

This substantial body of evidence tells us about prevalence rates in populations whose offending has been detected, rather than the general population. Given that most people who are convicted of a sexual offence have no previous sexual convictions (Sandler et al, 2008), far more knowledge is needed to understand sexual offending in the general population (DeLisi et al, 2016).

Lee et al (2023) estimated general population prevalence by combining the records of people convicted of a sexual offence for the first time and census data in the wider Canadian population. They estimated that, based on conviction patterns, approximately 1%–1.5% of men would be expected to be convicted of sexual offences at least once during their lifetime. However, having a previous non sexual offence more than doubled the risk of a later sexual offence, to around 3%–4%.

Using official criminal records relating to a sample of men in England and Wales born between the 1950s and 1970s, the first study to produce an authentic prevalence estimate (Marshall, 1997) found that around one in 60 men born in 1953 had been convicted of a sexual offence by the age of 40. It estimated that, in 1993, at least 260,000 men aged 20–40 in England and Wales had a sexual offence conviction.

It is vital to keep in mind that, while a certain proportion of individuals may be convicted of a sexual offence at some point during their lives, this understates the number of people who sexually offend because it omits those who remain undetected.

It is often assumed that all people who sexually abuse children are also sexually interested in them, and vice versa, but this is incorrect

In an effort to quantify this ‘dark figure’ of sexual offending, Drury et al (2020) used self-reports of actual sexual offending and data from official records in the USA. They found evidence that official data greatly underestimates the scale of offending. Based on data from 168 people with criminal convictions and disclosures obtained through polygraph-assisted interviews, Drury et al found that sexual offending was significantly undercounted in the official data. Almost three quarters of people with convictions reported at least one prior contact victim, and over one-third of the sample (n=57) had no official record of sexual offending despite reporting a total of 271 victims. On average, those interviewed reported more victims than were reflected in official records. Drury et al noted that those with convictions for offences involving child sexual abuse material (such as images) frequently reported having committed contact offences, despite no such offences appearing in their official histories. These accounts indicate that sexual offending can be understood as repetitive, underreported and frequently undetected.

Another method used to estimate prevalence in the population is the capture-recapture approach, which examines how many people in a defined population are officially detected more than once; this figure is then used to infer how many people in the general population are likely to be offending but never come to authorities’ attention. The logic of this model is that, if only a small number of people are caught repeatedly, they must represent a much larger hidden group of people who are never detected. Applying this method to a sample of 387 men convicted of sexual offences in Quebec between 1995 and 1998, Bouchard and Lussier (2015) estimated that the risk of conviction for any sexual crime (including offences against adults) across the Canadian population was about 5%. They also found that this risk was unequally distributed, with younger offenders more likely to be caught, and older offenders making up a larger share of the offending population but having a lower chance of detection.

Using the same method, the National Crime Agency estimated in its 2024 National Strategic Assessment that 710,000 to 840,000 people in the UK posed a sexual risk to children (NCA, 2024).

In an online survey of 2,828 adults in Germany, Sweden and Finland, Schulz et al (2016) found that 1% overall had engaged in online sexual solicitation of children aged under 14 (such as engaging in sexual communication with a child online and instigating sexual activities; sending or receiving sexual images; or arranging to meet the child offline). However, when looking at the sub-sample (n=386) of participants recruited from websites promoting support and therapy for self-identified paedophiles, the prevalence of this behaviour increased to 6%. More than one in six respondents who had engaged in this behaviour were female. Similar numbers of boys and girls were victims.

4.3 Self-report and anonymised community studies

In recent years, research has increasingly examined populations of individuals who have a sexual interest in children but have not offended (Cantor and McPhail, 2016). While the prevalence of paedophilic interest in pre-pubescent children among the general population has been estimated at around 1%–3% (Seto, 2018), the proportion of individuals *who remain non-offending* is likely to represent only a subset of this group. At the same time, there has been a shift away from viewing those who sexually offend against children as a homogeneous category.



An American study found evidence that official data based on convictions greatly underestimates the scale of actual sexual offending



Evidence indicates that not all individuals who commit such offences conform to a fixed paedophilic typology; many display broader patterns of offending behaviour (Soothill et al, 2000) or engage in abuse in response to situational, relational or contextual factors rather than because of a persistent sexual preference for children (Smallbone and Cale, 2016). This suggests that a focus solely on paedophilic interest risks overlooking a wider population of people who sexually abuse children but may not be characterised by a persistent sexual interest in them. Given that much of this abuse remains undetected, the composition and relative size of these different groups within the wider perpetrator population is still poorly understood.

An early study by Briere and Runtz (1989), examining sexual attitudes among 193 male undergraduate students in the USA, found that child focused sexual interest was not rare. Participants anonymously answered questions about their use of pornography, any history of child abuse, frequency of sex partners, their sexual functioning and their self-reported sexual interest in children; 21% of them reported some sexual attraction to children. When asked a hypothetical question about engaging in sexually abusive behaviours towards children, 7% of the sample said they would do so if detection and punishment were impossible.

O'Connor and Gannon (2021) examined men's sexual interest in children, but looked at the distinctions between child sexual interest generally and paedophilic interest in pre-pubescent children. Conducting two separate studies using non-forensic samples of adult men in the UK (study 1 n=195; study 2 n=220), they found that 40.3% and 29.5% respectively of participants reported some interest in child sexual abuse scenarios involving children under 16, with 14.7% and 19.5% respectively saying that they would be likely to engage in abusive behaviour within those scenarios. Only 3% expressed a sexual interest in *pre-pubescent* children, however. The studies' findings reinforced the notion that sexual arousal does not necessarily translate into intent or likelihood to offend, but they did indicate areas for prevention and early intervention.

While sexual interest is an important factor, other factors can equally contribute to sexually abusive behaviours. In an international study, Stewart and Campbell (2025) examined psychosocial, developmental, cognitive and sexual factors among men who reported a sexual interest in children but had no known criminal justice involvement. Through online sources, they recruited 609 men who self-reported a sexual interest in children aged up to 14, and compared these with 224 men who had other paraphilic interests. An online survey of both groups found that a sexual interest in children alone does not determine risk of offending; instead, the cumulative effect of different psychosocial vulnerabilities was associated with greater risk and need, supporting broader situational multi-factorial theories that explain child sexual abuse perpetration (Ward and Beech, 2016)



Research into adult men in the UK found that more than one third of participants reported some interest in child sexual abuse scenarios



In a large, anonymous online survey of 8,718 adult German men aged 30–50, Dombert et al (2016) sought to estimate the prevalence of sexual interest in pre-pubescent children (12 years or younger). This research involved more precise definitions than other research, and adopted a multimethod self-report approach which assessed sexual fantasies, behaviours, use of child sexual abuse material and other related indicators. It found that 5.5% of men reported sexual fantasies involving pre-pubescent children, and 3.2% said they had engaged in some form of sexual behaviour involving pre-pubescent children (both contact abuse and abuse through child sexual abuse material). These numbers are lower than those reported among a much younger sample by Seto et al (2015), who found that 4.2% of Swedish males aged 17–20 had viewed child sexual abuse material.

Ó Ciardha et al (2022) examined the prevalence of male adults' sexual interest across all ages of children, using an online crowdsourcing approach to recruit a sample of 997 men residing in Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the UK or the USA. They found 23.1% of participants reported at least some sexual interest in children, proclivity to offend, or self-reported 'contact or online' offending behaviour. Specifically, 16.3% said they had a sexual interest in children aged 11–14, and 1.0% a sexual interest in under-11s. Sexual offending behaviours were self-reported by 5.6% of participants, with 0.4%, 1.6% and 5.1% respectively saying they had offended against children aged under 11, 11–14 and over 14 but below the age of consent. The pattern of sexual interest and behaviour was found to be complex: among those who said they had sexually offended against children, only three-fifths said they had a sexual interest in children.

In a recent large-scale study, Woodlock et al (2026) investigated combinations of male sexual interest in children (defined as an attraction to children aged 15 or younger, or interest in abusing them in hypothetical scenarios) and sexual behaviour involving children (defined as having had sexual contact with children under 18). In an anonymous online survey of a sample of 4,918 men aged 18 and over, drawn from male populations in Australia, the USA and the UK (and representative of those populations in terms of age, residential region, household income and educational attainment), the 5.5% of the sample reported a sexual interest in children but no sexual behaviour; 6.4% reported sexual behaviour with children but no sexual interest in them; and 4.6% reported both. It is important to note that not all reported behaviour necessarily constituted criminal offending, as 'sexual behaviour involving children' included both illegal behaviour and legal sexual relationships between peers.

Across these single studies, anywhere between 3% and 40% of men presented with a sexual interest in children – but, where asked, only 3% to 5% said they were sexually attracted to pre-pubescent children. Between 3% and 11% said they had engaged in sexual behaviour involving children, while 7% to 19% said they would be likely to engage in such behaviour in certain hypothetical scenarios. The studies involved a wide range of different methods, however, including differences in sample selection. Combining data from multiple studies using systematic reviews and meta-analyses helps increase precision, improve generalisability, and remove bias, making them a preferred approach for synthesising evidence – yet very few of these types of study exist when examining perpetration.



Combining data from multiple studies using systematic reviews and meta-analyses helps to increase precision and remove bias



One systematic review of the prevalence and correlates of sexual interest in children across community, clinical, and forensic samples (Savoie et al, 2021) included 30 quantitative studies published between 1980 and 2020, and found that estimated prevalence varied widely depending on definition, population and measurement. Studies using broad indicators indicated that between 2% and 24% of men had a sexual interest in children – but when the review restricted its analysis to self-reported sexual interest in pre-pubescent children and used more conservative definitions and lower bias studies, a prevalence rate of around 2% was found. This study included clinical and forensic samples, however, which limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised to the wider population.

The first meta-analytical study examining self-report data on the prevalence of child sexual abuse perpetration *excluding clinical and forensic populations* was recently published. To estimate prevalence by adults in the general population, Whitten et al (2026) combined data from 38 studies, systematic reviews and meta-analyses involving the self-reports of adults who had engaged in child sexual abuse; they excluded studies examining clinical, forensic and child populations, and excluded adults who had only *sexual interests or feelings* towards children. By measuring *actual* engagement in sexually abusive behaviours rather than hypothetical engagement, they were able to estimate the number of people who commit sexual offences against children while avoiding criminal detection.

- ▶ Most of the 38 studies focused on participants from North America or Europe, although 12 studies included samples from several countries. Studies were more likely to measure contact offending than non contact offending. Some reported results for both men and women, while others focused only on men or only on women. Sample sizes varied widely, from a few dozen participants to thousands; the biggest samples typically came from online studies.

- ▶ The proportional meta-analysis found that non contact child sexual abuse was reported more frequently than contact offending. The prevalence rate for contact abuse was estimated at 4.5% when children of any age were included; when breaking the findings down by the child's age, prevalence was 2.0% for pubescent children – those aged 13 and over – and 1.5% for pre-pubescent children. (Some of the studies analysed had not differentiated between abuse of older and younger children; additionally, not all studies in the meta-analysis made a clear distinction between sexual abuse and consensual sexual behaviour with near-contemporaries among the youngest adult participants.) Estimates for non contact abuse were higher at 6.5% for children of any age and 6.2% for pubescent children, with a much lower estimate of 1.7% for pre-pubescent children. Non contact offending was about twice as common as contact offending among men, whereas contact and non contact offending by women had broadly similar prevalence rates.
- ▶ Whitten et al noted the need for caution when applying prevalence rates to general populations, because of the variance in study definitions, age ranges and research questions. Additionally, self-reporting can be vulnerable to bias, online samples may not represent the general population well, and the research literature does not represent all populations (such as women) and types of offending. Rather than being fixed numbers, their rates of child sexual abuse perpetration are estimated averages across all countries, communities and groups. Note too that the proportional meta-analysis did not cover harmful sexual behaviour by children.

A meta-analysis found that adults self-reported having committed non-contact child sexual abuse more often than contact abuse

4.4 What does the research tell us about the prevalence of child sexual abuse perpetration?

The existing evidence base on the prevalence of child sexual abuse perpetration is restricted by a set of persistent and interrelated limitations. The use of victimisation surveys, official records and self-report studies to estimate true prevalence is problematic. While self-report research is increasingly relied upon, it remains vulnerable to underreporting and sampling bias, especially given the stigma associated with child sexual abuse.

At the same time, there remains inconsistency in how studies define key concepts such as 'child', 'sexual interest' or 'offending behaviour', and many do not distinguish clearly between sexual interest and actual abusive behaviour. This conceptual inconsistency, combined with the use of hypothetical measures and purposive study designs, produces estimates that can only be used with great caution and are therefore of limited practical use.

Significant gaps remain in what we can confidently say about perpetration prevalence. While estimates for the general population are emerging, they remain limited in number – particularly those that focus on undetected offending rather than criminal justice samples. There is a lack of consistency and conceptual distinction across definitions, ages, offence types and population types, leading to wide variation in reported prevalence. Furthermore, certain people – including women, those who offend in groups, and people outside Western contexts – are underrepresented in the research literature on perpetration prevalence.

There has been a notable lack of research into how and why people move from sexual interest to sexual offending. This makes it difficult to identify risk clearly and target prevention effectively. Beyond this, areas such as child sexual abuse in online contexts and harmful sexual behaviour by children are not yet well integrated into prevalence research. Overall, the field remains some distance from producing a reliable, comprehensive picture of the scale or nature of perpetration.

What we can say is that our current understanding of the prevalence of sexual offending against children is likely to be an underestimation, online perpetration is likely to be more prevalent, and – while men appear to be the most prominent perpetrator group – the level of sexual offending against children by women and other children is not insignificant.



Child sexual abuse in online contexts and harmful sexual behaviour by children are not yet well integrated into prevalence research



5. Official data from local authority children's services in England

This chapter provides an overview of cases of child sexual abuse recorded in the child protection system (by local authority children's services) in England during 2024/25, using data published by the Department for Education. At the time of publication there was no equivalent information available for Wales.

Only a small minority of children experiencing sexual abuse come to the attention of children's services at the time of the abuse; as Chapter 3 shows, the estimated scale of child sexual abuse is far higher than the numbers recorded in the published data. And the data provides only limited information about children who *do* receive a response from children's services:

- ▶ Data is available 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, factors 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(s) for this. 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 protection plans, in a time series published since the early 1990s.
- ▶ No data is published regularly 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), nor about children referred to 'early help'. These children represent the vast majority of those supported by children's services, as a child is only placed on a protection plan under certain circumstances (see box below). Of the 632,830 children referred to children's services in England in 2024/25, just 10% (61,840) were made the subject of child protection plans under any category of abuse or neglect (Department for Education, 2025a: Tables A1 and D2).

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 children experience sexual abuse alongside other forms of abuse and/or neglect (see section 2.2.1 and the box in section 5.1), and many professionals have not been given the knowledge and skills to identify and name concerns of child sexual abuse with confidence (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2024; Ofsted et al, 2020).



Few sexually abused children come to the attention of children's services, and only limited data about those children is available



Child sexual abuse and exploitation: Recording practices in children's social care

In response to the National Audit on Group-based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (Casey, 2025), the Department for Education commissioned research to explore social workers' views on recording concerns of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation. The resulting report (Ball et al, 2026) raised the following practice issues about recording child sexual abuse (including child sexual exploitation) concerns:

- ▶ Early intervention can reduce the number of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation cases recorded in statutory data. Social workers described how, during the 45-day assessment period, they took action which disrupted or addressed sexual abuse or sexual exploitation before the end of the assessment. However, 'factors' that are reported to the Department for Education are recorded at the end of the assessment, and are only those that are relevant at the time: if sexual abuse or exploitation is no longer a current concern, it is not reported. Continuous recording of relevant factors during the assessment period would result in more accurate understanding of the concerns relating to sexual abuse or sexual exploitation.
- ▶ Child sexual abuse or exploitation concerns can get 'lost' in the context of multiple other issues about the family or the child, social workers said. This presented a particular difficulty when needing to 'identify a single primary driver of harm': "We are forced to pick something tidy, even when the situation is anything but tidy" (p17). When selecting the reason for making a child the subject of a child protection plan, "It often gets put under the category of neglect because that covers so many areas, including inability to protect and ensure safety, which can include physical, emotional and sexual [abuse]" (p23).
- ▶ Concerns about sexual abuse – and particularly sexual exploitation – emerge over time and through building a relationship with the child. If this does not happen until after the 45-day assessment period, these concerns will not be recorded at the end of the assessment. "The cases don't come in as 'sexual abuse'. They come in as 'we can't manage her behaviour' or 'he's going missing'. The sexual harm is buried" (p27).
- ▶ It appears that different thresholds are applied for the recording of sexual abuse and other forms of abuse/neglect. The response to child sexual abuse was described as being 'disclosure-led' while other forms of harm did not rely on the child's disclosure: "We don't want to label something as sexual abuse without a disclosure... but those disclosures often never come" (p21). Social workers appeared to lack confidence in recording child sexual abuse concerns in the context of partial information or behavioural clues.
- ▶ Related to this, social workers feel discomfort at recording sexual abuse: "It is more comfortable, it's more acceptable for families and carers if you're naming something else" (p21). They felt that *not* recording sexual abuse as the primary concern would support engagement with families, who might be more responsive to concerns framed in 'less sensitive terms'.
- ▶ Police investigations influence assessment decisions: echoing the findings from the national review into child sexual abuse within the family environment (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2024), this research found a lack of confidence in recording child sexual abuse concerns when the police have closed their investigation with no further action owing to evidential difficulties. While practitioners understood that children's social care operates on the evidential threshold of balance of probability, rather than the criminal standard of proof beyond reasonable doubt, naming sexual abuse or exploitation was described as being dependent on the 'definitive' evidence: "If the police say they're not progressing it, that affects people's confidence to record it as sexual abuse" (p21).
- ▶ It is not easy to extract concerns about sexual harm from children's social care case management systems, as details about such concerns are often recorded in narrative text: "The lived story doesn't fit the drop-down boxes. Workers end up writing long narrative that never translate into the national data." (p32).

To overcome these challenges, social workers stressed the importance of having a working environment that supports reflection, discussion and confidence-building. They also called for ongoing training on child sexual abuse, clear tools and pathways, and supportive supervision.

A recent analysis (Department for Education, 2025b) showed that, among children who were made the subject of a child protection plan after a needs assessment recorded concerns of sexual abuse, only 38% had sexual abuse recorded as the reason for their plan; among children placed on a plan after a needs assessment recorded concerns of sexual exploitation, only 16% had a plan with sexual abuse as the recorded reason. The box in section 5.1 contains more information about these children.

Another study found that, among children recorded in police data as having been sexually abused, 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, children are rarely recorded under the 'multiple' abuse category on their protection plan: in 2024/25, nearly three-quarters (n=111) of England's local authorities did not place any children under this category (Department for Education, 2025a, Table D2). Any sexual abuse concerns recorded under the 'multiple' category are not visible in the published data.

Despite these limitations, monitoring recorded cases of child sexual abuse in local authority data gives insight into the changing patterns of identification and recording of child sexual abuse by children's services, and also some information about 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.

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 5.1 of this report are multi-agency (Section 17) assessments.

Sources: Department for Education (2026); Children Act 1989.

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

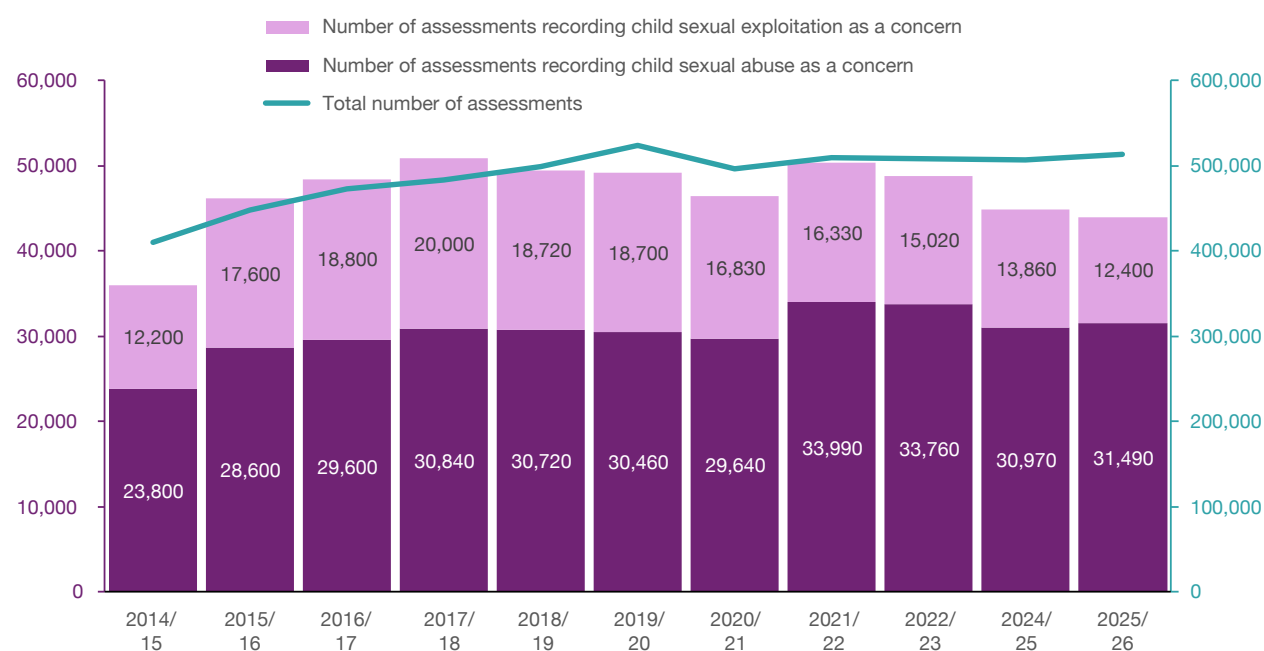
Source for this section, unless otherwise stated: DfE (2025a), Table C3.

The Department for Education publishes a list of 37 ‘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.⁸ Where multiple factors are identified, all are recorded.

Figure 27 shows that there was little change between 2023/24 and 2024/25 in the number of needs assessments recording concerns about child sexual abuse (in dark purple): 31,490 assessments noted sexual abuse as a concern, 2% more than in the previous year. There was, however, an 11% decrease in the number of assessments recording sexual exploitation (in light purple) in 2024/25, to 12,400. This percentage decrease was the third-largest of any category, behind only gangs and trafficking (both down by 13%).

Overall, there were 43,890 needs assessments relating to either sexual abuse or sexual exploitation concerns: the lowest number in a decade. Meanwhile, the total number of needs assessments recording *any* concerns (shown in green in Figure 27) increased by 1%.

Figure 27. Child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation identified during assessments by local authority children’s services, 2015/16–2024/25, England



Sources: Department for Education (2025a: 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.

8. A new analysis (Department for Education, 2025b) has shown that, among children assessed in 2024/25 as being affected by sexual exploitation, 15% were also assessed as being affected by “adult-on-child sexual abuse” and 11% by “child-on-child” sexual abuse. It is unclear whether this is because these children were considered at risk of those forms of sexual abuse and exploitation simultaneously, or because some local authorities recorded both factors for children affected by sexual exploitation because it is a form of sexual abuse. Guidance on recording concerns (Department for Education, 2025d) treats the two as separate issues, and does not instruct such double counting.

Concerns about child sexual abuse or exploitation were identified in a little under 9% of the 513,250 needs assessments which identified concerns. Child sexual abuse assessments remained at 6% of the total, and those relating to sexual exploitation fell to below 2.5% for the first time. The number of assessments identifying sexual exploitation in England has fallen every year since 2017/18, to well below two-thirds of the level in that year.

Other forms of abuse and neglect featured far more frequently in needs assessments: concerns of emotional abuse (97,700) and neglect (90,370) each featured in nearly one in five assessments recording any concerns, while one in seven featured physical abuse (76,680). Concerns of child *criminal* exploitation, which were introduced into the data collection statistics in 2021/22, were recorded in 16,250 assessments – one-third more than the number recording *sexual* exploitation.

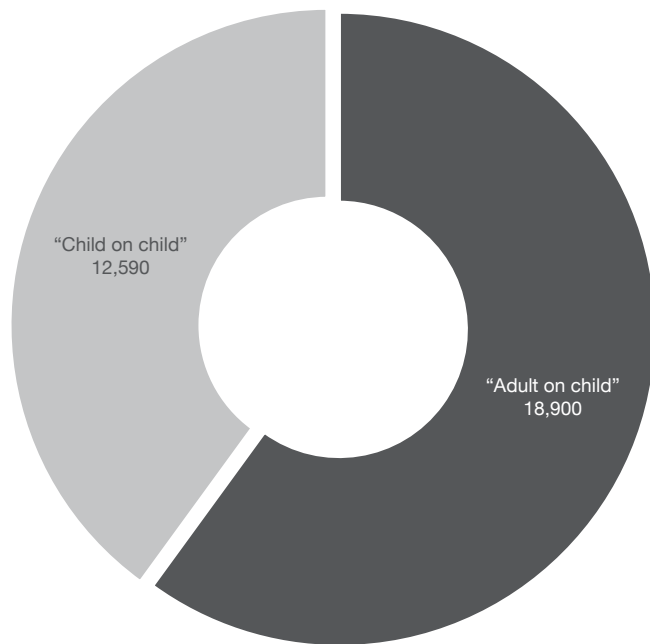
A new analysis (Department for Education, 2025b), detailed in the box overleaf, has shown that the 31,490 assessments recording sexual abuse concerns in 2024/25 involved 29,560 individual children, while the 12,400 assessments recording sexual exploitation concerns were of 12,120 children.

The ‘sexual abuse’ category in assessments was 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 2024/25, 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 28. These proportions have remained stable since they were first introduced. It is not clear to what extent concerns of ‘child on child’ abuse involved assessing both (or all) of the children involved – the child(ren) who were harmed *and* the child(ren) who harmed. It is likely that the 12,590 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 also be some instances where an assessment of a child records sexual abuse by an adult *and* ‘child-on-child’ sexual abuse.

Figure 28. Child sexual abuse identified during assessments by local authority children’s services, by age of perpetrator, 2024/25, England



Source: Department for Education (2025a: Table C3, year ending 31 March 2025).

It is likely that some incidents of ‘child on child’ abuse were recorded in the assessments of the child who was harmed and the child who harmed

Children in need because of sexual abuse or sexual exploitation: presence of other concerns, child characteristics, and school data

Last year, the National Audit on Group-based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (Casey, 2025) called for a better interrogation of child protection data. In response, the Department for Education conducted a focused analysis of children whose needs assessments raised concerns about child sexual abuse or child sexual exploitation. The analysis included previously unpublished data on the presence of other concerns, children's demographic characteristics, levels of special educational needs, school absence and exclusion, and the support provided by children's services following the assessment.

The resulting report (Department for Education, 2025b) set out the following findings in relation to children whose needs assessments, carried out in 2024/25, recorded concerns about sexual abuse ('adult on child' or 'child on child') or sexual exploitation:

- ▶ It was common for children whose assessments raised concerns about child sexual abuse to have other concerns recorded too – most commonly about parental mental health (27%), the child's mental health (25%) and emotional abuse (20%) – but one-third of them (32%) had no other concerns recorded.
- ▶ Children whose assessments raised concerns about sexual exploitation were much more likely to have additional concerns recorded. Most had mental health concerns recorded about them (51%) or a parent (33%), and one-third (34%) were recorded as being at risk of going missing. Other commonly recorded concerns related to socially unacceptable behaviour (28%), self-harm (28%) and drug misuse (27%). Only 11% had no other concerns recorded.

Demographic characteristics

- ▶ Girls accounted for 60% of the children whose assessments included 'adult on child' sexual abuse concerns and 67% of those for whom sexual exploitation concerns were recorded. However, almost half (47%) of children whose assessments identified 'child on child' sexual abuse as a concern were boys, suggesting that this category may include some children who had sexually harmed others as well as those who had been harmed.
- ▶ While more than half (53%) of England's general child population in mid-2024 was aged under 10 (Office for National Statistics, 2025c), nearly three-fifths (58%) of children whose assessments recorded sexual abuse concerns – and four-fifths (81%) of those with sexual exploitation concerns recorded – were aged 10 or over.
- ▶ Where the child's ethnicity was recorded, children of Asian heritage accounted for 7% of those whose assessments recorded sexual abuse or exploitation concerns, despite making up 14% of children attending state schools and nurseries in England (see Figure 32). In contrast, 79% of children with sexual abuse concerns recorded, and 74% of those with sexual exploitation concerns recorded, were White – compared with only 69% of all pupils at state schools and nurseries.
- ▶ A disability was recorded in the assessments of 5% and 8% respectively of children assessed with sexual abuse and sexual exploitation concerns; among all children in need, 14% had a recorded disability. In the latest Crime Survey for England and Wales, 22% of respondents reporting sexual abuse in childhood said they had been physically disabled as children, and 33% said they had had a long-term mental health condition or disability (see section 2.2).

Education and school engagement (note: these findings relate to 2023/24, not 2024/25)

- Around one in five (18%) of all children attending state schools had a special educational need in 2023/24, compared with 37% and 44% respectively of children assessed to be at risk of or affected by sexual abuse and sexual exploitation.
- Three-fifths (61%) of children with sexual abuse or exploitation concerns recorded were eligible for free school meals in 2023/24, compared to only a quarter (25%) of all state-educated pupils.
- Two-thirds (66%) of children whose assessments recorded sexual exploitation concerns, and more than two-fifths (43%) of those with sexual abuse concerns recorded, were persistently absent from school – meaning that they had missed more than 10% of all school sessions – in 2023/24. This was true of just one-fifth (20%) of state-educated pupils overall.
- One in five children (20%) with sexual exploitation concerns recorded, and one-tenth (10%) of those with sexual abuse concerns, had been suspended from school at least once in 2022/23; across all state-educated pupils, the figure was 4%. While just 0.1% of all state pupils had been permanently excluded from a school, the rates were far higher – at 1.5% and 0.8% – among children for whom sexual exploitation or sexual abuse concerns had been recorded in assessments.

These findings suggest that children's services may be under-identifying children under 10, disabled children and those of Asian heritage as being at risk of or affected by sexual abuse or exploitation. Children with sexual abuse or exploitation concerns recorded are particularly likely to have special educational needs, receive free school meals, be persistently absent from school, and be suspended or excluded from school.

5.2 Sexual abuse recorded on child protection plans

Source for this section, unless otherwise stated: Department for Education (2025a), Table D2.

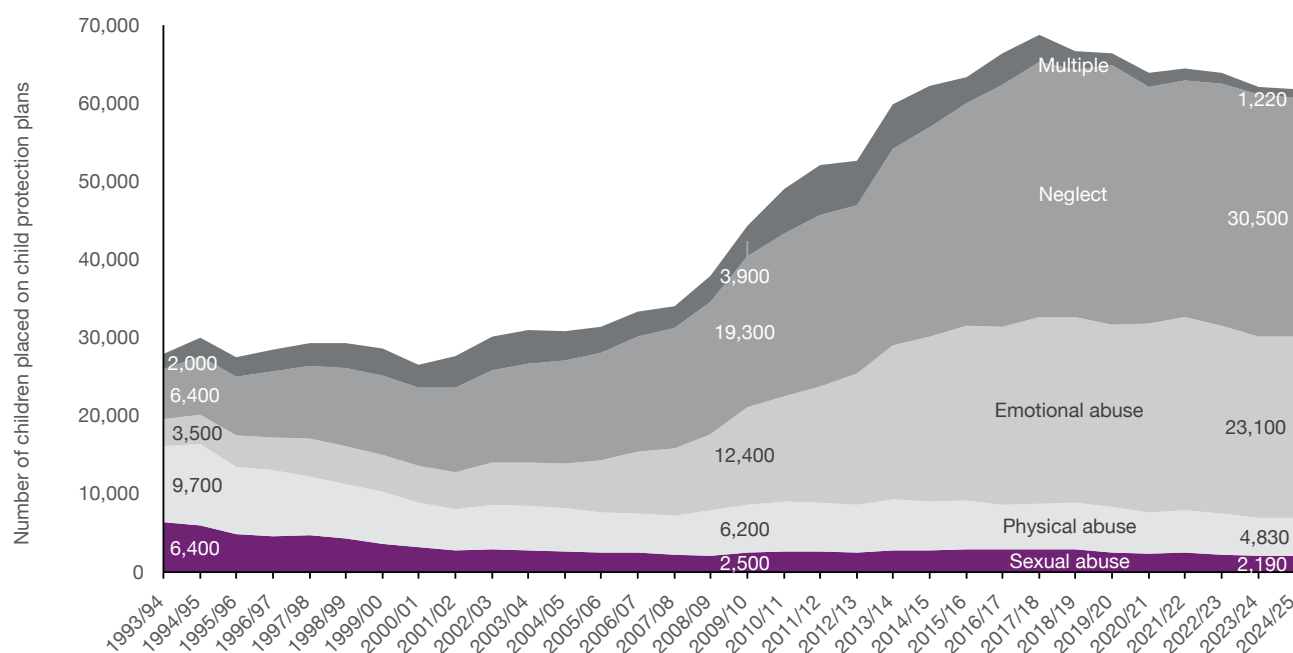
Just 2,190 children in England were made the subject of a child protection plan under the initial category of sexual abuse (which, for child protection plans, includes child sexual exploitation) in 2024/25. Although this was a slight increase on the previous year's figure of 2,160, it is the second lowest number recorded in the 32 years that this data has been published. Of all the child protection plans started in 2024/25, those under the category of sexual abuse accounted for 3.5%, similar to the previous year and the joint lowest proportion categorised under sexual abuse during the 32 years (see **Figure 29**).

Sexual abuse has accounted for a steadily declining share of new child protection plans over the past three decades. While the overall number of new plans per year has more than doubled since the early 2000s, the number of new plans under the sexual abuse category has fallen.

The number of children made the subject of a child protection plan under the category of sexual abuse equated to only 5% of the 43,890 needs assessments which recorded sexual abuse or sexual exploitation concerns in 2024/25. The equivalent proportion for physical abuse was similar at 6%, but it was much higher for emotional abuse and neglect (for which the numbers of new child protection plans equated to 24% and 34% respectively of initial needs assessments raising these concerns).

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 29. Children placed on child protection plans per year, by category of abuse, 1993/94–2024/25, England



Source: Department for Education (2025a: 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.

5.3 Characteristics of children on protection plans because of sexual abuse

Source for this section, unless otherwise stated: DfE (2025a), Tables A4 and A5.

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.

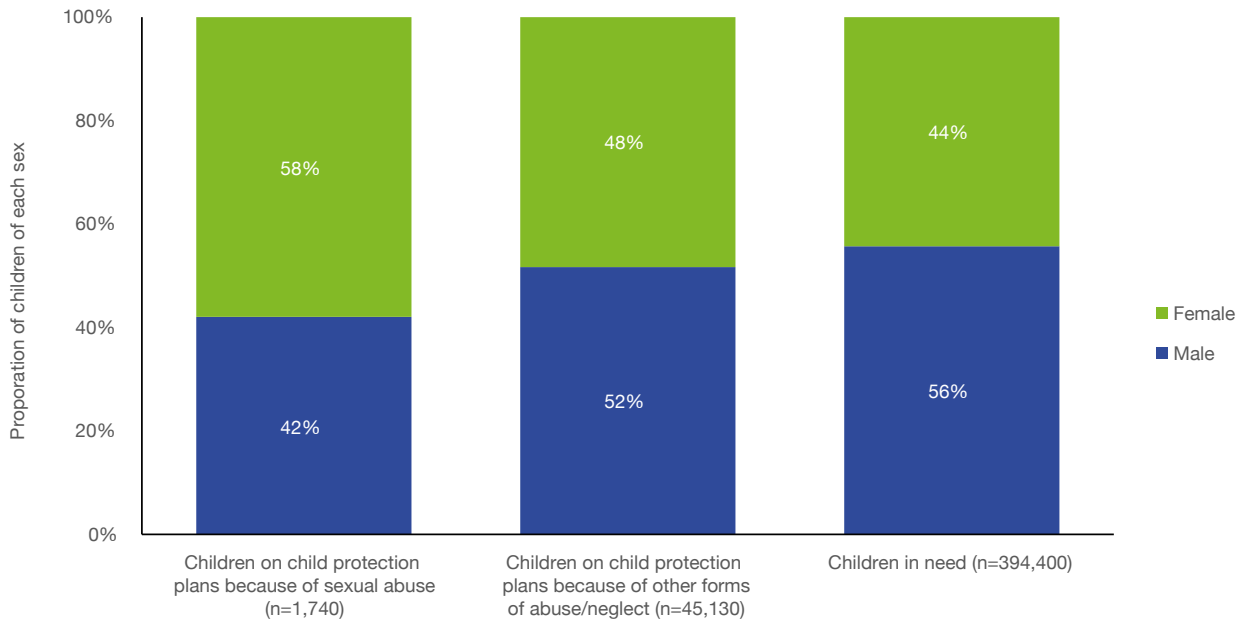
5.3.1 Sex

Figure 30 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 2025. In comparison, they accounted for fewer than half of children on child protection plans under other categories of abuse, and of children in need.

It is notable that the proportion of boys on child protection plans under the category of sexual abuse (42%) was significantly higher than the proportion of boys who are sexually abused according to prevalence surveys and police data.⁹ The reasons for this are unclear.

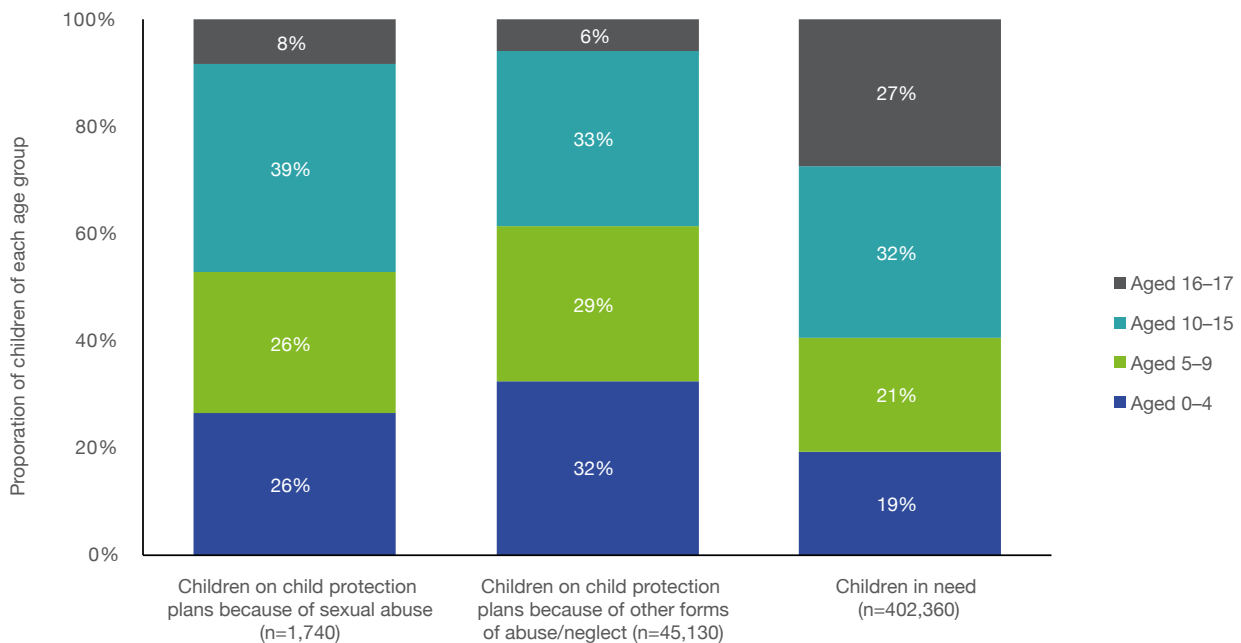
9. The latest Crime Survey for England and Wales childhood maltreatment module estimated that men account for, 22% of adults in England and Wales who were sexually abused in childhood (see section 2.3). And in the latest analysis of child victims of sexual offences recorded by the police in England and Wales, relating to 2024, 22% of victims whose sex was recorded were male (National Centre for Violence Against Women & Girls and Public Protection, 2025).

Figure 30. Children on child protection plans and children in need at 31 March 2025, by sex, England



Source: Department for Education (2025a: Tables A4 and A5, year ending 31 March 2025). The chart excludes a small number of children whose sex was not recorded, and children on child protection plans under multiple categories.

Figure 31. Children on child protection plans and children in need at 31 March 2025, by age, England



Source: Department for Education (2025a: Tables A4 and A5, year ending 31 March 2025). The chart excludes a small number of children whose age was not recorded, and children on child protection plans under multiple categories.

5.3.2 Age

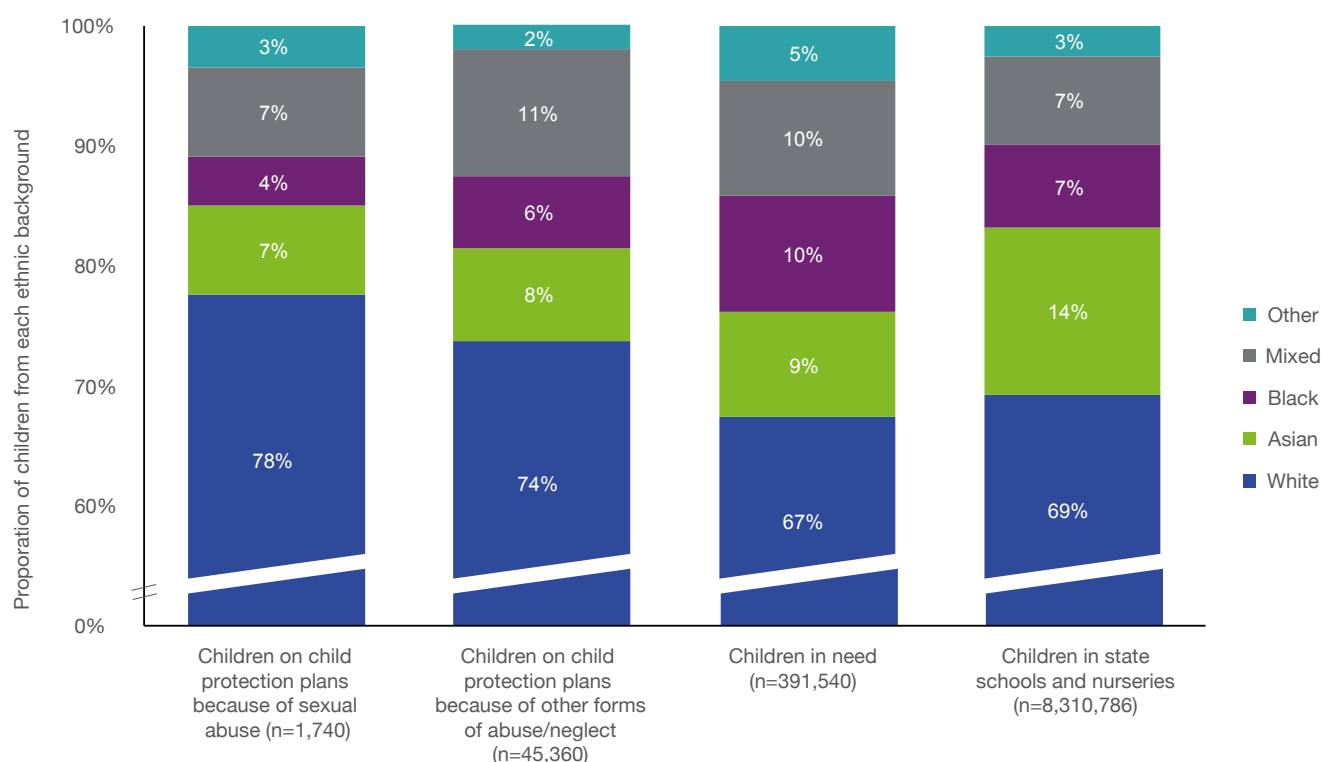
Compared with those on protection plans because of other forms of abuse or neglect, children in England who were the subject of child protection plans under the category of sexual abuse on 31 March 2025 were less likely to be aged under five and more likely to be over 10 years old (see **Figure 31**) – 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.¹⁰

5.3.3 Ethnicity

Children on child protection plans in England under the category of sexual abuse on 31 March 2025 were more likely than other children on child protection plans to be from White (White British or ‘White other’) backgrounds – and were considerably more likely to be White than the population of children attending English state schools and nurseries (see **Figure 32**).

While 14% of children attending state schools and nurseries were from Asian backgrounds, and 7% were Black, these proportions were halved (at 7% and 4% respectively) among children placed on child protection plans because of sexual abuse. Children of African, Asian and Caribbean heritage are under-represented in police-recorded child sexual abuse offence data too.¹¹

Figure 32. Children on child protection plans and children in need at 31 March 2025, by ethnicity, England



Sources: Department for Education (2025a: Tables A4 and A5, year ending 31 March 2025); Department for Education (2025c). The chart excludes a small number of children whose ethnicity was not recorded, and children on child protection plans under multiple categories.

10. Where data on their age was recorded, only 18% of children recorded as victims of sexual offences by the police in England and Wales in 2024 were aged under 10 (National Centre for Violence Against Women & Girls and Public Protection, 2025).

11. Where police records of child sexual abuse offences contained details of the victims' ethnicity in 2024, 90% of victims were White, 3% were of Asian heritage, 3% were Black, 3% were of mixed heritage, and 1% were from other minority ethnic backgrounds; however, only 34% of police records contained this information (National Centre for Violence Against Women & Girls and Public Protection, 2025).

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).

Research has concluded that the likelihood of being sexually abused in childhood does not vary significantly between ethnic groups

Children in need because of sexual abuse or sexual exploitation: journey through the child protection system

The Department for Education's 2025 review (see box in section 5.1) also examined what local authority children's services had done after recording concerns about sexual abuse or sexual exploitation in assessments of children.

Among children referred to children's services in 2023 whose assessment identified sexual exploitation as a concern, almost one-third (29%) were re-referrals – one of the highest re-referral rates across all 'assessment factors'. In contrast, the 19% re-referral rate among children whose assessments in 2023 recorded sexual abuse concerns was one of the lowest.

Tracking children whose assessments in 2017/18 had recorded concerns about sexual abuse or sexual exploitation, the review found that the majority (55% and 52% respectively) had been placed on a child in need plan at some point during the following six years. Smaller proportions were placed on the child protection plans (17% and 16% respectively) or became 'looked-after' children (11% and 14% respectively), while one in eight (and 14% and 12% respectively) had no further action recorded in the subsequent six years. Overall, these proportions were similar to those for all children assessed in 2017/18. The analysis could not, however, identify whether the sexual abuse or sexual exploitation concerns recorded in the 2017/18 assessments had prompted these safeguarding actions.

The review also looked at child protection enquiries (carried out under Section 47 of the Children Act 1989) for children whose initial assessments had included concerns about child sexual abuse or exploitation. In 2023/24, nearly half of children initially assessed as having been affected by child sexual abuse (47%) or child sexual exploitation (46%) were referred for a child protection enquiry – higher than the 31% referral rate for all children assessed. However, once a child protection enquiry had taken place, these children were less likely to progress to an initial child protection conference: fewer than one-third of Section 47 enquiries relating to child sexual abuse or exploitation were followed by an initial child protection conference, compared to two-fifths of all Section 47 enquiries.

In 2025, 14% of children assessed as being at risk of or being affected by sexual abuse, and 15% of those with sexual exploitation concerns recorded in their assessment, were made the subject of a child protection plan. Among the 1,820 children placed on child protection plans after an assessment had recorded sexual exploitation concerns, however, nearly half (47%) had plans initiated under the category of neglect, a third (31%) under emotional abuse, and only one in six (16%) under sexual abuse. In contrast, among the 4,130 children placed on child protection plans after sexual abuse concerns were raised in an assessment, 38% were placed under the category of sexual abuse, 35% under neglect and 20% under emotional abuse.

Where children became looked-after following an assessment in 2017/18 which recorded sexual abuse concerns, nearly half (48%) of these children were placed in foster care, one-sixth (15%) were placed in independent/semi-independent living arrangements or supported accommodation, and another one in six (15%) were adopted. Children assessed as being at risk or affected by sexual exploitation who subsequently became looked-after were almost equally likely to be placed in foster care (39%) or in independent/semi-independent living arrangements or supported accommodation (34%); only 4% were placed for adoption.

Source: Department for Education (2025b).

5.4 Local variation

Sources for this section, unless otherwise stated: DfE (2025a), Tables A4 and A5; DfE (2025c).

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

5.4.1 Assessments naming child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation

Figure 33 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 a higher number of needs assessments identifying this abuse, relative to the local child population.

In 2024/25, three local authorities did not identify sexual abuse concerns in the needs assessments of *any* children, and 12 local authorities identified these concerns in fewer than one assessment per 1,000 children living in the area. In contrast, four local authorities identified sexual abuse concerns in more than six assessments for every 1,000 children.

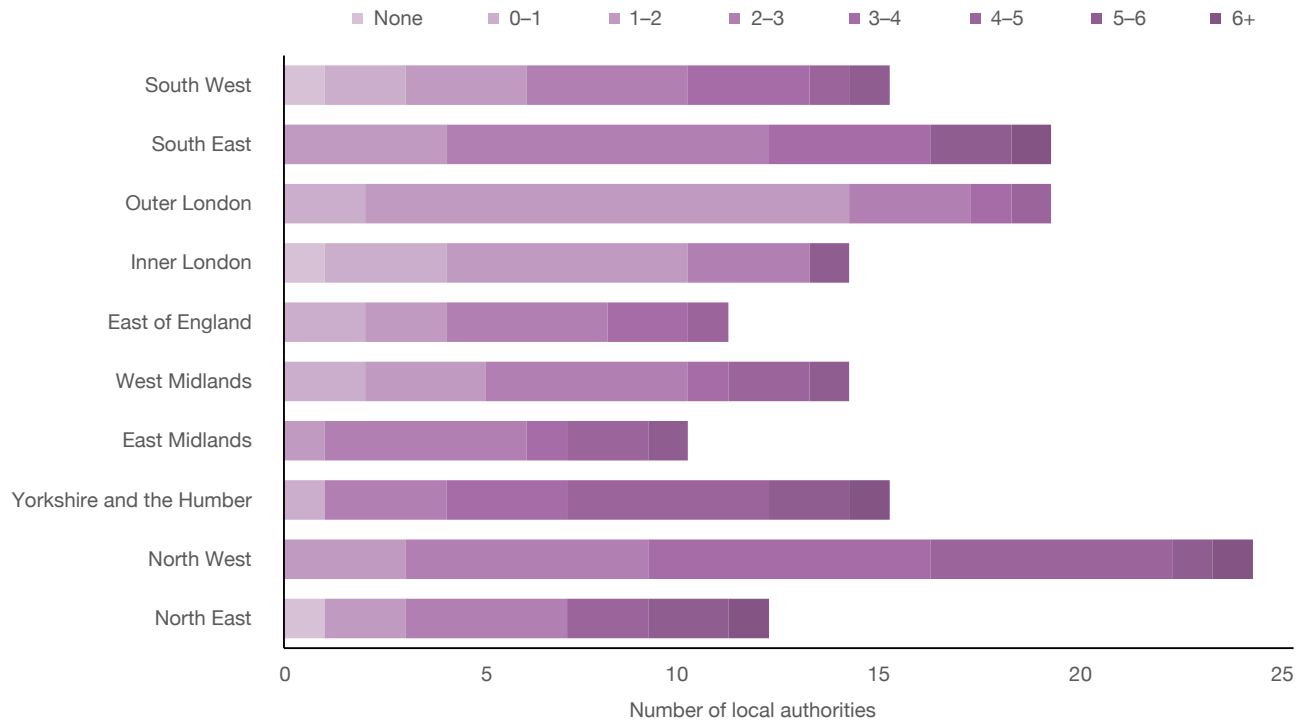
There was considerable variation between regions: eight of the 15 local authorities in Yorkshire and the Humber, but only two of London's 33 local authorities, had a rate above four assessments identifying sexual abuse concerns for every 1,000 children in the area. And local authorities in the East of England, the South West and the South East tended to have lower sexual abuse identification rates than those in the North East and the North West. Nevertheless, the range of shades of purple within each bar of Figure 33 indicates that every region showed considerable variation between its local authorities.

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

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 34**. The overall decrease in the number of assessments recording sexual exploitation is mirrored by the fall in individual local authorities' numbers: in 2024/25, only half of all England's local authorities recorded more than one child at risk of sexual exploitation for every 1,000 children living in the area, while three-fifths had done so a year earlier.

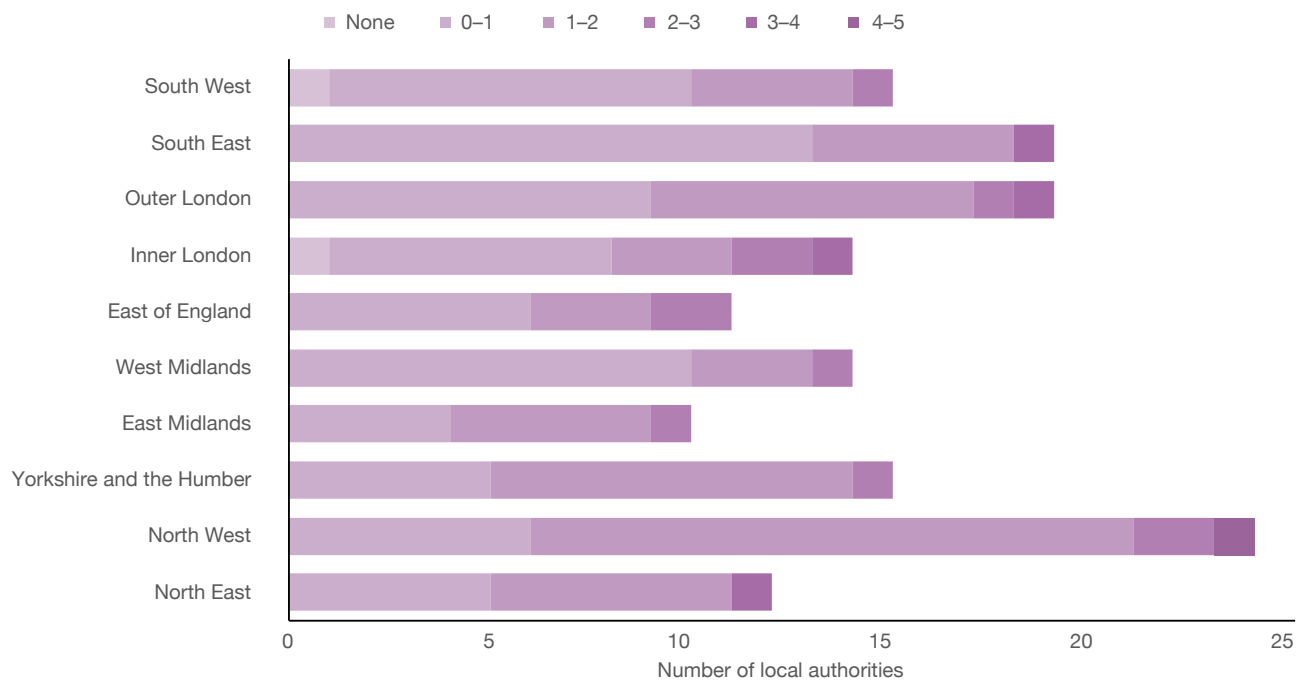
Within every English region there was wide variation between local authorities in their recording of concerns about child sexual abuse

Figure 33. Number of local authority assessments per 1,000 local child population recording children as at risk of sexual abuse, by region, 2024/25, England



Sources: Department for Education (2025a: Table C3, year ending 31 March 2025); Office for National Statistics (2025c). 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.

Figure 34. Number of local authority assessments per 1,000 local child population recording children as at risk of sexual exploitation, by region, 2024/25, England



Sources: Department for Education (2025a: Table C3, year ending 31 March 2025); Office for National Statistics (2025c). 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.

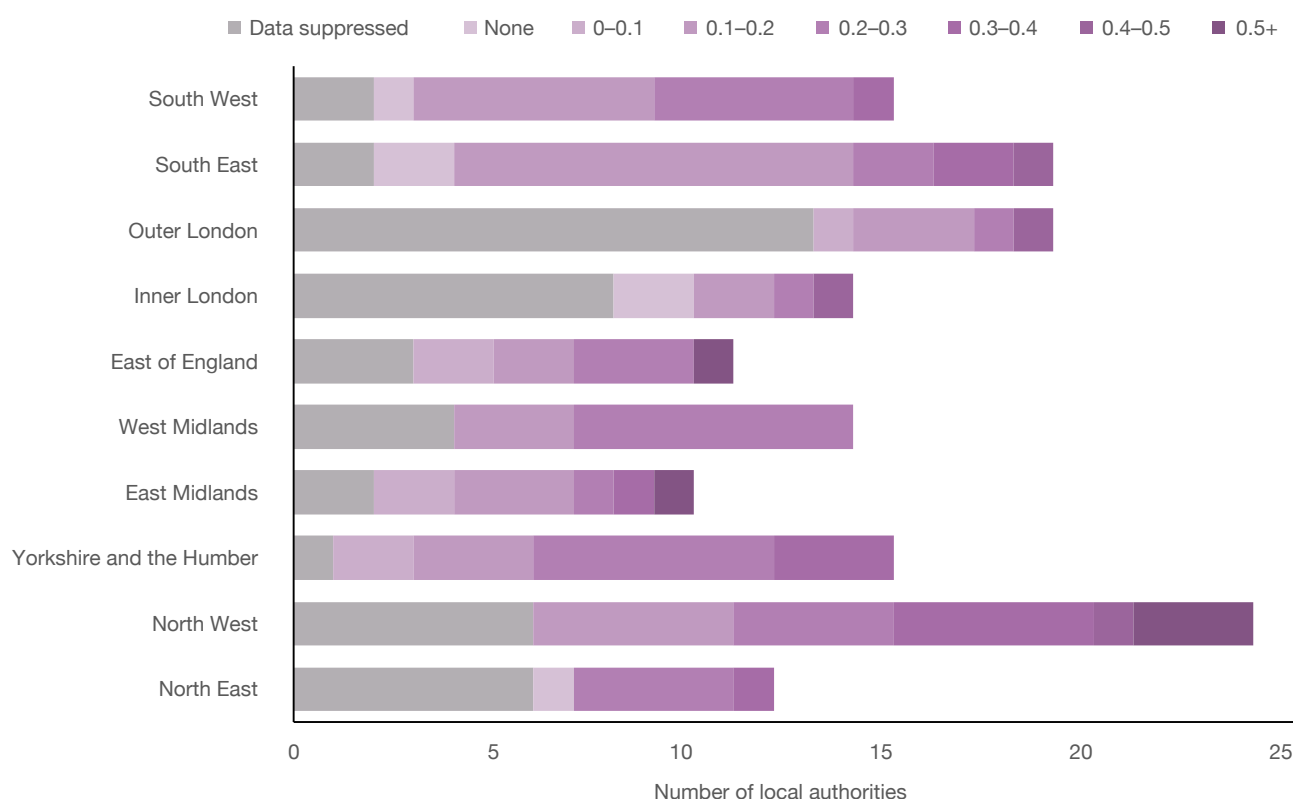
5.4.2 Child protection plans

It is harder to measure the variation in the number of children placed on child protection plans because of sexual abuse, as a proportion of the local child population: as in previous years, this data for 2024/25 was 'suppressed' (shown as grey in **Figure 35**) in around one-third of local authorities (47 out of 153). A proportion 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 106 local authorities, six placed no children on child protection plans under the primary category of sexual abuse at all, and in 44 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 nearly two-thirds of local authorities (97 out of 153) placed no or very few children on child protection plans because of sexual abuse.

There were no observable patterns within individual regions; the wide variety of shades of purple in each bar of Figure 35 indicates a high degree of variation in all regions.

Figure 35. 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, 2024/25, England



Sources: Department for Education (2025a: Table D2, year ending 31 March 2025); Office for National Statistics (2025c).

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, 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, 20 in the '0.1-0.2' group, three in the '0.2-0.3' group, and one in the '0.5+' group.

6. Data from criminal justice agencies in England and Wales

This chapter draws on publicly available data on police-recorded sexual offences against children published by the Home Office,¹² and data released by the Ministry of Justice¹³ 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.

6.1 Police-recorded crime statistics

Source for this section, unless otherwise stated: Home Office (2025b), Table 2024–25.

Table 5 shows that, in 2024/25 (April to March), a total of 103,547 identifiable¹⁴ child sexual abuse offences were recorded by the police in England and Wales.

Table 5. Identifiable child sexual abuse offences recorded by the police, 2024/25, England and Wales

Offence category	Number in England	Number in Wales	Total in England and Wales*
Rape of a female child under 13	4,812	260	5,073
Rape of a male child under 13	2,039	99	2,138
Rape of a female child under 16	8,219	449	8,680
Rape of a male child under 16	789	36	827
Sexual assault on a female child under 13	10,787	705	11,525
Sexual assault on a male child under 13	4,382	315	4,713
Sexual activity involving a child under 13	7,080	430	7,518
Sexual activity involving a child under 16	11,827	732	12,573
Abuse of children through sexual exploitation	942	24	968
Abuse of position of trust of a sexual nature	301	17	318
Sexual grooming	6,632	565	7,197
Child sexual abuse image offences**	39,644	2,352	42,017
Total	97,454	5,984	103,547

Source: Home Office (2025b: Table 2024–25, updated October 2025).

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

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

12. Published police data uses offence classifications set out in the Home Office Crime Recording Rules (Home Office, 2025a). These classifications are based on the Sexual Offences Act 2003.
13. 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.
14. Not all sexual offences against children are visible in publicly available data (see Appendix A); 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.
15. 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-2024 estimates (Office for National Statistics, 2025c).

The four police forces in Wales recorded almost 6,000 child sexual abuse offences, and England's 39 forces recorded just over 97,000. Relative to the child population, Welsh forces recorded more child sexual abuse offences (10.4 offences per 1,000 children aged 0–15)¹⁵ than forces in England (9.1 offences per 1,000 children).

More than two-fifths of identifiable child sexual abuse offences involved images, one in five were sexual activity offences, one in six were rape and another one in six were sexual assault offences. These findings were broadly consistent in England and in Wales.

If an offence is recorded by the police more than a year after it took place, the offence is considered 'non-recent' (Office for National Statistics, 2025d). Excluding image offences, one-third (32%) of child sexual abuse offences recorded by the police in 2024/25 were non-recent (Office for National Statistics, 2025d: Table B10). This proportion has decreased in recent years: in 2016/17, two-fifths (40%) of these recorded offences were non-recent.



Excluding image offences, a third of child sexual abuse offences recorded by the police in 2024/25 had taken place at least a year earlier



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 6.4.1), to minimise their risk to children.

Sources: Department for Education (2026); Criminal Justice Act 2003; College of Policing (2022, 2026a); Sexual Offences Act 2003.

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, 2025a:7).

An analysis of 499 police records of serious sexual offences against adults (Lovett et al, 2024) found that these records had a range of sources – including a large number of reports from the public and other agencies – and raised questions about the accuracy of the police’s recording of investigation outcomes for sexual offences:

- ▶ Two-fifths of the 499 recorded offences 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 when 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 the 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 analysis showed 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 analysis 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.

6.1.1 Trends over time

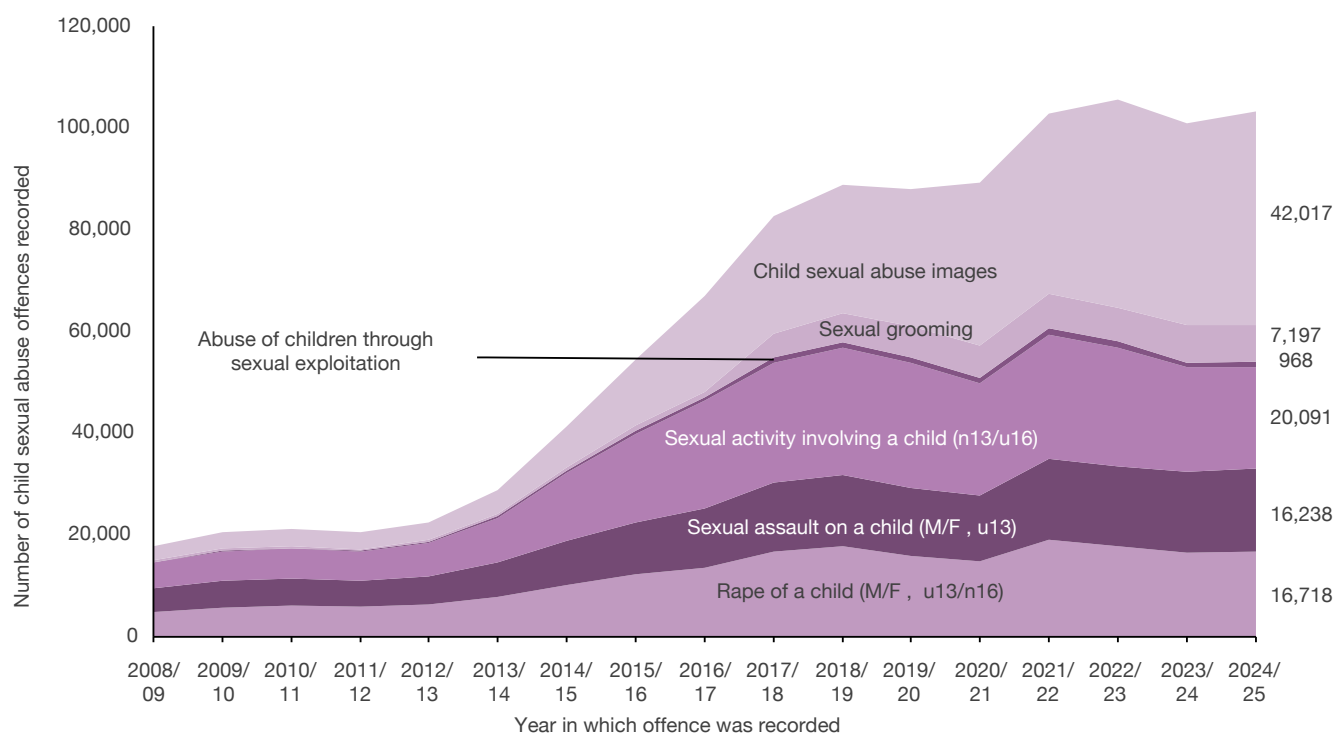
As **Figure 36** shows, there was a 2% overall increase between 2023/24 and 2024/25 in the number of police-recorded identifiable child sexual abuse offences across England and Wales. As in previous years, the largest increase was in the broad offence category of ‘obscene publications’ (involving mainly but not exclusively child sexual abuse images), which increased by 6%. Sexual assault offences increased by 3%, and rape offences by 1%. There were decreases in offences relating to sexual activity involving a child (–3%) and sexual grooming (–1%).

Meanwhile, there was a 6% increase (to 114,371) in recorded sexual offences against adults and children aged over 16, and a much larger 23% rise (to 21,414) in recorded sexual offences which do not differentiate between child and adult victims; the latter was driven mainly by a 29% increase in offences involving exposure and voyeurism.

More than half of the increase in the overall number of police-recorded sexual offences – against children or adults – in 2024/25 has been described as “a reflection of new offences being captured that were not previously recognised by law” (Office for National Statistics, 2025e). The Online Safety Act 2023 came into force in January 2024 and introduced two new sexual offences into legislation: ‘Sharing or threatening to share intimate photograph or film’ and ‘Sending etc photograph or film of genitals’ to either a child or an adult. Publicly available data does not differentiate between child and adult victims of these new offences, which are recorded under the broad offence categories of ‘obscene publications’ and ‘exposure and voyeurism’ – two of the categories that saw the largest increases in 2024/25.

The increases in police-recorded sexual offences contrasted with a small decrease (–2%) in the overall volume of victim-based crime recorded by the police in 2024/25 (Office for National Statistics, 2025d: Summary Table A6).

Figure 36. Number and type of child sexual abuse offences recorded per year, 2009/10–2024/25, England and Wales



Source: Home Office (2025b, updated October 2025); Home Office (2025c).

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.

The 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.

Police national analysis of child sexual abuse offences

Since 2022, the College of Policing's Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme – now the National Centre for Violence Against Women & Girls and Public Protection (NCVPP) – has published an annual overview of police-recorded child sexual abuse and exploitation offences. The overview is based on data, provided directly by all 44 police forces of England and Wales, which differs in key ways from the official statistics presented elsewhere in this report:

- ▶ It includes offences against children which are categorised in official statistics under predominantly adult sexual offence types (e.g. rape of a female aged 16 and over, exposure and voyeurism, sexual assault of a male aged 13 and over), if the police record of the offence states that the victim is aged under 18 at the time of the offence.
- ▶ It includes offences that are 'open' at the time of the data capture; in contrast, official statistics rely solely on 'closed' cases. Some of the offences captured in the police's own data may therefore be subsequently cancelled if further evidence suggests that the offence did not constitute a crime. The initial extraction of these recorded crimes allows for more timely identification of the scale for operational purposes.

The latest overview (NCVPP, 2025) showed a significantly larger scale of sexual offending against children than is visible in official statistics: overall, **122,768 sexual offences against under 18s** were recorded by the police in 2024 (January–December), 6% more than in 2023. Other findings included the following:

- Image offences constituted nearly one-third (29%) of all recorded child sexual abuse offences, and were the most prevalent offence type. Including 'contact' offences flagged by police records as 'online',¹⁶ at least 42% of all child sexual abuse offences had an online element, seven percentage points more than in the previous year; these were predominantly image offences, followed by sexual activity and grooming offences. While 'sexual activity involving a child' is typically seen as a 'contact' offence, a third (35%) of all sexual activity offences involved an online element (such as coercion to share sexual images). The online platforms most commonly used in online offending were Snapchat, WhatsApp and Instagram.
- Where the victim–suspect relationship was recorded, suspects across all child sexual abuse offences were most commonly an acquaintance of the victim (36%), the victim's current or ex-partner (16%); a stranger (17%) or the victim's parent (9%). Online offences were more likely to have a stranger as the suspect (35%). A quarter of suspects were part of the victim's family environment; the three most common offences with a family member as a recorded suspect were sexual assault, rape and sexual activity. Contact offences accounted for 96% familial offences and 76% of extra-familial offences.
- Where ages of victims and suspects were recorded, half of all offences included a suspect aged 10–17; the most common age group for both victims and suspects was 14–15. However, the suspect's age was unknown or not recorded in 38% of suspect records. Among offences with a child suspect, two-fifths (40%) were image offences and a quarter (24%) were sexual assault offences.
- The victim's sex was recorded in 92% of contact offences but only 33% of non-contact offences; 63% of suspect records, across both offence types, identified their sex. Where sex information was recorded, more than three-quarters of victims were girls (78%), and over four-fifths of suspects were male (82%).
- Information on (self-defined) ethnicity was available for only a third (34%) of both suspects and victims; in those records, as in previous years, the majority (87% of victims and 83% of suspects) were of White British heritage.

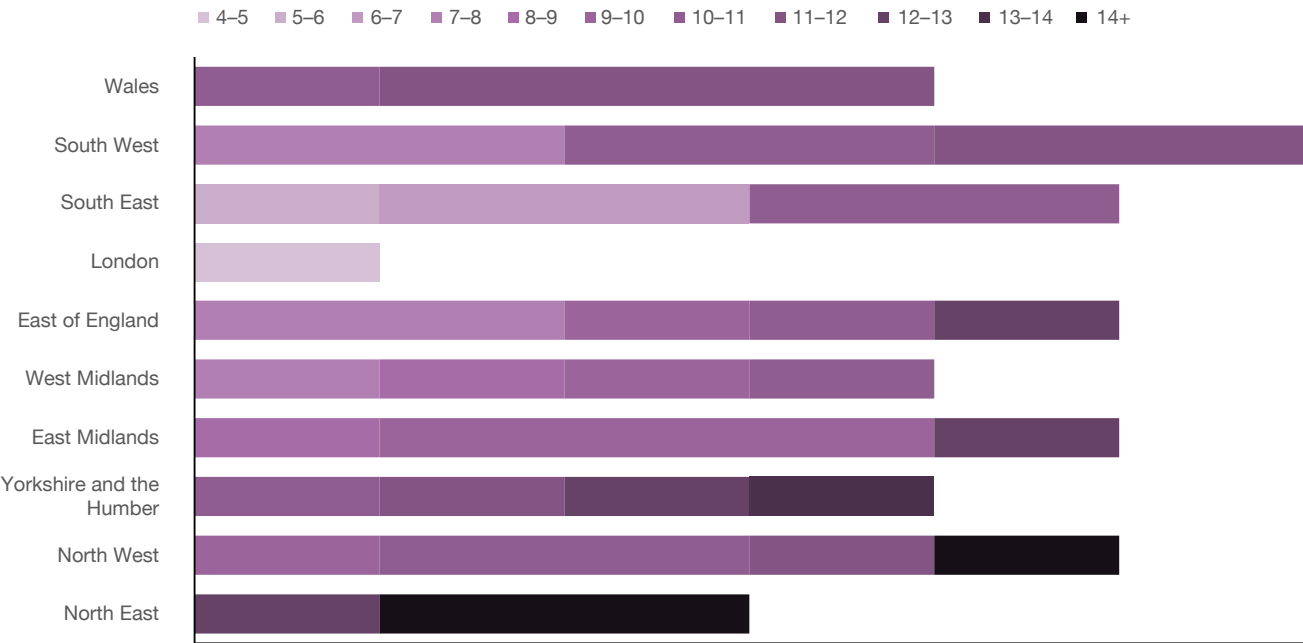
Group-based offending recorded by the police

A separate publication drawing on the same data source is published by the Hydrant Programme and explores the trends in group-based offending. The latest edition (Hydrant Programme, 2025) identified the following trends in the 12 months from January to December 2024:

- Just under 4% (n=4,450) of police-recorded sexual offences against children involved two or more suspects.
- One-third (32%) of these offences were broadly categorised as happening in a familial context, one in six (17%) were sexual exploitation, 9% were institutional and 0.2% were ritualistic. Another quarter (24%) were 'child-on-child' offences outside the above contexts.
- Rape (42%), sexual assault (29%) and sexual activity (25%) were the most common offence types.
- The demographic profile of victims was similar to that seen for police-recorded child sexual abuse offences overall.
- As with the overall findings above, the most commonly recorded type of suspect was an acquaintance to the victim (accounting for 29% of suspects whose relationship with the victim was recorded). Other common suspect types were parents (13%), strangers (11%), siblings (10%) and partners (9%).

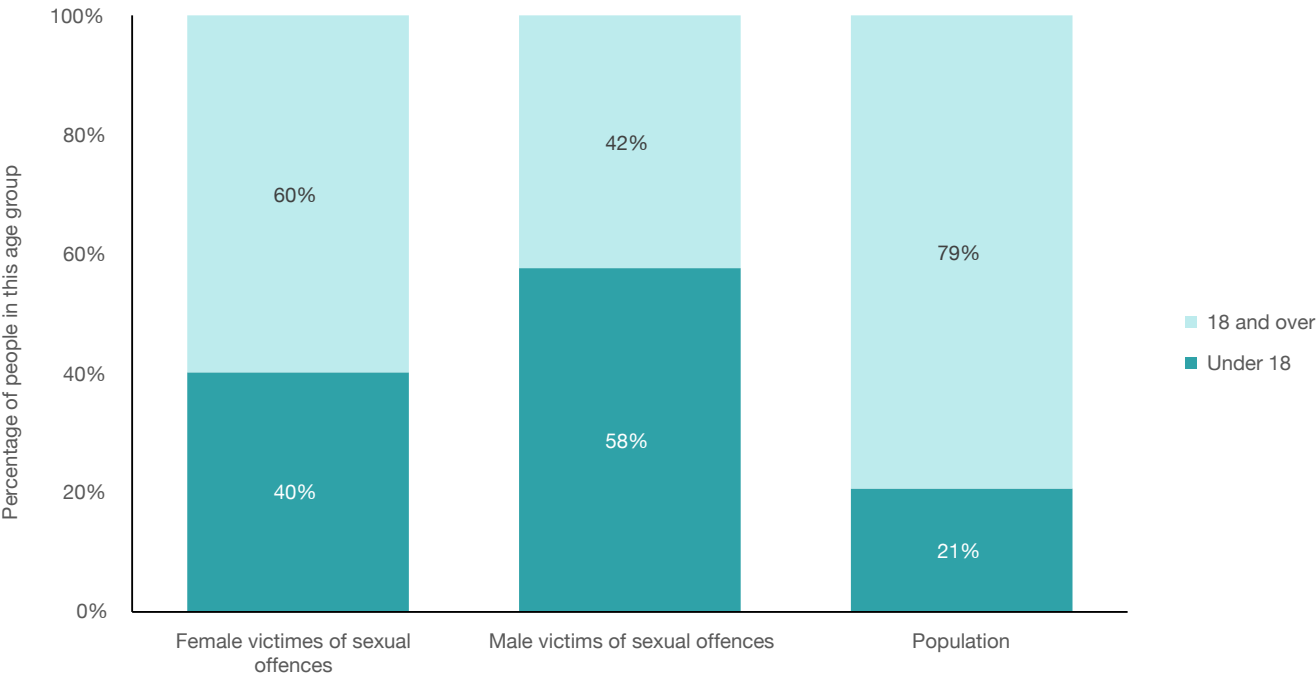
16. Official statistics show that 24% of child sexual abuse offences (excluding images) were flagged as having an online element by the police (Office for National Statistics, 2025d: Table C5).

Figure 37. Number of child sexual abuse offences recorded by police forces per 1,000 child population, by region, 2024/25, England and Wales



Sources: Home Office (2025b: Table 2024–25, updated October 2025); Office for National Statistics (2025c). Police-recorded crime includes non-recent offences. British Transport Police data is excluded, as is data from the City of London Police as it has a significantly smaller population than other forces. Population figures (ages 0–15) are mid-year estimates.

Figure 38. Proportion of children and adults in sexual offence and population statistics, 2024/25, England and Wales



Sources: Office for National Statistics (2025f: Tables 19a and 20a); Office for National Statistics (2025c). Police-recorded crime includes non-recent offences. Population figures (ages 0–17) are mid-year estimates for 2024.

6.1.2 Local patterns

The 2% overall increase in recorded offences of child sexual abuse was not uniform across the 43 police force areas in England and Wales: 24 forces recorded more child sexual abuse offences than they had in 2023/24, but 19 recorded fewer.

As in previous years (see Kewley and Karsna, 2025), there was wide variation in the number of police-recorded child sexual abuse offences *relative to the local child population*. As

Figure 37 shows, some police forces recorded as few as four child sexual abuse offences per 1,000 child population (aged 0–15) while others recorded three times as many; these are shown respectively as light and dark shades of purple. The Metropolitan Police and forces in Hertfordshire and the South East had the lowest rates of recording, while those in the North East had the highest rates.

6.1.3 Age of victims of sexual offences recorded by the police

Although official statistics do not regularly include 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. Analysis of data from 38 police forces in England and Wales on the ages of victims of all sexual offences (excluding child sexual abuse image offences) recorded by the police in 2024/25 (Office for National Statistics, 2025f) showed that three-fifths of male victims and two-fifths of female victims were aged under 18, despite under-18s constituting only one-fifth of the population (see **Figure 38**).

Table 6. investigation outcomes for child sexual abuse offences, 2024/25, England and Wales

Offence category	England	Wales	England and Wales*
Charged/summonsed	14%	12%	14%
Out-of-court resolution (formal): Cautioned	1%	1%	1%
Out-of-court resolution (informal): Community resolution	1%	0%	1%
Diversory, educational or intervention activity	3%	1%	3%
Further investigation not in the public interest: police decision	12%	13%	13%
Prosecution prevented: suspect died or too ill	1%	1%	1%
Prosecution prevented: suspect under age	3%	4%	3%
Prosecution not in the public interest: Crown Prosecution Service or police decision	1%	3%	1%
Insufficient evidence (suspect identified, victim supports action)	22%	28%	22%
Insufficient evidence (suspect identified, victim does not support action)	16%	12%	16%
Insufficient evidence (suspect not identified, victim does not support action)	6%	5%	6%
Investigation complete – no suspect identified	14%	15%	14%
Responsibility for further investigation transferred to another body	6%	4%	6%
Other reasons**	0%	0%	0%
Base number (offences)†	92,697	5,938	98,726

Source: Home Office (2025d: 'Crime Outcomes in England and Wales Open Data, April 2024 to March 2025', updated January 2026). 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; and d) Taken into consideration.

6.1.4 Police investigation outcomes

Table 6 shows that, in 2024/25, police concluded their investigation of 98,726 recorded child sexual abuse offences, of which 14,042 (14%) resulted in a suspect being charged/summonsed. A suspect was cautioned or a community resolution was reached in a further 1% of cases, and 3% concluded with a ‘diversionary, educational or intervention activity’. Prosecution was prevented in 4% of cases because the suspect was under the age of criminal responsibility, was too ill or had died.

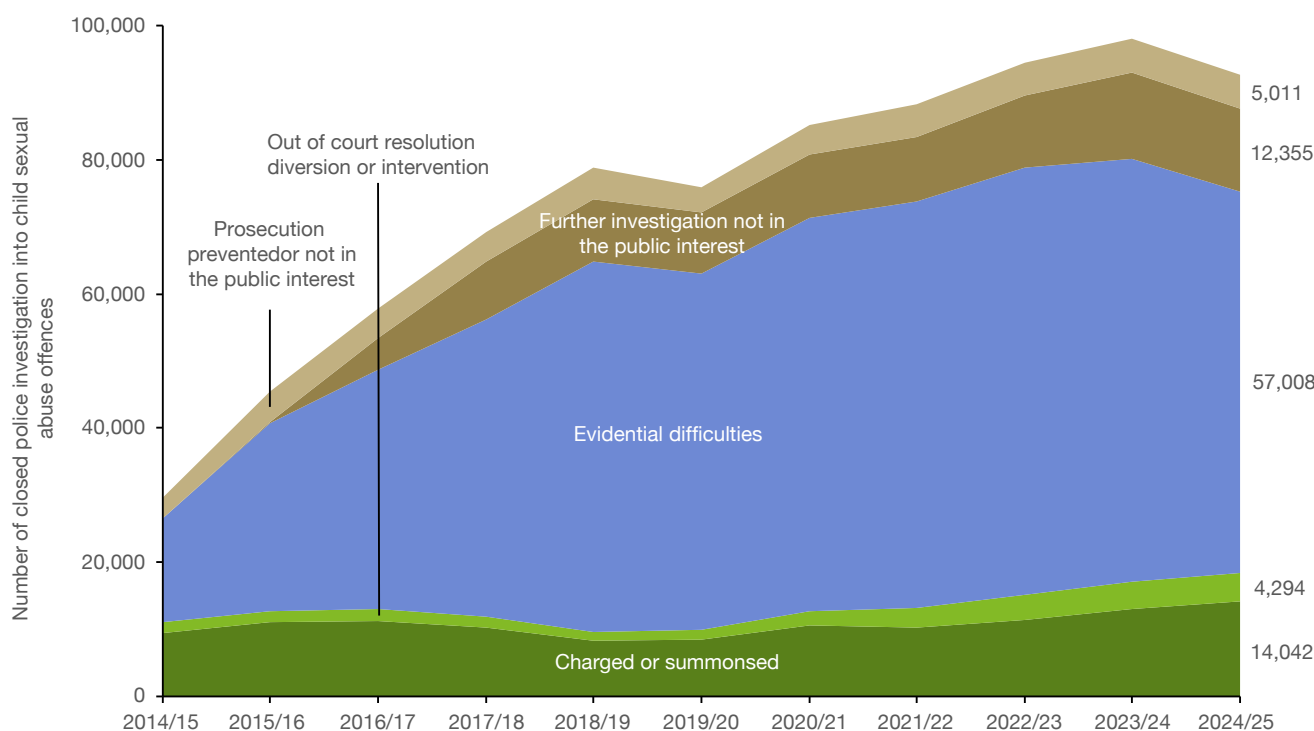
One in eight investigations (13%) ended following a decision that it was not in the public interest to continue the investigation. This outcome (known as ‘Outcome 21’) was introduced in 2015/16 primarily to reduce the criminalisation of under-18s in situations where the police receive reports of “youth produced sexual imagery” which involve children’s consensual sharing of self-generated images (Home Office, 2016) – see also Figure 40 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.

Nearly three-fifths of all investigations – 57,008 cases (58%) – were closed because of some form of evidential difficulty, and another 6% ended because responsibility for further investigation was transferred to another body.

Since the new framework for the police to record investigation outcomes was introduced (see box on page 74), 10 years’ worth of data has been published. **Figure 39** shows that, following large increases in the number of offences dealt with by the police over the last decade, 2024/25 saw a small drop in the number of concluded investigations into child sexual abuse offences. However, the number of investigations ending with a charge, a summons, an out-of-court resolution or a diversion continued to increase, leading to the highest-ever number of charges brought for child sexual abuse offences (14,042). In contrast, the number of cases being closed because of evidential difficulties – which had increased more than fourfold between 2014/15 and 2023/24 – fell by 10% in 2024/25.

Figure 39. Investigation outcomes for child sexual abuse offences, 2014/15–2024/25, England and Wales



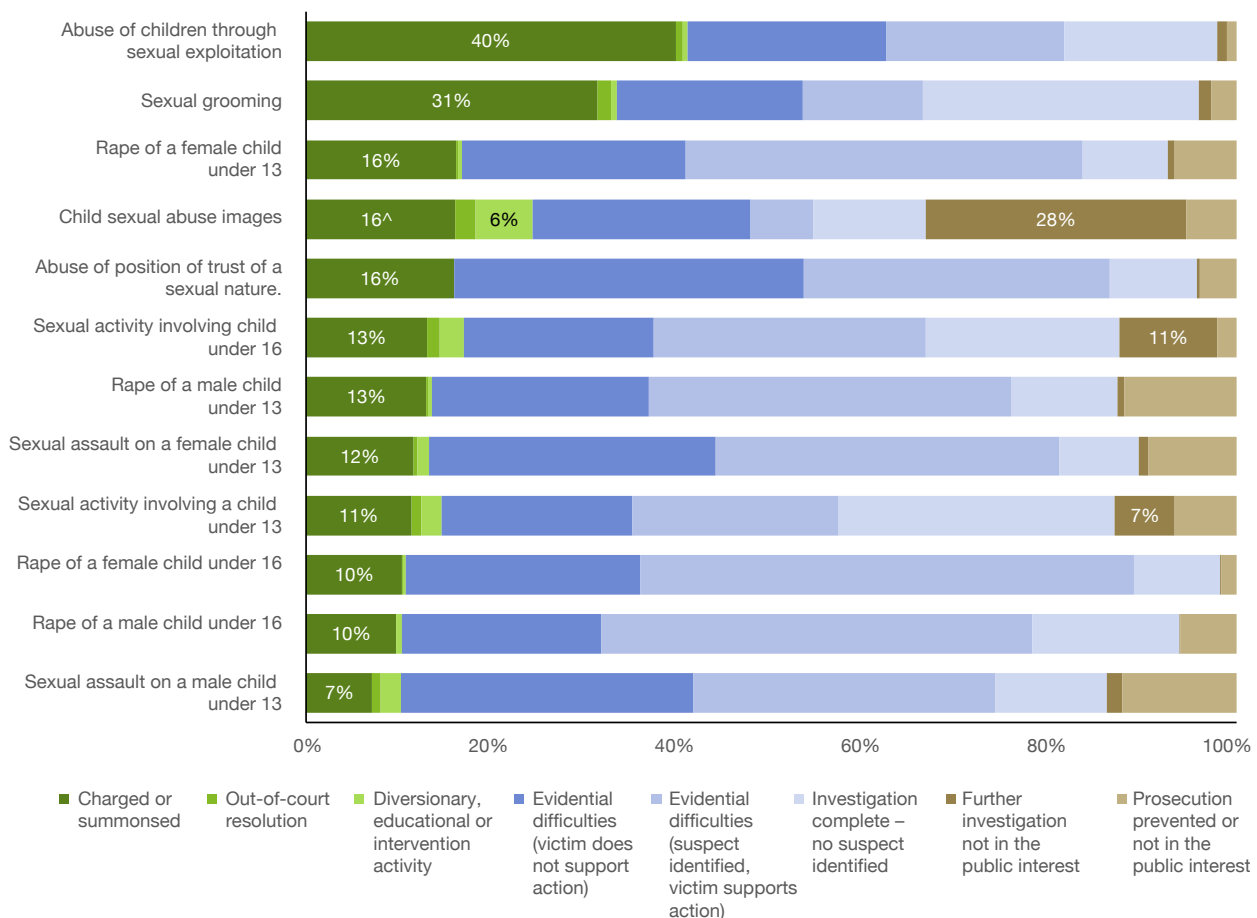
Source: Home Office (2025d, updated January 2026). Police-recorded crime includes non-recent cases. Excludes transferred cases and those taken into consideration. The categories of ‘Further investigation not in the public interest’ and ‘Diversion, educational or intervention activity’ were introduced in 2015/16 and 2019/20 respectively.

A similar trend is visible in the number of charges brought for sexual offences against children over 16 and adults: the number of investigations ending in a charge rose to 11,146 – the highest level on record – from 9,531 recorded in the previous year. An 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, 2023) introduced through Operation Soteria;¹⁷ the monitoring of outcomes, including charges, had made a difference (HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services, 2024). It may be that a focus on improving charging in relation to offences against adults has also improved investigation outcomes for sexual offences against children in some forces.

Investigation outcomes vary considerably by the type of child sexual abuse offence. **Figure 40** shows that two-fifths of investigations relating to 'abuse through sexual exploitation' ended with a charge or summons in 2024/25; as did nearly one-third of sexual grooming offences. However, only one in 14 sexual assault offences against children aged under 13, and one in 10 rape offences against children aged 13–15, ended in a charge or summons.

More than a quarter of investigations into child sexual abuse image offences ended with a 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 ('Outcome 21') was applied in 11% of investigations into sexual activity offences where the victim was aged under 16, and 7% where they were aged under 13, suggesting that the suspects in those investigations were aged under 18.

Figure 40. Investigation outcomes by child sexual abuse offence category, 2024/25, England and Wales



Source: Home Office (2025d: 'Crime Outcomes in England and Wales Open Data, April 2024 to March 2025', updated January 2026). Police-recorded crime includes non-recent cases. Excludes transferred cases and those taken into consideration. Child sexual abuse image offences are classified as 'obscene publications' in police data; a proportion of such offences do not involve images of children.

17. Operation Soteria was a programme that aimed to transform how the police handle adult 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 is charged or summonsed for the crime.

Caution. An offender is cautioned by the police.

Community resolution. A community resolution is applied in accordance with guidance from the College of Policing (2024).

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

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 dead. A named suspect is identified but is dead.

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

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

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.

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.

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.

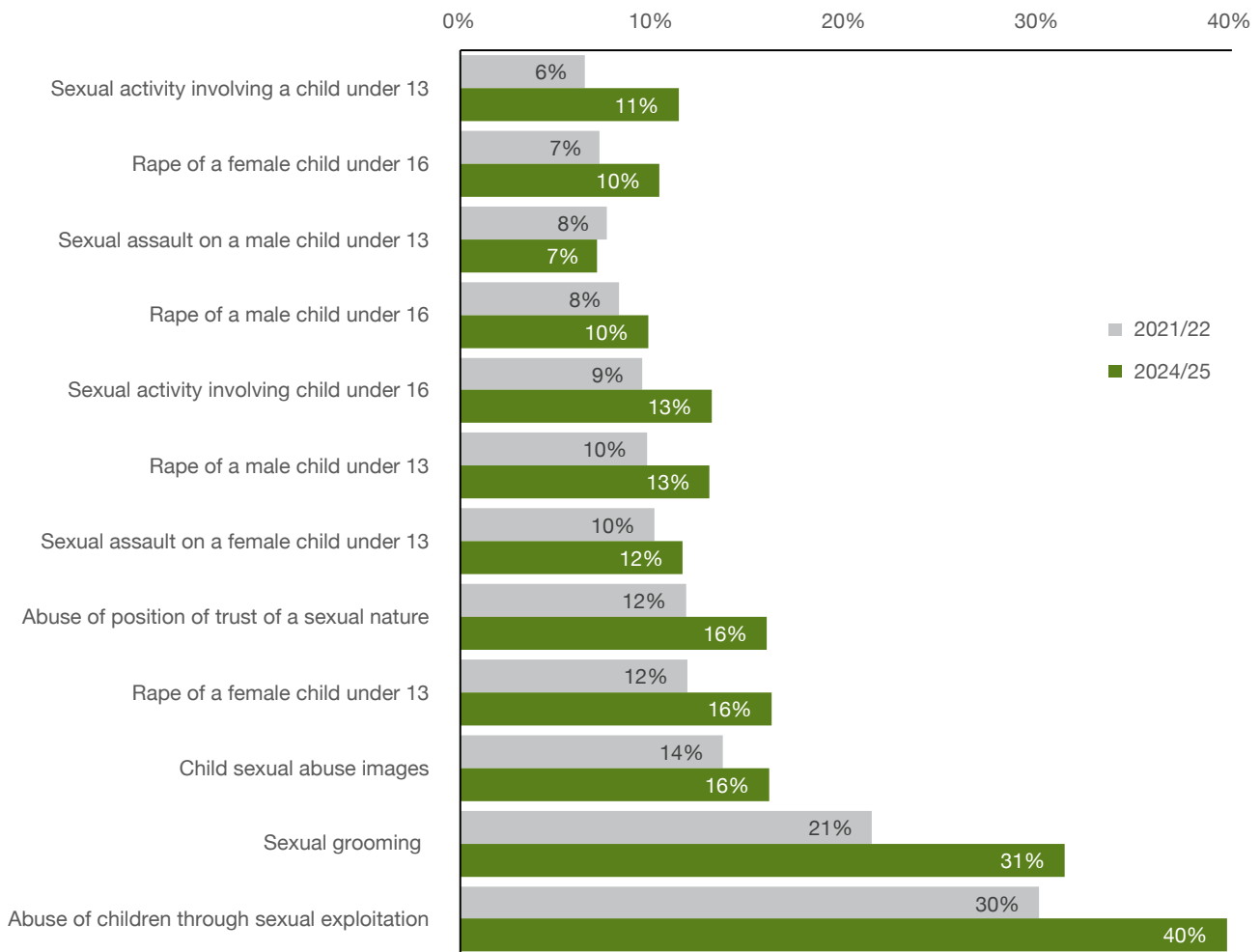
Investigation complete – no suspect identified. The crime has been investigated as far as reasonably possible and the case is closed pending further investigative opportunities becoming available.

Sources: Home Office (2025a, 2025e).

As **Figure 41** shows, the proportion of investigations ending in a charge increased across nearly all child sexual abuse offence types between 2021/22 and 2024/25. The most substantial increases were for the offences of abuse of children through sexual exploitation (from 30% to 40%) and sexual grooming offences (from 21% to 31%), while other offence types saw increases of between one and three percentage points.

During the same period, the proportion of investigations ending in a charge also increased for sexual offence types that may be committed against children or adults: the overall proportion for these offences rose from 6% to 9%, with the largest increases recorded for rape of a female aged 16 or over (from 4% in 2021/22 to 8% in 2024/25), and in sexual assault on a female aged 13 or over (from 7% to 10%) (Home Office, 2025d). This suggests that the new national operating model for adult rape and serious sexual offences is improving investigative practices.

Figure 41. Proportion of child sexual abuse offences where a police investigation results in a charge or summons, by offence category, 2021/22 and 2024/25, England and Wales



Source: Home Office (2025d: 'Crime Outcomes in England and Wales Open Data, April 2024 to March 2025', updated January 2026, and 'Crime Outcomes in England and Wales Open Data, April 2021 to March 2022', updated August 2025). Police-recorded crime includes non-recent cases. Excludes transferred cases and those taken into consideration. Child sexual abuse image offences are classified as 'obscene publications' in police data; a proportion of such offences do not involve images of children.

6.1.5 Time taken to investigate and charge sexual offences

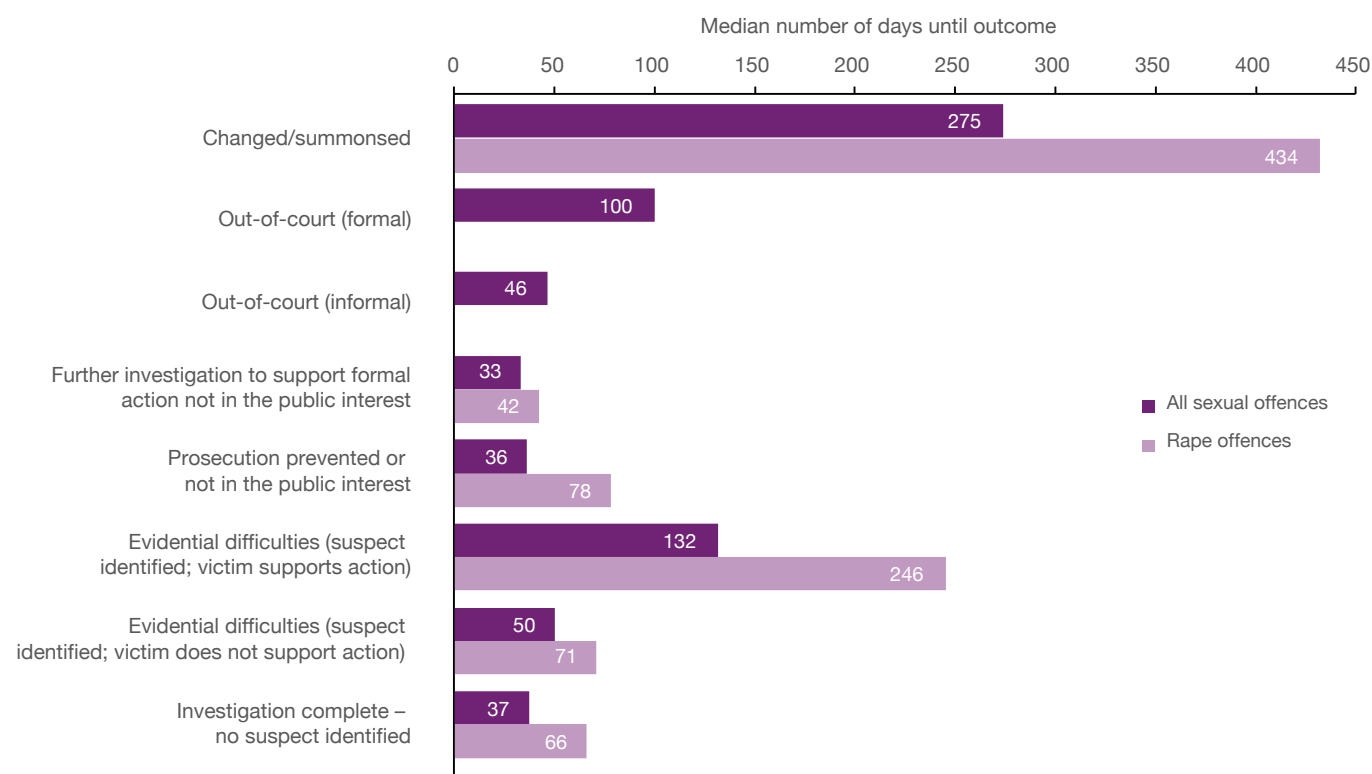
The Home Office publishes data on the median number of days taken for an outcome to be assigned to a recorded offence on police data systems. However, this data is available only for 'sexual offences overall' (excluding child sexual abuse image offences) and specifically for rape offences; it is not broken down by whether the victim was a child or an adult.

In 2024/25,¹⁸ sexual offences overall took a median of 65 days to progress from recording of the offence to an outcome (three days fewer than in the previous year); the median for rape offences was 103 days (four days fewer than in 2023/24) (Home Office, 2025f: Table 3.1).

As in previous years, sexual offences overall had the longest investigation timescales of all offence groups: 39% of investigations into these offences, and 51% of rape investigations, took more than 100 days to be assigned an outcome (Home Office, 2025f: Table 3.8).

18. The 2024/25 figures exclude data from Humberside Police, which was not provided during the reporting period (Home Office, 2025f).

Figure 42. Time taken for police investigations into sexual offences (against children or adults) to reach an outcome, by type of outcome, 2024/25, England and Wales



Source: Home Office (2025f: Table 3.3, updated July 2025). Figures are not shown for outcomes that occurred 50 times or fewer during the year. Excludes data from Humberside Police. Excludes sexual abuse image offences.

As **Figure 42** 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 275 days, or nine months. The cases closed most quickly were those that were not taken forward because action was undertaken by another body/agency:¹⁹ the median for these was 25 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 more than four months (132 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 50 days.

Timescales were longer for rape offences: it took a median of 434 days – well over a year – to charge a suspect with rape.

6.2 Legal decisions

The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) publishes 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 – and on the timeliness of these decisions.

In 2024/25, the CPS recorded legal decisions relating to 7,159 individuals suspected of child sexual abuse offences (CPS, 2025a: Table 4.3), 12% more than in the previous year. In 84% (6,012) 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 130 days (CPS, 2025a: Table 4.3) – seven days longer than in 2023/24. There was wide variation between CPS divisions, with the average ranging from 89 days in Yorkshire & Humberside to 226 days in the South East. The CPS's Central Casework Division, which deals with complex cases, took almost 18 months – 532 days.

19. 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.

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; this is particularly the case in large or complex child sexual abuse cases.

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 two or three magistrates or a District Judge determine 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 (2026); Home Office (2023).

6.3 Court proceedings

Sources for this section, unless otherwise stated: Ministry of Justice (2025a, 2024a).6.3.1

6.3.1 Prosecutions and convictions

For prosecutions and convictions in the year to December 2024, the Ministry of Justice published data on more detailed offence categories than previously, breaking down wider categories of sexual activity to further sub-categories (e.g. engaging in sexual activity in the presence of a child). **Table 7** presents this more detailed information.

Overall, 10,791 defendants were proceeded against in court during 2024 for offences related to child sexual abuse, and 8,388 defendants were convicted. These figures were, respectively, 17% and 13% higher than those in 2023.

More than two-fifths (42%) of all prosecutions and nearly half (46%) of all convictions in 2024 for child sexual abuse offences involved child sexual abuse image offences – similar to the proportion of child sexual abuse offences involving imagery recorded by the police. And nearly one in ten defendants (9%) were prosecuted for grooming offences – more than double the proportion seven years earlier.

Conviction rates

Data published by the Ministry of Justice does not track individuals through their court proceedings and cannot be used to understand conviction rates. Data from the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) *does* track individual cases from charge to conviction; it shows that, of the 6,183 'child sexual abuse flagged' prosecutions that were tracked in 2024/25, 81% (n=5,028) ended with a conviction (CPS, 2025b: Table 3.4).

The CPS data also outlines what happened in the 1,155 tracked prosecutions which did *not* result in a conviction: more than half (n=631, 55%) ended with an acquittal/dismissal after or during a trial, with the remainder including dropped prosecutions and cases where prosecution was prevented (CPS, 2025b: Table 3.5).

Two-fifths of all prosecutions in 2024 for child sexual abuse offences, and nearly half of all convictions, involved image offences

Table 7. Defendants prosecuted for and convicted of child sexual abuse offences, 2024, England and Wales

Offence category	England	Wales
Rape of a female aged 13 to 15	782	266
Rape of a male aged 13 to 15	58	29
Rape of a female child aged under 13 by a male	402	276
Rape of a male child aged under 13 by a male	85	64
Attempted rape of a female child aged under 13 by a male	43	20
Attempted rape of a male child aged under 13 by a male	8	3
Attempted rape of a female aged 13 to 15	53	17
Attempted rape of a male aged 13 to 15	1	2
<i>Total rape prosecutions/convictions</i>	<i>1,432</i>	<i>677</i>
Sexual assault on a male child aged under 13 – penetration	26	8
Sexual assault on a male child aged under 13 – touching	133	66
Sexual assault on a female child aged under 13 – penetration	271	168
Sexual assault on a female child aged under 13 – touching	755	438
Arrange/facilitate the rape/assault by penetration of a child under 13	53	31
<i>Total sexual assault prosecutions/convictions</i>	<i>1,238</i>	<i>711</i>
Causing or inciting a female child under 13 to engage in sexual activity	411	319
Causing or inciting a male child under 13 to engage in sexual activity	112	72
Causing or inciting a female child aged 13–15 to engage in sexual activity	595	451
Causing or inciting a male child aged 13–15 to engage in sexual activity	86	53
Engaging in sexual activity in the presence of a child aged under 13	27	27
Engaging in a sexual activity in the presence of a child aged 13–15	24	20
Arrange/facilitate sexual activity with a child	127	91
Causing a child under 13 to watch a sexual act	93	78
Causing a child aged 13–15 to watch a sexual act	180	163
Sexual activity with a female child aged under 13	28	31
Sexual activity with a male child aged under 13	50	57
Sexual activity with a female child aged 13–15	396	327
Sexual activity with a male child aged 13–15	75	66
<i>Total sexual activity prosecutions/convictions</i>	<i>2,204</i>	<i>1,755</i>
Sexual activity with a child family member aged under 13	5	6
Sexual activity with a child family member aged 13–17	54	58
Inciting a child family member to engage in sexual activity	8	3
<i>Total familial sexual offence prosecutions/convictions*</i>	<i>67</i>	<i>67</i>

Offence category	England	Wales
Taking, permitting to be taken or making, distributing or publishing indecent photographs or pseudo photographs of children	4,124	3,527
Possession of indecent photograph of a child	315	272
Possession of prohibited images of children	63	50
<i>Total child sexual abuse image prosecutions/convictions</i>	<i>4,502</i>	<i>3,849</i>
Engage in sexual communication with a child	873	937
Meeting a female child aged under 16 following sexual grooming	100	97
Meeting a male child aged under 16 following sexual grooming	32	27
<i>Total grooming offence prosecutions/convictions</i>	<i>1,005</i>	<i>1,061</i>
Child abuse through child sexual exploitation	234	176
Abuse of position of trust of a sexual nature	27	27
Possession of a paedophile manual	3	2
Gross indecency with children (historical offence)	12	26
Buggery or attempted buggery (historical offences)	66	37
Indecent assault or attempted indecent assault on a female aged under 16 (historical offence)	1	0
<i>Total other child sexual abuse offence prosecutions/convictions</i>	<i>343</i>	<i>268</i>
Total	10,791	8,388

Source: Ministry of Justice (2025a). Includes defendants proceeded against for non-recent offences.

*These categories are visible in this table (but not in Table 5, Figure 36 or Figure 40) because, unlike police data (see Appendix B), data published by the Ministry of Justice distinguishes between familial sexual offences against children and against adults.

6.3.2 Trends over time

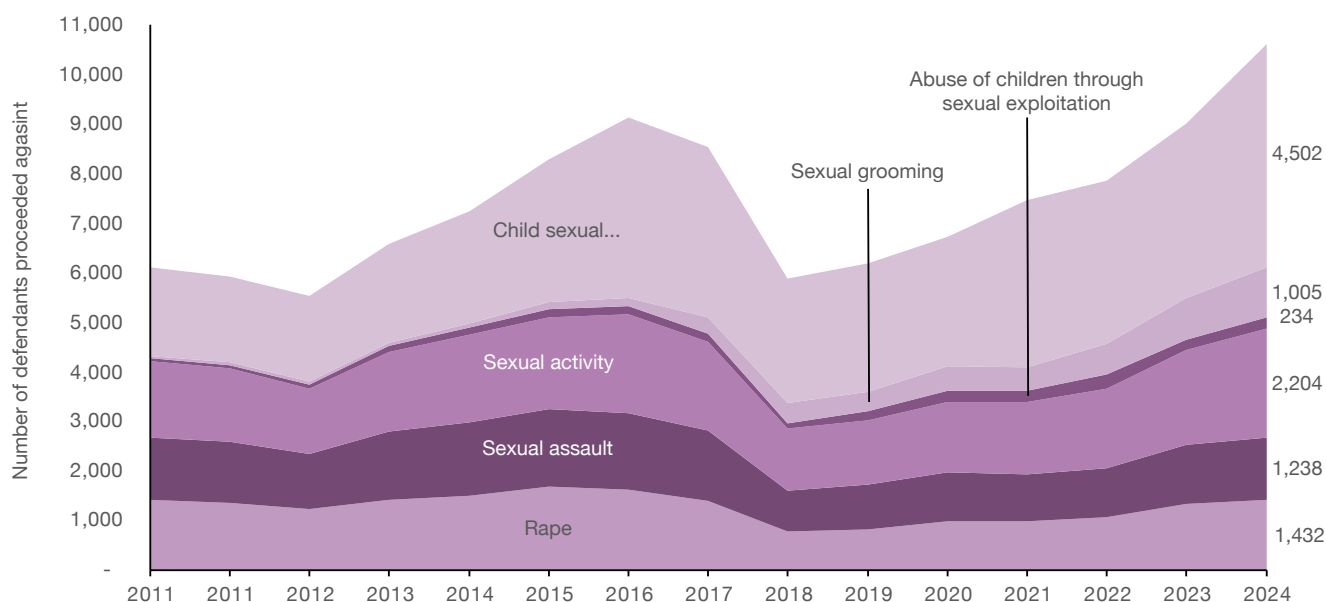
Figure 43 shows that in 2024 the annual number of defendants proceeded against for child sexual abuse offences increased by 18% from the 2023 level, to the highest number in the 20 years that this data has been recorded – exceeding the previous peak of 2016.²⁰ Prosecutions for all types of child sexual abuse offence increased, with the exception of familial offences. The largest percentage increases in prosecutions (of 28% and 20% respectively) were for image offences and sexual grooming. Rape prosecutions increased by 7%, and sexual assault prosecutions by less than 1%, but both had previously risen by more than 20% between 2022 and 2023.

The number of defendants who were convicted of child sexual abuse offences in 2024 (n=8,388) was also at its highest level in the 20 years that this figure has been published, and was 13% higher than the 2023 figure.

The *overall* number of prosecutions in England Wales across all offence types was also higher in 2024 than in 2023, by a smaller margin of 4%; convictions rose by 3%. These increases were mostly the result of rises of 16% and 12% respectively in prosecutions and convictions for indictable offences (Ministry of Justice, 2025b).

20. An analysis of rape, sexual offence and overall Crown Court proceedings found 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 slowly in 2019, the overall number of proceedings continued to fall; it reached its lowest point in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 43. Number of defendants proceeded against for child sexual abuse offences, by offence category, 2010–2024, England and Wales



Source: Ministry of Justice (2025a, 2024a). Includes defendants proceeded against for non-recent offences. Excludes offences – familial sexual offences, abuse of position of trust of a sexual nature, possession of a paedophile manual, and various historical offences – for which consistently fewer than 100 defendants per year have been proceeded against.

6.3.3 Characteristics of defendants: sex

As in previous years, the overwhelming majority of defendants proceeded against in 2024 for child sexual abuse offences were male. While the 133 prosecutions of female defendants represented a 11% increase on the 2023 figure, the number of male defendants rose by 17% to 10,391 – so females still represented just 1% of the 10,524 defendants whose sex was recorded.

Five out of six prosecutions (82%) of females were for offences related to child sexual abuse images (n=38), sexual assault (n=26) or sexual activity offences (n=47). Males too were most likely to be prosecuted for child sexual abuse image offences (n=4,380) and sexual activity offences (n=1,524), followed by rape or attempted rape (n=1,362) and sexual assault (n=1,178). Taken together, these offences account for four-fifths (81%) of male prosecutions.

As in 2023, by far the highest female-to-male ratio of defendants was for the offence of ‘abuse of position of trust’, but absolute numbers were very low: of the 27 defendants prosecuted for this offence, one-fifth (n=5, 19%) were female. Females accounted for 2% of historical offences against children, 4% of sexual activity offences, 3% each of familial and child sexual exploitation offences, 2% of sexual assault offences and less than 1% of other offences.

A total of 82 females were convicted of child sexual abuse offences in 2024; among males, there were 8,147 convictions, meaning that 1% of convicted defendants were female.

Prosecutions of females for child sexual abuse offences rose by 11% in 2024 to 133, but there were 10,391 male defendants (a 17% increase)

6.3.4 Characteristics of defendants: age

Figure 44 shows that under-18s accounted for 3% (n=291) of defendants prosecuted for child sexual abuse offences in 2024; this was 0.5 percentage points lower than the 2023 figure. In 2017, 4.7% of prosecutions were of under-18s. As in previous years, the next-smallest groups were 18–20-year-olds (7%) and 70+ (6%), while nearly a quarter (23%) of defendants were aged 30–39.

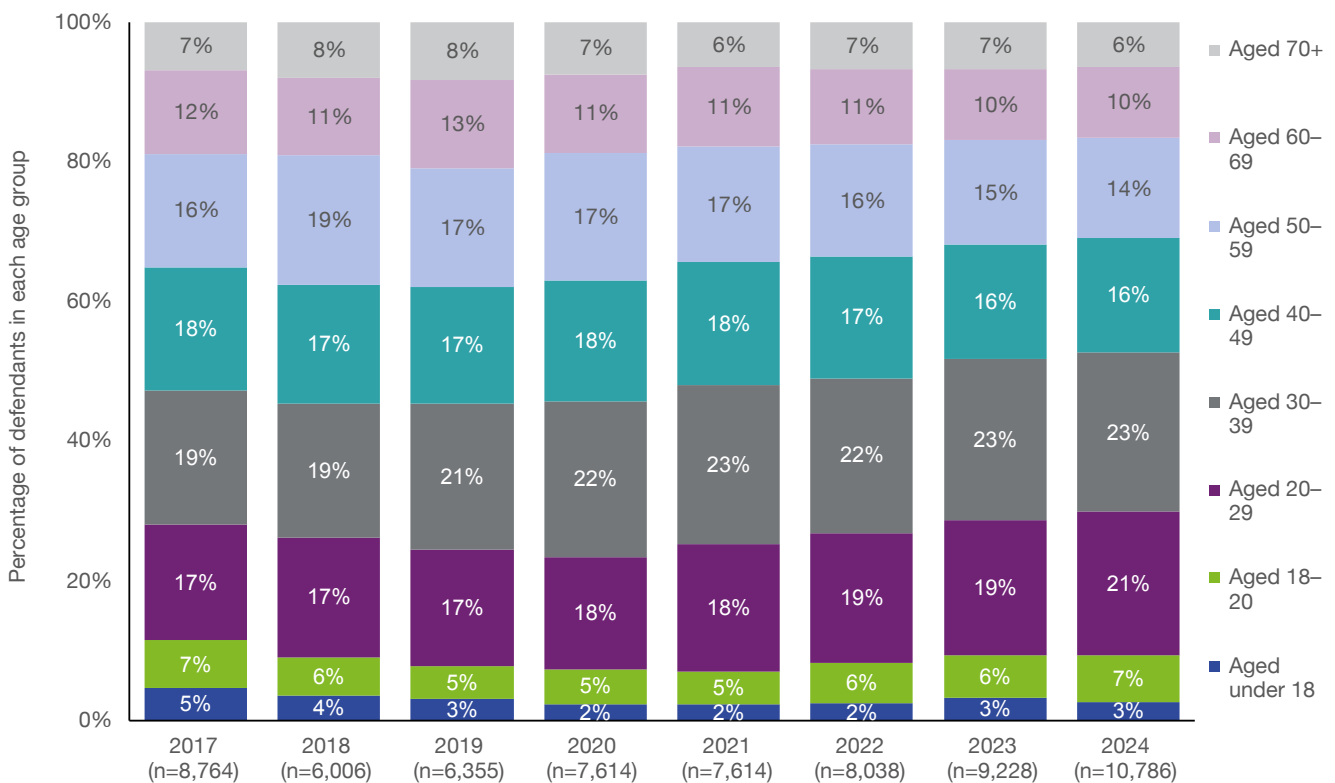
The breakdown by age group of defendants *convicted* of child sexual abuse offences was similar.

The number of defendants prosecuted in each age range increased in 2024, with the exception of a very small decrease in prosecutions of under-18s. The greatest increases were among defendants aged 20–39: compared with 2017 levels, prosecutions of 21–29-year-olds and 30–39-year-olds were respectively 52% and 46% higher.

Two-fifths of defendants aged under 18 (n=123, 42%) and half of those aged 18–20 (n=353, 49%) in 2024 were prosecuted for child sexual abuse image offences. While rape offences accounted for 13% of child sexual abuse offence prosecutions overall, they were the reason for 39% (n=113) of under-18s and a quarter (n=173, 24%) of 18–20-year-olds being prosecuted.

Defendants aged 70+ made up only 6% of defendants overall, but they accounted for 14% of sexual assault prosecutions and 31% of prosecutions for historical offences; a similar pattern was visible for the 60–69 age group. In contrast, only 3% of defendants prosecuted for grooming offences were aged 70+.

Figure 44. Defendants proceeded against for child sexual abuse offences, by age, 2017–2024, England and Wales



Source: Ministry of Justice (2025a). Includes defendants proceeded against for non-recent offences.

6.3.5 Characteristics of defendants: ethnicity

The ethnic background of defendants prosecuted for child sexual abuse offences was recorded in 72% (n=7,798) of cases in 2024, an increase of three percentage points on the previous year. Among these individuals, nine-tenths were White (7,018); across almost all other ethnicities, the proportion of defendants was considerably lower than in the general population of England and Wales (see **Table 8**). 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 2024.

6.3.6 Sentences for child sexual abuse offences

In 2024, two-fifths (41%; n=3,311) of defendants who were found guilty of child sexual abuse offences received an immediate custodial sentence – slightly more than in 2023, but a smaller proportion (by four percentage points) of the total sentences issued over the year. Almost as many (38%, n=3,104) received a suspended sentence, and one-fifth (21%; n=1,695) received a community sentence. Among under-18s found guilty, the vast majority (91%; n=181) received a community sentence (e.g. unpaid work, treatment or curfew; the details of the community sentences imposed are not available) but 8% (n=16) received an immediate custodial sentence.

Table 8. Proportion of defendants proceeded against for child sexual abuse offences in 2024 and make-up of the general population in 2021, by ethnic group, England and Wales

Ethnicity	Defendants proceeded against for child sexual abuse offences (2024)	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	6%	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	0%	1%
Any other mixed or multiple ethnic background	1%	1%
Any other ethnic background	1%	2%

Sources: Ministry of Justice (2025a); Office for National Statistics (2023). Includes defendants proceeded against for non-recent offences. Excludes 2,993 defendants whose ethnicity was not recorded. ‘Any other ethnic background’ includes Arab.

Figure 45 shows that, in 2024, immediate custodial sentences were most commonly imposed for contact offences such as rape/ attempted rape, sexual activity and sexual assault. More than half of individuals found guilty of abuse of trust and child sexual exploitation offences received immediate custodial sentences, but more than a third received suspended sentences. Those convicted of sexual grooming and image offences were typically issued with a suspended sentence or, particularly in the latter case, a community sentence.

The average length of a custodial sentence for child sexual abuse offences was 64.4 months, or more than five years: this average varied from just over one year for image offences to 10–13 years for rape offences.

6.3.7 Time taken to prosecute child sexual abuse offences

Information on timescales from charge to completion at court related to child sexual abuse is not in the public domain, but the Ministry of Justice has made data available for the CSA Centre's reporting of trends in official data (Ministry of Justice, 2026a, 2024b and 2023a).

Figure 46 shows that, since the court closures caused by COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021, the average (mean) timescale for prosecuting child sexual abuse offences (excluding image offences) in the Crown Court increased by more than four months – from 252 days in 2020/21 to 375 days in 2024/25. In contrast, the prosecution timescale for child sexual abuse image offences increased on average by a week (from 175 to 182 days) over the same period.

Between 2023/24 and 2024/25, these timescales remained stable: the average time taken to prosecute image offences decreased by two days, while for all other child sexual abuse offences it increased by four days.

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.

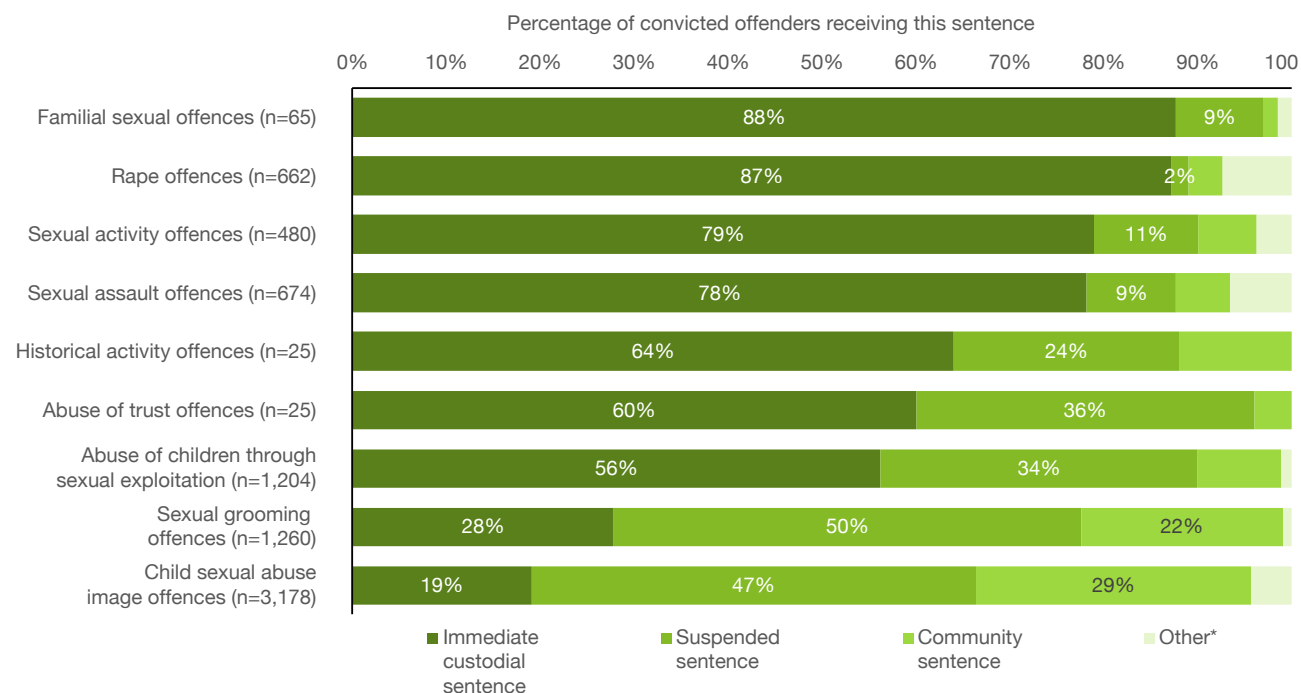
Community sentence. A community order must include one or more of the following: unpaid work, an activity or programme designed to reduce the likelihood of reoffending, a requirement not to engage in a prohibited activity, a curfew, exclusion from specific geographical areas, residence only where a probation 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 (2026a).

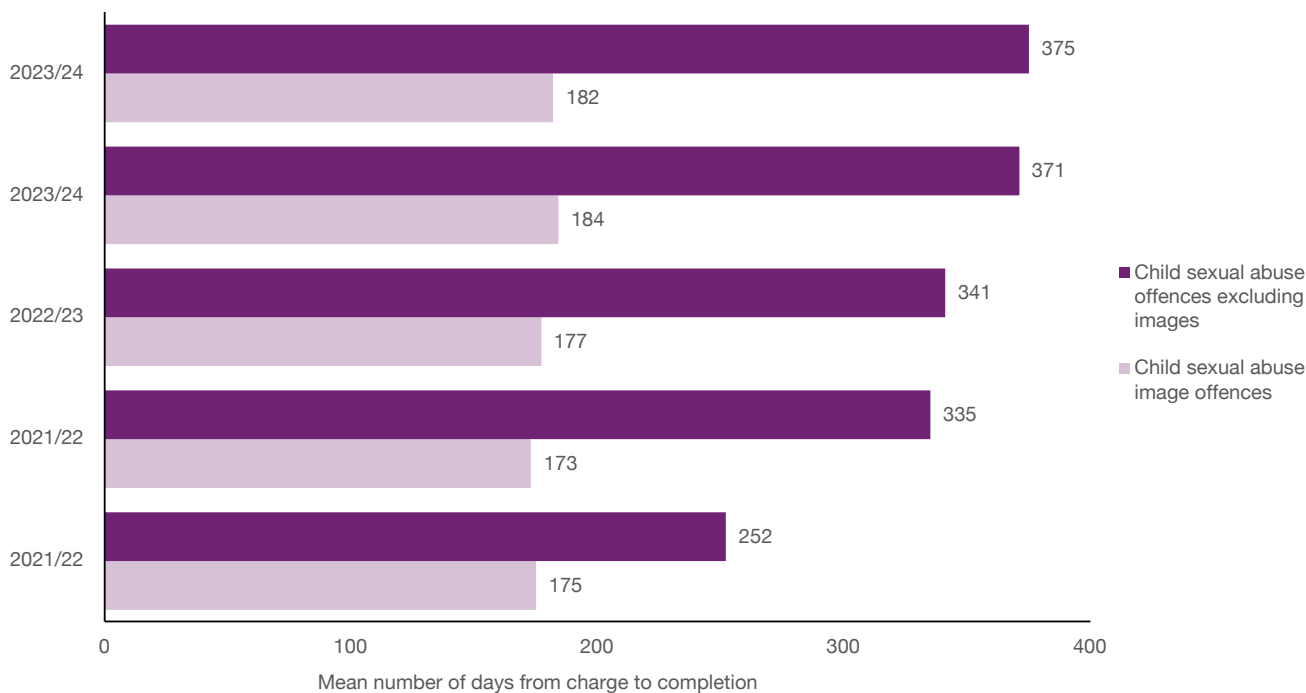
Figure 45. Sentences imposed on convicted defendants for child sexual abuse offences, by offence category, 2024, England and Wales



Source: Ministry of Justice (2025a). Includes defendants proceeded against for non-recent offences.

* 'Other' includes other orders, guardianship, hospital, referral, restriction and fines.

Figure 46. Mean prosecution timescales from charge to completion in the Crown Court, by type of child sexual abuse offence, 2020/21–2024/25, England and Wales



Source: Ministry of Justice (2026a, 2024b and 2023a). Excludes prosecutions for which timescales were not recorded.

Includes defendants proceeded against for non-recent offences.

6.4 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 2024/25, 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. They are sentenced to either an indeterminate or determinate (fixed-term) prison sentence.

- ▶ People serving indeterminate sentences may become eligible for parole after serving the minimum term (tariff) as set by the judge at sentencing, but they will not automatically be released at this point; the independent Parole Board must be satisfied that the risk of harm posed to the public is 'acceptable', based on assessments of behaviour and rehabilitation progress.
- ▶ Not all of a determinate sentence needs to be spent in prison; rules for release depend on when the offence was committed. People convicted of offences committed before 1 February 2015 are released at the halfway point, but only those receiving a sentence of 12 months or more are subject to licence conditions (see below). For offences committed from February 2015 onwards, regardless of sentence and release point, every person is subject to time on licence and extra community supervision after release.
- ▶ When the sentence is completed or the individual is granted parole, they are released from prison and are subject to licence conditions – which include being supervised by a probation and/or police professional – for a period. 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 6.1).

(The Sentencing Act 2026 has made changes to guidance on the early release and community supervision of sexual offenders in England and Wales. It reduces the time that serious sexual offenders – excluding those serving life sentences – need to serve before being eligible for release; but also introduces an 'earned progression model' whereby offenders need to meet expected milestones in order to earn the early release. The changes are due to come into effect in autumn 2026.)

If the individual receives a **suspended prison sentence**, which may be between 14 days and two years, they will complete their sentence in the community and engage in rehabilitation interventions while being supervised by a probation officer. 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 resentenced at court.

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 (2026a, 2026b); Ministry of Justice (2025c); HMPPS (2024); Parole Board (2022); Prison Reform Trust Advice and Information Service (2026).

6.4.1 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 47 shows that, in March 2025, just below three-quarters (73%) 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 2017 and 2024, there were 52,630 convictions relating to child sexual abuse offences (70%) and 22,593 convictions relating to sexual offences against adults (30%) (Ministry of Justice, 2025a).

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. The box in section 5.1 contains more information about notification requirements.

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: HMPPS (2024); Sexual Offences Act 2003.

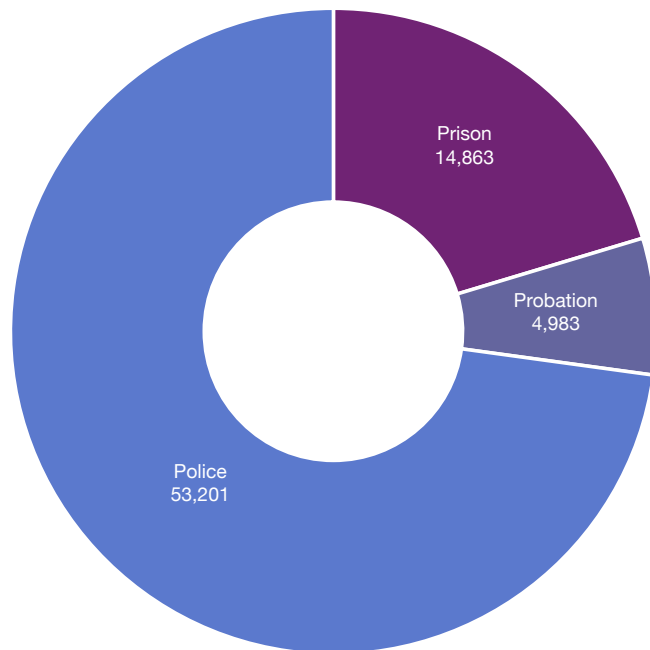
* Offences covered by this category include some sexual offences against adults (e.g., rape and indecent/sexual assault) and all sexual offences against children. A small number of sexual offences do not meet the threshold for notification requirements; people convicted of these offences are allocated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

The MAPPA Category 1 population – most of whom are likely to have committed child sexual abuse offences – grew by 4% during the year

In March 2025, the MAPPA Category 1 population was 4% higher than 12 months earlier, with 73,047 people – three-quarters of the total MAPPA population of 97,050 – classified as Category 1. **Figure 48** shows that 99% of them were managed at Level 1 (that is, by one lead agency); of the remaining 1%, most were managed at Level 2 (under multi-agency arrangements), with only 43 at Level 3 (more complex cases requiring involvement of senior management) (HM Prison & Probation Service (2025a: Table 1).

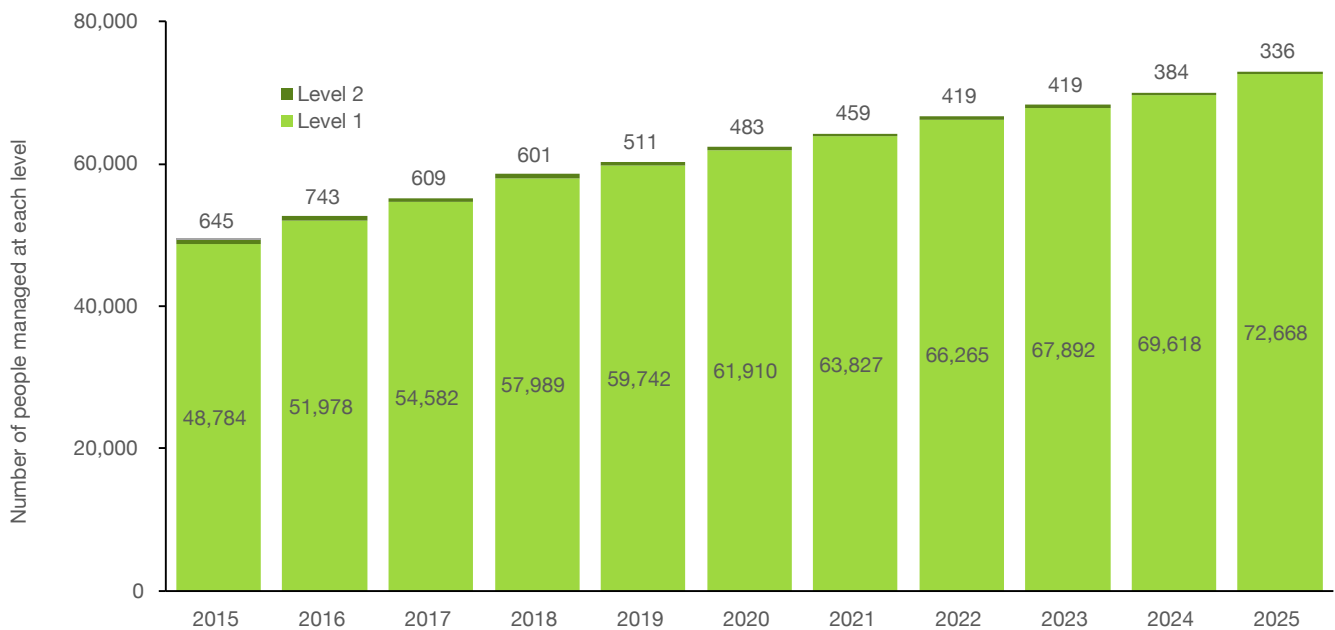
The population of people managed by MAPPA has grown steadily over the last decade. As Figure 48 also shows, this is mainly the result of a 48% increase in the number of people managed at Category 1, resulting from more convictions and sentences mandating sexual offender notification requirements. Many notification requirements imposed are long term or indefinite, meaning that these people remain within the MAPPA population for a considerable time (Ministry of Justice, 2025f).

Figure 47. People subject to sexual offender notification requirements (MAPPA Category 1) as of 31 March 2025, by lead agency, England and Wales



Sources: HM Prison & Probation Service (2025a: Table 1); Ministry of Justice (2025d: Table 1.A.6); Ministry of Justice (2025e: Table 6.7).

Figure 48. People subject to sexual offender notification requirements and managed at different levels as of 31 March, 2015–2025, England and Wales



Source: HM Prison & Probation Service (2025a: Table 1). The 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, 2026b). These include but are not limited to:

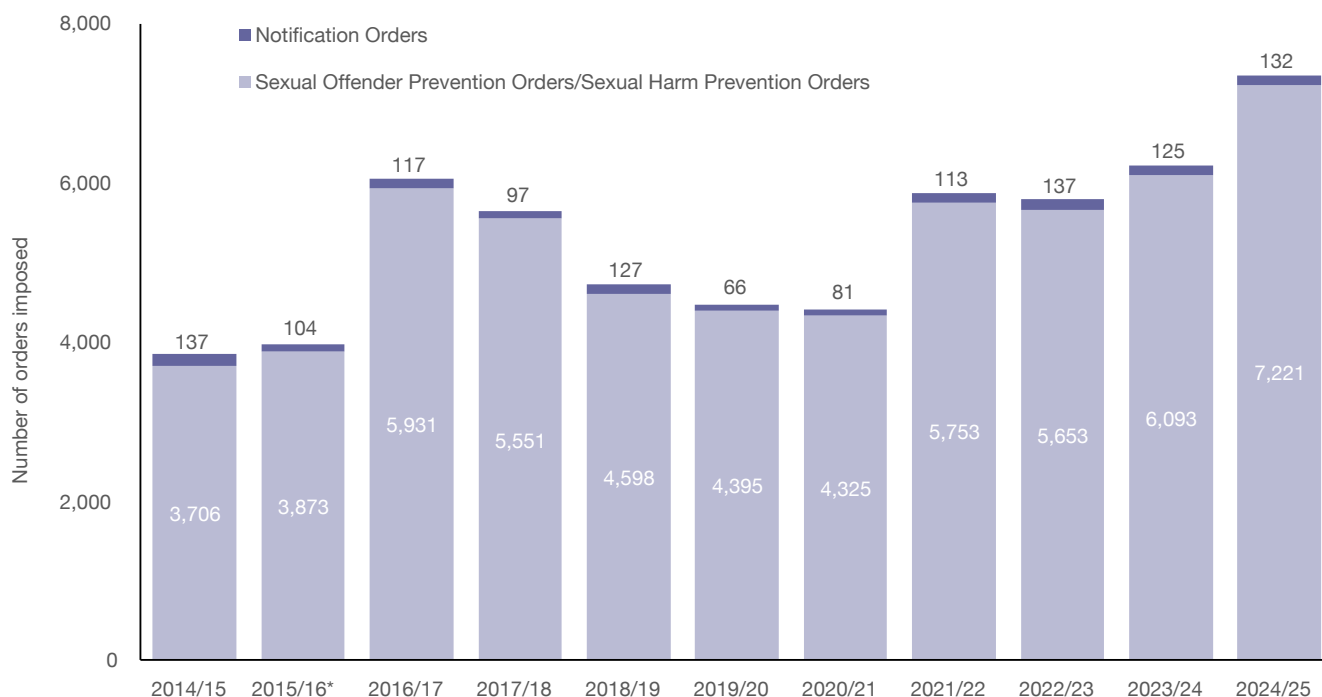
- ▶ A **Sexual Offender Prevention Order or Sexual Harm Prevention Order** (SOPO/SHPO) places specific restrictive conditions or positive obligations on someone convicted of a sexual offence, to prevent harmful behaviour. SOPOs have been replaced by SHPOs under the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing 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), which have been incorporated into SHPOs under the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, may prohibit travel to some or all countries outside the UK.

Figure 49 shows that there were 7,221 SOPOs/SHPOs imposed in 2024/25: a 19% increase on 2023/24, and 86% higher than the number in 2015/16 when the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 was applied. The number of NOs imposed was 6% higher than in 2024/25, but remained below the 2022/23 level.

Breaching any prohibition is a criminal offence, with a maximum penalty of five years' imprisonment. In 2024/25, 2,422 people in MAPPA Category 1 – equivalent to 3% of the people in that category at the end of the year – were cautioned or convicted for a breach of the notification requirement (HM Prison & Probation Service, 2025a: Table 5a).

Figure 49. Civil orders applied to people subject to MAPPA, 2014/15–2024/25, England and Wales



Source: HM Prison & Probation Service (2025a: Table 6).

* From 2015/16, Sexual Offender Prevention Orders were replaced by Sexual Harm Prevention Orders.

The chart does not show Foreign Travel Orders, or Foreign Travel Restrictions imposed under Sexual Harm Prevention Orders, as no more than 20 of these have been imposed in any year during this period.

In 2024/25, 76 people supervised by the probation service under Category 1 were convicted for a Serious Further Offence,²² and a further 60 had been charged and were awaiting an outcome at year end (HM Prison & Probation Service, 2025a: 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.

6.4.2 People in prison for sexual offences

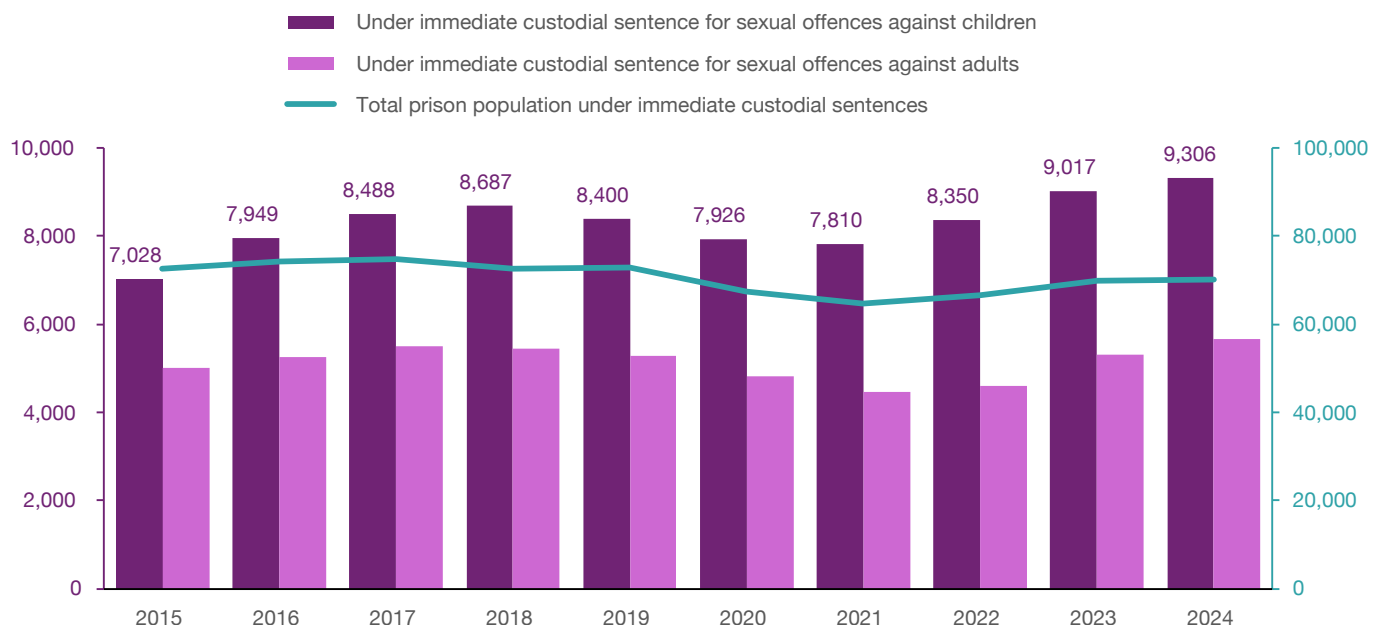
Data on the specific offences for which people in England and Wales are serving prison sentences is available only as a snapshot at 30 June each year.

In June 2024, prisons across England and Wales held 87,726 people in total, of which 70,225 were serving an immediate custodial sentence (Ministry of Justice, 2025d: Table 1.A.1 and 1.A.6).

The number of people in prison serving an immediate custodial sentence for *any* sexual offence (which, in official data, excludes image offences) was 14,437 in June 2024 – representing one in five of the total prison population under an immediate custodial sentence. Three-fifths of this group (8,772) were in prison for sexual offences against children.²³ A further 534 people were serving sentences for sexual abuse image offences, meaning that at least 13% of the total prison population serving immediate custodial sentences were in prison for sexual offences against children (Ministry of Justice, 2025d: Tables 1.A.6, 1.A.8 and 1.A.14).

In June 2024, at least 13% of people serving immediate custodial sentences were in prison for sexual offences against children

Figure 50. Prison population under immediate custodial sentences for sexual offences against children and adults as of 30 June, 2015–2024, England and Wales



Source: Ministry of Justice (2025d: Tables 1.A.6, 1.A.8 and 1.A.14).

22. 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).

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 8,772.

Figure 50 shows that, in June 2024, the number of people serving immediate custodial sentences for child sexual abuse offences was at its highest level since this data began to be published in 2015: it was 3% higher than 12 months earlier, while the total prison population under immediate custodial sentences had risen by only 1%. While the number of people in prison serving immediate custodial sentences for non-sexual offences has fallen by 9% over the past 10 years, the population imprisoned for sexual offences has increased: specifically, sexual offences against adults have risen by 13%, and those against children have seen a 32% increase over the decade.

In June 2024, there were 107 females and 9,199 males serving immediate custodial sentences for child sexual abuse offences – see **Table 9**. Of these, 3,841 (41%) had been convicted of the rape of a child, and 4,239 (46%) of sexual assault against a child aged under 13 or sexual activity involving a child under 16. A further 534 (6%) were in prison for ‘obscene publications’, including abusive images of children, representing a small proportion of the people convicted for this offence: as Table 7 in section 6.3.1 shows, 46% of all convictions for child sexual abuse offences in 2024 (3,849 out of 8,388) related to image offences.

Table 9. Prison population serving immediate custodial sentences for child sexual abuse offences at 30 June 2024, by sex and offence, England and Wales

Offence category	Female	Male	Total
Rape of a female child under 13	10	1,829	1,839
Rape of a female child under 16	8	1,460	1,468
Rape of a male child under 13	0	365	365
Rape of a male child under 16	1	168	169
<i>Total rape offences</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>3,822</i>	<i>3,841</i>
Sexual assault of a female child under 13	27	1,905	1,932
Sexual assault of a male child under 13	4	167	171
<i>Total sexual assault offences</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>2,072</i>	<i>2,103</i>
Sexual activity involving a child under 13	24	873	897
Sexual activity involving a child under 16	17	1,222	1,239
<i>Total sexual activity offences</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>2,095</i>	<i>2,136</i>
Obscene publications including indecent photographs of children	1	533	534
Sexual grooming	0	210	210
<i>Total image and grooming offences</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>743</i>	<i>744</i>
Abuse of children through sexual exploitation	10	375	385
Abuse of position of trust of a sexual nature	3	12	15
Gross indecency with children (historical offence)	2	80	82
<i>Total other child sexual abuse offences</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>467</i>	<i>482</i>
Total	107	9,199	9,306

Source: Ministry of Justice (2025d: 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 the box overleaf.

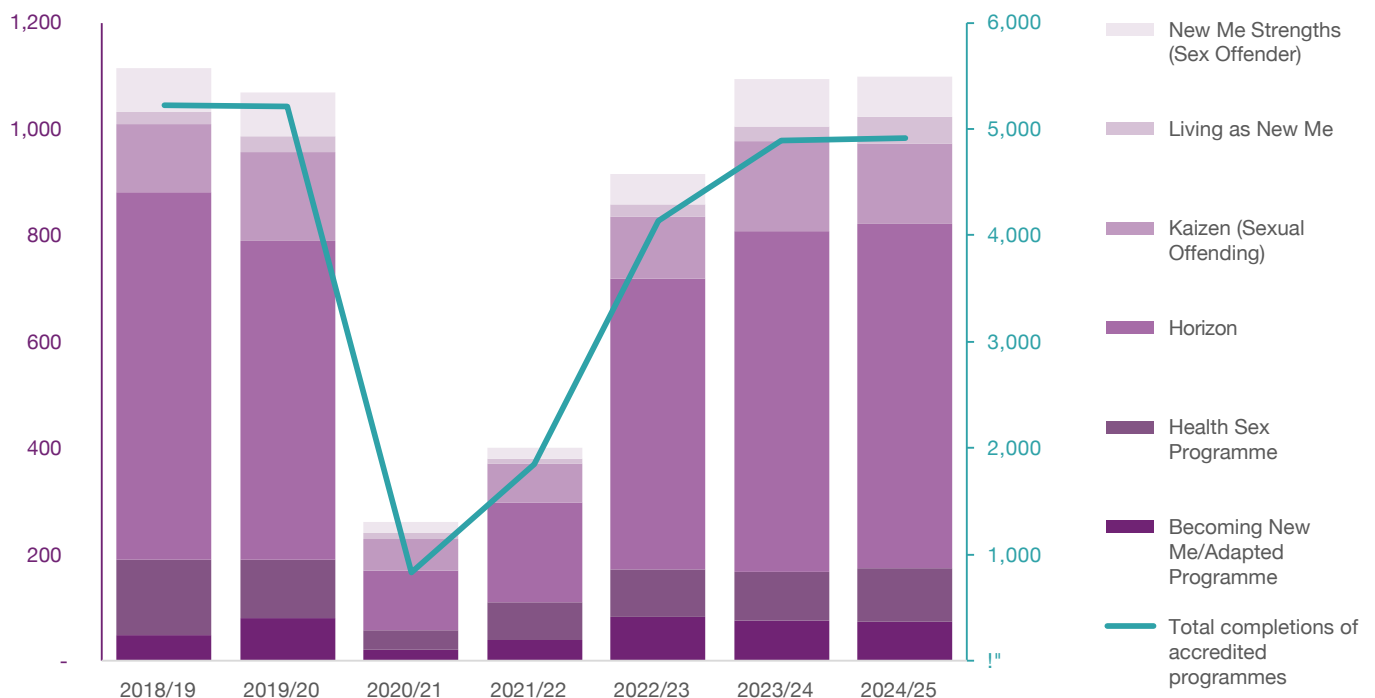
In the year 2024/25, 1,089 people in prison commenced a sexual offending behaviour programme, this was 2% fewer than in the previous year, and 6% below pre-pandemic levels (1,154 in 2018/19). They accounted for 20% of all offending behaviour programme commencements in custody, the same proportion as six years earlier (Ministry of Justice, 2025g: Table 3.1).

As **Figure 51** shows, 1,098 people in prison completed a sexual offending behaviour programme (practically the same as the 1,094 in 2023/24). As with commencements, this represented around one-fifth (22%) of all programme completions in custody – a proportion that has remained relatively static for seven years. Horizon was the most commonly completed programme, accounting for 595 of all completions (Ministry of Justice, 2025g: Table 3.2).

Access to sexual offender behaviour programmes in prison continue to present a challenge, with population pressures resulting in inconsistent delivery of accredited offending behaviour programmes; people convicted of sexual offences report having less access to these programmes (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales, 2025).

A fifth of offending behaviour programme commencements in custody during 2024/25 were sexual offending behaviour programmes

Figure 51. Completions of sexual offender accredited programmes and of all accredited offender programmes, 2018/19–2024/25, England and Wales



Source: Ministry of Justice (2025g, Table 3.2).

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 below.

Programmes available in prison

Building Choices. For adult men and women, including those with learning and disability challenges; group and individual sessions. Not offence-specific, but supports skill development in emotion management, healthy thinking, healthy relationships, sense of purpose, and healthy sex where relevant.

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); HMPPS (2025b).

6.4.3 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 2025, it was supervising 241,540 people pre- and post-release from prison, 1% more than in March 2024 (Ministry of Justice, 2025e: Table 6.6). **Figure 52** shows that, of those convicted of sexual offences, 2,234 people were being supervised under community orders (7% more than a year earlier, and 38% higher than in March 2020), and 2,749 (22% and 112% respectively above the March 2024 and March 2020 levels) were being supervised under suspended sentence orders; overall, the caseload of people managed by the probation service after being convicted of sexual offences was 14% higher than at the end of the previous year.

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 three-quarters of them have been convicted of child sexual abuse offences: in 2024, 4,799 out of 6,334 community orders and suspended sentences for sexual offences (76%) were related to offences against children²⁴ (Ministry of Justice, 2025a).

The number of people managed by the probation service after being convicted of sexual offences grew by 14% during 2024/25

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

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 (2026); HMPPS (2021b).

Reconvictions for sexual offences

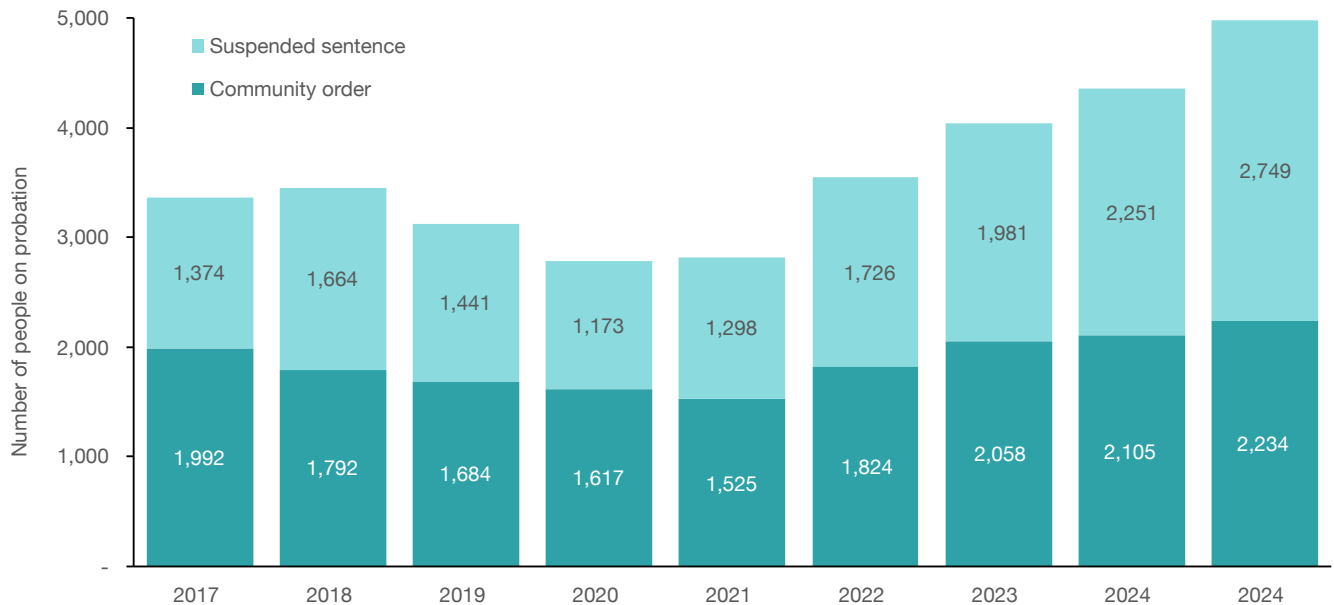
The Ministry of Justice publishes the 'proven reoffending rate' for adults (aged 18+) who are convicted or cautioned for a further offence within 18 months of having been released from custody or received a non-custodial sentence or a reprimand.²⁵ Within this data it is possible to track those whose 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, 2026b). 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

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.

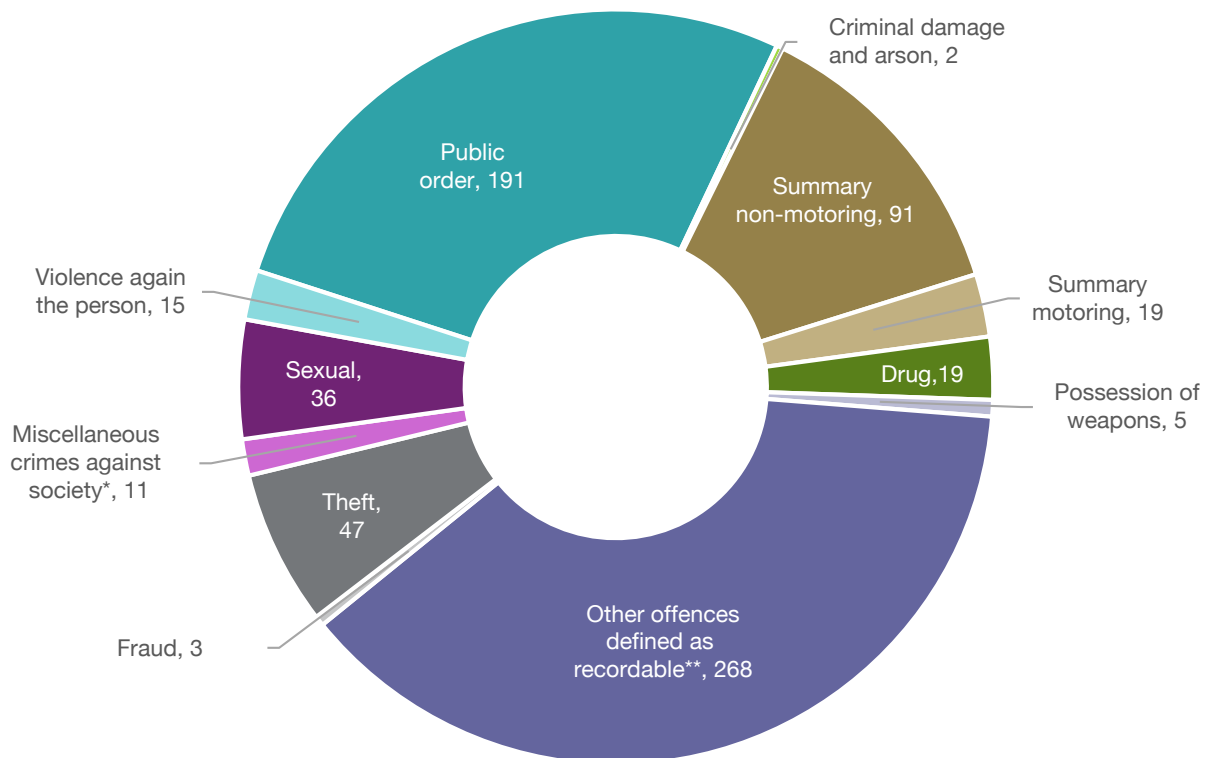
26. In 2023/24, it took an average of nine months for a police investigation into a sexual offence to result in a charge (see Figure 42) and a further year for a contact child sexual abuse offence prosecution to reach completion in the Crown Court (see Figure 46).

Figure 52. People on probation under suspended sentences or community orders for sexual offences (against children or adults) as of 31 March, 2017–2025, England and Wales



Sources: Ministry of Justice (2025e: Table 6.7); Ministry of Justice (2024c: Table 6.7); Ministry of Justice (2023b: Table 6.7); Ministry of Justice (2022: 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).

Figure 53. Subsequent offences for which adults were convicted within 18 months of having been released or receiving a non-custodial sentence for an initial sexual offence between October and December 2023, by type of subsequent offence, England and Wales



Source: Ministry of Justice (2025h: Table B4).

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

** Other offences defined as recordable include television licence evasion, driving without insurance, speeding and vehicle tax offences.

The data for people who were released or received non-custodial sentences/reprimands in October–December 2023 shows that, of the 1,434 adults in this cohort who had been convicted of a sexual offence, 232 (16%) were convicted of any further offence within 18 months; for the equivalent group in the same quarter the previous year, the proven reoffending rate was 13% (Ministry of Justice, 2025h: Table A4a). Despite this increase, proven reoffending among sexual offenders has consistently been lower than among any other reoffence group in recent years.

Figure 53 shows that, of the 707 ‘reoffences’ for which these 232 adults were convicted, 36 (5%) were sexual reoffences (excluding child sexual abuse image offences); more common types of reoffending were public order offences (27%) and summary non-motoring offences²⁷ (13%), while two-fifths of reoffending (38%) involved ‘other’ offences – those deemed less serious but still recordable in legislation, such as driving without insurance, speeding and vehicle tax offences.

Additionally, 314 sexual reoffences were committed by adults whose original conviction had been for a non-sexual offence: 80 of these were committed by adults who had originally committed a summary non-motoring offence, and 60 by those previously convicted for theft (Ministry of Justice, 2025h: 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).

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 6.4.2). In 2024/25, 63% of accredited programmes and other targeted interventions for people convicted of sexual offences were completed – a slight decline from 65% the previous year – against a 70% annual target for the probation service (Ministry of Justice, 2025i).



People serving community sentences for sexual offences in 2024/25 had a 63% completion rate for targeted interventions



27. These are offences such as minor criminal damage or minor assaults; they are dealt with by the magistrates’ courts.

7. Conclusions

This report presents the latest evidence on the scale and nature of child sexual abuse in England and Wales, drawing on recent systematic research, surveys and agency data for 2024/25. It provides new insights into the prevalence of child sexual abuse, who is affected by it, who commits it, and how agencies have identified and responded to it.

7.1 The estimated prevalence of child sexual abuse has increased

Our 2021 edition of this review estimated, on the basis of the available evidence at the time, that around one in ten children are sexually abused before the age 16, including 15% of girls and 5% of boys.

In this updated review and based on the latest evidence, we now estimate that at least **20% of girls and 10% of boys are sexually abused during childhood**.

Several factors may explain this:

- **Measurement has improved.** The latest Crime Survey for England and Wales included sexually abusive experiences across the whole childhood rather than only up to age 16; and better captured child sexual abuse in online contexts (see box at the top of Chapter 2). Recent global systematic reviews (Fang et al, 2026; Fry et al, 2025) are also more comprehensive, include more and newer surveys, and provide sub-regional estimates.
- **Child sexual abuse in online contexts has become visible.** The first generation to grow up with widespread mobile technology is now represented in adult self-report surveys, and their survey responses show that technology plays a significant role in the scale of this abuse (Finkelhor et al, 2024).

► **Greater awareness and reduced stigma.**

Online spaces and movements such as Everyone's Invited and Me Too may have created opportunities for better awareness about child sexual abuse, and greater willingness to report it in a survey, particularly among younger respondents.

The estimate that at least 20% of girls and 10% of boys are sexually abused during childhood draws on data from the youngest respondents (aged 18–24) to the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2024, and so reflects the most recent childhood experiences (see section 2.3); and on findings for Northern Europe (comprising the British Isles, the Nordic countries and the Baltic states) from the latest systematic global review of the prevalence of child sexual abuse (see section 3.1).

Understanding annual prevalence is important for policymakers and decision-makers addressing child sexual abuse. Only one UK study has ever measured *current* experiences of child sexual abuse (Radford et al, 2011) by asking children or their parents about any sexual abuse that had occurred in the preceding year; this survey is now 15 years old. Fang et al (2026) drew on evidence of surveys with children or their parents globally and provide single-year estimates for Northern Europe within this research (see section 3.1).

Using the latest evidence, we now estimate that at least 20% of girls and 10% of boys – almost one child in six – are sexually abused

Applying these percentage estimates to the latest child population estimates by age (Office for National Statistics, 2025c), we estimate that **at least 500,000 children experience in-person contact child sexual abuse** each year in England and Wales. This figure is, however, a significant underestimate of the overall scale of child sexual abuse, because it omits abuse solely in online contexts²⁸ as well as in-person non-contact abuse (e.g. exposure).

Evidence on perpetration has also improved. A recent systematic review has estimated that **1.5% of adults have engaged in contact sexual offending against children below the age of 13** (Whitten et al, 2026). In England and Wales, this equates to approximately 735,000 people (Office for National Statistics, 2025c). It is harder to estimate the number of adults in England and Wales who sexually abuse older children, as some published research into perpetration prevalence does not distinguish fully between sexual abuse of those children and consensual sexual relationships between young people of similar ages.

No single dataset provides a comprehensive measure of current or recent prevalence in England and Wales. The Crime Survey for England and Wales provides invaluable insight about people who have been affected by child sexual abuse, but it represents the experiences of a sample of the whole adult population and can only provide limited analysis of its youngest respondents, whose experiences of childhood abuse are the most recent. There is also evidence that the ‘crime’ framing of the survey may suppress levels of reported child sexual abuse, as people are less likely to disclose experiences of child sexual abuse in the context of criminal activity (see Karsna and Kelly, 2021).

A dedicated, representative survey of older children’s and young adults’ experiences in childhood is urgently needed, with a comprehensive module on child sexual abuse. The Office for National Statistics has confirmed the feasibility and value of such a survey, but has not secured funding to conduct it (Office for National Statistics, 2026).

7.2 Child sexual abuse often occurs in the context of other abuse, neglect and adversity

Findings from the 2024 Crime Survey for England and Wales showed that child sexual abuse rarely occurs in isolation (see section 2.2). Most respondents who had been sexually abused in childhood reported other forms of child abuse, neglect or adversity – including exposure to drug, alcohol or mental health issues in the household; or having spent time in care.

Yet, recent research with social workers found that child sexual abuse can often go unrecorded when multiple concerns are present. Social workers described feeling “*forced to pick something tidy*” because of evidential thresholds, and noted that “*it’s more comfortable, it’s more acceptable for families and carers if you’re naming something else*” (Ball et al, 2026).

The 2024 Crime Survey for England and Wales also highlighted that some groups are disproportionately affected. Respondents **who had been disabled or had long-term physical/mental health conditions as children reported higher levels of child sexual abuse**, as did those who **were gay, lesbian, bisexual or identified as transgender** at the time of the survey (see section 2.3). Practitioners should recognise and respond to these elevated risks, particularly when working with disabled children, those who are exploring their sexual orientation or questioning their gender identity, and children affected by neglect, emotional abuse, or parental drug, alcohol or mental health issues.

A dedicated, representative survey of older children’s and young adults’ experiences in childhood is needed, with a module on sexual abuse

28. Child sexual abuse in a solely online context may take many forms, including contact abuse (such as grooming a child to touch themselves) as well as non-contact abuse.

7.3 A significant proportion of child sexual abuse is committed by other children

The 2024 Crime Survey for England and Wales provided new evidence on the scale of sexual abuse by other children: **40% of respondents affected by child sexual abuse said that another child or children had been involved in it** (see section 2.4). This aligns with data from statutory agencies: police-recorded crime figures from 2024 show that around half of sexual offences where the age of the suspect was recorded involved a child suspect (National Centre for Violence Against Women & Girls and Public Protection, 2025), while sexual abuse carried out by other children was a concern in 40% of local authority child in need assessments in 2024/25 which recorded concerns about sexual abuse (see section 5.1).

A range of contexts for children's harmful sexual behaviour – including within peer groups, in early intimate relationships, and towards neighbours, siblings and other child family members – were identified in the 2024 Crime Survey for England and Wales (see section 2.4). Abuse by other children was disproportionately reported by male respondents, particularly when the abuse was penetrative.

The CSA Centre's *Key Messages from Research on Children and Young People Who Display Harmful Sexual Behaviour* (McNeish and Scott, 2023) highlights that many children who display harmful sexual behaviour have experienced adversity themselves, so early identification and intervention are essential to prevent escalation and reduce harm. It also specifies that a proportionate and developmentally appropriate response to children's harmful sexual behaviour must include specialist assessment, adapted investigative practice, coordinated safeguarding for both/all the children involved, and access to appropriate support.

7.4 Children need help to talk about sexual abuse, and professionals need confidence to act

Among respondents to the 2024 Crime Survey for England and Wales who had been sexually abused in childhood, fewer than half had told *anyone* at the time – and they had been most likely to tell a friend or a family member (see section 2.5). Only about one in 10 had told someone in an official role, such as a police officer, doctor or social worker. And considerably fewer said the abuse came to the attention of professionals who they had not told about it.

Despite clear evidence that verbal reports are uncommon, recent research shows that practitioners often hesitate to name and record child sexual abuse without it because they “*don't want to label something as sexual abuse without a disclosure*” – despite acknowledging that “*those disclosures often never come*” (Ball et al, 2026).

All professionals working with children need the knowledge, skills and confidence to recognise signs and indicators of sexual abuse and act on their concerns without relying on verbal disclosure (Glinski, 2021). They need to feel able to talk about their concerns with children (Glinski and Sabin, 2025). Without this, children will continue to be missed and the impact of sexual abuse will continue to go unaddressed.



Research shows that practitioners hesitate to name and record concerns of child sexual abuse unless the child has told someone about it



7.5 Identification of child sexual abuse by local authorities has fallen further

In 2024/25, the overall number of local authority child needs assessments recording concerns about any form of child sexual abuse fell to its lowest level in a decade (see section 5.1). While there was a slight rise in assessments recording 'child sexual abuse' as a concern, the number recording 'child sexual exploitation' – which is categorised separately within these needs assessments – continued its steep decline seen in previous years. It is unclear whether this represents an overall fall in identification of child sexual exploitation, or a move away from recording it as a separate concern.

In the 2024 Crime Survey for England and Wales, **one in three respondents who had experienced any form of abuse or neglect in childhood said this had included sexual abuse** (see section 2.2) – but only one in six local authority assessments recording abuse or neglect as a factor in 2024/25 included any form of sexual abuse, indicating the child sexual abuse is being disproportionately under-identified (see section 5.1).

The proportion of children placed on child protection plans because of sexual abuse remained at a historic low in 2024/25, matching the previous year's level (see section 5.2). Recent research from the Department for Education (2025b) has shown that, even where sexual abuse is identified in assessments, it is rarely recorded as the primary category in child protection plans: among children whose assessments recorded sexual abuse or sexual exploitation concerns, 62% and 86% respectively were placed on child protection plans under other categories. Without child sexual abuse being named in the plans the likelihood of it being addressed, or children and families receiving the support and protection they need is significantly reduced.

The same research (Department for Education, 2025b) found that, while one in seven needs assessments overall were of disabled children, a much *lower* proportion of children whose assessments recorded sexual abuse or sexual exploitation concerns were disabled – although the evidence from research and surveys points to disabled children being at much *higher* risk of sexual abuse (Jones et al, 2012).

7.6 Police-recorded offences, charges and prosecutions have risen again

The number of police-recorded child sexual abuse offences increased in 2024/25 (see section 6.1). The largest increases were in exposure and voyeurism offences (against either children or adults) and in online image offences, both of which included new offence types introduced in the Online Safety Act 2024.

The number of charges for child sexual abuse offences reached its highest level on record, alongside a 10% reduction in cases closed due to evidential difficulties (see section 6.1.4); however, four-fifths of police investigations did not progress to a charge, an out-of-court resolution or a diversionary, educational or intervention activity. Prosecutions and convictions also reached their highest levels on record (see section 6.3.2).

Both police investigation times and court processing times remained lengthy (see sections 6.1.5 and 6.3.7, reflecting the complex nature of these offences – particularly contact offences, where material evidence (such as images) are often not available. The average times from charge to completion which increased during the pandemic, have remained high.



Four-fifths of investigations did not progress to a charge, an out-of-court resolution or a diversionary, educational or intervention activity



7.7 Caseloads have grown for those managing people with sexual convictions

The population of people convicted of child sexual abuse offences and managed under Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) due to sexual offending continued to grow in 2024/25, with the police managing nearly three-quarters of this population at the end of the year (see section 6.4.1), and Probation managing the remainder.

Similarly, in the nine years from June 2015, the prison population of people serving immediate custodial sentences for child sexual offences increased by nearly one-third (see section 6.4.2).

7.8 Calls for action

Greater priority for the identification of and response to child sexual abuse

There continues to be a large gap between the estimated prevalence of child sexual abuse and its identification by agencies. National administrative data provides only a partial understanding of agencies' responses. Local partnerships need to prioritise a coordinated, multi-agency strategic approach to child sexual abuse, supported by existing guidance (Sabin, 2025).

Child sexual abuse is a serious issue yet it can be prevented. Improving early identification, supporting children to talk about it and seek help, strengthening information sharing and improving data collection are all essential to ensure that child sexual abuse is recognised and responses to it are tracked from identification through to outcome (of support provision, child protection measures and/or criminal justice processes).

Improvement in the knowledge, skills and confidence of the workforce

Most children do not tell professionals verbally that they are being or have been sexually abused. Professionals must be equipped to recognise emotional, behavioural and physical indicators, and understand how sexual abuse co-occurs with other forms of harm. They also need the skills and support to respond to children who display harmful sexual behaviours, recognising this behaviour's links to trauma and adversity. High-quality supervision is critical to support reflective practice and to challenge professionals' assumptions (Jones and Sabin, 2024).

A dedicated survey of current or recent child sexual abuse

A dedicated survey of older children and young adults is needed to better understand the scale and nature of child sexual abuse, particularly in light of the higher prevalence of child sexual abuse among the younger respondents to the 2024 Crime Survey for England and Wales. The Office for National Statistics has developed a 'Child safety' survey and demonstrated its feasibility. Government funding is now needed to undertake this survey.

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

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Appendix A. Methodology of the childhood abuse module in the 2024 Crime Survey for England and Wales

Framing

Crime victimisation survey.

Definition

‘Non-contact sexual abuse’ includes where the respondent indicated that someone made them watch or listen to sexual acts or look at sexual images, made or shared sexual images of them, deliberately exposed themselves to them or sent them sexual images or videos of themselves or others.

‘Contact sexual abuse’ includes being touched sexually. For example, touching or kissing any part of your body with any part of their body in a sexual way or being forced into touching your own or someone else’s body for sexual purposes. Unlike in previous publications, this category does not include rape or assault by penetration (including attempts).

‘Rape or assault by penetration category’ includes any act where a person is penetrated without consent, or is made to penetrate another person, with a penis or any object in either case.

‘Sexual abuse’ includes non-contact sexual abuse, contact sexual abuse and rape or assault by penetration (including attempts). These subcategories will not sum to the total of the “any abuse” category as victims may be included in multiple categories as they can experience more than one type of abuse.

Sample

The self-completion module on abuse during childhood had a sample of around 25,000 adults.

Method

Interview at respondent’s home address, with CSA questions given to the respondent to self-complete (computer-assisted self-interviewing)

Key questions

The following questions will ask about sexual harm you may have experienced before the age of 18. Please include things that anyone, of any age did to you.

1. Before you were 18 years old, did ANYONE ever do any of the following things to you when you did not want them to or felt unable to say no? [SELECT ALL THAT APPLY]

Make you watch or listen to sexual acts or look at sexual images

Make or share sexual images or videos of you

Deliberately expose themselves to you

Make you expose yourself to them or someone else

Send you sexual images or videos of themselves or others

Make you take part in, or listen to, sexual conversation

Experienced none of these

Don’t know or can’t remember

Don’t wish to answer

2. Before you were 18 years old did ANYONE ever do, or try to do, any of the following things to you when you did not want them to or felt unable to say no (whether or not clothes were worn)? [SELECT ALL THAT APPLY]

Touch or kiss any part of your body with any part of their body in a sexual way

Make you touch your own body in a sexual way

Make you touch their body (or someone else’s body) in a sexual way

Experienced none of these

Don’t know or can’t remember

Don’t wish to answer

3. Before you were 18 years old, did ANYONE ever do, or try to do, any of the following things to you when you did not want them to or felt unable to say no? [SELECT ALL THAT APPLY]

Penetrated your mouth, vagina or anus with their penis

Penetrated your vagina or anus with another part of their body or with an object

Make you penetrate their mouth, vagina, or anus with your penis

Make you penetrate their vagina or anus with another part of your body or with an object

Experienced none of these

Don't know or can't remember

Don't wish to answer

For a full list of the questions asked (including supplementary questions about what happened and the person or people involved, and who had been told or found out about it), see Kantar Public (2023).

Appendix B. Data definitions

B1. Local authority safeguarding data in England

The safeguarding data used in Chapter 5 is released by the Department for Education's annual children in need census (Department for Education, 2025a), and relates to information provided by local authorities for the 12-month period from April 2024 to March 2025. 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, 2024).

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 5.1 of our report draws on cases where either 'child sexual abuse' or 'child sexual exploitation' is among those factors (Department for Education, 2025a: Table C3).

The following definitions and limitations apply to this data

- ▶ The factors recorded are those identified at the end of a needs assessment and considered relevant by social workers at the time (Department for Education, 2024; Ball et al, 2026). Most children have more than one factor recorded for each episode of need (Department for Education, 2025a: 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 end 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, 2025d). Similarly, if a child was considered at risk of sexual exploitation at the start of the assessment but actions taken during the assessment period have removed this risk, sexual exploitation is not recorded as a factor (Ball et al, 2026).
- ▶ The data has been collected since 2014 and has been published at local authority level since 2015. There are 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, 2024).
- ▶ No information is published regularly about actions taken after 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 5.2 of our report relates to child protection plans started in the year 2024/25 where sexual abuse was the primary recorded category (Department for Education, 2025a: 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 'multiple' category is recorded in very few plans nationally, and is not used by all local authorities (Department for Education, 2025a).

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, 2024).
- ▶ 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, 2024).
- ▶ Where risks of sexual abuse are considered for unborn children, these are included in the data (Department for Education, 2024).

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, 2025a), 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, 2025a).²⁸
- ▶ 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, 2020d: Table 32).²⁹

28. 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.

29. 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, 2020d)..

- Offences are recorded in the year in which they are reported to the police, rather than the year in which they were committed. While Home Office data does not categorise offences into current and non-recent, the overall proportion of child sexual abuse offences that are non-recent is published separately; it shows that, in 2024/25, just under one-third of sexual offences against children (excluding image offences) recorded by the police were non-recent (Office for National Statistics, 2025d: Table B10).
- 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 4,621 defendants who were proceeded against on charges of indecent image offences in 2024, 97% (4,502) were prosecuted in relation to images of children (Ministry of Justice, 2025a). 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 6.1 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).

Outcomes of police-recorded crime

The definitions used in the outcomes framework are outlined in section 6.1.4, drawing on Home Office guidance (Home Office, 2025a). 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, 2025e).

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. As this data is dependent on staff identifying and correctly applying the relevant flag (Crown Prosecution Service, 2025a), it is likely to underestimate 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, 2025a).
- ▶ 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 'gross indecency with children' and other historical offences.
- ▶ Data is published 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).

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, 2025a).
- ▶ 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 counted (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, 2025a).

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 a central computer database called the Inmate Information System, which contains data from all prison establishments (Ministry of Justice, 2025c).

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, 2025c).

- ▶ 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, 2025a).
- ▶ 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, 2026b). For example, one-year reoffending results for the October to December 2023 quarterly cohort was published in October 2025.
- ▶ 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.

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, 2025c).

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, 2026b).

Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements

Data on people subject to sexual offender notification requirements (HM Prison & Probation Service, 2025a) is published as part of the annual MAPPA 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, 2025f).

The following definitions and limitations apply to this data:

- ▶ The data is drawn from MAPPA areas' local administrative IT systems (Ministry of Justice, 2025f). 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 MAPPA population. Data on people who reoffend while subject to MAPPA and managed by the police is not published.
- ▶ The MAPPA annual report's published data on people managed through MAPPA is not broken down by lead agency (i.e. police, the probation service or the prison service).

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

Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse

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

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