

Centre of  
expertise  
on child  
sexual abuse

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

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This is a revised edition of the evidence review by the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse, *Measuring the scale and changing nature of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation*, originally published in 2017 and updated in 2018. All sections have been updated with new data and research.

## Acknowledgements

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## About the authors

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## About the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse

The Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA Centre) wants children to be able to live free from the threat and harm of sexual abuse. Our aim is to reduce the impact of child sexual abuse through improved prevention and better response.

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. However, we are independent and will challenge any barriers, assumptions, taboos and ways of working that prevent us from increasing our understanding and improving our approach to child sexual abuse.

To tackle child sexual abuse we must understand its causes, scope, scale and impact. We know a lot about child sexual abuse and have made progress in dealing with it, but there are still many gaps in our knowledge and understanding which limit how effectively the issue is tackled.

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# Executive summary

This report brings together the latest evidence from surveys and official agency records to set out what is and is not known about the scale and nature of child sexual abuse (CSA) in England and Wales. Its purpose is to collate this evidence into a single report which can inform the development of CSA prevention, disruption and identification activities. It also highlights the remaining gaps in evidence, and makes recommendations about how to improve the collection of data on CSA.

The first edition of the report was published as a scoping exercise in 2017, with the aim of reaching the best estimate of the scale of CSA in all its forms in England and Wales and describing what was known of its nature. This edition updates this evidence base up to March 2020, the latest date for which national data is available. It therefore does not cover the possible impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the prevalence and nature of CSA and on agencies' ability to identify and respond to it, which will take many years to become fully measurable.

This review relies on two sources of information: self-report surveys that attempt to measure the prevalence of CSA in the population, and the number of CSA cases identified and recorded by the different agencies working to address the abuse.

## What we know from prevalence studies

### *The scale of child sexual abuse*

Surveys asking participants about their experiences of CSA differ in how they define sexual abuse, and whom and how they ask about it.

The two major surveys conducted in England and Wales have reached very different estimates of how many children experience CSA: the NSPCC child maltreatment study undertaken in 2009 found that 24.1% of adult participants described experiences of some form of CSA; but only 7.5% of respondents to the latest childhood abuse module (2019) within the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) reported experiences of CSA. There were some key differences in how the surveys were conducted:

- ▶ While the CSEW module asked questions about maltreatment that occurred before the age of 16, the NSPCC asked about these experiences up to the age of 18. International studies have shown that prevalence of almost every kind of sexual abuse – by adults, peers, family, acquaintances, and strangers – increases with age between 15 and 17, which was not captured in the CSEW.
- ▶ While the NSPCC child maltreatment study was a dedicated survey on child abuse, the CSEW module asked questions about abuse at the end of a survey on crime. Crime-focused surveys have been found to generate lower prevalence estimates than those framed in terms of health, wellbeing or sexual experience, as people are less likely to disclose experiences of CSA in the context of criminal activity.
- ▶ While the CSEW module asked adults aged 18–74 to report retrospectively about their experiences of childhood abuse, the NSPCC surveyed only children and young adults in order to measure the more recent prevalence of abuse.

Taking into account the variations in prevalence studies for England and Wales, the data suggests that at least 15% of girls/young women and 5% of boys/young men experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of 16, including abuse by adults and under-18s.

### *The nature of child sexual abuse*

- ▶ Penetrative abuse appears significantly less prevalent than other forms of CSA, but is more likely to be repeated. The NSPCC child maltreatment study found that 4.5% of young people aged 18–24 had been sexually assaulted by another child and 3.5% by an adult. In the CSEW childhood abuse module, 2% of participants reported experiences of rape or penetrative abuse in childhood, by another child or an adult; over two-thirds of them reported that this had happened more than once. The experiences of other forms of CSA were reported more frequently in the CSEW childhood abuse module: 5.8% of participants described non-penetrative contact abuse, and 3.4% non-contact sexual abuse.
- ▶ In surveys, girls are at least three times as likely as boys to describe experiences of CSA.
- ▶ Some children and young people appear much more likely to be sexually abused than the wider population: in the CSEW childhood abuse module, disabled participants were twice as likely as non-disabled participants to describe experiences of CSA; those who had lived in a care home were nearly four times as likely to have experienced CSA than those who had not; and those who had experienced childhood neglect were five times as likely to have also experienced CSA as those who had not.
- ▶ The vast majority of perpetrators are male: among respondents to the CSEW childhood abuse module who described being sexually abused in childhood, 92% said it had been perpetrated by males only, and 4% by both males and females. The NSPCC child maltreatment survey, too, found that most perpetrators were male and known to the child in some way.
- ▶ Penetrative offences are committed by people already known to the victim, with family members more common for girls/young women and authority figures more common for boys/young men. Fathers/stepfathers and other family members were identified as perpetrators by 16% and 30% respectively of women describing penetrative abuse in the CSEW childhood abuse module, and authority figures by 16% of male survivors of such abuse.
- ▶ Most children and young people do not tell anyone at the time that the abuse is taking place, and many wait to speak about it until they are adults. In the NSPCC child maltreatment survey, five out of six participants who said they had been sexually abused by another child had not told anyone about it, and one-third of participants who were sexually abused by an adult had not told anyone. In the CSEW childhood abuse module, in which all the participants had reached adulthood, around one in five who had experienced CSA had never told anyone.
- ▶ Children and young people who do tell are much more likely to tell friends or family than someone in a professional role. Official agencies had discovered or been told about abuse in a small minority (under 10%) of cases at the time it was happening, and in around one-quarter of cases at a later date, the CSEW childhood abuse module found.
- ▶ The most common reasons for not telling are embarrassment, fear of not being believed, and fear of humiliation, according to the CSEW module.

The data suggests that at least 15% of females and 5% of males in England and Wales experience sexual abuse before the age of 16

### Remaining gaps in the evidence base

- ▶ We do not know whether the prevalence of CSA has increased or decreased over time in England and Wales.
- ▶ Evidence of the scale of CSA committed by under-18s is particularly poorly understood.
- ▶ There is no estimate of the prevalence of online-facilitated CSA. Further, it is not yet possible to map online activity onto what we know about CSA, to explore how far the internet is a specific context for abuse and how far there are specific online forms of sexual abuse that have increased the scale of CSA.
- ▶ Neither abuse by multiple perpetrators nor abuse by subsequent perpetrators is well documented.
- ▶ There have been no attempts in England and Wales to conduct a survey of CSA perpetration, although such studies have been conducted internationally.

The lack of time series data and variations in methodological approaches make it difficult to explore whether or how the nature of CSA is changing: many studies are one-off, so trends over time cannot be discerned; different methodologies and definitions make comparisons across studies problematic; and there is often too little differentiation of both the forms (the sexually abusive acts) and the contexts (not just the victim's relationship to the perpetrator, but also the process of entrapment/point of first contact, and the location) of the abuse.

### What we know from agency data

#### *The scale of child sexual abuse*

Official data vastly underestimates the scale of CSA because:

- ▶ most CSA remains hidden and is never reported to, or uncovered by, an official agency – or is not reported until the victim is an adult
- ▶ not all suspected cases of CSA are recorded, and not all recorded cases are visible in the published data; this applies to both criminal justice and child protection data
- ▶ recording practices vary across agencies, across geographical areas and over time.

#### Local authority children's services

- ▶ Child protection data provides only a partial picture of the CSA concerns identified in the child protection system. The data shows that, while local authority children's services in England identified 30,460 children as being at risk of CSA in 2019/20, fewer than 9% (2,600) were recorded under this category of abuse on a child protection plan.
- ▶ The number of children placed on a child protection plan for CSA in England and on the child protection register for CSA in Wales has dropped by 60% over the past two decades, despite the overall number of children on plans/the register more than doubling over the same period.



England's local authorities found 30,460 children to be at risk of CSA in 2019/20, but placed just 2,600 on protection plans under this category of abuse



- ▶ The most recent available data (2019/20) shows a further 12% decrease in the number of CSA-related child protection plans in England, the sharpest decline in 18 years. Just 4% of all child protection plans in England and child protection registrations in Wales are under the category of sexual abuse.
- ▶ This suggests that there has been a change in the way that CSA is identified and/or recorded by children's services, as the decline in CSA-related child protection plans/registrations is not reflected in other measurements of the scale of CSA in England and Wales.
- ▶ Rates of child protection plans/registrations and of CSA risk vary considerably by local authority. Reasons for this variation are not clear.
- ▶ Charge rates vary by offence: in 2019/20, 'abuse through sexual exploitation' and 'sexual grooming' offences had the highest rates, of 23% and 15% respectively, while only 6% of offences relating to 'rape of female child under 16' or 'sexual activity with a child under 13' resulted in a charge.
- ▶ By 2019/20, the number of defendants prosecuted for CSA offences had fallen by more than one-third since its peak in 2016/17.
- ▶ The court system recorded a total of 6,387 prosecutions and 4,870 convictions for CSA offences in 2019/20. As the number of prosecutions has fallen, the conviction ratio has risen to 76% in 2019/20.
- ▶ The vast majority of defendants were male (99%) and from White ethnic backgrounds (92%) in 2019/20.
- ▶ Rates of CSA offences, charges and prosecutions all vary by local area.

### Criminal justice agencies

Criminal justice data provides a fragmented but consistent picture of the scale of CSA cases proceeding through the system. After years of increasing volumes of CSA offences recorded and defendants prosecuted, these numbers have levelled off:

- ▶ Across England and Wales, 87,992 CSA offences were recorded by the police in 2019/20, slightly fewer than in the previous year. It is not possible to estimate the extent to which this reflects the changing patterns of non-recent versus current CSA offences.
- ▶ Offences against children accounted for more than half of all sexual offences recorded by the police: in 2019/20, 48% of sexual offences against females were committed against children under 18, and 65% of sexual offences against males were perpetrated against under-18s.
- ▶ A small proportion (12%) of investigations into CSA offences were concluded with a decision to charge the offender(s) in 2019/20; the charge rate has fallen sharply from 37% six years earlier.

### Health agencies

Health agencies in England and Wales do not publish any data relating to CSA, but some data is collected regularly. The following data was released following data requests:

- ▶ In England during 2019, children and young people aged under 18 made 1,382 visits to sexual health clinics where evidence of 'acute' or 'non-acute' sexual assault was observed.
- ▶ 6,051 children and young people aged under 18 were in contact with a sexual assault referral centre in England in 2019/20, and 620 children and young people in Wales.

The scale of recorded concerns of CSA in these health datasets is low compared to the scale of reported CSA offences to the police.



In 2019/20, 12% of CSA offence investigations resulted in a decision to charge the offender(s); six years earlier, the figure was 37%



### *The nature of child sexual abuse*

- ▶ The vast majority of identified perpetrators of CSA are male: in 2019/20, males accounted for 99% of defendants prosecuted for CSA offences.
- ▶ Girls and young women are much more likely than boys and young men to be identified as victims of CSA: 60% of children on a child protection plan under the category of sexual abuse in England were female in 2019/20, and the comparable figure in Wales was 57%. Particularly high proportions of females were recorded in health service records (93% of users of sexual health clinics aged under 18, and 85% of under-18s using sexual assault referral centres), suggesting that boys and young men are less likely to be reached by these services.
- ▶ Children from White backgrounds are over-represented in the case files of official agencies. Where ethnicity was recorded, over three-quarters of children on a child protection plan under the category of sexual abuse in 2019/20 were from White ethnic backgrounds, as were 82% of children attending sexual health clinics and 87% attending sexual assault referral centres; in January 2020, White children accounted for 74% of England's state school population. Asian children are particularly under-represented in agency datasets. It should be noted, however, that it is common for children's ethnicity not to be recorded in agency data.

### *Remaining gaps in the evidence base*

- ▶ Criminal justice data provides no accurate measure of how many victims are being identified.
- ▶ The profiles of victims and perpetrators, apart from their gender, are not consistently recorded by official agencies.
- ▶ Data on the contexts for abuse – for example, the perpetrators' relationship to the victims, the locations of abuse and the duration of abuse – is not available in official data.
- ▶ We do not know what drives local variation in the identification and recording of CSA.

## What we know from helplines and hotlines

- ▶ The Internet Watch Foundation receives a large and increasing number of reports of CSA material identified online: there were more than 130,000 reports in 2019, one in five of which included material depicting rape or sexual torture.
- ▶ Around half of children in CSA material appeared to be aged 11–13, and 92% were female.
- ▶ 5,900 help-seekers contacted the Stop It Now! helpline in 2019, either because they were concerned about their own sexual thoughts, behaviour or feelings towards children or because they were concerned about someone else.
- ▶ The NSPCC's Childline service delivered 7,679 counselling sessions about sexual abuse (contact abuse or online abuse) in 2019/20. The number of these sessions delivered the following year was down by 22% – within an overall 14% reduction in counselling sessions, partly the result of the COVID-19 pandemic – but sexual abuse remained the most frequent form of abuse about which counselling sessions were delivered.
- ▶ Between 2019/20 and 2020/21, the NSPCC's helpline for adults concerned about children received 44% more contacts regarding online sexual abuse and 2% more regarding contact sexual abuse.

## Moving forward

This review concludes that significant gaps remain in what we know about the scale and nature of CSA in England and Wales. There is a continued need to improve data on the prevalence of CSA – which could best be achieved through a dedicated CSA survey – and to improve how agencies collect, record and publish data on CSA. But while improvements to the systems that capture data are important, that data cannot be separated from the people who create it and the culture in which they work. Therefore, there is also an ongoing need for enhanced training and support for professionals across all agencies, to empower them with the knowledge and confidence that they need to better protect children by identifying concerns of CSA and recording them appropriately in data systems.

# 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 (CSA). This report brings together the latest evidence showing what is and is not known about the scale and nature of CSA in England and Wales from surveys and agency records.**

The first edition of the report (Kelly and Karsna, 2017) was published as a scoping exercise in 2017, with the aim of reaching the best estimate of the scale of CSA in all its forms in England and Wales, describing what was known of its nature, and exploring how its measurement could be improved. This original review highlighted significant gaps and weaknesses in our collective understanding on this issue, and recommended improvements. The CSA Centre has since produced shorter updates of trends in official data (e.g. Parke and Karsna, 2019) and commissioned research to help fill some of the gaps in knowledge (Radford, 2018; Christie and Karsna, 2019; Roberts, 2020; CSA Centre with the Centre for Abuse and Trauma Studies, 2020).

Now, new data and research have shed more light on the scale and nature of CSA in England and Wales. A new survey module covering childhood abuse has been included within the Crime Survey for England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2020a), and new research and reviews have been published on different forms of CSA (e.g. Home Office, 2020a; Rodger et al, 2020; Hallett et al, 2019; Wager et al, 2018). Further data on the annual reach of statutory agencies up to March 2020 – collected by local authority children’s services, police forces, courts and the Crown Prosecution Service – highlights trends in safeguarding and criminal justice responses to CSA. For the first time, we have included in this edition some data on CSA collected by NHS England and Public Health England.

The purpose of this report is to bring together data across different data sources in one place so that evidence can inform the development of approaches to the prevention, disruption and identification of CSA. It also highlights the remaining gaps in evidence and makes recommendations on how to improve data on CSA.

It is important to bear in mind that the data presented in this report predates the COVID-19 pandemic and its possible impact, both on the prevalence and nature of CSA and on agencies’ ability to identify and respond to it in 2020–21; it is likely that the impact of lockdowns will take many years to become fully measurable in survey or agency data.

## 1.1 Working methods

This report has been undertaken primarily through desk-based research, reviewing existing prevalence estimates of CSA and analysing the official data on recorded cases. We have undertaken our own analyses of publicly available datasets to explore changes over time and regional variations.

Since this report’s first edition was published, new data and research have shed more light on the scale and nature of CSA in England and Wales

## 1.2 Structure of the report

This report is structured as follows:

- ▶ Chapter 2 provides an overview of the current definitions of CSA used in England and Wales, and explores how definitions can have an impact on data recording and decisions about the services that children receive.
- ▶ Chapter 3 focuses on what is known about the prevalence of CSA from self-report surveys. It starts with a short summary of CSA prevalence rates found in international research, looking at how methodological differences account for variations found in different surveys. It then looks more closely at the findings of two surveys undertaken in England and Wales: the most recent ‘childhood abuse’ module within the Crime Survey for England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2020a) and the child maltreatment study undertaken by the NSPCC (Radford et al, 2011).
- ▶ Chapter 4 brings together official statistics published by government departments in England and Wales. This includes the Children in Need census for England, published by the Department for Education, and the Children Receiving Care and Support census, published by the Welsh Government; 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. NHS England and Public Health England have made available previously unpublished data on the number of children attending sexual assault referral centres (SARCs) and sexual health services following a sexual assault.
- ▶ Chapter 5 provides a brief summary of data released by helplines and hotlines about reports of CSA images online (the Internet Watch Foundation); about children seeking support and advice in relation to CSA and adults seeking support about a child (the NSPCC); and about adults seeking support and advice about their own or others’ sexual thoughts or behaviour in relation to children (Stop It Now!).
- ▶ Finally, Chapter 6 draws conclusions from the data and sets out recommendations for action to gather more information on the prevalence of CSA and improve how agencies collect, record and publish data on CSA.

The data presented in this report predates the COVID-19 pandemic, and its possible impact on CSA and agencies’ ability to respond to it

## 2. Defining and framing child sexual abuse

Understandings of and responses to CSA have shifted in a variety of ways over time, and are in a continuous state of change and evolution (Lovett et al, 2018).

Each shift has meant that different forms and/or contexts of sexual abuse have been recognised and attended to, which has opened up space for survivors to speak and for agencies to listen and hear. These shifts have, however, too often driven local and national policy responses, as focus has swung from one high-profile scandal to another: holding all forms of and contexts for CSA in view at the same time has remained elusive for research, policy and practice.

In recent years, there has been a renewed focus on all forms of CSA in national policies – both the *Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Strategy* (Home Office, 2021) and the *Welsh National Action Plan: Preventing and Responding to CSA* (Welsh Government, 2019a) cover all forms of CSA.

### 2.1 Current definitions and framings

There are no agreed UK-wide definitions for CSA: all nations have their own definitions.<sup>1</sup> In England the definition is set out in the statutory guidance, *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (Department for Education, 2018:107):

“[CSA] involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, not necessarily involving a high level of violence, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. The activities may involve physical contact, including assault by penetration (for example, rape or oral sex) or non-penetrative acts such as masturbation, kissing, rubbing and touching outside of clothing. They may also include non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of, sexual images, watching sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways, or grooming a child in preparation for abuse. Sexual abuse can take place online, and technology can be used to facilitate offline abuse. Sexual abuse is not solely perpetrated by adult males. Women can also commit acts of sexual abuse, as can other children.”

The Wales national action plan has a shorter definition (Welsh Government, 2019a:4):

“Child sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a child to take part in sexual activities, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening, including: physical contact, including penetrative or non-penetrative acts; non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of, pornographic material or watching sexual activities or encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways.”

1. This report focuses on CSA in England and Wales, so the definitions used in Scotland and Northern Ireland are not discussed here.

CSE is the only form of CSA to have its own statutory definition in both England and Wales. In England, it is defined in a guide for practitioners, local leaders and decision-makers (Department for Education, 2017:5):

“Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.”

In Wales, a new definition of CSE – following a review (Hallett et al, 2017) of the Welsh Government’s statutory guidance<sup>2</sup> – was published in the national overall CSA action plan (Welsh Government 2019a:4):

“Child sexual exploitation is a form of sexual abuse that can include sex or any form of sexual activity with a child; the production of indecent images and/or any other indecent material involving children. It occurs to those up to the age of 18 years old. It involves some form of exchange: the exchange can include the giving or withdrawal of something, such as the withdrawal of violence or threats to abuse another person. There may be a facilitator who receives something in addition to or instead of the child who is exploited. Children may not recognise the exploitative nature of the relationship or exchange. Children may feel that they have given consent.”

Both these definitions of CSE position it as a form of CSA. Nesting CSE within CSA is appropriate, but delineating the boundaries has proven difficult in practice, leading to arbitrary and inconsistent categorisations (see e.g. Beckett and Walker, 2018; Hallett et al, 2017; Christie and Karsna, 2019).

In both England and Wales, consent features strongly in the CSE guidance. The guidance in England explains the limits of young people’s ability to consent to sexual exploitation (Department for Education, 2017:6):

“Even where a young person is old enough to legally consent to sexual activity, the law states that consent is only valid where they make a choice and have the freedom and capacity to make that choice. If a child feels they have no other meaningful choice, are under the influence of harmful substances or fearful of what might happen if they don’t comply (all of which are common features in cases of child sexual exploitation) consent cannot legally be given whatever the age of the child.”

An element of exchange is a central feature in both the English and Welsh definitions, and is considered the aspect that defines CSE most clearly. In the review of statutory guidance in Wales, Hallett et al (2017:29) said:

“The concept of exchange is fundamental to understandings of CSE. This is what makes it both distinct from other forms of child abuse and what makes it abusive even in cases where the young person may appear to be or consider themselves to be ‘consenting’ to the exploitation.”

The current Welsh statutory guidance notes that “the exchange of sex can be the meeting (and exploitation) of unmet needs” (Welsh Government, 2021:10).

Defining child sexual exploitation as a form of CSA is appropriate, but delineating the boundaries has proven difficult in practice

2. The Welsh Government published new statutory guidance for CSE in March 2021 (Welsh Government, 2021).

The English guidance offers further clarification regarding the concept of ‘exchange’ with perpetrators within CSE (Department for Education, 2017:6):

“Where it is the victim who is offered, promised or given something they need or want, the exchange can include both tangible (such as money, drugs or alcohol) and intangible rewards (such as status, protection or perceived receipt of love or affection). It is critical to remember the unequal power dynamic within which this exchange occurs and to remember that the receipt of something by a child/young person does not make them any less of a victim. It is also important to note that the prevention of something negative can also fulfil the requirement for exchange, for example a child who engages in sexual activity to stop someone carrying out a threat to harm his/her family.

Whilst there can be gifts or treats involved in other forms of sexual abuse (e.g. a father who sexually abuses but also buys the child toys) it is most likely referred to as child sexual exploitation if the ‘exchange’, as the core dynamic at play, results in financial gain for or enhanced status of, the perpetrator.

Where the gain is *only* for the perpetrator/facilitator, there is most likely a financial gain (money, discharge of a debt or free/discounted goods or services) or increased status as a result of the abuse.”

However, the boundaries that distinguish CSE from other forms of CSA, in terms of what children and young people receive, remain unclear: the Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland (SAVI) study (McGee et al, 2002) found that the offer of sweets, cigarettes, alcohol and other material objects was the most common tactic used by perpetrators in all forms of CSA, and these could be interpreted as forms of exchange. In sexually abusive peer relationships, the abused young person may gain affection or status: does this mean that such relationships should all be designated CSE? This is not a rhetorical question, as it has implications for how such situations are responded to: would CSE or domestic abuse services be more relevant? While there has been increasing recognition of these complexities since the original edition of this report (Beckett and Walker, 2018; Hallett et al, 2017), inconsistencies remain in how definitions are applied in practice. These have consequences for data and for decisions about the support services offered to children and young people.

In practice, decisions about whether acts of abuse amount to CSE or other forms of CSA are frequently made on the basis of the victim’s age or their relationship with the perpetrator, with intra-familial abuse (of younger children) being seen as ‘CSA’ and extra-familial abuse of young people as ‘CSE’ (Christie and Karsna, 2019; Beckett and Walker, 2018). This precludes the possibility that family members may sexually exploit children, even though this is known to happen: the production of CSA images during intra-familial abuse has been identified by Salter (2021) as an important but under-recognised source of such images, for example. Such an approach to decision-making conflates the forms of abuse and the contexts in which they take place, and is challenged in the latest Wales statutory guidance (Welsh Government, 2021:14):

“CSE can, and does, take place in families. The fact that the majority of CSE is extra-familial does not mean that CSE cannot take place within families or be facilitated by a family member.”

## A new typology of CSA offending

In 2018, the CSA Centre set out to develop a typology that would provide a new way of understanding CSA. It sought to identify and describe a set of types of CSA offending that are not constrained by existing constructs of CSA; these types were based on empirical data, so that the typology would be grounded in actual experiences of CSA, drawing upon both perpetrator and victim perspectives.

The typology of CSA offending (CSA Centre with the Centre for Abuse and Trauma Studies, 2020) was developed through research by Middlesex University and the CSA Centre. Focusing solely on offending by adults, it aimed to identify patterns of offending and the contexts in which CSA occurs.

The typology comprises nine types of CSA offending by adults. Although there are overlaps between different types, each type seeks to describe a specific set of contextual features – the connection between the perpetrator(s) and the child, the nature of the abuse, where/how it took place, and the process of gaining and maintaining access to the child – that define a particular type of abuse.

- ▶ **Child sexual abuse within the family environment:** sexual abuse of a child or young person by an adult family member, or by an adult who is connected to the family or to one of its members.
- ▶ **Child sexual abuse through trusted relationships outside the family environment:** sexual abuse of a child or young person by someone who holds a position of authority over them as a result of a professional or vocational role.
- ▶ **Child sexual abuse through an intermediary:** sexual abuse of a child or young person which is carried out by more than one perpetrator; the perpetrator who initiates the abuse (the initiating perpetrator) seeks to gain access to the child, or to images of the child, through another perpetrator (the intermediary perpetrator).
- ▶ **Child sexual abuse through online interaction:** abuse where a perpetrator, operating online, encourages/deceives/coerces a child or young person to take part in online sexualised conversations or sexual acts, and/or to produce images (photos or videos) of themselves that they share with the perpetrator online.
- ▶ **Child sexual abuse through viewing, sharing or possessing images:** the viewing of images of CSA that have already been created. This can include viewing, possessing and sharing images (photos or videos) with others, generally (but not exclusively) online.
- ▶ **Child sexual abuse through groups and networks:** sexual abuse committed by perpetrators who are part of a group or network. This may be a social group, gang or network that meets in person, or a group or network in which members interact online and remain anonymous.
- ▶ **Child sexual abuse arranged and perpetrated for payment:** sexual abuse of a child or young person by one or more perpetrators where, in return for payment (either financial or other), a perpetrator (“the seller”) offers other perpetrators (“buyers”) access to the child or young person for contact abuse and/or creates and sells images (photos or videos) of abuse, e.g. via live-streaming.
- ▶ **Child sexual abuse through a personal connection:** abuse committed by a perpetrator who establishes a personal connection with a child or young person and grooms or coerces them into sexual abuse.
- ▶ **Child sexual abuse through attack by an unknown person:** abuse where a perpetrator, who is unknown to the child or young person, attacks and sexually assaults them.

Further information is provided in the full typology report:

[www.csacentre.org.uk/documents/new-typology-of-child-sexual-abuse-offending/](http://www.csacentre.org.uk/documents/new-typology-of-child-sexual-abuse-offending/)

## 3. Prevalence research

Research into the prevalence of CSA has its origins in a groundbreaking study by Finkelhor (1979), with research in many countries following in the 1980s–1990s. Innovations in methods have continued in the past two decades: these were exemplified by the Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland (SAVI) study (McGee et al, 2002), which explored sexual violence in both childhood and adulthood, and a recent increase in studies involving young people (e.g. Finkelhor et al, 2014; Radford et al, 2011). Nonetheless, most studies to date have focused on assessing the scale of victimisation from retrospective reports by adults, and there have been limited efforts to measure actual or potential perpetration.

This chapter presents estimates of CSA prevalence reached by meta-analyses of multiple international studies, and explains how methodological differences can account for variations in studies' findings. It then explores recent prevalence data for England and Wales, obtained by the Crime Survey for England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2020a) and the NSPCC child maltreatment study (Radford et al, 2011); both of these embed questions about CSA within a survey on child maltreatment generally. (Appendix 1 summarises key information about their methodologies, including the questions asked.) Finally it outlines research aimed at measuring individuals' potential to perpetrate CSA, and summarises what the evidence base of CSA prevalence research does and does not tell us.

### 3.1 Overview of prevalence estimates from meta-analyses

Several meta-analyses<sup>3</sup> have been undertaken, and the best estimates they have reached are listed in Table 1.

While there were some differences in the estimates obtained through these meta-analyses, they were all within a relatively narrow range, indicating that 12%–20% of girls and 5%–8% of boys experience sexual abuse.

Finkelhor et al (2014), working with data gathered by the same team in three US studies involving young people aged 15–17, observed that lifetime prevalence increased with age for almost every kind of sexual abuse – by adults, peers, family, acquaintances, and strangers. They concluded that only the estimates derived from the 17-year-olds represented the near-complete experience of sexual abuse in childhood. Compared with the meta-analyses described above, their three studies combined produced a higher lifetime prevalence of 26.6% for girls and a lower 5.1% for boys. Among the female participants, considerable risk for sexual abuse and assault was concentrated in late adolescence, as the rate rose from 16.8% among 15-year-olds to 26.6% among 17-year-olds.

Crime-focused surveys generate lower prevalence estimates than those framed in terms of health, wellbeing or sexual experience

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

**Table 1. International meta-analyses conducted into the prevalence of child sexual abuse**

Authors	Estimated prevalence of CSA		Details of studies included	Age cut-off used by studies in defining childhood abuse	Age of study participants
	Among girls	Among boys			
Bolen and Scannapieco (1999)	20%	7%	22 random sample studies from North America	Various cut-offs, 15–18	12 studies of adults of any age 10 studies of young people/adults aged 17–27
Gorey and Leslie (1997)	12–17%	5–8%	16 studies from North America (12 random sample; four college/student sample)	Not reported	Not reported
Stoltenborgh et al (2011)	18%	8%	217 studies globally	Various cut-offs, 12–18	Not reported
Pereda et al (2009)	19%	8%	66 studies of adult samples from 22 countries	Not reported	Not reported
Barth et al (2013)	15%	8%	55 studies from 24 countries	Not reported	Under 18

### 3.2 Methodological lessons

Key methodological insights have been garnered over the four decades of prevalence research, which account for some of the variations in overall findings.

- ▶ How the survey is framed: crime-focused surveys generate lower prevalence estimates than those framed in terms of health, wellbeing or sexual experience, as people are less likely to disclose experiences of CSA in the context of criminal activity.
- ▶ Specialised CSA and sexual violence surveys produce higher estimates than modules nested in wider surveys.
- ▶ The upper age limit for ‘childhood’ – 15, 16 or 17 – affects prevalence estimates.
- ▶ The most effective questions are behaviourally specific lists (see Appendix 1) which avoid terms such as ‘rape’, ‘assault’, ‘violence’ or ‘force’.
- ▶ Including non-contact (and more recently online) abuse, and abuse by under 18s, increases prevalence estimates.

- ▶ The context in which surveys are completed (home, school, college) affects disclosure rates – especially for young people – and hence prevalence estimates.
- ▶ Offering more than one opportunity to reveal, including questions about escapes or attempts, increases prevalence estimates.
- ▶ Inclusion criteria for sampling, especially requirements to be a householder or have a telephone landline, exclude populations which may be more likely to have experienced CSA, such as people in institutions or homeless people.

Another methodological challenge is how to measure both the duration of the abuse and the number of abuse incidents. Similarly, collecting data that would differentiate single from multiple perpetrators, both with respect to particular experiences and in terms of re-victimisation by different perpetrators, is a complex undertaking within the confines of survey methodology. Few studies to date have included questions that might facilitate identifying some forms of CSE; for an exception, see Kelly et al (1991).

## Learning from international studies

After the original edition of this report was published in 2017, the CSA Centre commissioned a study of international survey methodologies to research rates of CSA victimisation and perpetration (Radford, 2018). The study identified 19 methodologically different self-report surveys that measured CSA victimisation, and 10 studies that also measured CSA perpetration. As in the UK, CSA was most frequently measured within broader surveys that covered maltreatment or adverse life experiences.

Fourteen different forms of CSA were identified across these surveys:

- ▶ indecent exposure/being made to watch sexual acts
- ▶ production or sharing of abusive images or other content
- ▶ saying sexual things/verbal sexual abuse
- ▶ solicitation, invitation or grooming
- ▶ participation in online sex acts
- ▶ kissing or sexual touching
- ▶ attempted oral, anal or vaginal penetration
- ▶ completed oral, anal or vaginal penetration
- ▶ attempted or completed sex acts when drunk, drugged or unable to consent
- ▶ statutory rape, i.e. sexual intercourse when a young person is below the age of consent
- ▶ abuse by persons in a position of trust or authority (e.g. care workers, teachers, police, faith leaders)
- ▶ selling/buying/exchanging sex for food, drugs etc
- ▶ sexual exploitation involving intermediaries
- ▶ trafficking.

The most comprehensive surveys covered 10 of these 14 forms. The most commonly asked-about forms of CSA were kissing, touching and penetration. The least commonly asked-about behaviours were trafficking and the role of intermediaries.

The study highlighted the difficulty of measuring the prevalence of CSA in vulnerable or minority groups, concluding that this information has typically been gained from surveys using convenience or clinical samples rather than population-based surveys.

In relation to perpetration, the study identified three different approaches to asking questions within surveys:

- ▶ Alternating questions about victimisation with questions about perpetration, so that participants were asked consecutively, for each individual act, whether they had experienced this act and/or had done it to somebody else.
- ▶ Asking about specific experiences and then using follow-up questions to discover which acts were non-consensual or coerced – and whether other people, such as peers, were perceived to have influenced these.
- ▶ Asking all the questions on victimisation first, followed by questions on perpetration.

The study did not draw clear conclusions about which method was most effective.

The full report is available at:

**[www.csacentre.org.uk/documents/a-review-of-international-survey-methodology-on-child-sexual-abuse-and-child-sexual-exploitation/](http://www.csacentre.org.uk/documents/a-review-of-international-survey-methodology-on-child-sexual-abuse-and-child-sexual-exploitation/)**

### 3.3 Prevalence studies: Crime Survey for England and Wales

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has twice included a module on childhood abuse in the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) – in 2016 and in 2019 (ONS, 2016; ONS, 2020a) – and plans to repeat this module every three years. The questions are administered using computer-assisted self-interviewing, where a tablet computer is given to the participant and they enter their responses anonymously. The survey asks adult respondents retrospectively about their experiences of emotional, physical and sexual abuse, and about witnessing domestic violence before the age of 16 years.

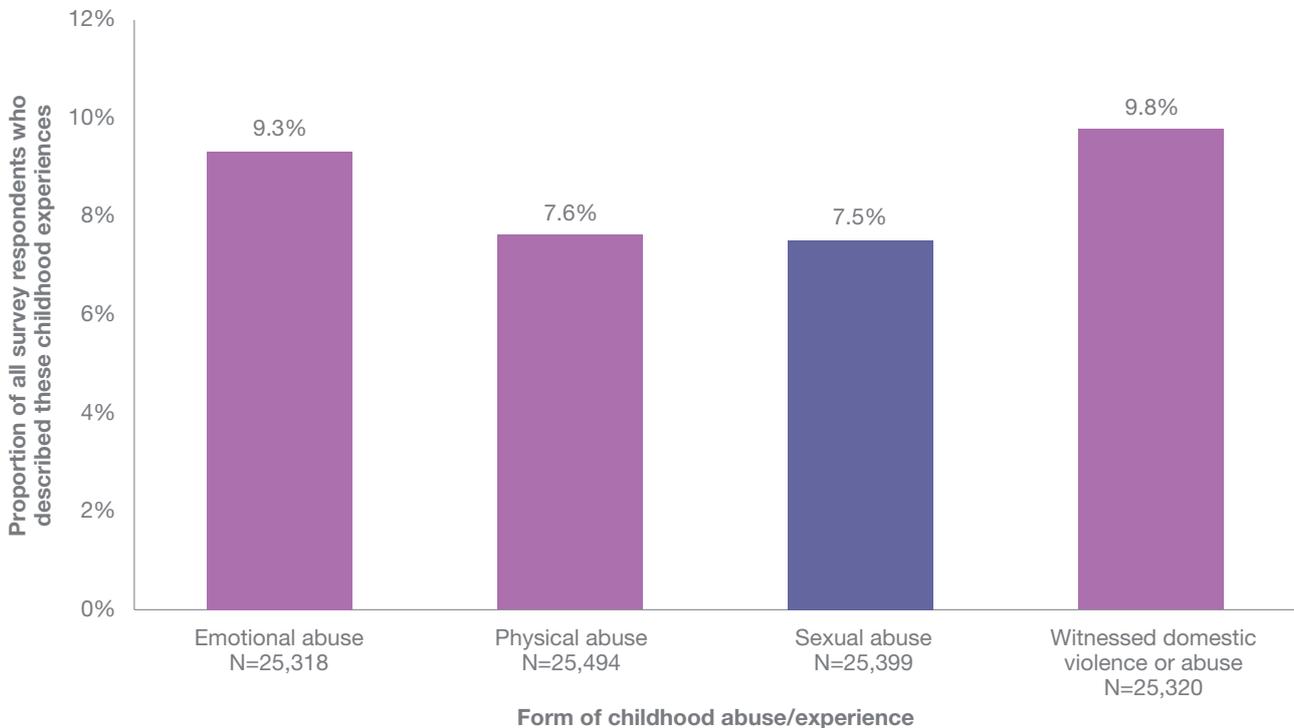
Owing to the differences in the scope, questions and sampling of the 2016 and 2019 modules, their results are not comparable.

#### 3.3.1. Prevalence of child sexual abuse

The latest childhood abuse module, collected in the year ending March 2019, was completed by a randomly selected representative sample of about 25,000 adults aged 18–74 living in England and Wales. Three specific questions (listed in Appendix 1) were included to estimate the prevalence of CSA in relation to:

- ▶ penetrative sexual abuse (including attempts)
- ▶ other contact abuse (being touched in a sexual way, or made to touch others)
- ▶ non-contact sexual abuse (being exposed to sexual images or acts, being made to share images of oneself, and indecent exposure).

**Figure 1. Proportion of respondents to the 2019 CSEW describing experiences of abuse and witnessing domestic violence before the age of 16**



Source: Office for National Statistics (2020b: Tables 1 and 2). Respondents could identify more than one form of abuse. The sample size varies slightly between forms of abuse because “Don’t know” and “Don’t wish to answer” responses to the different questions have been excluded.

A series of follow-up questions asked about each of these forms of CSA: where and how many times the abuse took place; who committed it; the age at which it started and stopped; whether anyone was told or found out about it at the time or later; who was told or found out; and the reasons for not telling about it. The questions related to abuse carried out by adults or by under-16s, although the published results did not break the figures down by the age of the perpetrator.

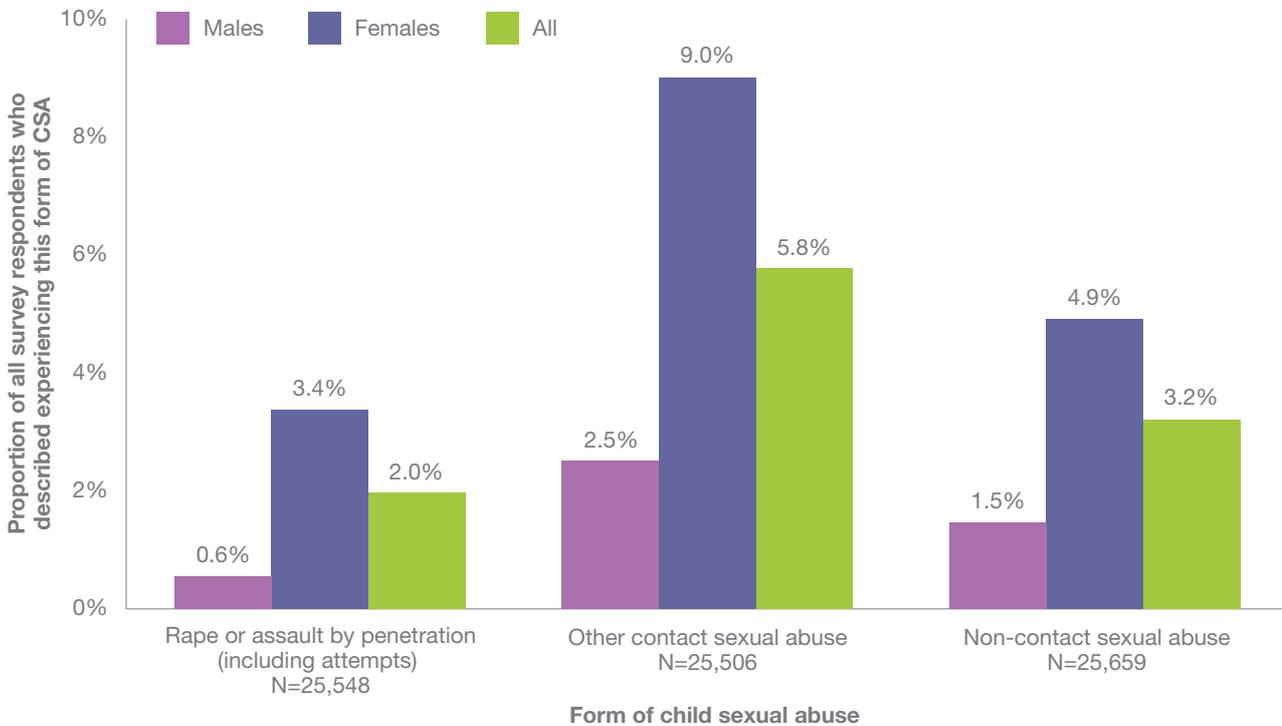
Overall, the childhood abuse module estimated that 7.5% of adults in England and Wales – 3.1 million people - had experienced some form of CSA before the age of 16 (see Figure 1). CSA was found to be as prevalent as childhood physical abuse, and slightly less prevalent than childhood emotional abuse or being a witness to domestic violence. Among the 1,969 respondents who described experiences of CSA, more than half (53.9%) said they had also experienced other forms of childhood abuse – with one in six (16.2%) saying they had been physically, emotionally and sexually abused *and* had witnessed domestic violence during childhood (ONS, 2020a).

### 3.3.2 Characteristics of respondents who said they had been sexually abused during childhood

The Crime Survey for England and Wales collects data on a large number of respondent characteristics. The 2019 survey found some correlation between the prevalence of CSA and many of these characteristics, although it is unclear whether adults with certain characteristics were less likely to have experienced CSA or were less likely to want to share such sensitive information in the survey.

Across all three forms of CSA covered in the module, female respondents were at least three times more likely than male respondents to say that they had been sexually abused in childhood (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Proportion of respondents to the 2019 CSEW describing experiences of sexual abuse before the age of 16, by respondent's sex and form of abuse**



Source: Office for National Statistics (2020b: Tables 1 and 2). Because respondents could indicate that they had experienced more than one form of CSA, the overall total adds up to more than the overall prevalence estimate for CSA (7.5%). The sample size varies slightly between forms of abuse because “Don’t know” and “Don’t wish to answer” responses to the different questions have been excluded.

More than one in eight (13.4%) respondents who were disabled<sup>4</sup> at the time of the survey said that they had been sexually abused in childhood – making them twice as likely as non-disabled adults to say they had been abused (see Figure 3). Research indicates that disabled children are at higher risk of sexual abuse than non-disabled children (Jones et al, 2012).

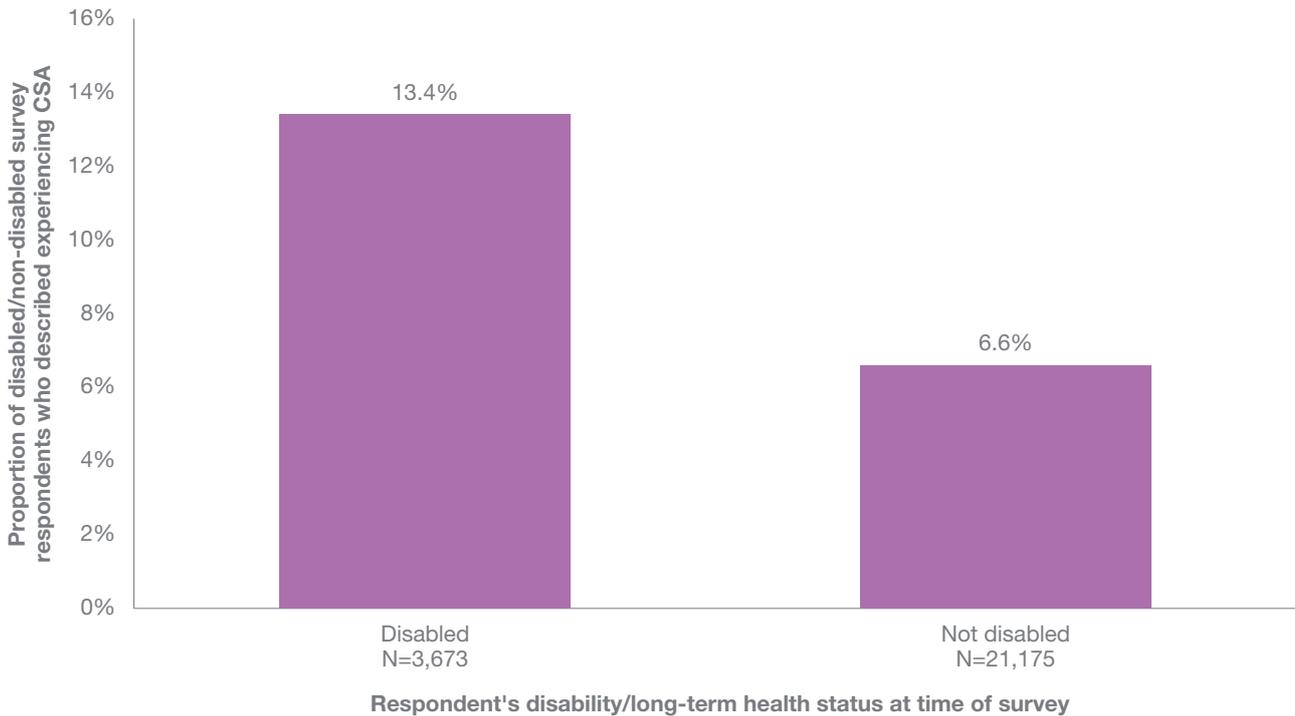
Compared with respondents from other ethnic groups, a considerably lower proportion of respondents of Asian backgrounds said that they had been sexually abused during childhood (see Figure 4).

A lower proportion of respondents from Muslim, Sikh and Hindu religions said that they had been sexually abused during childhood than those of other or no religious beliefs (see Figure 5).

Research has found that the likelihood of experiencing CSA does not vary significantly with ethnic group in England (Bebbington et al, 2011), but has highlighted that people from minority ethnic backgrounds face barriers to reporting CSA (Ali et al, 2021; Rodger et al, 2020).

Research has found that the likelihood of experiencing CSA is similar across ethnic groups, but that people in some groups face barriers to reporting it

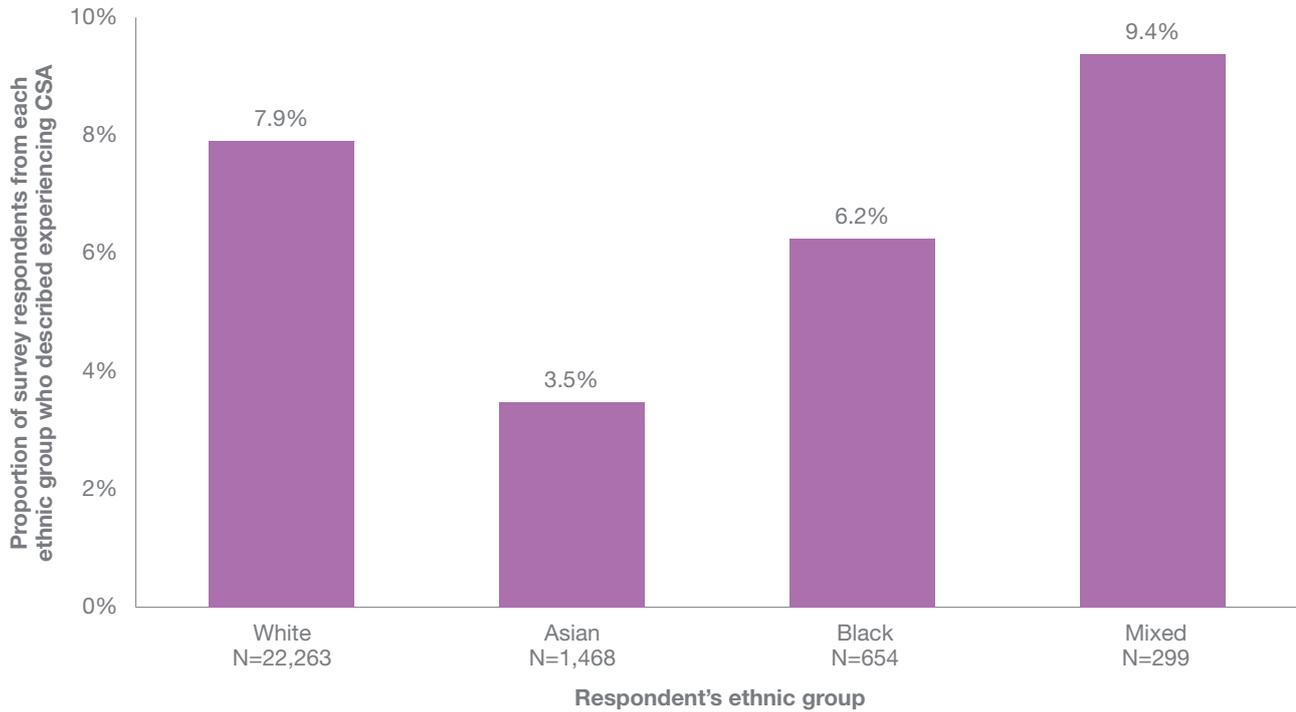
**Figure 3. Experience of CSA before the age of 16 among disabled and non-disabled respondents to the 2019 CSEW**



Source: Office for National Statistics (2020c: Table 7a). “Don’t know” and “Don’t wish to answer” responses have been excluded.

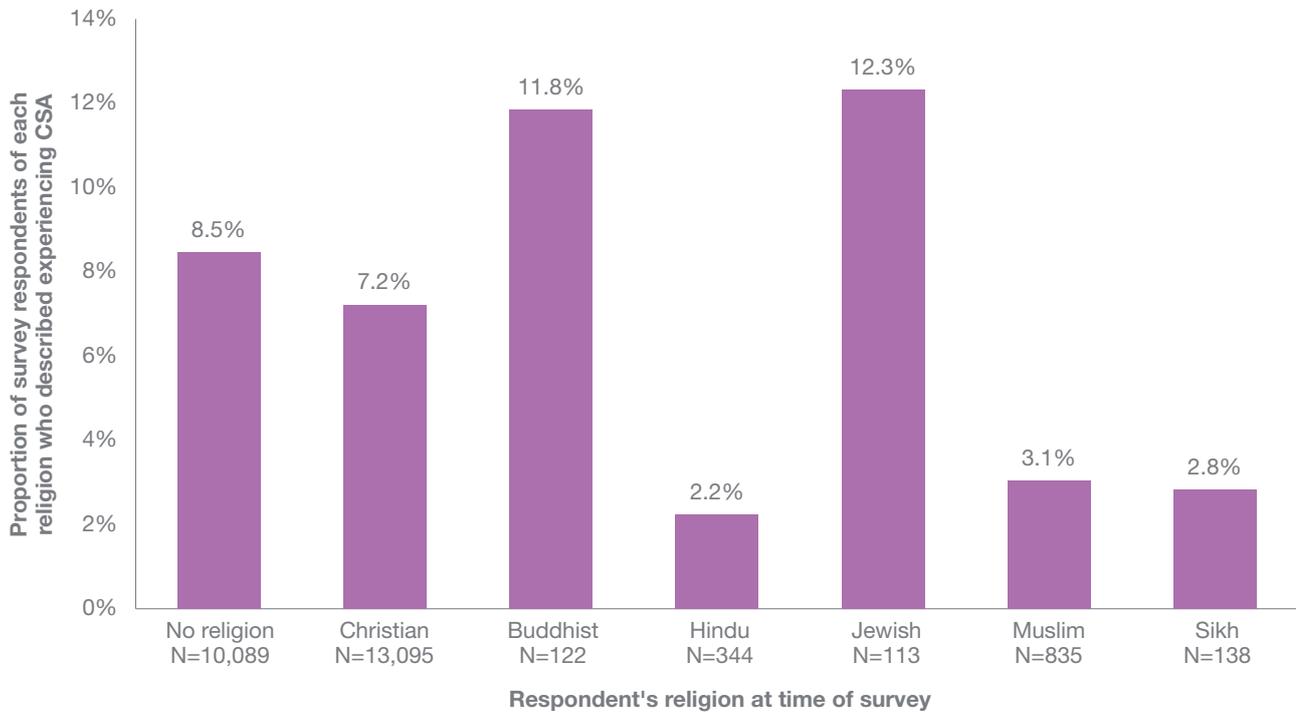
4. Respondents to the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2019 were considered to have a disability if they had any long-standing illness, disability or impairment which caused them difficulty with day-to-day activities (ONS, 2020c: Table 7a).

**Figure 4. Experience of CSA before the age of 16 among respondents to the 2019 CSEW, by ethnic group**



Source: Office for National Statistics (2020c: Table 7a). "Don't know" and "Don't wish to answer" responses have been excluded.

**Figure 5. Experience of CSA before the age of 16 among respondents to the 2019 CSEW, by religion**



Source: Office for National Statistics (2020c: Table 7a). "Don't know" and "Don't wish to answer" responses have been excluded.

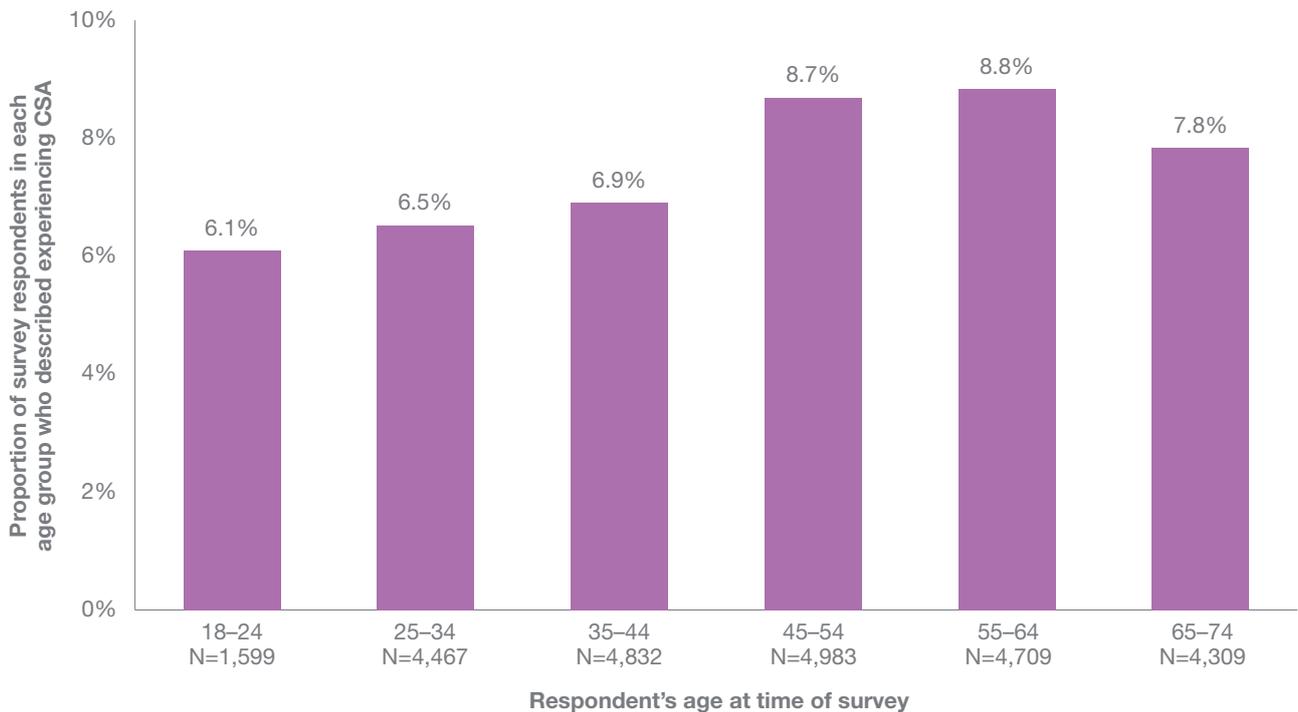
The level of reported CSA differed between age groups, and was highest among respondents who were aged 45–64 at the time of the survey (see Figure 6). Observing the same pattern in the previous survey on childhood abuse, the ONS (2016) noted that it could indicate a decline in the prevalence of CSA in recent decades, but could equally be linked to a greater willingness or readiness among older participants to define and share information about sexual abuse in their childhood. Higher levels of CSA reports among middle-age and older people have also been seen in the data collected by the Truth Project<sup>5</sup> (IICSA, 2021).

There was no difference in the rate of reported CSA between rural and urban communities, and the rate did not vary with the deprivation index of the area where respondents currently lived.

Over half (58.3%) of respondents with CSA experiences said they had also experienced domestic violence since the age of 16, and almost a quarter (22.7%) reported being victims of rape or penetrative sexual assault (including attempts) since the age of 16. Among those who had not been sexually abused as children, these experiences in adulthood were far less common (reported by 17.1% and 2.3% respectively).

It has been suggested that older survey participants may be more willing or ready to share information about sexual abuse in their childhood

**Figure 6. Experience of CSA before the age of 16 among respondents to the 2019 CSEW, by age group**



Source: Office for National Statistics (2020c: Table 7a). “Don’t know” and “Don’t wish to answer” responses have been excluded.

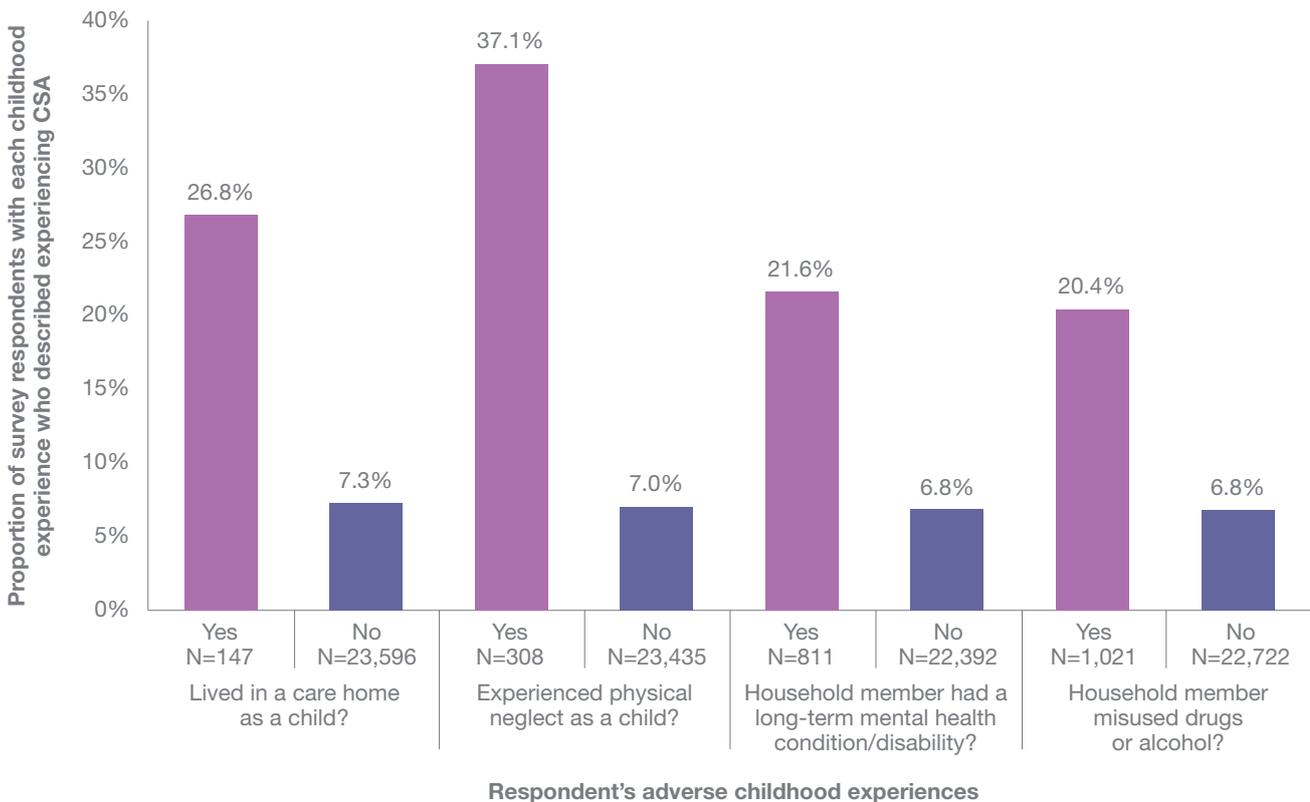
5. The Truth Project was set up by the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) to give victims of CSA an opportunity to be heard. The IICSA research team publishes quarterly dashboards providing information about the characteristics of victims and perpetrators and the nature of abuse. As of December 2020, 5,104 people had spoken to the Truth Project (IICSA, 2021).

Experience of CSA appeared to be correlated with several other adverse experiences in childhood.<sup>6</sup> CSA was described by three times as many respondents who had lived in a household with someone with a long-term mental health problems or disability, or with someone misusing alcohol or drugs, than by others (see Figure 7). By far the highest rates of CSA were experienced by those who had lived in a care home as a child<sup>7</sup> or had also experienced physical neglect. Over one-quarter of respondents who had lived in a care home described experiences of CSA; nearly four times as many as those who had not lived in a care home. Over one-third of respondents who had been physically neglected in childhood said they had also been sexually abused – nearly five times as many as those who had not been physically neglected.

For all of these childhood adverse experiences, there is no information regarding whether they preceded or followed the experience of CSA, and no causal links can be drawn.

The Crime Survey asked about other childhood adverse experiences, but not whether they preceded or followed the experience of CSA

**Figure 7. Experience of CSA before the age of 16 among 2019 CSEW respondents, by presence of other adverse childhood experiences**



Source: Office for National Statistics (2020c: Table 10a). “Don’t know” and “Don’t wish to answer” responses have been excluded.

6. Respondents to the Crime Survey for England and Wales were provided with a list of adverse childhood experiences and asked whether any of the circumstances had applied to them at any point before the age of 16.  
 7. It is not clear from the survey to what extent CSA experiences preceded or followed the move into residential care; in some cases, experiencing CSA could have been a reason for the child to be taken into care.

### 3.3.3 Characteristics of perpetrators

For respondents to the 2019 survey who said they had experienced CSA, Table 2 records their relationship to the perpetrator of the abuse, categorised by the form of CSA they reported. More than one-third (37.7%) of survivors of contact sexual abuse said it had been perpetrated by a friend or acquaintance of theirs or of their family, and almost a quarter (23.4%) said it had involved a family member other than a parental figure.

Non-contact CSA was most frequently said to have been committed by a stranger (in 34.7% of non-contact cases) or by a friend or acquaintance (30.8%).

Male survivors of CSA were more likely than female survivors to say that a carer/guardian or a person in a position of trust or authority had sexually abused them, and less likely to say they had been abused by a family member.

Among respondents describing experiences of penetrative abuse, 3.3% of females but 16.4% of males – five times as many – said an authority figure was involved. Family members also featured more strongly in relation to penetrative abuse: 16.0% and 29.6% respectively of women who had experienced such abuse said it had involved their father/stepfather or a non-parental family member, compared with 11.0% and 20.4% of male survivors.

The vast majority of perpetrators of CSA were said to be male: 91.7% overall. Female perpetrators were more likely to sexually abuse boys than girls (see Figure 8). In a small proportion of cases, both male and female perpetrators were involved; this was twice as likely to be reported by male respondents as by female respondents.

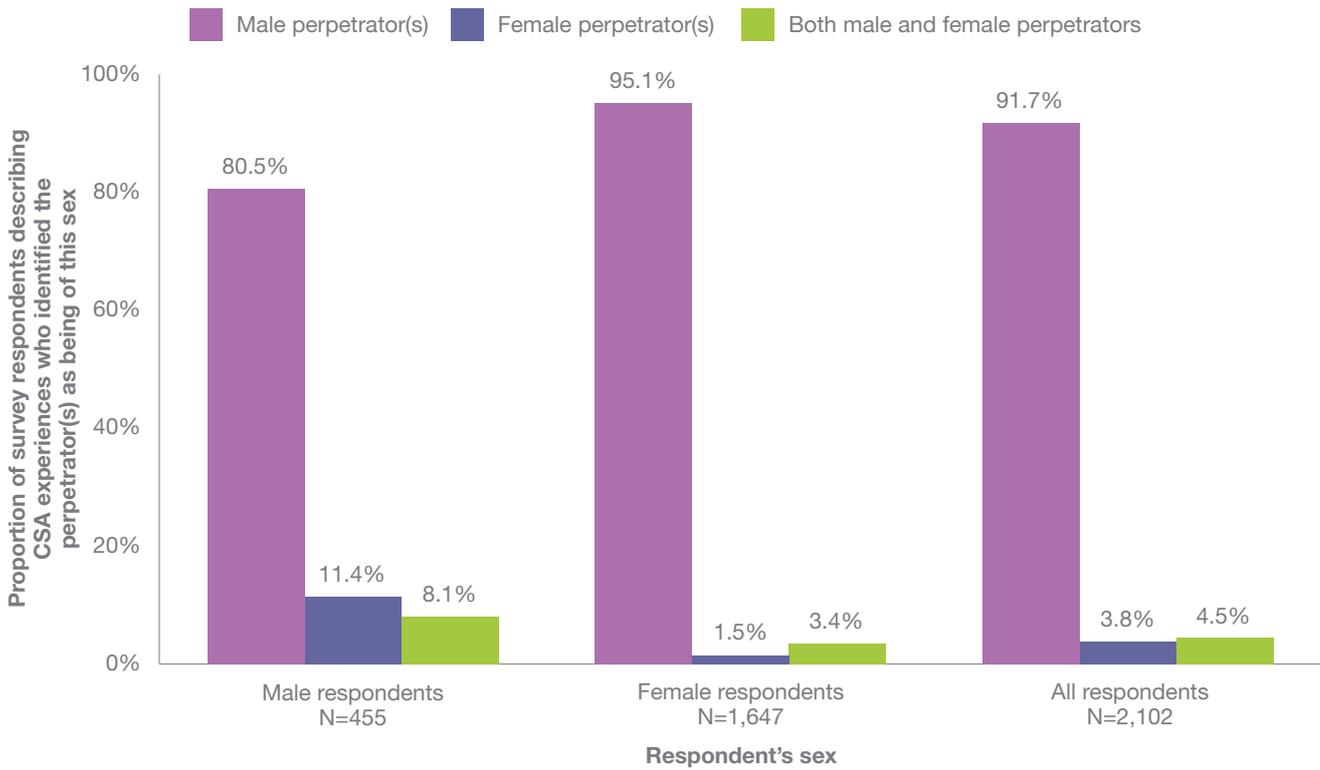
**Table 2. Perpetrator's relationship to survey respondent for sexual abuse before the age of 16, by respondent's sex and form of abuse**

Respondent's sex	Contact CSA			Non-contact CSA		
	Male	Female	All	Male	Female	All
Mother	0.2%	1.0%	0.8%	1.9%	2.2%	2.2%
Father	3.7%	5.8%	5.4%	5.0%	5.5%	5.4%
Stepmother	0.0%	0.3%	0.2%	0.4%	0.3%	0.3%
Stepfather	1.1%	7.8%	6.3%	1.9%	9.1%	7.5%
Other family member	15.3%	25.7%	23.4%	17.2%	22.8%	21.6%
Carer/guardian	0.5%	0.3%	0.3%	2.4%	1.0%	1.3%
Friend or acquaintance*	35.9%	38.2%	37.7%	30.7%	30.9%	30.8%
Partner or previous partner	3.8%	10.8%	9.3%	1.7%	6.4%	5.3%
Person in position of trust or authority*	19.1%	7.0%	9.7%	10.6%	2.7%	4.4%
Stranger	23.1%	20.3%	21.0%	29.7%	36.1%	34.7%
Someone else	8.8%	9.8%	9.6%	8.0%	3.9%	4.8%
Don't know/can't remember	2.8%	0.5%	1.0%	3.5%	0.1%	0.8%
Don't wish to answer	2.5%	2.7%	2.7%	2.7%	1.9%	2.0%
<b>Unweighted base – number of adults</b>	<b>334</b>	<b>1,246</b>	<b>1,580</b>	<b>183</b>	<b>690</b>	<b>873</b>

Source: Office for National Statistics (2020c: Table 12b). Percentages add up to more than 100% in each category because many respondents said they had been sexually abused in childhood by several perpetrators.

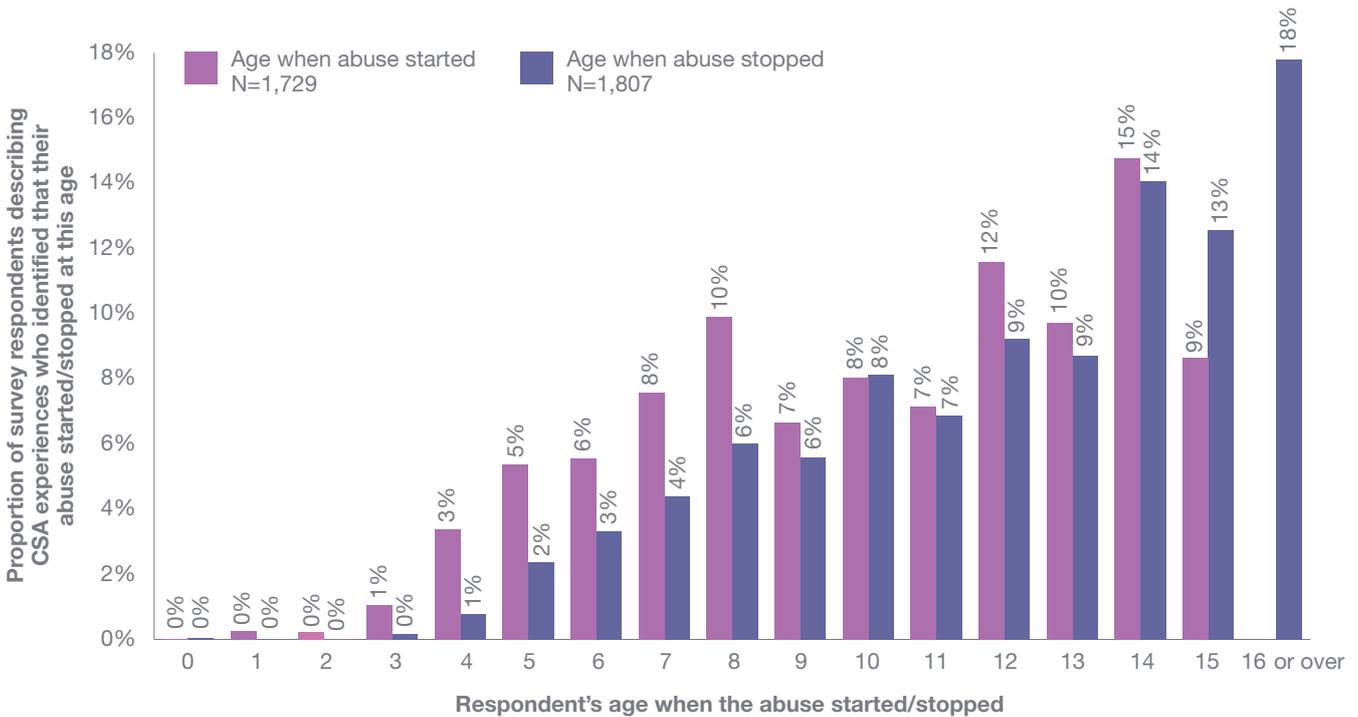
\* 'Friend or acquaintance' includes a friend or acquaintance of the respondent, a friend or acquaintance of one of their family members, or a neighbour. 'Person in position of trust or authority' includes people such as teachers, doctors, youth workers, coaches, religious figures, etc.

**Figure 8. Sex of perpetrators of CSA described in the 2019 CSEW, by sex of the survey respondent**



Source: Office for National Statistics (2020c: Table 13). "Don't know" and "Don't wish to answer" responses have been excluded.

**Figure 9. Age at which CSA experiences of 2019 CSEW respondents started and stopped**



Source: Office for National Statistics (2020c: Table 15). "Don't know" and "Don't wish to answer" responses have been excluded.

### 3.3.4 Characteristics and context of the abuse

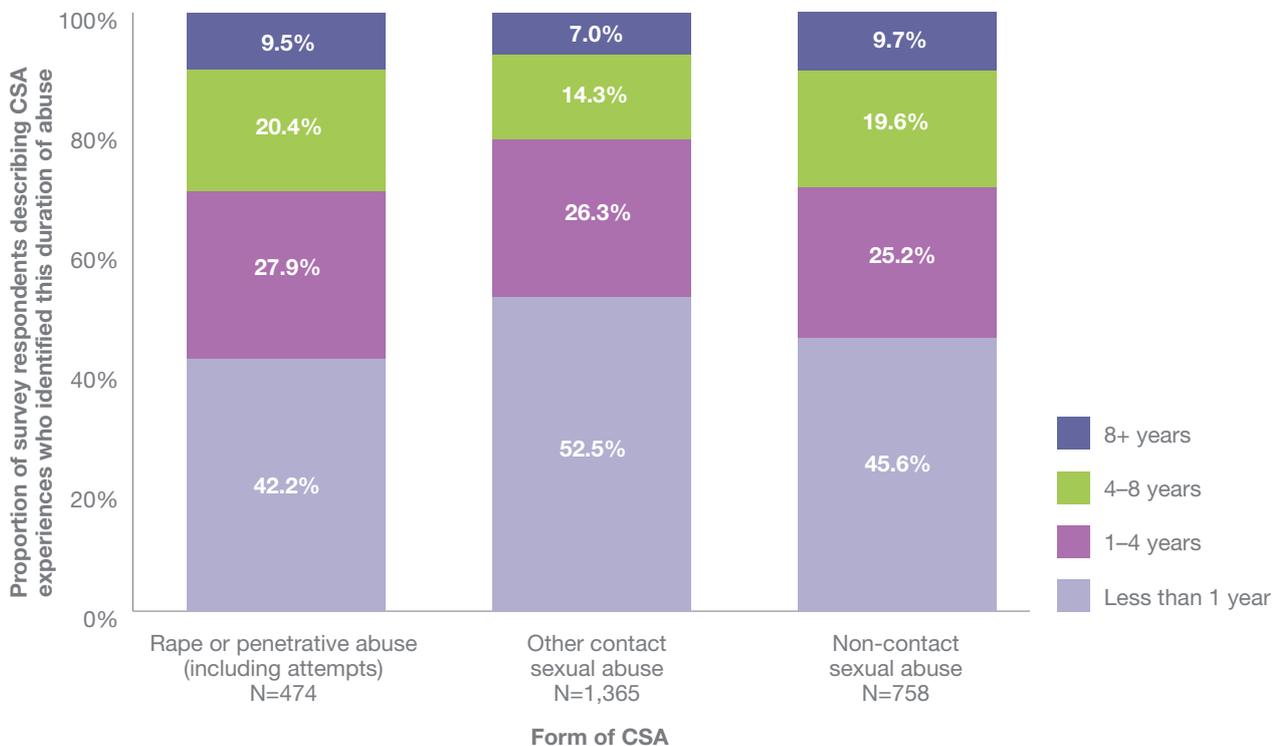
Information about the age of the child when the abuse started and when it stopped is presented in Figure 9. One-third of respondents said that the sexual abuse they experienced had started before the age of 9; another third that it started when they were aged 9–12; and the remaining third that it started between ages 13 and 15. Very few (0.5%) reported experiencing abuse before they were 3; the ONS points to the difficulties of remembering abuse from early childhood as a possible reason for this (ONS, 2020a). Just under one-third of respondents said the abuse had stopped by the age of 10, and for a quarter it stopped between ages 11 and 13; another quarter said it stopped when they were aged 14–15, while almost one in five said it had not stopped by their 16th birthday.

Just over half of participants describing experiences of CSA said that their abuse had lasted for less than one year (see Figure 10); for one-quarter it lasted between one and four years; and for around one in five it lasted for longer than four years.

Respondents were also asked about the number of incidents of CSA they had experienced (see Figure 11). This showed that rape and penetrative abuse were more likely than other sexual abuse to be repeated: fewer than a third of participants said that this form of abuse happened ‘once’, compared to two-fifths of those who had experienced other contact sexual abuse or non-contact sexual abuse. Over one-quarter of respondents who had experienced rape or penetrative abuse said that it had happened ‘20 times or more’.

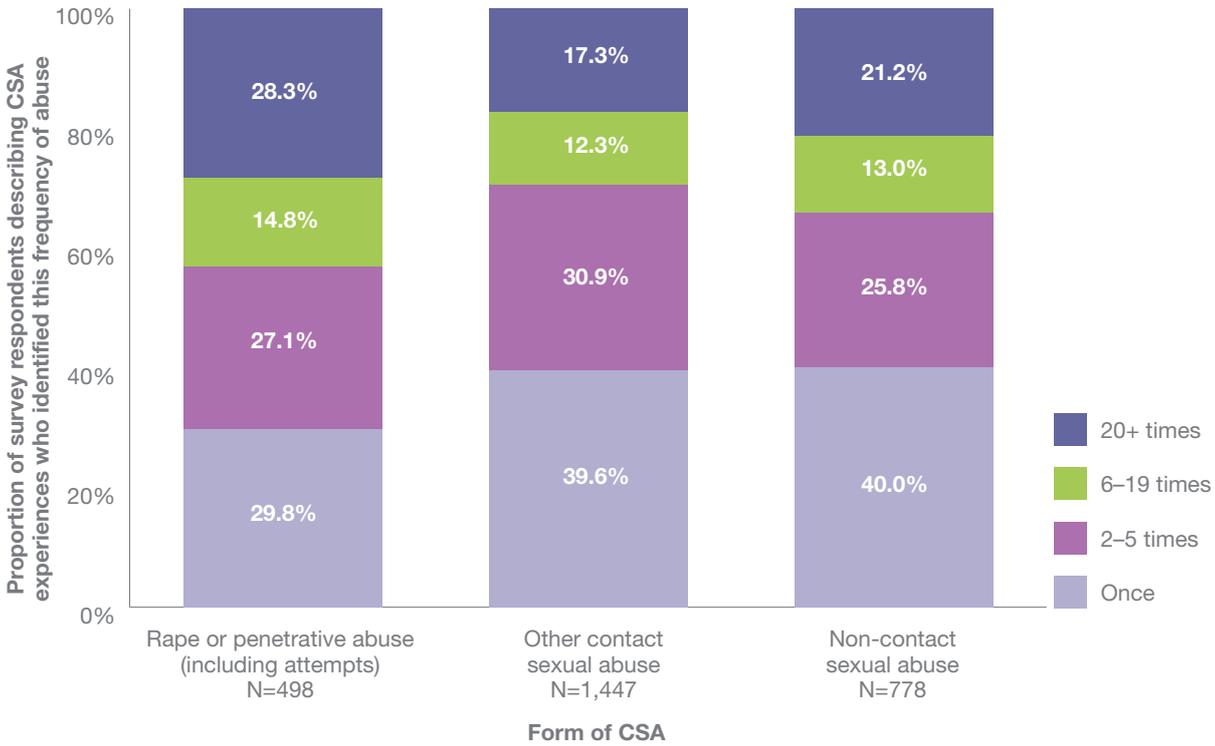
Domestic settings – the child’s own home or someone else’s home – were by far the most common locations where sexual abuse was said to have taken place (see Figure 12), and about one in five respondents said they had been abused in a public place or street. Female respondents were more likely than males to say they had been sexually abused in their own home, and less likely to say the abuse had happened in a school or college. One-quarter of respondents were abused in ‘other’ locations not listed in the survey.

**Figure 10. Duration of CSA experienced before the age of 16 by 2019 CSEW respondents, by form of abuse**



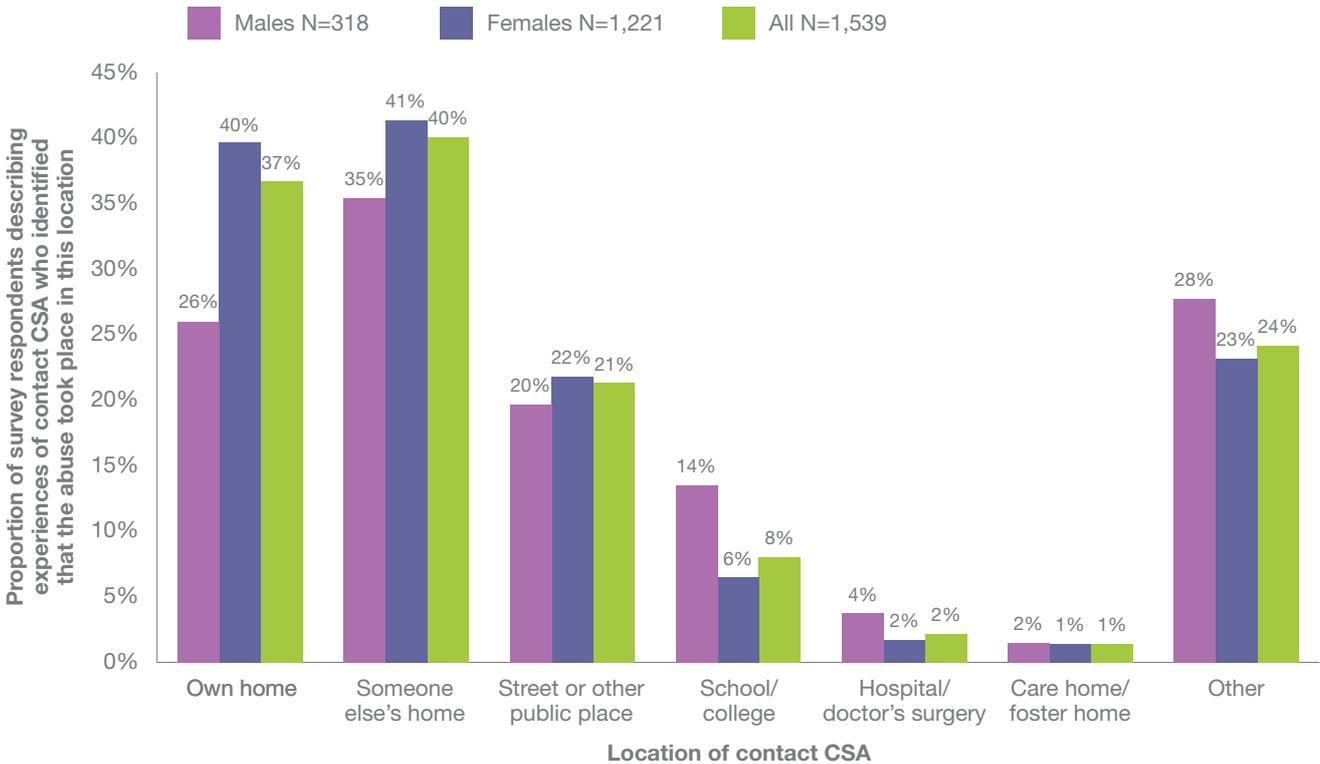
Source: Office for National Statistics (2020c: Table 16a). “Don’t know” and “Don’t wish to answer” responses have been excluded.

**Figure 11. Frequency of CSA experienced before the age of 16 by 2019 CSEW respondents, by form of abuse**



Source: Office for National Statistics (2020c: Table 17). “Don’t know” and “Don’t wish to answer” responses have been excluded.

**Figure 12. Locations where 2019 CSEW respondents were sexually abused before the age of 16, by sex of respondent**



Source: Office for National Statistics (2020c: Table 14). “Don’t know” and “Don’t wish to answer” responses have been excluded. Because respondents could select more than one location, totals are more than 100%.

### 3.3.5 How CSA experiences came to light

Most survey respondents describing experiences of CSA said they had not told anyone about their abuse at the time,<sup>8</sup> and around one in five had never told anyone before filling in the survey (see Figure 13). The likelihood of having told someone was lowest among those who had experienced rape or penetrative sexual abuse: fewer than one-third had told someone at the time, and almost half had told someone only later in life.

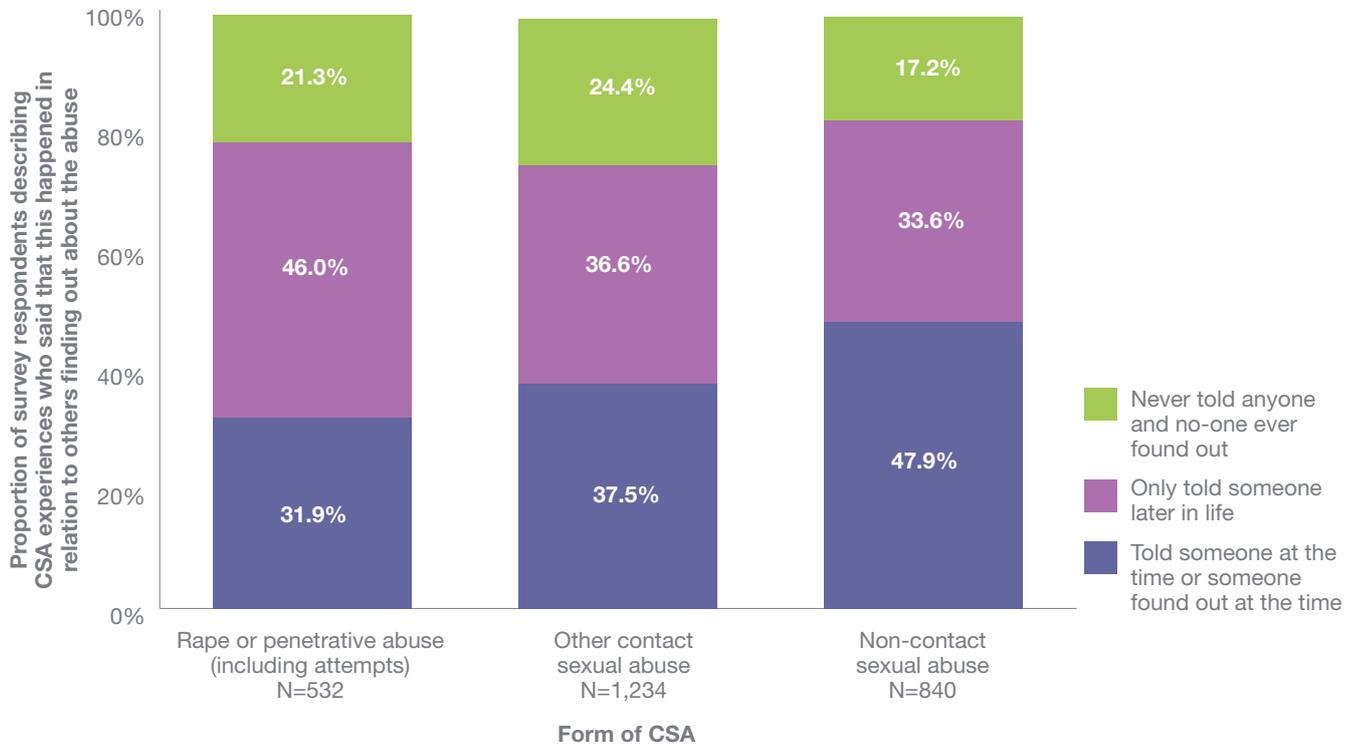
Among respondents who had told someone about the abuse at the time or later in life, or whose abuse had been discovered by someone, most – regardless of the form of CSA they had experienced – said it was someone known personally to them (e.g. their friends or family) who had been told/ found out about it (see Figure 14). Only about one-quarter said that someone in an official position (e.g. a police officer or a teacher) had been told about or discovered the abuse.

This suggests that only a minority of CSA victims ever come to the attention of official agencies, and that informal networks play an important role in supporting disclosures.

The professionals most commonly told/finding out about the abuse at the time were the police (see Figure 15): one in seven respondents who had experienced non-contact CSA and one in 15 of those with experiences of contact sexual abuse said the police had been told/ found out. Later in life, it was more common for healthcare professionals and therapists to be told – one in five said that they had spoken to a therapist or a healthcare worker about it.

Among respondents to the Crime Survey who described experiences of CSA, most said they had not told anyone about the abuse at the time

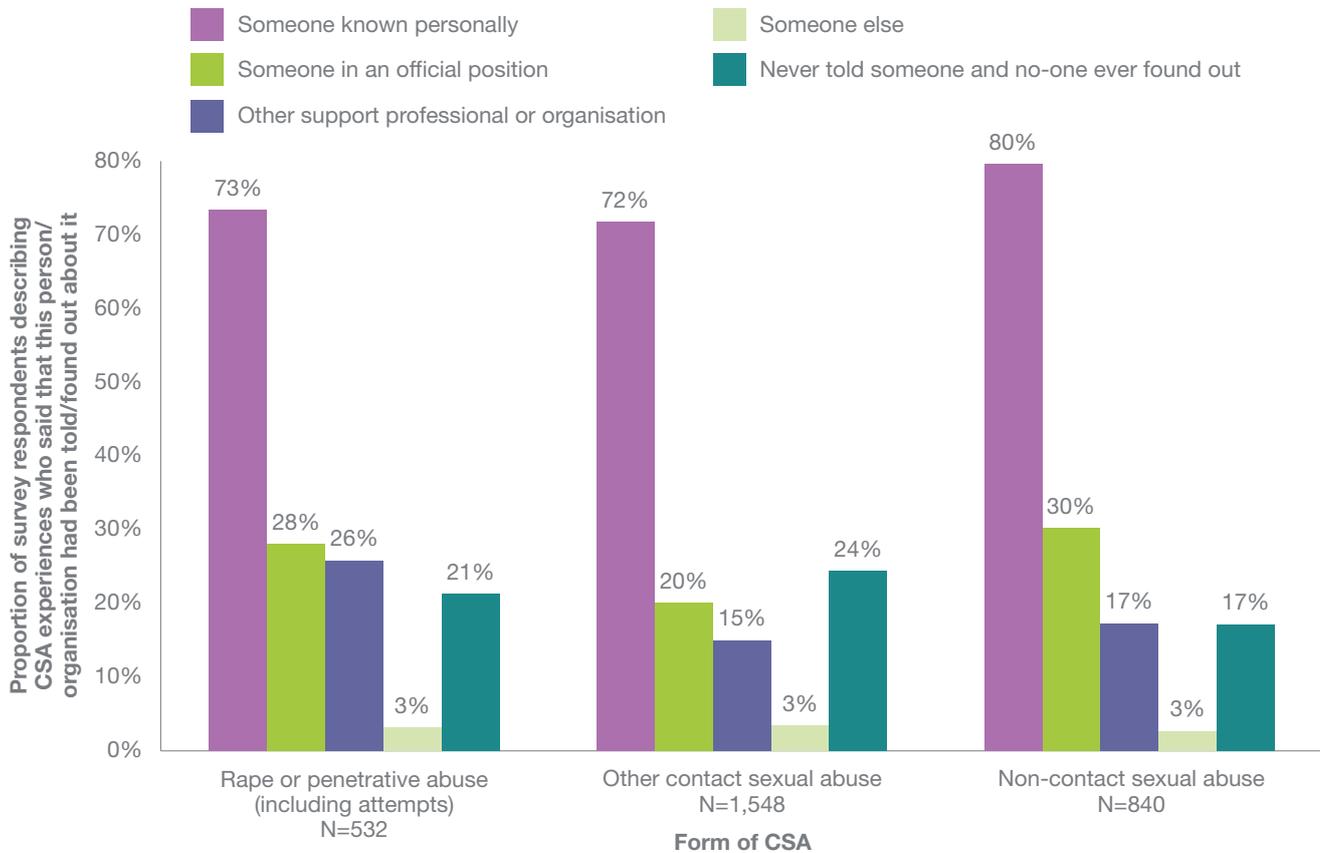
**Figure 13. 2019 CSEW respondents’ experiences of telling others about the CSA they had experienced before the age of 16, or others finding out about it, by form of abuse**



Source: Office for National Statistics (2020c: Table 18). “Don’t know” and “Don’t wish to answer” responses have been excluded.

8. This includes telling someone while the abuse was ongoing or shortly after it stopped.

**Figure 14. People whom 2019 CSEW respondents told about their experience of CSA at any time, or who found out about it at any time, by form of abuse**



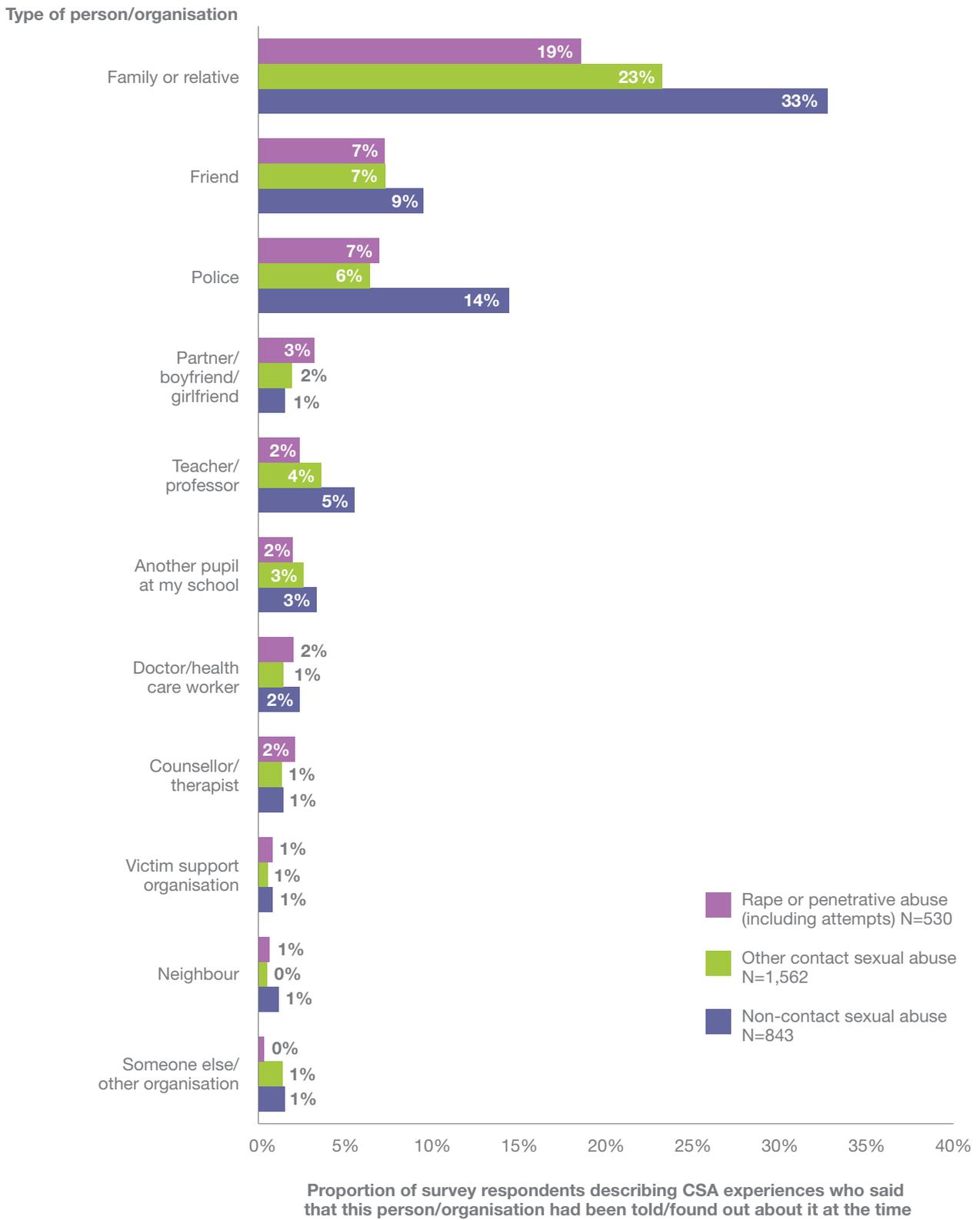
Source: Office for National Statistics (2020c: Table 20). “Don’t know” and “Don’t wish to answer” responses have been excluded. Because respondents could indicate that they had told more than one type of individual, totals for each form of CSA are more than 100%.

The reasons for not telling anyone about the abuse at the time were generally similar regardless of the form of CSA experienced (see Figure 16): by far the most common reasons were embarrassment, a fear of not being believed, a fear of humiliation, and believing nothing would be done about the abuse. Compared with those who had experienced non-contact CSA or other contact CSA, survivors of rape or penetrative abuse were more likely to have feared that they would not be believed, but much less likely to have believed it was ‘too trivial’ to tell anyone about.

### 3.3.6 Support services

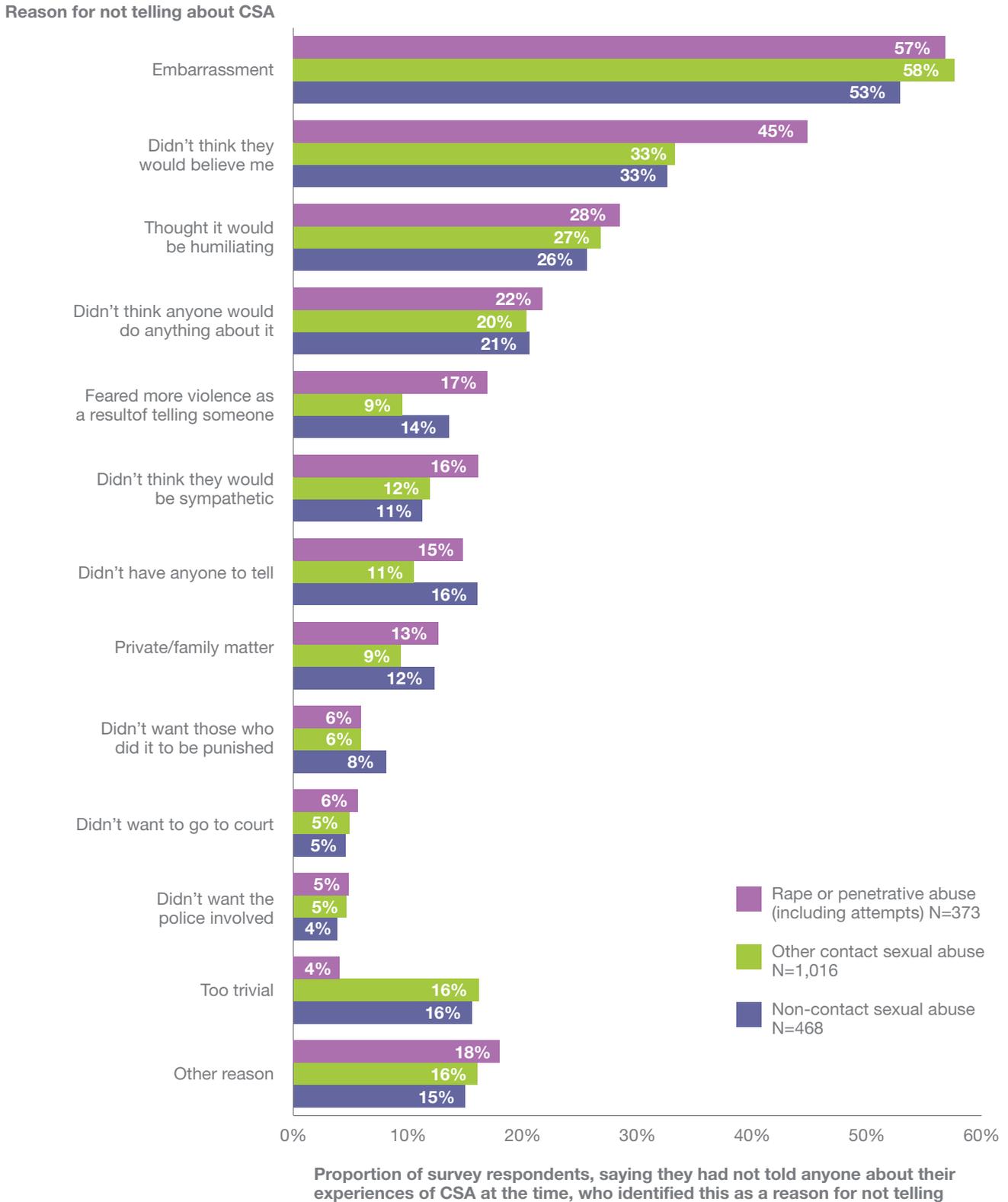
Following the 2019 CSEW, a cohort of respondents who said they had experienced CSA took part in a second study (Gekoski et al, 2020) aimed at learning more about their views and experiences of support services. Among the follow-up sample (n=181), nearly three-quarters said they had not accessed any support services, and only one-quarter had received some form of support, advice or treatment in relation to their experience of CSA. The average time between their first experience of CSA and accessing support was 19 years. Voluntary-sector counselling services specialising in CSA, sexual abuse or rape support were rated as the most helpful.

**Figure 15. People whom 2019 CSEW respondents told about their experience of CSA at the time, or who found out about it at the time**



Source: Office for National Statistics (2020c: Table 23). “Don’t know” and “Don’t wish to answer” responses have been excluded. Respondents could indicate that they had told more than one type of person/organisation.

**Figure 16. Reasons why 2019 CSEW respondents did not tell anyone about their experience of CSA at the time, by form of abuse**



Source: Office for National Statistics (2020c: Table 25). "Don't know" and "Don't wish to answer" responses have been excluded. Because respondents could select more than one reason, totals for each form of abuse are more than 100%.

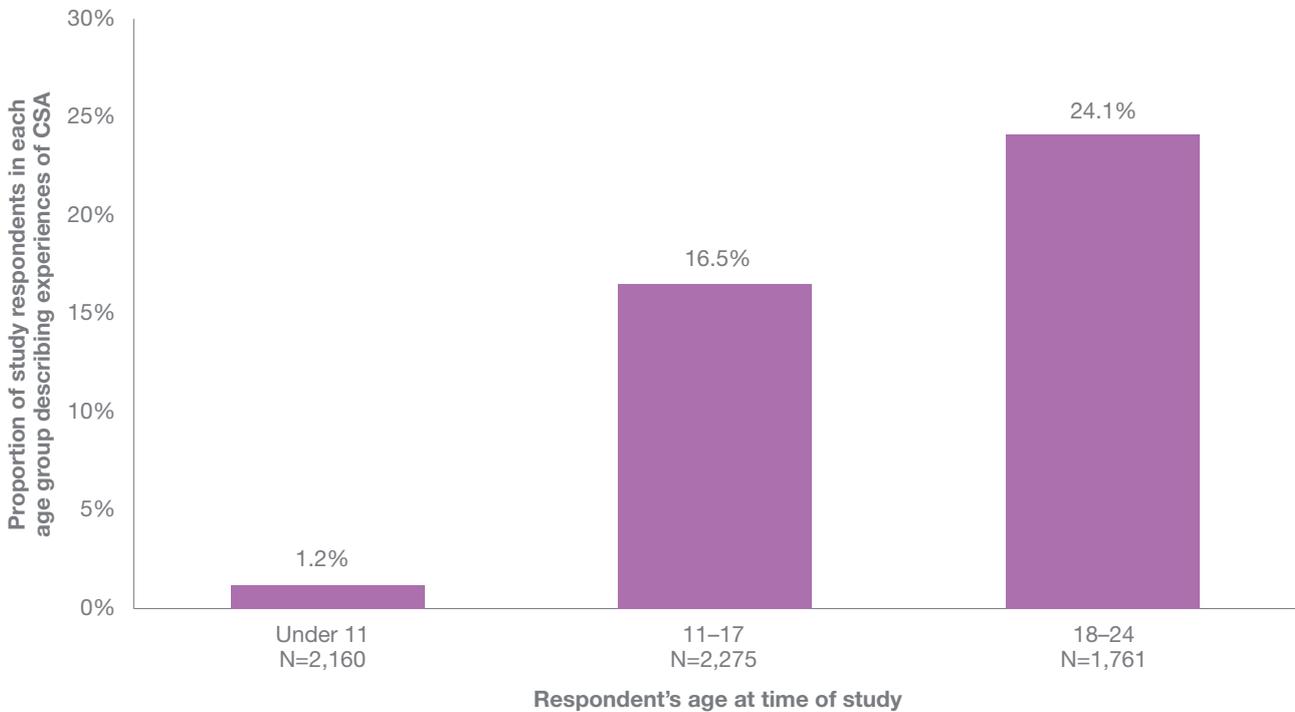
### 3.4 Prevalence studies: NSPCC child maltreatment study

Another significant survey that measured the prevalence of CSA in the UK was a child maltreatment study undertaken by the NSPCC in 2009 (Radford et al, 2011). There are some key differences between this study and the childhood abuse module of the 2019 CSEW:

- ▶ While the CSEW aimed to capture the prevalence of childhood abuse in the adult population, the NSPCC included only children (or their parents as a proxy) and young adults in order to measure the more recent prevalence of abuse.
- ▶ While the CSEW asked questions about maltreatment that occurred only before the age of 16, the NSPCC asked about these experiences up to the age of 18.
- ▶ While the CSEW sampled residents of England and Wales, the NSPCC study sampled across the four nations of the UK. Findings for each individual nation were not published.

The NSPCC study included questions on children’s and young adults’ childhood experiences of maltreatment at home, at school and in the community, including their experiences of physical, emotional and sexual abuse, of neglect, and of exposure to domestic violence. Questions about sexual abuse were included within an eight-question module which additionally asked older cohorts about sexual experiences more generally. Five of the questions covered what could be designated as CSA: inappropriate touching by child or adult, forced sexual acts (including attempts) by child or adult, flashing (indecent exposure), and sexual activity with adult in a position of trust. Overall, the forms of CSA included in the study are similar to the forms included in the CSEW childhood abuse module in 2019, with the exception that CSEW also included exposure to sexually explicit acts or images and being made to share those images.

**Figure 17. Proportion of respondents to the 2009 NSPCC child maltreatment study describing experiences of CSA, by age at the time of the study**



Source: Radford et al (2011: Table 5.2). Survey of under-11s filled in by parents.

The study sampled three groups: 2,160 parents of under-11s, who responded to the questions on behalf of their children; 2,275 11–17-year-olds who responded themselves to questions regarding maltreatment while their parents provided input on demographic information; and 1,761 young adults aged 18–24 who responded to the full questionnaire themselves. The maltreatment questions were administered using computer-assisted self-interviewing, where a tablet computer is given to the participant and they enter their responses anonymously.

### 3.4.1 Prevalence of child sexual abuse

Figure 17 shows that the overall reported prevalence of CSA – including contact and non-contact abuse by under-18s and adults – was 24.1% among the 18–24-year-olds, whose responses reflected their experiences across their whole childhoods. Prevalence was lower at 16.5% among 11–17-year-olds; this is to be expected because the study could only measure participants' experiences up to their age at the time. Very few (1.2%) of the under-11s had experienced CSA, according to their parents. Among the two sample groups who were still children at the time of the interview, 0.6% of under-11s and 9.4% of 11–17-year-olds had experienced CSA within the previous 12 months.

The overall prevalence of CSA among young adult respondents was over three times higher in this study than in the CSEW 2019 module (7.5%), a result that is likely to be at least partly influenced by the CSEW's omission of the sexual abuse of 16–17-year-olds; research suggests a higher lifetime prevalence of CSA in this age group than among younger children (Finkelhor et al, 2014).

However, the experiences of CSA among under-11s appear under-represented in the NSPCC study: the 1.2% overall prevalence rate is lower than found by the 2019 CSEW, in which nearly half (48.1%) of respondents describing experiences of CSA before the age of 16 said that it had started by the age of 11.

Given that children are unlikely to tell anyone about their abuse at the time it takes place (see sections 3.3.5 and 3.4.4), it may be that a high proportion of parents were not aware of their children's experiences of abuse. In addition, some parents may have been unwilling to tell about it in a survey.

The analysis of contact sexual abuse focused on abuse as defined by criminal law.<sup>9</sup> Figure 18 shows that 11.3% of young adults in the study had experienced contact CSA meeting the threshold of a criminal offence. The rate among respondents aged 11–17 was lower (4.8%); this is to be expected because the survey could only measure participants' experiences up to their age at the time.

Prevalence rates for the different categories of CSA that the survey measured are presented in Figure 19. Among young adults, one in 10 had experienced being 'flashed' at as a child, and one in 15 reported an attempted sexual assault; fewer than one in 20 had been sexually assaulted by another child, and around one in 30 said they had been sexually assaulted by an adult. Most perpetrators were male and known in some way to the child.

Based on national population estimates in mid-2019, we can estimate that more than 875,000 children in England and Wales had experienced any form of CSA during their lifetime, and 500,000 had been sexually abused during the previous year.<sup>10</sup>

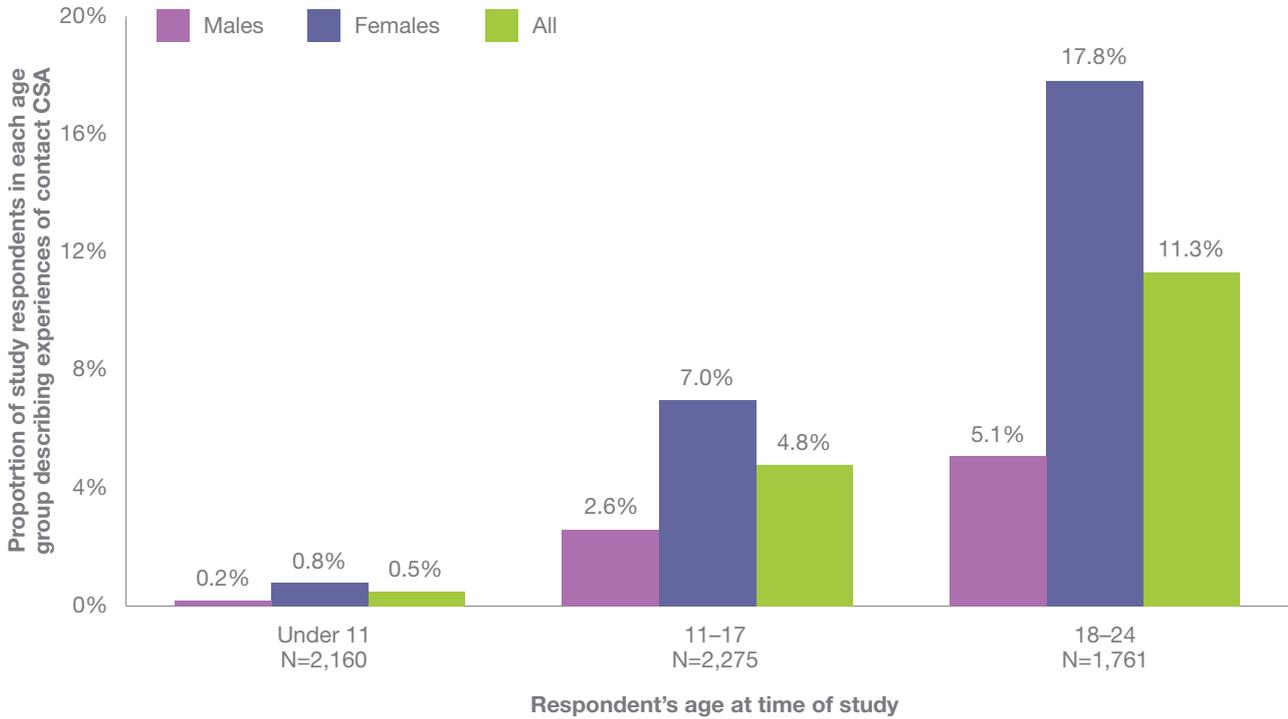


The reported level of sexual abuse of under-11s was low, which may indicate that many parents were not aware of their children's experiences



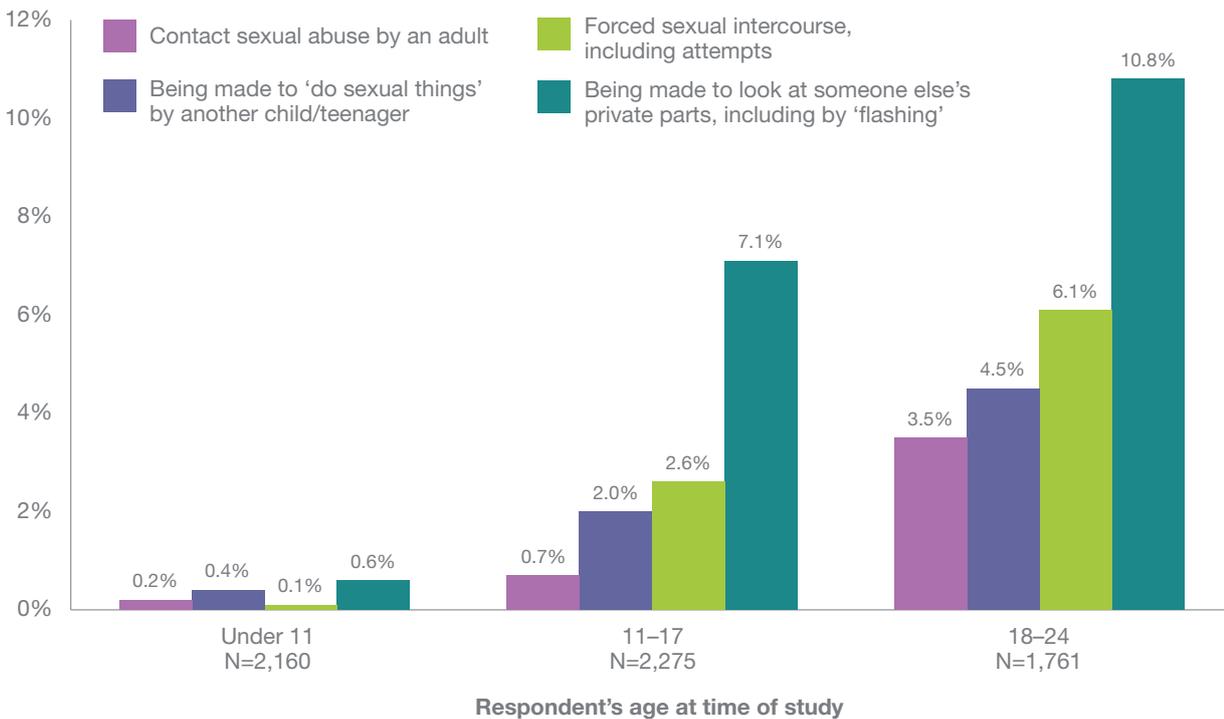
9. Contact sexual abuse was deemed to have met a criminal offence threshold when respondents said they had experienced a forced actual or attempted sexual assault. Any sexual acts in the following situations were also included: if the respondent was aged under 18 and the abuse was perpetrated by a parent, guardian, adult sibling or adult in a position of trust; if the respondent was aged under 16 and the abuse was perpetrated by an adult relative; or if the respondent was aged under 13 and the abuse was perpetrated by any adult.
10. Figures were calculated by taking reported rates from the survey and extrapolating them to mid-2019 ONS population estimates for England and Wales. This was a UK-wide survey; it is not known whether the results from England and Wales differed from the overall findings.

**Figure 18. Proportion of respondents to the 2009 NSPCC child maltreatment study describing experiences of contact CSA, by gender and age at the time of the study**



Source: Radford et al (2011: Table 5.1). Survey of under-11s filled in by parents.

**Figure 19. Proportion of respondents to the 2009 NSPCC child maltreatment study describing experiences of different forms of CSA, by age at the time of the study**



Source: Radford et al (2011: Tables B3.1-B3.3). Survey of under-11s filled in by parents.

### 3.4.2 Characteristics of victims

Gender differences in the prevalence of contact CSA were substantial (see Figure 18): among young adults, 5.1% of men but 17.8% of women said they had experienced contact CSA during their childhood.

### 3.4.3 Characteristics of perpetrators

The NSPCC child maltreatment study is the only UK survey to have published data on the prevalence of CSA committed by under-18s. Based on rates reported by participants (or their parents) who were aged 0–17, it found that 57.5% of contact sexual abuse was committed by children and young people, 34.1% by adults and 8.4% by both adults and children/young people. The proportion of abuse perpetrated by under-18s is higher than estimated in other research (e.g. Erooga and Masson, 2006).

### 3.4.4 How CSA experiences came to light

The NSPCC child maltreatment survey found that CSA was less likely to be disclosed if committed by another child or young person: five out of six (82.7%) participants who said they had been abused by another child or young person had not told anyone about it. Among respondents who said they had been abused by an adult, one-third (34%) had not told anyone about it.

## 3.5 Other prevalence surveys

Three other representatively sampled surveys in the past 10 years have published data on CSA, based in all three cases on a small number of questions on CSA:

- ▶ Separate national Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) studies have been undertaken in England (Bellis et al, 2014) and in Wales (Hughes et al, 2018). The short ACEs questionnaire, used in both studies, includes a single question on CSA that relates to sexual touching and forced sexual intercourse before the age of 18, perpetrated by individuals who were at least five years older than the respondent (see Appendix 1). Both studies included adult respondents aged 18–69: the English sample was 3,885 and the Welsh sample was 2,497 respondents. In England, 7.5% of women and 4.5% of men (6.3% overall) said they had been sexually abused during childhood. In Wales, the overall figure was 6.9%, with 10.3% and 3.8% respectively of male and female respondents describing CSA experiences.
- ▶ The EU-wide survey by the Fundamental Rights Agency regarding violence against women (FRA, 2014a) included around 1,500 women from the UK. It measured abuse up to the age of 15 and perpetrated by an adult (someone over 18). There were five behaviourally specific questions (see Appendix 1). In the UK as a whole, the CSA prevalence rate was 18%. The vast majority (97%) of perpetrators of sexual violence were said to be male: among UK women describing at least one incident of violence in their childhood, 60% said these incidents had involved men they had not previously known, and 25% identified male acquaintances, friends or neighbours; fathers (including foster/stepfathers) and other male relatives were said by 7% and 12% respectively to have perpetrated sexual violence (FRA, 2014b). Separate figures for each nation of the UK were not published.

### 3.6 Surveys about CSA perpetration

Methodologies that attempt to measure perpetration are much less developed, and there has been no attempt to measure this in a self-report survey in the UK. A review of international surveys (Radford, 2018) identified 10 undertaken in other countries, which measured CSA perpetration within questionnaires that also asked about victimisation. All of these had a limited number of questions, and many focused on specific contexts for abuse (e.g. intimate partnerships or paying for sex).

There are several US studies and a German survey that have focused on CSA perpetration specifically. The approach can be traced back to an exploratory study which sought to explore clinical constructions of sex offenders through research with ‘normal’ men (Briere and Runtz, 1989). A survey was administered to 193 male university students, of whom a fifth (21%) said they had some sexual attraction to children, 9% acknowledged having sexual fantasies involving children, and 7% agreed with the statement that there was a likelihood they would have sex with a child if they could avoid detection and prosecution. Correlations were found with early negative sexual experiences, having masturbated to pornography, having frequent sexual partners, and holding beliefs that supported male dominance. An adaptation of the methodological approach included women (n=180) and men (n=99), and found a significant gender difference in reported sexual attraction to children (Smiljanich and Briere, 1996): 22% of men reported such attraction, compared to 3% of women.

The German study (Dombert et al, 2016) involved a large online survey of 8,718 men which included questions on paying for sex and ‘prostitution tourism’. Here the findings on sexual fantasies were more specified: 4.1% reported having them about prepubescent children, and 0.1% were identified by the researchers as having what they defined as a “pedophilic sexual preference” (p215). Correlations with practices in relation to pornography were more complex than those reported in previous studies.

More studies have focused on potential CSA offending online. Self-report surveys focusing on online sexualised communication with under-18s have estimated significantly higher prevalence rates: between one in 10 and one in five adults reported having engaged in online sexualised conversations with young people under the age of 18 in the previous year, in surveys conducted in Germany, Sweden and Finland. Fewer than one in 20 reported having sexualised conversations with young people aged 13 years and younger (Wager et al, 2018).

In addition, self-report surveys conducted internationally show that between 4% and 12% of men and 3% of women in the general population engage with CSA images (Wager et al, 2018). One of these studies included a UK sample (Seigfried et al, 2008) but did not publish the prevalence figure for the UK.



International self-report surveys show that 4%–12% of men and 3% of women in the general population engage with CSA images



### 3.7 What we currently do and do not know about CSA through prevalence research

The following findings can be drawn from the current evidence base:

- ▶ Taking into account the variations in prevalence studies for England and Wales,<sup>11</sup> the data suggests that 15% of girls/young women and 5% of boys/young men experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of 16, including abuse by adults and under-18s. The methods used and number of questions asked affect estimates.
- ▶ The rates are significantly lower, although less easily calculated, for repeated penetrative abuse.
- ▶ Penetrative offences are more likely to be committed by persons known to the victim, with family members more common for girls/young women and authority figures more common for boys/young men; these offences are also more likely than other forms of CSA to be repeated.
- ▶ The vast majority of perpetrators are male.
- ▶ Most children and young people do not tell anyone at the time that the abuse is taking place, and many wait to speak about it until they are adults.
- ▶ Children and young people who do tell are much more likely to tell friends or family than someone in a professional role; official agencies discover or are told about abuse, either at the time or later, in a small minority of cases.
- ▶ Prevalence estimates are higher in surveys containing more than three CSA-related questions which are behaviourally specific and differentiated.
- ▶ Including abuse by under-18s taps into an additional layer of sexually abusive experiences, including those in early intimate relationships.

There remain significant gaps in the evidence base.

- ▶ We do not know if the prevalence of CSA has increased or decreased over time.
- ▶ The evidence of the scale of CSA committed by under-18s remains particularly poorly understood.
- ▶ Neither abuse involving multiple perpetrators nor abuse by subsequent perpetrators is well documented.
- ▶ There is no estimate of the prevalence of online-facilitated CSA. Further, it is not yet possible to map online activity onto what we know about CSA to explore how far the internet is a specific context for abuse and how far there are specific online forms of abuse that have increased the scale of CSA.
- ▶ The lack of time series data and variations in methodological approaches make exploration of a 'changing nature' of CSA complex: many studies are one-off, so trends over time cannot be discerned; different methodologies and definitions make comparisons across studies problematic; and there is often too little differentiation of both the forms (the sexually abusive acts) and the contexts (not just the relationship to the perpetrator, but also the process of entrapment/point of first contact, and the location) of the abuse.

A lack of time series data and variations in methodological approaches make it difficult to explore whether and how the nature of CSA is changing

11. Including ONS (2020a), Radford et al (2011) and Fundamental Rights Agency (2014b).

## 4. The scale of child sexual abuse in official data

When CSA is reported to local authority children's services and the police, this is recorded in the child protection system and/or within police recorded crime statistics. Such records enable the current level of reported CSA cases in England and Wales to be calculated and trends to be identified, although the latter is more difficult because the number and type of CSA cases that are recorded can be affected by changes in policy priorities, recording practices and agencies' resources.

It is generally recognised that official data vastly underestimates the scale of CSA because:

- ▶ most CSA remains hidden and is never reported to, or uncovered by, an official agency
- ▶ there is a time lag between experiencing CSA and reporting it, with many cases only reported in adulthood (Allnock et al, 2019; Office for National Statistics, 2020a), and we do not have a reliable measurement of how the rate of disclosure has changed over time
- ▶ not all suspected cases of CSA are recorded, and not all recorded cases are visible in the published data – this applies to both criminal justice and child protection data
- ▶ recording practices vary across agencies, across geographical areas and over time.

The most comprehensive effort to collate data across agencies was undertaken by the Children's Commissioner for England (Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2015):<sup>12</sup> it estimated that only one in eight victims of CSA come to the attention of the authorities at the time. Further, the number of cases in which the child told someone in an official position about their abuse, or someone in an official position found out about the abuse at the time it was taking place, was found to be very low in the latest childhood abuse module in the Crime Survey for England and Wales (ONS, 2020a) – see section 3.3.5.

It remains the case, therefore, that the majority of CSA is neither reported nor identified during childhood and thus will not appear in official agency data. As a result, far more children experience abuse than are currently being protected.

This chapter draws on publicly available data relating to local authority children's services (section 4.1) and criminal justice agencies (section 4.2). Section 4.3 outlines information about under-18s visiting sexual assault referral centres (SARCs) in England and Wales and sexual health clinic visits in England where sexual assault was a concern; both sets of data were provided for this report and have not previously been published.

While the Department for Education is responsible for collating and publishing data from local authority children's services (see below), no CSA-related data is collected within education services in England and Wales.

Annual local authority and police data is recorded from 1 April of one year to 31 March of the following year. In this section we follow the convention of writing, for example, '2019/20' to denote the 12 months from April 2019 to March 2020.

It remains the case that the majority of CSA is neither reported nor identified during childhood and thus will not appear in official agency data

12. No similar study has been carried out for Wales.

## Supporting agencies to improve their data on child sexual abuse

When the first edition of this report was published in 2017, it concluded that – despite CSA being identified as a national threat – the data being collected about CSA was limited and inconsistent. As a result, organisations were hampered in their ability to protect children from CSA and to identify and support those who have been sexually abused.

To improve the quality and consistency of the data on CSA that organisations collect in the delivery of their services, professionals providing expert input during the writing of the first edition suggested that the CSA Centre should develop a ‘core dataset’: a recommended list of information that organisations responding to CSA should be collecting. The professionals suggested that the core dataset should include data on the victim, on the suspected perpetrator, on the context of abuse and on the service response.

In response to this recommendation, the CSA Centre developed and piloted the CSA ‘data collection template’ – a set of 30 core items of data which all organisations responding to CSA are recommended to collect (Christie and Karsna, 2019; Karsna and Ariss-Majeed, 2019). The template also sets out how the data should be categorised, so that information can be recorded systematically and then extracted from data systems and reported in a standard format.

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

[www.csacentre.org.uk/documents/improving-your-data-on-csa-a-practical-guide/](http://www.csacentre.org.uk/documents/improving-your-data-on-csa-a-practical-guide/)



To improve the quality and consistency of data collected by organisations, the CSA Centre has developed a CSA ‘data collection template’



## 4.1 Local authority children's services

Data from the child protection system shows the reasons why children are made the subject of a child protection plan (or placed on the child protection register in Wales) by local authority children's services. In England there are four categories of abuse – emotional, physical, sexual, and neglect – with a fifth category to denote that the child is at risk of multiple forms of abuse.<sup>13</sup> In Wales, there is the additional category of financial abuse.<sup>14</sup> Since 2014/15, children's services in England have published information on the risk factors identified at the child's initial and most recent needs assessments; this data, in which sexual abuse and sexual exploitation are recorded as separate categories of need, is not published for Wales.

Child protection plans and registrations provide only a limited understanding of sexual abuse dealt with by local authority children's services, for the following reasons:

- ▶ Children frequently experience multiple forms of abuse, but it is usual for local authorities' data recording systems to require a single primary category to be selected; as a result, data relating to child protection plans provides only a partial picture of the abuse identified by children's services. A 'multiple' category is used in a small minority of cases in England and Wales, and its use varies widely across local authorities (Bywaters et al, 2017). Further, any concerns about sexual abuse recorded within the 'multiple' category are not visible in published data in England because a breakdown of the category is not available; it is available in Wales.
- ▶ Research by the Office of the Children's Commissioner (2015) found that, between 2012 and 2014 in England, children who had experienced CSA according to police records were frequently recorded under other categories of abuse by children's services: in cases where a CSA offence was recorded by the police and the victim was also made the subject of a protection plan, only 20% were recorded in the 'sexual abuse' category; 32% were recorded under neglect, 29% under emotional abuse, 5% under physical abuse and 14% under multiple forms of abuse.
- ▶ Similarly, research in Wales published by the CSA Centre (Roberts, 2020) found that placements on the child protection register were a poor measure of the scale of CSA concerns encountered by local authority children's services. In a study involving 44 case files from two local authorities, only one in five children whose case files recorded CSA concerns were on the child protection register under the category of sexual abuse, or under the 'multiple' category where sexual abuse was one of the concerns.
- ▶ The Office of the Children's Commissioner (2015) suggested that neglect was considered a "more straightforward" designation than sexual abuse by social workers, and Roberts (2020) highlighted that social workers hesitated to record concerns of CSA (other than CSE) in cases where their assessment was based on observation or professional judgement but the child had not verbally disclosed sexual abuse.

13. In addition to abuse, children can be assessed as being 'in need' for the following reasons: child's disability or illness; parent's disability or illness; family in acute stress; family dysfunction; socially unacceptable behaviour; low income; and absent parenting. When a child is in need for a combination of reasons, only one (the highest ordered in the list above, starting with abuse) is recorded. In both England and Wales, around half of all children in need are recorded under the abuse categories.

14. Social services are a devolved responsibility, whereas policing and criminal justice systems are not, meaning that social services data gathering and reporting is different in Wales and in England.

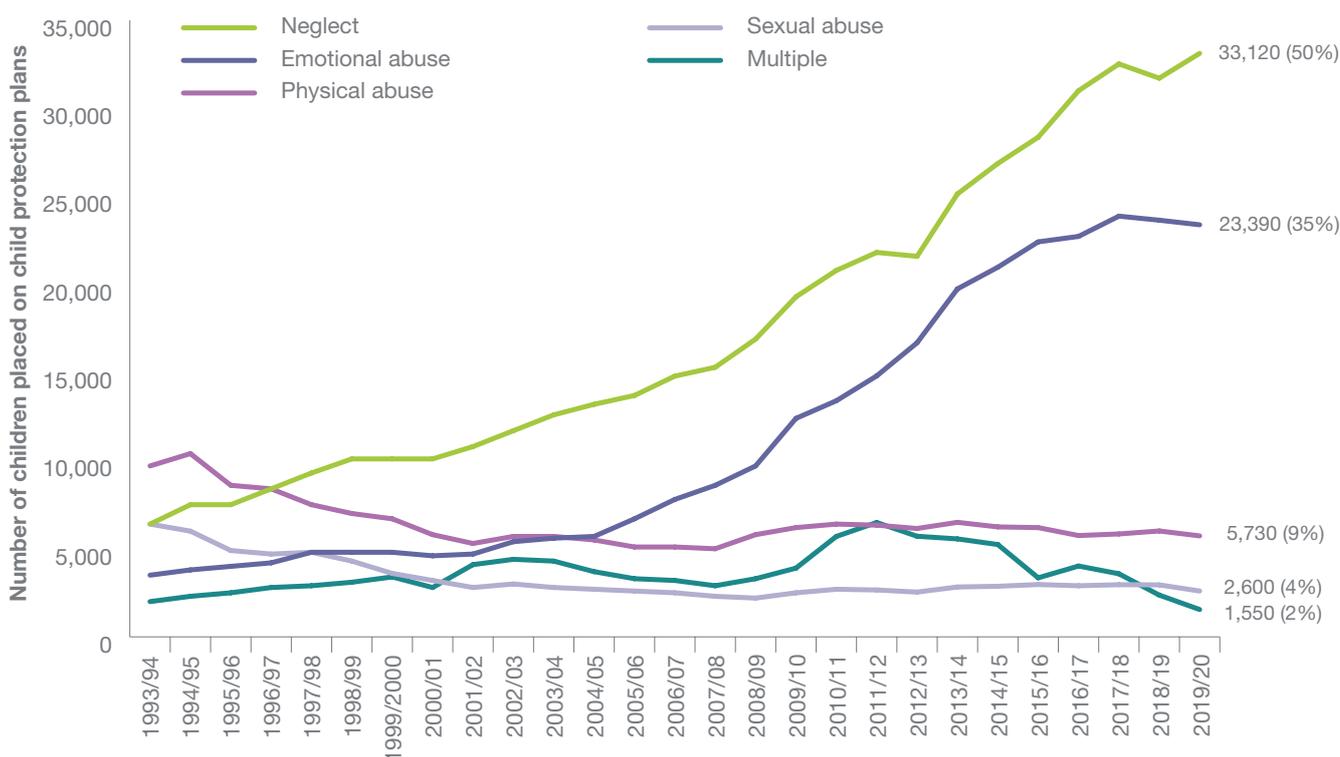
- ▶ The CSA Centre’s research has highlighted that records are not always updated during case work (Christie and Karsna, 2019): this means that, if a child is referred to children’s services for another reason but sexual abuse comes to light during work with their family, their formal record may continue to display only the original category of concern.
- ▶ A child is placed on a protection plan/register only when there are ongoing concerns. If a perpetrator of sexual abuse is removed from the household, for example, the child may be deemed as not requiring this type of intervention.

### 4.1.1 Trends over time

Figure 20 shows a significant decrease in the number of children made the subject of a child protection plan in England under the primary category of sexual abuse: their number fell by 60% from 6,400 in 1993/94 to 2,600 in 2019/20.<sup>15</sup> During the same period, the overall number of children on a child protection plan more than doubled, owing to substantial increases in the number of children placed on a child protection plan under the categories of neglect and emotional abuse. As a result, the proportion of children placed under the category of sexual abuse fell from 23% in 1993/94 to just 4% in 2019/20.

For these reasons, the data analysed in this section offers only a very partial understanding of the scale and nature of CSA encountered by local authority children’s services in England and Wales.

**Figure 20. Children placed on child protection plans, by category of abuse, 1993/94–2019/20, England**



Source: Department for Education (2020a: Table D2, years ending 31 March 2020 and 2012; Table 19, year ending 31 March 2011; Table 15, year ending 31 March 2010). Pre-2010 data is archived at: <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130411081546/https://www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/statistics/statistics-by-topic/childrenandfamilies/safeguarding>  
 If a child was in the child protection system more than once during the year, each incidence is recorded. Child-level (more detailed) information is collected from 2009/10. A data confidence indicator was used for the years 2008/09–2014/15; very few local authorities were considered to provide low-quality data. For the years 2009/10–2012/13, missing data was noted: by 14 local authorities in 2009/10, eight in 2010/11, two in 2011/12 and one in 2012/13.

15. While any trend figures over a long period need to be interpreted with caution, the Children in Need data collection framework (which pertains to this data) has remained stable. The format of data collection has changed twice: in 2000/01 the ‘multiple’ category was introduced, and in 2008/09 aggregate data collection at local authority level was replaced with more detailed child-level data collection (Department for Education, 2010).

It is important to bear in mind that the latest Crime Survey for England and Wales (ONS, 2020a) found emotional abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse to be almost equally prevalent in the population in England and Wales (see section 3.3.1). This suggests that CSA is significantly less likely than other forms of abuse to be recorded when a child is made the subject of a child protection plan.

In the latest year, 2019/20, the number of children placed on protection plans under the category of sexual abuse in England decreased by 12% (representing 350 children) compared to 2018/19: the largest single-year drop in 18 years.

This overall figure masks local variation in the direction and pace of change: among the 134 English local authorities where data was available, more than half (54%, 72) recorded fewer children under the category of sexual abuse in 2019/20 compared to the previous year, but two-fifths (39%, 52) recorded an increase, and in a few (7%, 10) the number of sexual abuse-related protection plans remained the same. The remaining 17 local authorities returned suppressed data in both years; data suppression is used to preserve the anonymity where numbers are small (five or fewer) in any given area.

Data from Wales is available only for children who had been on the child protection register at 31 March for three months or longer, giving a snapshot rather than the full number of children about whom there were child protection concerns in a given year. This data is therefore not directly comparable to that for England.

Owing to the increased demand for statistics to measure the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Welsh Government suspended the collection of data on the number of child protection registrations by different categories of abuse for 2019/20. The latest data available for this report therefore relates to 2018/19.

Longitudinal data for Wales shows a decline similar to that in England: the number of children on the child protection register under the category of sexual abuse, as a proportion of the total number on the register, decreased from 21% in 1993/94 to 4% in 2018/19 (see Figure 21); this reflected a reduction from 331 to 120 children, against a background of a significant increase in the total number of children on the register (from 1,610 in 1993/94 to 2,810 in 2018/19). Data published for Wales breaks down the ‘multiple forms of abuse’ category, revealing that sexual abuse concerns were recorded in 38% (40) of registrations involving multiple forms of abuse. The most frequently recorded combination with sexual abuse was neglect (30). The combined number of child protection registrations naming sexual abuse as a concern was 160 in 2018/19, representing 6% of all child protection registrations.

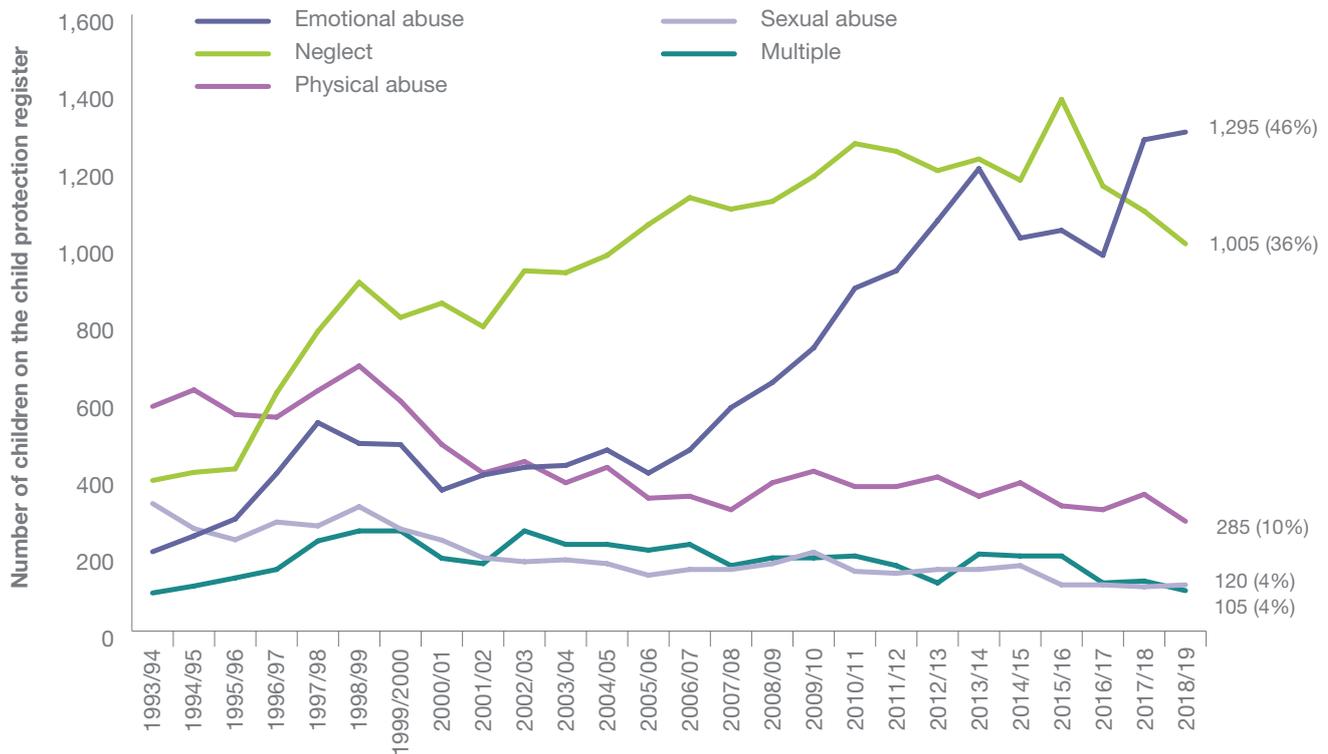
The downward trend in child protection placements/registrations, and the relatively low number of them, are not unique to England and Wales: Jud et al (2016) found sexual abuse to be generally the least commonly recorded form of child maltreatment in international administrative data, with rates ranging between 3% and 9% of all child abuse cases. They noted a significant drop in the USA since the 1990s, a pattern also found in New Zealand.



CSA appears significantly less likely than other forms of abuse to be recorded when children are made the subject of a child protection plan



**Figure 21. Children on the child protection register at 31 March, by category of abuse, 1993/94–2018/19, Wales**



Source: Welsh Government (2019b: data for 2016/17–2018/19); Welsh Government (2016: data for 1993/94–2015/16). All figures are as at 31 March.

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

#### Gender

Among children who were the subject of a child protection plan under the category of sexual abuse in England on 31 March 2020, 60% were female; in contrast, the majority of children on plans under other categories of abuse, and of children in need overall, were male (see Figure 22). In Wales in 2018/19, girls accounted for 57% (65) of child protection registrations under the category of sexual abuse (Welsh Government, 2019b).

These proportions are consistent with survey findings indicating that girls are more likely to experience CSA than boys (see Chapter 3). However, there is also evidence that professionals perceive abuse of girls and boys differently: they have more difficulty in viewing boys as victims of CSA compared to girls, and perceive the impact of CSA as being smaller on boys than on girls (e.g. Brayley et al, 2014; Maikovich-Fong and Jaffee, 2010).

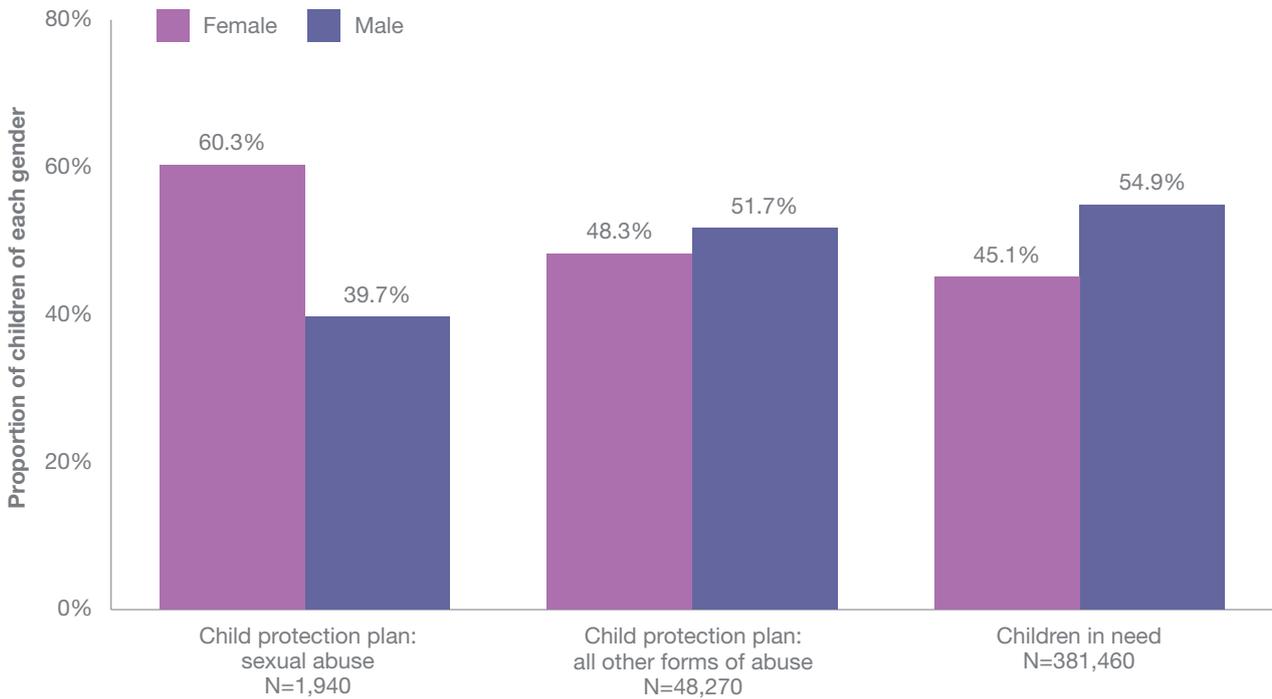
The gender profile of children made the subject of a child protection plan or placed on the register under the category of sexual abuse has not substantially changed over recent years.

#### Age

Compared with those on a protection plan because of other forms of abuse, children in England who were the subject of a child protection plan on 31 March 2020 under the category of sexual abuse were less likely to be aged under 5 and more likely to be over 10 years old (see Figure 23). Among children on Wales’s child protection register under the category of sexual abuse in 2018/19, only 17% (25) were aged under 5, 30% (45) were aged 5–9 and 53% (80) were at least 10 years old (Welsh Government, 2019b).

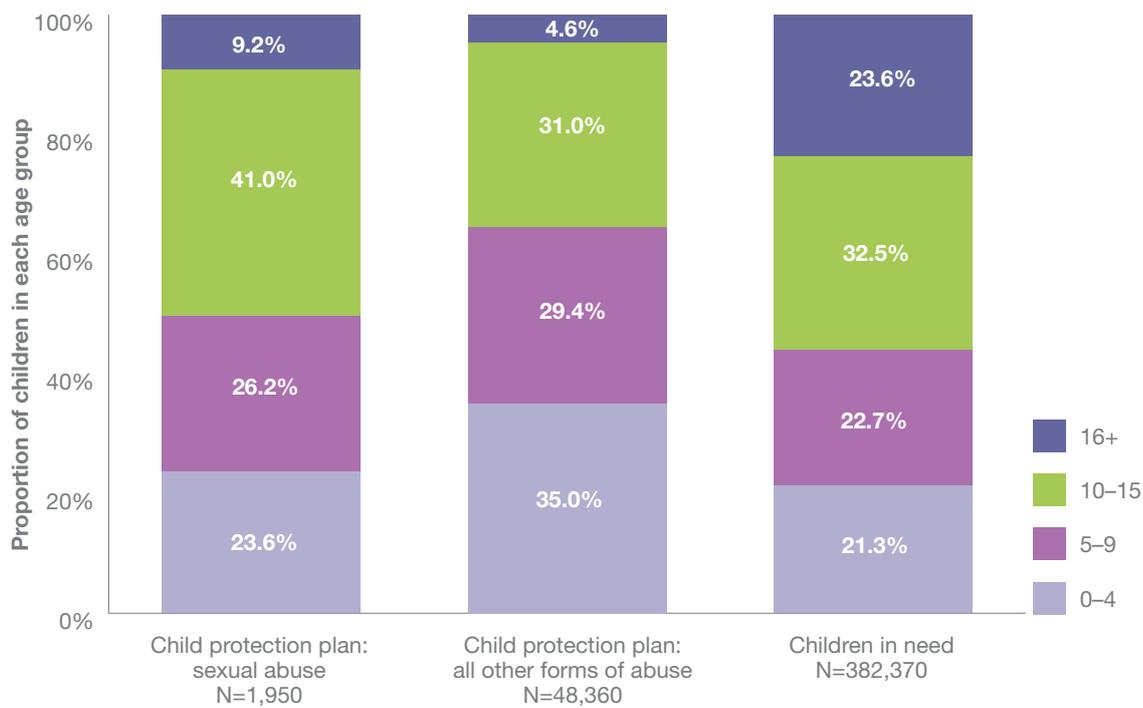
The difficulty of identifying the sexual abuse of younger children, particularly those who are pre-verbal, has been highlighted in research (Vrolijk-Bosschaart et al, 2017). In recent years there has been little change in the age profile of children made the subject of a child protection plan under the category of sexual abuse.

**Figure 22. Children who were the subject of a protection plan and all children in need on 31 March 2020, by gender, England**



Source: Department for Education (2020a: Tables A4 and A5, year ending 31 March 2020). Excludes a small number of children of unknown gender, and unborn children.

**Figure 23. Children who were the subject of a protection plan and all children in need on 31 March 2020, by age, England**



Source: Department for Education (2020a: Tables A4 and A5, year ending 31 March 2020). Excludes unborn children.

**Ethnicity**

On 31 March 2020 in England, more than three-quarters of children who were the subject of a child protection plan under the category of CSA were from White (British or ‘other’) backgrounds; this was similar to the proportion among children on a child protection plan because of other forms of abuse, but higher than the figure for all children in need (see Figure 24). Black children accounted for 4% of those on child protection plans due to CSA, Asian children for 9%, children from mixed ethnic backgrounds for 7% and those from ‘other’ backgrounds for 3%.<sup>16</sup> Information about ethnicity is not available for Wales.

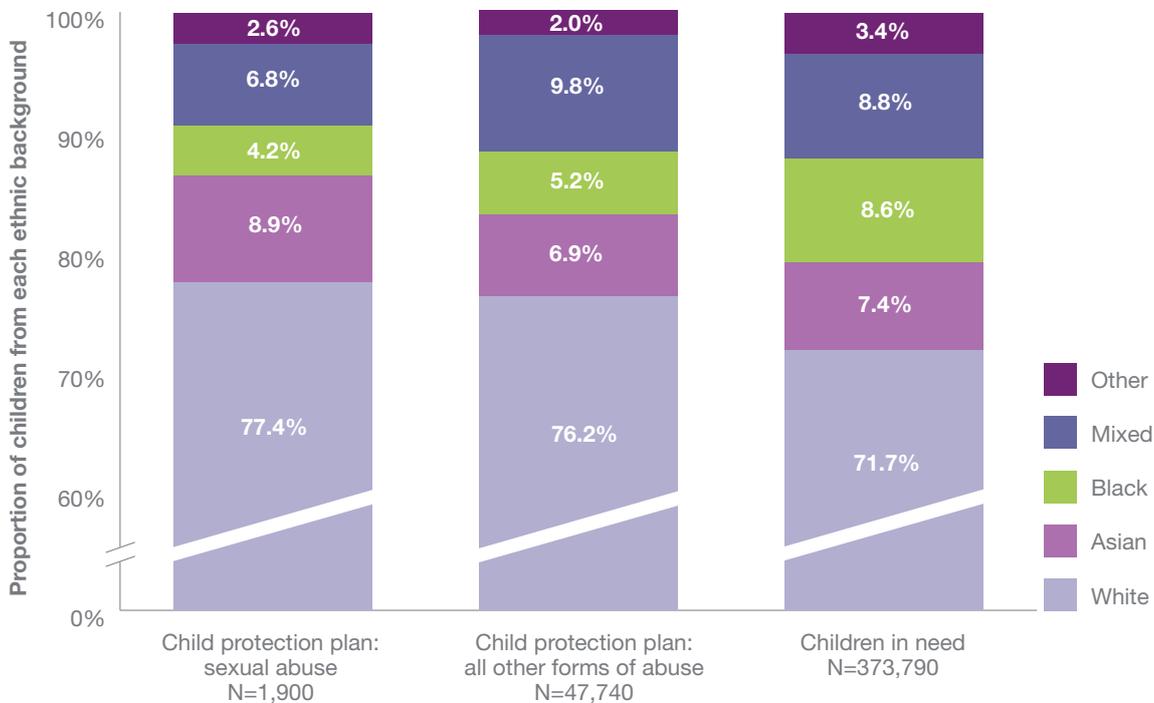
In January 2020, 74% of pupils in England’s state schools were White, with children from Asian backgrounds accounting for a further 12% (Department for Education, 2020b).

This indicates that White children are over-represented among children made the subject of a child protection plan under the category of sexual abuse (and other forms of abuse), while Asian children are under-represented. Research has highlighted the difficulties faced by sexually abused children from minority ethnic backgrounds in relation to disclosing the abuse and accessing services (Ali et al, 2021; Rodger et al, 2020), while also concluding that the likelihood of experiencing CSA does not vary significantly with ethnic group (Bebbington et al, 2011).

**Characteristics of suspected perpetrators**

No data on the number or characteristics of the suspected perpetrators of abuse is collected by the Department for Education in England or the Welsh Government in Wales, despite some of this data being recorded locally in children’s services data (Christie and Karsna, 2019; Roberts, 2020).

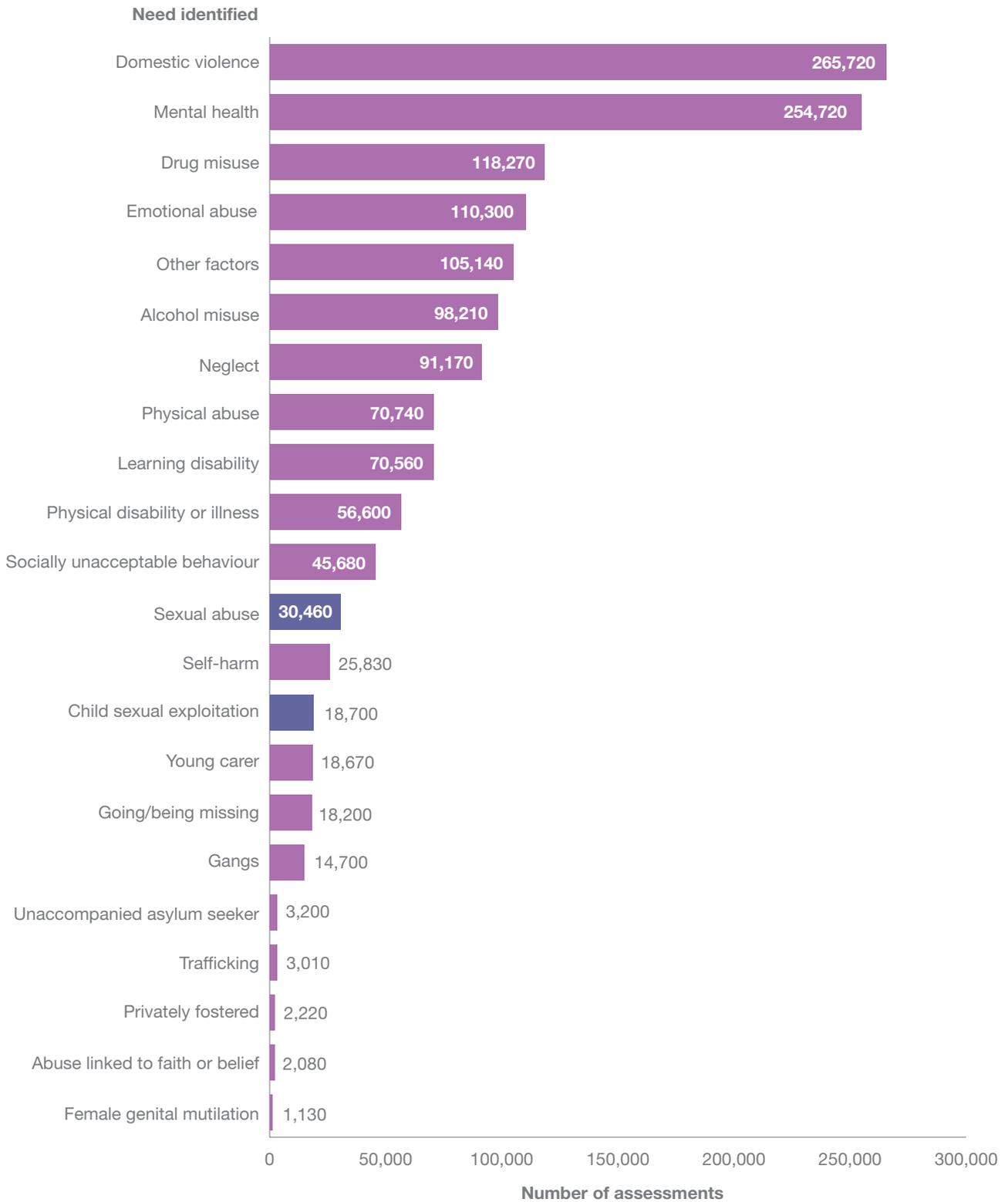
**Figure 24. Children who were the subject of a protection plan and all children in need on 31 March 2020, by ethnicity, England**



Source: Department for Education (2020a: Tables A4 and A5, year ending 31 March 2020). Excludes unborn children.

16. The ethnic background of children subject to a protection plan is published according to these five broad categories only.

**Figure 25. Needs identified during assessments by local authority children’s services, 2019/20, England**



Source: Department for Education (2020a: Table C3, year ending 31 March 2020). Number of episodes with assessment factor information; excludes assessments where no risks were identified or recorded. Total number of assessments: 522,990. Factors identified at the end of the assessment; figures add up to more than the total because multiple needs could be recorded.

### 4.1.3 Children at risk of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation in England

Since 2014/15, the Department for Education has published a list of risk factors identified in the assessments of children who are referred to local authority children's services in England; in this list, CSE is recorded separately from CSA. Where multiple risks are identified, all factors are recorded. Figure 25 shows that, out of 522,990 assessments undertaken in 2019/20, 4% (n=18,700) identified a risk of sexual exploitation and 6% (n=30,460) a risk of sexual abuse.<sup>17</sup> Both figures have been at this level as a proportion of total assessments since the data was first published. There is no published data showing the safeguarding action, if any, that followed the assessment.

### 4.1.4 Local variation

Figure 26 presents the number of children made the subject of a child protection plan under the category of sexual abuse, as a proportion of the children who live in each local authority area in England. These proportions vary considerably, with some local authorities placing no children on a protection plan because of sexual abuse while others place more than six children for every 10,000 children in the area. In 2013/14, 2016/17 and 2019/20, data from a large number of local authorities (36–37 out of 151) was suppressed, to preserve children's anonymity in local authorities where the numbers were small.

Comparison of the three years indicates that there was no significant change in the average number of children placed on protection plans under the category of sexual abuse. However, when adding up the local authorities that returned suppressed data<sup>18</sup> or placed fewer than one child per 10,000, the combined figure has increased from 42 (28% of the total) in 2013/14 to 53 (35% of the total) in 2019/20. This suggests that an increasing number of local authorities are placing very few (or no) children on a child protection plan because of sexual abuse.

Over a similar period, Wales too saw wide variation between local authorities in the proportion of the local child population that was placed on the child protection register under the category of sexual abuse (see Figure 27).<sup>19</sup> Data was suppressed in relatively more local authorities (9–11 out of 22) than in England, which is likely to be a result of relatively smaller local authority populations in Wales. Excluding suppressed data, there was a marked decrease in the average number of children per 10,000 child population on the register because of sexual abuse, from 3.9 children in 2014 to 3.2 in 2019.

The rate of child protection plan placements has been found to be higher in areas with higher levels of deprivation, although this association is weakest for sexual abuse protection plans (Bywaters et al, 2017). Local variations merit further research to understand whether policy priorities, resource allocation, training and/or availability of specialist teams affect identification and designation.

When identifying the risks facing children, local authority children's services are required to record the risk of CSE separately from the risk of CSA. In England during 2019/20, there were wide variations in the number of local authority assessments (as a proportion of the local child population) which identified a risk of CSE or of CSA. The variation was particularly noticeable in the identification of CSA risk: some local authorities identified no children at risk, while others identified more than 60 for every 10,000 children living in the local area (see Figure 28). The rates of identification of CSE risk were less varied: half of local authorities recorded between 10 and 20 children at risk of CSE for every 10,000 children. Comparable data is not available for Wales.

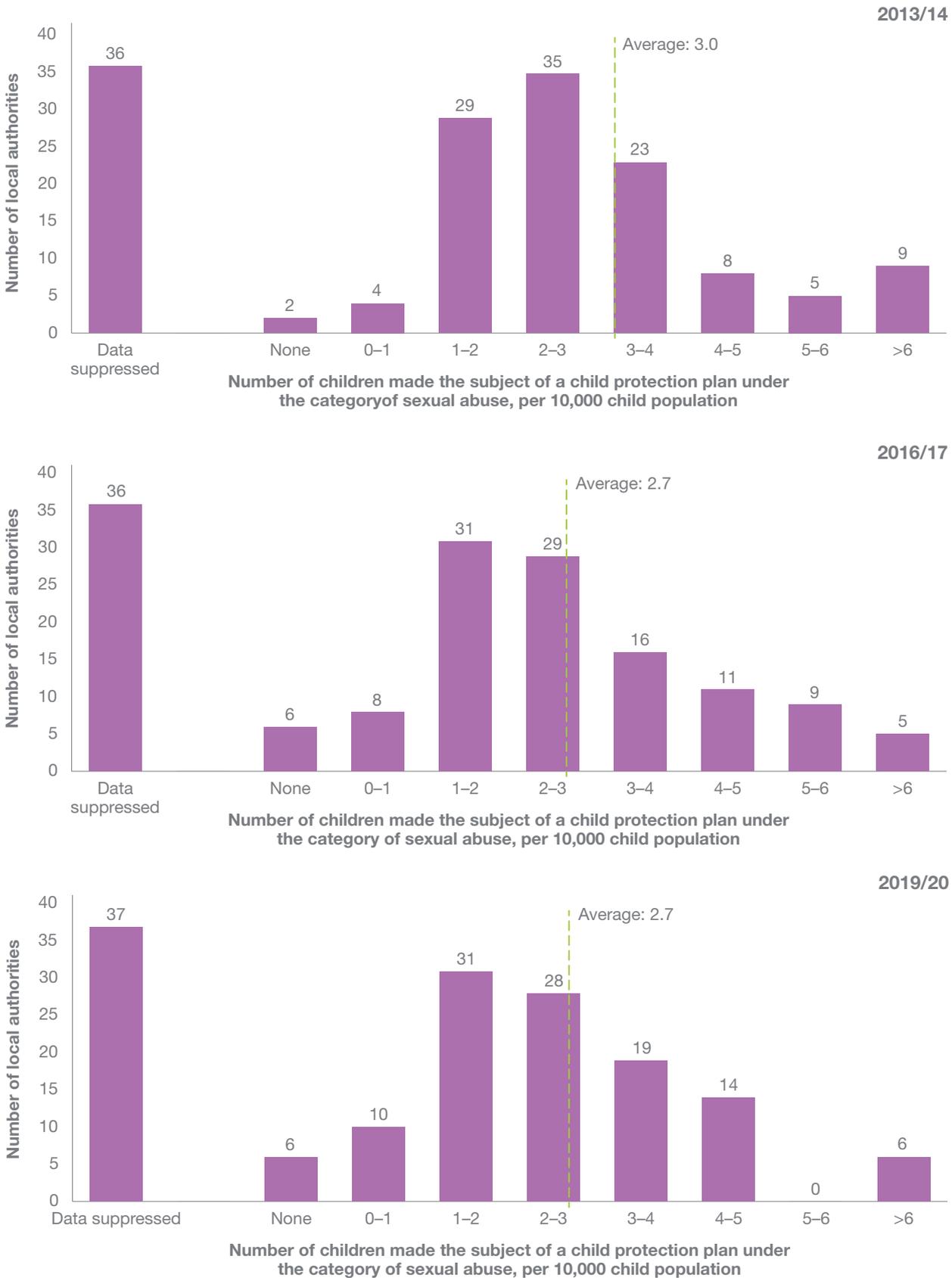
Research has found that the commissioning practice for CSE services is more well-developed than it is for CSA services (Kaur and Christie, 2017; Roberts, 2020), suggesting that local authorities' approach to CSE may be more consistent than for other forms of CSA.

17. Since children can be assessed more than once during the year, this may include double counting. It is unclear whether local authorities include children at risk of CSE also within the count of children at risk of CSA.

18. In most cases where a local authority placed five or fewer children on a child protection plan under the category of sexual abuse, the local authority would fall into the '0–1 per 10,000 population' category. Even in the extreme case where every local authority with suppressed data had five children on child protection plans because of sexual abuse, there would be 19 local authorities in the '0–1' group, 14 in the '1–2' group and one in the '2–3' group.

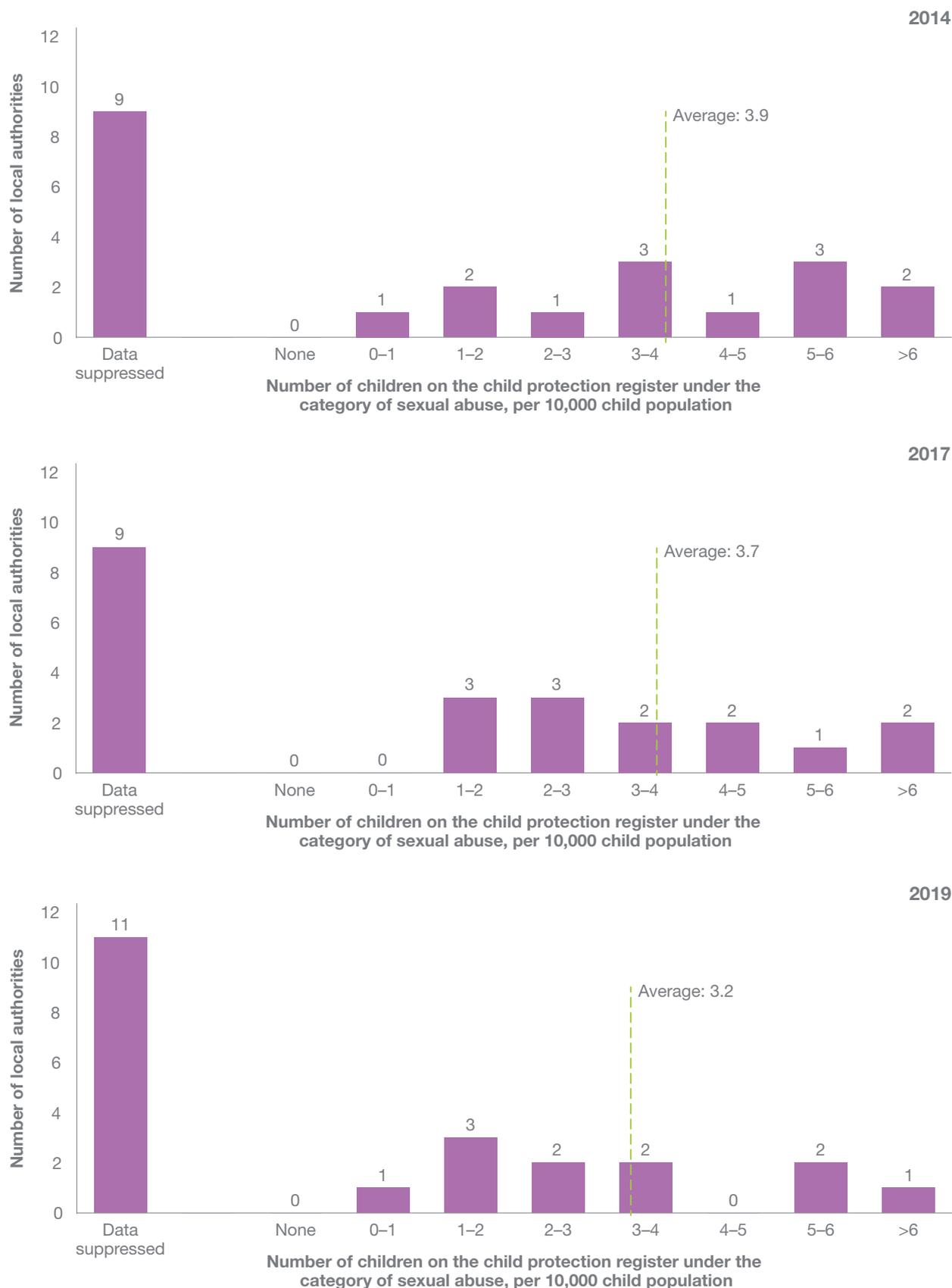
19. Only children who had been on the child protection register for at least three months on 31 March are counted. Further, this number is rounded to the nearest five, which can distort the rates calculated per population. For these reasons, the data is not directly comparable to data collected for England.

**Figure 26. Proportion of local authorities' child population made the subject of a child protection plan under the category of sexual abuse in 2013/14, 2016/17 and 2019/20, England**



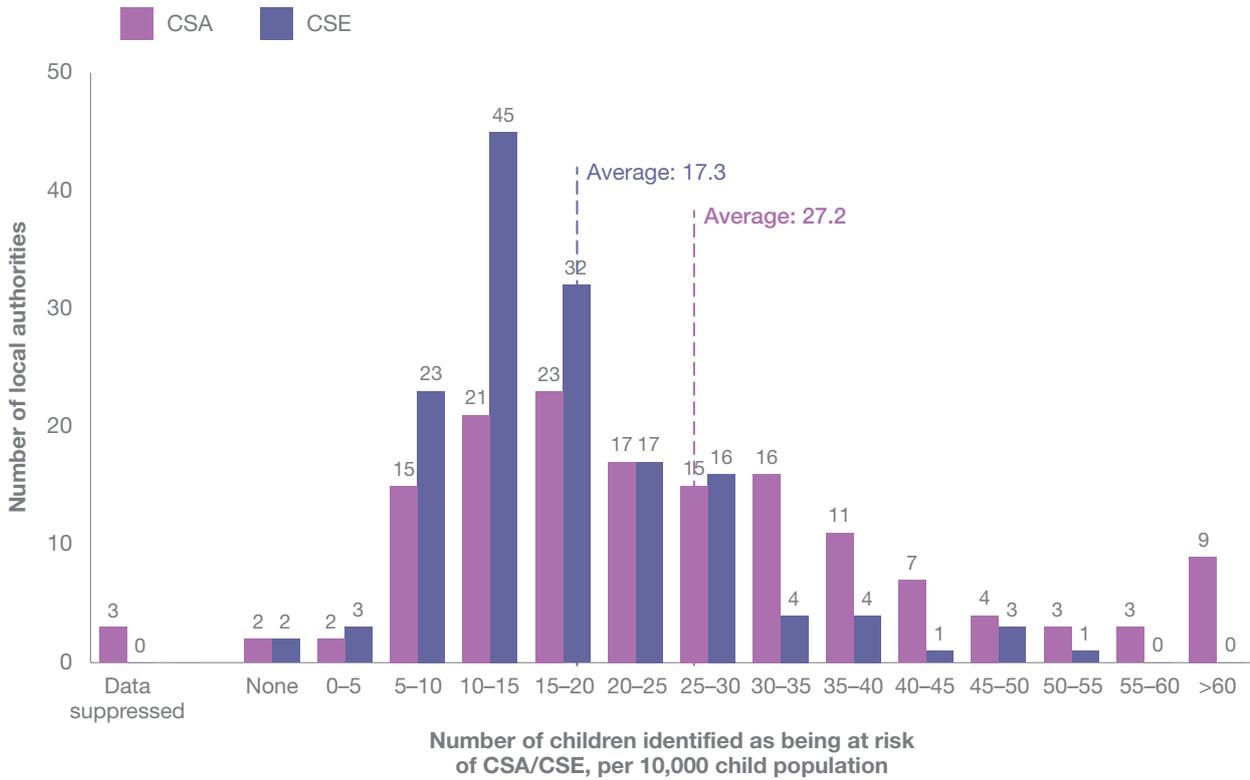
Source: Department for Education (2020a: Table D2, years ending 31 March 2014, 2017 and 2020). Where a child is the subject of more than one child protection plan in a year, both are counted. Population figures for 0-17-year-olds estimated at 30 June by the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2020d).

**Figure 27. Proportion of local authorities' child population on the child protection register under the category of sexual abuse on 31 March 2014, 2017 and 2019, Wales**



Source: Welsh Government (2019b: data for 2016/17 and 2018/19); Welsh Government (2016: data for 2013/14). All figures are as at 31 March. Population figures for 0-17-year-olds estimated at 30 June by the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2020d).

**Figure 28. Proportion of local authorities’ child population identified as being at risk of CSE and CSA, 2019/20, England**



Source: Department for Education (2020a: Table C3, year ending 31 March 2020). Need factors identified at the end of the assessment. Where a child is assessed more than once, all assessments are counted. Children can be identified as in need under multiple categories. Population figures for 0–17-year-olds estimated at 30 June by the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2020d).

#### 4.1.5 Knowledge gaps and challenges

Child protection data currently provides only a partial picture of the CSA concerns identified in the child protection system. The data shows that only a small proportion of children identified as being at risk of CSA are recorded under this category of abuse on a child protection plan or the child protection register, although a wider cohort of children is identified as being at risk of CSA (including CSE) in England during needs assessments.

Analysis also suggests that there has been a change in the way that CSA is identified and/or recorded over the past two decades, as the decline in CSA-related child protection plans or registrations is not reflected in other measurements of the scale of CSA in England and Wales. Some commentators – for example, Nelson (2016) – argue that the crises around CSA in the late 1980s and the 1990s<sup>20</sup> had a “chilling effect”, making child protection agencies anxious about recording cases as CSA unless there was clear evidence of sexual assault. This means that children’s services data tells us less about the scale of CSA in child protection systems and more about recording practices over time.

20. These included the Cleveland crisis, in which paediatricians and social workers diagnosed a large number of young children as having been sexually abused and the police withdrew cooperation from joint investigations. There is a belief that the inquiry found that the children had not been abused; this is not the case. Other high-profile cases where there was public debate and disquiet took place in Rochdale, Nottingham and Orkney. Again, there is a belief that all of these cases involved accusations that were not proven: in several, adults were convicted of sexual abuse. For a summary of these and other cases, see Nelson (2016).

The most recent available data shows a further decline in the number of CSA-related child protection plans, the sharpest in 18 years. The reasons for this decrease, which occurred before the COVID-19 restrictions affected referrals to local authorities, are unclear and merit further investigation. It is nevertheless clear that the majority of children for whom CSA concerns exist are not placed on a child protection plan or register under the category of sexual abuse, and are unlikely to access support in response to CSA (Roberts, 2020).

For reasons that are unclear, the further decline in the number of CSA-related child protection plans in 2019/20 was the steepest for 18 years

## Responding to child sexual abuse: learning from children's services in Wales

In 2019, as part of the Welsh Government's action plan to prevent and respond to CSA (Welsh Government, 2019a), the CSA Centre commissioned a research project to explore how CSA is identified, recorded and responded to by local authority children's services (Roberts, 2020). The research involved the examination of a sample of electronic social care records relating to children in two Welsh local authorities. Additionally, two focus groups were held with 10 social workers from across different teams in those local authorities.

The study found that:

- ▶ Only one-fifth of children whose case files recorded concerns about CSA (including CSE and harmful sexual behaviour) had been placed on the child protection register under the category of sexual abuse.
- ▶ Social workers reflected on the infrequency with which children disclosed CSA to social workers, and recognised that this had an impact on the number of CSA cases they saw in their caseloads.
- ▶ In the absence of disclosure, caution was expressed with regard to talking to the child about potential abuse, for fear of asking leading questions.

- ▶ With regard to recording concerns about CSA (other than CSE) in social care records, some social workers appeared hesitant to do this if a child had not verbally disclosed – it was felt that this would complicate work with the family.
- ▶ There was a consensus that local authority children's services were more able to identify CSE than other types of CSA. Although CSE was unlikely to be disclosed, participants expressed the view that it was easier for social workers to articulate concerns about CSE than other forms of CSA, as the emphasis in cases of CSE was on recognising risk as opposed to the child communicating that they had been abused.

The study called for improvements in the training of social workers in relation to managing disclosures and understanding the signs and indicators of CSA, as well as clearer guidance about what questions can be asked in relation to CSA where there is no disclosure but concerns exist, and how such concerns can be named in care records.

For the full report, please see:

[www.csacentre.org.uk/documents/responding-to-csa-childrens-services-wales/](http://www.csacentre.org.uk/documents/responding-to-csa-childrens-services-wales/)

## 4.2 Data from criminal justice agencies

In this section we draw on publicly available data from the Home Office, the Crown Prosecution Service and the Ministry of Justice.

### 4.2.1 Police recorded crime statistics

Police data is published by the Home Office according to offence classifications in the Home Office Counting Rules (Home Office, 2020b). 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 one crime is recorded for each victim-offender relationship. Where a series of crimes are reported all at the same time (between the same victim and offender), one crime will be recorded; this will be the most serious crime reported. For example, if a victim reports that they have been raped several times by the same suspect, one crime will be recorded (Home Office, 2020b).<sup>21</sup>
- ▶ Not all CSA offences are identifiable in the publicly available data, because they are recorded under categories of offence that also include adult victims (e.g. rape of a male/female over 16, incest, trafficking, abduction, exposure or voyeurism); the precise number of these offences that are committed against children (i.e. individuals aged under 18) cannot be calculated from publicly available police recorded crime data, as the age of the victim is not published. Nevertheless, it is known that at least 10,594 offences against under-18s were recorded in 2018/19 under these offence categories – 14% of all recorded CSA offences (Office for National Statistics, 2020c: Table 32).<sup>22</sup>
- ▶ Offences are recorded in the year in which they are reported to the police, rather than the year in which they were committed; it is not possible to establish from publicly available data the proportion of current and non-recent offences, although the Office for National Statistics sometimes publishes its analysis of the proportion of non-recent offences. Among CSA offences reported to the police in 2018/19, the ONS calculated that around one-third (34%) had taken place at least a year earlier (ONS, 2020c: Table 37).
- ▶ Some reports of rape made to the police are recorded initially as ‘incidents’. Following assessment and initial investigation, some of these remain recorded as incidents rather than offences. In 2018/19, the police recorded at least 926 such incidents against children in England and Wales, of which 403 took place in a different police force area from the one that received the report; and in 471 cases, the victim or a third party could not be traced or confirmed (ONS, 2020c: Table 33).<sup>23</sup>
- ▶ Data relating to offences of possessing or making indecent images of children (CSA images) are published within the overarching category of ‘obscene publications’. Although the recorded crime statistics for this category do not differentiate between images of children and adults, prosecution data from the Ministry of Justice suggests that the vast majority of prosecutions involve images of children: in 2019, out of 27,233 indecent image offences proceeded against, 96% (26,124) featured images of children (Ministry of Justice, 2020).
- ▶ Following a systems change in December 2019, all records from 2012/13 onwards have been updated retrospectively; therefore the figures for these years published in this report will differ from those in previous publications (Home Office, 2020c: ‘Police recorded crime Police Force Area open data tables, year ending March 2013 onwards’).

21. 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. (These offences would be prosecuted under the previous legislation, however.)

22. The figures are based on 39 (out of 43) police forces and only for offences where the victim’s age was recorded. The data is designated as experimental to ‘highlight that they are based on an emerging collection’ (ONS, 2020a).

23. The figures are based on 33 police forces and are designated as experimental.

- 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 (ONS, 2018a). Since 2014, when a review found that the police were not recording as crimes up to 26% of sexual offences reported to them (HM Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2014), improvements have been made. All the police forces inspected by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services in 2020 were observed to have a good standard of recording sexual offences, according to inspection reports published on its website.<sup>24</sup> While the assessment includes sexual offences against children, it is not possible to judge whether these findings fully reflect the recording accuracy of CSA.

Table 3 shows that 87,992 identifiable CSA offences (including offences involving CSA images) were recorded by the police in England and Wales in 2019/20, slightly fewer than the 88,743 offences recorded in the previous year. This represents, after years of substantial increases, a levelling off in the number of CSA offences recorded by police forces in England and Wales.

The overall figure masks local variation in the direction and extent of change among the 43 police force areas, however: in 25 of these areas, the number of recorded CSA offences declined in 2019/20 compared with the previous year; in 16 the number increased; and in the remaining two areas the number remained similar (less than 1% change). This variation is explored further in section 4.2.1.2.

**Table 3. Identifiable CSA offences in England and Wales, 2019/20**

Offence category	Number in England	Number in Wales	Total in England and Wales*
Rape of a female child under 13	4,824	279	5,104
Rape of a male child under 13	2,147	147	2,294
Rape of a female child under 16	6,890	369	7,266
Rape of a male child under 16	942	50	994
Sexual assault on a female child under 13	9,059	599	9,681
Sexual assault on a male child under 13	3,521	257	3,785
Sexual activity involving a child under 13	8,754	812	9,568
Sexual activity involving a child under 16	13,779	1,038	14,819
Abuse of children through sexual exploitation	979	22	1,001
Abuse of position of trust of a sexual nature	338	4	342
Sexual grooming	5,958	368	6,329
CSA image offences**	25,034	1,763	26,809
<b>Total</b>	<b>82,225</b>	<b>5,708</b>	<b>87,992</b>

Source: Home Office (2020c: 'Police recorded crime Police Force Area open data tables, year ending March 2013 onwards', Table 2019–20).

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

\*\* This figure includes offences classified as 'obscene publications'; a small proportion of images associated with these offences do not involve children. The volume of child sexual abuse images and offenders committing abuse online

24. All crime data integrity inspections are available at: [www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmicfrs/our-work/article/crime-data-integrity/reports-rolling-programme-crime-data-integrity/](http://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmicfrs/our-work/article/crime-data-integrity/reports-rolling-programme-crime-data-integrity/)

## The volume of child sexual abuse images and offenders committing abuse online

Police forces in England and Wales identify significant volumes of CSA material each year. All police forces in England and Wales use the Child Abuse Image Database (CAID) to store captured CSA images. As of January 2019, CAID contained over 13 million CSA images (Jay et al, 2020).

While the majority of websites that host CSA images are accessed via the ‘open web’ (National Crime Agency, 2020), an increasingly prominent role is played by the ‘dark web’,<sup>25</sup> which hosts forums in which CSA images and ideas about abuse are exchanged among people with an interest in sexually abusing children. According to the evidence submitted to the internet investigation carried out by the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, at any one time the dark web hosts just under 15,000 live sites that contain criminal content, including but not limited to CSA (Jay et al, 2020). It is estimated that around 250,000 individuals in the UK use the dark web to access CSA images (NCA, 2020). The UK is thought to be the third-largest consumer in the world of the live-streaming of CSA (Jay et al, 2020), frequently committed against children overseas (NCA, 2020).

In its latest assessment of CSA threat, the National Crime Agency considered that between 550,000 and 850,000 individuals in the UK pose “varying degrees of sexual risk to children” online or offline (NCA, 2021), with the figure skewed towards online offending. It concluded that the overall scale of CSA had continued to increase, and attributed its growth to new internet technologies without an accompanying moderation of the online space (NCA, 2021).

The NCA assessment considered it likely that more individuals with a sexual interest in children access CSA material online than offline, due to low perceived risk, and that individual offenders may be able to groom children more prolifically (NCA, 2021). Both trends are contributing to an overall increase in CSA offending. The assessment highlighted that the planned use of end-to-end encryption<sup>26</sup> across social media platforms would further increase the risk of CSA offending on those platforms, and would decrease the number of referrals from the platforms.

In 2019/20, 7,212 arrests were made in relation to online-facilitated CSA, and 8,329 children were safeguarded (Home Office, 2021).

A survey commissioned by Ofcom found that, in early 2020, 3% of adults and 5% of young people aged 12–15 said they had encountered CSA material online in the previous 12 months (Ofcom, 2020).



The NCA considers that at least 550,000 people in the UK pose a sexual risk to children, with the figure skewed towards online offending



25. Part of the World Wide Web that can be accessed only using special software, such as The Onion Router (Tor), Freenet and I2P. It contains content that cannot be indexed by traditional search engines, and provides anonymity for users and website operators.

26. End-to-end encryption (E2EE) is a method of secure communication that prevents third parties (including platform operators) from accessing data while it is transferred from one system or device to another.

### 4.2.1.1 Trends over time

Until 2018/19, the number of CSA offences recorded by the police had increased significantly each year over a six-year period. The Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2018b:2) identified two reasons for this increase:

“Increases in the number of sexual offences handled by the police in recent years largely reflect improvements in police recording and more victims being willing to report.”

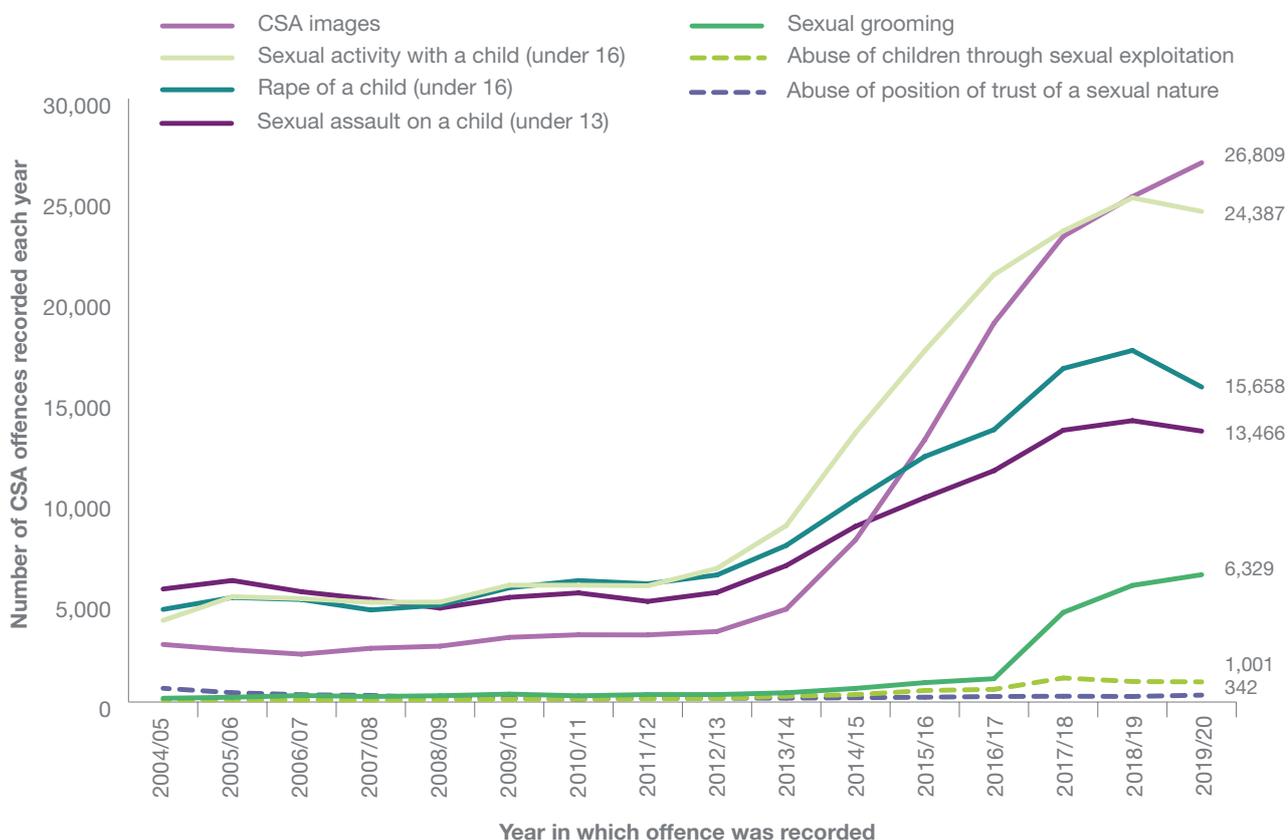
Figure 29 shows a large increase in nearly all CSA offences between 2012/13 and 2018/19. In 2019/20, there was a small decline across most CSA offence types, apart from CSA image and sexual grooming offences which continued to grow. Despite this recent decline, all identifiable CSA offences apart from ‘abuse of position of trust’ have increased substantially overall since 2004: the steepest rises have occurred in sexual grooming offences (a 34-fold increase, likely to be linked to the introduction of the new ‘Communication with a child’ offence under this category), CSA image offences (ninefold) and sexual activity offences (sixfold).

### 4.2.1.2 Local patterns

There is increasing local variation in the number of CSA offences recorded by the police relative to the local population. Figure 30 presents the distribution of police force areas according to the number of CSA offences per 1,000 child population (aged 0–15) in 2013/14, 2016/17 and 2019/20. In 2013/14, over half of police forces recorded two CSA offences for each 1,000 children and all other forces (apart from one outlier) remained in the range of one to four CSA offences per 1,000 children. As the overall number of CSA offences increased significantly in the following years, the local variation became greater, indicating an uneven pace of change in different areas: in 2019/20, the number of CSA offences per 1,000 children ranged from three to 12 in different police force areas.

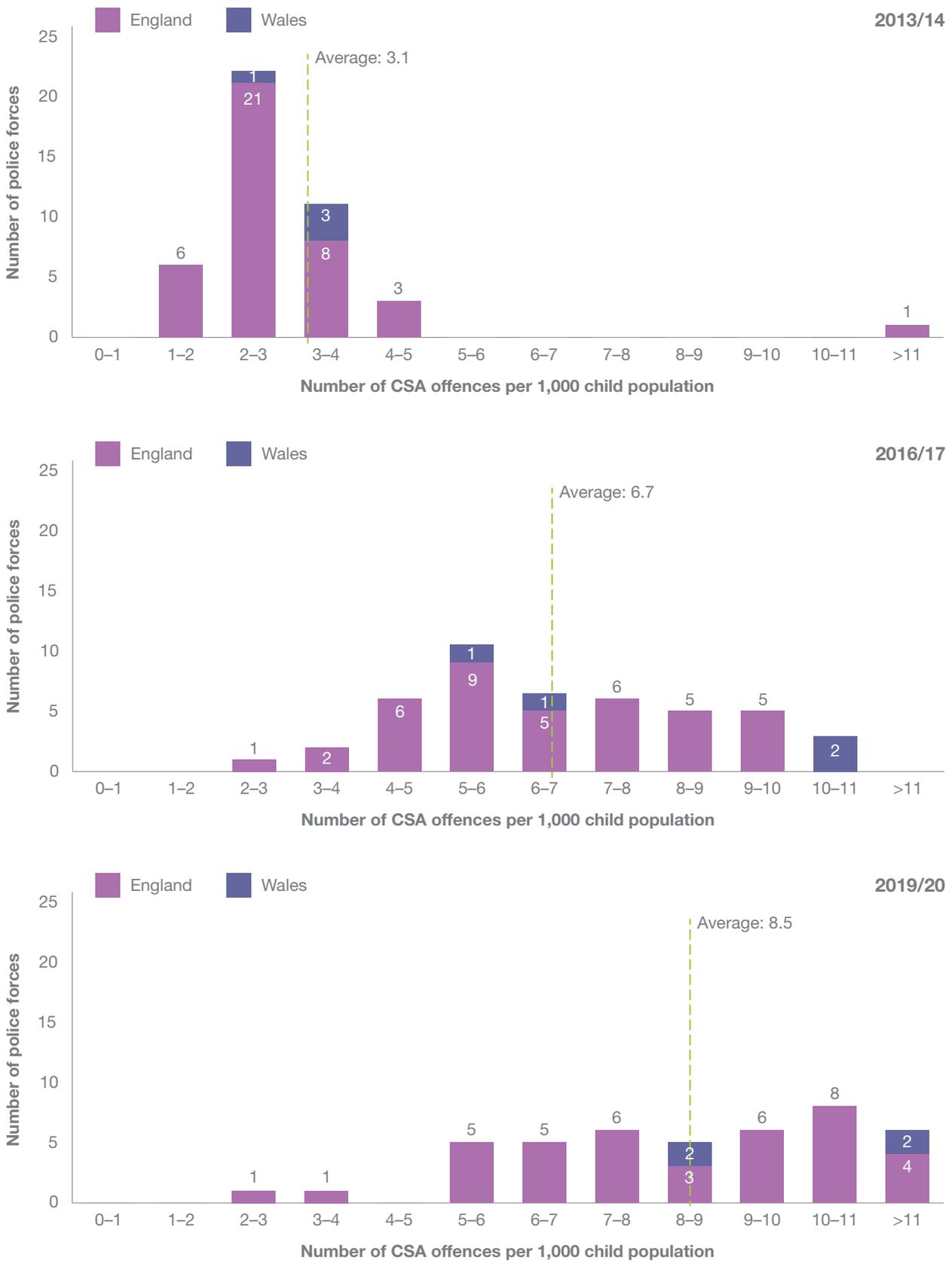
The Office of the Children’s Commissioner has pointed to success in identification, rather than changes in crime rates, as a reason for such variation in offence rates (Berelowitz et al, 2012; OCC, 2015). Local variation merits further research.

Figure 29. Number and type of CSA offences per year, 2004/05–2019/20, England and Wales



Source: Home Office (2020c: ‘Police recorded crime Police Force Area open data tables, year ending March 2013 onwards’; ‘Police recorded crime Police Force Area open data tables, year ending March 2008 to year ending March 2012’; ‘Police recorded crime Police Force Area open data tables, year ending March 2003 to year ending March 2007’). Police recorded crime includes non-recent offences.

**Figure 30. Distribution of the rate of CSA offences recorded per 1,000 child population by police force area, 2013/14, 2016/17 and 2019/20, England and Wales**



Source: Home Office (2020c: 'Police recorded crime Police Force Area open data tables, year ending March 2013 onwards'). Police recorded crime includes non-recent offences. British Transport Police data excluded. Population figures for 0-17-year-olds estimated at 30 June by the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2020d).

### 4.2.1.3 Case attrition

There is considerable attrition as CSA offence investigations proceed from the initial report to charging someone with the offence. As reports of CSA offences have continued to grow in recent years, the number of charges has not increased, leading to a decline in the ‘charge rate’: among CSA offences recorded in 2019/20 and reaching an outcome by October 2020, charges were laid in relation to just 10%<sup>27</sup> of offences in England and 14% in Wales (see Table 4). An offender was cautioned or a community resolution was reached in a further 2% of cases in England and 1% in Wales.

Evidential difficulties were the main barrier to a successful outcome: almost two-thirds of cases reaching an outcome were closed for this reason. An investigation or prosecution was prevented or deemed not to be in the public interest in one-sixth of cases: this means that either the Crown Prosecution Service decided not to prosecute or authorise a formal action, or the police decided to close the investigation because it was not in the public interest or owing to circumstances (e.g. because the suspect or victim was too ill) (Home Office, 2016).

**Table 4. CSA offences by outcome in England and in Wales, 2019/20**

Outcome category	England	Wales
Charged/summonsed	10%	14%
Out-of-court resolution (formal): Cautioned	1%	1%
Out-of-court resolution (informal): Community resolution	1%	0%
Prosecution prevented or deemed not in the public interest: Crown Prosecution Service decision	5%	4%
Further investigation not in the public interest: police decision	11%	11%
Insufficient evidence (suspect identified, victim supports action)	22%	24%
Insufficient evidence (victim does not support action)	25%	26%
Investigation complete – no suspect identified	17%	15%
Responsibility for further investigation transferred to another body	7%	4%
<b>Base number (offences)</b>	<b>75,710</b>	<b>5,343</b>

Source: Home Office (2020c: ‘Crime outcomes in England and Wales open data, April 2019 to March 2020’). Excludes offences recorded by the British Transport Police, which operates across geographical boundaries. Police recorded crime includes non-recent cases.



Reports of CSA offences have continued to grow, but the number resulting in charges has not increased, leading to a decline in the ‘charge rate’



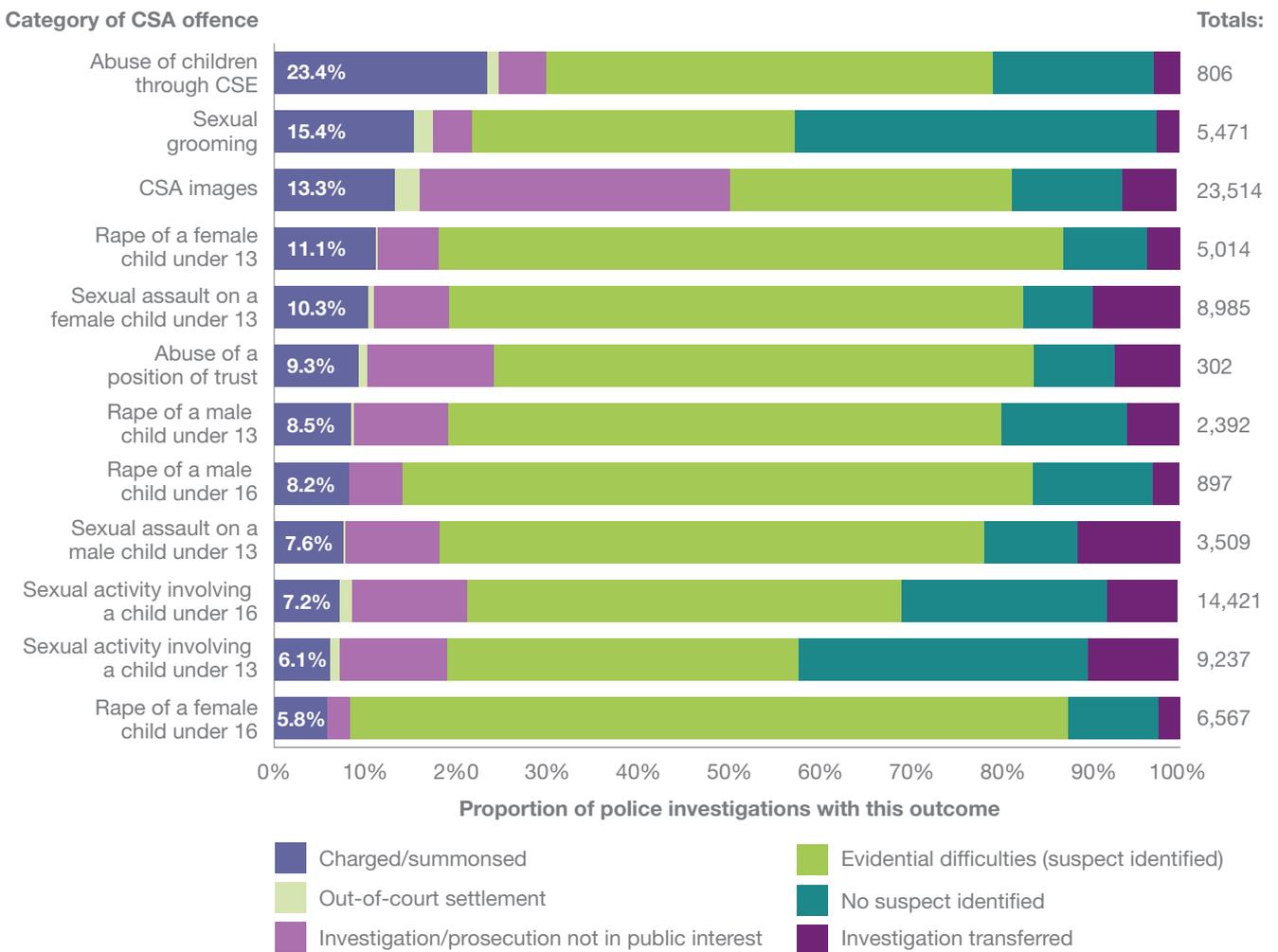
27. Crime outcome data continues to be updated and revised in data releases by the Home Office, and the charge rate for 2019/20 may therefore change in future data releases.

The charge rate varies considerably across the 43 police force areas in England and Wales, ranging from 5% to 16% in England and from 9% to 20% in Wales in 2019/20. This variation merits further research.

There is also considerable variation in charge rates across different categories of offence: Figure 31 shows that investigations relating to ‘abuse of children through CSE’ had the highest charge rate of all identifiable CSA investigations: nearly one-quarter (23%) ended in a charge or summons. Investigations related to ‘rape of female child under 16’ and ‘sexual activity with a child under 13’ had the lowest charge rates, with only 6% of each ending in a charge or summons.

Across the 43 police force areas in 2019/20, the charge rate varied between 5% and 16% in England, and between 9% and 20% in Wales

**Figure 31. Crime outcomes by CSA offence category in England and Wales, 2019/20**



Source: Home Office (2020c: ‘Crime outcomes in England and Wales open data, April 2019 to March 2020’). Police recorded crime includes non-recent cases.

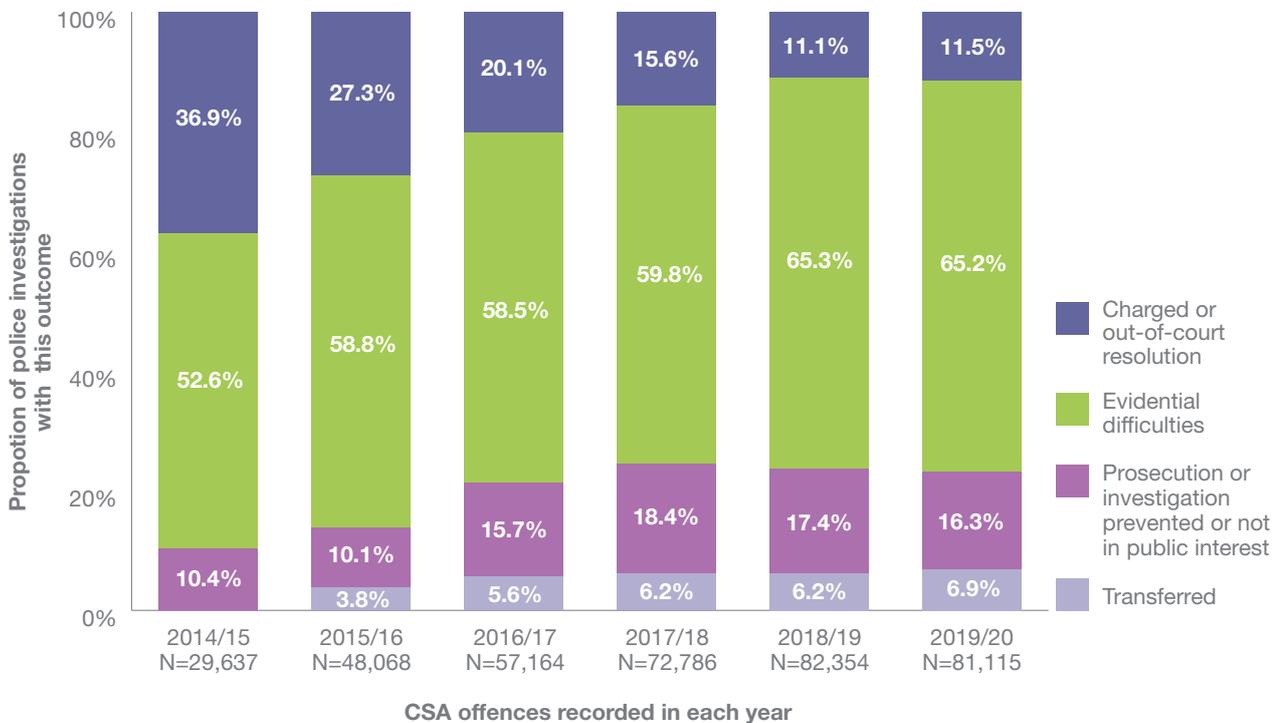
Over the past six years, there has been a sharp decline in the proportion of CSA investigations ending in a charge, a summons or an out-of-court resolution, from 37% in 2014/15 to just 12% in 2019/20. The increase in the proportion of offences closed owing to evidential difficulties accounts for the largest part of this decline: this outcome increased from 53% to 65% of all CSA investigations (see Figure 32). The Office for National Statistics suggests that this decline may be attributable in part to the substantial increase in recorded sexual offences (against both adults and children) – including non-recent cases, which may take longer to investigate before an outcome can be assigned – and the resulting resource pressures on the police: offences have become increasingly complex, increasing the time it takes for the police to consider all the evidence (ONS, 2018b).

**4.2.1.4 Data on suspected victims and perpetrators**

Little information on the profile of suspected CSA victims and perpetrators has been made publicly available from police recorded crime data.

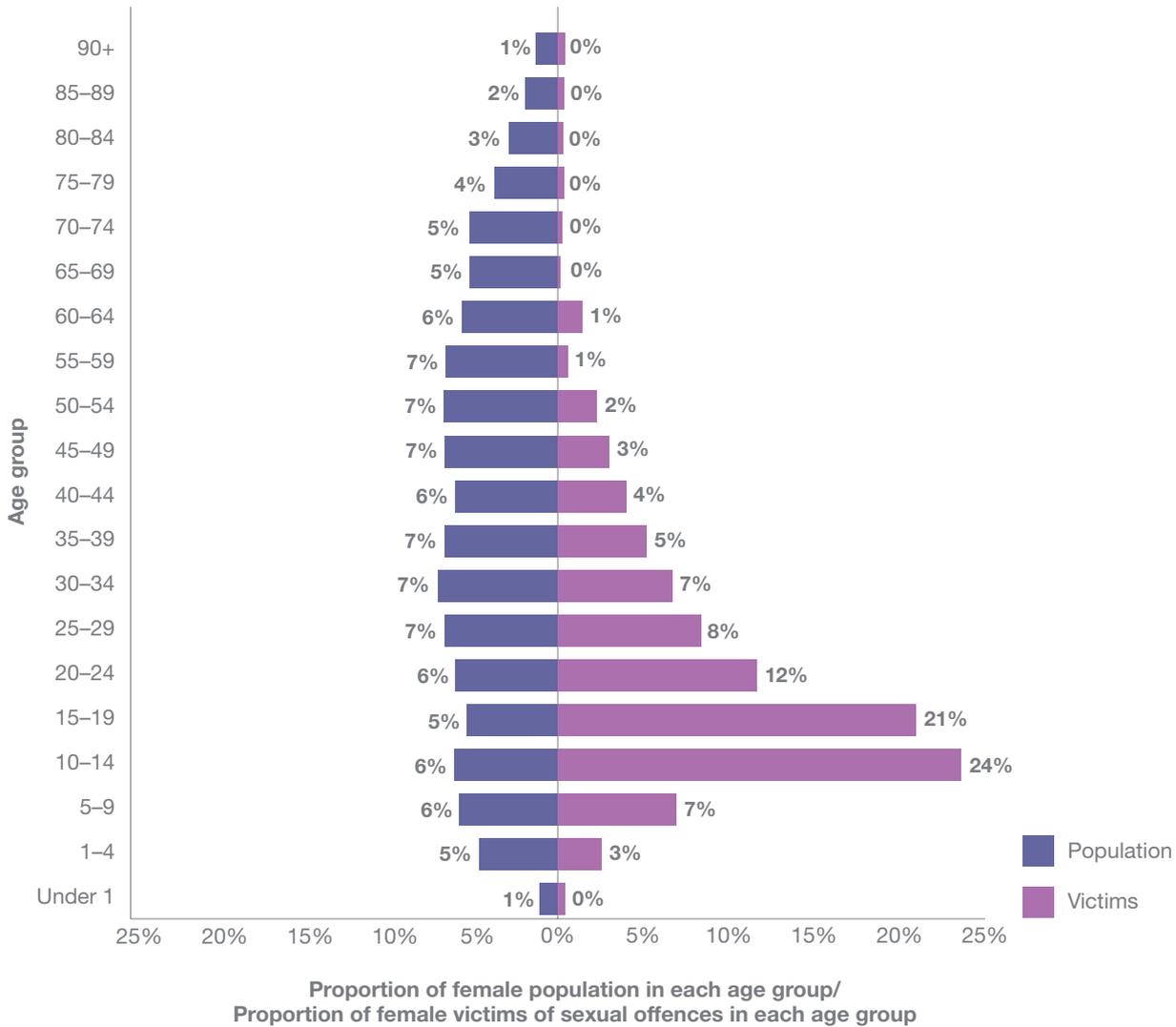
In 2021, however, the Office for National Statistics published data on the gender and age of victims of all sexual offences (adults or children, not including image offences) in the records of 24 police forces, showing that children were disproportionately at risk (ONS, 2021). Among females, girls and young women aged 10–19 were shown to be at the highest risk of becoming victims of sexual offences. Under-18s accounted for 48% of all female victims of sexual offences in 2019/20, while making up an estimated 20% of the female population in England and Wales (see Figure 33). Over the same period, males were at the highest risk of becoming a victim of a sexual offence between the ages of 5 and 14: under-18s accounted for 65% of male victims of sexual offences, while making up only 22% of the male population (see Figure 34).

**Figure 32. Crime outcomes for CSA offences in England and Wales, 2014/15–2019/20**



Source: Home Office (2020c: ‘Crime outcomes in England and Wales open data, April 2014 to March 2015’ to ‘Crime outcomes in England and Wales open data, April 2019 to March 2020’). Police recorded crime includes non-recent cases.

**Figure 33. Distribution of the female population and female victims of police recorded sexual offences in England and Wales in the year ending March 2020, by age**

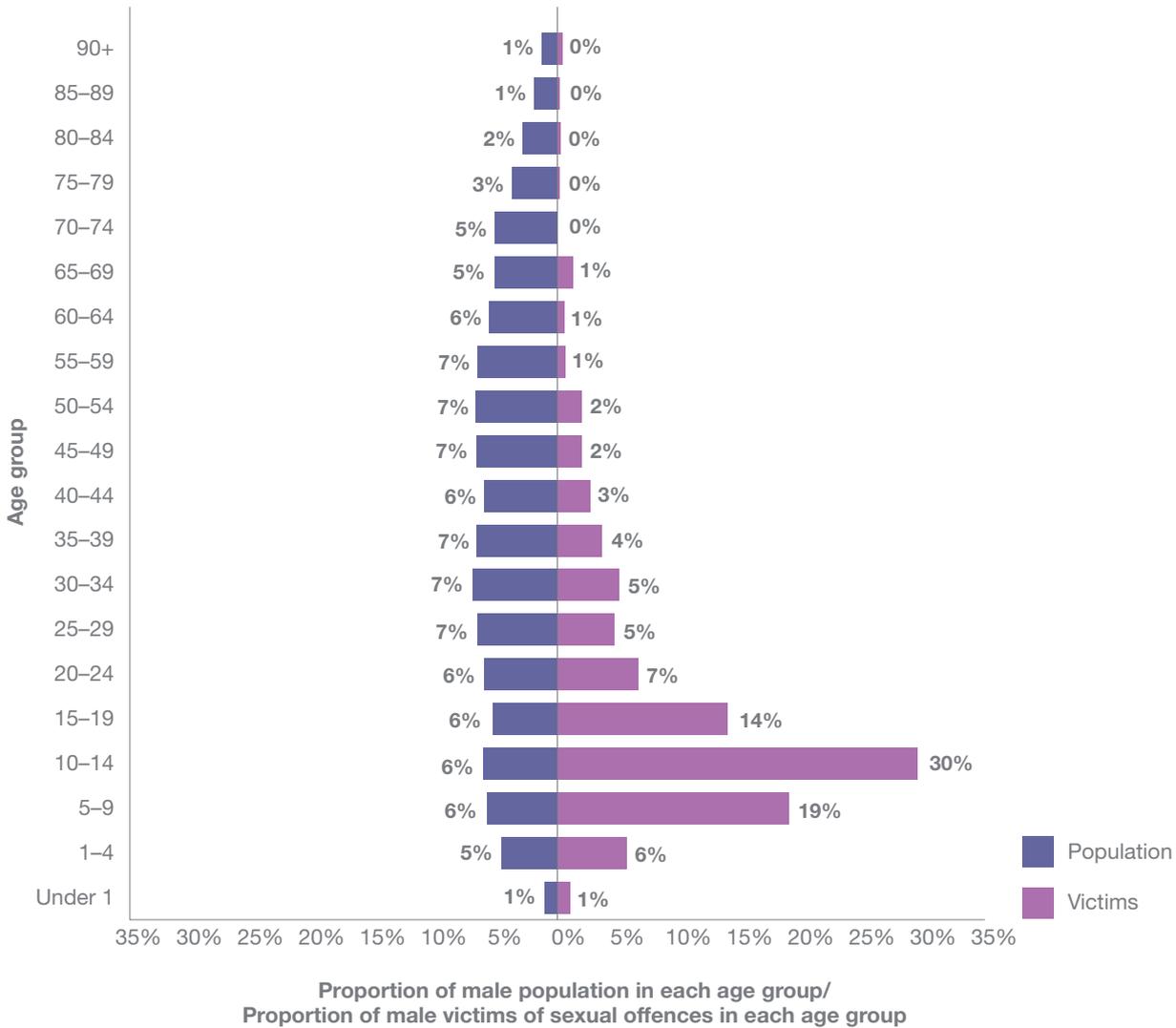


Source: Office for National Statistics (2021: Table 20), based on 24 police forces that provided data to the Home Office Data Hub. Population estimates calculated at mid-year 2019 by the Office for National Statistics.

The Office of the Children’s Commissioner (2015) released data on CSA victims compiled from three data sources – the police, local authorities and the voluntary sector – which identified 49,673 victims over the two years from April 2012 to March 2014. Nearly three-quarters (73%) were female. At the time the abuse was discovered/reported, 70% of female victims were aged 12–17, while most males were under 12: 32% were aged 0–7, and 28% aged 8–11. Data on ethnicity was missing in nearly one-third of cases (30%); where known, the ethnicity of 84% of victims was recorded as White, 6% as Asian, 6% as Black, and 4% as mixed.

Over the same two-year period, the Office of the Children’s Commissioner (2015) identified 34,241 CSA offenders, a third of whom were under 18. No data was published on either the ethnicity or the gender of the suspected perpetrators.

**Figure 34. Distribution of the male population and male victims of police recorded sexual offences in England and Wales, in the year ending March 2020, by age**



Source: Office for National Statistics (2021: Table 21), based on 24 police forces that provided data to the Home Office Data Hub. Population estimates calculated at mid-year 2019 by the Office for National Statistics.

Drawing on published research, a Home Office review of the characteristics of group-based CSE in the community (Home Office, 2020a) concluded that perpetrators of this form of abuse are predominantly male, with some evidence suggesting that those offending in groups tend to be younger than those operating alone. It is difficult to draw firm conclusions about the ethnicity of offenders, as existing research is limited and data collection is poor; however, the available evidence suggests that perpetrators who offend in groups are predominantly from White ethnic backgrounds.



Under-18s accounted for 65% of male victims of sexual offences across England and Wales in 2019/20, but only 22% of the male population



## Improving understanding of agency records on CSA

In 2018, the CSA Centre commissioned a pilot study to explore how information on CSA was recorded in the data systems of the police forces, local authority children's services and third-sector support services in four local authority areas (Christie and Karsna, 2019). The aim of the study was to assess these organisations' readiness to adopt the CSA Centre's CSA data collection template (see page 40).

The study found that the majority of the core data about the victims of CSA, the suspected perpetrators, the context of abuse and the service response was already being collected by all three organisations in each area. However, for this data to be useful, it needs to be recorded in a format that enables it to be extracted easily from data systems and reported. Only data about the demographic profile of the CSA victims was recorded in a reportable format by all three types of organisation; most of the remainder was stored in narrative text fields and used mainly for planning and decision-making about individual cases rather than for strategic planning and commissioning. Only minor differences were found between the three types of organisation in terms of their reporting capabilities or the types of data they collected.

The study therefore concluded that the organisations would be able to improve their ability to use their data if they made changes in how they record data rather than changing the information they collect. It suggested that significant improvements could be made without placing additional burdens on practitioners, if provisions were made in data systems for this already routinely collected information to be entered as distinct categories in addition to free-text notes.

The study also raised concerns about the accuracy of data recorded in the pilot areas: in particular, it highlighted that records were often not updated during case work, and that referrals were vague rather than specific about concerns.

Interviewees from the four pilot areas described differences in how general child protection services and specialist CSE services recorded data. They suggested that CSE data was kept more accurately and in more detail than the CSA data held in general child protection data systems. CSE was also said to be more visible in referral forms, and in data systems through the use of a CSE 'flag'.

To access the full report, please visit:

[www.csacentre.org.uk/csa-centre-prodv2/assets/File/Data%20collection%20template%20pilot%20-%20English.pdf](http://www.csacentre.org.uk/csa-centre-prodv2/assets/File/Data%20collection%20template%20pilot%20-%20English.pdf)

### 4.2.2 Crown Prosecution Service data

The Crown Prosecution Service monitors CSA prosecutions and convictions in England and Wales. The data it publishes is collected for the management of its prosecutions and does not constitute official statistics as defined in the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007.<sup>28</sup> Data on CSA is published by defendant, and it is not possible to distinguish between current and non-recent cases. All cases flagged as 'child abuse' and relating to sexual offences are counted.

Data since 2007/08 (see Figure 35) shows that the number of completed prosecutions of CSA offences peaked in 2016/17, when 7,196 defendants were prosecuted. Prosecutions have since fallen by more than one-third, to 4,226 in 2019/20. This fall has coincided with an increase in the proportion of successful prosecutions, however, as the conviction rate has increased from 75% to 83% during the same period.<sup>29</sup> The conviction rate is lower for contested cases: out of 1,094 contested trials relating to CSA, two-thirds (65%, n=708) were convicted (Crown Prosecution Service, 2020: Table AR9).

28. The official statistics relating to crime and policing are maintained by the Home Office, and the official statistics relating to sentencing, criminal court proceedings, offenders brought to justice, the courts and the judiciary are maintained by the Ministry of Justice.

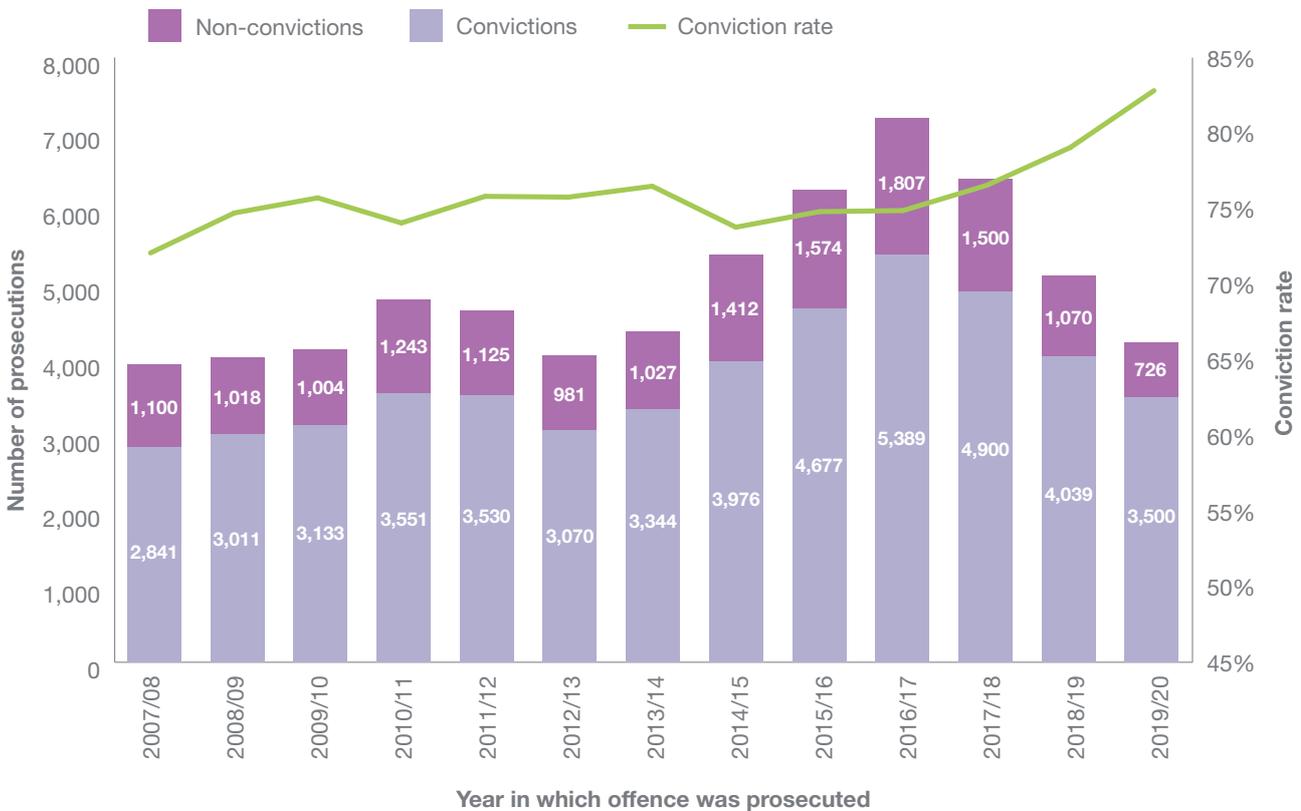
29. It is important to recognise that the conviction rate is calculated by dividing the number of defendants found guilty by the number of defendants *charged* with a CSA offence, which make up a very small proportion of all CSA offences reported to the police (10% in England and 14% in Wales in 2019/20) – see section 4.2.1.3.

There is some variation in the conviction rates recorded by the 14 regional divisions of the Crown Prosecution Service, ranging from 74% to 89%; similar variation (between 73% and 94%) is also visible between the 43 police force areas served by these divisions.

Profile information was available about the 4,226 defendants prosecuted for CSA offences, but not about the complainants in these prosecutions. Of the defendants, 98% were male. Only a small number (5%) were aged under 18, or were young adults aged 19–24 (13%); close to two-thirds (62%) were aged 25–59, and one-fifth (19%) were aged 60 or over. Given that the Office of the Children’s Commissioner (2015) found that one-third of CSA offences recorded by the police involved suspected perpetrators aged under 18 (see section 4.2.1.4), under-18s appear much less likely than adults to be prosecuted.

The conviction rate rose to 83% in 2019/20 – but where CSA-related cases were contested, only 65% of trials resulted in a conviction

**Figure 35. Defendants prosecuted for sexual offences flagged as ‘child abuse’, by prosecution outcome, 2007/08 –2019/20, England and Wales**



Source: Crown Prosecution Service (2020: Table AR8); Crown Prosecution Service (2019: Tables ‘Child sexual offences: completed prosecutions by outcome 2009–2019’ and ‘CPS child abuse sexual offence prosecutions 2007–2014’). Data includes outcomes completed by the 14 regional divisions and the Central Specialist Casework Teams. Both recent and non-recent CSA cases are included in the prosecution data.

#### 4.2.3 Data from the Ministry of Justice

The Ministry of Justice collates data on court proceedings via extracts from court database administrative systems. It publishes information on defendants prosecuted, cautioned, convicted and sentenced, by the type of offence; this data is designated as National Statistics. The following considerations apply to the data:

- ▶ For each defendant, data is recorded about the principal offence for which they are dealt with: where a defendant is proceeded against for multiple offences, only the principal offence is counted (Ministry of Justice, 2020).
- ▶ The records are based on the ‘final’ offence/conviction: if a defendant is proceeded against for a more serious offence but convicted of a lesser offence, only the lesser one is counted (ONS, 2018b).
- ▶ When a defendant is found guilty of two or more offences, data is recorded on the offence for which the heaviest penalty is imposed (Ministry of Justice, 2020).
- ▶ Owing to data recording issues, figures for females prosecuted for ‘sexual activity with a child’ offences were not included in the Court Proceedings Database prior to 2015 (Ministry of Justice, 2020).

**Table 5. Defendants cautioned, prosecuted and convicted, by CSA offence category, England and Wales, 2019**

Offence category	Cautions issued	Proceeded against	Convicted
Rape of a female child under 13	7	232	127
Rape of a male child under 13	1	75	34
Rape of a female child under 16	3	417	175
Rape of a male child under 16	0	53	21
Sexual assault of a female child under 13	30	853	324
Sexual assault of a male child under 13	2	76	52
Sexual activity involving a child under 13	39	489	312
Sexual activity involving a child under 16	52	832	640
Familial sexual offences with a child family member aged under 13	1	22	9
Familial sexual offences with a child family member aged 13–17	2	48	58
Child abuse through prostitution and pornography	3	207	140
Abuse of position of trust of a sexual nature	7	14	10
Taking, permitting to be taken or making, distributing or publishing indecent photographs or pseudo photographs of children	108	2,347	2,211
Possession of indecent photograph of a child	71	240	228
Possession of prohibited images of children	11	32	40
Sexual grooming	83	432	449
Possession of a paedophile manual	0	0	3
Gross indecency with children (historical offence)	2	18	37
<b>Total</b>	<b>422</b>	<b>6,387</b>	<b>4,870</b>

Source: Ministry of Justice (2020). Includes defendants proceeded against for non-recent offences.

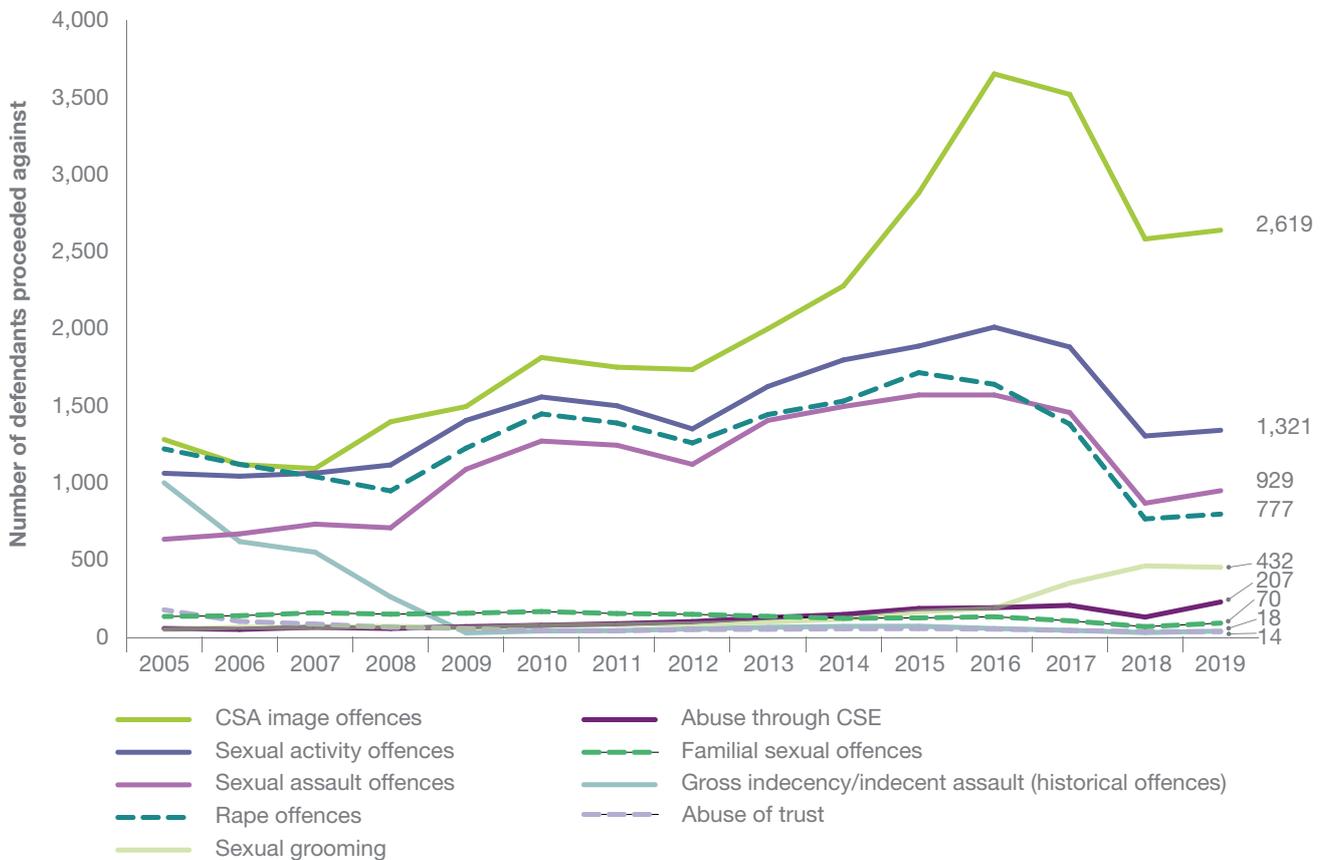
- As in the police data (see section 4.2.1), not all CSA offences are identifiable in the publicly available data; this is because some offences are recorded under other, mainly adult-related offence categories (e.g. rape of a male/female over 16, exposure or voyeurism). It is not possible to estimate how many offences are excluded from the data for this reason. Unlike the police, the Ministry of Justice releases CSA data related to incest offences.
- While the police record non-recent CSA offences according to current legislation, 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’, a historical offence.

- Data is recorded according to calendar years (January to December): this is different from both the police and local authority data, which is presented in financial years (April to March).

Table 5 shows that 6,387 defendants were proceeded against for identifiable CSA offences in 2019, and 4,870 were convicted.

A ‘conviction ratio’ can be calculated by dividing the number of convictions by the number of prosecutions in a given year. This data is indicative, as cases are not actually tracked through to outcome. In 2020, the overall conviction ratio for CSA-related prosecutions was 76%, below the ‘conviction rate’ level recorded by the Crown Prosecution Service (see section 4.2.2); this is likely to be the result of differences in how the Ministry of Justice and the Crown Prosecution Service calculate the conviction rate/ratio.

**Figure 36. Number of defendants proceeded against for child sexual offences, by offence group, 2005–2019, England and Wales**



Source: Ministry of Justice (2020; 2016). Figures presented per calendar year to December. Includes defendants proceeded against for non-recent offences.

**4.2.3.1 Trends over time**

Figure 36 presents the number of defendants proceeded against for different categories of CSA offence between 2005 and 2019. It shows that, after a substantial rise in prosecutions of most CSA offences between 2012 and 2016, the numbers fell sharply in 2017 and in 2018; prosecutions of sexual grooming offences continued to increase, however (likely to be linked to the introduction of the new ‘Communication with a child’ offence within this group in 2017; see also section 4.2.1.1). In 2019 the numbers across most offences increased again slightly (by 5% overall).

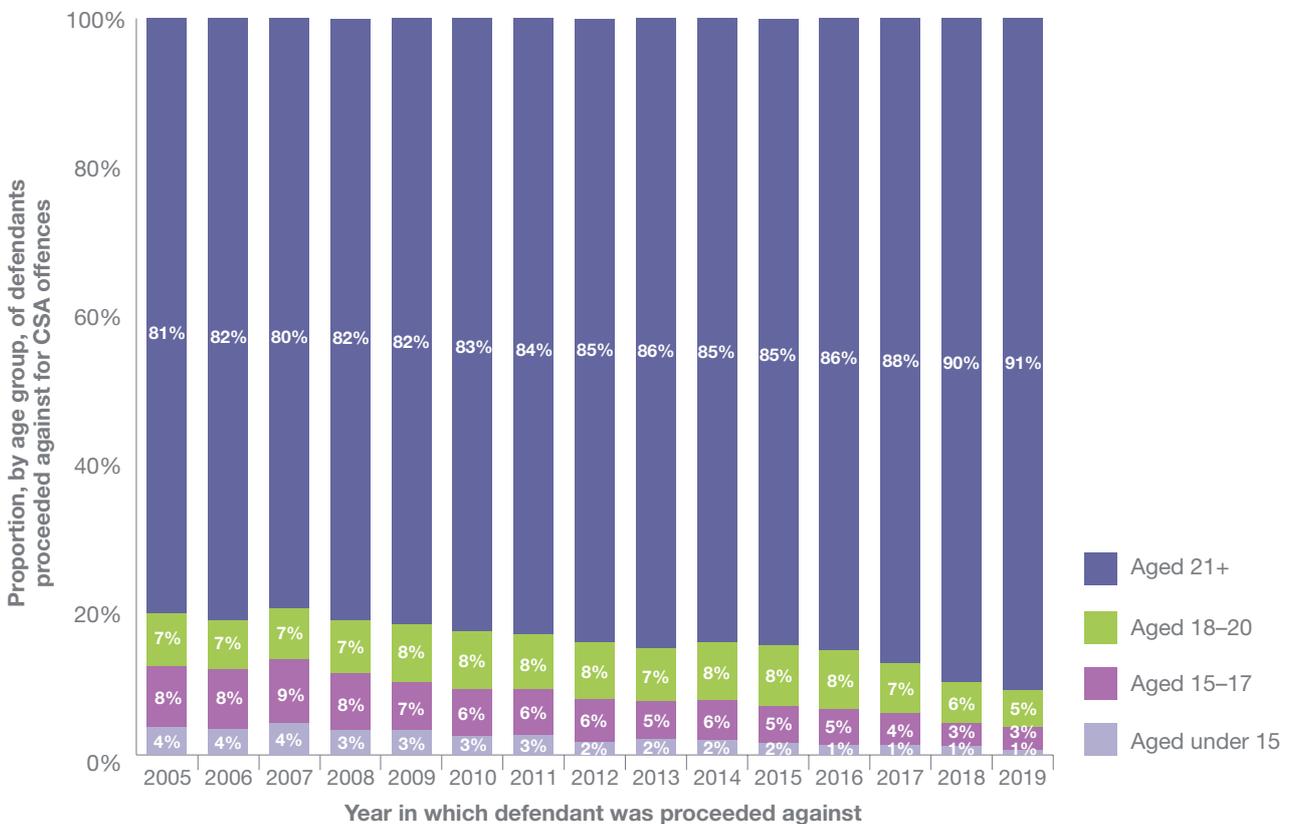
The court system is currently the only public data source to separate CSA offences committed by ‘juveniles’ (aged under 18) from those committed by adults. Its data shows that under-18s account for a falling proportion of defendants, from 12% in 2005 to 4% in 2020 (see Figure 37). One-fifth (21%) of defendants in 2020 were aged 30–39, with another quarter (24%) aged 40–59.

The most common CSA offences for which under-18s were proceeded against in 2020 were those related to rape of a female child (75, 31%) or sexual assault of a female child (42, 17%).

Only 1% (n=86) of all defendants proceeded against for CSA offences in 2020 were female, and their share has not exceeded 2% in any year since records began in 2005. The majority of female defendants were proceeded against for the offence of sexual activity with a child under 13 (21, 24%) or under 16 (24, 28%).

One-fifth of CSA offence defendants in 2020 were aged 30–39, and a quarter were in the 40–59 age group; only 4% were aged under 18

**Figure 37. Defendants proceeded against for CSA offences, by age group, 2005–2019, England and Wales**



Source: Ministry of Justice (2020; 2016). Figures presented per calendar year to December. Includes defendants proceeded against for non-recent offences. Excludes defendants whose age was not recorded.

In 2020, the broad ethnic background of only 70% (4,480) of CSA offence defendants was recorded in the court data systems. Where ethnicity was recorded, the vast majority (92%, n=4,107) of defendants were White, 4% (n=179) were Asian, 2% (n=101) were Black, 1% (n=53) were from mixed ethnic backgrounds, and 1% (n=40) had 'other' backgrounds. Compared to the latest available population data (from the 2011 Census), defendants from White ethnic backgrounds were over-represented and defendants from all other ethnic backgrounds were under-represented (see Figure 38).

In 2019, two-fifths (39%, 1,883) of defendants found guilty received an immediate custodial sentence, over one-quarter (28%, 1,385) received a suspended sentence, and one-fifth (22%, 1,055) a community sentence. The vast majority of convicted under-18s (85%, 138) received a community sentence, while only 10% (17) received an immediate custodial sentence.

Defendants convicted of CSA image offences and sexual grooming offences were the least likely to receive an immediate custodial sentence: 19% (459) and 30% (136) respectively did so. Around two-thirds of defendants convicted of these offences received either a suspended or a community sentence. Contact offences had significantly higher rates of immediate custodial sentences: 58% (551) of those convicted of sexual activity offences, 61% (85) of abuse through 'prostitution and pornography', 69% (260) of sexual assault offences, 83% (295) of rape offences and 88% (59) of familial sexual offences were immediately sentenced to custody (see Figure 39).

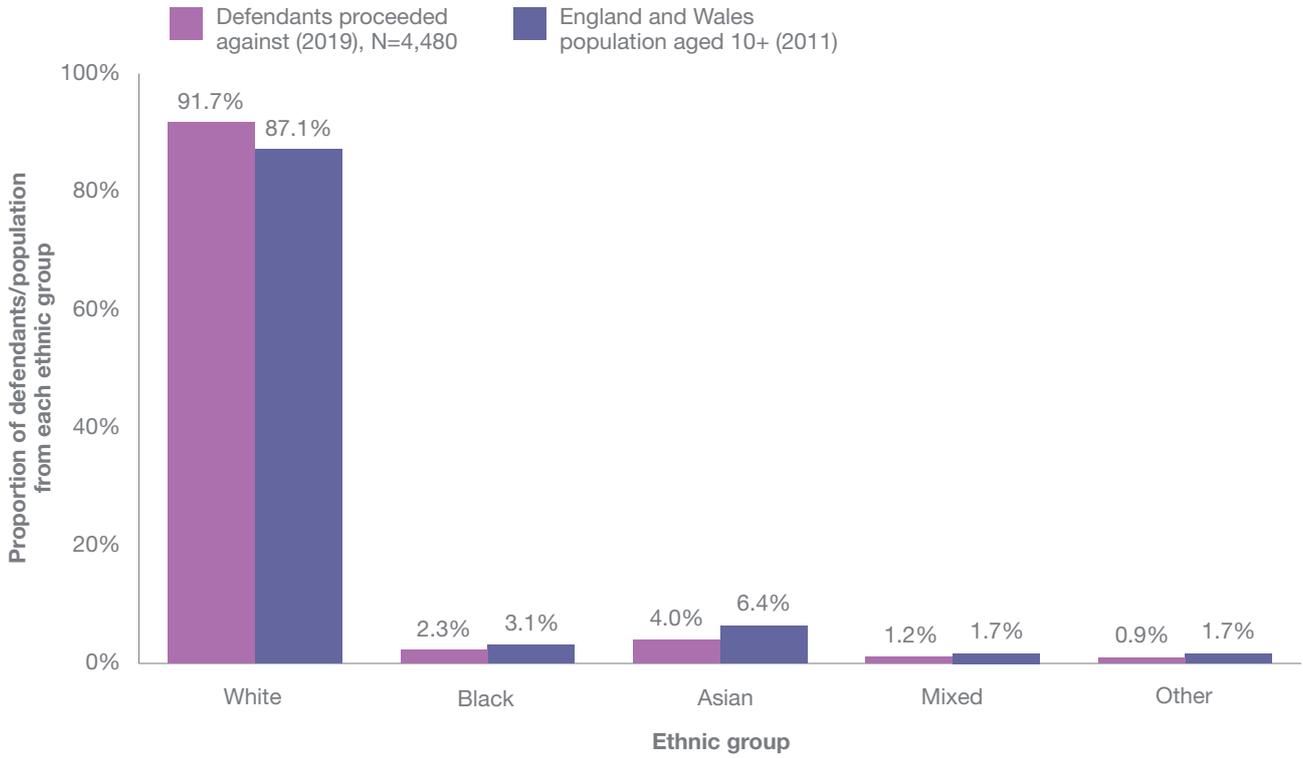
#### 4.2.4 Gaps and challenges

Criminal justice data provides a fragmented but consistent picture of the scale of CSA cases proceeding through the system: after years of increasing volumes in the CSA offences recorded and defendants prosecuted, these numbers had begun to fall well before the impact of COVID-19 on the operations of criminal justice agencies – which is likely to exacerbate the decline. From the publicly available data, it is not possible to estimate the extent to which this reflects the changing patterns of reports of non-recent versus current CSA offences.

Against the backdrop of large increases in the volume of offences recorded, there has been a concerning fall in the charge rate, with only one in eight police investigations ending in a charge or summons or an out-of-court resolution in the latest year. As the number of prosecutions has fallen, the conviction rates have risen, suggesting that the threshold for prosecution may have changed. Tracking cases and attrition from the first report to police through to conviction is hampered by differences in counting rules – the police record offences, while the Crown Prosecution Service and the Ministry of Justice count defendants – and in data capture points (based on the calendar year or the financial year). The criminal justice agencies' IT systems lack universal unique reference numbers, which would enable case progress to be tracked, although attempts are being made to achieve this (HM Courts & Tribunals Service, 2019).

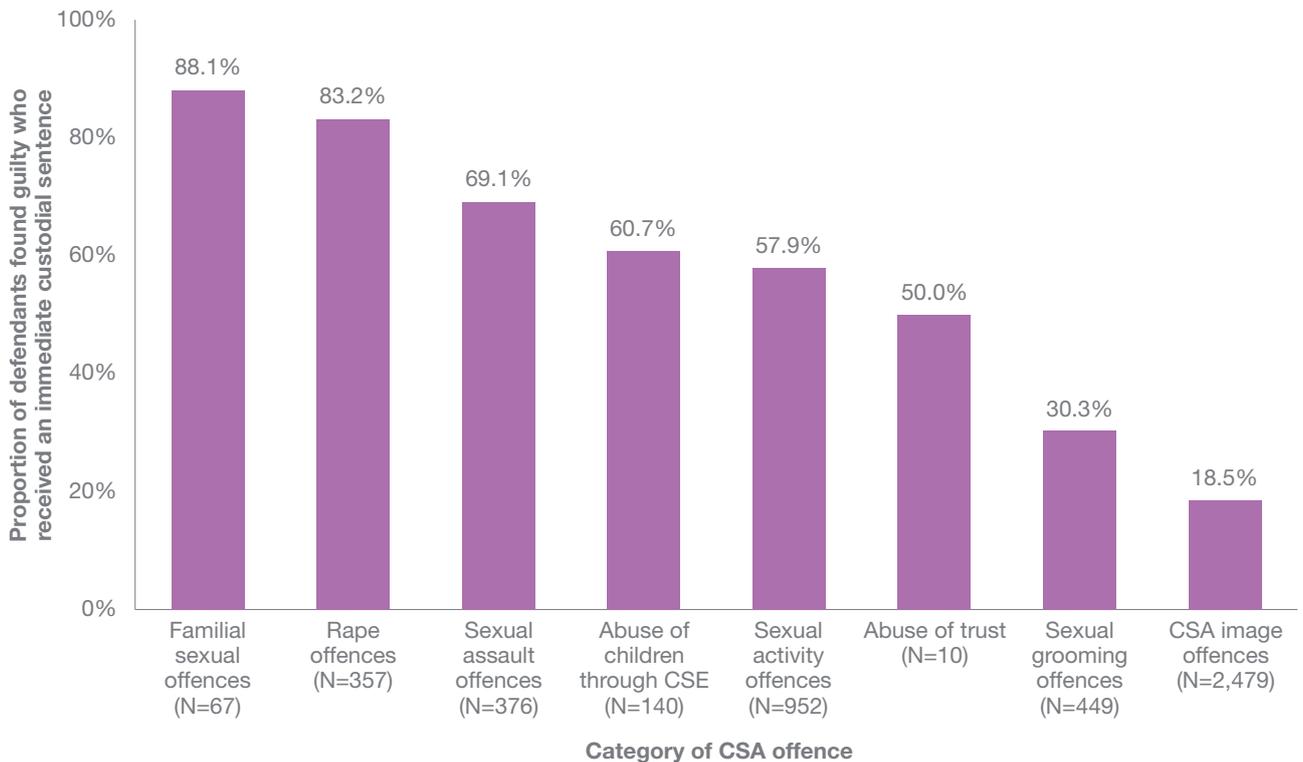
Some data on the characteristics of suspected perpetrators is publicly available from the Crown Prosecution Service and the courts data systems reported by the Ministry of Justice. Both show that a small and decreasing number of CSA prosecutions involve defendants aged under 18. The vast majority of defendants are male, and most are from White ethnic backgrounds according to the basic categories recorded within the criminal justice data. No data is regularly released on the number of victims and complainants in the criminal justice system, the characteristics of these individuals, or the relationship between them and the perpetrator of the abuse.

**Figure 38. Proportion of defendants proceeded against for CSA offences and the population, by broad ethnic group, 2019, England and Wales**



Source: Ministry of Justice (2020). Excludes defendants whose ethnicity was not recorded. Population figures are taken from the 2011 Census (Office for National Statistics, 2018c).

**Figure 39. Proportion of defendants found guilty of CSA offences who received an immediate custodial sentence, 2019, England and Wales**



Source: Ministry of Justice (2020).

### 4.3 Health agencies

Health agencies in England and Wales do not publish any data relating to CSA, although some data is regularly collected by NHS England, NHS Digital (the national information and technology partner to the health and care system) and Public Health England – see below. In Wales, this review did not uncover any centrally collected data on CSA from health agencies.

Following data requests to NHS England and Public Health England, and to individual sexual assault referral centres (SARCs) in Wales, we received previously unpublished data on:

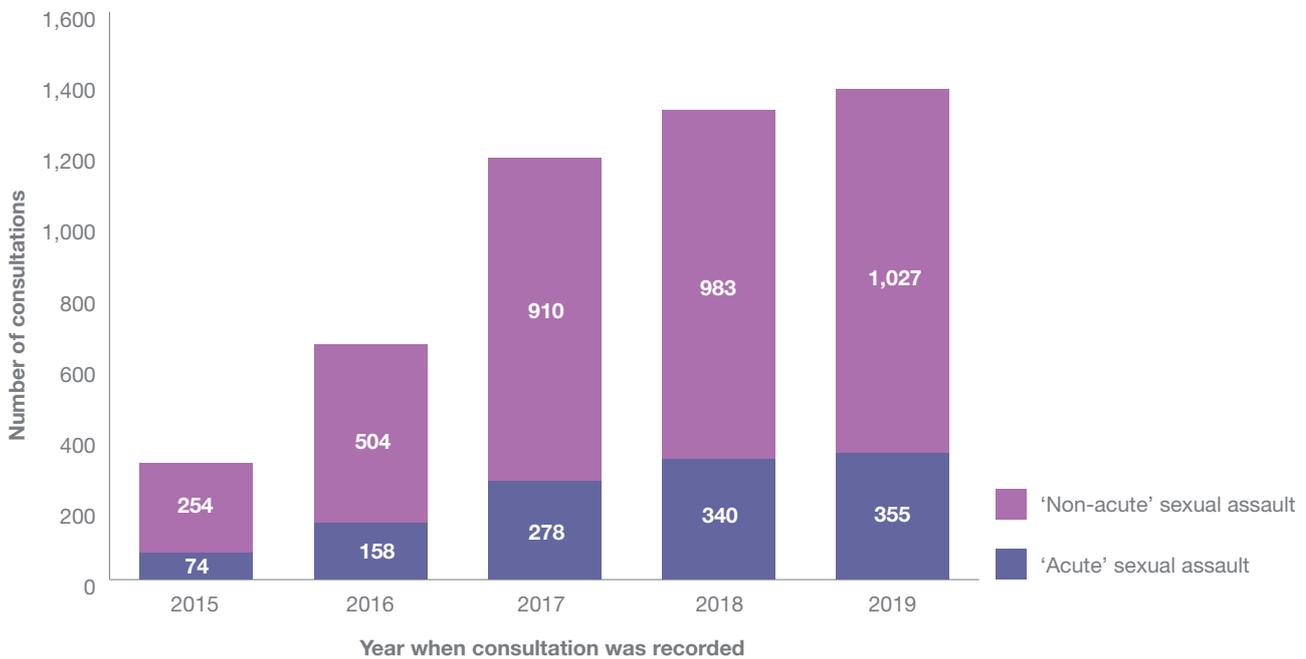
- ▶ the number of visits to sexual health clinics by under-18s in England where evidence of ‘acute’ or ‘non-acute’ sexual assault was observed
- ▶ the number of under-18s visiting SARCs in England and Wales.<sup>30</sup>

This data includes information about the age, gender and ethnicity of the children visiting these locations.

#### 4.3.1 Data on sexual assaults of under-18s recorded during sexual health clinic consultations

Public Health England manages a ‘Genito-urinary medicine clinic activity dataset’ (GUMCAD), which provides information on consultations taking place in sexual health clinics in England. The dataset includes information on consultations that found evidence of ‘acute’ or ‘non-acute’ sexual assaults<sup>31</sup> of children and young people (Public Health England, 2020). This data has been collected since 2015, and is presented by calendar year (January to December) rather than financial year (April to March).

**Figure 40. Number of sexual health clinic consultations by under-18s in which evidence of acute or non-acute sexual assault was found, 2015–2019, England**



Data source: Public Health England (2021).

30. SARCs provide forensic medical examinations in a specialised space. A forensic medical examination involves a holistic assessment of a child’s health and wellbeing after CSA has been disclosed or is suspected by other agencies. In addition to forensic medical examinations, some SARCs provide mental health support and independent sexual violence adviser (ISVA) services on site; others signpost to such services.

31. An ‘acute’ sexual assault is defined as having taken place within seven days of the consultation; a ‘non-acute’ sexual assault is defined as having taken place more than seven days prior to the consultation (Public Health England, 2020).

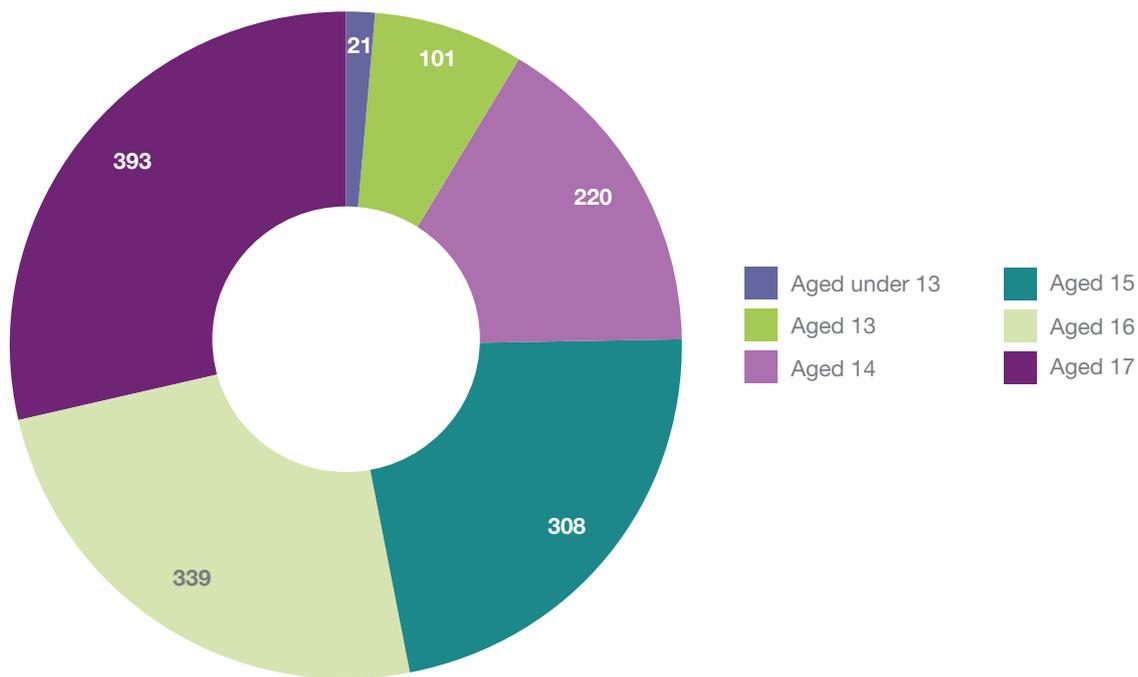
Figure 40 shows a fourfold increase in the number of consultations at which evidence of ‘acute’ or ‘non-acute’ sexual assault of a child under 18 was recorded, from the very low number of 329 consultations in 2015 to 1,382 in 2019. This rise, particularly between 2015 and 2017, is likely to be a reflection of clinic practitioners’ increased awareness of these new data codes in GUMCAD.

In the 1,364 GUMCAD records from 2019 in which gender was recorded, the vast majority (93%, 1,271) of under-18s attending sexual health clinic consultations in relation to sexual assaults were female. The proportion of females recorded in the GUMCAD dataset is higher than in any other agency dataset presented in this report (see sections 4.1.2 and 4.2.1.4).

In three-quarters of consultations relating to sexual assaults of under-18s, the attendees were aged 15–17 (see Figure 41). Combined with the information about gender above, it appears that the majority of recorded concerns of sexual assault recorded by sexual health clinics in 2019 related to females aged 15–17.

Data on the ethnicity of young people attending consultations was captured in 1,276 records in 2019, showing that 82% of these young people were from White ethnic backgrounds. The proportion of young people from White backgrounds is higher in GUMCAD than in other agency datasets (see sections 4.1.2 and 4.2.1.4), suggesting that sexual health clinics are less likely to reach young people from minority ethnic backgrounds, and particularly Asian backgrounds.<sup>32</sup>

**Figure 41. Age of children and young people attending sexual health clinic consultations in which evidence of acute or non-acute sexual assault was found, 2019, England**



Data source: Public Health England (2021). N=1,382.

32. Among consultations in which sexual assault of under-18s was recorded, only 4% involved young people from Asian ethnic backgrounds. In comparison, 9% of children made the subject of a child protection plan in England under the primary category of sexual abuse were Asian; and 6% of CSA victims were Asian in a dataset compiled by the Office of the Children’s Commissioner (2015) from local authority, police and voluntary-sector records.

**4.3.2 Data on under-18s receiving support from sexual assault referral centres**

NHS England collects quarterly data from all 47 SARC in England through the Sexual Assault Referral Centre Indicators of Performance (SARCIP) data collection framework. The SARCIP dataset contains information on children and young people aged under 18 who were in contact with a SARC for a medical examination, or for a consultation where a medical examination was not needed.

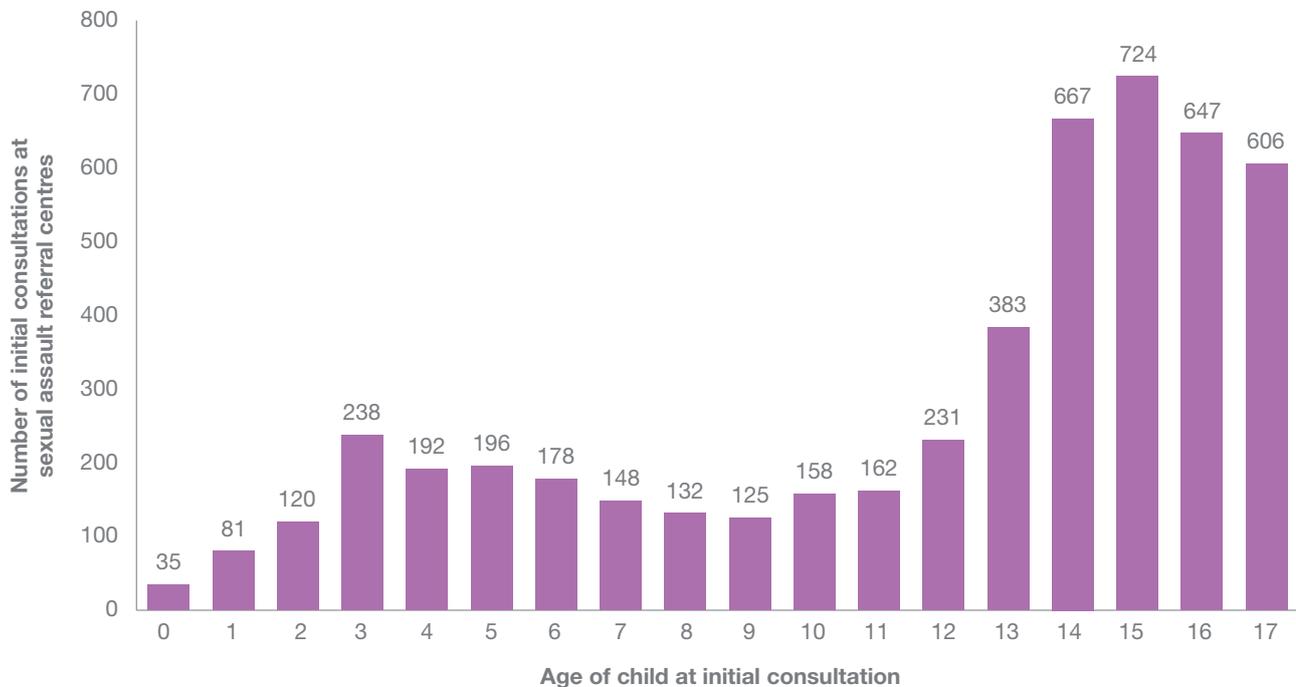
In 2019/20, 6,051 initial contacts with under-18s were recorded on SARCIP: just under half (46%, 2,768) of these involved a medical examination, contact was made in order to receive other forms of support in one-third (34%, 2,043) of cases, and one in five contacts (20%, 1,240) involved initial consultations delivered remotely (NHS England, 2021).<sup>33</sup>

In addition, Wales has eight SARCs. No data on these is collected centrally, but data provided to the CSA Centre by each SARC shows that a total of 620 under-18s made contact with Wales’s SARCs in 2019/20.

Demographic details (age, gender and ethnicity) of children and young people seen face to face in England’s SARCs during 2019/20 are available (NHS England, 2020), while Wales’s eight SARCs provided data on the gender of SARC attendees aged under 18 over the same period:

In England during 2019/20, 85% of children and young people making initial contact with a SARC were female – in Wales, the figure was 88%

**Figure 42. Number of under-18s making initial contact with SARCs, by age, 2019/20, England**

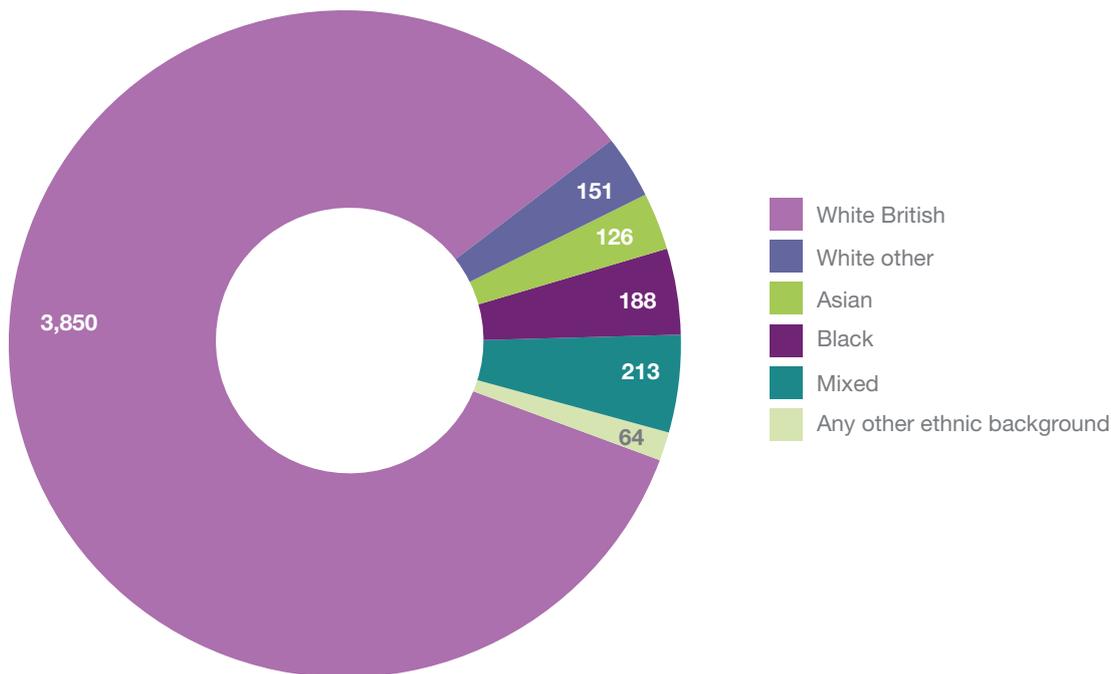


Data source: NHS England (2021).

33. Remotely delivered consultations could involve telephone calls or other modes of communication (as a result of COVID-19 or for other reasons). This category excluded contact involving only signposting or basic advice (NHS England, 2020). Remotely delivered consultations formed a higher proportion of initial contacts (20%) in 2019/20 than in the previous year (14%), possibly as a result of COVID-19 restrictions imposed in March 2020.

- ▶ In England, 85% (4,277) of children and young people whose first contacts with a SARC were recorded on SARCIP were female. In Wales, the proportion was even higher at 88% (542). This suggests that SARCs, like sexual health clinics, reach a lower proportion of males than are reached by local authorities or police forces (see sections 4.1.2 and 4.2.1.4).
- ▶ The ages of children and young people at the time of their initial contact with a SARC in England had a bimodal distribution, with a small peak in the 3–5 age range and a much higher peak between the ages of 14 and 16 (see Figure 42). Initial consultations with young people aged 14–17 accounted for more than half (53%, 2,644) of all initial consultations with under-18s in that year.
- ▶ Figure 43 shows the ethnic background, where recorded, of under-18s making initial contact with SARCs in England. This information was missing in 8% (405) of records. Among those whose ethnicity was recorded, 84% (3,850) were White British and 3% from White non-British backgrounds. The proportion of children from other ethnic backgrounds, at 13% in total, is lower in SARCIP than in any other dataset presented in this report (see sections 4.1.2, 4.2.1.4 and 4.3.1). Children and young people from Asian backgrounds (3%, 126) were particularly under-represented among SARC attendees, compared to other datasets (6%–9%) and the fact that they comprise 12% of England’s state school population (Department for Education, 2020b).

**Figure 43. Number of under-18s making initial contact with SARCs, by ethnic background, 2019/20, England**



Data source: NHS England (2021). Excludes children whose ethnicity was ‘not stated’. NHS England records more detailed information on ethnicity than is presented here; ethnic backgrounds have been grouped in order to facilitate comparison with ethnicity data collected and published by other agencies.

For SARCs in England, SARCIP also contains information on the forms of abuse reported/suspected and the sources of referrals in 2019/20 (NHS England, 2020):

- ▶ There were 3,833 cases in which the nature of the sexual assault that prompted the child or young person's initial contact with a SARC was recorded. Of these, more than two-thirds (68%, 2,617) related to rape.
- ▶ SARCIP is the only central data system to record data on the source of referrals to SARCs. Among the 5,026 cases where this information was recorded, nearly two-thirds (63%, 3,173) of initial contacts with under 18s were made following a referral from the police, and one in five (21%, 1,031) came from local authority children's services. Low levels of referrals from other sources were recorded: health services accounted for 2% (116) of referrals, and education providers and the voluntary sector services for 1% each (41 and 60 respectively). Self-referrals or referrals from family and friends accounted for 6% (281) of the total.

#### 4.3.3 Other health datasets

At least two other health datasets collect (currently unpublished) information on CSA in England:

- ▶ The Community Services Dataset (previously the Children and Young People's Health Services Dataset) held by NHS Digital collects data monthly from all publicly funded community services (e.g. acute and mental health trusts, integrated care providers or local authorities providing district nursing, school nursing and health visiting services, etc). The dataset is large and contains some fields that relate to CSA: whether the child is 'an alleged victim of sexual assault', at risk of or a suspected victim of sexual abuse, or a suspected victim of sexual grooming and at risk of CSE, for example. This data is designated as experimental and these concerns are currently recorded at very low levels.
- ▶ An annual Sexual and Reproductive Health Activity Dataset (SRHAD) collected by NHS England contains some fields on 'acute' and 'non-acute' sexual assault, and complements the GUMCAD dataset (Public Health England, 2018).

In Wales, some CSA data is included in the data collected by the Violence Prevention Unit, which brings together the criminal justice and public health agencies plus third-sector support organisations. The CSA data collected is based on police records. There is no centrally collected data on CSA from health agencies in Wales.

In 2019/20, five-sixths of under-18s' initial contacts with SARCs in England were made following referrals by the police or by children's services

## Insights about children and young people who attended a sexual assault referral centre

In 2018 the CSA Centre and Saint Mary's SARC in Greater Manchester collaborated on research to build a better understanding of the characteristics and experiences of children and young people who attended the SARC (Karsna and Majeed-Ariss, 2019). Data was retrospectively extracted from the paper case file – 986 in total – of every 'service user' aged under 18 who had visited the SARC over a three-year period.

The study described the characteristics of these service users:

- ▶ Girls accounted for 86% of the children and young people attending Saint Mary's SARC following the disclosure or suspicion of sexual assault. Among children aged under 12, however, boys represented one-quarter of the total. The median age of boys attending the SARC was 6 years; among girls, it was 13 years.
- ▶ A large majority (79%) of service users were from White British backgrounds. Compared to the local population, minority ethnic groups were under-represented in the sample.
- ▶ More than one-quarter of service users were at the time or had previously been identified as 'children in need' or placed on a child protection plan by a local authority – a far higher proportion than among the child population in Greater Manchester.
- ▶ The proportions of school-aged service users reporting physical disabilities and learning disabilities (1.5% and 16% respectively) were considerably higher than the proportions of children with those disabilities attending state schools in Greater Manchester. More than a quarter of service users of school age reported additional needs at school. Learning disabilities and additional needs at school were both more commonly reported among boys.
- ▶ Mental health issues were reported by many service users aged 12–17: 40% reported mental health difficulties, 35% self-harm and 12% suicide attempts at some time prior to their attendance at the SARC.

The suspected perpetrators of the abuse were also described:

- ▶ More than a quarter of those suspected of committing abuse were the service users' friends or acquaintances, and a fifth were strangers or new acquaintances. Parents accounted for one-fifth of suspected perpetrators, as did other relatives (including siblings and grandparents).
- ▶ Overall, case files recorded a near-equal split between extra-familial (52%) and intra-familial (48%) suspected perpetrators. Intra-familial figures – parents, siblings, other relatives and family friends – represented 87% of suspected perpetrators of abuse against children aged 0–11, while 81% of individuals suspected of abusing service users aged 12–17 were outside their family – friends, partners, acquaintances or strangers.
- ▶ One in eight service users reported abuse by multiple perpetrators. Strangers to or new acquaintances of the service user were the group most commonly suspected of committing abuse together or in groups: 30% of suspected perpetrators who had been known to the service user for less than 24 hours were reported to have committed CSA in pairs or groups.
- ▶ Only 3% of suspected perpetrators were female, and one-third of them were suspected of committing abuse alongside a male. Males made up a large majority of suspected perpetrators against all age groups and in all types of victim-perpetrator relationship.
- ▶ Nearly one-third (31%) of those suspected of committing CSA were other children and young people aged under 18.
- ▶ Three-quarters of service users reported abuse taking place in a domestic setting, with nearly two-thirds reporting abuse in their own home or the perpetrator's home (if different). Abuse outdoors was reported by 28% of those aged 12–17.

The full report is available at:

[www.csacentre.org.uk/documents/st-marys-case-file-review/](http://www.csacentre.org.uk/documents/st-marys-case-file-review/)

## 4.4 What we currently do and do not know about CSA through administrative data

### 4.4.1 What we know

- ▶ The majority of CSA is neither reported nor identified during childhood and thus will not appear in official agency data.
- ▶ Patterns of identification and reporting have changed in recent years, with CSA representing a much lower (and declining) proportion of child protection data but a much higher number of crimes recorded by the police. The increases in reports of CSA offences to the police have recently levelled off.
- ▶ Over half of all sexual offences recorded by the police are perpetrated against children.
- ▶ There are considerable and increasing local variations in the identification of CSA and outcomes of investigations or prosecutions across administrative data.
- ▶ The vast majority of identified perpetrators of CSA are male.
- ▶ Girls and young women are much more likely than boys and young men to be identified as victims of CSA. The particularly high proportion of females in the health service records presented in this report suggests that males are less likely to be known to sexual health clinics and SARCs than to local authority children's services or the police.
- ▶ It is common for the ethnicity of victims of CSA not to be recorded in agency data; where it is recorded, children from White backgrounds are over-represented in the case files of official agencies. This is particularly evident in health service records, and Asian children are particularly under-represented.
- ▶ Child abuse images are being identified in increasing numbers, and there is an increase in successful prosecutions.
- ▶ Rates of attrition through the criminal justice system vary by offence and are generally high.

### 4.4.2 What we do not know

- ▶ Criminal justice data provides no accurate measure of how many victims are being identified.
- ▶ The profiles of victims and perpetrators, apart from their gender, are not consistently recorded.
- ▶ Data on the contexts for abuse – the perpetrators' relationship to the victims, the locations of abuse and the duration of abuse – is not available in administrative data.
- ▶ Data on perpetrators does not identify whether they were single or multiple (offending in a group), and/or were serial (offending against several victims) offenders.
- ▶ We do not know what drives local variation in the identification and recording of CSA.

Where the ethnicity of victims of CSA is recorded, children from White backgrounds are over-represented in the case files of official agencies

## 5. Data based on reports to helplines and ‘hotlines’

In addition to data from official agencies, valuable information is available from voluntary-sector services which are contacted by members of the public in relation to CSA. This section brings together data from three of these organisations:

- ▶ the Internet Watch Foundation, which receives reports on CSA material online
- ▶ the Lucy Faithfull Foundation, which manages the ‘Stop It Now!’ helpline for adults seeking help about their own or others’ sexual thoughts, behaviours or feelings towards children, or in relation to their internet use
- ▶ the NSPCC, which manages the Childline service for children seeking support about abuse and a separate helpline for adults concerned that a child may be abused or at risk of abuse.

### 5.1 Internet Watch Foundation

Offences related to the creation and distribution of CSA images (also known as indecent images of children) accounted for more than one-third of defendants proceeded against in England and Wales in 2019 (see Table 5 in section 4.2.3).

Such images are most commonly shared online, and an idea of the quantity of CSA images in circulation is provided by the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF), which publishes data on the number of ‘reports’ of CSA material it receives or identifies. Its annual overviews also provide outline information on the age and gender of the children in the images, and the severity of the abuse depicted.

#### 5.1.1 The volume of child sexual abuse material online

In 2019, the IWF received or identified more than 130,000 reports that included CSA material; as Figure 44 shows, this represented an increase of 70% since 2017 (IWF, 2020). Each of these reports is a webpage or a newsgroup that has been assessed by the IWF’s analysts to contain CSA material (between one and thousands of individual images and videos). It is therefore not possible to estimate the number of CSA images or videos captured by the IWF, but it is likely to equate to millions of individual images and videos.

One in five of these CSA reports in 2019 included images or videos classified as Category A: the most serious category of abuse, depicting penetrative CSA or sexual torture. A further one-fifth involved Category B material, depicting children in non-penetrative sexual activity, and the remainder were Category C (all other CSA images or videos). The increase in the number of CSA reports was greatest for Category C material (see Figure 44).

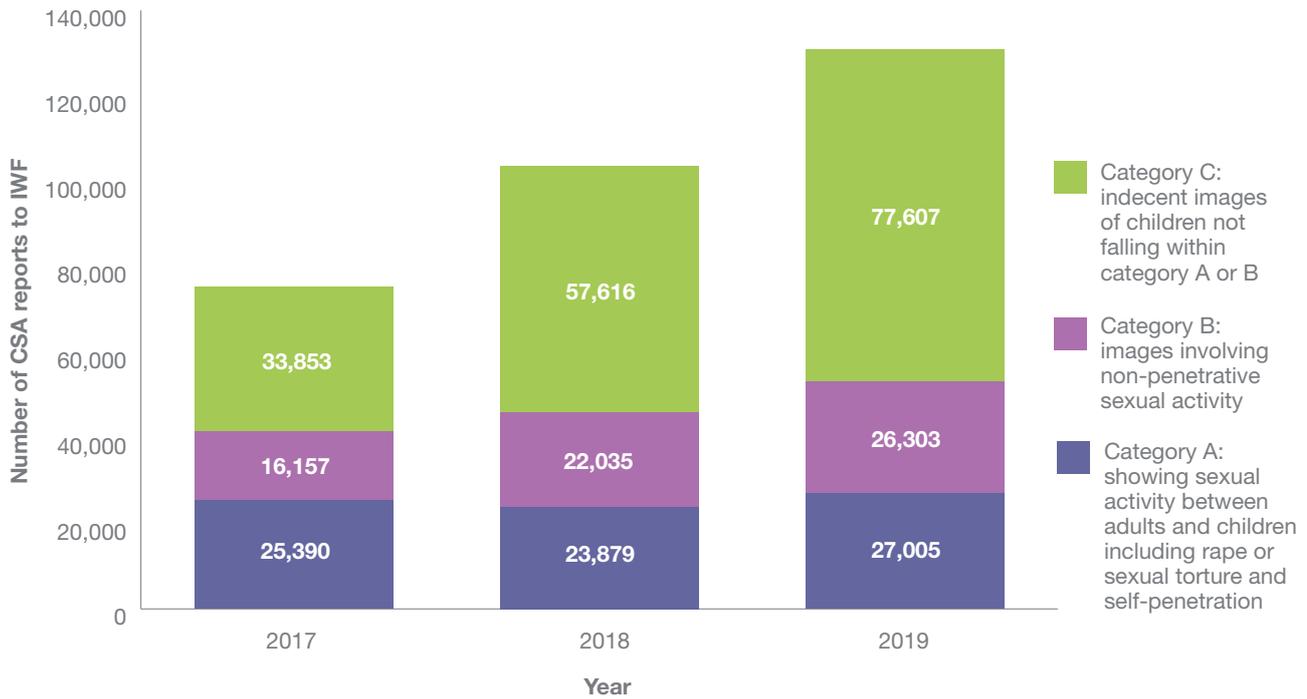
Only a fraction (0.1%) of the websites and newsgroups that contained CSA images were hosted in the UK in 2019, following a significant fall over the previous decade. Nevertheless, CSA material hosted anywhere in the world is accessible to offenders in England and Wales, and content generated in England and Wales can be hosted anywhere in the world.



In 2019, the IWF received or identified over 130,000 reports of CSA material, one-fifth of which depicted penetrative abuse or sexual torture

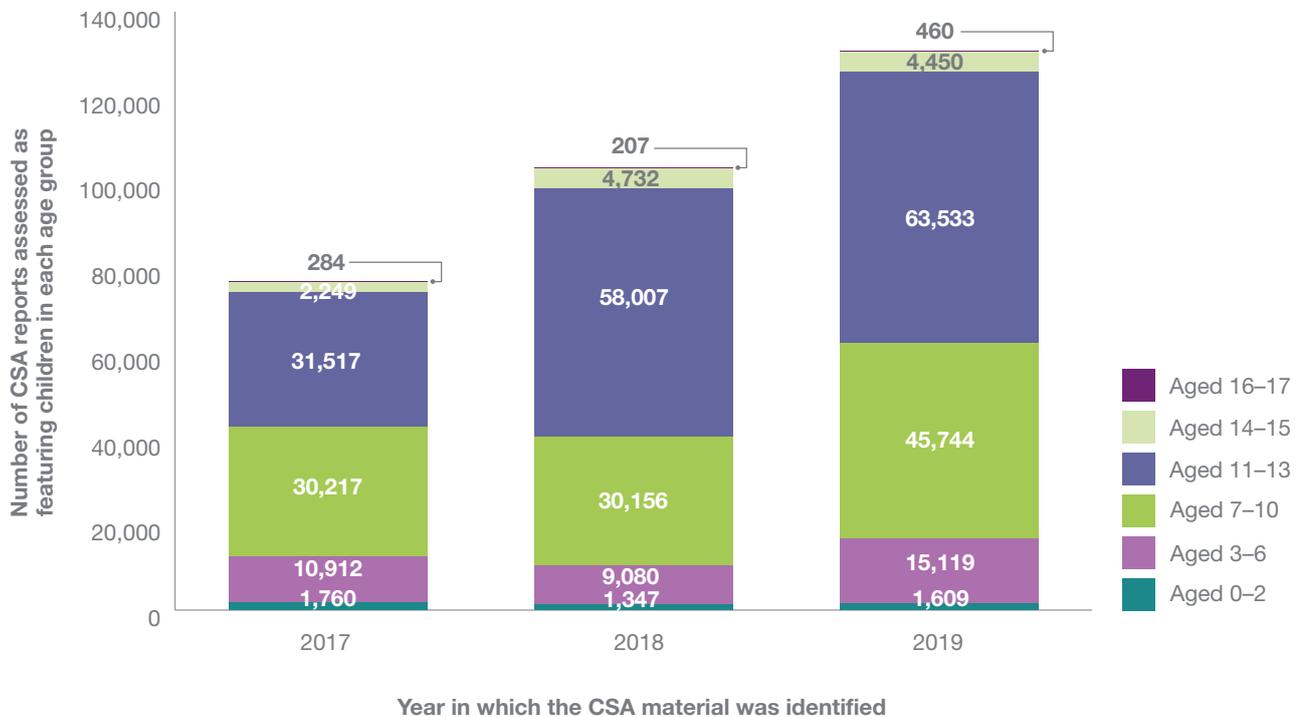


**Figure 44. Number of CSA reports to the IWF, by severity of the abuse, 2017–2019**



Source: Internet Watch Foundation (2020). Each CSA report can contain multiple images or videos of CSA. One category of abuse is coded for each report. When a report contains multiple images or videos, the most severe abuse category found in the material is recorded.

**Figure 45. Apparent age of children in CSA reports to the IWF, 2017–2019**



Source: Internet Watch Foundation (2020). Each CSA report may contain multiple images or videos of CSA. One age is coded for each report. When a report contains multiple images or videos, the youngest age found in the material is recorded.

### 5.1.2 Characteristics of children in reports

When CSA images (including videos) are identified by the IWF, its analysts assess the child’s age and gender from their appearance; where reports involve multiple images or videos, only the youngest age found in the material is coded for each report.

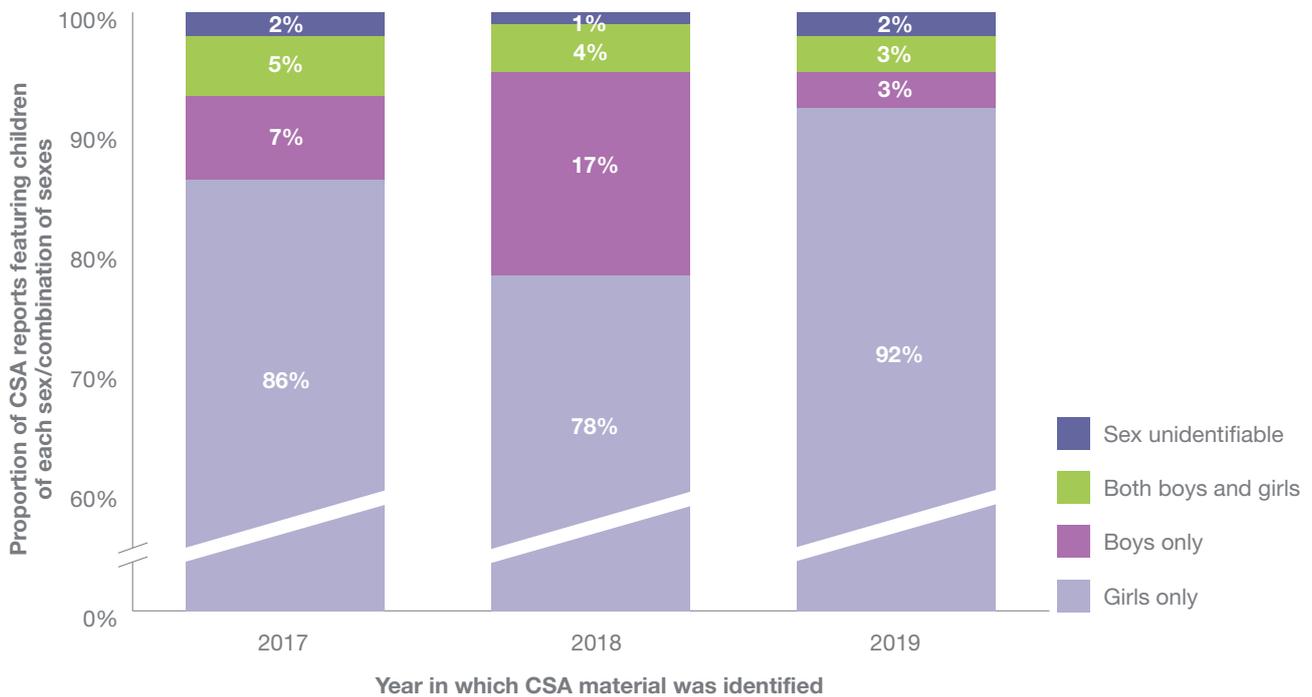
In the reports processed by the IWF in 2019, around half of webpages containing CSA material showed 11–13-year-olds, one-third depicted children aged 7–10, and one in 10 featured children aged 3–6 (IWF, 2020). Between 2017 and 2019, the IWF reported increases in the number of reports relating to children in nearly all age groups (except 0–2-year-olds); the largest increases were in material containing children aged 11–15 (see Figure 45).

Among webpages featuring children aged 0–2, more than two-thirds (71%) showed acts of penetrative abuse. Such abuse also featured in two-fifths (41%) of webpages depicting children aged 3–6, one in five (22%) webpages showing children aged 7–10, and one in seven (14%) depicting children aged 11–15.

Overall in 2019, the vast majority (92%) of webpages showing CSA included girls only, 3% depicted boys only, and 3% included both girls and boys. The proportion of webpages featuring only boys was lower in 2019 than in 2018 (17%) and in 2017 (7%); see Figure 46.

There is a professional consensus that the vast majority of victims of online-facilitated CSA are girls aged 7–13 (Jay et al, 2020).

**Figure 46. Sex of children in CSA reports to the IWF, 2017–2019**



Source: Internet Watch Foundation (2020). Base numbers were not published.

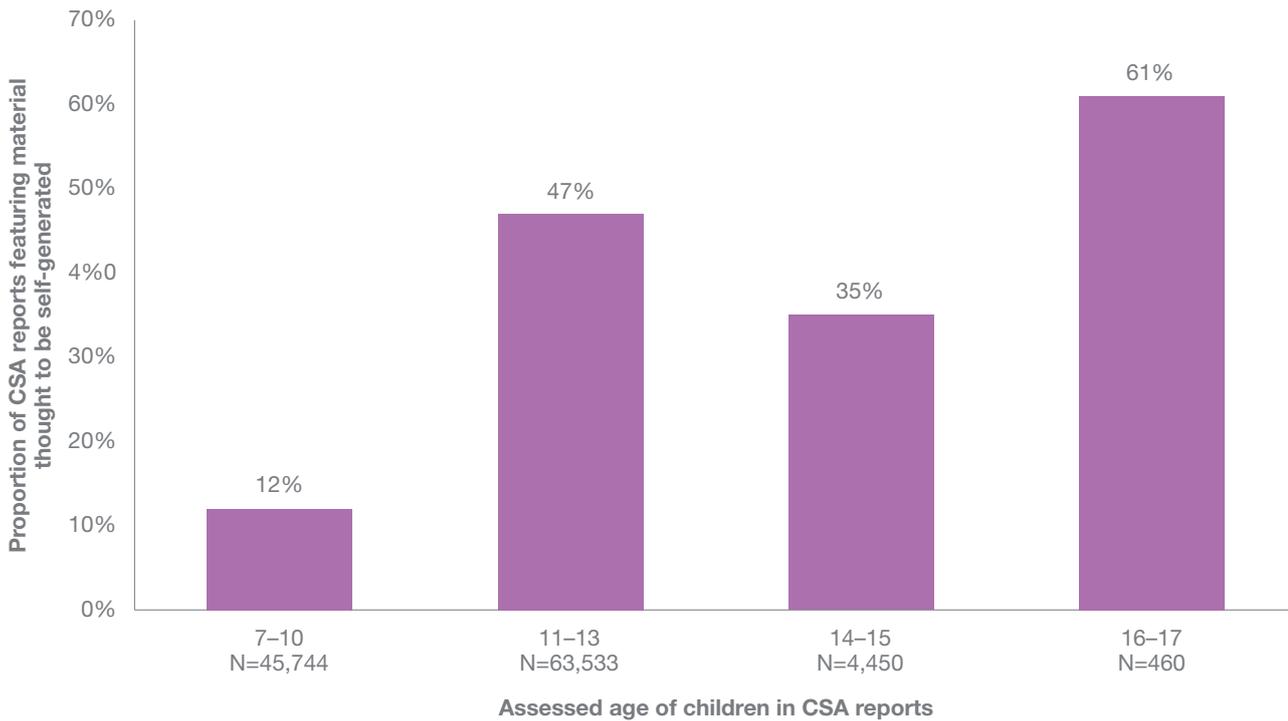
5.1.3 ‘Self-generated’ CSA material

In recent years, the IWF has identified a growing number of CSA reports that involve ‘self-generated’ material. This frequently takes the form of videos, produced through live-streaming services (see below) sometimes through coercion and blackmail, that are then captured and distributed widely across the internet (IWF, 2020). Self-generated images and videos may also be produced as part of a consensual exchange of images or videos between peers, but may then be non-consensually shared onwards or uploaded by the child themselves in order to receive ‘likes’ or approval (Jay et al, 2020).

Nearly one-third (29%) of CSA reports processed by the IWF in 2019 were thought to include self-generated material. Of these 38,424 reports, one in five were assessed as involving Category A material, one in four involved Category B material, and over half were Category C; 95% involved material depicting girls only.

Among webpages identified by the IWF in 2019 as containing self-generated images or videos, three-quarters depicted girls aged 11–13 – and nearly half of all webpages depicting children aged 11–13 showed self-generated content (see Figure 47). Self-generated material featured in one in eight webpages including CSA images or videos of children aged 7–10, and one-third of those depicting 14–15-year-olds.

Figure 47. Proportion of CSA reports to the IWF that were thought to include ‘self-generated’ material, by age of children depicted, 2019



Source: Internet Watch Foundation (2020).

### 5.1.4 Live-streaming

Live-streaming of abuse is increasingly common and is considered by the UK's National Crime Agency to be a "key threat" in relation to CSA (NCA, 2020). A large proportion of this form of material is self-generated by children live-streaming from their homes; it is then recorded and shared online by offenders without consent. A smaller proportion, which is much less likely to be shared online, involves offenders paying for the live streaming of abuse of children (frequently overseas).

An IWF study of CSA material produced through live-streaming over three months in 2017 identified 2,082 images and videos (IWF, 2018). It found that:

- ▶ 96% of the children on live streams were on their own, in a home setting such as a bedroom or bathroom
- ▶ 96% of the children on live streams were girls
- ▶ 69% of the children on live streams were thought to be 11–13 years old, and 28% were assessed as being aged 7–10.

### 5.1.5 Developments in 2020

According to the IWF annual report for 2020 (IWF, 2021), more than 150,000 reports of CSA material were received or identified during the year, representing a 16% increase on 2019. The increase was particularly steep for self-generated CSA content, which featured in 68,000 reports – 77% more than in 2019. As in previous years, the self-generated material predominantly depicted girls aged 11–13 (IWF, 2021).

## 5.2. Stop It Now! UK and Ireland

A total of 5,900 help-seekers<sup>34</sup> made 10,700 contacts to the confidential Stop It Now! service during 2019, by calling its helpline or sending an email. Half were concerned about their own sexual thoughts, behaviours or feelings towards children, while most of the others were concerned about someone else's thoughts or behaviours.

Stop It Now! recorded an increase in the number of contacts from help-seekers in 2020, when almost 6,600 people made 12,500 contacts seeking support. The charity noted that the increase in demand was influenced by a number of factors, with COVID-19 lockdowns among them (Stop It Now!, 2021).

The website recorded a decrease in the number of unique users visiting 'Stop It Now! Get Help' – an online self-directed intervention for people concerned about their online sexual behaviour towards children – and its Family and Friends Forum in the period of the first lockdown (March–May 2020), but the numbers recovered later in 2020 to some 5,000 per month.



Stop It Now! recorded a rise in the number of contacts from help-seekers in 2020, when almost 6,600 people sought support



34. This was the overall figure, and includes help-seekers from outside England and Wales.

## 5.3 NSPCC

The NSPCC Childline service gives children and young people a safe and confidential space to talk about any concerns or worries they have and receive support. In addition, the NSPCC manages a helpline for adults who are worried about a child's welfare.

The number of contacts with Childline and the NSPCC helpline, and the reasons for those contacts, can be affected by campaigns and other external factors such as high-profile news stories (ONS, 2020a). It is not possible to identify the number of children or adults who are speaking to these helplines, as the same person may have multiple contacts with NSPCC.

### 5.3.1 Childline

The NSPCC reports on the main concern raised when a child contacts Childline; where multiple concerns are raised, only the main concern is used in the analysis. In 2019/20, Childline delivered 7,679 counselling sessions about sexual abuse (contact abuse or online abuse). Sexual abuse was the main concern raised in 3% of all counselling sessions, and was the most frequent form of abuse for which children sought help (NSPCC, 2021).

In 2020/21, Childline delivered 5,962 counselling sessions about sexual abuse – a reduction of 22% compared to the previous year (NSPCC, 2021). Despite this reduction, sexual abuse remained the most frequent form of abuse on which counselling sessions were delivered, and accounted for a similar proportion of all counselling sessions as in the previous year (3%). The 14% overall decline in the number of counselling sessions delivered during 2020/21 was partly due to the reduction in the number of volunteers receiving contacts from children during the COVID-19 pandemic (NSPCC, 2021).

The NSPCC noted a significant increase in traffic to the Childline website and engagement through message boards and social media in 2020/21 (NSPCC, 2021).

### 5.3.2 NSPCC helpline

In 2019/20, the NSPCC helpline for adults concerned about a child recorded 7,138 contacts in relation to contact sexual abuse and a further 1,474 relating to online sexual abuse.

In 2020/21, following the imposition of pandemic restrictions, the number of contacts regarding online sexual abuse increased by 44% to 2,131. The number of contacts regarding contact sexual abuse increased by 2% to 7,338. There was an overall increase of 23% in the number of contacts to the NSPCC helpline, following a campaign to increase awareness. Nevertheless, sexual abuse was the form of abuse mentioned least by adults contacting the helpline; concerns about neglect, physical abuse and emotional abuse were raised more frequently.



In 2020/21 there was a significant increase in traffic to the Childline website and engagement through message boards and social media



## 6. Conclusions

The first edition of this report in 2017 sought to develop a better understanding of what we do and do not know about the scale and nature of child sexual abuse in England and Wales. In exploring data from self-report surveys and from agencies at local and national levels, it captured some of the experiences of children and young people and highlighted the significant evidence gaps.

This edition presents some new insights into the prevalence and incidence of CSA in 2019/20. For example, the childhood abuse module in the 2019 Crime Survey for England and Wales gathered new information on the experiences of CSA within the adult population. It found that, overall, the prevalence of CSA was at a similar level to other forms of childhood abuse. Consistent with international research, it highlighted the higher risk of abuse among some groups: experiences of CSA were twice as likely to be described by disabled respondents than by non-disabled respondents; four times as likely by those who had lived in residential care than those who had not; and five times as likely by respondents who had also experienced childhood neglect than those who had not.

Among respondents to the Crime Survey, women were at least three times as likely as men to describe experiences of CSA; again, this reflects the findings of previous international research. Abuse by family members was more commonly described by women, while men were more likely to identify authority figures as perpetrators. The vast majority of perpetrators were reported to be male.

There is often a time lag between experiencing abuse and reporting it, with many cases only reported in adulthood. In the Crime Survey, only one in 15 respondents with experiences of contact sexual abuse said that the police had been told or found out about it at the time. Other professionals – teachers, social workers, doctors – were even less likely to have known about the abuse.

It is important to bear in mind, however, that this survey does not tell us about the current prevalence of child sexual abuse, because much of the abuse described in the survey dates back decades ago when the participants were children. Further, its estimate of the overall prevalence rate is likely to be lower than the actual figure because it excluded the experiences of 16–17-year-olds (which is also an issue in the criminal justice data), and because the survey was framed in terms of crime; research has found that people are more likely to talk about their experiences of CSA in surveys relating to their health, wellbeing or sexual experience.

Given that the last major CSA-related survey of children and young people in the UK was in 2009, this means that we lack knowledge on the current prevalence of CSA in England and Wales and it is not possible to track whether the prevalence of CSA has increased or decreased over time. In the absence of updated prevalence data, our best estimate remains that 15% of girls/young women and 5% of boys/young men experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of 16, including abuse by adults and under-18s.

It is important to bear in mind that the Crime Survey for England and Wales does not tell us about the *current* prevalence of CSA

The latest official data from local authorities, criminal justice agencies and health agencies tell us much about these agencies' current response to child sexual abuse:

- ▶ It is clear from prevalence studies that **far more children experience abuse than are being recorded by police or identified by child protection services**. Furthermore, patterns of identification and reporting show a marked change in recent years: there has been a large increase in the number of CSA offences recorded by the police, but CSA features in a much lower (and declining) proportion of child protection data. In 2019/20, the number of children placed on child protection plans in England under the category of sexual abuse fell by 12% compared to the previous year – the largest decrease in 18 years – from 2,960 to 2,600. There are many factors that contribute to the low and declining recognition of CSA within local authority child protection data: for example, child protection professionals may perceive that they should not name and record their concerns about certain forms of CSA if there has not been a verbal disclosure, although this is not considered a requirement for other forms of abuse. It is also clear that not all recorded cases are visible in published data – this applies to both criminal justice and child protection data. In the year to March 2020 the overall picture was one of a continuing and significant gap between the number of children who experience sexual abuse and the much smaller number who are identified and supported by agencies. It is likely that the COVID-19 pandemic widened this gap further in 2020/21, with lockdowns making children even less likely to be able to be noticed or tell someone about their abuse.
- ▶ Although police recording of CSA offences has increased in recent years (prior to levelling off in 2019/20), **attrition of child sexual abuse cases within the criminal justice system is worsening – but it isn't clear where the issues lie**. There has been a sharp decline in the proportion of CSA investigations ending in a charge, a summons or an out-of-court resolution, from 37% in 2014/15 to just 12% in 2019/20. The overall rate masks significant differences in investigation outcomes between CSA offences: in 2019/20, just 6% of investigations into rape of female children under 16 or sexual activity with children under 13 ended in a charge or summons. Evidential difficulties were the main barrier cited to a successful outcome, with almost two-thirds of all investigations into CSA offences closed for this reason.
- ▶ **Where a child lives affects the likelihood that their abuse will be identified and responded to**. Between local areas, there continues to be considerable variation in whether or not CSA will be identified by or reported to official agencies, and what the outcome of a criminal justice investigation will be – and that variation is increasing. Currently, we do not know what drives local variation in the identification and recording of CSA.
- ▶ It remains the case that **children from minority ethnic backgrounds are under-represented in all agency data**, meaning their experiences of CSA are missed even more frequently by official agencies than those of White children. This under-representation is particularly evident in data from sexual health clinics and sexual assault referral centres. Boys and young men, too, are less likely than girls and young women to access services from health clinics or sexual assault referral centres.

## Our recommendations in 2017 and progress since then

The first edition of this report, published in 2017, made three key recommendations. Below we reflect on the progress made against these recommendations.

### 1. The UK Government should commit to commissioning a regular CSA prevalence study.

The CSA Centre has worked with partners in survey specialist and academic organisations to develop a methodology for a comprehensive prevalence survey of CSA.

At the same time, the CSA Centre has contributed to the development of methods for a wider child maltreatment study led by the Office for National Statistics, the proposal for which was being consulted on at the time of writing.

### 2. Organisations carrying out surveys and longitudinal cohort studies on linked issues should consider including a module on CSA.

The CSA Centre has continued to contribute to the development of questions on CSA within the Crime Survey for England and Wales (ONS, 2020a); most recently it has been part of the development group for the survey's revised 'childhood abuse' module, the results of which are presented in this report. It has also supported the development of questions on CSA in the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles-4 (Natsal-4) and other smaller surveys.

### 3. The CSA Centre will work with relevant agencies in local areas to improve the consistent recording of core administrative data about CSA.

Since the publication of its original scoping review in 2017, the CSA Centre has developed, piloted and published the final version of the 'CSA data collection template', consisting of core data that organisations are recommended to collect about CSA. It has also published a practical guide for organisations to improve their collection and recording of data relating to CSA (Karsna, 2019). It is currently working with a group of local authorities in London to use the template in improving CSA data. The CSA Centre regularly supports local areas with tailored data reports, supporting a greater understanding of local and regional trends and contributing to service and policy development.



The CSA Centre supports local areas with tailored data reports, supporting a greater understanding of local and regional trends



## 6.1 Moving forward: data and practice cannot be separated

In previous editions of this report, we have made recommendations about how to improve the data available from surveys and official agency records in England and Wales. While steps have been taken to implement these recommendations (see box on page 85), significant gaps remain.

Better and comparative data are crucial underpinning components in tackling CSA and, ultimately, protecting children:

- ▶ Comprehensive and comparative data can inform the development of approaches to the prevention, disruption and identification of abuse. Understanding the extent of CSA, who is affected by it, and where and when it happens, is crucial for the development of responses and services that are appropriate to need.
- ▶ Identification of changing patterns of abuse – in relation to online or other contexts, for example – can help equip agencies with the right information and tools. Being able to identify changes in prevalence and emerging risks to different groups of children makes it possible for services to respond to these changes.
- ▶ Robust information can help to better determine the appropriate allocation of resources.
- ▶ Accurate data enables better assessment of the effectiveness of policy and practice in tackling CSA.

A commitment is needed from the UK Government to a regular national prevalence survey of child sexual abuse. The Office of National Statistics (ONS) is currently consulting on a child maltreatment study. While such a study is needed (because the evidence for all forms of child maltreatment is outdated), it is unlikely to cover CSA sufficiently; it could therefore contribute to a significant under-representation of the scale of CSA. A broad survey of child abuse will always be limited in the level of detail it can give about CSA specifically, because the number of questions asked and the forms of abuse included have a significant influence on the estimates of prevalence.

Local and national agencies need to improve the consistency of how they record core administrative data about CSA. Since the publication of this review's first edition in 2017, the CSA Centre has developed, piloted and published a 'CSA data collection template' along with a practical guide to data improvement. However, as the findings from this review highlight, official data continues to be confusing and inconsistent, with different agencies collecting and publishing data on different aspects of CSA.

Improvements to the systems that capture data are important, but the data cannot be separated from the people who create it and the culture in which they work. Recorded CSA data is the product of a professional (social worker, police officer, doctor or nurse) identifying and recording a concern. In order to identify that concern, they need to understand CSA and the signs and indicators which signal that it may be occurring. In order to record that concern, they need the confidence to name it as such, and to address it.



A commitment is needed from the UK Government to a regular national prevalence survey of child sexual abuse



Over the last four years, it has become increasingly clear through the CSA Centre's work with practitioners that safeguarding and child protection professionals across a range of agencies are not sufficiently equipped with the training, development and support necessary to enable them to apply knowledge and understanding of CSA with confidence (Roberts, 2020). CSA has been eroded from the content of most core pre- and post-qualification training programmes for safeguarding professionals. Without that training, it is unclear how social workers, police officers, teachers, doctors and nurses can be expected to confidently identify concerns and record them appropriately in data systems.

This inability to consistently identify and record CSA has significant knock-on effects: if professionals do not recognise the signs or are not confident to record and respond to them, agency data does not accurately reflect the scale of CSA that is occurring, so the issue appears less important and prioritisation of training and support declines further. The result is that fewer children are protected from abuse or are supported to deal with its impacts and consequences.

The absence of training and development for professionals has an even greater impact on the protection of sexually abused children who we know are already under-represented in the data (e.g. boys and young men, and children from minority ethnic groups).

In the last two years the Welsh Government and the UK Government have published strategic plans to address CSA (Welsh Government, 2019a; Home Office, 2021). These strategies cover CSA in all its forms, recognise the need to improve our understanding of its incidence and prevalence, and make clear commitments to increasing and improving CSA training for professionals across education, social work, the Crown Prosecution Service, policing and probation. They represent the first step towards a strategic approach to tackling this national threat consistently.

If the vision of these strategies is realised, we hope that the future edition of this report could present a more hopeful picture where more children are protected from the threat and harm of child sexual abuse.



Government-level strategic plans to address CSA represent the first step towards an approach to tackling this national threat consistently



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# Appendix 1: Details of prevalence studies

Here key aspects of method, and especially the questions asked to calculate prevalence, are recorded for each of the studies detailed in sections 3.3–3.5.

## Crime Survey for England and Wales 2019

### *Framing*

Crime victimisation survey.

### *Definition*

Sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts): sexual assault by penetration of a [mouth, vagina or anus; or mouth or anus] with a penis, or penetrated their [vagina or anus; or anus] with an object (including fingers).

Other sexual assaults including indecent exposure or unwanted touching: the category includes indecent exposure (as in, flashing), or being touched sexually whether it was agreed to or not (for example, groping, touching of breasts or bottom, kissing).

### *Sample*

The self-completion module on abuse during childhood had a sample of around 25,000 adults aged 18–74.

### *Method*

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

### *Questions*

1. Thinking about any time before you were 16 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?

- ▶ make you watch or listen to sexual acts or to look at sexual images (this might have been in person or in films, videos, internet images or telephone calls)
- ▶ make or share sexual images or videos of you
- ▶ deliberately expose themselves to you (i.e. flashing)
- ▶ send you sexual images or videos of themselves or others

2. Thinking about any time before you were 16 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?

- ▶ kiss or grope any part of your body in a sexual way (whether or not you were wearing clothes)
- ▶ force or manipulate you into touching someone else's body (including their own) for sexual purposes

3. Thinking about any time before you were 16 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?

- ▶ penetrated your [mouth, vagina or anus/ mouth or anus] with their penis
- ▶ penetrated your [vagina or anus/anus] with an object (including fingers)

## NSPCC child maltreatment study

### Framing

Child maltreatment survey

### Definition

Used both the UK government's definition and definitions from criminal law.

### Sample

2,160 parents of under-11s.

2,275 children and young people aged 11–17, with input from their parents.

1,761 young adults aged 18–24.

### Method

Computer-assisted self-interviewing, listening on headphones and entering responses.

### Questions

This is the whole module. Those questions marked \* are related to CSA; the others might be, but not enough data to make a decision.

**\*1, At any time in ([CHILD]'s/your) life/ Before you were 18), did a grown-up touch ([CHILD]'s/your) private parts when they SHOULDN'T have, or MAKE ([CHILD]/you) touch their private parts or did a grown-up FORCE ([CHILD]/you) to have sex?**

**\*2. Now think about other young people, like from school, a friend, (IF YOUTH/RETRO SURVEY: a boyfriend or girlfriend,) or even a brother or sister.**

At any time in ([CHILD]'s/your) life/Before you were 18), did another child or teenager MAKE ([CHILD]/you) do sexual things?

**\*3. At any time in ([CHILD]'s/your) life/Before you were 18), did anyone TRY to force ([CHILD]/you) to have sex, that is sexual intercourse of any kind, even if it didn't happen?**

**\*4. At any time in ([CHILD]'s/your) life/Before you were 18), did anyone make ([CHILD]/you) look at their private parts by using force or surprise, or by "flashing"**

**5. At any time in ([CHILD]'s/your) life/Before you were 18), did anyone hurt ([CHILD]'s/your) feelings by saying or writing something sexual about ([CHILD]/you) or ([CHILD]'s/your) body?**

**6. (only for 12+) At any time in your life/Before you were 18), did you do sexual things with anyone 18 or older, even things you wanted?**

**\*7. (only for 16-24) Since you were 16, have you done/And thinking back to when you were 16 or 17, did you do) sexual things with anyone who was in a position of trust, such as a teacher or personal adviser, even things you both wanted?**

**8. (only for 18-24) Now thinking about things that might have happened before you were 16.**

- a. Before you were 16, were you hugged or kissed in a sexual way, whether you agreed to it or not?
- b. Before you were 16, did you have full sexual intercourse?
- c. Before you were 16, did you have anal intercourse?
- d. Before you were 16, did you have oral sex?
- e. Before you were 16, did someone put their finger, tongue or an object into your (IF FEMALE: "vagina or") anus?

**9. Did anyone on the Internet ever ask ([CHILD]/you) sexual questions about ([CHILD]/yourself) or try to get ([CHILD]/you) to talk online about sex when ([CHILD]/you) did not want to talk about those things?**

## ACEs studies

### *Framing*

Adverse childhood experiences studies.

### *Definition*

Contact or non-contact abuse experienced up to the age of 18 by a person at least five years older.

### *Sample*

England: 3,885 adults aged 18–69.

Wales: 2,497 adults aged 18–69.

Quota sampling.

### *Method*

Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI), and Computer Assisted Self Interviewing (CASI). Respondents were also given the option to complete the survey on paper.

### *Questions*

While you were growing up, during your first 18 years of life:

- ▶ How often did anyone at least five years older than you (including adults) try to make you touch them sexually?
- ▶ How often did anyone at least five years older than you (including adults) force you to have any type of sexual intercourse (oral, anal or vaginal)?
- ▶ How often did anyone at least five years older than you (including adults) ever touch you sexually?

## EU Fundamental Rights Agency survey

### *Framing*

Violence against women survey.

### *Definition (via methodology)*

Under the age of 15, by an adult 18 or over, contact and non-contact.

### *Sample*

Minimum 1,500 aged 18–74 in each EU member state, selected through multistage random probability sampling.

N=42,002.

### *Method*

Paper and pencil interview and computer-assisted self-interviewing, with CSA questions given to the respondent to self-complete.

### *Questions*

Before the age of 15, how often did an adult who was 18 years or over do the following to you, when you did not want them to?

- ▶ Expose their genitals to you.
- ▶ Make you pose naked in front of any person or in photographs, video or an internet webcam.
- ▶ Touch your genitals or breasts against your will.
- ▶ Make you touch their private parts – genitals or breasts.
- ▶ Force you to have sexual intercourse.

The logo features a vertical rectangular background with a geometric, low-poly pattern. The colors transition from dark blue at the top to purple, then green, and finally to a bright lime green at the bottom. The text is white and positioned on the left side of the rectangle.

**Centre of  
expertise  
on child  
sexual abuse**

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

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