

Article

# Child neglect in England and Wales: year ending March 2019

Child neglect in England and Wales, bringing together different data sources from across government and the voluntary sector.

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Release date:  
14 January 2020

Next release:  
To be announced

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# 1 . Main points

- The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) estimated that 1 in 100 adults aged 18 to 74 years experienced physical neglect before the age of 16 years (481,000 people); this includes not being taken care of or not having enough food, shelter or clothing, but it does not cover all types of neglect.
- The police recorded 18,706 cruelty to children/young persons offences in England and Wales in the year ending March 2019; however, some of these offences will be child physical abuse rather than neglect.
- Neglect was the most common category of abuse for child protection plans (CPPs) in England (25,330 children at 31 March 2019) and the second most common for the child protection register (CPR) in Wales (1,005 children).
- At 31 March 2019, around one-fifth of children in England on a CPP because of neglect were on a plan for one year or more, a higher proportion than for other single types of child abuse.
- The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children's (NSPCC's) helpline received 12,708 contacts from people worried about a child being neglected in the year ending March 2019; around two-thirds of these were referred to an external agency, a higher proportion than for other types of child abuse.

## Finding help

If you or someone you know has experienced abuse, help is available:

- [Childline](#) can be called on 0800 1111
- [Help for Adult Victims of Child Abuse \(HAVOCA\)](#) offers online support
- [Mind](#) can be called on 0300 123 3393 or emailed at [info@mind.org.uk](mailto:info@mind.org.uk)
- [National Association for People Abused in Childhood \(NAPAC\)](#) can be called on 0808 801 0331
- [National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children \(NSPCC\)](#) can be called on 0808 800 5000 or emailed at [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk)
- [Rape Crisis](#) can be called on 0808 802 9999
- [Samaritans](#) can be called on 116 123 or emailed at [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)
- [The Survivors Trust](#) can be called on 08088 010 818
- [Victim Support](#) can be called on 0808 16 89 111
- The National Male Survivor Helpline can be called on 0808 800 5005 or emailed at [support@safeline.org.uk](mailto:support@safeline.org.uk)

## 2 . What is child neglect?

There is no specific offence of "child neglect". Practitioners have come to define child abuse based on the laws designed to protect children from harm. For example, [the 2018 HM Government report, 'Working together to safeguard children'](#), defines "child neglect" as:

“The persistent failure to meet a child's basic physical and/or psychological needs, likely to result in the serious impairment of the child's health or development. Neglect may occur during pregnancy as a result of maternal substance abuse. Once a child is born, neglect may involve a parent or carer failing to:

- provide adequate food, clothing and shelter (including exclusion from home or abandonment)
- protect a child from physical and emotional harm or danger
- ensure adequate supervision (including the use of inadequate care-givers)
- ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment

It may also include neglect of, or unresponsiveness to, a child's basic emotional needs”.

A child is defined as anyone who has not yet reached their 18th birthday. This is consistent with the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCRC\)](#). Article 1 states that everyone under the age of 18 years has all the rights in the Convention.

### **3 . Things you need to know about this release**

This article brings together different data sources on child neglect with the aim of providing a better understanding of child neglect than is possible from looking at individual data sources. It has been produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), working in collaboration with the:

- Department for Education (DfE)
- Home Office
- National Association for People Abused in Childhood (NAPAC)
- National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC)
- Welsh Government

Further commentary on child abuse, and quality and methodology information, can be found in [Child abuse in England and Wales](#).

#### **How is child neglect measured?**

Measuring the scale and nature of child neglect can be difficult because it is usually hidden from view. Adults are not always able to recognise that neglect is taking place. Physical neglect may be more identifiable than other forms of neglect. For example, it may be visible if a child's basic needs, such as food or clothing, are not met. Other types of neglect, such as emotional neglect, are harder to identify as there may be no physical signs of the abuse.

This combined with victims often feeling unable to report their experiences means that administrative data sources do not represent the full scale of the issue. There are no current surveys that measure children's experiences of neglect because of the challenges in asking this age group about such a sensitive topic. We therefore do not know how many children are currently experiencing, or have experienced, neglect.

However, there are a number of sources of information that when looked at together can help build up a picture of the scale and nature of child neglect. Indicators of child neglect reported in this article use data on:

- adults' self-reported experiences of child physical neglect
- cruelty to children/young persons offences recorded by the police
- children who come to the attention of children's services
- contact with support services

The different data indicators are not directly comparable. They are collected on different bases (for example, victims or crimes), using different timescales and reference periods.

Findings from the data sources reported on in this article, as well as additional data sources, can be found in the [appendix tables](#). We have also released a [data landscape](#), which includes a comprehensive list of data sources relating to child abuse.

## 4 . What do we know about the prevalence of neglect during childhood?

### Current prevalence of child neglect is challenging to measure

There is no source providing the current prevalence of child neglect. The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) provides the best available indicator by measuring the prevalence of adults who experienced physical neglect before the age of 16 years.

The CSEW provides an underestimate of child neglect as it is restricted to physical neglect only and does not include physical neglect of 16- and 17-year-olds.

Data on emotional neglect are covered by the CSEW but are included as part of the measure of emotional abuse. See [Emotional abuse in England and Wales: year ending March 2019](#) for more information. The CSEW does not include any measure of medical or educational neglect. See [Quality and methodology](#) for more information on the CSEW.

### The CSEW estimated that 1 in 100 adults experienced physical neglect before the age of 16 years

In the year ending March 2019, the CSEW estimated that approximately 481,000 adults aged 18 to 74 years experienced physical neglect before the age of 16 years ([Table 1](#)). This is equivalent to 1.2% of the population aged 18 to 74 years ([Table 2](#)). Victimization varied by certain personal characteristics. See [Characteristics of victims of child neglect](#) and [Table 2](#) for more information.

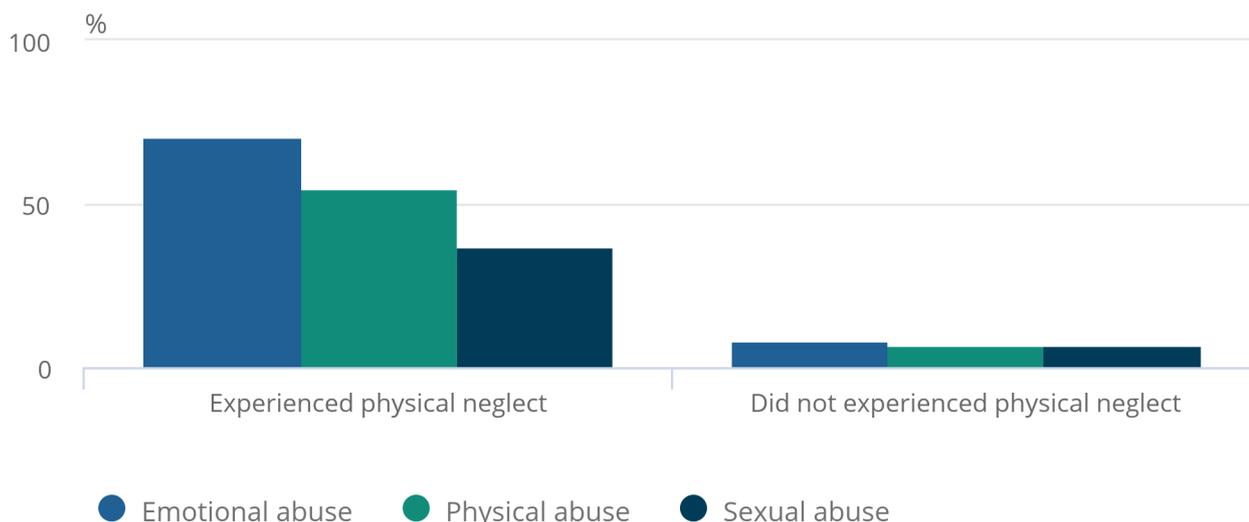
Around 7 in 10 (70.3%) adults who experienced physical neglect in the year ending March 2019 were also a victim of emotional abuse before the age of 16 years (Figure 1 and [Table 3](#)). As emotional neglect is included in the CSEW measure of emotional abuse, this could reflect people experiencing a combination of both physical and emotional neglect as a child.

**Figure 1: Adults were more likely to be a victim of emotional abuse if they experienced physical neglect**

England and Wales, year ending March 2019

Figure 1: Adults were more likely to be a victim of emotional abuse if they experienced physical neglect

England and Wales, year ending March 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics – Crime Survey for England and Wales

Notes:

1. Estimates of physical neglect are based on a self-completion question asking a representative sample of adults aged 18 to 74 years in England and Wales about their circumstances during childhood. As other types of abuse were asked about using a separate measure, it is not possible to provide data on “Any abuse” including physical neglect.
2. “Emotional abuse” was referred to as “psychological abuse” in previous publications.
3. “Sexual abuse” includes rape or assault by penetration (including attempts), other contact sexual abuse, and non-contact sexual abuse.

The CSEW estimates fill an important evidence gap but only of adults’ past experiences of neglect. They do not provide a measure of the current level of neglect experienced by children in England and Wales. We are undertaking a feasibility study to determine whether a new survey could effectively measure the scale and nature of child abuse and neglect. Findings from this feasibility study will be published later in 2020.

## 5 . Child neglect offences recorded by the police

Some victims of child neglect remain hidden. Understanding how many victims (or potential victims) do come to the attention of authorities is important to get a sense of the resources needed to support the child protection system.

Some offences recorded by the police will have come to their attention through the child protection system. A child protection investigation is mainly the responsibility of social workers within children's services. However, they work closely with the police, health workers and other professionals who are connected to the child and family.

As part of this, the police will investigate whether a criminal offence has been committed. They will not always record an offence because it is sometimes judged that it is not in the best interests of the child. Other action, such as a referral to the local authority, may be more appropriate. The number of offences recorded by the police is therefore an underestimate of the demand on the police for child neglect.

## **Number of cruelty to children/young persons offences recorded by the police has continued to increase**

The best available indicator of child neglect recorded by the police is offences of cruelty to children/young persons. However, some of these offences would be counted as child physical abuse rather than neglect. We cannot separately identify these offences. See [Quality and methodology](#) for more information.

There were 18,706 cruelty to children/young persons offences recorded by the police in the year ending March 2019, an increase of 19% from 15,749 in the previous year ([Table 4](#)).

The number of these offences has almost tripled since the year ending March 2013, from 6,370 ([Table 4](#)). This is partly because of the change in the offence classification in June 2015 to include psychological suffering or injury as well as physical suffering or injury.

The increase has also been impacted by improvements made by the police in the recording of violent offences. [Crime-recording: making the victim count](#) showed that violent offences were previously under-recorded by 33%. More recent [Crime Data Integrity inspections](#) carried out by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS)<sup>1</sup> indicate evidence of improvements in the recording of violent offences made by forces since 2014.

All police recorded crime data relate to offences recorded in the given year, regardless of when the offence took place.

See [Quality and methodology](#) for more information on police recorded crime.

### **Notes for: Child neglect offences recorded by the police**

1. These reports were published between 2016 and 2019, and the most recent reports were published on 7 January 2020.

## 6 . Child neglect cases that come to the attention of children's services

Children may be referred to their local authority children's services because of concerns they are at risk of harm. As children's services work with the police to investigate concerns and safeguard children, there will be overlap in the cases handled by both agencies. Not all child neglect offences recorded by the police will be referred to children's services. Only those where it is decided the child is at risk of ongoing harm would be referred.

There will be additional cases not recorded by the police as a criminal offence, but the police may still be involved in the child protection investigation. Cases handled by children's services will also include children at risk of neglect. Such cases would not be included in offences recorded by the police as a crime has not yet been committed. The aim of the local authority intervention is to prevent neglect from occurring.

Each indicator identified in this article does not necessarily refer to the same cohort of cases. Direct comparisons therefore cannot be made.

The Department for Education (DfE) collects data on children who come to the attention of local authority children's services in England. The Welsh Government collects similar data for Wales. These data provide an insight into cases where the child needed support from a local authority.

### Factors identified at end of assessment following a referral to children's services

Once a referral has been made, the local authority will decide what action to take, which may include an assessment. If the local authority identifies there is reasonable cause to suspect the child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm, it will carry out an assessment under [section 47 of the Children Act 1989](#) to determine if it needs to take steps to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child.

Factors contributing to concerns about the child are identified at the end of an assessment; more than one factor can be identified. The factors are designed only to identify what kinds of pressures are placed on children's services. The data are based on the opinions of the social workers assessing the cases. Care should be taken when drawing conclusions using this information.

In the year ending March 2019, there were 89,730 assessments in England where neglect was identified as a factor at the end of the assessment ([Table 8](#)). Similar data are not available for Wales.

### The number of children subject to a protection plan because of neglect decreased in both England and Wales

Where concerns about a child's welfare are verified after assessment, a child protection case conference is held. The available evidence is drawn together to determine whether further action needs to be taken. Following this, a child may be subject to a [child protection plan](#) (CPP; England) or be placed on the [child protection register](#) (CPR; Wales). These set out actions to keep the child safe from harm.

Although the terminology between nations differs slightly, both record information relating to children whose safety is an ongoing concern. However, the two sources should not be compared.

At 31 March 2019, 25,330<sup>1,2</sup> children in England (21 per 10,000) were subject to a CPP for neglect ([Table 9](#)). The small decrease seen in the latest year (2%) follows a steady increase seen in previous years. A further 1,005<sup>3</sup> children in Wales (16 per 10,000) were on the CPR for neglect ([Table 13](#)). This was an 8% fall compared with the previous year.<sup>4</sup>

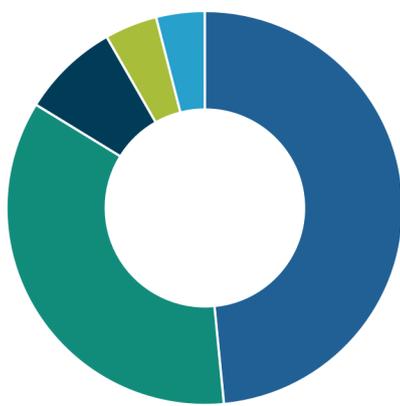
Neglect was the most common initial category of abuse for CPPs in England at 48% (Figure 2; [Table 9](#)) and the second most common category in Wales at 36% ([Table 13](#)).

### Figure 2: Neglect accounts for around half of children subject to child protection plans in England

England, year ending March 2019

Figure 2: Neglect accounts for around half of children subject to child protection plans in England

England, year ending March 2019



Source: Department for Education – Children in Need census

#### Notes:

1. Category of abuse as assessed when the child protection plan commenced.
2. Includes unborn children.
3. "Multiple" refers to instances where there is more than one main category of abuse. These children are not counted under other abuse headings, so a child can only appear once in this chart.

## The majority of children on a child protection plan for neglect are on a plan for less than a year

The length of time<sup>5</sup> a child is subject to a CPP is a useful indication of how long authorities are providing a child with support. It is not an indication of the length of time that abuse is occurring since the abuse may have been experienced for some time before it came to the attention of children's services.

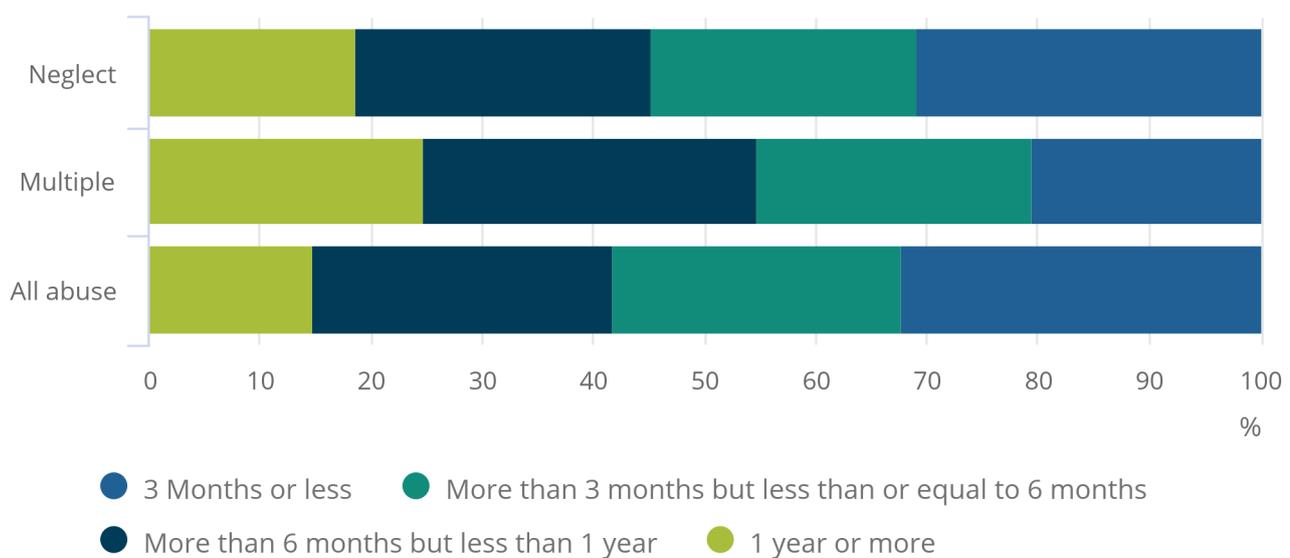
At 31 March 2019, around one-fifth (19%) of children in England on a CPP because of neglect were on a plan for one year or more (Figure 3; [Table 11](#)). Although this is lower than the proportion of children on CPPs for multiple types of abuse (25%), it is higher than CPPs for other single types of abuse (between 13% and 15%).

**Figure 3: Around one-fifth of children on a child protection plan for neglect were on a plan for one year or more**

England, year ending March 2019

Figure 3: Around one-fifth of children on a child protection plan for neglect were on a plan for one year or more

England, year ending March 2019



Source: Department for Education - Children In Need census

### Notes:

1. Category of abuse as assessed when the child protection plan commenced.
2. Durations are calculated from the date of the latest plan within the same local authority.
3. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10. Sub totals may not add up to totals due to rounding.
4. "All abuse" excludes neglect and multiple types of abuse.

## Children returning to a child protection plan

Of the 31,710 CPPs for neglect in England that were started during the year ending March 2019, around one-fifth (22%) were a second or subsequent plan ([Table 12](#)). Previous plans were not necessarily for the same type of abuse as the current plan. This indicates how many children are in recurring circumstances of abuse, but it could also indicate that decisions to remove children from CPPs are sometimes premature.

Further information on children on CPPs or on the CPR for neglect can be found in [Tables 9 to 15](#).

## Serious incident notifications involving neglect by a parent or carer

Local authority children's services in England have a duty to notify the [Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel](#) if a child dies or is seriously harmed and abuse is known or suspected; or a looked after child dies. Where an incident involves harm to more than one child, data are only collected about the first child identified on the incident form.

There were 30 serious incident notifications for serious harm involving neglect by a parent or carer in England in the year ending March 2018 (the latest data available) ([Table 16](#)). This is an increase from 23 incidents in the previous year and is the highest number in the last five years. Neglect accounted for nine serious incident notifications for child death in the year ending March 2019 ([Table 17](#)). Equivalent data are not available for Wales.

### Notes for: Child neglect cases that come to the attention of children's services

1. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10.
2. At 31 March 2019, there were 820 unborn children subject to a CPP for neglect because of concerns that the unborn baby was suffering or was likely to suffer significant harm once born ([Table 10](#)).
3. Figures are rounded to the nearest 5.
4. As a result of changes in the legislation, comparable data are only available since the year ending March 2017.
5. There is no optimal amount of time to be subject to a CPP or on the CPR.

## 7 . Use of child abuse support services

Some victims are not able to recognise that they are being neglected, and adults cannot always spot the signs that child neglect is taking place. Those that do recognise neglect may not seek help or report this neglect to a support service. However, data from child abuse support services provide some indication of the outreach of victims of child neglect as well as those who are concerned about neglect. The data also provide an indication of the level of demand on services in this sector.

It should be noted that there are a number of support services for victims of child abuse. The support services covered in this section may not be representative of all services.

There will be overlap in cases handled by authorities and dealt with by support services. Some cases that come to the attention of support services may already have been identified by the child protection system. The support service may also refer cases to external agencies.

Each indicator identified in this article does not necessarily refer to the same cohort of cases and so direct comparisons cannot be made.

## **Fewer children contact Childline to discuss neglect than any other form of abuse**

If a child has any concerns, they may contact Childline. This is a free service where children and young people in the UK can talk to a counsellor about anything. Information about Childline counselling sessions, which include calls, online chats and emails, indicates the levels and nature of concerns about abuse from children who turn to Childline for support. The number and reasons for counselling sessions can be affected by Childline campaigns and other external factors such as high-profile news stories. Children may talk about a range of different issues over the course of a counselling session, but the issue they talked about the most is recorded.

There were 488 counselling sessions delivered to children in the UK where neglect was the primary concern in the year ending March 2019 ([Table 18](#)). This accounted for around 1 in 40 (2.5%) of all abuse-related counselling sessions. This may be because children who are being physically neglected often also experience other forms of abuse. As children find it harder to recognise neglect, they may be less likely to speak about it over the other types of abuse they are experiencing, according to [research by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children \(NSPCC\)](#).

The number of counselling sessions for neglect has decreased by 21% in the last year, but the overall number of counselling sessions has also fallen over this time period ([Table 18](#)). This is partly because more sessions are taking place online, which takes longer than over the phone. Counselling sessions are also taking place later in the day when fewer volunteers are available.

It is not possible to identify the number of children who are speaking to Childline as the same child may have multiple counselling sessions.

[Childline is a confidential service](#), but in exceptional circumstances, for example, if a child is requesting direct help or is in a life-threatening situation, Childline may make a referral to an external agency. In the year ending March 2019, Childline made 42 neglect-related referrals on behalf of children ([Table 20](#)).

## **Neglect-related contacts to the NSPCC have increased in the last year**

Data from the NSPCC's helpline provide information on contacts from those who are worried about the safety or welfare of a child across the UK.<sup>1</sup> These contacts are based on the caller's own perceptions of abuse and neglect.

The number of contacts cannot tell you the total number of children about whom there are concerns. One contact can relate to multiple children, while multiple contacts can relate to the same child.

There were 12,708 contacts to the NSPCC's helpline where there was a concern about child neglect in the year ending March 2019. This was an increase of 3% from the previous year (12,310; [Table 21](#)). This compares with an overall increase of 12% in helpline contacts over the same period.

## **The majority of contacts to the NSPCC for neglect resulted in a referral**

Callers to the NSPCC's helpline can receive advice or, when there is a serious concern about a child, a referral may be made to the local authority for support. The police will also be contacted if the child is at immediate risk.

For a referral to be made, information about the child's identity must be provided. Therefore, in some cases, it may only be possible for advice to be given even where there is a serious concern.

Of the 12,708 neglect-related contacts to the NSPCC's helpline in the year ending March 2019, around two-thirds (65%) resulted in referral to an external agency<sup>2</sup>, with around one-third (35%) receiving advice ([Table 21](#)).

Information on who contacted the NSPCC's helpline for concerns of neglect can be found in [Tables 22 and 23](#).

## Adults who were neglected as a child may require support later in life

The National Association for People Abused in Childhood's (NAPAC's) helpline offers support to adult survivors<sup>3</sup> of child abuse across the UK. Data from the NAPAC's helpline indicate the support adult survivors of neglect require later in life and the demand on support services after the abuse has ended.

In the year ending March 2019, the NAPAC helpline received 396 calls that included reports of neglect, though callers could disclose more than one type of abuse during the call ([Table 24](#)). This accounted for one-tenth of calls to the NAPAC's helpline in that year (9.7%). More information on calls to the NAPAC's helpline can be found in [Tables 24 to 26](#).

### Notes for: Use of child abuse support services

1. A small proportion of calls in the latest year to the NSPCC's helpline are from children experiencing abuse themselves (3%; [Table 23](#)). Analysis excludes callers where the relationship to the child was unknown.
2. Includes referral updates, where the helpline received additional information about an existing referral.
3. A small proportion of calls to NAPAC's helpline in the latest year were from children (2%; [Table 26](#)). Analysis excludes callers where age was undisclosed.

## 8 . Characteristics of victims of child neglect

Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) data provide a good indicator of the groups of children that are most likely to be victims of physical neglect.

In the year ending March 2019, the CSEW estimated that women were more likely to have experienced physical neglect than men (300,000 women compared with 200,000 men; [Table 1](#)).

More information on the characteristics of those who experienced physical neglect before the age of 16 years can be found in [Table 2](#).

The characteristics of those who come to the attention of the police and children's services also provide valuable insights into groups that are more likely to be known to the authorities.

In contrast to the CSEW, males accounted for the majority of victims of cruelty to children/young persons offences recorded by the police in the year ending March 2019 (55% males compared with 45% females; [Table 5](#)).

Similarly, boys were more likely than girls to be on a child protection plan (CPP) in England or on the child protection register (CPR) in Wales<sup>1</sup> for neglect, with 21 in 10,000 boys and 20 in 10,000 girls on a CPP<sup>2</sup> and 16 in 10,000 boys and 15 in 10,000 girls on the CPR<sup>3</sup> ([Tables 10 and 15](#)).

The majority of victims of cruelty to children/young persons offences recorded by police in the year ending March 2019 were aged under 10 years at the time of the offence ([Table 6](#)). Children aged under one year were more likely than other age groups to be subject to a CPP or on the CPR for neglect, with 41 in 10,000 children on a CPP and 38 in 10,000 children on the CPR ([Tables 10 and 14](#)).

## Characteristics of those who use support services

Some children are more likely to use Childline than others, so counselling sessions will disproportionately reflect their experiences. The majority of counselling sessions are with girls and, according to [research by Childline](#), the most common age is 15 years. Children who contact Childline to receive support and advice for neglect are more likely to be older than children who come to the attention of children's services. This could be because younger children are less likely to have access to their own personal phone or online devices and are therefore unable to access Childline services. They may also be less likely to recognise that they need help.

Of the counselling sessions provided for neglect in the year ending March 2019 ([Table 19](#)), where gender was known, 72% or 293 were delivered to females<sup>4</sup>, and where age was known, age 12 to 15 years was the most common age group, accounting for 51% or 217 sessions<sup>5</sup>.

The least common age group for counselling sessions for neglect was age 16 to 18 years, accounting for 21% or 90 sessions ([Table 19](#)). For other types of abuse, age 11 years and under was the least common age group. Research shows that social care and other safeguarding professionals have found it hard to identify, assess and respond appropriately to adolescent neglect, according to a [report by The Children's Society](#). The [National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children \(NSPCC\)](#) state that this may be because people perceive adolescents as more independent and less in need of parental care.

Around four-fifths (81%) of neglect-related calls to the National Association for People Abused in Childhood's (NAPAC's) helpline in the year ending March 2019 were from females ([Table 26](#)).<sup>6</sup> Comparing this with CSEW estimates suggests that females are more likely than males to seek support for neglect later in life after the abuse has ended.

### Notes for: Characteristics of victims of child neglect

1. Data for Wales refer to at 31 March 2018. These are the latest data available.
2. Analysis excludes children on a CPP for neglect of a missing or indeterminate gender.
3. Analysis is based on figures rounded to the nearest five. Figures therefore do not sum to 100%.
4. There were 81 counselling sessions that were delivered to children whose gender was unknown. These sessions have been excluded from the analysis.
5. There were 62 counselling sessions that were delivered to children whose age was unknown. These sessions have been excluded from the analysis.
6. Analysis excludes callers where gender was undisclosed.

## 9 . Quality and methodology

All differences reported in this article, based on the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW), are [statistically significant](#) at the 5% level unless stated otherwise. More information about the methodology of the CSEW can be found in the [User guide to crime statistics for England and Wales](#).

Any rates reported in this article are calculated using [mid-year population estimates](#) for the child population (those aged 0 to 17 years). For example, figures for the year ending March 2019 will be based on mid-year 2018 population estimates.

Further commentary on child abuse and quality and methodology information can be found in [Child abuse in England and Wales](#).

### **Cruelty to and neglect of children offences recorded by the police**

Cases of neglect recorded by the police are included in the category of cruelty to children/young persons. Under the [Children and Young Persons Act 1933](#), this category provides the number of offences recorded by the police “if any person who has attained the age of 16 years and has responsibility for any child or young person under that age, wilfully assaults, ill-treats (whether physically or otherwise), neglects, abandons, or exposes him, or causes or procures him to be assaulted, ill-treated (whether physically or otherwise), neglected, abandoned, or exposed, in a manner likely to cause him unnecessary suffering or injury to health (whether the suffering or injury is of a physical or a psychological nature)”.

Previously, the offence of cruelty to children/young persons only covered physical harm to a child and limited the extent to which police were able to respond in cases of non-physical neglect such as emotional, medical and educational neglect.<sup>1</sup> In June 2015, as set out in the [Serious Crime Act 2015](#), the offence was amended to include cases where suffering or injury are psychological and/or physical in nature.

However, not all cases of child neglect come to the attention of the police and, as such, this measure only reflects the number of cases handled by the police, rather than the number of children experiencing child neglect.

### **Child abuse cases that come to the attention of children’s services**

Children may be known and referred to children’s services following emergency intervention by the police or a court order. Where there is a risk to the life of a child or a likelihood of serious immediate harm, local authority social workers, the police or the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) should use their statutory child protection powers to act immediately to secure the safety of the child. Whenever there is reasonable cause to suspect that a child is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm, there should be a strategy discussion involving local authority children’s social care (including the residential or fostering service, if the child is looked after), the police, and health and other bodies such as the referring agency. This might take the form of a multi-agency meeting or phone calls, and more than one discussion may be necessary.

### **Child abuse cases referred to the child protection system are only a partial picture**

Although data on child neglect cases that come to the attention of the authorities provide valuable information, they can only ever provide a partial picture of child neglect as many cases remain hidden.

A [study conducted by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children \(NSPCC\) in 2009](#) looked at the prevalence of child abuse and neglect in the UK. It estimated that 5.0% of children aged under 11 years, 13.3% of young persons aged 11 to 17 years and 16.0% of those aged 18 to 24 years had experienced neglect by a parent or carer at some point in childhood. However, these findings are now more than 10 years old. It is not known whether or how the picture of child neglect has changed since then.

Estimates from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) provided in this article help to partially address this evidence gap by providing official statistics on the prevalence of adults who experienced physical neglect before the age of 16 years.<sup>2</sup> They are based on a self-completion question asking a representative sample of adults aged 18 to 74 years in England and Wales about their circumstances during childhood. This includes whether they experienced physical neglect (that is, someone was not there to take care of them or they did not have access to sufficient food, shelter and clothing). As other types of abuse were asked about using a separate measure, it is not possible to provide data on “Any abuse” including physical neglect.

While the self-completion questionnaire, where respondents were given a tablet computer on which to complete their answers, is designed to be anonymous, to give the respondent privacy and to encourage full disclosure, some may still be unwilling to disclose experience of neglect. While the level of failure to disclose is unknown, it is reasonable to assume some element of under-reporting.

The CSEW does not include any measure of medical or educational neglect. Data on emotional neglect are covered by the CSEW but are included as part of the measure of emotional abuse. This data cannot, therefore, be separated out from CSEW data on emotional abuse. See [Child emotional abuse in England and Wales, year ending March 2019](#) for more information. More information about the methodology of the CSEW can be found in the [User guide to crime statistics for England and Wales](#).

The CSEW estimates in this article cannot be compared with [the NSPCC's 2009 survey results](#). The definitions and methodology used across the two sources are not directly comparable. For example, “neglect” defined by the NSPCC’s study includes all forms of neglect, whereas CSEW estimates are based on physical neglect only. Children and young people were also surveyed within their homes. As a result, a level of under-reporting is expected as the perpetrator may have been present while the survey was being carried out. Furthermore, the estimates for children aged under 11 years were derived from interviewing the child’s parent or guardian. For more information on the methodology used in the NSPCC survey, see [Child abuse and neglect in the UK today](#).

## Notes for: Quality and methodology

1. The cruelty to children/young persons offence was introduced from 1 April 2012 and replaced classifications 11 and 12, “Neglecting to provide for apprentice or servant” and “Cruelty to or neglect of children”.
2. It was not possible to ask respondents about abuse that occurred under the age of 18 years within the constraints of the CSEW. This is because of an overlap with existing survey questions on abuse experienced since the age of 16 years.