

Article

Child sexual abuse in England and Wales: year ending March 2019

Child sexual abuse in England and Wales, bringing together a range of different data sources from across government and the voluntary sector

Contact:
Meghan Elkin
crimestatistics@ons.gov.uk
+44 (0) 20 7592 8695

Release date:
14 January 2020

Next release:
To be announced

Table of contents

1. [Main points](#)
2. [What is child sexual abuse?](#)
3. [Things you need to know about this release](#)
4. [What do we know about the prevalence of sexual abuse during childhood?](#)
5. [Child sexual abuse recorded by the police](#)
6. [Indecent images of children](#)
7. [Child sexual abuse cases that come to the attention of children's services](#)
8. [Circumstances of sexual abuse before the age of 16 years](#)
9. [Did victims of child sexual abuse tell anyone about the abuse?](#)
10. [Use of child abuse support services](#)
11. [Characteristics of victims of child sexual abuse](#)
12. [What do we know about perpetrators of sexual abuse before the age of 16 years?](#)
13. [Quality and methodology](#)

1 . Main points

- The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) estimated that 7.5% of adults aged 18 to 74 years experienced sexual abuse before the age of 16 years (3.1 million people); this includes both adult and child perpetrators.
- The abuse was most likely to have been perpetrated by a friend or acquaintance (37%); around a third (30%) were sexually abused by a stranger.
- The majority of victims did not tell anyone about their sexual abuse at the time, with “embarrassment” being the most common reason.
- In the year ending March 2019, the police in England and Wales recorded 73,260 sexual offences where there are data to identify the victim was a child.
- At 31 March 2019, 2,230 children in England were the subject of a child protection plan (CPP) and 120 children in Wales were on the child protection register (CPR) for experience or risk of sexual abuse.
- Sexual abuse has become the most common type of abuse counselled by Childline in recent years; it was also the most commonly reported type of abuse by adults calling the National Association for People Abused in Childhood’s (NAPAC’s) helpline in the year ending March 2019.

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
- [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
- [Rape Crisis](#) can be called on 0808 802 9999
- [Samaritans](#) can be called on 116 123 or emailed at jo@samaritans.org
- [The Survivors Trust](#) can be called on 08088 010 818
- [Victim Support](#) can be called on 0808 16 89 111

2 . What is child sexual abuse?

Practitioners have come to define child sexual 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 sexual abuse” as:

“...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 [including via the internet] ... Sexual abuse is not solely perpetrated by adult males. Women can also commit acts of sexual abuse, as can other children.”

Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. [The same 2018 HM Government report, 'Working together to safeguard children'](#), defines “child sexual exploitation” as:

“...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”.

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) separates child sexual abuse into “contact” or “non-contact”. Contact sexual abuse includes sexual assault by rape or penetration, including attempts, and other behaviours such as being touched sexually (for example, groping, touching of breasts or bottom, and kissing) or being forced into touching someone else’s body for sexual purposes. Non-contact sexual abuse includes where someone made the individual watch or listen to sexual acts or look at sexual images; made or shared sexual images of them; deliberately exposed themselves to them; or sent them sexual images or videos of themselves or others.

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 sexual abuse with the aim of providing a better understanding of child sexual abuse 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)
- National Crime Agency (NCA)
- 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 sexual abuse measured?

Measuring the scale and nature of child sexual abuse can be difficult because it is usually hidden from view. Victims often feel unable to report their experiences and adults are not always able to recognise that abuse is taking place. As a result, administrative data sources do not represent the full scale of the issue. There are no current surveys measuring children's experiences of sexual abuse 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, sexual abuse.

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

- adults' self-reported experiences of child sexual abuse
- child sexual abuse 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 sexual abuse during childhood?

Current prevalence of child sexual abuse is challenging to measure

There is no source providing the current prevalence of child sexual abuse. The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) provides the best available indicator by measuring the prevalence of adults who experienced sexual abuse before the age of 16 years. This includes sexual abuse perpetrated by adults or children.

The CSEW provides an underestimate of child sexual abuse as abuse against 16- and 17-year-olds is not included. See [Quality and methodology](#) for more information on the CSEW.

In the year ending March 2019, the CSEW estimated that approximately 3.1 million adults aged 18 to 74 years experienced sexual abuse before the age of 16 years ([Table 1](#)). This is equivalent to 7.5% of the population aged 18 to 74 years ([Table 2](#)).

Contact sexual abuse was more common than non-contact sexual abuse

In the year ending March 2019, the CSEW estimated that 3% of adults aged 18 to 74 years experienced non-contact sexual abuse before the age of 16 years. Around twice as many experienced contact sexual abuse (6%). Within this category, rape or assault by penetration, including attempts, was less common than other contact sexual abuse (2% compared with 6%). Other contact sexual abuse includes being touched sexually (for example, groping or kissing) or being forced to touch someone else's body for sexual purposes.

Victimisation varied by certain personal and household characteristics. See [Characteristics of victims of sexual abuse](#) and [Tables 7a to 8b](#) for more information.

Over one-third of victims experienced more than one type of sexual abuse

Around 4 in 10 adults (36%) who were sexually abused before the age of 16 years experienced more than one of non-contact sexual abuse, rape or assault by penetration (including attempts), or other contact sexual abuse ([Table 3b](#)). Women were more likely than men to have experienced multiple types of sexual abuse (39% compared with 26%).

Over half of adults (54%) who were sexually abused before the age of 16 years also experienced another type of abuse, whether physical abuse, emotional abuse, and/or witnessing domestic violence or abuse ([Table 4](#)).

More information on multiple victimisation can be found in [Tables 3a to 6b](#).

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

5 . Child sexual abuse recorded by the police

Some victims of child sexual abuse 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.

For each type of sexual abuse measured by the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW)¹, it was estimated that less than one-quarter of adults had reported their abuse to the police ([Table 20](#)). Therefore, the number of child sexual offences recorded by the police cannot be used as a measure of prevalence.

Some of the 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 sexual abuse.

Around one-quarter of child sexual offences recorded by the police in the last year were rape offences

Some sexual offences relate specifically to children, for example, rape of a male or female child under age 16 years. However, both adults and children can be victims of other sexual offences. Age of the victim is therefore needed to identify those that relate to child sexual abuse.

The Home Office Data Hub is a live database that allows police forces to provide the Home Office with record-level information on all crimes recorded. This includes the age of victims at the time of the offence.² However, this information is not always provided so not all sexual offences against children recorded by the police can be identified.

In the year ending March 2019, the police recorded 73,260 sexual offences where there are data to identify the victim was a child ([Table 32](#)). Around one-quarter (27%) of these were rape offences.

It is not possible to identify the number of children that the number of offences recorded by the police relate to, as the same child may be the victim of multiple offences.

The number of police recorded child sexual offences has been impacted by improvements made by the police in the recording of these offences. The HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) report, '[Crime-recording: making the victim count](#)', showed that sexual offences were previously under-recorded by 26%. More recent [Crime Data Integrity inspections](#) carried out by HMICFRS³ indicate evidence of improvements in the recording of sexual offences made by forces since 2014.

High-profile media coverage of child sexual offences and the police response to reports of non-recent child sexual abuse are also thought to have influenced the number of police recorded child sexual offences.

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

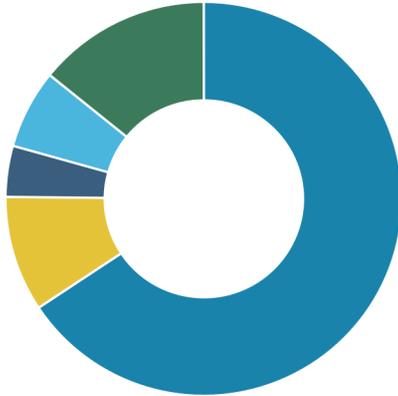
Where data were available from the Home Office Data Hub, 34% of sexual offences against children recorded by the police in the year ending March 2019 occurred one year or more ago ([Table 37](#)).

Figure 1: Around one-third of sexual offences against children occurred one year or more ago

England and Wales, year ending March 2019

Figure 1: Around one-third of sexual offences against children occurred one year or more ago

England and Wales, year ending March 2019



Source: Home Office – Home Office Data Hub

Notes:

1. Police recorded crime data are not designated as National Statistics.
2. These figures are designated as experimental statistics to highlight that they are based on an emerging collection.
3. Only includes offences where a victim's age and information on when the sexual offence occurred were recorded by the police. This information is not always provided, therefore it is not possible to identify the time between the sexual offence occurring and reporting to the police for all sexual offences against children recorded by the police.
4. All offences with more than one victim attached to that offence have been removed from the analysis.
5. Figures are based on 39 police forces that supplied data.

Notes for: Child sexual abuse recorded by the police

1. Three types of sexual abuse are defined by the CSEW: non-contact sexual abuse, rape or assault by penetration (including attempts), and other contact sexual abuse.
2. The majority of police forces use the Data Hub, but some information is only available for certain forces, depending on the quality of information supplied. The Home Office is continuing to develop and implement this system.
3. These reports were published between 2016 and 2019, and the most recent reports were published on 7 January 2020.

6 . Indecent images of children

Obscene publications offences relate to the possession, taking and distribution of sexual images.¹ Some of the sub-categories of this offence relate specifically to children. Information on these sub-categories comes from the Home Office Data Hub. However, as not all police forces use the system, not all obscene publications offences against children recorded by the police can be identified.

The 39 police forces that currently use the Home Office Data Hub recorded 17,521 obscene publications offences against children in the year ending March 2019 ([Table 36](#)).

Child Abuse Image Database

[The Child Abuse Image Database \(CAID\)](#) holds data relating to child abuse images encountered by the police, the National Crime Agency (NCA), and approved industry bodies. The CAID is a UK-wide system, although images could be taken anywhere in the world and include victims from any country. The CAID helps police identify victims and perpetrators of sexual abuse. Not all images in the database will be recorded as crimes.

Of the 2.1 million unique images recorded in the CAID in the latest year ([Table 38](#)):

- 191,963 (9%) involved penetrative sexual activity
- 204,049 (10%) involved non-penetrative sexual activity
- 1,603,356 (76%) were indecent images not falling into penetrative or non-penetrative sexual activity²
- 106,256 (5%) were animations or depictions of indecent images of children

The ease at which indecent images of children can be accessed and shared online results in offenders commonly being found with hundreds of thousands, and sometimes millions, of indecent images of children on their devices.

Identifying UK victims in child sexual abuse materials

In the year ending March 2019, 552 unique victims within indecent images of children were identified by UK law enforcement ([Table 42](#)). These data are collated by the NCA. Some of these victims will have been identified with the assistance of the CAID.

For further data relating to indecent images of children, see the data landscape.

Notes for: Indecent images of children

1. These are recorded under the category of “Miscellaneous Crimes Against Society”.
2. This includes children posing in a sexualised manner or images focussing on their genital region. There must be an indecent element to the image.

7 . Child sexual abuse 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 and data handled by both agencies. Not all child sexual abuse 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 sexual abuse. 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 sexual abuse 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 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 30,720 assessments in England where sexual abuse was identified as a factor and 18,720 assessments where sexual exploitation was identified as a factor ([Table 43](#)). Similar data are not available for Wales.

The number of children identified by children’s services as needing support because of sexual abuse has remained stable over time

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, 2,230 children^{1,2} (2 per 10,000) were subject to a CPP in England with a primary concern of sexual abuse. This is a 2% increase from the previous year ([Table 44](#)). A further 120 children³ in Wales (2 per 10,000) were on the CPR because of sexual abuse. This has remained at a similar level to the previous year ([Table 48](#)).

Children returning to a child protection plan

Of the 2,950 CPPs for sexual abuse⁴ that were started in England during the year ending March 2019, 18% (530⁵) were a second or subsequent plan. Previous plans were not necessarily for the same type of abuse as the current plan ([Table 47](#)). 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. Similar data are not available for Wales.

Further information on children on CPPs or the CPR for sexual abuse can be found in [Tables 43 to 50](#).

Serious incident notifications relating to sexual abuse have decreased in the last year

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 if 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 44 serious incident notifications for serious harm with a cause of sexual abuse or exploitation in England in the year ending March 2018⁶ – a fall of 19% compared with the previous year ([Table 51](#)). This is in line with the overall fall seen for all serious incident notifications for serious harm in the latest year (21%). Equivalent data are not available for Wales.

Notes for: Child sexual abuse 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 20 unborn children subject to a CPP for sexual abuse because of concerns that the unborn baby was suffering or was likely to suffer significant harm once born ([Table 45](#)).
3. Figures are rounded to the nearest five.
4. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10.
5. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10.
6. These are the latest data available.

8 . Circumstances of sexual abuse before the age of 16 years

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) provides information on the circumstances of sexual abuse before the age of 16 years. This provides insight into the experience of victims, which can be used to inform policy and interventions for child sexual abuse.

Where does sexual abuse occur?

Contact sexual abuse (see [Section 2](#) of this article for definitions) experienced before the age of 16 years was most likely to have occurred in someone else's home (40%) or in their own home (37%). Further breakdowns by type of contact sexual abuse can be found in [Table 14](#).

How long does sexual abuse last?

For over half (54%) of adults who experienced sexual abuse before the age of 16 years, the abuse lasted for less than one year ([Table 16a](#)). For a further quarter (25%), the abuse occurred over a period of one year or more but less than four years.

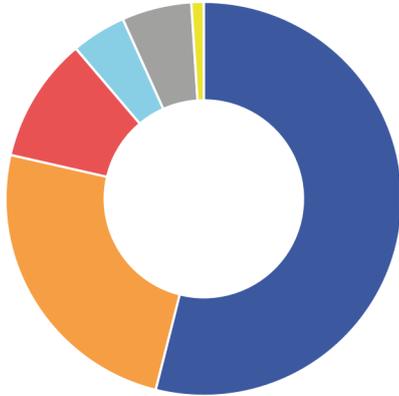
The length of abuse will be affected by the age abuse started, and people may find it difficult to recall experiences of sexual abuse in early infancy. For information on age when abuse started, see [Characteristics of victims of sexual abuse](#).

Figure 2: The majority of sexual abuse before the age of 16 years lasted for less than one year

England and Wales, year ending March 2019

Figure 2: The majority of sexual abuse before the age of 16 years lasted for less than one year

England and Wales, year ending March 2019



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

Notes:

1. These data are derived using the age at which the sexual abuse started, the age at which the abuse stopped, or whether the abuse continued past the age of 16 years. To provide an estimate of the length of abuse from the data available, it has been assumed that the victim was abused for the full year in which both the abuse started and the abuse stopped. For example, if the respondent said the abuse started at age six years and stopped at age eight years, the length of abuse has been calculated to be three years. For the purpose of calculating the length of abuse that occurred before the age of 16 years, any abuse continuing to or beyond the age of 16 years is treated as if it had ended at the age of 15 years.
2. For cases where the respondent has answered “Don’t know/can’t remember” or “Don’t wish to answer” for age abuse started or age abuse stopped, it cannot be determined how long the abuse occurred. For this reason, these data have been excluded from the analysis.

For a breakdown of length of abuse by type of sexual abuse and length of abuse by age group, see [Tables 16a and 16b](#).

How frequently did sexual abuse occur?

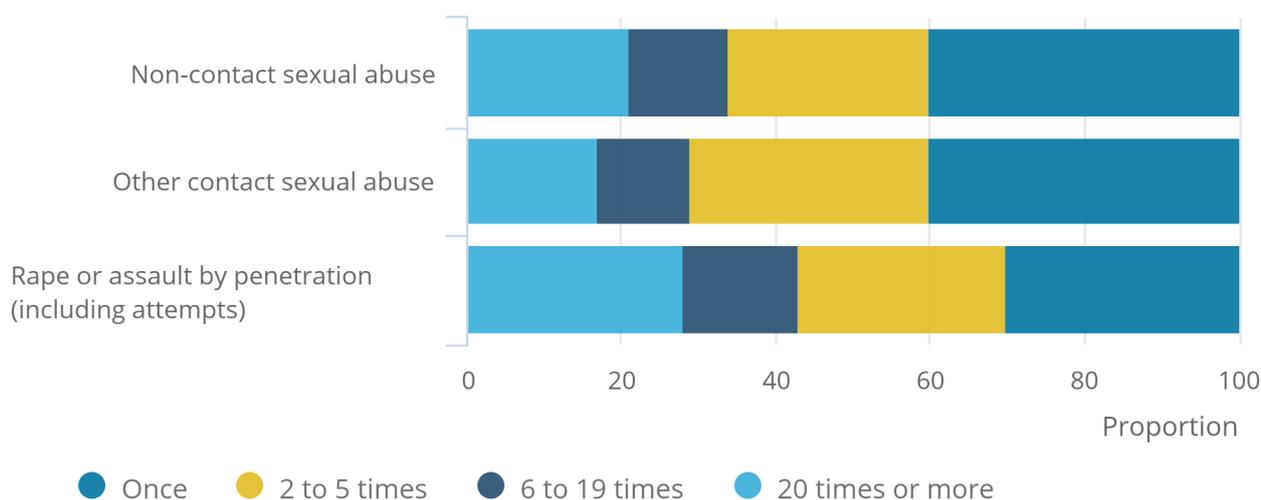
Length of abuse may cover one or more incidents that occurred infrequently or continuous incidents covering the whole period between the abuse starting and stopping. Not everyone's experience of abuse is the same. It is therefore important to also consider the frequency and type of the abuse. The CSEW estimated that for rape or assault by penetration, including attempts, 7 in 10 adults experienced more than one incident. For other contact sexual abuse and non-contact sexual abuse, around 6 in 10 adults experienced more than one incident ([Table 17](#) ; Figure 3).

Figure 3: Frequency of sexual abuse experienced before age 16 years varied by type of abuse

England and Wales, year ending March 2019

Figure 3: Frequency of sexual abuse experienced before age 16 years varied by type of abuse

England and Wales, year ending March 2019



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

Notes:

1. See Section 5.1 of the [User guide](#) for definitions of abuse during childhood.
2. “Don’t know or can’t remember” and “Don’t wish to answer” responses have been excluded from the analysis.

9 . Did victims of child sexual abuse tell anyone about the abuse?

Many victims do not disclose their abuse to anyone. The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) data on adults' experience of sexual abuse before the age of 16 years provides a good indicator of how much abuse remains hidden.

Some adults who experienced sexual abuse before the age of 16 years have never told anyone

The CSEW estimated that the victim had never told anyone and no-one ever found out about the sexual abuse before the age of 16 years for ([Table 19](#)):

- one in six victims of non-contact sexual abuse (17%)
- one in five victims of rape or assault by penetration (including attempts) (21%)
- one in four victims of other contact sexual abuse (24%)

There was no significant difference between men and women in the disclosure of rape or assault by penetration, including attempts. Men were more likely than women to have never told anyone or for no-one to have ever found out about other contact sexual abuse (34% compared with 22%) and non-contact sexual abuse (30% compared with 14%) ([Table 19](#)).

Around one-quarter of adults told someone about their sexual abuse at the time

Around one in four adults (24%) who experienced rape or assault by penetration, including attempts, before the age of 16 years told someone about the abuse at the time. Disclosure rates were higher for other contact sexual abuse (30%) and non-contact sexual abuse (40%) ([Table 22](#)).

Those who told someone at the time were most likely to have told someone they knew personally (for example, a family member, friend, partner or neighbour) ([Table 23](#)).

Around one in seven adults (14%) told the police about non-contact sexual abuse they experienced before the age of 16 years. Reporting rates to the police were lower for rape or assault by penetration, including attempts (7%), and other contact sexual abuse (6%) ([Table 23](#)).

The most common reason for not telling anyone at the time was “embarrassment”

For all three types of sexual abuse, “embarrassment” was the most commonly reported reason for not disclosing at the time (53% to 58%) ([Table 25](#)). Other common reasons included:

- “Didn’t think they would believe me” (33% to 45%)
- “Thought it would be humiliating” (26% to 28%)
- “Didn’t think anyone would do anything about it” (20% to 22%)

More than one-third of adults only told someone about the sexual abuse later in life

The CSEW estimated that around half of adults (46%) who experienced rape or assault by penetration, including attempts, before the age of 16 years only told someone about the abuse later in life. This was lower for other contact sexual abuse (37%) and non-contact sexual abuse (34%) ([Table 29](#)).

Further breakdowns of when and who adults who experienced sexual abuse told can be found in [Tables 18 to 31](#).

10 . Use of child abuse support services

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

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.

Sexual abuse was the most common abuse-related concern counselled by Childline in the latest year

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 current 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.

In the year ending March 2019, 8,841 counselling sessions were delivered to children in the UK where sexual abuse was the primary concern. This number has fallen by 25% since the year ending March 2015, but the overall number of counselling sessions delivered by Childline has also fallen ([Table 54](#)). 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.

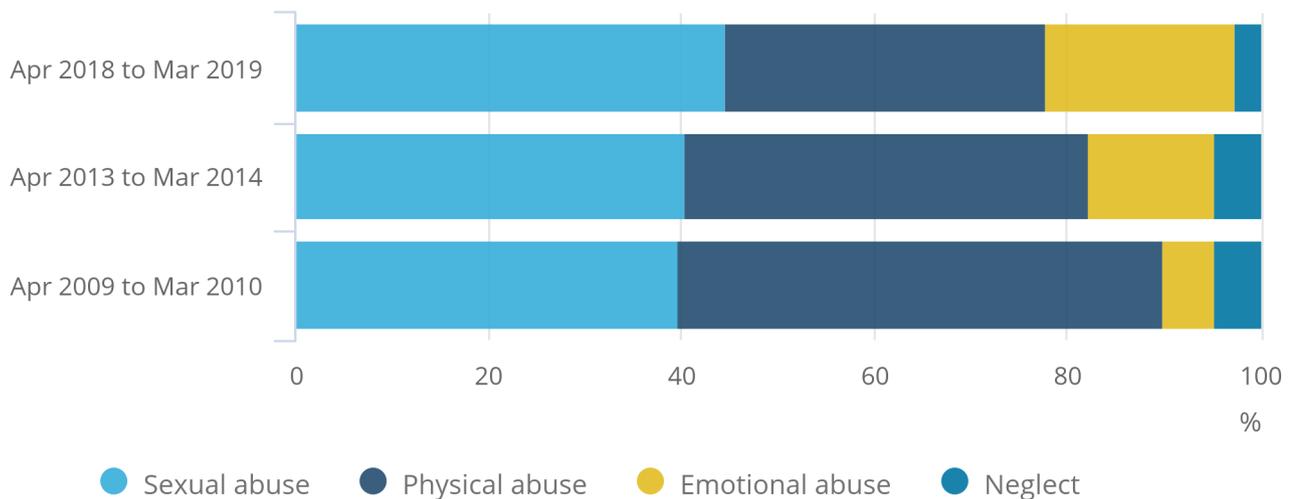
It is not possible to identify the number of children who are speaking to Childline as the same child may have multiple counselling sessions.

Figure 4: Sexual abuse has overtaken physical abuse in recent years as being the most common abuse-related concern counselled

UK, year ending March 2010 to year ending March 2019

Figure 4: Sexual abuse has overtaken physical abuse in recent years as being the most common abuse-related concern counselled

UK, year ending March 2010 to year ending March 2019



Source: NSPCC – Childline

Notes:

1. The number and reasons for counselling sessions can be affected by Childline campaigns, and other external factors such as high-profile news stories.
2. All data relates to the number of counselling sessions delivered by Childline (as opposed to the number of children speaking to Childline). The same child may have multiple counselling sessions with Childline.
3. All data relates to counselling sessions where the young person talked about their own worries. Data from counselling sessions where young people had concerns about another child are not included in these breakdowns.
4. All data relates to the “main concern” young people talked about in each counselling session. This is the issue that children and young people talked about most in their counselling session. However, children may talk about a range of different issues over the course of a counselling session.

[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 209 sexual abuse-related referrals on behalf of children ([Table 56](#)).

This number has increased by 17% in the last year and has more than doubled since the year ending March 2010. There has been an overall increase in the number of referrals made by Childline in recent years. Childline is analysing the factors behind this.

Sexual abuse-related contacts to the NSPCC have increased in the last year

Data from the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children's (NSPCC's) helpline provide information on contacts from those who are worried about the safety or welfare of a child across the UK.¹ 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 was an increase of 11% in sexual abuse-related contacts to the NSPCC's helpline in the year ending March 2019 (9,232). This is in line with an overall increase of 12% in helpline contacts over the same period ([Table 57](#)).

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 9,232 sexual abuse-related contacts to the NSPCC's helpline in the year ending March 2019, around one-third (32%) resulted in referral to an external agency.² Around two-thirds (68%) received advice. This differs from other types of abuse where the majority of calls resulted in a referral ([Table 59](#)).

Information on who contacted the NSPCC's helpline with concerns of sexual abuse can be found in [Table 58 and 59](#).

Sexual abuse was the most commonly reported type of abuse to the NAPAC's helpline

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

In the year ending March 2019, 63% (2,562) of calls to the NAPAC's helpline reported sexual abuse ([Table 60](#)). Sexual abuse was the most commonly reported type of abuse, though callers could state more than one type of abuse during the call. In contrast, sexual abuse was one of the least prevalent types of abuse estimated by the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) ([Table 2](#)). This suggests that victims of sexual abuse are more likely to seek support later in life than victims of other types of child abuse.

More information on calls to the NAPAC's helpline can be found in [Tables 60 to 62](#).

Notes for: Use of child abuse support services

1. A small proportion of calls in the latest year to the NSPCC's helpline for abuse were from children experiencing abuse themselves (3%) ([Table 58](#)). Analysis excludes callers where the relationship to the child was unknown.
2. This includes referral updates, where the helpline received additional information about an existing referral.
3. A small proportion of calls to the NAPAC's helpline in the latest year were from children (2%) ([Table 62](#)). Analysis excludes callers where age was undisclosed.

11 . Characteristics of victims of child sexual abuse

Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) data on adults' experience of abuse before the age of 16 years provide a good indicator of the groups of children that were most likely to be victims of sexual abuse.

[Child abuse extent and nature, England and Wales: year ending March 2019](#) provides more detailed commentary on these groups.

In the year ending March 2019, the CSEW estimated that women were around three times as likely as men to have experienced sexual abuse before the age of 16 years (11.5% compared with 3.5%) ([Table 7b](#)). This equates to an estimated 2.4 million women and 709,000 men aged 18 to 74 years ([Table 1](#)). Rape or assault by penetration, including attempts, showed the greatest proportional difference between women and men (3.4% compared with 0.6%).

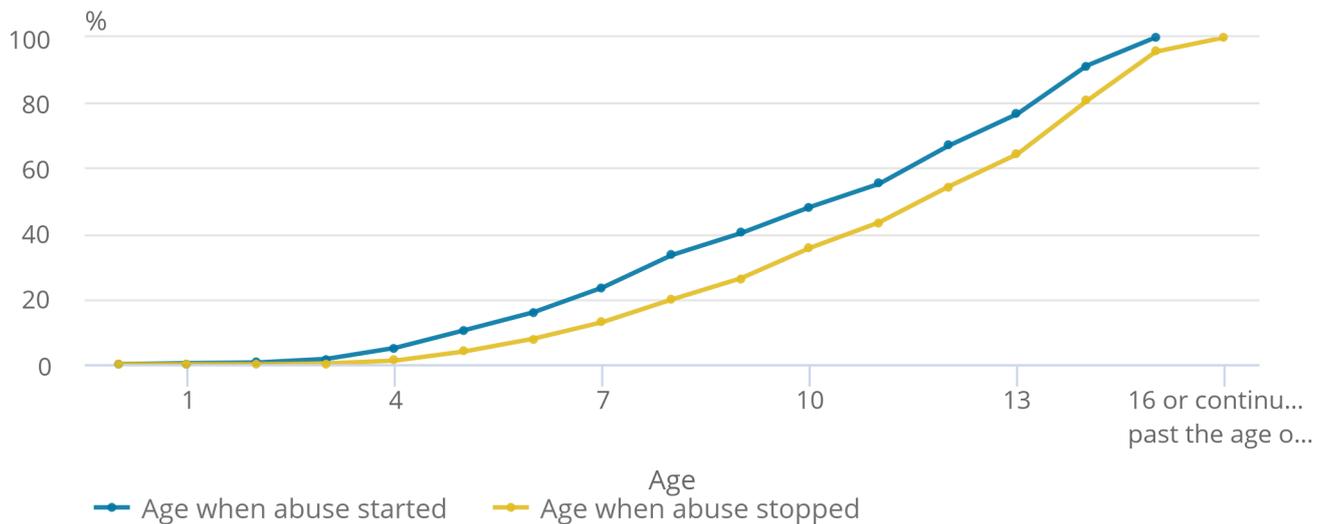
Sexual abuse experienced before the age of 16 years had started or occurred by age 11 years for around half of victims (48%) ([Table 15](#); Figure 5). For the majority of victims (96%), the abuse had stopped before they were age 16 years.

Figure 5: Around half of sexual abuse started before secondary school age

England and Wales, year ending March 2019

Figure 5: Around half of sexual abuse started before secondary school age

England and Wales, year ending March 2019



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

Notes:

1. These data are derived using the age the sexual abuse started, the age the abuse stopped, and whether the abuse continued past the age of 16 years. If a respondent said the abuse stopped at age 16 years, or said that the abuse continued past the age of 16 years, they have been categorised as experiencing the abuse at 16 years or having the abuse continued past the age of 16 years.
2. “Don’t know or can’t remember” or “Don’t wish to answer” responses have been excluded from analysis.

The figure indicates that relatively few adults experienced abuse between the ages of 0 and 3 years, although there may be recall issues with remembering sexual abuse in early infancy.

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

Females accounted for the majority of victims of sexual offences against children recorded by the police in the year ending March 2019 (80% female, 20% male) ([Table 34](#)).

Girls were around twice as likely as boys to be subject to a child protection plan for sexual abuse in England ¹ or on the child protection register for sexual abuse in Wales ² (2 in 10,000 girls compared with 1 in 10,000 boys) ([Tables 45 and 50](#)).

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. [Childline data](#) show that the majority of counselling sessions are with girls and the most common age is 15 years.

Of the counselling sessions provided for sexual abuse in the year ending March 2019 ([Table 55](#)), where gender was known, 87% were delivered to females (6,986)³, and where age was known, age 12 to 15 years was the most common age group at 50% (3,885)⁴.

Around three-quarters of sexual abuse-related calls to the National Association for People Abused in Childhood's (NAPAC's) helpline in the year ending March 2019 were from females (75%) ([Table 62](#)).⁵

Notes for: Characteristics of victims of child sexual abuse

1. Data for England refer to at 31 March 2019.
2. Data for Wales refer to at 31 March 2018. These are the latest data available.
3. There were 798 counselling sessions delivered to children whose gender was unknown. These sessions have been excluded from the analysis.
4. There were 1,132 counselling sessions delivered to children whose age was unknown. These sessions have been excluded from the analysis.
5. Analysis excludes 60 callers where the gender of the caller was unknown.

12 . What do we know about perpetrators of sexual abuse before the age of 16 years?

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) provides information on the relationships between adults who experienced sexual abuse before the age of 16 years and their perpetrator(s). This includes sexual abuse perpetrated by adults or children. Knowledge of perpetrators is useful in tackling abuse as it can inform approaches that could be used to identify and prevent sexual abuse against children.

The majority of perpetrators of sexual abuse before the age of 16 years were males

Around 9 in 10 adults (92%) experienced sexual abuse committed by males only. A further 4% experienced sexual abuse committed by both males and females, and 4% experienced sexual abuse by females only ([Table 13](#)).

Victims were most likely to have been sexually abused by a friend or acquaintance

Adults who were sexually abused before the age of 16 years were most likely to have been abused by a friend or acquaintance (including neighbours and friends or acquaintances of oneself or one's family) (37%). Around one-third (30%) were sexually abused by a stranger ([Table 12a](#)).

These were the most common perpetrators for both men and women, but (Figure 6):

- women were around five times as likely as men to have experienced sexual abuse by a step-father, at 7.5% compared with 1.4%
- women were more likely than men to have experienced sexual abuse by a family member that was not a parent or step-parent, at 24% compared with 15%
- women were around four times as likely as men to have been sexually abused by a partner or ex-partner, at 11% compared with 3%
- men were more likely than women to have experienced sexual abuse by a person in a position of trust or authority, such as a teacher, doctor or youth worker, at 16% compared with 6%

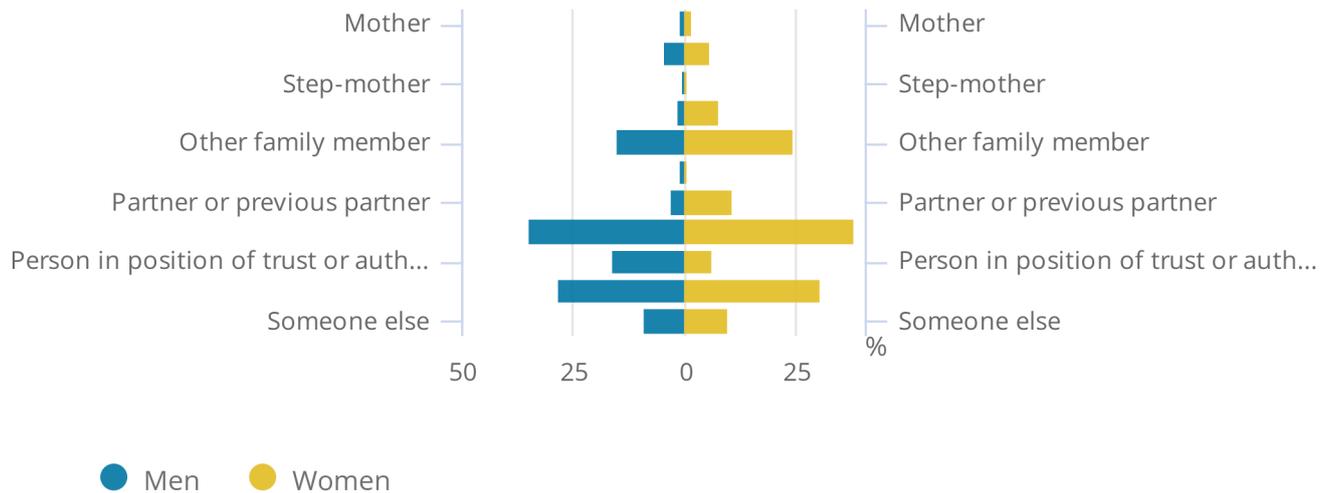
Other apparent differences between men and women are not statistically significant.

Figure 6: Men and women were equally likely to have been abused by a friend or acquaintance or a stranger

England and Wales, year ending March 2019

Figure 6: Men and women were equally likely to have been abused by a friend or acquaintance or a stranger

England and Wales, year ending March 2019



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

Notes:

1. Percentages sum to more than 100 as respondents could choose more than one answer for this question.
2. “Friend or acquaintance” includes friend or acquaintance, friend or acquaintance of a member of your family, or neighbour.
3. “Person in position of trust or authority” includes people such as teachers, doctors, youth workers, coaches and religious figures.

Further information about perpetrators by type of sexual abuse can be found in [Table 12b](#).

13 . 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](#).

Child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation flagged offences

Police are required to flag offences where children have been sexually abused or exploited. This allows sexual offences against children to be identified where the offence does not specify that the victim is a child. As the use of these flags is currently inconsistent across forces, we have instead used age of the victim to provide a more reliable measure of such offences in this article. [Experimental Statistics](#) relating to the flags can be found in [Tables 35a and 35b](#).

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 sexual abuse cases that come to the attention of the authorities provide valuable information, they can only ever provide a partial picture of child sexual abuse 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 1.2% of children aged under 11 years, 16.5% of children aged 11 to 17 years and 24.1% of those aged 18 to 24 years had experienced sexual abuse 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 sexual abuse has changed since then.

Estimates from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW), provided in this article, help to address this evidence gap by providing [official statistics](#) on the prevalence of adults who experienced sexual abuse before the age of 16 years. This includes sexual abuse perpetrated by adults or children. They are based on a set of self-completion questions asked to a representative sample of adults aged 18 to 74 years in England and Wales.

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.

The survey separates child sexual abuse into "non-contact" and "contact". Non-contact sexual abuse includes where someone made the individual watch or listen to sexual acts or look at sexual images; made or shared sexual images of them; deliberately exposed themselves to them; or sent them sexual images or videos of themselves or others. Contact sexual abuse includes sexual assault by rape or penetration, including attempts, and other behaviours such as being touched sexually (for example, groping, touching of breasts or bottom, and kissing) or being forced into touching someone else's body for sexual purposes.

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

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, estimates for children aged under 11 years were derived from interviewing the child's parent or guardian. Children and young people were also surveyed within their homes for the NSPCC study. As a result, a level of under-reporting is expected as the perpetrator may have been present while the survey was being carried out. For more information on the methodology used in the NSPCC survey, see [Child abuse and neglect in the UK today](#).