

Article

# Transforming children's crime statistics for England and Wales: March 2023

Progress update on our transformation of the Children's Crime Survey for England and Wales.

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Release date:  
1 March 2023

Next release:  
To be announced

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# 1 . Overview

It is vital that children are visible in our statistics, and their views and experiences are reflected to enable evidence-informed government decisions and policies that support and protect children. The Children's Crime Survey for England and Wales (CCSEW) is one of few continuous, nationally representative surveys of children and provides important information on the prevalence and nature of crime and other harmful experiences among children.

Since its inception, the CCSEW has been a face-to-face survey of children aged 10 to 15 years. One child is invited to take part in households where an individual aged 16 years or over has taken part in the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW). In response to evolving user needs and changes in respondent behaviour following the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, we have identified the need to review how the CCSEW operates to ensure we can continue to produce timely and quality statistics which meet the needs of users. Alongside the [re-design of the adult CSEW \(PDF, 558KB\)](#), we are undertaking user engagement and research to transform the CCSEW to an online mode of data collection. The aim of this transformation is to improve the flexibility, inclusivity and sustainability of the survey.

We are taking an iterative approach to transformation, enabling us to learn and adapt the survey design in response to feedback from children and parents. Last year we commissioned Kantar Public to conduct research into the practical and ethical issues involved in moving the CCSEW online. This article provides an update on our development work to date and future plans for transforming the CCSEW.

## 2 . Why we are transforming the Children's Crime Survey for England and Wales

Transforming the Children's Crime Survey for England and Wales (CCSEW) is important for improving the quality and availability of statistics relating to children's risk of being a victim of crime and other harmful experiences. Response rates for children sampled from households taking part in the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) have notably fallen in recent years, making it difficult to collect sufficient data to produce timely outputs to meet users' needs.

During the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, data collection for the CCSEW was paused, at a time when data was crucial for understanding the impact on children's lives. These challenges have increased the importance of alternative modes of interviewing to increase flexibility for children and provide greater resilience to external events.

To overcome these challenges, we are undertaking ambitious plans to move data collection for children online and separate it from the adult survey collection. Our vision for a transformed survey is to sample children directly from administrative sources, rather than through households responding to the CSEW. This approach provides potential long-term benefits, including:

- a larger and more representative sample, with potential for including children aged 16 and 17 years
- improved quality and granularity of estimates
- a shorter data collection period and more timely estimates
- opportunities for longitudinal data collection

Our research over the next two years will inform our recommendation for the design of a transformed online survey of children, with the objective of improving the quality, inclusivity, and sustainability of the survey, enabling us to produce statistics that better meet user needs. These statistics will be important for informing and monitoring the impact of policy recommendations for improving children's safety in the community and online, such as those highlighted in the [Children's Commissioners' Big Answer](#).

## 3 . User engagement

We recognise the importance of consulting with data users to ensure that the impacts of changes are understood. Over the past 18 months we have held stakeholder events, conducted a stakeholder survey and run a [public consultation on the redesign of the Crime Survey for England and Wales \(PDF, 558KB\)](#). These have given users an opportunity to tell us what they need from a transformed survey and provide feedback on our plans. Through this we have learnt:

- an online approach to data collection is welcome
- there is a need for comparable data on children aged 16 and 17 years to reflect that the legal definition of a child is everyone under the age of 18 years
- preserving the time series was seen as less important than improving the quality and coverage of statistics
- a longitudinal approach was seen as beneficial for analysing trends in victimisation over time
- more granular data, including breakdowns by protected characteristics and smaller geographies would be helpful for understanding how crimes are affecting different groups

We are continuing to engage with users to ensure they are kept informed, and their data needs are reflected within our transformation plans. We have recently established a Children's Crime Survey Steering Group (CCSSG). Comprising of representatives from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), external government departments and children's charities' representatives, the group aims to provide advice and guidance in relation to the re-design of the survey.

## 4 . Progress to date

We are taking an iterative approach to transformation and involving children throughout our research, enabling us to learn quickly and adapt our plans. Our research has focused on how we can appropriately and safely survey children online. While there are examples of children already being surveyed online, very few ask about their experience of victimisation and other harmful experiences.

### Qualitative research

To understand the additional challenges with conducting a survey of this nature online, we commissioned Kantar Public to undertake qualitative research with children and their parents. The objectives of this were to explore the practical and ethical issues involved in moving the Children's Crime Survey for England and Wales (CCSEW) online and whether it could be suitably administered to a wider age range, including 9-year-olds and 16- to 17-year-olds.

This research focused on the self-completion module, which is already designed to be completed independently by children on a tablet, following the interviewer administered section of the survey. This enabled early discovery of the challenges of moving the survey online before investing in significant work to re-develop the interviewer administered sections for online completion.

Parallel interviews were conducted with children aged 9 to 17 years, and a parent or guardian. During the interview, participants were shown pre-survey communication materials, including the Parental Information Card and the Youth Survey Leaflets used in the current face-to-face survey, and mock-up versions of a survey invitation letter to an online survey. The child then completed the self-completion module of the survey online with the interviewer observing, while the parents reviewed a copy of the questionnaire.

The findings from this research and how they have influenced the ongoing development of an online CCSEW are discussed in this section. For more information on the research itself, see [Kantar Public's Research on Transforming the Crime Survey for England and Wales report \(PDF, 2.3MB\)](#).

## Small-scale test

We have recently commenced a small-scale online test with the support of Kantar Public. The test aims to incorporate recommendations from the previous research and explore some of the challenges identified in a real-life setting. Although we are aiming to sample children separately in the future, for this test we are inviting children whose parent or guardian completed a Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) interview between October 2021 and March 2022. Children in these households have not previously taken part in the face-to-face survey as it was paused during this time.

The online test launched in January 2023 and fieldwork will run for five months until the end of May 2023. Follow-up qualitative interviews will be conducted with a small sample of children who complete the online survey and their parent or guardian. The interviews will explore their experience of taking part in the survey, including:

- their thoughts on the pre-survey communication and any further improvements that could be made
- how their parents were involved in survey completion and how this could be minimised in future
- whether the level of support in place before and after completing the survey was adequate
- accessibility of the survey

Section 5: Considerations for developing an online CCSEW outlines how the findings from the first phase of qualitative research have informed the design for the online test and ongoing research to develop an online CCSEW.

## 5 . Considerations for developing an online CCSEW

### Communication materials

#### The purpose of the survey needs to be clear and compelling

The findings from the qualitative research have highlighted the importance of clear and engaging pre-survey communication materials. They need to communicate any information that an interviewer would typically provide, to ensure that children understand the purpose of the survey and to reassure parents that the survey is suitable for their child. This is especially important if we use a sample separate from the adult CSEW in the future, as the parent will not have any prior knowledge of the survey. Further detail on these findings can be found in Section 7 of [Kantar Public's Research on Transforming the Crime Survey for England and Wales report \(PDF, 2.3MB\)](#).

We have made a number of changes to the materials for the online test, including:

- simplifying the language to ensure it can be understood by younger children
- re-framing the call to action around "helping the government understand how to keep children safe" to move the focus of the survey away from crime
- reframing as the "Young People's Safety Survey" for consistency with the call to action
- developing a new website and frequently asked questions (FAQs) for signposting to more information to keep the letters simple and engaging

The impact of these changes on respondents' understanding of the survey will be explored through follow-up qualitative interviews.

## **Questionnaire**

### **An online survey needs to be shorter and less repetitive**

The findings support our assumption that an online survey would need to be much shorter than the current face-to-face survey. In 2019 to 2020, the average survey took over 25 minutes to complete and it was even longer for children who reported being a victim of crime.

To enable us to continue to measure a breadth of content on victimisation and other harmful experiences through an online survey, we envisage that the survey will follow a modular design. This would involve following up respondents to the first module to invite them to complete a second module. We will need to give careful consideration to the content and length of each module as well as how to minimise attrition between modules.

Our work to develop an online victimisation module will focus on how we can measure prevalence of crime as our consultation highlighted that this was of greater importance to users than incidence of crime. We will continue engagement with users to understand their requirements for data from an online survey. We will also use existing research with children, such as the Children's Commissioner's Big Ask, as well as engaging directly with children, to ensure the content reflects the issues most relevant to children.

### **The language needs to be simple and accessible to all children**

The qualitative research identified some challenges with comprehension among some questions. These were related to the use of ambiguous or outdated language which was misinterpreted by some children. For example, terms such as "bothered" or "inappropriate websites" were interpreted by children in multiple ways. Although not directly linked with mode, in the face-to-face survey, the interviewer is on hand to clarify anything that is unclear to the respondent. In an online survey, it is important that the language is clear and understood by all children to minimise confusion and potential involvement from parents.

As the re-design of the victimisation module will take place over a longer timescale, for the online test we are using the self-completion module again. Considering the findings from the qualitative research, we have reviewed and simplified the language in the questionnaire. We have reduced the length to 15 minutes by temporarily removing questions on speaking to strangers online and sending sexual messages. We have also included a sentence in the communication materials and at the start of the survey to explain to children the importance of completing the survey in private where possible.

## **Age suitability**

### **The minimum age that children could complete the CCSEW independently online is 10 years**

The research raised significant challenges with the youngest age group completing the survey online. Children aged 9 years felt that they would need a high level of support from parents to overcome issues with comprehension. Parental involvement during the survey is also likely to be a challenge for children aged 10 years and over, although it is anticipated this can be managed through careful design of the survey.

Given the nature of the topics covered in the survey, children may not feel comfortable answering honestly in the presence of a parent and may alter their answers to more sensitive questions. Therefore, we have concluded that it would not be feasible to extend the survey to 9-year-olds. Although children aged under 10 years are included in other self-completion surveys, these are usually administered within a school setting, or are much shorter and simpler than the CCSEW. An important focus of the online test is exploring how parental involvement can be minimised for children aged 10 years and over through adaptations to the survey, including simplifying communication materials and reinforcing the importance of children completing in private.

## **The questionnaire should be tailored to different age groups to ensure it is relevant and engaging for children**

The qualitative research found that some of the content in the current survey was less relevant for 16- and 17-year-olds. Tailoring the language and content to this age group could help increase engagement in an online mode. More information on these findings can be found in Section 9.8 of Kantar Public's report.

We are aiming to undertake question development with future expansion to 16- and 17-year-olds in mind. The design of the questionnaire will require a careful balance between ensuring the survey is suitable for all age groups and maintaining enough similarity to enable comparisons to be made between them. We anticipate some questions may only be asked of certain age groups. This is similar to the approach we currently take where questions on sexual messages are only asked of children aged 13 years and over.

## **Ethical considerations**

### **Parental consent is needed for children aged under 16 years**

In the current face-to-face survey parental consent is obtained from parents after the adult interview, before an interview can take place with a child. For the online test, we have adapted the consent process. All letters are addressed to the parent or guardian. If they are happy for the selected child to take part in the survey, they are advised to pass a child friendly version of the letter on to them. In accordance with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) an additional layer of consent is requested of parents of children aged 12 years and under. Before their child can complete the survey, they are required to complete a short, online consent form. Once this has been completed the link to the survey for children is unlocked. This is similar to the approach taken by other online surveys, as outlined in the literature review in Section 4.2 of Kantar Public's report.

### **The safeguarding approach needs to be clearly communicated and easy to understand**

In the current face-to-face survey, the safeguarding approach consists of a combination of signposting to support services and a risk rating mechanism. A risk rating score is generated based on children's answers to questions in the child cyber module. It is designed to provide an indication of the risk (low, medium, or high) associated with the child's behaviour and encourage conversations between parents and children without disclosing their answers to the survey.

The qualitative research found it would be challenging for parents and children to understand the risk rating process in the absence of an interviewer to explain it. Although an overview was provided in the communication materials, parents and children tended to skim-read the text and miss or not fully understand the information about the risk rating process. More information on the findings on the risk rating approach can be found in Section 10 of Kantar Public's report.

Given these challenges, we did not include more sensitive topics (such as speaking to strangers online and sending sexual messages), which feed into the risk rating, in the questionnaire for the online test. To ensure children can access support on the topics included, we embedded signposting to websites and contact details for support services within the questionnaire.

We plan to carry out a comprehensive review of the risk rating system. We will consider whether it could be adapted to make it suitable for an online survey or whether an alternative safeguarding approach would be more appropriate.

We will use the literature review (in Section 4.4 of Kantar Public's report) of safeguarding procedures used by other online surveys of children to explore other safeguarding options for the CCSEW.

## **6 . Future developments**

Over the next six months, we will continue our work with Kantar Public to monitor and evaluate the performance of the online test. The findings will shape ongoing research and future iterations of testing to develop a recommendation for the design of a transformed Children's Crime Survey for England and Wales (CCSEW).

We are also undertaking the following research:

- exploring how we can measure the prevalence and risk of victimisation among children through an online survey
- improving data collection on children's experience of other harmful behaviour, including bullying and online safety
- exploring the coverage and quality of administrative data sources for sampling children directly
- exploring the impact of different sample sizes on the precision of estimates to inform the development of a cost-effective sample design
- reviewing the current risk rating system to inform the development of a safeguarding approach
- refining our engagement strategy and communication materials

We will continue to engage with data users and consult the Children's Crime Survey Steering Group (CCSSG) as our research progresses.

Later this year, we plan to undertake a larger scale statistical test to explore engagement rates and quality of data collected through an online survey which will enable us to assess the viability of proceeding to move data collection online.

We aim to have a recommended design for a transformed CCSEW by April 2025 to enable us to live launch as soon as feasible. In the interim, we will continue to collect data from children through the face-to-face survey and incorporate learning and continuous improvement from transformation research where appropriate.

## 7 . Related links

[Research on Transforming the Crime Survey for England and Wales \(PDF, 2.3MB\)](#)

Qualitative report | Released 26 January 2023

A summary of the findings from the qualitative research conducted by Kantar Public.

[Consultation response: Redesign of the Crime Survey for England and Wales \(PDF, 558KB\)](#)

Consultation response | Released 7 November 2022

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) response to the consultation on the redesign of the Crime Survey for England and Wales that ran from May to August 2022.

## 8 . Cite this article

Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 1 March 2023, ONS website, article, [Transforming children's crime statistics for England and Wales: March 2023](#)