

Article

Child abuse extent and nature, England and Wales: year ending March 2019

Child abuse in England and Wales, bringing together a range of 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 one in five adults aged 18 to 74 years experienced at least one form of child abuse, whether emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, or witnessing domestic violence or abuse, before the age of 16 years (8.5 million people).
- Many cases of child abuse remain hidden; around one in seven adults who called the National Association for People Abused in Childhood's (NAPAC's) helpline in the latest year had not told anyone about their abuse before.
- In the year ending March 2019, Childline delivered 19,847 counselling sessions to children in the UK where abuse was the primary concern; around 1 in 20 of the sessions resulted in a referral to external agencies.
- At 31 March 2019, 49,570 children in England and 4,810 children in Wales were looked after by their local authority because of experience or risk of abuse or neglect.
- Around half of adults (52%) who experienced abuse before the age of 16 years also experienced domestic abuse later in life; compared with 13% of those who did not experience abuse before the age of 16 years.

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
- The National Male Survivor Helpline can be called on 0808 800 5005 or emailed at support@safeline.org.uk

2 . What is child abuse?

There is no specific offence of “child abuse” in law. 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] abuse” as:

“A form of maltreatment of a child. Somebody may abuse or neglect a child by inflicting harm, or by failing to act to prevent harm. Children may be abused in a family or in an institutional or community setting by those known to them or, more rarely, by others. Abuse can take place wholly online, or technology may be used to facilitate offline abuse. Children may be abused by an adult or adults, or another child or children”.

Child abuse is typically defined in four main categories – emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse and neglect – although it can come in many forms. For example, child abuse includes offences relating to modern slavery, human trafficking, female genital mutilation, child sexual exploitation, and witnessing domestic violence or abuse. Not all crimes against children are child abuse. Child abuse does not include straightforward property offences where the child is a victim, for example, theft of a mobile phone.

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 abuse with the aim of providing a better understanding of child 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)
- 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](#). This includes separate articles that provide more detail on the different types of abuse.

How is child abuse measured?

Measuring the scale and nature of child abuse is 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 that measure children’s experiences of 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, abuse.

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 abuse. Indicators of child abuse reported in this article use data on:

- adults’ self-reported experiences of child abuse
- 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 abuse during childhood?

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

The CSEW provides an underestimate of child abuse as abuse against 16- and 17-year-olds is not included. Abuse perpetrated by children aged under 16 years is also only included for sexual abuse. See [Quality and methodology](#) for more information on the CSEW.

The CSEW estimated that one in five adults experienced abuse before the age of 16 years

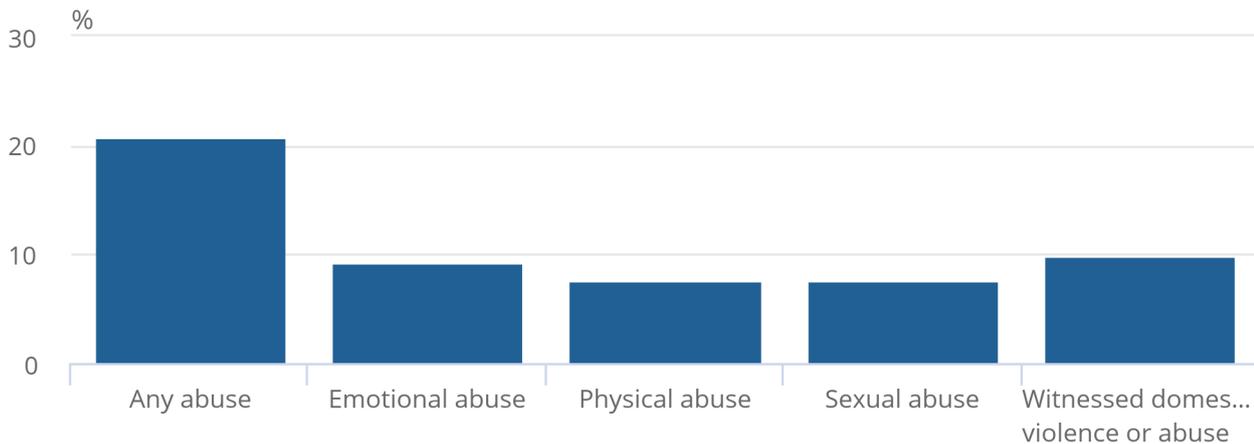
In the year ending March 2019, the CSEW estimated that approximately 8.5 million adults aged 18 to 74 years experienced abuse before the age of 16 years ([Table 1](#)). This is equivalent to 20.7% of the population aged 18 to 74 years ([Table 2](#); Figure 1).

Figure 1: Witnessing domestic violence or abuse and emotional abuse were the most commonly experienced types of abuse

England and Wales, year ending March 2019

Figure 1: Witnessing domestic violence or abuse and emotional abuse were the most commonly experienced types of abuse

England and Wales, year ending March 2019



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

Notes:

1. "Don't know or can't remember" and "Don't wish to answer" responses have been excluded.
2. "Any abuse" includes respondents who said they experienced emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, or said they witnessed domestic violence or abuse in the home. See Section 5.1 of the [User Guide](#) for definitions of abuse during childhood.
3. "Any abuse" will not be the sum of the different types of abuse, as some victims may be included in multiple categories as they can experience more than one type of abuse.
4. "Emotional abuse" was referred to as "psychological abuse" in previous publications.
5. "Sexual abuse" includes rape or assault by penetration (including attempts), other contact sexual abuse, and non-contact sexual abuse.

Victimisation varied by certain personal and household characteristics; see [Characteristics of victims of child abuse](#) and [Tables 5 and 6](#) for more information.

Just under half of victims experienced more than one type of abuse

Around 4 in 10 adults (44%) who were abused before the age of 16 years experienced more than one of emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, or witnessing domestic violence or abuse ([Table 3](#)). This proportion is higher for women than men (46% compared with 41%).

The CSEW estimates fill an important evidence gap but only of adults' past experiences of abuse. They do not provide a measure of the current level of 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 abuse cases that come to the attention of children's services

Some victims of child abuse remain hidden. Around one in seven adults (15%) who called the National Association for People Abused in Childhood's (NAPAC's) helpline in the latest year had not told anyone about their abuse before ([Table 48](#)).¹

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.² Children may be referred to their local authority children's services because of concerns they are experiencing, or are at risk of, abuse or neglect.

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 insight into cases where the child needed support from a local authority or to be moved out of their usual family home.

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

Children identified by children's services as needing support because of abuse or neglect

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 therefore be taken when drawing comparisons using this information.

Information on factors relating to abuse identified at assessments in England can be found in [Table 12](#). Similar data are not available for 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, 52,260 children^{3,4} in England (43 per 10,000) were subject to a CPP ([Table 13](#)). Despite a small decrease in the latest year (3%), this number has increased by 21% since the year ending March 2013. A further 2,820 children⁵ in Wales (45 per 10,000) were on the CPR ([Table 17](#)). This was a 5% fall compared with the previous year.⁶

Further information on children subject to CPPs or on the CPR can be found in [Table 13 to 21](#).

Children cared for by local authorities because of abuse or neglect

Some children who come to the attention of local authorities will become "looked-after children". The definitions between England and Wales differ slightly, but generally this refers to those who are cared for by local authorities.

In most cases, if a child on a CPP or on the CPR becomes looked after, it will no longer be necessary to maintain the CPP or be on the CPR. However, there are a small number of cases where safeguarding issues will remain and a looked-after child will also be subject to a CPP or on the CPR.

At 31 March 2019, 49,570 children⁷ in England (41 per 10,000) were looked after by their local authority because of abuse or neglect ([Table 22](#)).⁸ A further 4,810 children⁹ in Wales (76 per 10,000) were looked after because of abuse or neglect ([Table 28](#)). The difference in rates between England and Wales is consistent with the difference in the rates of all looked-after children.

The number of children looked after because of abuse or neglect has increased by 4% in England and by 6% in Wales in the latest year.

Further information on children receiving care and support from their local authority can be found in [Tables 22 to 31](#).

Serious incident notifications relating to abuse or neglect

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 of child abuse involves harm to more than one child, data are only collected about the first child identified on the incident form.

There were 155 abuse-related serious incident notifications for serious harm in England in the year ending March 2018 ([Table 32](#)). Abuse accounted for 54 serious incident notifications for child death in the year ending March 2018 ([Table 33](#)).¹⁰ Equivalent data are not available for Wales.

Notes for Child abuse that comes to the attention of children's services

1. Analysis excluded 1,553 callers who did not disclose whether they had disclosed their abuse before.
2. We do not know how many child abuse offences are recorded by the police as there is no specific offence of "child abuse" in law. Child abuse would fall under many different offences and cannot always be separated from offences against adults.
3. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10.
4. At 31 March 2019, there were 1,210 unborn children on a CPP for abuse or neglect because of concerns that the unborn baby was suffering or was likely to suffer significant harm once born ([Table 14](#)).
5. Figures are rounded to the nearest five.
6. As a result of changes in the legislation, comparable data are only available since the year ending March 2017.
7. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10.
8. Further detail of the primary need codes can be found in Appendix A of the [Children in need census collection guide](#).
9. Figures are rounded to the nearest five.
10. These are the latest data available.

6 . Use of child abuse support services

Some victims are not able to recognise that they are being abused, and adults cannot always spot the signs that child 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 abuse as well as those who are concerned about child 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.

Around 1 in 12 Childline counselling sessions relate to abuse or neglect

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. 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 19,847 counselling sessions delivered to children in the UK where abuse or neglect was the primary concern in the year ending March 2019. This is a decrease of 25% since the year ending March 2015, but the overall number of counselling sessions has also fallen over this time period ([Table 37](#)). 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. The proportion of abuse-related counselling sessions has remained stable over this period at between 8% and 10% ([Table 37](#)).

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, 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 847 abuse-related referrals on behalf of children ([Table 39](#)).

This number has increased by 31% in the last year and has doubled since the year ending March 2010 ([Table 39](#)). The proportion of abuse-related counselling sessions resulting in referral has also increased over the same period (from 1% in the year ending March 2010 to 4% in the year ending March 2019). Childline is analysing the factors behind this.

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, or multiple contacts can relate to the same child.

There were 44,025 contacts to the NSPCC's helpline where there was concern about child abuse in the year ending March 2019. This was an increase of 5% from the previous year. This compares with an overall increase of 12% in helpline contacts over the same period ([Table 40](#)).

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. 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. The police will also be contacted if the child is at immediate risk.

Of the 44,025 abuse-related contacts to the NSPCC's helpline in the year ending March 2019, 55% resulted in referral to an external agency,² with 45% receiving advice ([Table 40](#)).

Information on who contacted the NSPCC's helpline with concerns of abuse or neglect can be found in [Tables 41 and 42](#).

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

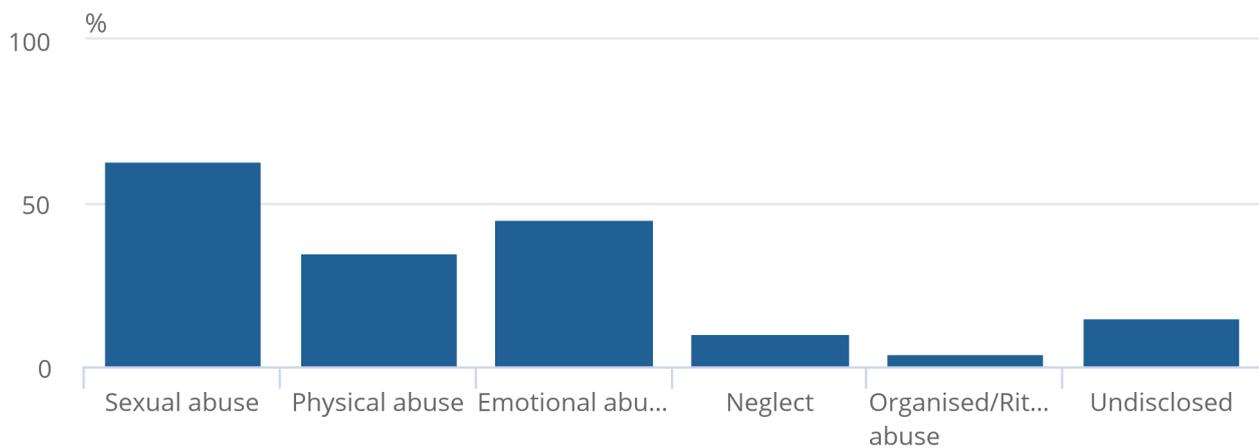
The National Association for People Abused in Childhood's (NAPAC's) helpline offers support to adult survivors of child abuse across the UK.³ Data from the NAPAC's helpline indicate the support adult survivors of abuse require later in life and the demand on support services after the abuse has ended. In the year ending March 2019, there were 4,064 calls made to the NAPAC's helpline (Figure 2; [Table 43](#)).

Figure 2: Sexual abuse was reported in around two-thirds of calls to NAPAC's helpline

UK, year ending March 2019

Figure 2: Sexual abuse was reported in around two-thirds of calls to NAPAC's helpline

UK, year ending March 2019



Source: National Association for People Abused in Childhood (NAPAC)

Notes:

1. Data relate to contacts where the caller talked about abuse they had experienced as a child. Data from contacts where the caller had concerns about someone else are not included in these breakdowns.
2. Percentages sum to more than 100 as callers could state more than one type of abuse.
3. "Organised" or "Ritual" abuse can include sexual, physical and emotional abuse.

More information on calls to the NAPAC's helpline can be found in [Tables 43 to 51](#).

What is often a hidden crime can have an impact later in life

In some cases, experience of abuse as an adult may lead people to reach out for support about their experience of abuse as a child as well. Around half of adults (52%) who experienced abuse before the age of 16 years also experienced domestic abuse later in life⁴; this compares with the 13% of adults who experienced domestic abuse later in life but did not experience abuse before the age of 16 years.

For further information about the impacts of child abuse later in life, using data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) for the year ending March 2016, see [People who were abused as children are more likely to be abused as an adult](#).

Notes for Use of child abuse support services

1. A small proportion of calls in the latest year to NSPCC's helpline for abuse are from children experiencing abuse themselves, at 3% ([Table 41](#)). 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 50a](#)). Analysis excludes callers where age was undisclosed.
4. The CSEW defines domestic abuse as occurring since the age of 16 years, and it includes sexual abuse, non-sexual abuse and stalking by a partner or family member.

7 . Characteristics of victims of child 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 are most likely to be victims of abuse.

Victimisation varied by a number of personal and household characteristics ([Tables 5 and 6](#)), but many of these characteristics will be closely associated (for example, marital status and age). Caution is needed in the interpretation of the effect of these different characteristics when viewed in isolation.

The personal characteristics of CSEW respondents are those at the time of their interview, so some of these characteristics may differ from the time they experienced the abuse.

The characteristics of children who come to the attention of children's services also provide valuable insight into the groups that are more likely to become known to the authorities.

Women were more likely than men to have experienced abuse before the age of 16 years

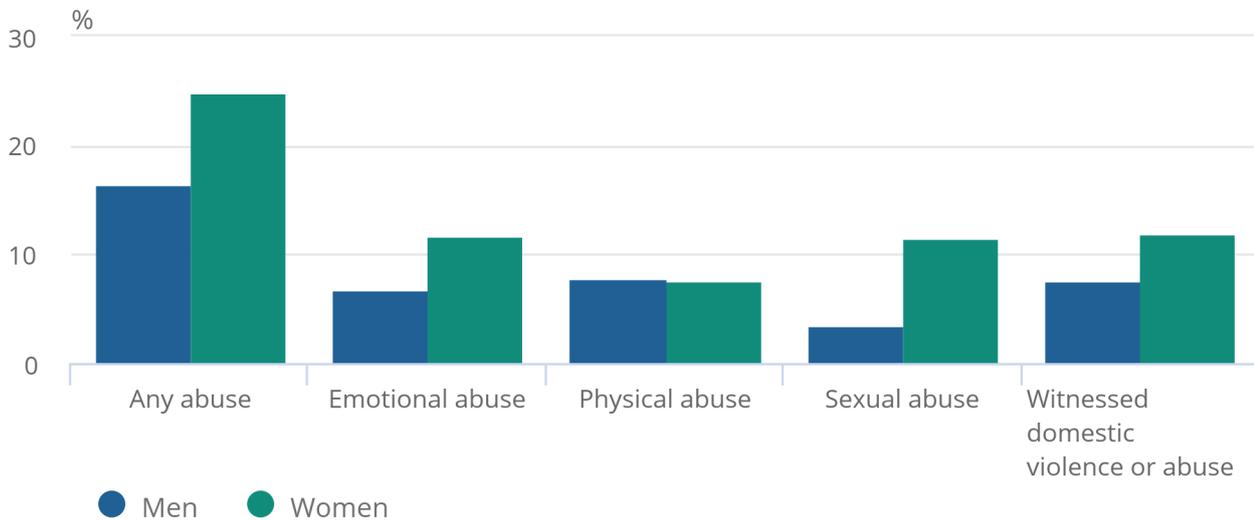
Around one in four women (25%; 5.1 million women) and around one in six men (16%; 3.3 million men) aged 18 to 74 years experienced abuse before the age of 16 years ([Table 1](#)). Prevalence was higher for females than males for each type of abuse, with the exception of physical abuse where there was no difference (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Experience of sexual abuse before the age of 16 years showed the greatest difference between men and women

England and Wales, year ending March 2019

Figure 3: Experience of sexual abuse before the age of 16 years showed the greatest difference between men and women

England and Wales, year ending March 2019



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

Notes:

1. See Section 7.3 of [User Guide](#) for definitions of personal characteristics.
2. “Any abuse” includes respondents who said they experienced emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, or said they witnessed domestic violence or abuse in the home. See Section 5.1 of the [User Guide](#) for definitions of abuse during childhood.
3. “Emotional abuse” was referred to as “psychological abuse” in previous publications.
4. “Sexual abuse” includes rape or assault by penetration (including attempts), other contact sexual abuse, and non-contact sexual abuse.

Boys were slightly more likely to be subject to a child protection plan (CPP) in England than girls (43 per 10,000 and 42 per 10,000 respectively; [Table 14](#)).¹ The likelihood of being on the child protection register (CPR) in Wales was the same for boys and girls (38 per 10,000; [Table 19](#)).²

Boys were more likely than girls to be looked after by local authorities because of abuse or neglect (43 per 10,000 boys and 40 per 10,000 girls in England, 79 per 10,000 boys and 73 per 10,000 girls in Wales; [Tables 23 and 29](#)).³

Younger children were more likely to come to the attention of children's services

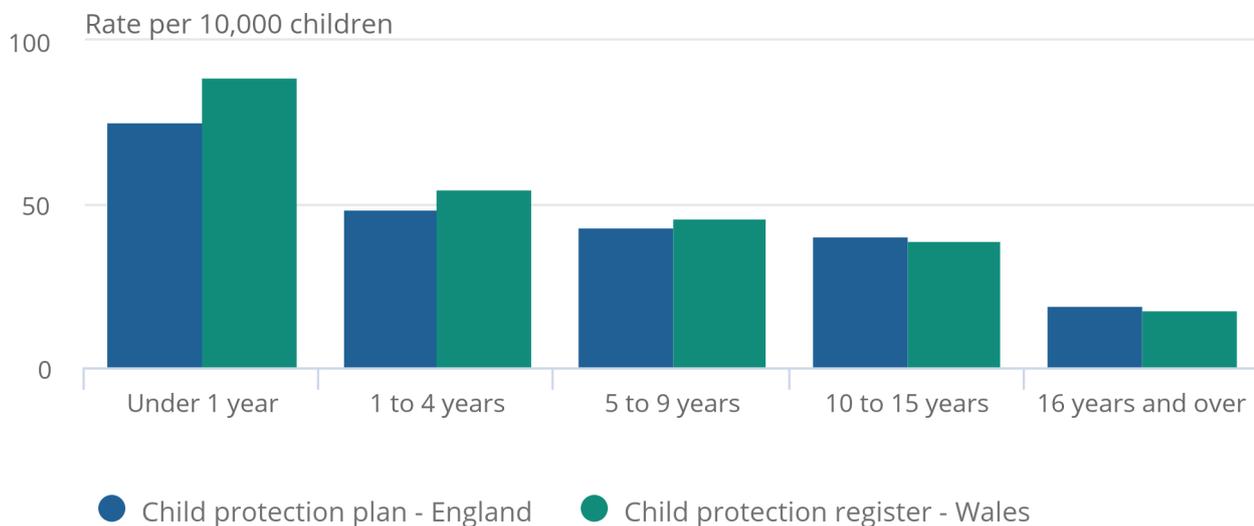
In the year ending March 2019, children under the age of one year were the most likely age group to be subject to a CPP in England (76 per 10,000⁴; [Table 14](#)) or on the CPR in Wales (89 per 10,000; [Table 18](#)).

Figure 4: As the age of children increased, the likelihood of being subject to a CPP or on the CPR decreased

England and Wales, year ending March 2019

Figure 4: As the age of children increased, the likelihood of being subject to a CPP or on the CPR decreased

England and Wales, year ending March 2019



Source: Department for Education – Children in need census and Welsh Government – Children receiving care and support (aggregate return)

Notes:

1. Data for Child Protection Plan – England includes some young people aged 18 or over who are still receiving care and accommodation or post-care support from children's services.
2. Data for Child Protection Register – Wales are experimental

Experience of child abuse differs between ethnic groups

The CSEW shows differences in the prevalence of child abuse between ethnic groups. Those identifying as having a Mixed or multiple ethnic identity were significantly more likely to have experienced abuse before the age of 16 years (32%) than White (21%), Black (17%), Other (17%) and Asian (11%) ethnic groups.

Asian ethnic groups were significantly less likely to have experienced abuse before the age of 16 years than all other ethnic groups, except for Other ethnic groups where there was no significant difference.

These differences vary by the type of abuse. More detail can be found in [Table 5](#), but caution should be taken when interpreting the figures between ethnic groups. Many of the differences are not statistically significant, particularly when looking at smaller minority ethnic groups where results are based on a small number of respondents.

These findings may also be affected by cultural differences in the likelihood of disclosing abuse. [Research](#) has shown that children from black and minority ethnic groups face additional barriers to disclosing child abuse.

Children who were subject to a CPP in England and children who were on the CPR in Wales were predominantly White (77%⁵ and 95%⁶ respectively; [Tables 14 and 19](#)). Similar proportions are seen for children looked after by local authorities (79% in England⁷ and 93% in Wales⁸; [Tables 23 and 29](#)). These figures are similar to the proportion of the population that are White.⁹

Further questions on adverse childhood experiences provide additional insight

The CSEW included questions about adverse childhood experiences that occurred before the age of 16 years. These questions did not cover all adverse childhood experiences. A list of those included in the survey can be found in [Quality and methodology](#). Caution is needed in interpreting the relationships. It is not known whether the adverse childhood experience is a result of any abuse as a child or whether they were at greater risk of being a victim because of any adverse childhood experiences. However, the questions provide a useful indicator of some adverse childhood experiences that may make children more vulnerable to abuse or that may have occurred as a result of abuse.

Adverse childhood experiences is a commonly used term. However, in the context of circumstances that occur as a result of child abuse, some may have helped the child. For example, a child may have lived in a care home to protect them from harm in their family home or a child may have experienced a household member going to prison because they were convicted of abusing the child.

Adults who experienced abuse before the age of 16 years were more likely to have experienced one or more adverse childhood experience before the age of 16 years than those who did not experience abuse (34% compared with 9%).¹⁰ This was true for all types of abuse ([Table 7](#)).

Adults were more likely to have been abused before the age of 16 years if they experienced any of the adverse childhood experiences asked about in the CSEW. For example, adults who ([Table 8](#)):

- lived with a household member who had a long-term physical health condition or disability (35% compared with 20%)
- lived with a household member who had a long-term mental health condition or disability (54% compared with 19%)
- lived with someone who was a problem drinker or misused drugs (70% compared with 18%)

Adults with a disability were around twice as likely to have experienced abuse before the age of 16 years

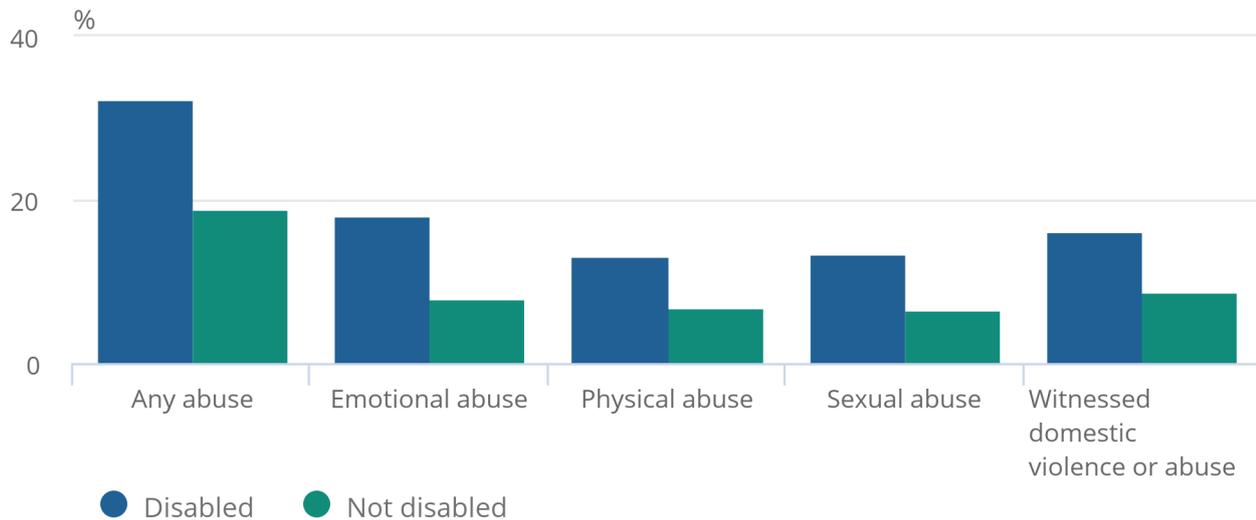
A person is considered to have a disability if they have a long-standing illness or impairment that causes difficulty with day-to-day activities. This definition of disability is consistent with the [core definition of disability under the Equality Act 2010](#). Adults aged 18 to 74 years with a disability were significantly more likely to have experienced abuse before the age of 16 years than those without a disability, at 32% compared with 19% (Figure 5). This was true for all types of abuse asked about in the CSEW.

Figure 5: Adults with a disability were around twice as likely to have experienced any type of abuse before the age of 16 years

England and Wales, year ending March 2019

Figure 5: Adults with a disability were around twice as likely to have experienced any type of abuse before the age of 16 years

England and Wales, year ending March 2019



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

Notes:

1. See Section 7.3 of [User Guide](#) for definitions of personal characteristics.
2. “Any abuse” includes respondents who said they experienced emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, or said they witnessed domestic violence or abuse in the home. See Section 5.1 of the [User Guide](#) for definitions of abuse during childhood.
3. “Emotional abuse” was referred to as “psychological abuse” in previous publications.
4. “Sexual abuse” includes rape or assault by penetration (including attempts), other contact sexual abuse, and non-contact sexual abuse.
5. The definition of disability used is consistent with the core definition of disability under the Equality Act 2010. A person is considered to have a disability if they have a long-standing illness, disability or impairment that causes difficulty with day-to-day activities.

Similarly, around twice as many adults who had a long-term condition or disability during childhood experienced abuse before the age of 16 years than those without such a condition, at 40% compared with 20%. It is not known whether the adults had a disability at the time of their abuse. However, the findings suggest that children with disabilities may be at greater risk of abuse as they are more vulnerable than other children. [Research suggests that there are several factors that contribute to disabled children](#) and young people being more vulnerable and at greater risk of being abused than non-disabled children.¹¹

Lesbian, gay or bisexual adults were more likely to have experienced abuse before the age of 16 years

Adults whose sexual orientation was bisexual (48%) or gay or lesbian (30%) were more likely to have experienced abuse before the age of 16 than heterosexual (straight) adults (20%; Figure 6).¹² This was true for emotional abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse.

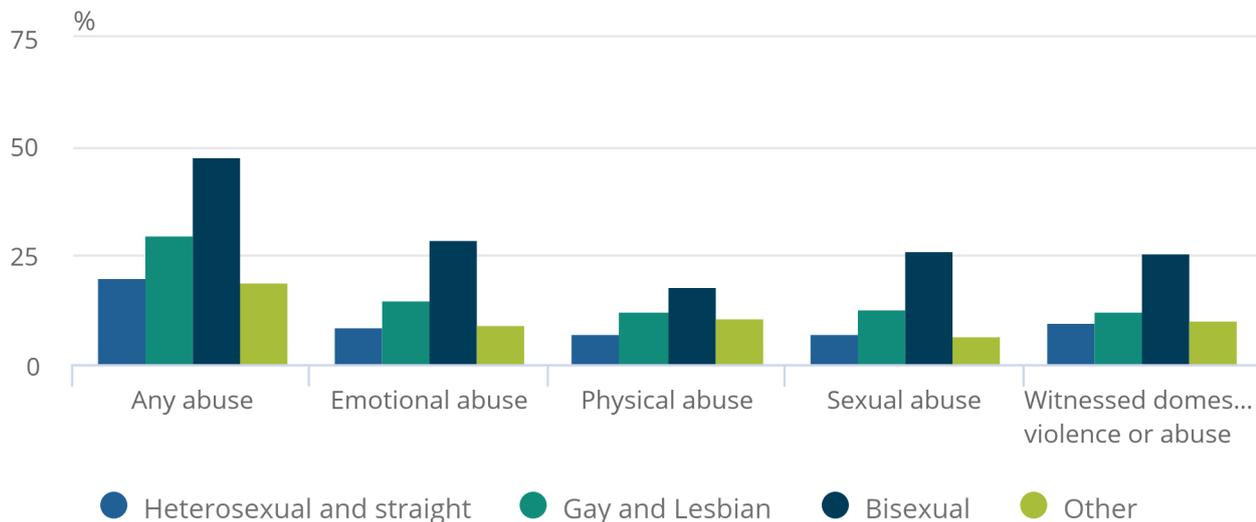
The sexual orientation of CSEW respondents is at the time of their interview, which may not be the same as their sexual orientation at the time of their abuse. However, there is some [evidence that sexual minority teens are more vulnerable to abuse](#) because of negative attitudes towards them.

Figure 6: Bisexual adults were the most likely to have experienced abuse before the age of 16 years

England and Wales, year ending March 2019

Figure 6: Bisexual adults were the most likely to have experienced abuse before the age of 16 years

England and Wales, year ending March 2019



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

Notes:

1. See Section 7.3 of [User Guide](#) for definitions of personal characteristics.
2. “Any abuse” includes respondents who said they experienced emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, or said they witnessed domestic violence or abuse in the home. See Section 5.1 of the [User Guide](#) for definitions of abuse during childhood.
3. “Emotional abuse” was referred to as “psychological abuse” in previous publications.
4. “Sexual abuse” includes rape or assault by penetration (including attempts), other contact sexual abuse, and non-contact sexual abuse.

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 children who contact Childline are girls and the most common age is 15 years.

Of the counselling sessions provided for abuse or neglect in the year ending March 2019 ([Table 38](#)), where gender was known¹³, 79% were delivered to females (13,787), and where age was known¹⁴, age 12 to 15 years was the most common age group, at 52% (9,038).

Around three-quarters of 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 50a](#)).¹⁵ Comparing this with CSEW estimates suggests that females are more likely to seek support for child abuse later in life after the abuse has ended.

Where information was disclosed, around 6 in 10 callers who spoke to NAPAC were over the age of 45 years (59%; [Table 50a](#)).¹⁶ This indicates that many adults do not disclose their abuse and do not seek support until later in life. This is consistent with evidence provided by Survivors UK to the [All-Party Parliamentary Group on Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse](#), which found that the average wait for people to disclose their experience of child abuse was 26 years.

Notes for Characteristics of victims of child abuse

1. For England, the analysis excludes 70 children where gender was missing or indeterminate.
2. Data for Wales refer to at 31 March 2018. These are the latest data available.
3. The difference in rates between England and Wales is consistent with the difference in the rates of all looked-after children.
4. There were 1,210 unborn children subject to a CPP. These unborn children have been excluded from the analysis.
5. Excludes 1,640 children in England where ethnicity was not obtained.
6. Excludes 45 children in Wales where ethnicity was refused or not obtained.
7. Excludes 400 children in England where ethnicity was refused or not yet available.
8. Excludes children in Wales where ethnicity was not obtained.
9. According to the 2011 Census, the White ethnic group made up 79% of the population aged under 18 years in England and 96% of the population aged under 18 years in Wales.
10. "Abuse" here refers to the four main types of abuse asked about in the CSEW: emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse and witnessing domestic violence or abuse.
11. "Disabled children" refers to children and young people with a range of very different conditions and identities, some of whom may not identify as being disabled. This includes children who are d/Deaf; are on the autistic spectrum; have a condition such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); have a learning disability; have a physical disability such as cerebral palsy; or have a visual impairment.
12. The terminology used to label this data has been changed to "sexual orientation" from "sexual identity" to align with terminology used in legislation ([Equality Act 2010](#)). Sexual orientation is an umbrella concept that encompasses sexual identity, attraction and behaviour. This question described within this principle is based on a substantial body of research and is designed to capture self-perceived sexual identity. An individual could respond differently to questions on either sexual identity, attraction or behaviour. The measurement of sexual identity was identified within the research as the component of sexual orientation most closely related to experiences of disadvantage and discrimination. The question was not designed for specific or detailed studies of sexual behaviour or attraction where a series of more detailed questions and answer categories might be more appropriate.
13. There were 2,377 counselling sessions that were delivered to children whose gender was unknown. These sessions have been excluded from the analysis.
14. There were 2,615 counselling sessions that were delivered to children whose age was unknown. These sessions have been excluded from the analysis.
15. Analysis excludes 103 contacts where the gender of the caller was undisclosed.
16. Analysis excludes 2,460 contacts where age of the caller was undisclosed.

8 . 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 population estimates for 2018.

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

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 abuse cases that come to the attention of the authorities provide valuable information, they can only ever provide a partial picture 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 6% of children aged under 11 years, 19% of children aged 11 to 17 years and 25% of those aged 18 to 24 years had experienced severe maltreatment at some point during childhood.

Experiences of maltreatment were defined as severe on the basis of the type of maltreatment; its frequency; whether there were multiple forms of maltreatment; whether there was an injury; whether a weapon had been used; and whether it was defined by the victim as being abusive or would fall into a more severe category of abuse under the criminal law.

These findings are now more than 10 years old. It is not known whether, or how, the picture of child 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 abuse before the age of 16 years. 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.

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](#) because of the different definitions and methodology used. For example, “emotional abuse” as defined by the NSPCC’s study includes bullying, whereas the CSEW measures emotional abuse perpetrated by someone aged 16 or over only. 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. 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](#).

The CSEW also included questions about whether adverse childhood experiences occurred for respondents before the age of 16 years. These questions did not cover all adverse childhood experiences. Those included were:

- respondent had a long-term physical health condition or disability
- respondent had a long-term mental health condition or disability
- household member had a long-term physical health condition or disability
- household member had a long-term mental health condition or disability
- respondent lived in a care home
- respondent lived with a household member who was a problem drinker or alcoholic or misused street or prescription drugs
- respondent lived with a household member who was ever sent to jail or prison
- respondent experienced physical neglect (that is, someone was not there to take care of the respondent they did not have access to sufficient food, shelter and clothing)