

How safe are our children? 2017

REPORT BRIEFING: NORTHERN IRELAND CONTEXT



Introduction

The NSPCC has published the *How safe are our children? 2017* report, our fifth annual overview of child protection in the UK. The report sets out 20 different indicators, providing an overview of the child protection landscape and collating the most up-to-date data that exists across each of the four nations in the UK. Compiling this data is part of the NSPCC's commitment to gathering evidence. It helps us to track the progress of how we are keeping children safe, and sets out what we need to do to protect children.

The data reported shows that collectively we are all doing more to try to keep children safe. In Northern Ireland the PSNI are investigating more suspected cases of child abuse than ever before, social workers are providing support to more and more looked after children, and more members of the public are calling the NSPCC helpline for advice or to report a concern about a child than five years ago.

However, the report data does not show the number of children who may be suffering abuse or neglect and are not known to the system. In 2011, the NSPCC estimated that for every child who was subject to a child protection plan or on a register, another eight were experiencing maltreatment but not getting the support they need. The lack of recent prevalence data means that the true extent of child abuse and neglect today is unknown. This is why we are calling on the Northern Ireland Executive to support the UK Government to launch a new study to assess the extent of abuse and neglect.

This briefing accompanies the UK-wide *How safe are our children? 2017* report. It draws out key data in Northern Ireland and outlines the trends in this data, the policy landscape and child protection priorities in Northern Ireland.

Neglect

While consistently exhibiting lower rates of recorded cruelty and neglect than the other UK nations, Northern Ireland has seen the most notable increase over the past five years. In 2015/16, recorded cruelty and neglect cases reported to the PSNI, while relatively small in number (341), have shown a fairly substantial rise from 4.5 per 10,000 in 2014/15 to 8.9 per 10,000 in 2015/16. Similar rises were reported in England and Wales.

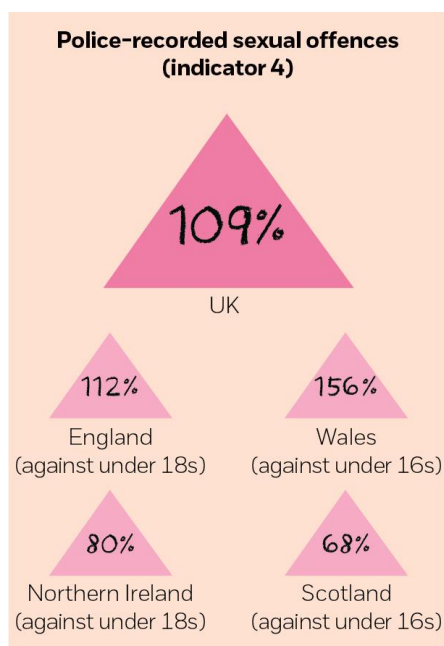
Key findings

- The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) recorded 1,809 sexual offences against victims under 18 in 2015/16; and 341 recorded offences for cruelty and neglect, a rate of 8.9 offences per 10,000 children aged under 16.
- There were no homicides of children under 18 years recorded in 2015/16.
- There were 66,218 contacts from across the UK made to the NSPCC helpline in 2016/17. This is a 21 per cent increase since 2015/16.
- The number of PSNI recorded offences for "Obscene Publications" has increased by 71 per cent in Northern Ireland since 2014/15.
- Across the UK, Childline delivered 295,202 counselling sessions in 2016/17 – a 55 per cent increase since 2009/10.
- Northern Ireland has the highest rate of children on child protection registers, with 49 per 10,000 under 18s on the register.
- 10.3 per cent of children on the child protection register in Northern Ireland are on the register for two years or longer. This is compared with 5.8 per cent in Scotland and 3.8 per cent who are subject to a child protection plan in England.
- This year the number of looked after children (2,890) is the highest on record in Northern Ireland.

Neglect continues to be the most common concern for people contacting the NSPCC helpline. There were 19,448 contacts across the UK to the NSPCC helpline in 2016/17. Of these, 2,556 helpline contacts involved providing adults concerned about neglect with advice. The remaining 16,882 were serious enough to result in referrals to external agencies. Overall, the number of contacts has increased by 61 per cent over the past five years. The biggest leap has come from referrals, which have increased by 96 per cent.

Trends in reporting and in the number of recorded cruelty and neglect offences may reflect increased public awareness and changes in policing structures rather than an increased incidence. Due to a lack of data on prevalence we cannot be certain of the underlying extent of neglect suffered by children in Northern Ireland.

What's changed since the last UK prevalence survey?: 2009/10 – 2015/16



Sexual abuse

All UK nations saw an increase in the number of recorded sexual offences against children in 2015/16. The rate of recorded sexual offences across the UK has doubled since 2005/06, and this year we have seen the highest number of recorded offences for the past decade.

In 2015/16, there were 1,809 recorded sexual offences committed against under 18s in Northern Ireland. This represents an overall increase of 19 per cent on the previous year. The rate of offences per 10,000 under 18 year olds has more than doubled from 19.9 in 2005/06 to 41.7 offences in 2015/16. The most notable year-on-year changes include a 26 per cent increase in offences of sexual assaults involving a child aged 13 and over (from 214 to 270); and a 24 per cent increase (from 293 to 364) in offences of sexual activity involving a child aged 13 and over.

This data only reflects the year in which an offence was reported and not when it was committed. A proportion of offences may not be recent. It is not possible to say how many children may be sexually abused today due to a lack of available information on prevalence beyond the cases reported.

There is a downward trend in the proportion of children on a child protection register (CPR) due to sexual abuse. In 2015/16 sexual abuse accounted for 6 per cent of total registrations. This is an important development and possibly due to the many prevention and early intervention initiatives in Northern Ireland to encourage children and their families to seek help.

Across the UK, our helpline data contacts on sexual abuse have seen a rise of 23 per cent in 2015/16, as part of a consistent year-on-year trend, suggesting that adults and adults feel more confident about reporting sexual abuse.

Mental health and child suicides

Data from Childline shows that mental health is a key concern for children across the UK. Our figures reveal that, across the UK, mental and emotional health issues were the most common reason for Childline counselling sessions with children.

There were 13 suicides where death was recorded as by intentional self-harm and a further four deaths by undetermined intent of 15 to 19 year olds in 2015. The five-year combined rate among 15 to 19 year olds has increased by 194 per cent since 1985. Young people who have died as a result of suicide in Northern Ireland are relatively small in number. Notwithstanding this, Northern Ireland has the highest rate of suicide among 15 to 19 year olds.

Since 2014/15 suicidal feelings has been one of the top five concerns in Childline counselling sessions with children. For the seventh year running, there was an increase in the number of Childline counselling sessions with children across the UK about suicidal issues. Suicidal issues also remains the most common reason for a referral to be made to an external organisation, accounting for 61 per cent of all referrals. The number of referrals about suicide has increased by 733 per cent since 2009/10.

Information on the number of suicides is an important measure of the safety of children and young people, and may often be the result of a combination of other factors, such as abuse, neglect, family problems or mental health issues. It emphasises the need for a whole system approach through the Department of Health's Protect Life Suicide Prevention Strategy; structured processes need to be developed to ensure sources of help; and outcomes-focused pathways for recovery need to be implemented for children who are experiencing suicidal ideation.

Online abuse

For children there is no distinction between their online and offline lives. While the internet can be extremely beneficial for children, it can also leave them vulnerable to risks. The data charting online abuse and risk remains an emerging area, however we are steadily gaining a clearer picture of children's experiences through research such as the NSPCC's Net Aware report, analysis of Childline sessions, and police recording of "Obscene Publications" offences.

We are increasingly seeing children turning to Childline in order to receive support about the issues they face online.

Our data shows that online safety and abuse including cyberbullying, child sexual exploitation online, and sexting are all growing areas of concern for young people talking to Childline counsellors. In 2016/17, Childline delivered 12,248 counselling sessions about online safety and abuse. This is a 9 per cent increase from 2015/16. Of these, 5,103 sessions mentioned cyberbullying, a 12 per cent increase on the previous year. Childline also delivered 2,132 sessions on online child sexual exploitation. This is

an increase of 44 per cent from 2015/16. In 2016/17, there were 221,840 page views of the Childline website explore pages about sexting, making this the most viewed topic for the fourth consecutive year.

For our Net Aware study, the NSPCC asks around 1,700 children aged 11 to 18 from across the UK to review the top social networking sites, apps and games that young people are using. In 2015/16 young people were most likely to say that they had seen bullying on social networks, while in 2016/17 violence and hatred was the most common type of inappropriate content, with 30 per cent of young people's reviews reporting this content. There were 21 per cent of reviews reporting seeing sexual content and 17 per cent reported seeing adult or illegal material, including content that related to gambling, drugs, or alcohol.

In Northern Ireland, we have seen a 71 per cent year-on-year increase of police-recorded offences of "Obscene Publications". This can include offences relating to taking, permitting to be taken, making, copying, and distributing, possessing or publishing advertising relating to indecent photographs or pseudo photographs of a child under the age of 18. In 2015/16 there were 394 recorded offences in this category compared to 231 in 2014/15. The increase is the largest increase seen between any two years in the data series.

Child protection referrals and children in need

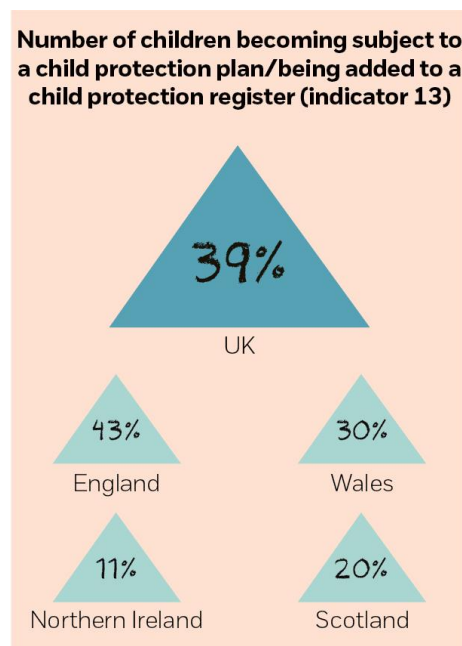
A referral is the first stage of the child protection process when aspects of a child's life give cause for concern. There were 34,124 children referred to social services for the year ending 31 March 2016 in Northern Ireland. Due to changes in the data collection in 2014/15, data is not comparable with previous years. More data is needed for a trend to be established.

A child is in need if they are unlikely to achieve or maintain, or have the opportunity of achieving or maintaining, a reasonable standard of health or development without the provision of services; or if the child's development or health is likely to be significantly impaired or further impaired without the provision of such services. There were 24,698 children in need at 31 March 2016. Despite the slight increase in the number of children in need over the past year in Northern Ireland, overall numbers have remained fairly stable since 2011/12.

Children in the child protection system

There were 2,146 children on a child protection register in Northern Ireland on 31 March 2016, and 2,040 children were added to a child protection register during that year. Where a child has moved onto the register several times during the year, each registration is recorded. Between 2002 and 2016 the number of children on a child protection register increased by 40 per cent and the number of children added to the register per year increased by 89 per cent. Northern Ireland had the highest rate of children in the child protection system with 49 per 10,000 under 18s on the register in Northern Ireland.

What's changed since the last UK prevalence survey?: 2009/10 – 2015/16



The proportion of children on the register due to physical abuse is 32 per cent, followed by neglect at 29 per cent. Emotional abuse, which is a big driver for children being in the child protection system in other nations, is a reason in only 8 per cent of the cases in Northern Ireland. There has been an upward trend in the proportion of children on a register due to physical abuse. More needs to be done to understand these trends and why these may be different to other nations as it is unknown whether emotional abuse is masked by other forms of registration, or if there are complexities associated with identification in Northern Ireland. Awareness of emotional abuse and how to spot it is the first step in ensuring that action can be taken to make children safe. To ensure effective safeguarding arrangements are in place, it will be important to further explore the cross-jurisdictional disparity, and on-going decreasing registrations for emotional abuse in Northern Ireland.

To assess whether children leaving the child protection registration process do so appropriately we look to data on re-registration. Re-registration rates could suggest that the decision to initially remove a child from a CPR was premature, or it could mean that circumstances in the child's life have changed requiring re-registration.

In Northern Ireland there has been an upward trend in the percentage of children re-registered. The proportion increased from 15 per cent in 2010/11 to 22 per cent in 2015/16, the highest among the nations.

Since 2001/02 there has been a downward trend on the percentage of children ceasing to be on a child protection register who had been on one for longer than two years. However, this percentage increased in the past year from 8.6 to 10.3 per cent.

Looked after children

Looked after children are those children who are cared for by the state. Children might be taken into care after suffering abuse or neglect, because they are at risk of abuse. Children might also become looked after if a parent is ill or has a disability or if they are absent, while the state can also look after children on a voluntary basis for a period of time with agreement of the parent/s.

There were 2,890 children looked after in Northern Ireland at 31 March 2016. The data presented excludes children who are in care for respite purposes only; this means that totals are generally smaller than for the other UK nations. The number of looked after children has increased each year since 2011 and is now the highest recorded in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland data does not allow us to identify the proportion of children who are looked after due to abuse or neglect. In England, 60 per cent of all looked after children in 2015/16 were looked after as a result of abuse or neglect; and in Wales the figure is 68 per cent.

Changes in the recording and reporting of the data reflecting the specific category of need (abuse or neglect) would allow us to gain a better understanding of key influencing factors and would be helpful in facilitating practice.

The proportion of looked after children who had three or more placement moves in a given six month period is in decline. In the six months prior to 31 March 2016 there were 154 looked after children who had three or more placements, this was 5.3 per cent of all looked after children at 31 March 2016. While the data from Northern Ireland compares favourably with other UK nations, it should be noted that the decline can be attributed to changes in recording practices in April 2015 which excluded placement moves for respite purposes.

Fighting for every childhood

The evidence presented in *How safe are our children? 2017* indicates that together we are doing more as members of the public and as people working with children to fight for every childhood across the UK. We know this is making a big difference, yet more could be done. The lack of recent data means that the true extent of child abuse and neglect today is unknown. We do not know if levels are increasing or decreasing. To prevent child abuse we need robust knowledge of what is happening in children's lives.

While Childline and research give us important insights into what's happening in children's lives, we need the big picture too. Without it, it's difficult to demonstrate the scale of the task and the resources needed to support the child protection system. It makes it hard to target the scarce resources that we do have where they are needed most. The potential impact of abuse on a child's life – and on the health of wider society – is too significant to leave to guesswork based on old data.

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THE MOST COMPREHENSIVE OVERVIEW
OF CHILD PROTECTION IN THE UK

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