

How safe are our children? 2017

REPORT BRIEFING: SCOTLAND 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. It 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 data means that the true extent of child abuse and neglect today is unknown. This is why we are calling on 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 Scotland and outlines the trends in this data, the policy landscape, and child protection priorities in Scotland.

Neglect

In 2015/16, Scotland saw a decline in the number of recorded cruelty and neglect offences. This trend in Scotland is distinctive from other nations, with a 45 per cent decrease between 2009/10 and 2015/16 in contrast to a rising trend across the rest of the UK. The reasons behind this are not clear, however.

There were 822 cruelty and neglect offences recorded in Scotland in 2015/16, a 21 per cent decrease from the previous year and the lowest figure recorded within the data set. These recorded offences represent a rate of 9.0 offences per 10,000 children aged under 16. This is the second lowest in the UK, following closely the 8.9 per cent 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

Key findings

- Police Scotland recorded 3,715 sexual offences against children under 16 in 2015/16, an increase of 7 per cent on the previous year.
- Unlike the rest of the UK, recorded offences for child cruelty and neglect are decreasing in Scotland. In 2015/16, there were 822 offences recorded, which marks a decrease of 56 per cent over the past five years.
- Mental/emotional health was the top reason for Childline counselling sessions with children and young people in Scotland.
- Parental substance misuse; domestic abuse; emotional abuse; and neglect remain the main reasons identified for children being placed on the child protection register.
- The number of recorded offences concerning indecent images of children under 16 rose by 7 per cent to 645.
- In July 2016, there were 15,317 looked after children in Scotland; of whom 11,447 were accommodated away from home. This is a slight decrease from the previous year.

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 Scotland.

The scale and challenge of neglect was recognised by the Scottish Government in its Child Protection Improvement Programme, which included a specific focus on neglect. As part of this, the Scottish Government has launched a programme of work to improve responses to neglect. The Government also intends to review the relevant legislation to

ensure neglect and cruelty offences reflect our modern understanding of neglect, including emotional neglect.

To inform this work stream, it will be important to take note of the apparent anomaly in recorded offences in Scotland and analyse the reasons behind this.

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 in the last decade.

In Scotland, there were 3,715 sexual offences against children under 16, an increase of 7 per cent on the previous year. The most notable year-on-year changes include a 27 per cent increase in offences of sexual activity involving a child under 13 (from 192 to 244); sexual activity involving a child aged 13 to 15 rose by 21 per cent (492 to 594); and grooming offences more than doubled from 23 to 50.

In 2015/16, sexual abuse was infrequently recorded as an identified concern for a child being placed on the child protection register; it accounted for only 6 per cent of concerns.

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

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



available information on prevalence beyond the cases reported.

Our UK helpline contacts about 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 feel more confident about reporting child 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 Scottish children in 2016/17. Suicidal thoughts and feelings was the third most common reason for Childline counselling sessions.

There were 13 suicides where death was recorded as by intentional self-harm, and no deaths by undetermined intent of 15 to 19 year olds in 2015, a five-year average combined rate of 71.3 per million 15 to 19 year olds.

Online abuse

The internet offers children opportunities to learn, communicate, develop, create and explore the world around them. Yet, in spite of the fact that children make up one third of internet users, in too many cases it also leaves them vulnerable to online abuse or exploitation, and exposes them to experiences which they might find upsetting.

Preventing abuse online remains a challenging issue for Scotland, the UK and internationally. Pornography is more readily available than ever before and “sexting” is an increasingly normalised part of young people’s sexual interactions and relationships. Data from the *How safe are our children? 2017* report shows that recorded offences against children online are on the rise, as professionals and the public become increasingly aware of the changing nature of child abuse in the digital age.

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 2014/15. In 2016/17, there were 221,840 page views of the Childline website section on 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 Scotland the number of recorded offences relating to indecent images of children rose 7 per cent to 645. In summer 2016, Police Scotland conducted a six-week operation into online child sexual abuse. Operation LATTISE recovered 30 million images of abuse and identified more than 500 children aged three to 18 who were victims or potential victims of online predators. Through the operation, 77 individuals were arrested and charged. In total, more than 390 charges were brought including for

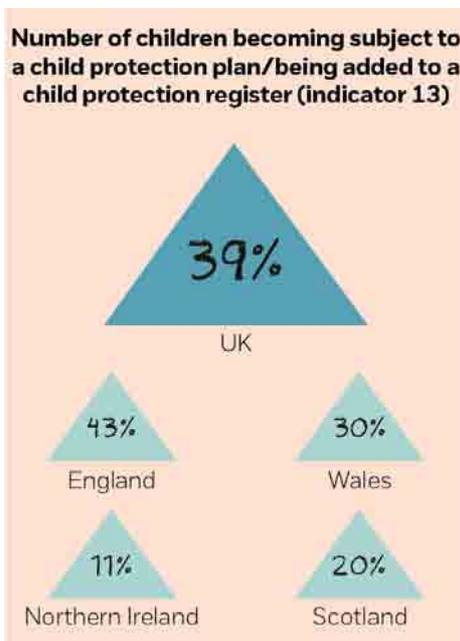
rape, sharing indecent images of children, and grooming for sexual purposes.

Children in the child protection system

The method of recording abuse and neglect in Scotland changed in 2012 to enable multiple concerns to be recorded at each case conference rather than just the initial main category of abuse. Since this change Scotland records additional categories, including domestic abuse, parental substance misuse and parental mental health. On average it records two or three concerns per child case conference.

The percentage breakdown of causes were as follows: 39 per cent parental substance misuse, 39 per cent domestic abuse; 36 per cent emotional abuse; 35 per cent neglect; 26 per cent parental mental health problems; 26 per cent drug misuse; 21 per cent non-engaging family; 20 per cent alcohol misuse; 20 per cent physical abuse; 12 per cent

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



other concerns; 6 per cent sexual abuse and 2 per cent child placing themselves at risk.

Looked after children

As of July 2016, 15,317 children were looked after in Scotland, with more than 11,000 being accommodated away from home. The number of children who are looked after in Scotland decreased in 2015/16; however, there has been a long-term increasing trend in the number of looked after children who are accommodated away from home in Scotland since 1998. Increasing numbers of children are being accommodated away from home in community settings, particularly in foster care. Foster care and kinship

care are the most common placements for looked after children.

Over the past ten years, children have started to be looked after at younger ages; in 2016, 38 per cent of children starting to be looked after were under the age of five.

There has been a general downward trend in the number of looked after children who had three or more placements in the year. In 2016, this was the case for 833 children, just over 5 per cent.

With more children being placed in foster care and kinship care placements at an increasingly younger age, it is vital that we make sure those foster and kinship carers are supported and equipped to meet the emotional needs of these young children.

Our experience of delivering the New Orleans model in Glasgow, which supports young children in foster care, suggests we have some way to go to appreciate fully the significance of foster care as an intervention, and to provide foster carers with sufficient support to meet the needs of young children in their care.

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. We know that 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

[NSPCC.ORG.UK/HOWSAFE](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/howsafe)