The criminal justice response to child sexual abuse

This information shows you an overview of all the available 2012/13 data. Though comparisons between the nations and datasets are limited, it is important to show the flow of victims and offenders through the system, and place the recorded offences data in context.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>England and Wales</th>
<th>Northern Ireland</th>
<th>Scotland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>73,900</td>
<td>3,700</td>
<td>9,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victims under 16</td>
<td>Victims under 18</td>
<td>Victims under 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18,700</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>3,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recorded offences</td>
<td>Recorded offences</td>
<td>Recorded offences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3,600</td>
<td>Data not available</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defendants in court proceedings</td>
<td>Defendants in court proceedings</td>
<td>Defendants in court proceedings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,100</td>
<td>Data not available</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offenders found guilty</td>
<td>Offenders convicted</td>
<td>Offender charges proven</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Victims**: The number of children who reported experiencing contact child sexual abuse in the last year. Estimates are based on findings from a UK-wide NSPCC survey. Self-reported experience of contact sexual abuse, extrapolated using latest ONS population data and Radford, I et al. (2011) Child abuse and neglect in the UK today.

- **Recorded offences**: When the police receive a report of sexual abuse they judge by law to be a crime, they’ll record it as an offence (regardless of the date the abuse originally took place).

- **Defendants in court proceedings**: The number of defendants brought before a court on child sexual abuse charges. Some defendants will be accused of crimes against more than one victim and there may be multiple defendants accused of crime against one victim.

- **Offenders found guilty**: Scotland: Scottish Government (data provided to NSPCC). Using sexual offence categories against under 16s.

- **Convictions**: The number of offenders found guilty of child sexual offences at court. As with defendants, these figures cannot be compared to police data as they look at offenders rather than crimes or victims.


- **Data not available**: Northern Ireland: PSNI Statistics Branch (data provided to NSPCC). Including all sexual offences against under 18s.

- **Defendants in court proceedings**: Scotland: Scottish Government (data provided to NSPCC). Using convictions for sexual offences against under 18s.

- **Offender charges proven**: Scotland: Scottish Government (data provided to NSPCC). Using convictions for sexual offences against under 18s.
NSPCC research\(^1\) suggests that **1 in 20** children in the UK have been sexually abused. It takes great courage for children to reveal their ordeal. Many are frightened because they wrongly feel ashamed, afraid of being stigmatised, or accused of lying.

Dealing with the authorities can be daunting for anyone. And it can be particularly difficult for a child to provide a statement that has to detail and recall their ordeal.

In many child sexual abuse cases the child’s testimony is central to the case. This can put huge pressure on the child. The police and CPS may feel it too much for the child to handle, and not pursue the case.

The NSPCC found that over half of child witnesses experienced symptoms of stress – such as sleep and eating problems, depression, panic attacks and self-harm.\(^2\)

In addition, nearly half of children didn’t understand some of the questions asked in court.\(^2\)

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**The need for more therapy**

It is of course important to convict and punish offenders, but the stress and pressure of the process can take its toll on the victims.

That’s why all sexual abuse victims should have access to therapeutic support, regardless of whether or not a prosecution is pursued. Therapy services are vital in helping victims of child sexual abuse recover from the trauma of their abuse\(^3\).

Though the number of therapy places currently available to children is not known, research indicates that provision is patchy and many children are not being offered the support they need. For example, a recent report\(^4\) found that 31 per cent of local safeguarding children’s boards reported no specialised services for victims of child sexual exploitation in their area.

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Data and the criminal justice system

What are the limitations of the data?

There are a number of limitations to the available data*, including the following points:

- Different datasets come from different sources, using different recording methods.
- Statistics measure different things (victims, offences or offenders). This limits comparability between datasets as, for example, one crime may be committed by more than one offender, while one offender may commit more than one crime.
- Different datasets cover different groups of people (for example, police-recorded crime figures provide data on offences against specific age groups, such as sexual assault of a female child under 13, whereas survey data captures information on all experiences of contact sexual abuse of a representative sample of children).
- A crime may be committed one year, and recorded another, and an offender proceeded against in yet another. So data for any single year on victims, offences and offenders will not necessarily relate to the same cases.
- England and Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland have entirely separate criminal legal systems, and recording methods, which limits comparability between the nations.

Where does the data come from, and what can it tell us?

To calculate the number of child victims of sexual abuse, we applied the findings from the NSPCC’s 2011 survey on children who reported experiencing contact sexual abuse in the last year** to the ONS’s most recent child population data. Contact sexual abuse is not a perfect match for child sexual offences and the victim estimates do not take into account variations across the four nations. However the estimates do give an indication of the number of children experiencing the most serious forms of sexual abuse.

Research shows that many children who experience sexual abuse do not tell anyone else about it.** This means that a significant proportion of sexual offences against children do not get reported, and therefore are not included in police-recorded crime. Where the sexual abuse of a child is reported to the police, it will be recorded as an offence if the circumstances described amount to a crime as defined by law, and there is no credible evidence to the contrary. Offences are counted in the year they are recorded, regardless of when the crime was committed. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland a separate offence is counted for each victim of a crime. Scotland has its own crime recording standards, limiting their comparability with the rest of the UK.***

There are a number of reasons why reported offences do not proceed to the courts. After recording a crime police may decide that it did not in fact take place, for example if the allegation is retracted. In some cases police may not be able to identify a suspect. Police may also decide to take no further action, for example in cases of minors engaging in unlawful, but consensual sex. In some cases the police may decide to issue a caution as opposed to proceeding through the courts, for example if the victim’s age, welfare or mental wellbeing suggests a trial would not be in the public interest. In some cases the evidence may not be strong enough for the prosecution service to conclude that there is a realistic chance of conviction; or, on hearing the evidence, magistrates may decide that there is no case to answer and the case is dismissed.

For cases that do reach the courts, figures are collected for the number of defendants and convicted offenders. Figures from police and court sources cannot be directly compared as one crime may be committed by more than one offender and one offender may commit more than one crime. After hearing all the evidence, the jury will find the defendant guilty or not guilty or, in the case of Scotland, a third possible verdict of not proven.

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*** For more information on recorded sexual offences against children see Indicator 4.