Abuse and neglect: self-reported sources

Indicator 20 — Public attitudes to child abuse and neglect

Key messages

- People have a good awareness of the prevalence of child abuse and neglect. Three in five people describe child abuse and neglect as "common" in the UK.
- People are aware of the main types of abuse and neglect though they tend to focus on physical and sexual abuse, and physical forms of neglect.
- People judge maltreatment to be reprehensible and suspect abuse and neglect has widespread impacts on the individual and society.
- People see government (53 per cent) and society (70 per cent), as well as parents (72 per cent), as responsible for preventing abuse and neglect and for protecting children. However, there is also a strong sense of fatalism – a sense that nothing can be done (75 per cent).

Why is this indicator important?

Evidence tells us that if people have greater understanding of the causes and drivers of social challenges they are well equipped to support interventions and solutions, and to take action themselves. Greater public support for policies and practices to reduce child maltreatment will strengthen the political mandate for policy and practice change.

Tracking changes in public attitudes is also one measure of the effectiveness of organisations who aim to influence the public. Perhaps most important of all, only if people first notice – not just those whose job it is to do so – and then act on concerns about child abuse and neglect, can children be made safer.

Limitations of the data

Our data is drawn from a quantitative public attitudes survey. The survey was run using YouGov’s panel online with a nationally representative sample of 3,057 UK adults in June/July 2013. The data is weighted by age, gender, social grade, and government office region. Like most survey data, the survey data may be subject to error associated with sampling.

The data is also drawn from one-to-one cultural model interviews conducted in England in 2013 by the FrameWorks Institute. This qualitative research provides detailed snapshot data.

Data availability and comparability

Comparable qualitative or quantitative data is not available for previous years. Comparable qualitative data is not available for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Findings

Three out of five people describe child abuse and neglect as a common problem in the UK. Most people can accurately describe the main types of abuse and neglect and are aware that experience of abuse and neglect has detrimental consequences for the child and for wider society. However, people tend to underestimate the scale and distribution of the social impacts of abuse and neglect. A 2013 qualitative study found universal condemnation of child abuse and neglect.

Almost three-quarters of people think parents and society as a whole should be held responsible for tackling abuse and neglect (72 and 70 per cent respectively), with more than half believing government has some responsibility (53 per cent).

The evidence suggests people have some blind spots in their understanding of child abuse and neglect:

- People often have no understanding of how experiences of abuse and neglect get built into the brain and the body leading to adverse life outcomes (that is, how child abuse affects development).
- People tend to be more aware of physical and sexual abuse although emotional abuse and neglect are more common types of maltreatment and can be more damaging to the child.
- People find neglect a particularly challenging concept; it is hard for people to define and to know when a line has been crossed.
- People tend to see maltreatment as a one-off event although it is more usually a series of adverse experiences.
Survey and interview data both show that people do not feel confident in identifying the reasons why child abuse and neglect happens or solutions for it. People see abusive behaviour as primarily an individual level problem: an issue of control and personal failings (with the abuser as a rational actor who has lost control). This sits in contrast to research evidence which tends to focus on the systemic level: that is, the importance of social and economic problems in creating the conditions for abuse. People identify a cycle of abuse and say maltreated children are at greater risk of perpetrating abuse, though they tend to attribute this to children ‘normalising’ abusive behaviour rather than impaired mental and physical development resulting from suffered abuse or neglect.

People have a strong default to fatalism when thinking about what can be done to prevent abuse and neglect. They often say attempts to prevent it are futile. This is illustrated by the low response rates to the suggested solutions in the survey shown below. Again, this contrasts with evidence demonstrating interventions can prevent abuse and neglect and protect children.

Drivers and solutions

Attitudes to taking action

People are still hesitant to contact children’s services directly to discuss concerns about a child. People can report abuse to the NSPCC helpline. In 2012/13 there was a 15 per cent increase in total contacts to the helpline. There are many reasons why people contact the helpline (see Indicator 8 for more detail). More than 70 per cent of contacts relate to child abuse or neglect. Other reasons for contacting the helpline include calls about child or adult behaviour, family relationships and child health. NSPCC helpline data shows that of those contacts that are about abuse and neglect, the four main concerns that people contacted the helpline about were:

- neglect (37 per cent)
- physical abuse (25 per cent)
- sexual abuse (20 per cent) and
- emotional abuse (17 per cent).

* Percentage of people who described the prevalence of child abuse and neglect in the UK as rare or common

** Views of the potential solutions to tackling child abuse and neglect
Independent survey evidence shows that one in five adults would report suspicions of child sexual abuse even if they had doubts, but most would not. The main reason (59 per cent) that people gave for hesitation in reporting was the fear they may be wrong. Worryingly, 39 per cent were concerned that reporting might make it worse for the child. Most people (58 per cent) say they do not feel confident in spotting signs of child sexual abuse.

**Question asked: Which, if any, of the following do you think are potential solutions to child abuse and neglect?**

- Removing children at risk of being abused from their families/careers: 31%
- Training or education to improve parents/careers parenting skills with their child: 29%
- Providing help and support for parents/careers who are isolated and have few family or friends: 25%
- Doing more to reduce levels of poverty: 23%
- Better health care services for parents and carers who need them (e.g. mental health services, home visiting): 21%
- Longer sentences for offenders: 21%
- Support for parents in abusive relationships: 20%
- More or better services to reduce substance abuse: 17%
- Preventing early sexualisation of children: 16%
- Doing more to prevent violence in society: 16%
- Encouraging society to look out for other people’s children: 15%
- Public education to change society’s attitudes and behaviours: 13%
- Better therapeutic services for children who have been abused: 13%
- Other: 3%
- Not applicable - I don’t think there are any solutions: 2%
- Don’t know: 9%

* Multiple responses possible, totals will not sum to 100%