

Article

Abuse during childhood: Findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales, year ending March 2016

The 2015 to 2016 Crime Survey for England and Wales ran for the first time a module of questions asking adults whether they were abused as a child. The analysis of these questions covering psychological, physical, and sexual abuse as a child, are published within the report.



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1. Main points

A new module of questions included in the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) between 1 April 2015 and 31 March 2016 asked adult respondents aged 16 to 59 whether they had experienced a range of abuse while a child. The questions were restricted to abuse carried out by an adult and included psychological, physical, and sexual abuse and also having witnessed domestic violence or abuse in the home.

The survey showed that 9% of adults aged 16 to 59 had experienced psychological abuse, 7% physical abuse, 7% sexual assault and 8% witnessed domestic violence or abuse in the home. With the exception of physical abuse, women were significantly more likely to report that they had suffered any form of abuse asked about during childhood than men.

This was most marked with regard to any form of sexual assault, where women were 4 times as likely as men to be a survivor of such abuse during childhood (11% compared with 3%).

Women (3%) were significantly more likely than men (1%) to experience sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) during childhood. This equates to an estimated 567,000 adult women aged 16 to 59 having experienced this type of abuse during their childhood, compared with an estimated 102,000 adult men aged 16 to 59.

The proportions of adults reporting experience of abuse during childhood tended to increase with age. For example, adults aged 16 to 24 and 25 to 34 reported lower levels of any sexual assault (3% and 5%) than those aged 45 to 54 and 55 to 59 (both 9%). It is difficult to determine whether this indicates a reduction in the prevalence of child abuse in more recent years or whether it is due to survivors being more willing to disclose past abuse the further in time they are away from the experience.

Almost half (42%) of adults who had survived abuse during childhood had suffered 2 or more different types of abuse. The type of abuse most likely to be experienced on its own was sexual assault, with over half of all survivors of sexual assault experiencing no other form of abuse.

Perpetrators were most likely to be a parent for those that had suffered psychological abuse (father, 35% and mother, 40%) or physical abuse (father, 39% and mother, 29%). In contrast, survivors of sexual assault by rape or penetration reported that the perpetrator was most likely to be a friend or acquaintance (30%) or other family member (26%). For other types of sexual assault, the perpetrator was most likely to be a stranger (42%). For sexual assault by rape or penetration, male victims (15%) were more likely than females (4%) to report that they had been abused by a person in a position of trust or authority, such as a teacher, doctor, carer or youth worker.

Additional information was collected from adults who had survived sexual assault by rape or penetration during childhood. Around 3 in 4 victims had not told anyone about the abuse at the time it happened, and the most common reasons cited for not disclosing the abuse were embarrassment or humiliation, or thinking that they would not be believed.

2. Introduction

Crime can be challenging to measure. This is particularly the case for crimes where victims feel, for whatever reason, unable to report their experiences to the authorities. Over the last 30 years there has been increasing concern about child abuse in the wake of high profile cases, and growing awareness of the scale of abuse previously hidden from public view.

In 2003, the government published the [Every child matters green paper](#) alongside the formal response to the report into the death of Victoria Climbié. This was followed by the [Children Act 2004](#) and the [Children and Young Persons Act 2008](#). More recently, reports of child sexual abuse in a number of institutions including the BBC, schools, hospitals, and care homes have increased awareness of child sexual abuse. Running in parallel have been a series of high profile cases involving people in prominent positions in public life. New guidance for people working with children – [Working together to safeguard children](#) – has been issued and the government has initiated the statutory [Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse](#) (The Goddard Inquiry) on 12 March 2015. The purpose of the inquiry is to investigate whether public bodies and other non-state institutions have taken seriously their duty of care to protect children from sexual abuse in England and Wales.

Whilst there is a growing evidence base on child abuse, the scale of child abuse remains unclear¹. The police recorded crime series provides some information such as the number of sexual offences against children recorded by the police. According to the most recent police recorded crime figures, for the year ending March 2016, there were 39,813 recorded sexual offences where it was known that the victim was aged under 16. For other types of abuse, the police recorded crime series is currently unable to identify child victims. As the police are starting to collect information about the age of victims centrally, this will be possible in future.

The Department for Education also provides valuable information as part of its publication [Characteristics of children in need](#). This includes numbers of referrals, assessments, and children who were the subject of a child protection plan, as well as information from the monitoring and evaluation of family intervention projects. Valuable as this information is, it can only provide evidence of children in need that has come to the attention of authorities.

Cases referred to the police or social services can only ever provide a partial picture since much child abuse is hidden. The estimates provided in this report address this evidence gap by providing the first official statistics on prevalence of abuse during childhood. They are based on a set of questions asking a representative sample of adults aged 16 to 59 in England and Wales to recall childhood experience of abuse. While they do not provide a measure of the current level of abuse experienced by children, they do provide the first official estimates of adults' experiences of being abused as children. The questions build on work previously done by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC).

The questions covered a range of abuses including psychological abuse, physical abuse, witnessing domestic violence or abuse in the home, and sexual assault.

Notes:

1. Other sources including the NSPCC Radford study have in the past developed useful prevalence measures of child abuse and neglect (<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/services-and-resources/research-and-resources/pre-2013/child-abuse-and-neglect-in-the-uk-today/>)

3. Things you need to know

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) is a face-to-face survey in which people resident in households in England and Wales are asked about their experiences of crime in the 12 months prior to the interview. It covers adults aged 16 and over and children aged 10 to 15, but does not cover those living in communal establishments (such as care homes). An adult (and if applicable, a child aged 10 to 15) from each sampled household in England and Wales is asked about their experiences of a selected number of offences in the last 12 months.

As some respondents may not wish to disclose sensitive information in a face-to-face interview, the survey has included self-completion modules on sensitive topics. Until now these modules have included questions on sexual assault and domestic violence experienced as an adult, with follow-up questions on either partner abuse or serious sexual assault every other year. The module on abuse during childhood was added to the self completion section of the CSEW in place of the follow-up questions on serious sexual assault for survey year ending March 2016. As the self-completion modules are only asked of respondents aged 16 to 59, the oldest respondents (those aged 59 at the time of interview) answered questions about their experience of abuse between 1956 and 1972 and the youngest (those aged 16 at the time of interview) between 1999 and 2015¹.

While the self-completion questionnaire is designed to be anonymous, to give the respondent privacy and to encourage full disclosure of victimisation, some may still be unwilling to disclose. While the level of failure to disclose is unknown, it is reasonable to assume some element of underreporting.

Generally, practitioners have come to define child abuse based on the laws designed to protect children from harm. For example, Working Together to Safeguard Children defines 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 (e.g. via the internet). They may be abused by an adult or adults, or another child or children."

As there are many forms of child maltreatment, the CSEW module defines abuse during childhood as comprising the following elements²:

- witnessing domestic abuse as a child
- psychological abuse by an adult
- physical abuse by an adult
- sexual assault by an adult, which in turn can be divided into 2 subcategories:
- sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts)
- other sexual assault – this includes indecent exposure and unwanted touching/kissing of a sexual nature

This definition does not include peer-on-peer abuse such as assaults or school bullying.

Apart from questions about witnessing domestic abuse as a child, where the relationship with the perpetrator is known, the CSEW asked respondents their relationship to the perpetrator at the time of the abuse. The CSEW did not ask respondents to recall each incident of abuse during childhood separately (for example, the number of times the abuse was experienced), or the lifetime impact of the abuse.

Additional questions were asked about instances of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts), with regard to where the incident took place, the age at which the abuse started and finished, and whether the respondent told anyone about the abuse at the time. The greater focus on the experiences of survivors of this type of abuse within the self completion module was due to the high demand from users for statistics on this topic.

Unless stated otherwise, all differences between CSEW estimates described in the main text are statistically significant at the 5% level.

Notes:

1. Years in which the respondent was aged 0-15 was derived from the respondents age at time of interview.
2. More detail on these definitions can be found in the Quality and methodology section of this article.

4. Statistician's quote

"Police forces in England and Wales have been dealing with a growing number of reports of child abuse in recent years. Many of these have been historical cases reported by adults many years after the event. These new ONS estimates, based on asking adults to recall abuse experienced during their childhood, provide a more comprehensive picture than has previously been available."

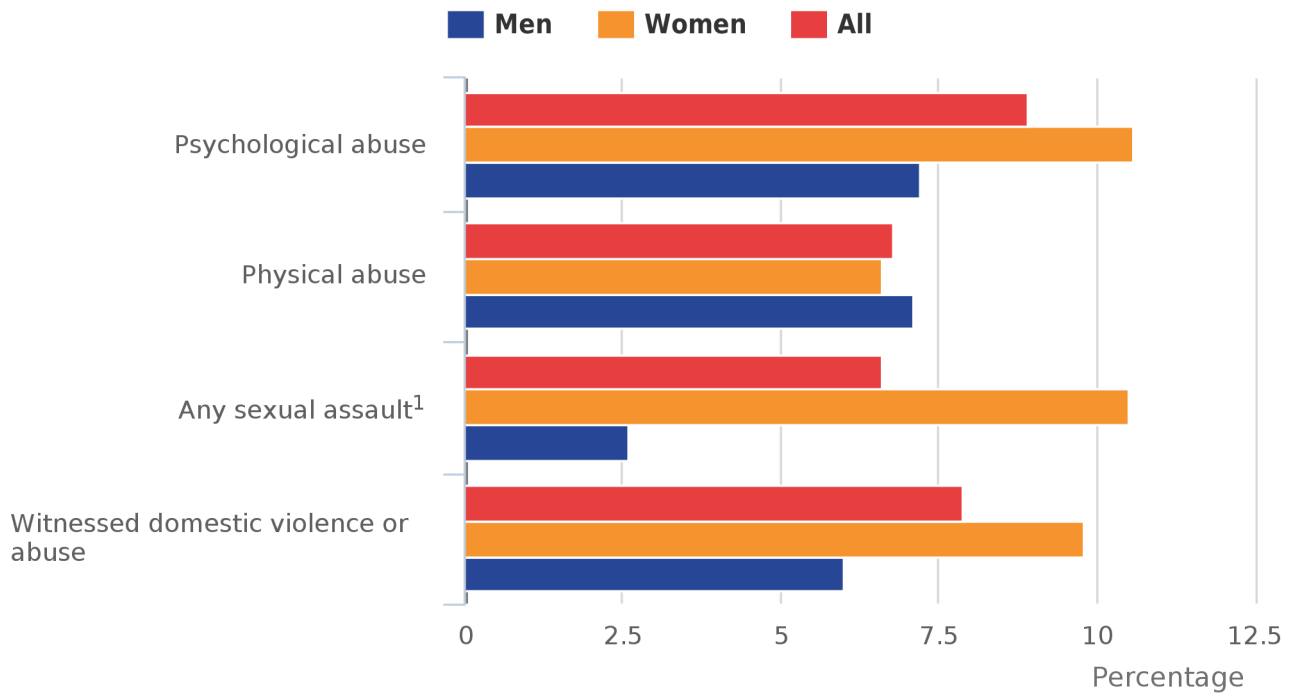
John Flatley, Crime Statistics and Analysis, Office for National Statistics, [@ONSJohnFlatley on Twitter](#)

5. Prevalence of abuse during childhood by abuse category

The reported level of abuse experienced during childhood is broadly similar for each of the abuse types¹ measured (Figure 1). Psychological abuse was the most frequent type of abuse experienced in childhood with nearly 1 in 10 adults reporting psychological abuse as a child (9%), although similar levels of abuse were also reported in relation to witnessing domestic violence or abuse (8%) physical abuse (7%) and any sexual assault (7%).

With the exception of physical abuse, the level of abuse experienced during childhood was more prevalent for females than for males across all abuse types. The category of any sexual assault shows the largest difference between males and females. Women were nearly 4 times as likely to be a survivor of any sexual assault in childhood, with 11% of females and 3% of males experiencing this type of abuse during childhood. This is compared with witnessing domestic violence or abuse (10% for females and 6% for males), and psychological abuse (11% for females and 7% for males). For physical abuse, levels were similar for women and men (both 7%).

Figure 1. Prevalence of abuse during childhood among adults aged 16 to 59, by sex and by category, year ending March 2016, CSEW¹



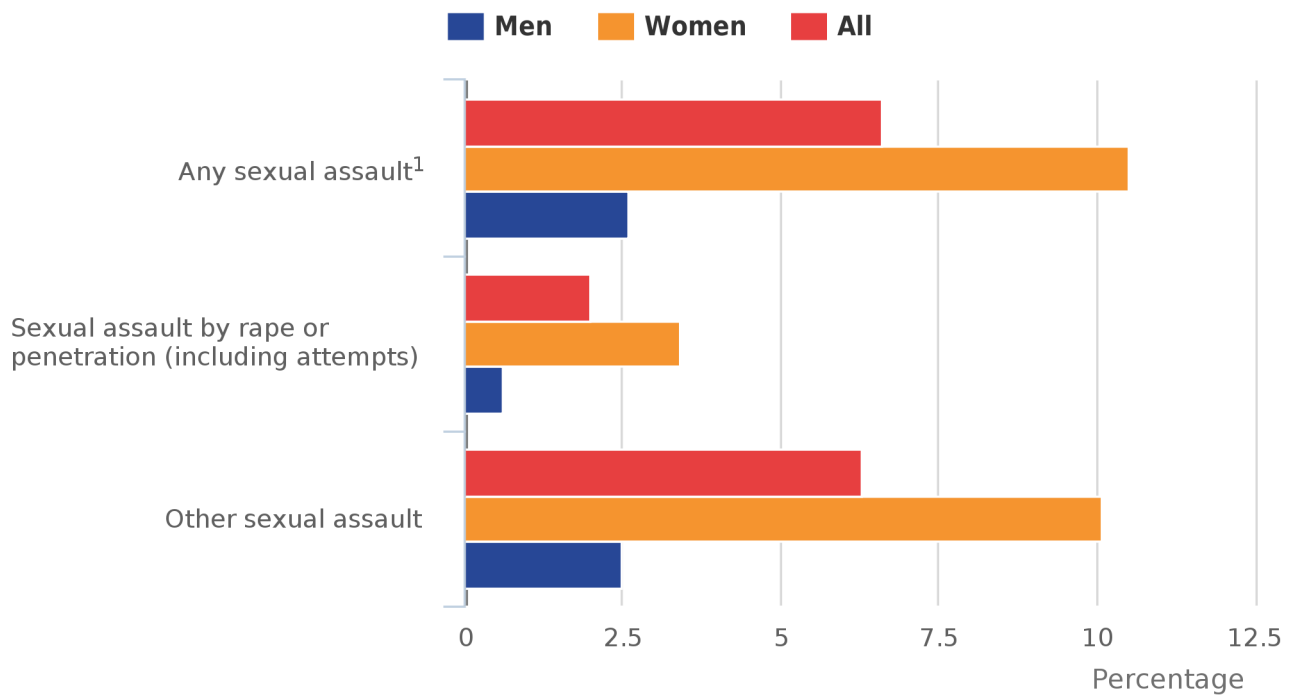
Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales, Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. 'Any sexual assault' includes sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) and other sexual assault including indecent exposure or unwanted touching.

Sexual assault can be further broken down into 2 subcategories of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) and other sexual assault (Figure 2). Of those sexually assaulted, 2% of adults reported sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) and 6% reported experiencing other sexual assaults during childhood. Women (3%) were significantly more likely than men (1%) to experience sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) during childhood. This equates to an estimated 567,000 adult women aged 16 to 59 having experienced this type of abuse during their childhood compared with an estimated 102,000 adult men aged 16 to 59.

Figure 2: Prevalence of sexual assault during childhood among adults aged 16 to 59, by sex and by abuse type, year ending March 2016, CSEW¹



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

Notes:

1. 'Any sexual assault' includes sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) and other sexual assault including indecent exposure or unwanted touching. These two sub categories do not sum to 'any sexual assault', as a respondent could be a survivor of either or both sub categories.

In a separate module of questions, the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) asked adults aged 16 to 59 whether they were sexually assaulted as an adult (from the age of 16). Whilst men reported similar levels of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) during childhood compared with adulthood (0.6% and 0.5% respectively)², women experienced nearly twice as much (6% since the age of 16 compared with 3% during childhood).

Table 1: Proportion of adults experiencing (or not) sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) as a child and whether they went on to experience the same type of abuse as an adult, by sex, year ending March 2016 CSEW¹

England and Wales	Adults aged 16 to 59		
	Male	Female	All
	Percentages		
Experienced before the age of 16 and as an adult	3.8	26.7	23.3
Experienced before the age of 16 and not as an adult	96.2	73.3	76.7
Unweighted base - number of adults	53	358	411
Not experienced before the age of 16 and experienced as an adult	0.5	5.3	2.9
Not experienced before the age of 16 and not as an adult	99.5	94.7	97.1
Unweighted base - number of adults	9,240	10,931	20,171

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

Notes:

1. Data does not include respondents who reported that they had experienced rape or penetration (including attempts) as a child and this same abuse continued past the age of 16.

Adults were more likely to be a victim of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) if they experienced the same offence as a child (Table 1). In all, 23% of adult survivors who reported sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) as a child became victims of the same offence as an adult³. This compares to the 3% of adults who did not report sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) as a child but who became victims of the offence as an adult.

The proportion of adults reporting the abuse as both a child and an adult is predominantly driven by female survivors. Over a quarter of female survivors (27%) of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) as a child went on to become an adult victim of the same offence, compared to 4% of men.

Notes:

1. Respondents could report more than one type of abuse, therefore the percentages for each abuse category will not sum to the figure for "any abuse" (Appendix Table 1).

2. See Supplementary Table S39.

3. This figure excludes adults who reported sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) as a child where the abuse carried on beyond the age of 16.

6. Number of types of abuse during childhood

Table 2 shows further analysis of the number of types of abuse suffered and their combinations. It was found that 42% of childhood abuse survivors suffered more than 1 type of abuse, with male and female survivors being equally likely to have suffered multiple types of abuse (42%). Just under a quarter (23%) of survivors of abuse during childhood suffered 2 types of abuse, with psychological and physical abuse or psychological abuse and witnessing domestic abuse the most commonly experienced combinations, together accounting for over half of those suffering 2 types of abuse. For the 14% of survivors who experienced 3 types of abuse during childhood, psychological, physical, and witnessing domestic abuse was the most commonly experienced combination, accounting for over three-quarters of those suffering 3 types of abuse. Four percent of survivors of abuse suffered all 4 types of abuse. The type of abuse most likely to be experienced as the only type of abuse by survivors was any sexual assault. Of the 58% of survivors who only experienced 1 type of abuse, the most common type of abuse experienced was sexual assault (19%). Over a quarter (26%) of female survivors and nearly 1 in 10 (9%) male survivors experienced any sexual assault without experiencing any other form of abuse.

Table 2: Number and types of child abuse that survivors experienced before the age of 16, by sex, year ending March 2016 CSEW^{1,2}

England and Wales		Adults aged 16-59		
	Men	Women	All	
	Percentage			
1 type of abuse	58	58	58	
Psychological abuse only	16	13	14	
Physical abuse only	18	4	10	
Any sexual assault only	9	26	19	
Witnessed domestic violence or abuse only	15	14	15	
2 types of abuse	24	23	23	
Psychological abuse and physical abuse	10	5	7	
Psychological abuse and any sexual assault	2	4	3	
Psychological abuse and witnessed domestic violence or abuse	6	6	6	
Physical abuse and any sexual assault	2	2	2	
Physical abuse and witnessed domestic violence or abuse	4	2	3	
Any sexual assault and witnessed domestic violence or abuse	1	4	3	
3 types of abuse	15	14	14	
Psychological abuse, physical abuse and any sexual assault	1	2	2	
Psychological abuse, physical abuse and witnessed domestic violence or abuse	13	8	10	
Psychological abuse, sexual abuse and witnessed domestic violence or abuse	0	3	2	
Physical abuse, any sexual assault and witnessed domestic violence or abuse	1	1	1	
4 types of abuse	2	6	4	
Psychological abuse, physical abuse, any sexual assault and witnessed domestic violence or abuse	2	6	4	
Unweighted base - number of adults	1,245	2,447	3,692	

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

Notes:

1. These data are based on respondents who reported experience of psychological abuse, physical abuse, any sexual assault or witnessed domestic violence or abuse.

2. For cases with missing values for any of the types of abuse, it cannot be determined how many types of abuse the survivor experienced. For this reason they have been excluded from the table.

7. Survivor and perpetrator relationship by abuse category

Appendix Table A3 provides information on the survivor-perpetrator relationship¹ for abuse experienced before the age of 16, by sex (of survivor) and type of abuse. In the survey, survivors were able to select all the different perpetrators who carried out the abuse they were reporting on. For abuse type “witnessing domestic violence or abuse” the survivor-perpetrator relationship was not asked as the perpetrator was, by definition, a parent or step-parent.

In addition to demographic change, such as the rising age of mothers, other social changes over the twentieth century have altered family relations. For example, lone parenthood has seen continuous growth since the mid 1990s and the number of children living with step-parents has decreased². As a result, when childhood abuse between family members is reported it needs to be seen in the context of these changing family structures.

Psychological abuse

Table 3 shows that for all survivors aged 16 to 59 of psychological abuse during childhood, the perpetrator was most likely to have been the survivor’s mother (40%) or father (35%). Men were equally likely to have been abused by their fathers (38%) or their mothers (38%), whereas women were more likely to have experienced psychological abuse by their mothers (42%) than their fathers (33%). Overall, the perpetrators of psychological abuse were likely to be within the immediate family of the survivor.

Physical abuse

Around 4 in 10 (39%) of victims of physical abuse in their childhood were abused by their father. A further 29% were abused by their mother, 12% by a partner or previous partner³ and, 10% by step-father and 10% by another family member⁴. Table 3 shows the perpetrators of abuse by sex of the respondent. Women who experienced physical abuse were more likely to have been abused by their father (36%), mother (33%) or partner or previous partner (19%), whereas men were more likely to have been physically abused by their fathers (41%), mothers (24%) or by a stranger (13%).

Table 3: Survivor-perpetrator relationship for psychological and physical abuse before the age of 16, by sex, year ending March 2016 CSEW

England and Wales	Adults aged 16-59					
	Psychological abuse			Physical abuse		
	Men	Women	All	Men	Women	All
	Percentage ¹					
Mother	38	42	40	24	33	29
Father	38	33	35	41	36	39
Step-father	12	12	12	9	10	10
Step-mother	3	5	4	2	3	2
Other family member	13	15	14	9	12	10
Partner or previous partner ²	12	19	16	4	19	12
Friend or acquaintance ³	10	9	10	8	5	7
Person in position of trust or authority e.g. teacher, doctor, carer, youth worker	7	4	5	7	3	5
Stranger	4	5	4	13	5	9
Someone else	3	2	3	5	2	3
Don't know/can't remember	2	1	1	1	1	1
Don't wish to answer	7	9	8	6	6	6
Unweighted base - number of adults	678	1,294	1,972	681	832	1,513

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

Notes:

1. Percentages sum to more than 100 as respondents could choose more than one answer for this question.
2. Partner or previous partner refers to the survivors partner or previous partner. As questions were asked in relation to adult perpetrators it is assumed that the partner or previous partner was aged over 16 at the time of the assault whilst the survivor was aged under 16.
3. Friend or acquaintance includes friend or acquaintance, friend or acquaintance of a member of your family, or neighbour.

Any sexual assault – sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts)

Table 4 shows a breakdown for the sexual assault subcategories: sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) and other sexual assaults. Whilst the table breaks down the survivor-perpetrator relationship by sex and type of sexual assault, it should be noted that far more women were victims of sexual assault during childhood than men (11% compared with 3%, see Figure 1).

Of those survivors of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts), 30% reported that the perpetrator was a friend or acquaintance, followed by a family member other than a parent or step parent (26%). These were by far the most common survivor-perpetrator relationship for both sexes.

Table 4 shows few differences between women and men, although male survivors were more likely to suffer sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) as a child from a person in a position of trust (such as a teacher, doctor, carer, youth worker) than women (15% compared to 4%), and female survivors were more likely to be abused by a partner or previous partner (10% compared to 1%).

Any sexual assault – other sexual assaults including indecent exposure or unwanted touching

While survivors of rape or penetration were most likely to be abused by family members, friends or acquaintances, the most common perpetrator of other sexual assaults during childhood was a stranger (41% men and 43% women – Table 3). This is in contrast to other categories of abuse, where strangers were among the least frequently mentioned perpetrator. The second most frequent perpetrator of other sexual assaults for both men and women was a friend or acquaintance (23%).

As with sexual assault by rape or penetration, male survivors were more likely to suffer other sexual assaults from a person in a position of trust (such as a teacher, doctor, carer, youth worker) than women (13% compared with 5%).

Table 4: Survivor-perpetrator relationship for abuse before the age of 16, by sex and type of sexual assault, year ending March 2016 CSEW

England and Wales	Adults aged 16-59					
	Any sexual assault					
	Sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts)			Other sexual assault		
	Men	Women	All	Men	Women	All
	Percentage ¹					
Mother	2	1	1	4	1	1
Father	5	7	7	2	5	4
Step-father	8	8	8	3	6	5
Step-mother	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other family member	23	27	26	10	17	16
Partner or previous partner ²	1	10	8	5	4	5
Friend or acquaintance ³	27	30	30	21	23	23
Person in position of trust or authority e.g. teacher, doctor, carer, youth worker	15	4	6	13	5	6
Stranger	16	13	14	41	43	42
Someone else	11	7	7	8	7	7
Don't know/can't remember	1	0	0	0	0	0
Don't wish to answer	4	3	4	3	2	2
Unweighted base - number of adults	68	444	512	266	1,190	1,456

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

Notes:

1. Percentages sum to more than 100 as respondents could choose more than one answer for this question.
2. Partner or previous partner refers to the survivors partner or previous partner. As questions were asked in relation to adult perpetrators it is assumed that the partner or previous partner was aged over 16 at the time of the assault whilst the survivor was aged under 16.
3. Friend or acquaintance includes friend or acquaintance, friend or acquaintance of a member of your family, or neighbour.

Notes:

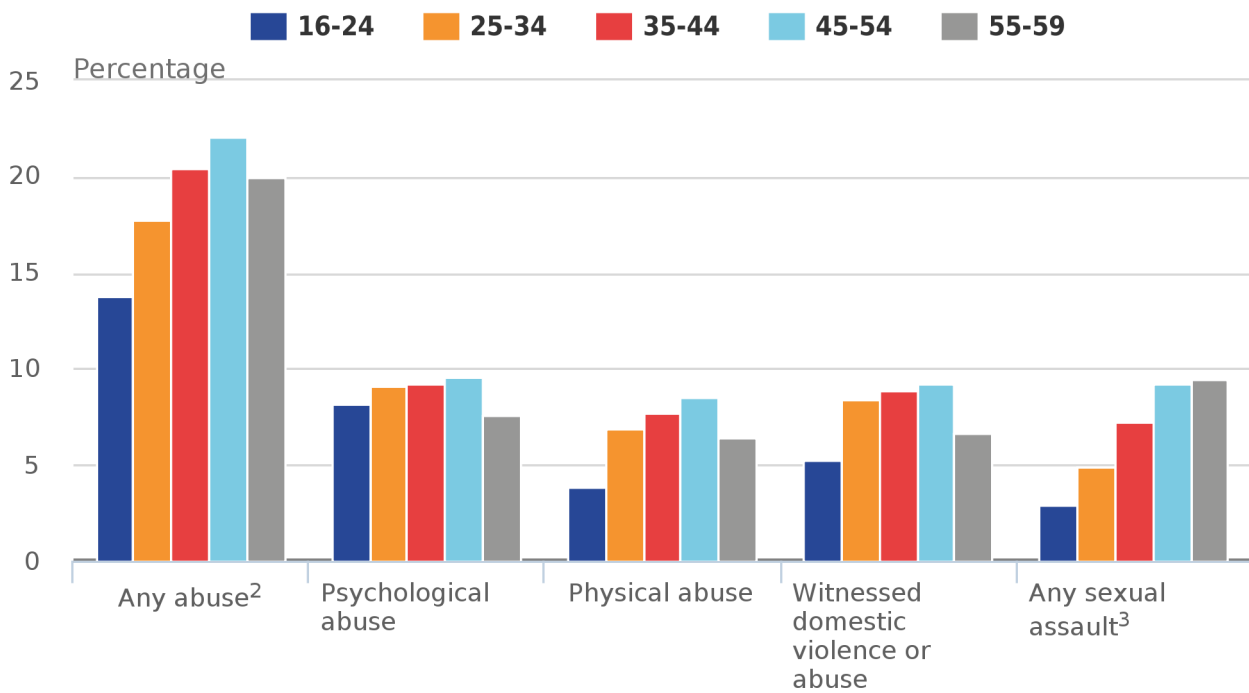
1. Respondents could choose more than one perpetrator for each abuse category which means that the figures for each perpetrator will not sum to 100.
2. [2011 Census results show that the number of stepparents is decreasing.](#)
3. As the abuse relates to adult perpetrators it is assumed the partner or previous partner was aged over 16 when the abuse took place.
4. Other family member refers to another relative who could be a sibling, cousin, aunt, uncle or grandparent.

8. Personal and household characteristics of survivors of abuse during childhood

[Appendix Tables A4a, A4b, A5a and A5b](#) provide detailed information on the proportion of adults who were survivors of abuse by type of abuse and the respondent's personal and household characteristics at the time of the interview. Most of the survivors' characteristics will be different to those at the time of the abuse and care should be taken in interpreting the relationships. The commentary below is not intended to imply causal relationships; it is rather a summary of the main findings and significant differences (unless stated in the text) between characteristics. Some of the characteristics may be closely associated with each other, so caution is needed in the interpretation of the effect of these different characteristics when viewed in isolation, (for example, having a long-term illness or disability and being economically inactive).

The levels of any sexual assault during childhood reported by adults aged 16 to 59 generally increased with the current age of the respondent ([Appendix Table A4a and A4b](#)). Figure 3 shows adults aged 16 to 24 and 25 to 34 reported lower levels of any sexual assault (3% and 5%) than those aged 45 to 54 and 55 to 59 (both 9%). For other abuse types similar increases in levels of abuse occurred with current age, although for the oldest age group – 55 to 59 – the level of abuse declined slightly.

Figure 3: Proportion of adults who experienced abuse during childhood by abuse type and age group, year ending March 2016 CSEW^{1,2,3}



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

Notes:

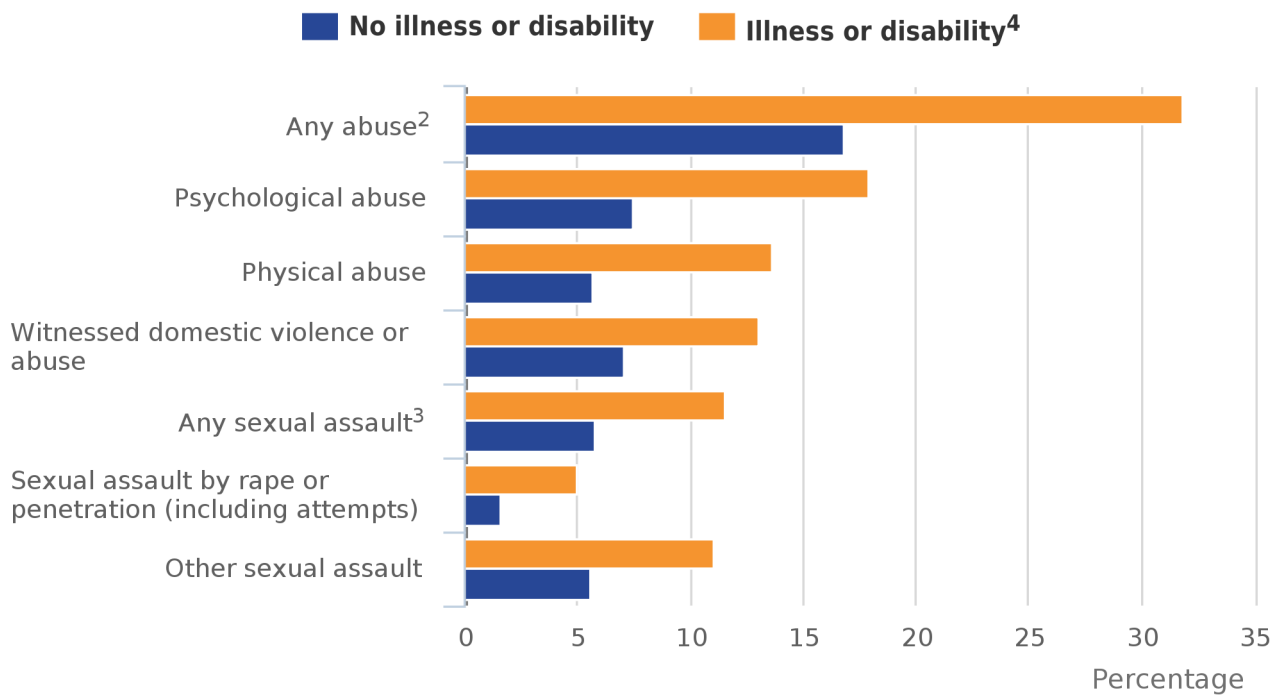
1. See Section 7.3 of [User Guide](#) for definitions of personal characteristics.
2. 'Any abuse' includes respondents who said they experienced psychological abuse, physical abuse, any sexual assault, or said they witnessed domestic violence or abuse in the home.
3. 'Any sexual assault' includes sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) and other sexual assault including indecent exposure or unwanted touching.

This may represent a general reduction in the prevalence of abuse during childhood over time and is consistent with other crime trends suggesting society has become less tolerant of violence and sexual offences. However, it may also reflect that survivors are more likely to disclose past abuse the further in time they are away from the experience. Understandably, there are many reasons why younger adults who experience abuse during childhood might be unwilling to disclose the abuse, including: a lack of confidence; where they are still living in the home where the abuse took place; where the perpetrator is still a threat to them, or; the young adult has not come to terms with the abuse. As a result the young adult may be unaware, unwilling, or unable to report the abuse in the survey.

The relationship between the age of survivors and reporting levels are consistent with evidence gathered for the [Children's Commissioners Inquiry, 2015](#), which noted that it can often take years to disclose sexual abuse, particularly for younger victims and those who do not have the capacity to disclose their abuse directly.

Adults aged 16 to 59 with a long-term illness or disability were significantly more likely to have experienced all types of abuse during childhood (including sexual assaults) than those without such a condition. For example, nearly a third (32%) of adults who had a long-term illness or disability reported any type of abuse as a child, compared with 17% without a longstanding illness or disability. This includes 1 in 20 (5%) adults with a long-term illness or disability reporting sexual assault by rape or penetration, (including attempts) compared with 1 in 50 (2%) of those without such a condition (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Proportion of adults who experienced abuse during childhood by abuse type and whether the respondent had a long term illness or disability, year ending March 2016 CSEW^{1,2,3,4}



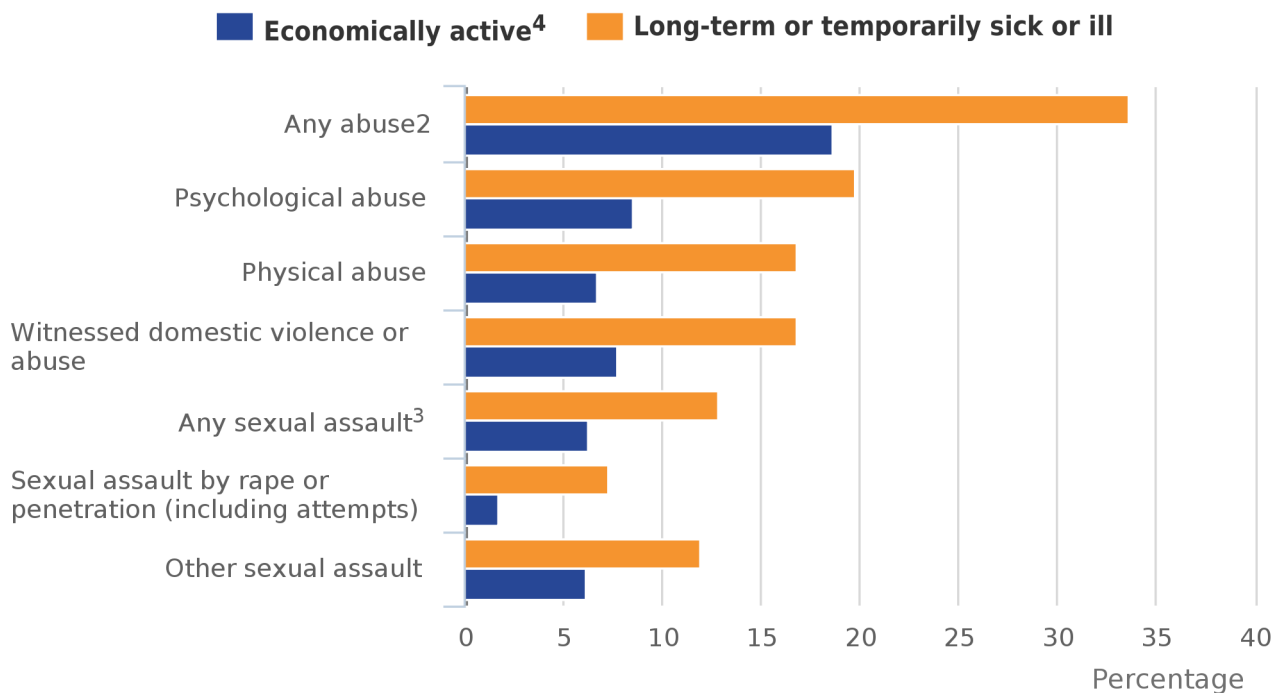
Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales, Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. See Section 7.3 of User Guide for definitions of personal characteristics.
2. 'Any abuse' includes respondents who said they experienced psychological abuse, physical abuse, any sexual assault, or said they witnessed domestic violence or abuse in the home. These sub categories do not sum to 'any abuse', as a respondent could be a survivor of one or more sub categories.
3. 'Any sexual assault' includes sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) and other sexual assault including indecent exposure or unwanted touching. These two sub categories do not sum to 'any sexual assault', as a respondent could be a survivor of either or both sub categories.
4. "Illness or disability" refers to whether the respondent has a long standing illness or disability.

In addition to long-term illness or disability, adults who were economically inactive due to a long-term or temporary sickness or illness were more likely to have experienced abuse during childhood when compared with economically active adults. For example, reporting of sexual assault by rape or penetration, (including attempts) was 3 times higher for long-term or temporarily sick adults (7%) compared with 2% of economically active adults (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Proportion of adults who experienced abuse during childhood by abuse type and whether the respondent was economically active or was long term/temporarily sick/ill, year ending March 2016 CSEW 1,2,3,4



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

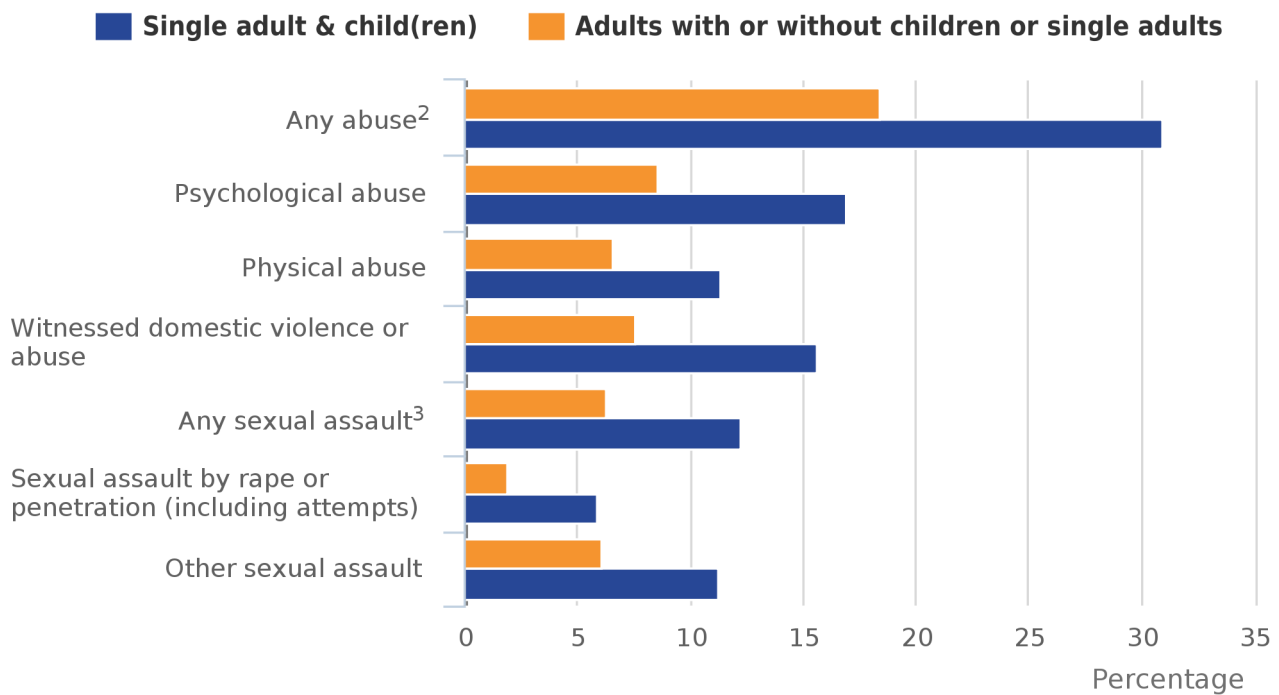
Notes:

1. See Section 7.3 of [User Guide](#) for definitions of personal characteristics.
2. 'Any abuse' includes respondents who said they experienced psychological abuse, physical abuse, any sexual assault, or said they witnessed domestic violence or abuse in the home. These sub categories do not sum to 'any abuse', as a respondent could be a survivor of one or more sub categories.
3. 'Any sexual assault' includes sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) and other sexual assault including indecent exposure or unwanted touching. These two sub categories do not sum to 'any sexual assault', as a respondent could be a survivor of either or both sub categories.
4. 'Economically active' refers to respondents who were employed or unemployed.

Evidence included in the Children’s Commissioner [Report on Protecting Children from Harm: 2015](#) reported the biggest impacts of sexual abuse and neglect was on mental health and emotional wellbeing¹. The physical and emotional impact of child sexual abuse is reported to persist into adulthood for many survivors. This is outlined in many research studies including [Child Neglect and Maltreatment and Childhood-to-Adulthood Cognition and Mental Health in a Prospective Birth Cohort: 2016](#) which highlights the lifelong burden of child neglect on cognitive abilities and mental health, and in the report [Care and support needs of male survivors of childhood sexual abuse](#). However, it is not known whether the disability suffered by the adult is a result of any abuse as a child or whether the child was at greater risk of being a victim because of their disability at the time.

Adults currently living in households with children and no other adult were significantly more likely (31%) to have experienced abuse during childhood than adults currently living in other types of household² (18%). Adults currently living in households with children and no other adult were twice as likely to report witnessing domestic violence or abuse as a child than adults currently living in other types of household (16% compared with 8% – Figure 6).

Figure 6: Proportion of adults who experienced abuse during childhood by abuse type and household structure, year ending March 2016 CSEW^{1,2,3}



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

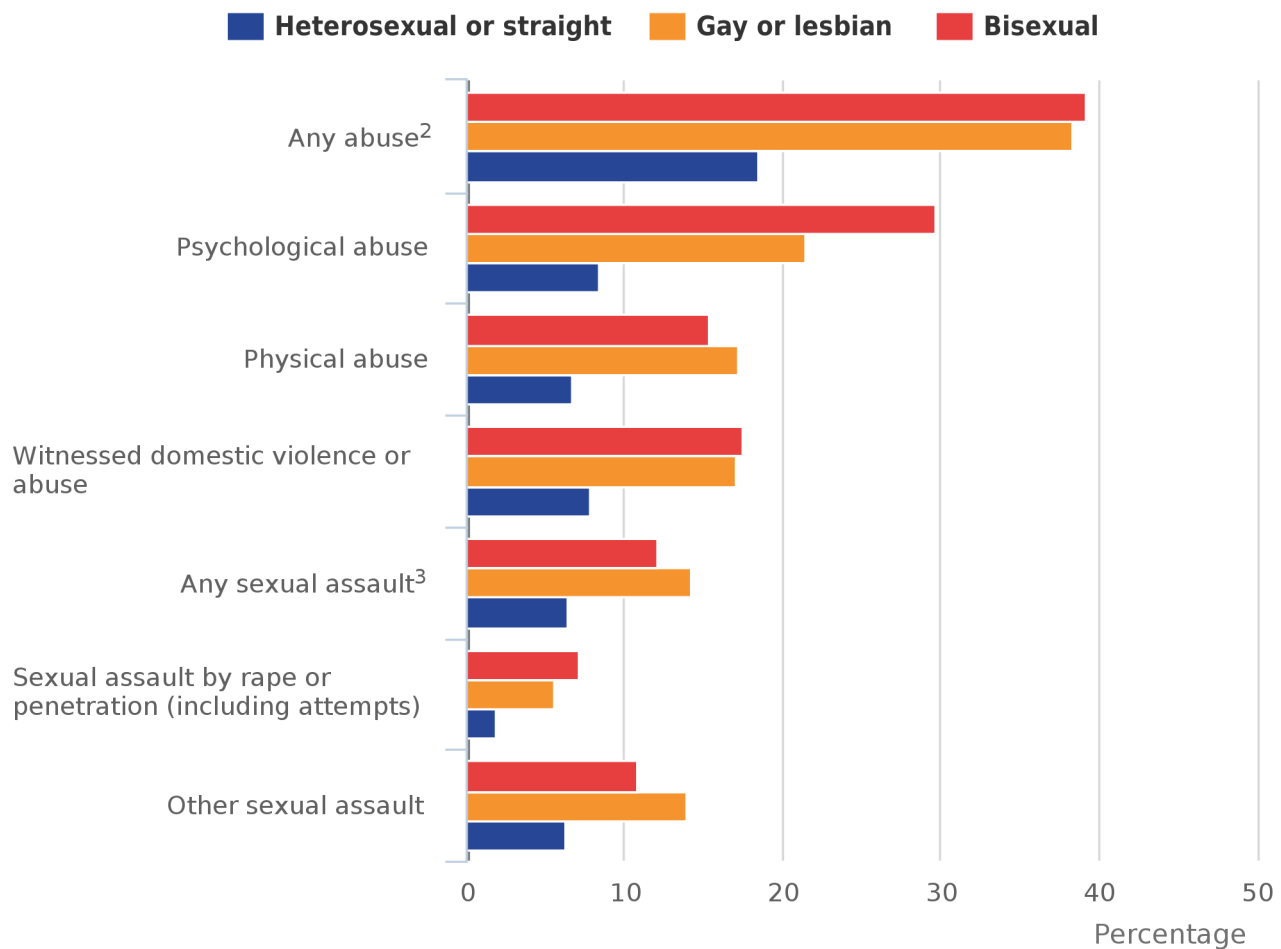
Notes:

1. See Section 7.3 of [User Guide](#) for definitions of personal characteristics.
2. 'Any abuse' includes respondents who said they experienced psychological abuse, physical abuse, any sexual assault, or said they witnessed domestic violence or abuse in the home. These sub categories do not sum to 'any abuse', as a respondent could be a survivor of one or more sub categories.
3. 'Any sexual assault' includes sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) and other sexual assault including indecent exposure or unwanted touching. These two sub categories do not sum to 'any sexual assault', as a respondent could be a survivor of either or both sub categories.

The findings appear to indicate there is an association where childhood abuse is more likely to be reported by lone parents and divorced adults, although age may also be a determining factor as lone parents and divorced adults are also likely to be older than other respondents ([Appendix table A4a and A5a](#)). Research in [The influence of childhood adversity on social relations and mental health at mid-life, \(2011\)](#) reported on childhood adversity being associated with smaller social network size and higher negative aspects of close relationships.

Figure 7 shows adults whose sexual identity was bisexual or gay or lesbian were twice as likely to report any form of childhood abuse (39% and 38% respectively) compared with heterosexual (straight) adults (18%). The bisexual and gay/ or lesbian groups reported experiencing higher levels of all forms of abuse as a child than heterosexuals, apart from other sexual assaults where the apparent 5 percentage point difference between bisexuals and heterosexuals (11% and 6% respectively) was not found to be statistically significant.

Figure 7: Proportion of adults who experienced abuse during childhood by abuse type and sexual identity, year ending March 2016 CSEW¹



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

Notes:

1. See Section 7.3 of [User Guide](#) for definitions of personal characteristics.
2. 'Any abuse' includes respondents who said they experienced psychological abuse, physical abuse, any sexual assault, or said they witnessed domestic violence or abuse in the home. These sub categories do not sum to 'any abuse', as a respondent could be a survivor of one or more sub categories.
3. 'Any sexual assault' includes sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) and other sexual assault including indecent exposure or unwanted touching. These two sub categories do not sum to 'any sexual assault', as a respondent could be a survivor of either or both sub categories.

There is some evidence that sexual minority teens are more vulnerable to abuse compared with heterosexual (straight) teens as negative attitudes toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual people put them at an increased risk for experiencing violence or hostility. This is highlighted in the report by Barnados [‘It’s Not on the Radar’](#) which also drew upon [The Ace Project: Developing an Agenda for Change in the North East and Beyond on Young LGBTQ People and Child Sexual Exploitation](#) and the report on [Digital dangers: The impact of technology on the sexual abuse and exploitation of children and young people](#).

Of the few stable characteristics between childhood and when the respondent would have taken part in the survey, one is their ethnic group. White, or mixed multiple ethnic groups, were more likely than other ethnic groups to report any childhood abuse (20% and 24% respectively) compared with Asian (11%), Black (15%), and other ethnic groups (11%). The figures also show other differences. For example, psychological abuse was higher among the White ethnic group (10%), compared with Asian (5%) and Black (6%) ethnic groups ([Appendix table A4a](#)).

In adults aged 16 to 69, 21% of those without any religious affiliation reported some form of abuse during childhood compared with 17% who identified with a religion. Whilst [Table A4a and A4b](#) indicate differences between different religious groups, caution should be taken when interpreting the figures as many of the differences presented were not found to be statistically significant, particularly when looking at smaller minority religious groups where results are based on a small number of respondents. For example, the table shows that 13% of Buddhists reported any sexual assault during childhood compared with 7% of Christians, although the apparent 7 percentage points difference was found not to be significant.

Notes:

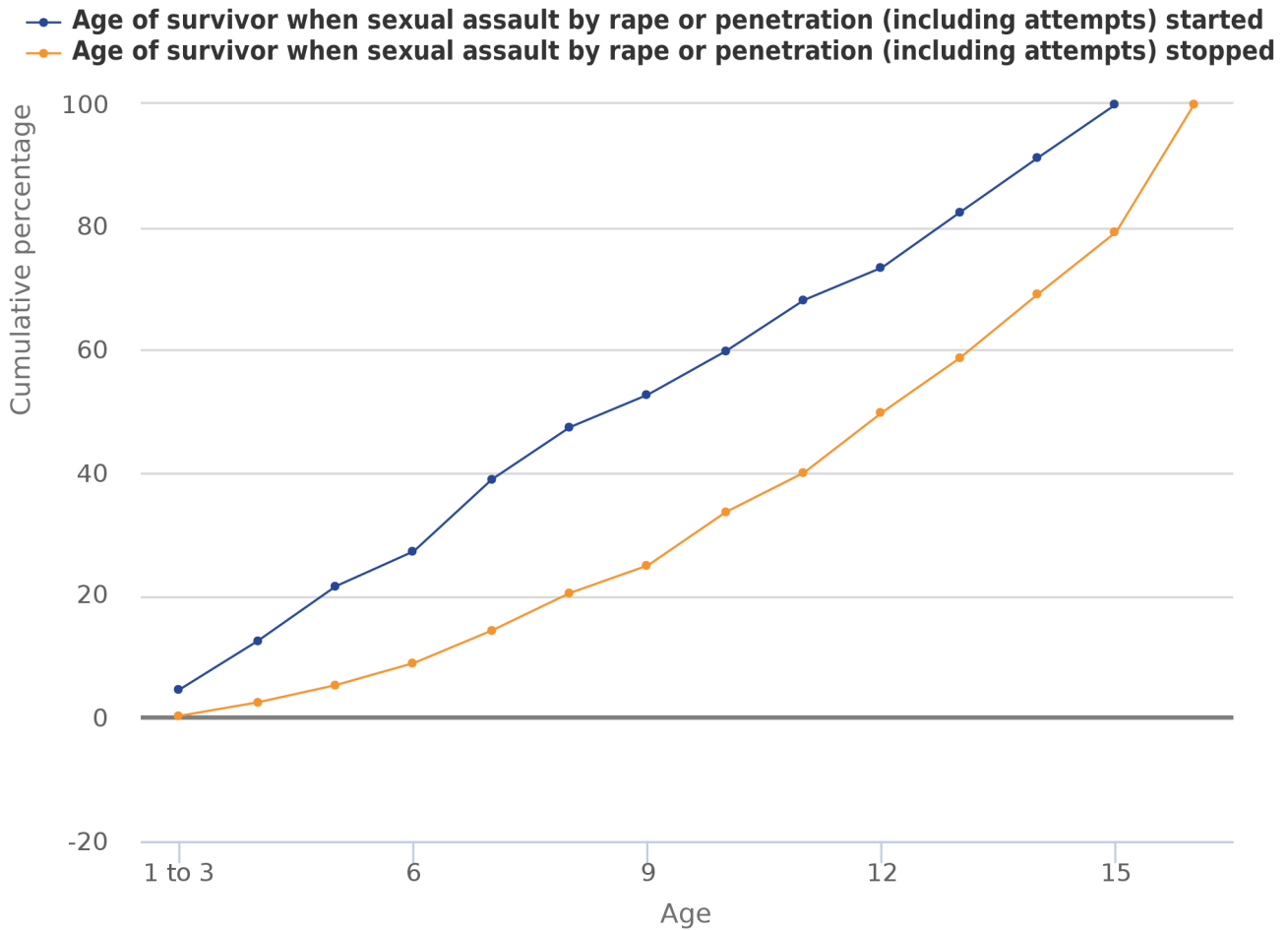
1. Evidence from the survivor survey reported the biggest impact was on the mental health and wellbeing.
2. This includes households with more than 1 adult living with children, or entirely adult households made up of 1 or more adults.

9. Age at which sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) occurred

The frequency of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) was not asked in the self completion module of the survey as it was believed that it would be problematic for survivors to recall accurately the number of times a particular abuse took place. However it was felt that survivors would be able to give an indication of the length of time over which the abuse took place by recalling or reporting on the age at which the abuse started, the age at which the abuse stopped, and whether the abuse continued beyond childhood (age 16). It is important to emphasise that such experiences may refer to a single incident or perpetrator while other survivors may have experienced multiple incidents or abuse by multiple perpetrators over a number of years.

Figure 8 shows the age of the survivor at the time of the first instance of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) and the age of the survivor when the abuse stopped. For 1 in 20 survivors (5%) the abuse had already started before the age of 4. By the age of 6, just over a quarter of survivors had suffered abuse (27%), and just over half of survivors had suffered abuse by the age of 9 (53%). By age 12, nearly three-quarters (73%) of survivors reported that the first instance of sexual assault had occurred.

Figure 8: Age at which sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) first occurred and age of survivor when sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) stopped, year ending March 2016 CSEW^{1,2,3}



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

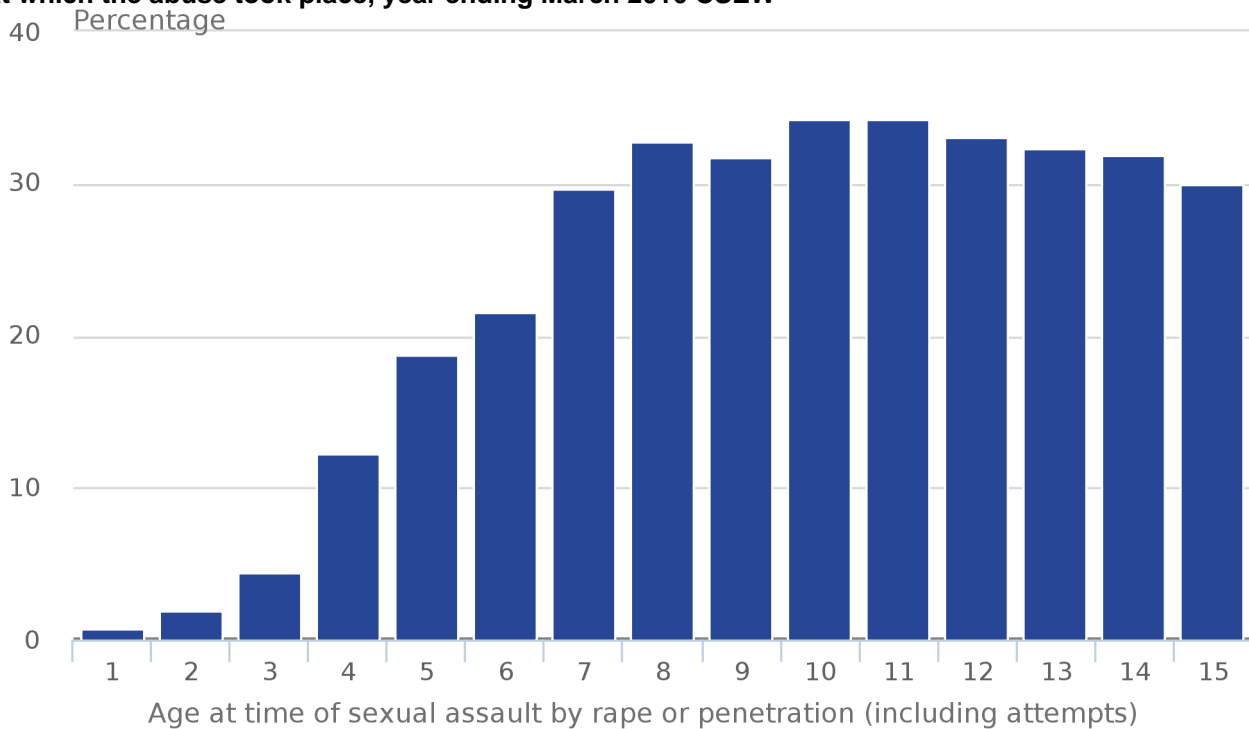
Notes:

1. These data are derived using the age at which the survivor said the sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) started, the age at which the abuse stopped, and whether the abuse continued past the age of 16. If a respondent said the abuse stopped at age 16, or said that the abuse continued past the age of 16, they have been categorised as experiencing the abuse beyond the age of 15.
2. No respondents reported that sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) started under the age of 1.
3. It is not possible to link across the data on the age that the abuse started to the age that the abuse stopped. Data on the number of years that sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) took place is presented in Tables 5a and 5b.

Sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) stopped for a quarter of survivors (25%) by the age of 9, half of survivors (50%) by the age of 12, and for just over three-quarters of survivors (79%) by the age of 15. However, for just over 1 in 5 (21%) survivors of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts), the abuse continued into adulthood (age 16 and above).

Figure 9 combines the date at which the abuse started and the age at which the abuse stopped to calculate the age(s) at which the reported abuse (sexual assault by rape or penetration, including attempts) occurred. For example, at age 11, 34% of survivors were being abused. The figure indicates that relatively few survivors said the sexual assaults by rape or penetration (including attempts) took place between 1 and 3 years old (1% and 4% respectively), although there may be recall issues with remembering sexual abuse in early infancy. The prevalence increases to around the age of 8 with a third (33%) of survivors reporting abuse at this age. From the age of 8 to the age of 15 the figure remains consistent with between 30% and 34% of survivors reporting the abuse taking place in any of the intervening years.

Figure 9: Proportion of the survivors of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts), by age at which the abuse took place, year ending March 2016 CSEW^{1,2,3}



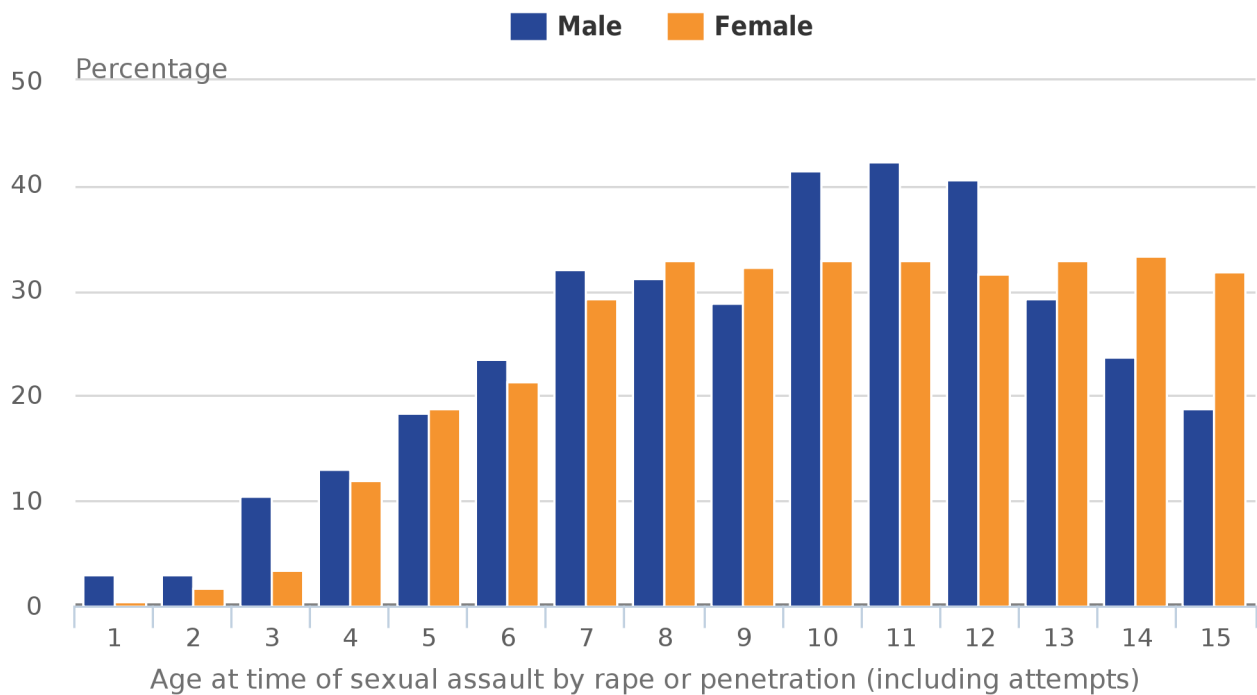
Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales, Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. These data are derived using the age at which the survivor said the sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) started, the age at which the abuse stopped, and whether the abuse continued past the age of 16.
2. Percentages will sum to more than 100, as respondents could have experienced sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) at more than one age.
3. Sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) experienced by the survivor may refer to specific events that occurred infrequently or were continuous events from the age the abuse started and the age it stopped, before the age of 16. The frequency of abuse was not asked in the self completion module of the survey.

For men, it appears that the abuse was most prevalent at age 11 (Figure 10) with 42% of men reporting they were abused at this age, the prevalence of abuse then fell to 19% at age 15. For women the figure remains relatively similar from about age 7 (29%) through to age 15 (32%). For both men and women, the pattern prior to age 7 is similar with a general increase in the proportion of survivors reporting abuse from 1 to 6 years of age.

Figure 10: Proportion of the survivors of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts), by age at which the abuse took place and sex, year ending March 2016 CSEW ^{1,2,3}



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

Notes:

1. These data are derived using the age at which the survivor said the sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) started, the age at which the abuse stopped, and whether the abuse continued past the age of 16.
2. Percentages will sum to more than 100, as respondents could have experienced sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) at more than one age.
3. Sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) experienced by the survivor may refer to specific events that occurred infrequently or were continuous events from the age the abuse started and the age it stopped, before the age of 16. The frequency of abuse was not asked in the self completion module of the survey.

10. Length of time over which the sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) occurred

Table 5a and Table 5b show the number of years over which sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) occurred. The figures were derived using the age at which the survivor said the abuse first occurred, the age at which the abuse stopped, and whether the abuse continued past the age of 16. The time period calculated may cover 1 or more incidents that occurred infrequently or continuous incidents covering all the years between the year the abuse started and the year it stopped.

Table 5a shows that over a third (37%) of survivors of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) said the abuse occurred over a period of less than a year. For a further 29% of survivors, the abuse lasted between 1 and 3 years. The breakdown in Table 5a shows that there was little difference in the period over which sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) occurred between men and women.

Table 5a: Number of years that sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) before the age of 16 took place, by sex, year ending March 2016 CSEW

England and Wales	Adults aged 16 to 59		
	Men	Women	All
	Percentage		
Less than one year	31	38	37
Between 1-3 years	34	28	29
Between 3-5 years	20	14	15
Between 5-10 years	11	15	14
Between 10-14 years	5	5	5
Unweighted base - number of adults	55	370	425

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

Notes:

1. These data are derived using the age at which the survivor said the sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) started, the age at which the abuse stopped or whether the abuse continued past the age of 16. For the purpose of calculating the length of abuse that occurred before the age of 16, any abuse reported as continuing to or beyond the age of 16 is treated as if it had ended at the age of 15.
2. Ranges have been provided rather than the exact number of years as, for example, if a respondent said that the abuse started at age 8 and stopped at age 9, then the abuse could have spanned a period of between one and two years.

Table 5b shows the period that sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) lasts, broken down by the current age of the survivor. Most of the figures in Table 5b do not appear to show any statistically significant differences apart from adult survivors aged 45-59, which were more likely to report sexual assault by rape of penetration lasting between 1 and 3 years (34%) compared with 20% of 16-29 year olds.

Table 5b: Number of years that sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) before the age of 16 took place, by age group, year ending March 2016 CSEW

England and Wales	Adults aged 16 to 59			All
	16-29	30-44	45-59	
	Percentage			
Less than one year	43	34	36	37
Between 1-3 years	20	28	34	29
Between 3-5 years	18	15	14	15
Between 5-10 years	15	17	12	14
Between 10-14 years	4	6	4	5
Unweighted base - number of adults	74	168	183	425

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

Notes:

1. These data are derived using the age at which the survivor said the sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) started, the age at which the abuse stopped or whether the abuse continued past the age of 16. For the purpose of calculating the length of abuse that occurred before the age of 16, any abuse reported as continuing to or beyond the age of 16 is treated as if it had ended at the age of 15.

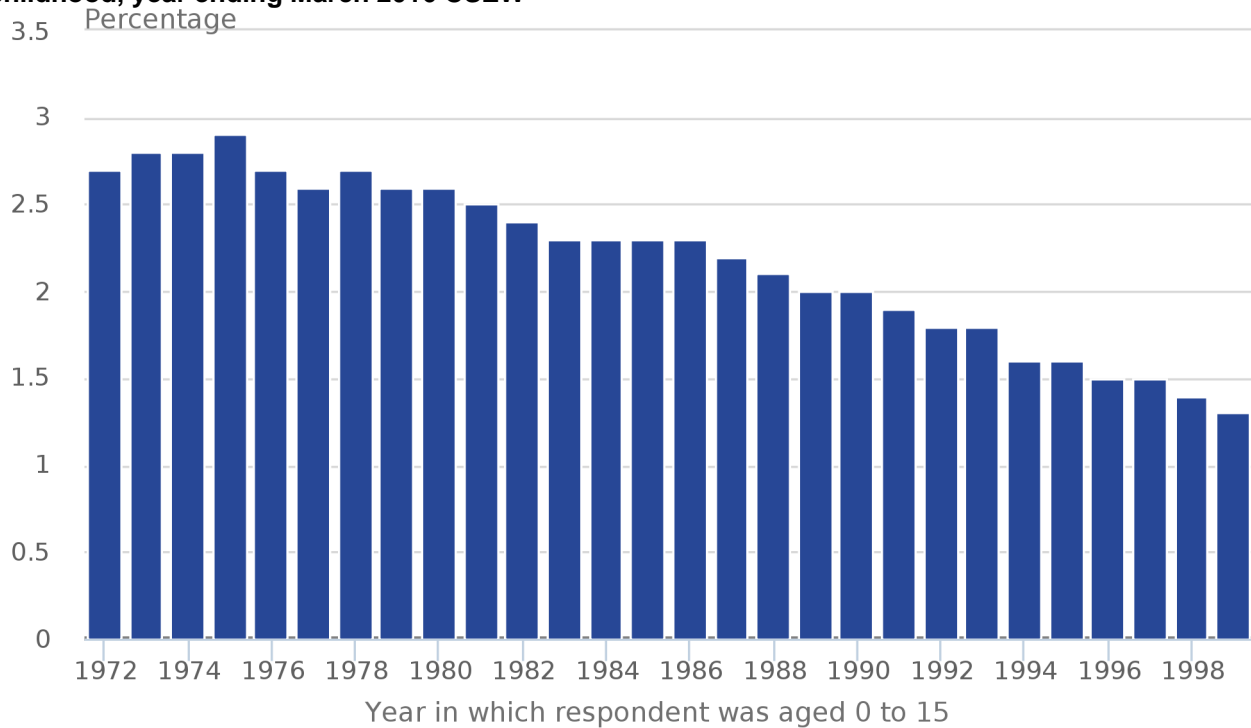
2. Ranges have been provided rather than the exact number of years as, for example, if a respondent said that the abuse started at age 8 and stopped at age 9, then the abuse could have spanned a period of between one and two years.

11. Year of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts)

The prevalence of sexual assault of children by rape or penetration over time has been calculated using the respondents' age at the time of interview. For example, a respondent aged 41 in 2016 would have been aged between 0 and 15 between 1975 and 1990¹. Therefore, a time series of childhood prevalence can be calculated, based on the respondent's age. Figure 11 shows the prevalence of sexual assault by penetration or rape (including attempts) for children aged 0 to 15 in any given calendar year. For example, the prevalence during childhood for adults aged 0 to 15 years in 1972 was 2.7% (read as 2.7% of children aged 0 to 15 in 1972 were sexually assaulted by rape or penetration (including attempts) at some point in their childhood, but not necessarily in 1972).

Figure 11 indicates that the reported prevalence rate of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) during childhood declines slowly from the mid 1970s to 1999 (the latest figure calculable). The prevalence for adults aged 0 to 15 in 1975 was 2.9% compared with 2.3% for those aged 0 to 15 in 1985, and 1.3% for those aged 0 to 15 in 1999². As previously suggested, it is possible that younger adults, when asked about their experience of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) during childhood, may be less likely to report than older adults, and this may be a contributory factor to the downward trend. For example, a young adult may lack the confidence to report the abuse, or may still be living in the home where the abuse took place.

Figure 11: Prevalence of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts), by calendar year of childhood, year ending March 2016 CSEW^{1,2,3}



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

Notes:

1. Each year of childhood is derived from the current age of respondents. Each year includes all respondents who were aged between 0 and 15 years old in that particular year.
2. The year ending March 2016 CSEW covers three quarters of 2015 and one quarter of 2016. For this reason, the years in which respondents were aged between 0 and 15 years old will differ depending on whether they were interviewed in 2015 or 2016.
3. Questions on experience of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) before the age of 16, are asked of 16 to 59 year olds only. Data is only available from 1972 (or the year in which, someone who was 59 years old in 2016, would have been 15) to 1999 (the year in which, someone who was 16 years old in 2015, would have been born).

Notes:

1. The year of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) refers to the calendar year, as in, 1 January to 31 December, where respondent was aged 0 to 15.
2. Each year of childhood is derived from the current age of respondents. Each year includes all respondents who were aged between 0 and 15 years old in that particular year. Questions on experience of sexual assault by penetration or rape (including attempts) before the age of 16 are asked of 16 to 59 year olds only. Data are only available from 1972 (or the year in which someone who was 59 years old in 2016 would have been 15) to 1999 (the year in which someone who was 16 years old in 2015 would have been born).

12. Where sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) happened

Survivors of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) were asked where the abuse happened. Table 6 shows that someone else's home (45%) was the most frequent location stated, followed by the survivor's own home (39%) and "other" locations, for example a street or other public place (30%).

Table 6: Location of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) experienced before the age of 16, year ending March 2016 CSEW

England and Wales	Adults aged 16 to 59
	Percentage ¹
Someone else's home	45
Own home	39
School/college	3
Care home/foster home	2
Hospital/doctor's surgery	1
Other ²	30
Don't know/can't remember	1
Don't wish to answer	1
Unweighted base - number of adults	490

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

Notes:

1. Percentages sum to more than 100 as respondents could choose more than one answer for this question

2. 'Other' includes 'in a street or other public place' and 'some other place'

13. Whether survivors of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) told anyone about the abuse at the time the abuse occurred

Survivors who reported childhood sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) were asked whether they told anyone about what was happening to them at the time of the abuse. Just under three-quarters (74%) of survivors (Table 7) did not tell anyone about the abuse at the time the abuse occurred. The breakdown by sex shows no statistically significant differences between men and women on whether they told anyone at the time of experiencing the sexual assault, but the breakdown by age does show some significant differences. In particular, those aged less than 45 at the time of interview were significantly more likely to have told someone at the time the abuse occurred than those aged 45 to 59. This gives some indication that disclosure rates have increased over time.

Table 7: Whether survivors of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) before the age of 16 told anyone about the abuse at the time, by sex and age group, year ending March 2016 CSEW

England and Wales			Adults aged 16 to 59
	Yes	No	Unweighted base - number of adults
			Percentages
Male	17	83	61
Female	28	72	417
16-29	28	72	85
30-44	32	68	182
45-59	21	79	211
All	26	74	478

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

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) last asked adults whether they were similarly abused, and by whom, from the age of 16 in the intimate personal violence and serious sexual assault module in the year ending March 2014. Those who had experienced sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) as an adult (aged 16 and above) were then asked who they had personally told. Disclosure rates were higher than those reported as a child with over two-thirds of adult survivors telling someone about their most recent experience since the age of 16 (67%¹). This compares with the 26% of survivors who said they had told someone of their childhood sexual abuse at the time it occurred.

Survivors of childhood sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) were also asked who they had spoken to about the abuse they had experienced (Table 8). For the purpose of analysis, these have been split into 3 types of support: someone known personally to them (for example a friend or relative), someone in a professional organisation (for example police, health professionals or a local council department) or someone in another support organisation (for example Victim Support or a helpline).

Both female and male survivors (12% and 25%) were most likely to tell someone they knew personally about childhood sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) at the time, with survivors most commonly telling a family member or relative (18%). Only 1 in 10 (10%) of all survivors of childhood sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) told someone in an official position about the abuse at the time, with 7% reporting the abuse to the police. Reporting rates from the CSEW in the year ending March 2014 were higher when reporting sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts). Over a quarter of adult survivors (28%) reported telling someone in an official position about their most recent experience since the age of 16, with 17% reporting the incident to the police.

Table 8: Who survivors of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) told about their abuse, year ending March 2016 CSEW

England and Wales	Adults aged 16 to 59		
	Men	Women	All
	Percentage		
Told anyone	17	28	26
Told someone known personally	12	25	23
Family or a relative	12	19	18
Friend or a neighbour	0	7	6
Another pupil at my school/co-student	0	2	2
Partner/boyfriend/girlfriend	0	0	0
Told someone in an official position	7	10	10
Police	2	8	7
Teacher/professor	4	3	3
Doctor/health care worker	1	2	2
Lawyer, solicitor or other legal professional	0	0	0
Told other support professional or organisation	3	2	2
Victim support organisation	0	1	1
Counsellor or therapist	3	1	2
Told somebody else or another organisation	3	1	1
Don't know/can't remember	0	0	0
Don't wish to answer	0	0	0
Unweighted base - number of adults	61	417	478

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

This indicates that children are less likely to report sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) compared with adult survivors, suggesting that child sexual assault is hidden to a greater extent than adult sexual assault. Other research has suggested that as few as 1 in 8 reports of child sexual abuse come to the attention of professionals, as highlighted in the Children's Commissioner report [Protecting Children from Harm: A critical assessment of child sexual abuse in the family network in England and priorities for action, 2015.](#)

The reasons for not telling anyone at the time of experiencing sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) are shown in Table 9. The first and second most frequent reasons cited were "embarrassment and humiliation" (48%) and "thinking they would not be believed" (38%).

Table 9: Why the survivor did not tell anyone about the sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) experienced before the age of 16, year ending March 2016 CSEW

England and Wales	Adults aged 16 to 59
	Percentage ¹
Embarrassment/thought it would be humiliating	48
Didn't think they would believe me	38
Didn't think anyone would do anything about it	19
Feared more violence as a result of telling someone	14
Didn't want the police involved or didn't want the person/people who did it to be punished	12
Didn't have anyone to tell	11
Didn't think they would be sympathetic	9
Private/family matter	9
Didn't want to go to court	6
Too trivial	3
Dislike/fear of police	0
Already told the police about it before	0
Police didn't come when called	0
Some other reason	23
Don't know/can't remember	6
Don't wish to answer	2
Unweighted base - number of adults	352

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

Notes:

1. Percentages sum to more than 100 as respondents could choose more than one answer for this question

Notes:

1. Figures are reported in [Chapter 4: Violent Crime and Sexual Offences - Intimate Personal Violence and Serious Sexual Assault](#) from Findings from the year ending March 2014 Crime Survey for England and Wales and police recorded crime over the same period on violent crime and sexual offences. See also Appendix Table 4.19.

14. Quality and methodology

Data

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) is a face-to-face survey in which people resident in households in England and Wales are asked about their experiences of crime in the 12 months prior to the interview. It covers both children aged 10 to 15 and adults aged 16 and over, but does not cover those living in communal establishments (such as care homes, student halls of residence and prisons). The CSEW is able to capture a broad range of victim-based crimes experienced by those interviewed, not just those that have been reported to, and recorded by, the police.

As some respondents may not wish to disclose sensitive information in a face-to-face interview, the survey has included self-completion modules on sensitive topics since 2004 to 2005 (and prior to this in 1996 and 2001). The module on abuse during childhood was added to the self-completion section of the CSEW survey year ending March 2016 and was asked of respondents aged 16 to 59. As a result, the oldest respondents (those aged 59 at the time of interview) answered questions about their experiences between 1956 and 1972 and the youngest (those aged 16 at the time of interview) between 1999 and 2015.

Definitions

Generally, practitioners have come to define abuse from the laws designed to protect children from harm. The CSEW module defines abuse during childhood as comprising of 4 main elements. These are: witnessing domestic abuse as a child; psychological abuse by an adult, physical abuse by an adult, and sexual abuse by an adult. It is recognised that this definition does not include peer-on-peer violence such as school bullying, which is often used in definitions of child abuse. The questions on which these concepts are based can be found in the [2015/16 paper version of the questionnaire](#).

Witnessing domestic abuse:

- the abuse during childhood module asks adults if they had witnessed domestic violence or abuse (witnessing any psychological, physical or sexual assault at home) during childhood. Research has shown that witnessing domestic violence or abuse can cause significant harm¹. Witnessing domestic violence is therefore categorised as child abuse in this report.

Psychological abuse:

- the abuse during childhood module defines psychological abuse where the adult respondent indicates that they: were told that they should have never been born; were threatened to be abandoned or thrown out of the family home; were repeatedly belittled to the extent that they felt worthless; were physically threatened or someone close to them physically threatened; were emotionally neglected, or; were told they were not loved.

Physical abuse:

- physical abuse is defined as where the adult respondent indicated that they were: pushed, held down or slapped hard; kicked, bit, or hit with a fist or something else; had something thrown at them; were choked or where someone had attempted to strangle them; hit or attacked with a weapon or an object (for example a stick or a knife); burned; had some other kind of force inflicted against them in a non-sexual way. This can include smacking or corporal punishment at school if the respondent considered it to be abuse.

Any sexual assault:

The abuse during childhood module splits “any sexual assault” into 2 subcategories:

- Sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts): sexual assault by penetration of a [mouth, vagina or anus; or mouth or anus] with a penis, or penetrated their [vagina or anus; or anus] with an object (including fingers).
- Other sexual assaults including indecent exposure or unwanted touching: the category includes indecent exposure (as in, flashing), or being touched sexually whether it was agreed to or not (for example, groping, touching of breasts or bottom, kissing).

“Any abuse” is abuse during childhood in which respondents reported witnessing domestic violence or abuse, or experienced psychological abuse, physical abuse, or any sexual assault.

A “survivor” of “any abuse” is a respondent who reported experiencing 1 or more types of abuse before the age of 16.

The survey asked respondents about their experiences of abuse during childhood based on witnessing domestic abuse, psychological abuse, physical abuse and any sexual assault. The experiences of survivors of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) were the main focus of the self-completion module because of the demand from users for statistics on this topic. The CSEW did not ask respondents to recall each incident of abuse during childhood separately, (for example the number of times the abuse was experienced) or the lifetime impact of the abuse.

Questions relating to sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) assume continuous victimisation and provide a measure of the length of time over which the abuse occurred. The data are derived using the age at which the survivor said the abuse started, the age at which the abuse stopped, and whether the abuse continued past the age of 16. Therefore, the abuse experienced by the survivor could refer to specific events that occurred infrequently or to continuous events.

Accuracy of the statistics

In the year ending March 2016 the CSEW achieved a nationally representative sample of 35,248 adults with a response rate of 72%. The survey is weighted to adjust for possible non response bias to ensure the sample reflects the profile of the general population. Based on a sample survey, the estimates are subject to margin of error. Unless otherwise stated, all differences in CSEW estimates described in the main text are statistically significant at the 5% level. For more information on statistical significance on the survey see the [User Guide](#).

Even though the respondents self-complete by entering responses to questions directly onto the laptop, and additional confidentiality statements given to ensure respondents feel more at ease, issues of disclosure may remain. Whilst the level of failure to disclose is unknown, it is reasonable to assume that estimates of abuse as a child will include some element of underreporting as respondents may find it difficult to recall such events or prefer not to do so.

It should also be noted that societal norms shift over time and that some of the behaviours now considered as abuse would not have been thought of in the same way 30 or 40 years ago and may affect the way people of different ages respond to questions on abuse during childhood.

Other errors may occur where respondents have recalled abuse during childhood incidents in the reference period (as a child aged between 0 and 15 years old) that actually occurred outside that period at aged 16 years and over (“telescoping”).

Information relating to the time period in which the sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) occurred assumes ongoing victimisation, as the data are derived using the age at which the survivor said the abuse started, the age at which the abuse stopped, and whether the abuse continued past the age of 16. Therefore, the abuse experienced by the survivor could refer to specific events that occurred infrequently or to regular events.

Notes:

1. [Problems Associated with Children's Witnessing of Domestic Violence](#) reports a series of childhood problems statistically associated with a child's witnessing domestic violence. The report [Children's Witnessing of Adult Domestic Violence](#) provides a more in depth summary of the studies in this area of abuse.

15. Background notes

1. National Statistics are produced to high professional standards set out in the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. They undergo regular quality assurance reviews to ensure that they meet customer needs. They are produced free from any political interference.
2. The [UK Statistics Authority](#) has designated these statistics as National Statistics, in accordance with the [Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007](#) and signifying compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics.