

Statistical bulletin

Online bullying in England and Wales: year ending March 2020

Estimates of the prevalence and nature of online bullying among children using data from the 10- to 15-year-olds' Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW).

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1 . Main points

- There is no legal definition of bullying, but it is often described as behaviour that hurts someone else, physically or emotionally, and can happen anywhere - at school, at home or online.
- Around one in five children aged 10 to 15 years in England and Wales (19%) experienced at least one type of online bullying behaviour in the year ending March 2020, equivalent to 764,000 children.
- More than half (52%) of those children who experienced online bullying behaviours¹ said they would not describe these behaviours as bullying, and one in four (26%) did not report their experiences to anyone.
- Being called names, sworn at or insulted and having nasty messages about them sent to them were the two most common online bullying behaviour types, experienced by 10% of all children aged 10 to 15 years.
- Nearly three out of four children (72%) who had experienced an online bullying behaviour experienced at least some of it at school or during school time.

Statistician's comment

"Greater use of smartphones, social media and networking applications means online bullying can follow a child anywhere they go. Using new data from the crime survey we can see that around 1 in 5 children between the ages of 10 to 15 had experienced some form of online bullying in the previous 12 months.

"This compares with 2 in 5 children who experienced bullying in person, and whilst these data were collected before the coronavirus pandemic, children's isolation at home and increased time spent on the internet is likely to have had a substantial impact on the split between real world and cyber bullying."

Sophie Sanders from the Office for National Statistics Centre for Crime and Justice.

Finding help

If you believe a child is in immediate danger, contact the police on 999 or 112. If the child is not in immediate danger but you are still concerned, or you or someone you know is experiencing bullying, you can contact:

- the NSPCC helpline on 0808 800 5000 or by emailing help@nspcc.org.uk
- [Childline](https://www.childline.gov.uk) on 0800 1111
- your local child protection services

Notes: Main points

1. In the survey, children were first asked to identify any nasty things that had happened to them or been done to them from a list of behaviours commonly recognised as bullying. Children were later separately asked whether or not they would describe their experiences mentioned as "bullying".

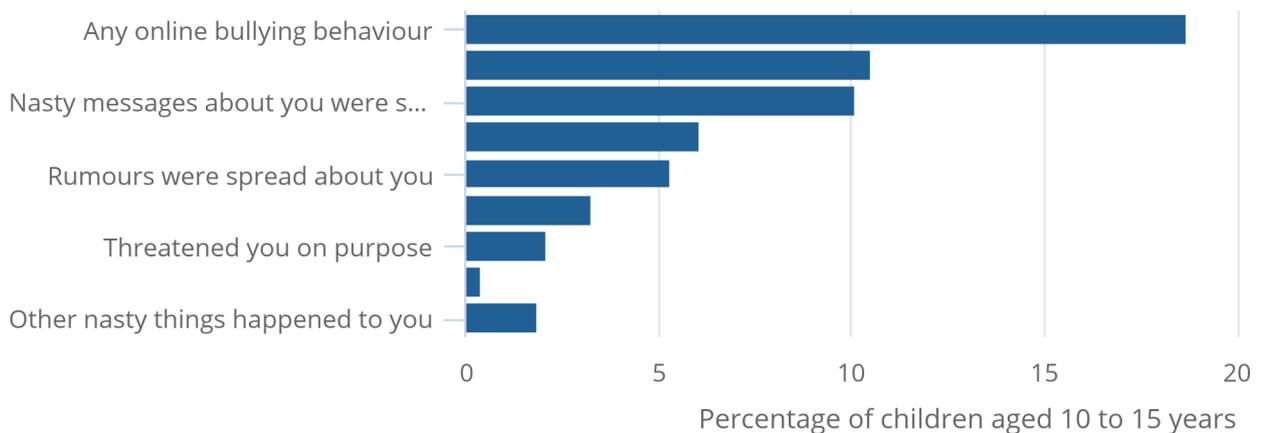
2 . Prevalence of bullying

Figure 1: Almost one in five children experienced at least one type of online bullying behaviour in the previous 12 months

Proportion of children aged 10 to 15 years who experienced online bullying behaviours in the previous 12 months, by type of bullying behaviour, England and Wales, year ending March 2020

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Proportion of children aged 10 to 15 years who experienced online bullying behaviours in the previous 12 months, by type of bullying behaviour, England and Wales, year ending March 2020



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

Notes:

1. Percentages may not sum to 100 as respondents may have given more than one answer.

In the year ending March 2020, an estimated one out of five children aged 10 to 15 years in England and Wales experienced at least one type of online bullying behaviour (19%). This equates to approximately 764,000 children.

Online bullying has been increasingly enabled by wider access to the internet and greater use of smartphones, social media and networking applications. By comparison, twice as many children (38%) reported that they had experienced a bullying behaviour in person. A smaller percentage experienced a bullying behaviour by a telephone or mobile phone call (4%). As some children experienced multiple types of bullying behaviour, overall 42% of children aged 10 to 15 years experienced some form of bullying behaviour in the year ending March 2020.

There was no [significant](#) difference in the proportion of girls (20%) and boys (17%) who had experienced an online bullying behaviour. However, the prevalence of online bullying was significantly higher for children with a long-term illness or disability (26%) than those without (18%). Asian or Asian British children were also significantly less likely to have experienced an online bullying behaviour (6%) than White children (21%), Black or Black British children (18%) and Mixed Ethnic group children (19%).

As the data used for this publication relate to the period prior to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and lockdown, with children's isolation at home and increased time spent on the internet, the split between in person and online bullying is likely to have changed substantially during this period.

Out of all children who had experienced a form of online bullying behaviour, slightly less than half (48%) stated that they had experienced two or more types of online bullying behaviours.

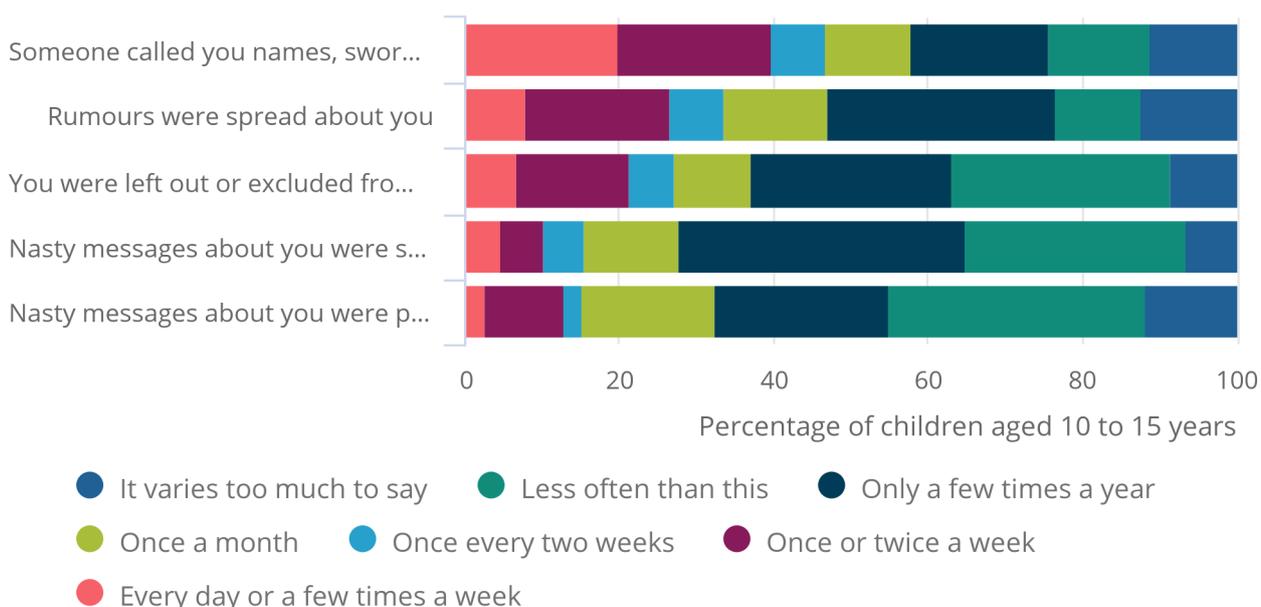
3 . Nature of online bullying

Figure 2: Being called names, sworn at and insulted was the most frequently experienced online bullying behaviour

Frequency of online bullying behaviours experienced by children aged 10 to 15 years in the previous 12 months, by type of bullying behaviour, England and Wales, year ending March 2020

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Frequency of online bullying behaviours experienced by children aged 10 to 15 years in the previous 12 months, by type of bullying behaviour, England and Wales, year ending March 2020



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

Notes:

- Types of online bullying behaviour with an unweighted base of less than 50 were excluded from this figure.

The number of times online bullying behaviours were experienced varied between different types. Being called names, sworn at and insulted was the most frequently experienced online bullying behaviour, with 20% of children who experienced this type of behaviour stating they experienced it every day or a few times a week. An additional 20% of children experienced it once or twice a week.

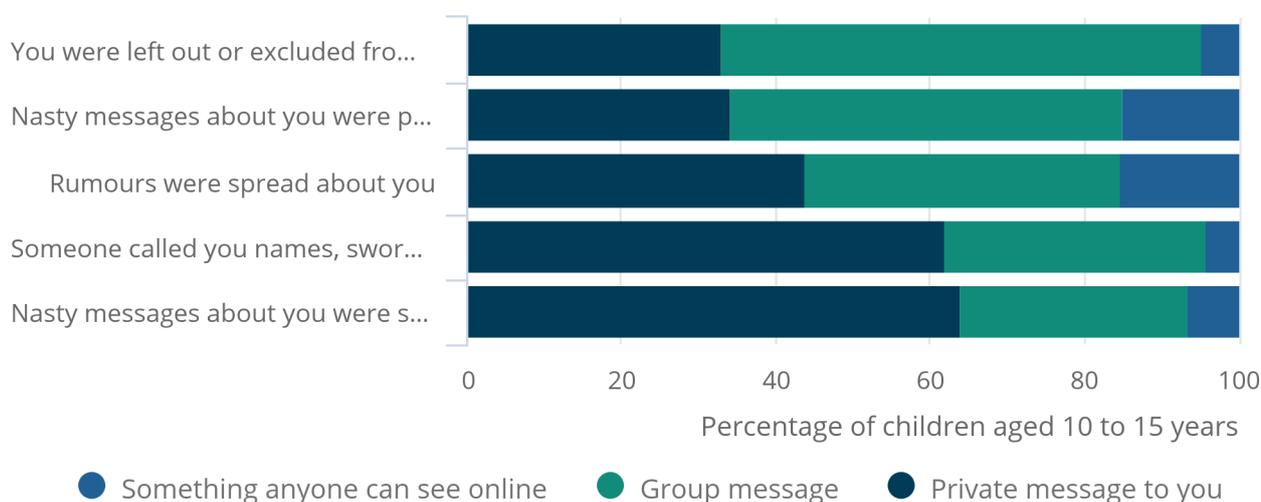
Experiencing bullying behaviours through being sent messages, images or videos was the method with the highest percentage across all types of online bullying behaviours ([Appendix table 6](#)). Other methods of carrying out online bullying behaviours included posting online messages, images or videos about children, contacting children in a chatroom, and through online games. The percentages for these methods varied for each type of online bullying behaviour.

Figure 3: For some types of online bullying behaviours experienced in the previous 12 months, the majority were carried out in private

Privacy level of messages received by children aged 10 to 15 years who experienced online bullying behaviours, by type of bullying behaviour, England and Wales, year ending March 2020

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Privacy level of messages received by children aged 10 to 15 years who experienced online bullying behaviours, by type of bullying behaviour, England and Wales, year ending March 2020



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

Notes:

- Types of online bullying behaviour with an unweighted base of less than 50 were excluded from this figure.

Children who experienced an online bullying behaviour through messages being sent to them, posted online or in chatrooms were asked whether these were private messages to them, group messages or something that anyone could see online.

Private messages were used more frequently for types of bullying that do not necessarily involve any other children except the victim, such as someone calling them names, swearing at them or insulting them and nasty messages about them being sent to them.

As online bullying behaviours by private messages are only experienced by the victim, it is more likely that they will go unnoticed unless someone is told.

Group messages were more frequently used for types of online bullying behaviour that mainly involve other people such as nasty messages about children being passed around or posted where others could see and children being left out of or excluded from a group or activity on purpose.

Children were also asked whether the online bullying behaviours that they experienced were carried out by the same person or same group of people. Slightly over half of the children (51%) answered that the online bullying behaviours they experienced were carried out by the same people. Just over a third (36%) answered that they were not carried out by the same people, while 13% did not know.

4 . Bullying and school

School has a central role in bullying. It is the place where children spend a lot of their time daily and interact with other children who may display bullying behaviours. It can be a place where bullying takes place but also a place where children may seek direct help from their teachers or school staff.

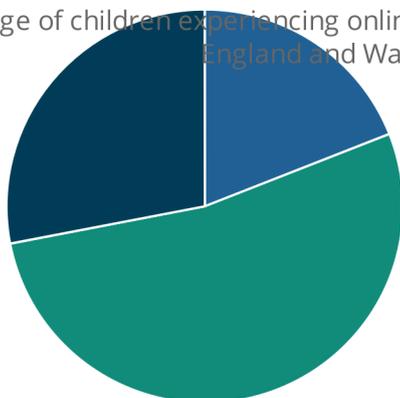
In the year ending March 2020, 7 out of 10 (70%) children aged 10 to 15 years who experienced an online bullying behaviour said this was by someone from their school.

Figure 4: Nearly three out of four children (72%) who experienced an online bullying behaviour in the previous 12 months experienced at least some of it at school or during school time

Percentage of children experiencing online bullying behaviours at school or during school time, England and Wales, year ending March 2020

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Percentage of children experiencing online bullying behaviours at school or during school time, England and Wales, year ending March 2020



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

Another important finding concerning schools is children's perception of how well their school deals with bullying. More than two-thirds of children (68%) believed that their school deals with bullying very well or quite well, while a quarter (25%) believed that their school does not deal with bullying very well or not at all well. A minority (6%) answered that bullying is not a problem at their schools.

These figures varied depending on whether children experienced at least one online bullying behaviour in the previous year. For children who had experienced online bullying, the percentage saying that their school does not deal with bullying very well or not well at all was more than double (44%) that for children who had not (21%).

5 . Perception and impact of online bullying

Around 7 out of 10 children were emotionally affected by the online bullying behaviours experienced

Bullying, among other factors, can have an impact on a [child's emotional well-being](#). For the year ending March 2020, 22% of children aged 10 to 15 years who had experienced a type of online bullying behaviour said that they were emotionally affected a lot by these incidents. A further 47% said that they were a little affected and 32% said that they were not affected at all. This means that almost 7 out of 10 children (68%) were emotionally affected to an extent by the online bullying behaviours experienced.

An estimated one in three children (32%)¹ who experienced online bullying behaviours reported it to their teachers, and 18% reported it to another member of staff. However, children most commonly reported their online bullying experiences to parents (56%), while 19% reported it to other family members. Helplines were used by 1% of children to report online bullying behaviours they had experienced, while 15% of children reported these experiences to someone else.

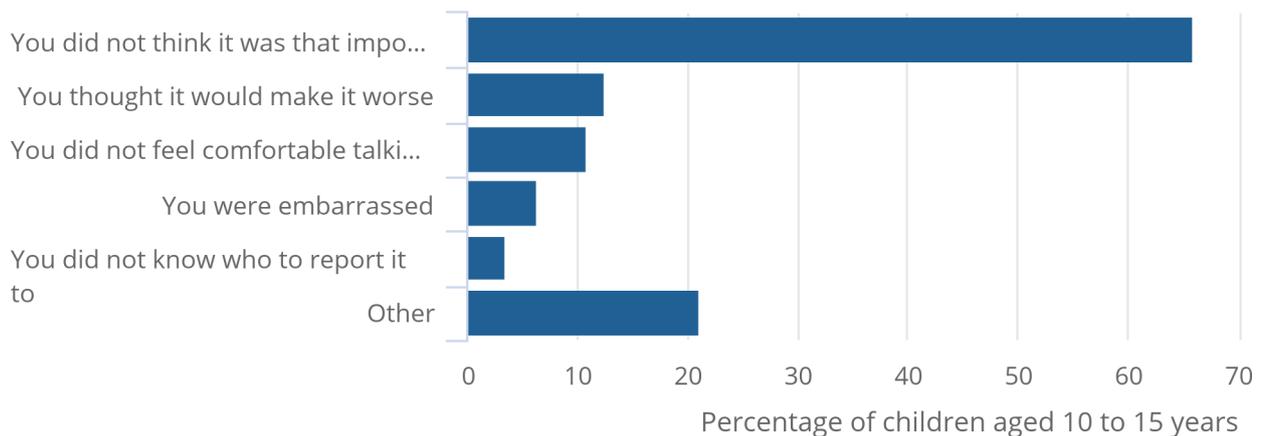
Slightly over one in four children (26%) did not report their online bullying experienced. There is a [significant](#) difference between boys and girls, with 34% of boys not reporting these experiences to anyone compared with 15% of girls.

Figure 5: The most common reason for not reporting experiences of online bullying behaviours to anyone was that the victim did not think it was important

Reasons for children aged 10 to 15 years not reporting online bullying behaviours experienced in the previous 12 months, England and Wales, year ending March 2020

Figure 5: The most common reason for not reporting experiences of online bullying behaviours to anyone was that the victim did not think it was important

Reasons for children aged 10 to 15 years not reporting online bullying behaviours experienced in the previous 12 months, England and Wales, year ending March 2020



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

Notes:

1. Percentages may not sum to 100 as respondents may have given more than one answer.

When asked the reason for not reporting anything, two out of three children (66%) mentioned that they did not think it was important.

An estimated 52% of children said they would not describe the online bullying behaviours they experienced as bullying

There is no legal definition of bullying, but it is often described as behaviour that hurts someone else, physically or emotionally, and can happen anywhere – at school, at home or online. Because there is no single definition, bullying can be perceived differently by individuals, particularly between adults and children, and this can depend on the context in which something is taking place and who it is carried out by.

In the survey, children were first asked to identify any nasty things that had happened to them or been done to them from a list of behaviours commonly recognised as bullying. Children were later separately asked whether or not they would describe their experiences mentioned as “bullying”.

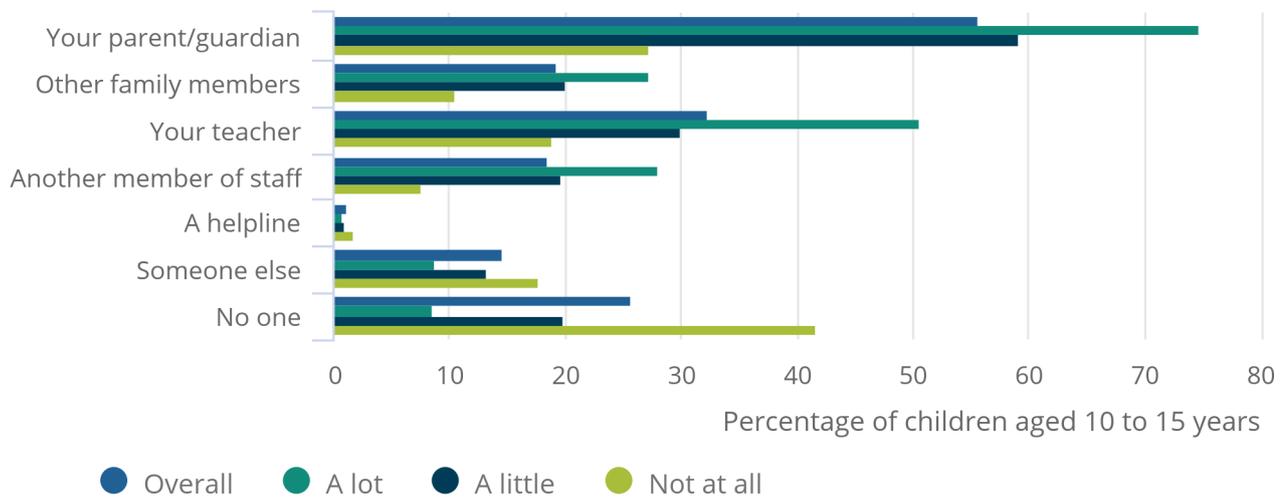
More than half of the children (52%) who experienced an online bullying behaviour answered that they would not describe their experiences as bullying, while 29% did describe their experiences as bullying and 19% did not know. This could be for a number of reasons including the child was not aware these behaviours are commonly recognised as bullying, they did not consider the incident to be significant or they did not want to admit that they had been bullied.

Figure 6: Children with a higher emotional impact from online bullying behaviours were more likely to report their experiences

Who children aged 10 to 15 years told about their experiences of online bullying behaviours, by emotional impact, England and Wales, year ending March 2020

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Who children aged 10 to 15 years told about their experiences of online bullying behaviours, by emotional impact, England and Wales, year ending March 2020



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

Notes:

1. Excludes those who said “Don’t know” or “Don’t want to answer”.
2. Percentages may not sum to 100 as respondents may have given more than one answer.

There is a clear relationship between the emotional impact of online bullying behaviours, whether children would describe it as bullying and whether they report it.

Children who said they were affected a lot were more likely to report their experiences with 9% not reporting these to anyone compared with 20% of children who were affected a little and 42% of children who were not affected at all.

Children who described their experiences of online bullying behaviours as bullying were also significantly more likely to have reported these to someone. Of those children who described their experiences as bullying, almost three out of four children (74%) reported their experiences to their parents or guardian, and 53% reported them to their teachers. In comparison, of the children that did not describe their experiences as bullying, 40% reported their experiences to their parent or guardian and 17% reported them to their teacher. An estimated 35% of children who did not describe these behaviours as bullying did not report them to anyone, compared with 11% of children who did.

Out of the children who said their experiences of online bullying behaviours affected them a lot, 58% described their experiences as bullying. In comparison, 30% of children who were affected a little and 10% of children who were not emotionally affected at all by their experiences described them as bullying.

Notes: Perception and impact of online bullying

1. Percentages may not sum up to 100% as children may have given more than one answer.

6 . Online bullying data

[Online bullying in England and Wales appendix tables](#)

Dataset | Released 16 November 2020

Data from the 10- to 15-year-olds' Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) on the prevalence and nature of online bullying.

7 . Glossary

Bullying

There is no legal definition of bullying. According to the [National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children \(NSPCC\)](#):

"Bullying is behaviour that hurts someone else. It includes name calling, hitting, pushing, spreading rumours, threatening or undermining someone.

"It can happen anywhere – at school, at home or online. It's usually repeated over a long period of time and can hurt a child both physically and emotionally."

Online bullying

The [NSPCC](#) defines cyberbullying as: "bullying that takes place online. Unlike bullying in the real world, online bullying can follow the child wherever they go, via social networks, gaming and mobile phone."

8 . Measuring the data

Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW)

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) is a face-to-face victimisation survey, which asks people resident in households in England and Wales about their experiences of a selected range of offences in the 12 months prior to the interview. In addition, from April 2009, in households with children aged 10 to 15 years, a child is also selected at random to be interviewed using a separate shorter 10- to 15-year-olds' questionnaire. For the year ending March 2020, 2,398 children aged 10 to 15 years took part in the children's survey.

Data used in this bulletin come from the Bullying module of the self-completion section of the [10- to 15-year-olds' questionnaire](#). In response to growing concern around risks to children posed online, this module underwent extensive review, and questions to capture the extent and nature of children's online experiences of bullying were first introduced in the 10- to 15-year-olds' questionnaire in April 2019. Findings from new questions capturing the extent and nature of children's online experiences of sexting, speaking with and meeting strangers, and online safety more widely will be published in [February 2021](#).

Putting the safety of the public first, we have suspended all face-to-face interviewing on the CSEW to minimise social contact as a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Fieldwork for the year ending March 2020 was suspended two weeks early on Wednesday 17 March 2020 just prior to the lockdown restrictions being announced by the government on 23 March 2020. Estimates for the year ending March 2020 presented in this release are therefore unaffected by the pandemic.

On 20 May 2020, we launched an interim telephone survey (TCSEW) based on a reduced set of questions usually collected through the face-to-face CSEW. The TCSEW does not collect data from children aged 10 to 15 years as the procedure for interviewing more than one member of the household via a telephone interview would be complex and add considerable time to the length of the household interview. We do not currently know when we will return to face-to-face interviewing.

All differences reported in this article are [statistically significant](#) at the 5% level unless stated otherwise.

The [User guide to crime statistics for England and Wales](#) provides detailed information about the CSEW.

Safeguarding

Because of the sensitive nature of the questions and the young age of the respondents, we took care to address a series of ethical considerations before introducing these questions into the survey. Our concerns focused on how we could identify an "at risk" child through the proposed data collection and how to respond to such an identification without undermining respondent trust and confidentiality. To address this, we sought advice from both the NSPCC Research Ethics Committee and the National Statistician's Data Ethics Advisory Committee as well as approval from the latter.

Consequently, we implemented a "risk rating" approach where, based on the answers a child gives, a score is calculated that can fall into three categories (low, medium or high risk). Once the risk rating is calculated, a letter is sent to both the parent and child explaining the "risk rating" for the child. This letter does not reveal any children's responses to the questions or which questions have triggered a higher risk rating for the children. Children are made aware of this process before starting their interview and letters are sent to all children who have completed the survey. In this way, we achieve a good balance between maintaining the confidentiality of the child's responses but at the same time identifying and dealing with possible causes for concern. In addition, a number of resources with further information about this process and possible contacts for help were provided to both parents and the children before the interviews took place.

Pilot studies carried out by an independent contractor showed that a child's willingness to complete the survey and do so honestly was not affected by the risk rating approach. The approach was welcomed as a valuable tool for better understanding and discussion of online risks.

Estimating the prevalence of bullying

Children were first asked to identify any nasty things that had happened to them or been done to them from a list of behaviours commonly recognised as bullying. Children were able to give more than one answer. The prevalence of bullying was measured by the number of children who reported they had experienced at least one type of bullying behaviour in the last 12 months.

To estimate the prevalence of different types of bullying, children were asked whether each behaviour they experienced happened in person, by a telephone or mobile phone call, by text message or instant message, or online. Because of their nature, some behaviours are classified directly to a type of bullying, for example, "Physically hurt you on purpose" would be classified as in person without asking how this behaviour happened.

9 . Strengths and limitations

Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW)

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) is a large, national sample survey that has used a consistent methodology over time. Households from all over England and Wales are interviewed, and the raw results are weighted to compensate for unequal probabilities of selection involved in the sample design so that they are nationally representative.

The CSEW does not cover those not resident in households, for example, children who live in institutions are excluded from the survey. In addition, the survey is subject to error associated with sampling and respondents recalling past events, especially children. Children complete these self-completion modules on the interviewer's tablet by themselves (computer-assisted self-interviewing (CASI)) and, when finished, their answers are hidden. Although this is considered the best data-collection method for questions with a sensitive nature, it is still acknowledged that children may not report experiences of bullying behaviours.

Comparability

Since the suspension of all face-to-face interviewing and the replacement of the CSEW with an interim telephone survey (TCSEW), we have been collecting a small amount of data on children's online experiences by proxy through parents. These questions collect information on the online activities of children aged 10 to 15 years during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, including time spent online and negative experiences while online. Findings from these questions were reported in [Coronavirus and crime in England and Wales](#) and [Crime in England and Wales: year ending June 2020](#) releases. Because of differences in the mode and methods used, these data are not comparable with data provided in this release.

As a result of the changes made in April 2019 to the bullying questions in the 10- to 15-year-olds' questionnaire, the data in this publication are also not comparable to estimates of bullying for previous years produced using the CSEW.

Experimental statistics

Data used in this bulletin come from the Bullying module of the 10- to 15-year-olds' questionnaire introduced in April 2019. As the year ending March 2020 is the first year of data, statistics in this publication are classified as [Experimental Statistics](#); therefore, users should interpret and treat these statistics with caution. As the statistics are new, they are still subject to testing in terms of their volatility but also their ability to meet customer needs. Experimental statistics can become [National Statistics](#) once they meet the required standards, something that is a long-term aim for these statistics.

Feedback from users on our statistics is welcome, especially when this concerns newly developed statistics. We are willing to consider different suggestions to further improve the statistics included in this release and ensure the provision of high-standard statistics.

Users can provide their feedback and suggestions by emailing crimestatistics@ons.gov.uk.

10 . Related links

[Child abuse in England and Wales: March 2020](#)

Bulletin | Released 5 March 2020

Statistics and research on child abuse in England and Wales, bringing together a range of different data sources from across government and the voluntary sector.

[Childhood vulnerability to victimisation in England and Wales: year ending March 2017 to year ending March 2019](#)

Bulletin | Released 5 November 2020

Victimisation and negative behaviours of children aged 10 to 15 years living in a household with an adult who reported experiencing domestic abuse, substance misuse and mental ill-health (the so-called "toxic trio" factors) based on findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW).