

Article

Exploring the feasibility of a survey measuring child abuse in the UK: April 2022

Update on the first phase of research to understand whether a new survey to measure the current extent and nature of child abuse in the UK is viable.

Contact:
Nicholas Stripe
crimestatistics@ons.gov.uk
+44 207 592 8695

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1 . Overview

Child abuse is a global problem with potentially serious life-long consequences, which has been recognised by the World Health Organisation. Measuring the extent and nature is difficult because it is usually hidden from view and comes in many forms. There is no single data source which measures the current prevalence of child abuse in the UK.

Data are key to understanding the prevalence, causes, nature and effects of child abuse. If we cannot learn and understand this, child abuse cannot be prevented, and we cannot ensure children and adults receive the support they need. Therefore, we have been assessing the feasibility of a survey measuring the prevalence of child abuse in the UK.

In January 2021, we ran a public consultation on [our proposals](#) for what a survey could look like. For more information see our [Consultation response: Exploring the feasibility of a survey measuring child abuse in the UK report \(PDF, 478 KB\)](#), published July 2021. Through this we identified the research needed to conclude whether the work could proceed to developing a pilot survey (phase 2). We commissioned NatCen Social Research to conduct this research which found:

- schools would agree to participate and facilitate a survey, providing they are given appropriate support and resource, and have clear information on the safeguarding process
- significant adaptations would be needed to include young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)
- young adults with experiences of abuse would appreciate the opportunity to take part in a survey
- parents and guardians of children with known experiences of abuse would be more likely to give permission for their child to participate if the outcomes of a survey outweighed the potential risk, such as improvements to justice and support services
- a safeguarding procedure is feasible but there were mixed views on how to implement it
- young people's willingness to report experiences of abuse in a survey would be influenced by a range of factors such as, whether they've told anyone previously, the level of detail asked and how their responses would be handled
- young people's ability to recall the abuse they experienced varies between individuals

Given these findings, while there are challenges, we are still broadly confident with our proposals for a survey. Therefore, we are concluding that phase one of the feasibility research has found no fundamental reason not to conduct a survey in this way. There are significant challenges to be addressed in the next stage of this work including:

- ensuring schools have capacity to facilitate such a survey and to feed into the required developments within the context of recovery from the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic
- developing an appropriate safeguarding process and questionnaire
- exploring how a questionnaire could be adapted to include young people with SEND where possible
- conducting a pilot to understand data quality and how a survey would be implemented in schools, including the support they would need to facilitate it

Appropriate funding will be required to take forward these developments and to launch a pilot. In the meantime, given the importance of providing data on the scale and nature of child abuse and crime against children, we will be taking forward work in three areas: the abuse during childhood module asked within the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW); new questions in the 10-15s Crime Survey and investigating new administrative data sources as part of our violence against women and girls project.

2 . Aims of the qualitative research

Following the publication of our proposals and public consultation, in May 2021 we put out a research tender that focused on the outstanding challenges.

This research aimed to answer whether:

- schools would be willing to participate in a survey of this nature
- home-schooled children could take part in such a survey
- a survey could be inclusive of young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)
- young people with past experiences of abuse would agree to take part in a survey of this nature
- parents or guardians of children with known experiences of abuse would give permission for their child to participate
- the appropriate safeguarding needed for carrying out a survey could be provided
- young people can recall and would report experiences of abuse in a survey

In July 2021, we awarded the contract to NatCen Social Research. Their qualitative research involved:

- interviews with young adults, aged 18 to 25 years, with experiences of abuse during childhood
- focus groups with parents of children who had experienced abuse during childhood
- interviews with local authority child protection leads from across the UK
- focus groups with school leads from across the UK

The research intended to include children aged 11 to 17 years. Because of recruitment difficulties, it was not possible to include them. However, we gained insight from the views of young adults on how they would have felt as children. Please note, these findings are from a small sample and may not reflect the views of the wider population. This progress report will outline the main findings from this qualitative research and its effect on our previous proposals. Full details can be found in NatCen's [full report](#).

3 . Methodology findings

School leads felt the survey could be completed in a school environment with the right support

Some school leads felt positive that they would be able to accommodate a survey, while others said they would require more information. They emphasised the need for clarity on the safeguarding process and who would be responsible for handling referrals. School leads also raised concerns regarding the scheduling of a survey and the practicalities of how children would complete it.

Despite concerns, schools offered a wide range of solutions that would encourage their participation, such as:

- flexibility around administering the survey, including location and timing
- careful planning with a minimum of half a term's notice to organise staff resources
- additional staffing, not only on the day of the survey, but in the following days for those children who required extra support
- the use of personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) or relationship and sex education (RSE) classes to inform preparatory work with pupils
- the provision of computer tablets for children to complete the survey and financial incentives to cover school expenses connected to the survey

For further information on our safeguarding findings and outcomes please see [Section 5](#).

To enable home-schooled children to take part, a national register would be required

Child protection leads were asked to reflect on the inclusion of home-schooled children in the survey. They identified that accessing these children would pose a challenge. They highlighted that although parents could voluntarily register their child as home schooled with a local authority, there was no compulsory register. There were wider concerns raised about engaging with parents of home-schooled children and gaining their permission for their child to take part. Another key consideration was how home-schooled children could receive support following a survey.

To enable children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) to take part, considerable adaptations to the survey would be needed

School leads were asked to reflect on whether young people with SEND could be appropriately included in the survey. There were mixed views, and key challenges were highlighted around young people's range of abilities and needs. In particular, the research found that some SEND schools would be hesitant to take part.

Some participants felt the challenges could be mitigated if adaptations were made, such as the use of audio-assisted technology, visual communication tools and large text options. SEND school leads felt that one-to-one support would be needed for some children to interpret and respond to questions, but this was manageable.

Young adults would prefer to complete the survey online

The young adults interviewed considered two options for survey delivery to older children (aged 16 to 17 years) and young adults (aged 18 to 25 years). These were online mode and computer assisted self-completion supported by a researcher. They told us they would prefer an online mode because this would offer them a greater sense of privacy and control over how they completed the survey. Some felt that having a researcher present would make them feel intimidated or rushed. However, they did state that everyone in these age groups should be offered the choice, as a researcher could help support with understanding the questions and use of the tablet.

Outcomes

These findings support our previous recommendation that a survey of children aged 11 to 15 years should be administered in a school environment or equivalent educational establishment. To enable home-schooled children to take part in the survey a national sampling frame is necessary. Without this, it would not be possible to include them in the survey sample. In February 2022, the Department for Education (DfE) published a response to its [Children not in school consultation](#). As a result of their findings, the DfE remain committed to a registration system for children not in school, which could provide a suitable sampling frame in the future.

An additional recommendation for phase two is to work with schools to assess if adaptations can be made to the survey and its delivery to an extent where it is feasible for children with SEND to take part.

We are separately conducting research into asking questions on sensitive topics online. This will inform the most appropriate mode for interviewing young people aged 16 to 25 years. For more information, please see our latest [Improving Crime Statistics for England and Wales -progress update July 2021](#).

4 . Ethical findings

Young adults who have experienced abuse would appreciate the opportunity to take part in a survey of this nature

Young adults shared that they could see both the individual and wider benefits of a survey. They viewed the survey as a potentially cathartic exercise that could reduce shame and secrecy for those that have experienced abuse. They felt it would enable some young people to voice their experiences and for others to recognise their experience as abuse. To encourage their participation, young people would need to know in advance about confidentiality and who could access their responses. If these concerns were addressed, young adults told us they would be pleased to be offered the opportunity to take part.

The outcomes of the survey would need to be considered worthwhile by parents, for them to give their permission for their child to take part

Some parents, whose children had experienced abuse, supported the idea of evidence gathering while some found it difficult to see how the survey could affect change. For the parents who we spoke to, the outcomes would need to outweigh any risk of retraumatisation and fatigue to their child. However, parents did appear to be motivated by outcomes such as improvements to support and justice for children that have experienced abuse. Prior communication with parents was seen as vital by school and child protection leads. They suggested this could be done by hosting briefing sessions with parents or by providing written materials in the weeks leading up to the survey.

A safeguarding procedure is feasible but there were mixed views on how to implement it

Schools were asked to reflect on our initial safeguarding proposal. There were different views on how this could be implemented. School leads raised the concern that the survey would first need to generate enough detail to make a referral feasible. One view was that a follow-up process outside of the survey may be needed to capture sufficient information from anyone who had reported abuse.

There were differing views on what an appropriate threshold for a referral would be. Some child protection leads felt any report of abuse should be referred. However, other participants felt that a threshold should be set in line with child protection guidance for schools.

Reflecting on the proposal that survey administrators would handle referrals, one view shared by school and child protection leads was that it was a practical necessity for schools to be involved. This centered on their existing knowledge of children's individual circumstances, local safeguarding processes and that there may be a legal obligation for them to be involved.

Participants offered views on how survey responses could be assessed and emphasised the need to do this in a timely manner. Some school leads suggested that surveys could undergo immediate triage to enable any referrals to be made within 24 hours of data collection. Another view was to adopt a process used by exam boards. This would involve the surveys being assessed by the survey administrator and returned to schools if action was needed, at this point schools would have a set time to make referrals.

Offering all participants support could reduce the risk of retraumatisation

Some young adults felt that the risk of retraumatisation would always exist and would come down to how individuals felt on the day. Across all participant groups, the provision of emotional support and aftercare was viewed to mitigate this risk, it was suggested that:

- school staff could convene one-to-one conversations with children who had recently been through the child protection process to support informed decision-making
- the survey administrator could call each survey respondent to see how they are the day after the survey
- schools could signpost children to staff that they can talk to in person
- the survey administrator could commission an external counselling service or support helpline for a set period after the survey

Outcomes

We are broadly confident with our original recommendation that the survey should adopt a flagging safeguarding procedure. This would be used to assess the current level of risk to the child and apply the appropriate level of safeguarding, depending on the circumstances of the child and reported abuse.

The qualitative research has outlined that schools would need to be involved in the safeguarding process and highlighted challenges on its implementation. This would need significant development in phase two, involving the design of the procedure simultaneously alongside questionnaire development.

Phase two would need to involve active engagement with two groups. It is important to engage with parents to design materials that support them in understanding the research and giving their permission. It is also important to speak to government departments, charity organisations and others who will use the data to ensure they are used effectively.

5 . Data accuracy and reliability findings

Young people’s likelihood of reporting abuse in a survey would be influenced by a range of factors

Young adults shared what they thought would increase a young person's likelihood of reporting abuse in a survey, for example:

- if they had already told someone about the abuse they had experienced
- they felt in control of how much information they shared
- the survey questions were tiered, moving from broad to more detailed questions
- response options were broad, especially for questions on the perpetrator
- any follow-up questions were optional
- their responses were kept anonymous and confidential
- the age of respondent, as young adults aged 18 to 25 years would not be subject to safeguarding procedures

Young adults held differing views on the use of open and closed questions. Some felt selecting responses to closed questions required less thought on their experiences of abuse. Others felt open questions could provide a positive space for people to freely share their experiences.

There were mixed views on the extent to which young people could recall abuse

Some young adults shared that they could vividly recall the details of their abuse. Others felt that recalling the time frames was a particular challenge. However, they said they would be able to answer in broad time frames such as "in primary school" or "last year". Both young adults and school leads agreed that asking about young people's whole lifetime would capture a more rounded picture of their experiences. Young adults also suggested having the response option of "too many to remember" where frequency of abuse was difficult to define.

Outcomes

We acknowledge that a survey would never be able to provide a complete estimate of child abuse as some children and young people would not report their experiences of abuse. We are confident in our previous conclusion that a survey would provide data of additional value to existing sources of administrative data on child abuse.

Young adults have shared in what circumstances they would report their experiences of abuse in a survey and have suggested a range of mechanisms to enable this. They include the role of question structure and response options. Phase two of the research would involve testing how these could be used to maximise data quality.

6 . Future developments

Phase one has found no fundamental reason not to conduct a survey. Phase two, a pilot, is essential to understand and assess the quality of data a survey would achieve. A pilot would first require:

- an understanding of whether schools have capacity to facilitate such a survey, and to feed into the required developments within the context of recovery from the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic
- building an appropriate safeguarding process
- designing a questionnaire
- further development of the sampling approach and mode for young people aged 16 to 25 years
- understanding the logistics required to implement in schools
- exploring how all countries in the UK could be included and how robust data for each of these could be achieved
- further development of the adaptations needed to include young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) where possible

Appropriate funding will be required to take forward these developments and to launch a pilot. We will continue to look at how best we can use the Crime Survey for England and Wales. This year, we will develop new questions for the aged 10 to 15 years survey and make improvements to the abuse during childhood module asked on the adult survey. We will also explore new data sources as part of developing our [violence against women and girls data landscape](#), that could contribute to building a better picture of the extent and nature of child abuse.

7 . Related links

[Feasibility of a survey on child abuse](#)

Qualitative report | Released 6 April 2022

A summary of the qualitative findings from the focus groups and interviews conducted by NatCen Social Research in 2021.

[Consultation response: Exploring the feasibility of a survey measuring child abuse in the UK](#)

Consultation response | Released 23 July 2021

ONS response to public consultation Exploring the feasibility of a survey measuring child abuse in the UK, which ran from January to April 2021.

[Exploring the feasibility of a survey measuring child abuse in the UK: January 2021](#)

Article | Released 21 January 2021

Initial findings from the first phase of research, to understand whether a new survey to measure the current extent and nature of child abuse in the UK is viable.

[Feasibility of a survey on child abuse](#)

Qualitative report | Released 21 January 2021

A summary of the qualitative findings from the focus groups conducted by NatCen Social Research in 2019.

[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.