

Do only 2% of child abusers get convicted?

First of all, it's necessary to find out the annual incidence of child sexual abuse. The definition of a child is generally taken to mean someone under the age of 18 though can be 16.

It is believed that many cases of child sexual abuse (CSA) go unreported, so surveys of random samples of the population have been performed to gain some idea of the incidence of CSA. The results are then extrapolated to give an indication of the incidence in the population as a whole.

The NSPCC sponsored survey “Child abuse and neglect in the UK today”

This survey looked at self-reported maltreatment in a sample of 6196 children and young adults up to the age of 24 in 2009.

In doing a survey of this nature it is important that the sample is an accurate reflection of the population as a whole, and the report stated (section 2.7) that the sample was “comparable” to the general population. I could not find the age at which a person stopped being a child, but by looking at the sample questions used I was able to work out that the survey defined children as being under the age of 18.

- 2,160 interviews were with the parents or guardians of under 11s
- 2,275 were with young people in the 11 – 17 age range and with their parents or guardians
- 1,761 were with young adults in the 18 – 24 age range

The response rate was 60.4%

Contact Sexual Abuse

17.8% of females and 5.1% of males aged 18 – 24 had experienced contact sexual abuse as defined by criminal law at some point in their childhood. [Male + female = 11.3%]

1.5% of females and 0.4% of males aged 18 – 24 had suffered contact sexual abuse from their parents or guardians during childhood. [Male + female = 0.9%]

4.7% of females and 1.1% of males aged 18 – 24 had had contact sexual abuse by an adult who was not a guardian or parent. [Male + female = 2.8%]

The majority of contact abuse (65.9%) was perpetrated by under 18s¹ (section 7.6).

¹ This includes contact sexual abuse by any person under 18 to another child or young person, siblings, peers and intimate partners. 57.5 per cent of contact sexual abuse was perpetrated by children and young people, 34.1 per cent was perpetrated by adults and 8.4 per cent was perpetrated by both adults and children or young people. Figures based on the reports of 0–17s.

Adults perpetrated 42.5% of contact sexual abuse. 8.4% was perpetrated by both adults and children.

Contact + Non-contact Sexual Abuse

1.7% of 18 – 24 year olds reported abuse by a parent or guardian (section 3.4)

5.3% of 18 – 24 year olds reported abuse by a non-resident adult (section 4.1)

24.1% of 18–24s had experienced sexual abuse including non-contact offences, by an adult or by a peer at some point in childhood. (p9).

Therefore around $(1.7 + 5.3) / 24.1 \times 100 = 29\%$ of all types of sexual abuse was perpetrated by adults. It could be less than this, because the data doesn't make clear whether or not there was some overlap between the figures for parents + guardians and non-resident adults. Some children may have been abused by both categories of adult.

Incidence may be falling

6.8% of children under 16 had reported coerced sexual acts in the 1998 study and 5% in the latest 2009 study.

What is the annual incidence of child sexual abuse in England?

If the sample surveyed in 2009 were truly representative of the UK population and were evenly distributed throughout all member countries of the UK, it ought to be possible to calculate how many under 18s were abused in 2009. For the sake of the calculation the cohort of children reaching adulthood at 18 in 2009 is being used.

In 2009 there were 353,217 males and 339,889 females aged 18 (Office of National Statistics) in England (total males + females = 693,106).

Contact sexual abuse

If the survey results can be reliably extrapolated to the whole population of England, in 2009 *18,014 males aged 18 and 60,500 females aged 18 had suffered contact sexual abuse in their lifetime, mainly by their peers.*

Of these men and women, $(0.9\% + 2.8\%) \times 693,106 = 25,645$ were abused by adults in their childhood.

All types of sexual abuse

The lifetime experience of contact + non-contact sexual abuse as reported by 18 – 24 year olds was 24.1% of males and females which is a total of 167,039 of those reaching 18 in 2009. Of these, 48,516 were perpetrated by adults.

Assault by rape or penetration (actual and attempted assaults)

The ONS Crime Survey of 2016 found that 2% of adults aged 16 – 59 reported attempted or actual assault by rape or penetration before they were 16.

If this figure is applied to the number of 18 year olds in 2009, it would mean 13,886 were assaulted in this way.

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

According to the ONS Crime Survey 2.6% of males aged 16 – 59 and 10.5% of females were survivors of sexual assault (any type) by an adult during childhood (*before 16*) in England and Wales in 2016.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/abuseduringchildhood/findingsfromtheyearendingmarch2016crimesurveyforenglandandwales#introduction>

The ONS definition of sexual assault was sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) and indecent exposure and unwanted touching/kissing of a sexual nature.

Using the definition of sexual assault which consisted of rape or penetration including attempts, but excluded other types, the figures were 0.6% of men and 3.4% of women, 2% of all adults.

The researchers also noticed that older people were more likely to report having been sexually assaulted. They did not know if this was because the sexual abuse is declining or because younger people were more reluctant to report abuse.

In 2015 there were 15,068,372 men aged 16 – 59 and 16,757,300 women aged 16 – 59 in England and Wales.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/populationestimatesforukenglandandwalesscotlandandnorthernireland>

Therefore there are around 392,000 male and 1,759,500 female survivors aged 16 – 59 who suffered some form of child sexual abuse by an adult.

Children's Commissioner: Inquiry into Child Abuse in the Family Environment

This inquiry was published in November 2015 and looked into child sexual abuse in the period April 2012 – March 2014. Children were defined as being those under the age of 18. It used evidence from a variety of sources including a survivor survey of 795 respondents.

They used a statistical method called a Multiple Systems Estimation based on numbers of cases known to various agencies. This was prepared by Professor Silverman who acted in a personal capacity. This means, as far as I know, that it is not published so is not peer reviewed.

His estimation of the incidence of CSA was 400,000 to 450,000 cases in England in the period April 2012 - March 2014. *This would give an annual incidence of about 200,000 cases in England. This was all forms of CSA, and not just those in the family.*

This is a similar estimate to that obtained from the NSPCC survey figures above.

Cases reported to the police

The same inquiry looked at the number of reports of CSA made to the police.

Between 2012 – 2014, 37,844 cases were reported to the police, 9,921 were 'detected' and 6,414 were convicted.

Therefore the annual reporting rate was 18,922 and 3,207 were convicted.

The NSPCC survey figures were used to work out the annual incidence of adult contact sexual abuse of children as above and this was 25,645. If the only people convicted were adult perpetrators of contact sexual abuse, then *the conviction rate for those committing these most serious acts would be 12.5% [3,207 / 25,645]*. As this is probably not the case, then the conviction rate would have been lower than this.

Conclusion

Only a small proportion of those who experience CSA report it to the police. Of those who have suffered contact sexual abuse by an adult 12.5% or less see their abuser convicted.