Statistics briefing: child deaths due to abuse or neglect

March 2019

Introduction

This briefing introduces the data available about child deaths due to abuse or neglect. Data is collected on: child homicides, child deaths where the cause of death was assault, neglect or unexplained and child deaths which result in a case review. Statistics can help professionals, and the organisations they work for, make evidence based decisions about child protection.

What does the data tell us?

- In the last five years there was an average of 68 child deaths by assault or undetermined intent a year in the UK.
- On average at least one child is killed a week in the UK.
- Children under the age of one are the most likely age group to be killed by another person, followed by young men.
- Child homicides are most commonly caused by the child’s parent or step-parent.
- There are a number of different sources of data on child deaths, which all provide different insights in to the number of deaths by abuse or neglect.

Contents

- What data is available?
- How can the data be used?
- What does the data tell us?
- References.
- Further information.

Review date: February 2020
What data is available?
Data about child deaths due to abuse or neglect is available from a number of sources. Information covered includes:

- The number of deaths
- The cause of death
- Demographic information about the children who died
- The perpetrator and their relationship to the child.

Throughout this briefing, figures given are the most up to date at the time of publication.

How can the data be used?
Data can only ever tell part of the story. It’s important to bear in mind the limitations of the data available:

**You can use this data to:**  
- Give total figures for the number of child homicides, the number of deaths by recorded cause, and the number of case reviews and child death reviews.
- Look at data on child deaths across the UK nations

**But you can’t use it to:**  
- Give a definitive, overall figure for child deaths by abuse and neglect.
- Directly compare national figures because of differences in national laws and practice on how accidental and violent deaths are investigated, certified and registered.

Official measures are likely to be underestimations due to a range of issues, including:

- the legal complexity of proof of homicide
- misdiagnosed cause of death
- abuse not being the immediate cause of death, but being a contributing factor
- cause of death remaining unknown or unexplained.
What does the data tell us?

In the last five years there was an average of 68 child deaths by assault or undetermined intent a year in the UK.

Mortality statistics report the number of children who died in any given year based on death certificates provided by local Registrars’ and Coroner’s reports. Mortality statistics assign codes for causes of death. These are based on the Tenth Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10), which replaced ICD-9 in January 2001.

- Deaths are coded as by ‘assault and neglect’ where it is known that a third party was culpable.\(^1\)
- Deaths are coded as by ‘undetermined intent’ where available evidence is insufficient to make a distinction between accident, self-harm and assault. Deaths of ‘undetermined intent’ are regarded as probable suicides where it concerns adults, but for young children a question usually remains as to whether a third, unidentified party was in fact culpable.\(^2\)
- Deaths are coded as ‘by sequelae’ of assault and neglect/undetermined intent where a death occurs as a consequence of, but a year or more after, an incident. Deaths by sequelae are included in counts of child deaths by assault and neglect in Scotland and Northern Ireland, but are excluded from current official counts in England and Wales.\(^3\)

Data on the number of people dying due to assault, neglect or undetermined intent is published in five-year age brackets. This means it is only possible to extract data for children who died under the age of 15. The most recent data available is for 2017.

- In 2017 there were a total of 71 child (under 15) deaths by assault or undetermined intent in the UK: 62 in England, 0 in Northern Ireland, 5 in Scotland and 4 in Wales.
- For the last five years of available data (2013 – 2017) there was an average of 68 child deaths by assault or undetermined intent a year in the UK.
- The average child death rate for the five-year period 2013-2017 was 6 per million.

Sources: ONS, 2018; Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), 2018; National Records of Scotland, 2018.

On average at least one child is killed a week in the UK.

Offence statistics provide annual figures for the number of child homicides recorded by the police. The term “homicide” covers the offences of murder, manslaughter and infanticide. A homicide is recorded at the point at which the police first become

\(^1\) Since 2001 (ICD-10): X85-Y09; Pre 2001 (ICD-9): E904, E960-E969
\(^3\) Since 2001 (ICD-10): Y87.1, Y87.2
aware of the incident. This means suspected homicides that have not yet been fully investigated and for which there is yet to be a conviction are included in the count. Homicide offences relate to the year in which the police initially recorded the offence. This is not necessarily the year in which the incident took place or the year in which any court decision was made.

The criteria for recording homicides in the UK have not changed since the mid-seventies, making it the longest, consistent source of data on child killings. Data on the number of homicide victims under the age of 18 is not published, but is requested by the NSPCC on an annual basis.

- In 2016/17 there were 98 child (under 18) homicides in the UK: 91 in England (of which 22 were victims of the 1989 Hillsborough disaster, included after the 2016 inquest found victims were unlawfully killed), 4 in Scotland, none in Northern Ireland and 3 in Wales.
- In the last five years (2012/13 – 2016/17) there was an average of 76 child homicides a year in the UK
- On average at least one child is killed a week in the UK.

Sources: Home Office recorded crime statistics data provided to the NSPCC, Scottish Government recorded crime statistics data provided to the NSPCC and Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), 2017.

Although measuring similar things, the number of homicides and mortalities by assault or undetermined intent are not the same. This is because:

- homicide data relates to under 18s, whilst mortality data relates to under 15s
- homicide numbers only count deaths where homicide has been determined as the cause of death by the police, whilst mortality numbers include deaths by undetermined intent
- homicide data relates to deaths identified by the police as homicides within the past year. This could include deaths which occurred in the past, but which have only just been identified as homicides. Mortality data relates to the cause of death registered at the time the death occurred.

**Child homicides are most commonly perpetrated by the child’s parent or step-parent.**

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) homicide statistics include figures on the relationship between the child victims (defined in their publications as children under the age of 16) and the principal suspect for England and Wales. The relationship of the victim to the suspect is defined as: son/daughter; other family/friend or acquaintance; stranger; no suspect. In cases where the relationship is categorized as “son/daughter” the suspect could be the child’s birth-parent, step-parent or adoptive parent.

- Child homicides are most commonly (42%) perpetrated by the child’s parent or step-parent.
• Proportionally few homicides of those aged under 16 were committed by strangers. The victim was known to have been killed by a stranger in 3 offences in the year ending March 2016 (4%).

• As of 16 November 2017, there were 28 victims aged under 16 years (41%) for whom no suspect had been identified. This number is likely to fall as police investigations continue.4

Sources: Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2018.

**Children under the age of one are the most likely to be killed by another person, followed by young men aged 16-24.**

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) homicide statistics include figures on the age and gender of victims of homicide in England and Wales. Their data shows:

• children under the age of one have the highest rate of homicide (36 per million population)

• followed by males aged 16 to 24 years (25 per million population). The most common method of killing 16 to 24 year old males was by knife or other sharp instrument, accounting for 54 out of 85 homicides (64%). 5

Source: ONS, 2018.

**Case review data provides an insight into child deaths due to abuse or neglect.**

When a child dies or is seriously harmed as a result of abuse or neglect, a case review may take place. The purpose of case reviews is to learn lessons to better safeguard and promote the wellbeing of children.

In England, from 2011-2014, 293 serious case reviews were undertaken of which 197 related to child deaths. Of these:

• 93 (47%) from deaths related to, but not directly caused by maltreatment (including sudden unexpected death in infancy and suicide)

• 48 (24%) related to deaths from fatal physical abuse

• 28 (14%) from deliberate/overt homicide

• 19 (10%) from other causes/category not clear.

• 6 (3%) from extreme neglect/deprivalional abuse

• 3 (2%) from infanticide/covert homicide


In Northern Ireland, between January 2003 and December 2008 there were 24 case management reviews (CMRs) undertaken in Northern Ireland. 18 of the reviews were convened on children who had died, of which:

• 8 (44%) related to deaths from suicide or accident

---

4 There were 96 deaths that occurred at Hillsborough in 1989 that were recorded as manslaughters in the year ending March 2017 following the verdict of the Hillsborough Inquest in April 2016. To analyse the latest trends on a comparable basis, the Hillsborough victims were removed from the ONS analysis.

5 Hillsborough victims were removed from the ONS analysis.
- 6 (33%) from sudden unexpected death in infancy (SUDI)
- 4 (22%) related to deaths from physical or sexual assault.

Source: Devaney et al., 2013

In Scotland there were 20 serious case reviews (SCRs) completed between April 2012 and March 2015 and submitted to the Care Inspectorate for inclusion in its retrospective review. 11 related to the death of a child, of which:
- 3 (27%) related to deaths from sudden unexpected death in infancy (SUDI)
- 3 (27%) from suicide
- 2 (18%) from a drug overdose
- 1 (9%) from drowning
- 1 (9%) from physical injuries
- 1 (9%) from a fall.

Source: Care Inspectorate, 2016.

In Wales, New Child Practice Review arrangements (CPRs) were introduced on 1 January 2013, replacing SCRs. As of yet there is no data available on the number of CPRs related to child deaths.

**Child death reviews tell you how many child deaths could have potentially been prevented.**

The child death review process is mandatory in England and Wales. Scotland and Northern Ireland do not currently have mandatory processes, but have been researching models with a view to implementing their own national systems.

In England practitioners should notify the local child death review partners, via the local child death overview panel (CDOP) administrator (or equivalent) of the death of any child of which they become aware. In Wales practitioners are required to notify the Child Death Review Team in Public Health Wales of all child deaths.

In England, child death reviews determine whether or not a child’s death involved “modifiable contributory factors”, with the ultimate aim of helping identify where action can be taken to reduce the number of child deaths. Current Working together to safeguard children guidance defines “modifiable contributory factors” as, “factors which may have contributed to the death of the child and which might, by means of a locally or nationally achievable intervention, be modified to reduce the risk of future deaths” (DfE, 2018).

Examples of “modifiable factors” include:
- family environment
- parenting capacity
- service provision.

Data relating to child death reviews is published for England only. The publication of statistics for the year ending 31 March 2018 has been postponed.
Data for 2017 relates to child deaths which involved “modifiable factors”, defined in the previous edition of Working together as, “those where, if actions could be taken through national or local interventions, the risk of future child deaths could be reduced”.

- Of the 3,555 child death reviews completed in England in the year ending 31 March 2017, 974 (27%) were identified as having modifiable factors (DfE, 2017).

Public Health Wales publishes an annual report and thematic reviews focusing on specific causes of deaths. For example, reports have been published on deaths of children from Sudden Unexpected Death in Infancy (SUDI) and of children and young people through probable suicide.

**Serious incident notifications tell you how many looked after children died and how many children died where abuse or neglect was suspected.**

In England, under the statutory guidance Working together to safeguard children (DfE, 2018), local authorities should notify the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel where it knows or suspects that a child has been abused or neglected, if:

- the child dies or is seriously harmed in the local authority’s area, or
- while normally resident in the local authority’s area, the child dies or is seriously harmed outside England.

The local authority must also notify the Secretary of State and Ofsted where a looked after child has died, regardless of whether abuse or neglect is known or suspected.

Prior to the publication of the new Working together guidance in July 2018, local authorities notified Ofsted of serious incidents. Ofsted published data on these notifications on an annual basis.

- From 1 April 2017 to 31 March 2018, 209 cases of child deaths were notified to Ofsted.

The numbers of notifications received during this time period are not necessarily the number of incidents which have occurred during that period. Some notifications relate to incidents which occurred before 1 April 2017, but about which Ofsted was not notified until after 1 April 2017. Each child death will have its own separate notification.

Source: Ofsted, 2018
References

General


England and/or Wales


http://www.wales.nhs.uk/sitesplus/888/opendoc/237368


Northern Ireland

https://library.nspcc.org.uk/HeritageScripts/Hapi.dll/search2?searchTerm0=C4380


Scotland

Care Inspectorate (2016) Learning from significant case reviews in Scotland: a retrospective review of relevant reports completed in the period between 1 April 2012 and 31 March 2015 (PDF). Dundee: Care Inspectorate.

Further information

- Case reviews: https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/case-reviews/

For further reading about child deaths, search the NSPCC Library using the keywords “child deaths” or “infant deaths” or “homicide” or “infanticide” or “filicide”. https://library.nspcc.org.uk/HeritageScripts/Hapi.dll/search1

Contact the NSPCC’s Knowledge and Information Service with any questions about child protection or related topics:

Tel: 0116 234 7246 | Email: learning@nspcc.org.uk | Twitter: @NSPCCpro

Sign up for our weekly current awareness email newsletter www.nspcc.org.uk/caspar

Copyright © 2019 NSPCC Knowledge and Information Services - All rights reserved.