Statistics briefing: child deaths due to abuse or neglect

This briefing looks at what data and statistics are available about child deaths due to abuse or neglect.

December 2021

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 58 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 16- to 24-year-olds.
- 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 into the number of deaths by abuse or neglect.
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 for the UK as a whole 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>You can use this data to:</th>
<th>But you can’t use it to:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✓ 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.</td>
<td>✗ Give a definitive, overall figure for child deaths by abuse and neglect.</td>
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</tbody>
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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.
Look at data on child deaths across the UK nations.

Directly compare national figures. Differences in national laws and practice on how accidental and violent deaths are investigated, certified and registered means that figures are not directly comparable.

What does the data tell us?

In the last five years there was an average of 58 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 Coroners’ reports. Mortality statistics assign codes for causes of death. These are based on the Tenth Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) (World Health Organisation (WHO), 2019), which replaced ICD-9 (WHO, 1978) in January 2001. The table below sets out the relevant codes when counting deaths by assault or undetermined intent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>ICD-9 codes</th>
<th>ICD-10 codes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Assault or neglect</td>
<td>Deaths where it is known that a third party was culpable.</td>
<td>E904, E960-E969</td>
<td>X85-Y09</td>
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<td>Injury/ poisoning of undetermined intent</td>
<td>Deaths where available evidence is insufficient to make a distinction between accident, self-harm and assault (these 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).</td>
<td>E980-E989</td>
<td>UK: Y10-Y34</td>
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<td></td>
<td>In England and Wales deaths where the coroner’s verdict is still pending (which were previously coded as Y33.9) are now assigned to the code U50.9. As most deaths where the coroner’s verdict is still pending end up being coded as assaults, these totals are included in our &quot;undetermined intent&quot; codes for 2007 onwards.</td>
<td></td>
<td>England and Wales only: U50.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sequelae of assault or neglect/ event of undetermined intent</td>
<td>Deaths which occur 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 official counts in England and Wales.</td>
<td>Northern Ireland and Scotland only: Y87.1, Y87.2</td>
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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 for all four nations is for 2019.

- In 2019 there were a total of 39 child (under 15) deaths by assault or undetermined intent in the UK: 33 in **England**, 2 in **Scotland**, 1 in **Northern Ireland** and 3 in **Wales**.
- For the last five years of available data (2015 – 2019) there was an average of 58 child deaths by assault or undetermined intent a year in the UK.
- The average child death rate for the five-year period 2015-2019 was 4.5 per million.

(Sources: NOMIS, 2021; Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), 2020; National Records of Scotland, 2021)

**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 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 2019/20 there were 68 child (under 18) homicides in the UK: 61 in **England**, 4 in **Northern Ireland**, 2 in **Scotland**, and 1 in **Wales**.

(Sources: NOMIS, 2021; Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), 2020; National Records of Scotland, 2021)
• In the last five years (2015/16 – 2019/20) there was an average of 82 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), 2020)

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 (27%) perpetrated by the child’s parent or step-parent.
• The victim was known to have been killed by a stranger in 16% of the offences in the year ending March 2020.
• As of 15 December 2020, there were 20 victims aged under 16 years (44%) for whom no suspect had been identified. This number is likely to fall as police investigations continue.

(Source: ONS, 2021)

Children under the age of one are the most likely to be killed by another person, followed by young people 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 (28 per million population)
• followed by those aged 16 to 24 years (23 per million population).

(Source: ONS, 2021)

Case review and significant incident notification 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, the relevant authorities should be notified and a case review may take place. The purpose of a case review is to identify ways that professionals and organisations can improve the way they work together to safeguard children and prevent similar incidents from occurring.

In England, under the statutory guidance Working together to safeguard children (Department for Education (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 Panel where a looked after child has died, regardless of whether abuse or neglect is known or suspected.

The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel received notification of 482 serious incidents relating to 514 children between 1 January and 31 December 2020. Of these 482 notifications 206 were in relation to child deaths. Of these:

• 36 (17%) were caused by maltreatment within the family
• 17 (8%) were related to extra-familial child homicide or fatal assault
• 63 (31%) were related to Sudden Unexpected Death in Infancy (SUDI)
• 42 (20%) were related to suicide
• 20 (10%) were other deaths related to maltreatment
• 15 (7%) were not maltreatment related
• and for 13 (6%) the cause of death was not clear.

(Source: Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2021)

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%) were related to deaths from suicide or accident
• 6 (33%) were from sudden unexpected death in infancy (SUDI)
• 4 (22%) were related to deaths from physical or sexual assault.

(Source: Devaney et al., 2013)

In **Scotland**, the Care Inspectorate received 82 notifications that initial case reviews (ICRs) had been undertaken between 1 April 2018 and 31 March 2021, of which 32 progressed to a significant case review (SCR). The Care Inspectorate analysed 50 ICRs that did not progress to a full SCR, 23 SCRs and two thematic learning reviews; relating to 96 children and young people as part of its triennial review of findings. Of these 96 children and young people 28 had died, of which:

• 4 (14%) died to Sudden Unexpected Death in Infancy or Childhood (SUDI/SUDIC)
• 8 (29%) died of suicide
• 2 (7%) died of culpable homicide or murder
• 4 (14%) died of neglect
• 7 (25%) died for reasons related to drugs
• 1 (4%) died of physical injury
• 1 (4%) died of accident or misadventure
• 1 (4%) died of a health-related condition.

(Source: Care Inspectorate, 2021)

In **Wales**, New Child Practice Review arrangements (CPRs) were introduced on 1 January 2013, replacing SCRs. 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.

- Of the 3,347 child death reviews completed in England in the year ending 31 March 2020, 862 (31%) were identified as having modifiable factors.

(Source: National Child Mortality Database, 2021)

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.

References

General


England and/or Wales


<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/homicideinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2020>

<https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/query/construct/summary.asp?mode=construct&dataset=161&version=0>


Northern Ireland


Scotland


Further information

For further reading about child deaths due to abuse or neglect, search the NSPCC Library Catalogue using the keyword “child deaths”.

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

Visit NSPCC Learning to learn more about the statistics behind child abuse nspcc.org.uk/statistics