Statistics briefing: harmful sexual behaviour

This briefing looks at what data and statistics are available about harmful sexual behaviour to help professionals, and the organisations they work for, make evidence based decisions.

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Introduction

This briefing introduces research data around harmful sexual behaviour (HSB). Statistics can help professionals and the organisations they work for make evidence based decisions about how best to meet the needs of children with HSB.

What does the data tell us?

- Around a third of child sexual abuse is by other children or young people.
- There is some cross-over between online and offline HSB and between child sexual exploitation and HSB.
- Harmful sexual behaviour is most commonly identified in adolescent boys, but girls and younger children can also exhibit HSB.
- A significant proportion of children with HSB also have a learning disability.
- The majority of children with HSB have themselves experienced trauma, including abuse or neglect.
- The majority of children and young people displaying HSB do not become sexual offenders as adults.
- Young people who display HSB often experience other emotional, behavioural and peer related difficulties.
What is harmful sexual behaviour?

The NSPCC defines harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) as developmentally inappropriate sexual behaviour which is displayed by children and young people.

It can be displayed towards younger children, peers, older children or adults, and is harmful to the children and young people who display it, as well as the people it is directed towards.

There is no universally agreed definition of what harmful sexual behaviour is. Definitions change between studies, disciplines, cultures and over time. This makes comparisons between studies problematic.

What data is available?

There are no officially published statistics on the prevalence of harmful sexual behaviour, its causes or the characteristics of young people who display this behaviour. However researchers have attempted to estimate the scale and the nature of HSB.

Areas of research include:

- scale of the issue
- data from NSPCC services on HSB
- technology assisted HSB
- the link between HSB and child sexual exploitation
- characteristics of young people who display harmful sexual behaviour
- children with HSB’s own experiences of abuse
- recidivism and reoffending
- wider behavioural problems.

How can the data be used?

Data can only ever tell part of the story. It’s important to bear in mind the limitation of the data available.
What does the data tell us? – Scale of the issue

We do not know the true number of children and young people affected by HSB. HSB covers a wide range of behaviours, many of which do not come to the attention of authorities. However some attempts to estimate the prevalence of HSB have been made using data from children’s self-reported experiences of sexual abuse by peers and services which work with children with HSB.

**Around a third of child sexual abuse is by other children and young people.**

Hackett’s overview of research and crime statistics suggests that anywhere from one-fifth to two-thirds of sexual abuse is committed by other children and young people. The NSPCC uses the figure of “around a third” as a mid-way point between the lower end and the higher end of the estimates.

- Reviewing the pattern of criminal statistics over a period of a decade, Hackett (2004) estimated that between one fifth and one third of all child sexual abuse in the UK involves other children and adolescents as perpetrators.
- Research by Vizard found that children and young people account for approximately a quarter of all convictions against victims of all ages (Vizard, 2004) and that 30-50% of sexual abuse is perpetrated by adolescents (Vizard et al, 2007).
- Erooga and Masson (2006) found that HSB constituted a third of all sexual abuse coming to the attention of the professional system in the UK.
- Radford et al’s 2011 study of child maltreatment in the UK found that 65.9% of contact sexual abuse reported by under 18 year olds was perpetrated by other children and young people under the age of 18.
Over 9,000 recorded child sex offences were perpetrated by children in 2016.

Barnardo's freedom of information (FOI) request to police forces in England and Wales found that the number of police recorded sexual offences against under-18 year olds, by under-18 year olds, rose from 5,215 in 2013 to 9,290 in 2016. There was no response from 7 of the 43 police forces, so the true figure is likely to be higher.

(Source: Barnardo's, 2017.)

In 2017/18 there were 3,878 counselling sessions about peer-on-peer sexual abuse, an increase of 29% from 2016/17.

- In 2017/18, Childline delivered 3,878 counselling sessions about peer sexual abuse, compared to 3,004 in 2016/17.
- In 622 of these counselling sessions (16%), young people said they had been abused by a current partner and in 558 sessions (14%) they said they had been abused by an ex-partner. In 1,499 sessions (39%), they told us about being abused by a friend, and in 1,199 sessions (31%) they raised concerns about abuse by another young person.
- Information was available on the age of children in 77% of Childline’s counselling sessions in 2017/18. In general, the majority of Childline counselling sessions are with children aged 12 or over (89% of sessions where age is known). This trend is more pronounced for counselling sessions about peer sexual abuse, with 97% of sessions where age is known being with children aged 12 or over.

(Source: NSPCC data, retrieved 2019.)

In 2017/18 the NSPCC helpline responded to 773 contacts from adults who were concerned about peer sexual abuse or children displaying harmful sexual behaviour.

- In 2017/18, the NSPCC helpline responded to 232 child welfare contacts where the person contacting was worried about children displaying sexually harmful behaviour, this includes contacts that resulted in advice, referrals and updates to existing referrals. There were a further 541 contacts where the adult was concerned about peer sexual abuse (online and offline).
- Due to changes in the helpline recording system, 2017/18 NSPCC helpline figures are not comparable to previous years.

(Source: NSPCC data, retrieved 2019.)
What does the data tell us? - Online harmful sexual behaviour

In 2016 the NSPCC conducted a literature review on “technology assisted harmful sexual behaviour” (TA-HSB). For the purpose of this review, TA-HSB was defined as sexualised behaviour which children or young people engage in using the internet or technology such as mobile phones.

As with ‘offline’ HSB, TA-HSB encompasses a range of behaviours and there is no universally agreed definition of what it involves. This makes comparisons across studies problematic.

The NSPCC’s systematic search strategy for research about TA-HSB published between 2000 and 2015 identified 453 articles after duplicates were removed (Belton and Hollis, 2016). The review found that there was a limited amount of research around TA-HSB, but was able to identify some emerging findings.

Some of these findings are set out below, along with additional data from studies published since the literature review was conducted.

Young people engage in a range of TA-HSB.

Belton and Hollis’s review identified a number of forms of TA-HSB.

- Four studies identified within the literature review focused on young males and young adults (from 12.4 to 20 years) accessing and distributing indecent images of children (IIOC) (Moultrie, 2006; Stevens et al, 2013; Aebi et al, 2014; Seto et al, 2015).
- One study showed young people’s involvement in grooming (Shannon, 2008)
- Two other studies showed how young people sexually solicited other children and young people online (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2013, and Mitchell et al, 2014).

(Sources: Belton and Hollis, 2016; Moultrie, 2006; Stevens et al, 2013; Aebi et al, 2014; Seto et al, 2015; Shannon, 2008; Wolak & Finkelhor, 2013 and Mitchell et al, 2014.)

A significant minority of indecent images of children offences are committed by young people.

The term indecent images of children (IIOC) relates to images depicting child abuse images, from erotic posing to violent sexual acts. It includes self-taken sexual images that may not have initiated from sexual abuse (Belton and Hollis, 2016).
Studies identified in a review of the literature by Belton and Hollis (2016) gave estimates of between 3 and 15% of IIOC offences being committed by young people. These studies included:

- Carr’s 2004 New Zealand study of child abuse image cases coming to the attention of the police which found that, based on 106 cases of which 100 were internet only, in 15 cases the offender was under the age of 18 (14%). The most common age of offenders was 17
- Wolak et al’s 2011 study which found that 5% of those arrested for possessing IIOC in the USA in 2006 were under 18 years, and 18% were aged 18–25.

(Sources: Belton and Hollis, 2016; Carr, 2004 and Wolak et al, 2011.)

**A significant minority of children and young people have viewed violent pornography and/or illegal pornography.**

The literature review also identified evidence that a significant minority of children and young people have viewed violent and/or illegal pornography. Findings from the studies included:

- in a survey of 2,880 Croatian children and young people aged 10–16, around 4% reported receiving images containing violence in addition to nudity and sexual activity, and 1% received sexual images involving children (Flander et al, 2009). The research did not make clear whether the images were unintentionally viewed or sought out
- Seto et al’s (2015) representative sample of 17–20-year-old males found that 4% had ever viewed child pornography
- a survey of 18–20-year-old students in Norway found that 17.3% of males and 2.5% of females reported having watched child pornography (Hegna et al, 2004)
- Sabina, Wolak and Finkelhor (2008) found that 17.9% of the males and 10.2% of the females in their survey reported viewing pornography prior to the age of 18 that depicted rape/sexual violence, 15.1% of males and 8.9% of females reported viewing sexual pictures of children and 31.8% males and 17.7% females reported viewing bestiality.

(Sources: Belton and Hollis, 2016; Flander et al, 2009; Seto et al, 2015; Sabina, Wolak and Finkelhor, 2008.)

**There is a small amount of cross-over between online and offline HSB.**

Three studies identified in the literature review looked at the overlap between viewing IIOC and contact HSB among young people (Aebi et al, 2014; Stevens et al, 2013 and Moultrie, 2006). The findings suggested some level of overlap between the two behaviours although this relationship was small and varied between studies.
• Aebi et al (2014) found that six of the 168 juveniles in their sample with a contact offence also had a conviction for the possession or distribution of illegal pornography prior or current to the index offence (3.6%). Two of the 96 pornography offenders (combining those who view IIOC and other illegal pornography) reoffended with a contact offence (2.1%).

• Stevens et al (2013) found that one of 184 (0.5%) contact offenders reoffended with an image offence and none of those viewing IIOC crossed-over to contact HSB. None of the six IIOC offenders in the sample were noted as having engaged in sex play with boys as a child compared with 53% of the 184 child abusers, and none of these had previous convictions of any kind or any sexual allegations.

• Moultrie (2006) found that two of the seven young people referred for the possession and/or distribution of IIOC in their sample had other HSB, which included contact child sexual abuse and taking indecent pictures of children in the community. There were also a further three who were later found to be engaging in 'risky' behaviours in the community (such as following children or using recording equipment in the community).

Later research by the NSPCC (Hollis and Belton, 2017) found the children referred to the NSPCC for support for harmful sexual behaviour were often involved in both online and offline HSB:

• 46% of all the children and young people who were assessed for the NSPCC's harmful sexual behaviour programme 'Turn the Page' displayed some form of TA-HSB, including 7% who only displayed TA-HSB with no offline HSB.

(Sources: Belton and Hollis, 2016; Aebi et al, 2014; Stevens et al, 2013; Moultrie, 2006, Hollis and Belton, 2017.)

What does the data tell us? - Harmful sexual behaviour and child sexual exploitation

Research suggests there is an overlap between HSB and child sexual exploitation.

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is defined by the Department for Education as 'a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity
appears consensual, Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.’ (DfE, 2017).

Harmful sexual behaviour could be deemed to be CSE if there is an imbalance of power between the young people involved, and if there is an element of exchange involved in the harmful sexual activities between them. (Hackett, Branigan and Holmes, 2019)

**Research shows some cross-over between child sexual exploitation and harmful sexual behaviour.**

Hackett and Smith (2018) explored 14 cases known to a CSE team over a 24-month period where an alleged perpetrator was under the age of 18 at the point of their harmful or exploitative sexual behaviours.

Typically, the young people were involved in multiple and in some cases escalating harmful sexual behaviours. HSB towards teenage peers was preceded in only three cases by sexual abuse of pre-pubescent children. Twelve of the young people had long-standing nonsexual offending histories including theft, burglary, criminal damage and general antisocial behaviours. For all the young people HSB appeared to be more directed towards peers as part of a broader catalogue of deviance and non-sexual offending.

The researchers concluded that, “it has been difficult to separate the young people’s behaviours meaningfully and neatly into categories of CSE and HSB. While all fit the widely used definition of HSB, the extent to which they are accompanied by overt elements of exchange (as would fit the definition of CSE) is much less clear in many cases . . . This perhaps reflects the present inadequacy of using distinct sets of language and concepts (CSE and HSB) and service frameworks to respond to the problem of transgressive sexual behaviour in adolescence.”

(Source: Hackett and Smith, 2018.)

**What does the data tell us? - Characteristics of children and young people with HSB**

**Most HSB is displayed by boys.**

The vast majority of children and young people who display HSB are male, even taking into account the likelihood that abuse by girls is under-reported.
Taylor’s 2003 study looked at 227 children and young people living in a West Midlands city in the UK who were the subjects of child protection strategy meetings due to allegations that they had sexually abused another child between November 1993 and December 1999. 92% (208) of the young people were male and 8% (19) were female.

Vizard et al’s 2007 study analysed data relating to young people with sexually abusive behaviour who were referred to the Young Abusers Project in the UK over the period 1992-2003. It found that, of the 280 children and young people for whom there was sufficient data, 256 (91%) were male and 24 (9%) were female.

Finkelhor, Ormrod and Chaffin’s 2009 research looked at data from the USA’s National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) about 13,471 juvenile sex offenders who committed sex offences against children identified in 2004. It found that 93% of the offenders were male and 7% were female.

Hackett et al’s 2013 study analysed case files of 700 sexually abusive 5-28-year-olds first referred to intervention services in the UK between 1992 and 2000. 97% (676) of children and young people referred were male and 3% (24) female.

(Sources: Taylor, 2003; Vizard et al, 2007; Finkelhor, Ormrod and Chaffin, 2009; Hackett et al, 2013.)

The majority of children with HSB are adolescents.

Research suggests that adolescence is the peak time for the occurrence of HSB.

Taylor’s 2003 study of 227 children and young people in the West Midlands found that the age of young people, when first reported for inappropriate sexual behaviours, ranged from four years to 16 years, with a mode of 13 years, a mean of 11.5 years and a median of 12 years. Children aged 10 years or younger were responsible for 34% (137) of all incidents.

The age range of children and young people receiving treatment for HSB in Vizard et al’s 2007 study was 5-21 years of age. The mean age of the sample at the time of assessment was 13.9 years. The majority (81%) were aged 11-17 years at assessment. 14% were under the age of 10 years.

Finkelhor, Ormrod and Chaffin’s 2009 research, based on 13,471 juvenile sex offenders who committed sex offences against children, found that 38% of offenders were between the ages of 12 and 14 and 46% were between the ages of 15 and 17. 16% were younger than 12.

Hackett et al’s 2013 study found that the most common age at referral was 15 years, though a third of all referrals related to children aged 13 or under. The mean age at referral was 14 years and the modal age was 15 years. However, over a third of referrals related to children aged 13 or under.
A significant proportion of children with HSB have a learning disability.

The term learning disability is not clearly defined and is used in different ways by professionals in different disciplines, making it hard to give a precise figure for the number of children with HSB who had learning difficulties. However a number of researchers have attempted to analyse case files to get an estimate of the proportion.

- Hackett et al (2013) read through case files recording any information that indicated the presence or absence of learning disability. In 38% (241) of cases where information about disability was noted the young person was identified as having a learning disability. In a further 62% (392) of cases the young person had no cognitive impairment.

- Between 2002 and 2003, Hackett, Masson and Phillips collected data, via a survey, from 186 services working with children and young people with HSB in the UK and Republic of Ireland. The research identified that a significant proportion of children receiving services were identified as having a mild-to-severe learning disability. For example, among the 111 youth offending teams (YOTs) that responded, 47 (53%) estimated that up to 25% of the young people they had worked with had a mild-to-moderate learning disability, and a further 16 teams (18%) reported even higher proportions.

What does the data tell us? - Adverse childhood experiences and harmful sexual behaviour

The majority of children with harmful sexual behaviour have themselves experienced trauma, including abuse or neglect.

Research studies into children with harmful sexual behaviour are often quite small. However most do find that children with harmful sexual behaviour have also experienced trauma, including abuse or neglect. Hackett’s 2016 review of the literature identified a number of studies in to this issue, and since its publication further research has been published around this issue.

- Hackett et al’s 2013 study into the experiences of 700 children and young people who had been referred to nine UK services for HSB over a nine year period. They found two-thirds were known to have experienced at least one
form of abuse or trauma, including physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, severe neglect, parental rejection, family breakdown and conflict, domestic violence or parental drug and alcohol abuse.

- Vizard et al (2007) found that 92% of their sample had experienced some form of abuse or had been exposed to neglect or domestic violence.
- A study of 76 children displaying sexual behaviour problems and their parents (Tougas et al, 2016) found that, according to the parents, almost three-quarters of the children from the sample had been neglected (71%), approximately two out of three had been abused psychologically (63%) or physically (63%), and more than half of them had been victims of sexual abuse (53%).
- Barra et al (2018) analysed data from the case files of 687 adolescents convicted of sexual offences between January 2007 and September 2014. The research found that around two thirds (66.5%) of adolescents were highly likely to have experienced several adverse childhood experiences (parental abuse or neglect, peer abuse, bullying or exposure to family violence) before their first sexual assault that led to a conviction.
- Hall and Moser (2018) looked at data from the files of 120 adolescents who had received residential and/or intensive outpatient treatment at a treatment facility in rural Appalachia between 2003 and 2014. 97% of the adolescents had at least one adverse childhood experience.

(Sources: Hackett, 2014; Vizard et al, 2007; Barra et al, 2018; Hall, Stinson and Moser, 2018; Tougas et al, 2016.)

What does the data tell us? - Recidivism

Young offenders who have committed a sexual offence are less likely than average to commit a further offence.

- Ministry of Justice (2018) records that the proven reoffending rate for juveniles who were convicted of or cautioned for a sexual offence in England and Wales in 2015/16 was 15.2%. This compares with an overall juvenile reoffending rate of 42.2%.
- In their meta-analysis of 18 studies, McCann and Lussier (2008) found that sexual recidivism ranged from 1.6% to 29.9%. In contrast, the general juvenile recidivism rate was, on average, 53%.

(Sources: Ministry of Justice, 2018; McCann and Lussier, 2008.)
Sexual reoffending rates of online and/or offline HSB among young people who view indecent images of children (IIOC) are low.

Findings from two studies (Aebi et al, 2014; Stevens et al, 2013) with young people found that a small proportion of young people who view IIOC online are known to sexually reoffend and reoffending rates among this group are lower than young people with offline HSB.

- In a follow-up study of around 2.95 years (ranging between nine months and 6.41 years), Aebi et al (2014) found that only one of the 54 juveniles convicted of viewing IIOC sexually reoffended (1.9% sexual reoffending rate). Among the 64 young people convicted of a contact child sexual offence, three sexually reoffended (4.7% reoffending rate).
- In Stevens et al’s (2013) study, there was a sexual reoffending rate of 7% among their sample of young people referred to a treatment programme displaying varying types of HSB over ten years. Of the six young people who viewed IIOC in the sample, none sexually reoffended during the follow-up (mean period of four years and six months).

(Source: Belton and Hollis, 2016; Aebi et al, 2014; Stevens et al, 2013.)

The majority of children and young people displaying HSB do not become sexual offenders as adults.

- Research by Nisbet et al (2004) examined risk and recidivism in a sample of 303 Australian adolescent male sex offenders. As adults, 25 (9%) came to the attention of the police for further alleged sexual offences.
- Hargreaves and Francis (2013) analysed data on men who had committed a first sexual offence under the age of 21 using the England and Wales Offenders Index. They found that, after 35 years, an estimated 13% of juvenile sex offenders had been reconvicted of a sexual offence.
- An examination of the Philadelphia birth cohort longitudinal data by Zimring et al (2009) found that no female juvenile sex offenders had committed a further sexual offence between the ages of 18 and 26. One in ten male juvenile sex offenders had committed a further sexual offence in their first eight years of adulthood.

(Sources: Nisbet, 2004; Hargreaves and Francis, 2013; Zimring et al, 2009.)
What does the data tell us? - Wider behavioural problems

Young people who display HSB often experience other emotional, behavioural and peer related difficulties.

- Joyal, Carpentier and Martin (2016) conducted a study of 351 young males assessed for contact sexual offences in Canada between 1992 and 2002. They compared the histories of young people whose HSB was directed at peers or adults with those whose HSB was directed at younger children. Their research found that children whose HSB was directed towards peers or adult were more likely to be involved in general antisocial behaviour. For example, 36.1% of young people whose HSB involved peers or adults had prior criminal history compared to 12.3% of young people whose HSB involved younger children. Young people whose HSB involved younger children were more likely to have poor social skills. For example, 73.0% of young people whose HSB was directed at younger children reported experiencing social isolation or rejection compared to 24.6% of young people whose HSB was directed at peers or adults.

- Cale et al’s 2016 longitudinal study of 217 young people charged with at least one sexual offence in Australia between 2001 and 2009 found that those who offended regularly and over a long period of time seemed to have first been involved in an escalating sequence of non-sexual offences. The average number of charges in adolescence for the sample was 19.6 charges. 55.3% had ever been charged for a non-violent crime and 38.7% had been charged for a violent, non-sexual crime.

(Sources: Joyal, Carpentier and Martin, 2016; Cale et al, 2016.)

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**Further reading**


**Further information**

For further information about harmful sexual behaviour, visit the dedicated HSB page on NSPCC Learning  
[nsppc.org.uk/hsb](http://nsppc.org.uk/hsb)

Sign up for our weekly current awareness email newsletter  
[nsppc.org.uk/caspar](http://nsppc.org.uk/caspar)

Visit NSPCC Learning to learn more about the statistics behind child abuse  
[nsppc.org.uk/statistics](http://nsppc.org.uk/statistics)