

**United Nations Economic Commission for Europe**

**United Nations Children's Fund**

**Expert meeting on statistics on children**

Geneva, Switzerland, 4–6 March 2024

Item 5 of the provisional agenda

**Violence against children and the implementation of the International Classification of Violence against Children**

## **Improving ONS statistics on violence against children**

**Note by the Office for National Statistics, United Kingdom\***

### *Abstract*

The ONS is committed to improving the availability and quality of statistics on violence against children (VAC). The Crime Survey for England and Wales is one of the main survey sources for statistics on VAC in the United Kingdom. In addition to collecting data from adults, the survey also collects data directly from children aged 10 to 15 on their experience of violence (including bullying) in the past 12 months. We are undertaking ambitious redesign of our data collection approach for children, to an online survey where children are sampled through administrative data sources. This approach aims to deliver more robust statistics, based on a larger and more inclusive sample and greater insight into experiences of VAC among sub-populations. Alongside this, we are conducting a feasibility study to determine whether a new national survey could provide an effective source of data on the current scale and nature of child abuse. The paper will discuss the key challenges, progress and future plans in relation to the work above to improve the availability and quality of statistics on VAC.

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## I. Introduction

1. Data is key to understanding and preventing violence against children (VAC). The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW), managed by the ONS, is a key source of data on VAC. The CSEW is a face-to-face victimisation survey which interviews household residents in England and Wales. First introduced in 2015 and repeated in 2018 and 2023, the CSEW incorporates a self-completion module, which asks adult respondents about their experiences of abuse (including emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse and neglect) as a child. The survey also collects information about the nature of abuse, including the victim's relationship to the perpetrator, the age at which the abuse started and ended and whether it was reported to anyone at the time.
2. Since 2009, children aged 10 to 15 years have also been interviewed in households where an adult CSEW interview has been conducted. Using a separate shorter questionnaire, children are asked about their experiences of victimisation in the 12 months prior to the interview, for a range of crime types (including violence, theft, robbery and criminal damage). Children are also asked about the nature of their victimisation, including who the perpetrator was, when it happened and whether any injury was sustained. Through self-completion modules at the end of the questionnaire, data is also collected on the prevalence and nature of experiences of in-person and online bullying, as well as children's experience of sending and receiving sexual messages. The children's CSEW doesn't collect data on sexual violence.
3. The CSEW provides the best available indicator of the prevalence of abuse during childhood in England and Wales. Some improvements were made to the module before it was reintroduced into the questionnaire in 2023. Previously, the CSEW underestimated the prevalence of abuse during childhood as experiences of abuse experienced by children aged 16 and 17 years were excluded. The module now collects data from adults on experiences of abuse before the age of 18 (formerly before the age of 16) and the latest estimates of prevalence of abuse during childhood are expected to be published in late 2024/early 2025. However, there is still no source providing the current prevalence of abuse in the UK. To address this, the ONS are conducting a feasibility study to determine whether a new national survey could provide an effective source of data on the current scale and nature of child abuse.
4. Collecting data from children face-to-face has become increasingly challenging in recent years. The children's CSEW was paused for two years during the Covid-19 pandemic, and since returning to face-to-face interviewing response rates have notably fallen, reducing the capacity to produce some of the regular indicators from the survey. To address some of these challenges, an online mode of data collection is being piloted with children, with a view to replacing the current in-home children's survey. The online survey also aims to address some of the evidence gaps in the data currently produced from the survey due to limitations in the design. This paper discusses progress, lessons learned and future developments in relation to the two projects mentioned which aim to improve the collection of data on violence directly from children.

## A. Children's CCSEW

5. Our vision for a transformed, online Children's CSEW is to sample children directly from administrative data sources, rather than from households who respond to the CSEW. This approach provides a number of potential benefits, including:
  - A larger achieved sample size to enable more robust estimates among sub-populations
  - A more inclusive achieved sample of children, including those living in non-household populations
  - Creates opportunity to expand the survey to children aged 16 and 17
6. Although response rates to online surveys are typically lower than face-to-face surveys, sampling from administrative data sources enables a much larger and more efficient sample to be issued, resulting in a larger achieved sample. The current sample size for children is constrained by the number of adults who respond to the CSEW with children aged 10 to 15 years. Auxiliary information available on administrative data sources can also be used to draw a more targeted sample of children, for example by oversampling small population groups, or groups who are less likely to respond.
7. As children aged 16 and 17 years are interviewed as part of the adult CSEW, it is not currently possible to produce comparable data on experiences of violence for children under the age of 18. The proposed design for an online survey would also enable children aged 16 and 17 to also be interviewed in future.
8. An addition to the benefits of this approach, there are also challenges with collecting data on VAC online, including effective safeguarding of respondents, parental consent, managing respondent privacy and the role of parents in the absence of an interviewer. There is also the challenge of developing a questionnaire on a complex and sensitive topic that can be completed independently by children. To explore the feasibility of collecting data on sensitive topics from children online, we are carrying out a programme of research with several phases:
  - Discovery phase – aims to explore the practical and ethical issues of collecting data on sensitive topics online and whether the survey could be administered to a wider age range (9-year-olds to 17-year-olds)
  - Large-scale statistical test – aims to explore uptake for an online survey of children sampled from the general population, optimise strategies for maximising response rates and understand factors influencing the quality of data collected
  - Questionnaire development – aims to develop an online self-complete questionnaire for measuring crime victimisation among children
9. We are now preparing to launch the large-scale statistical test, with data collection planned for 6 weeks between mid-February and March 2024.

### 1. Discovery phase

10. The discovery phase included stakeholder engagement, a literature review and qualitative research with parents and children, followed by a small-scale online pilot to explore some of

the challenges raised in a real-life survey setting. The small-scale pilot was conducted with a very small sample of around 200 children in households where an adult CSEW interview had taken place, but a child interview had not due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Only the self-completion modules were used in this pilot, as they were already designed for children to answer independently on a tablet. This phase of research found:

- Public acceptability for collecting data on sensitive topics from children online within households that had taken part in the CSEW. Parents existing relationship with the survey is likely to have been a contributing factor. Piloting the survey with a general population sample will provide a better indication of the expected response rate.
- The minimum age that children could complete the survey independently online is aged 10 years. Children under the age of 10 would need high levels of support from a parent/guardian to complete, which may influence their answers.
- If extending the survey to include 16 and 17 year-olds, the questionnaire should be tailored to different age groups to ensure it is relevant while maintaining the ability to make comparisons across age groups for key indicators.
- Although there is a greater risk of excessive parental involvement in an online survey and an impact on data quality, this can be managed by developing age-tailored survey materials and questions and encouraging privacy
- Few barriers to online completion were identified, but some adaptations would be needed to enable children Special Educational Needs or Disabilities to take part in an online mode.
- The survey should be framed as a survey of safety

## 2. Large scale test

11. In parallel to the research above, we have started developing an online questionnaire to measure children's experience of crime-victimisation (including violence, theft and robbery). As this part of the questionnaire is currently interviewer-led, it needs to be entirely re-developed to make it accessible for children to complete independently without the help of an adult. So far, we have undertaken stakeholder engagement, developed a first draft of the questionnaire and undertaken two rounds of cognitive testing with children.
12. The first draft of the questionnaire will be piloted as part of the large-scale statistical test. This is the first time we have piloted questions on victimisation and is an important stage in understanding uptake to an online survey of this nature and using a sample of children from the general population. Following consultation with the National Statistician's Data Ethics Advisory Committee (NSDEC), a total confidentiality safeguarding approach is being taken. Tailored signposting to guidance and support services based on children's responses to certain questions has been built into the questionnaire and questions have been carefully designed to avoid free text responses.
13. The issued sample for the test is 7,000 children aged 10 to 15 years. Although our ambition is to expand the survey to children aged 16 and 17 in future, further questionnaire development is needed before it is suitable for administering to this age range. The sample has been drawn from the English School Census (ESC). The ESC contains socio-demographic information of children, including age, sex, ethnicity, whether they receive free school meals and Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision. Using this information we

have oversampled small population groups to enable analysis of differential response rates among sub-groups of the population with improved precision.

14. All letters will be sent by post to the parent/guardian of sampled children, with an accompanying letter and information leaflet for children. Invitation letters will include a link to the survey and instructions on how to complete. We are also running a split-sample trial to assess the impact of different mailing strategies on the response rate. Half of the sample will receive a pre-notification letter in advance of the invitation letter, half of the sample will also receive an additional reminder letter. Analysis of response rates around the time of letters being sent will also enable us to optimise scheduling of reminder letters.

### **3. Future developments**

15. We will be undertaking an in-depth evaluation of the statistical test, including:
  - Response rate analysis, overall and by sub-populations to understand response propensity and adjust the sample design accordingly
  - Comparison of indicators of violence produced from data collected online and face-to-face to understand data quality and mode effects
  - Analysis of evaluation questions, and survey helpline call logs to evaluate the operational design
  - Analysis of survey metadata, including survey completion time and survey drop off to inform ongoing question development
16. This will inform an assessment of the feasibility of transforming data collection to an online mode and a recommendation for the design of the transformed survey. We will also be carrying out further questionnaire development, including more qualitative research with children to understand how they conceptualise victimisation and violence.

### **B. Child abuse prevalence survey feasibility study**

17. Measuring the extent and nature of child abuse and neglect (CAN) is difficult because it is usually hidden from view and comes in many forms. Data are key to understanding the prevalence, causes, nature and effects of CAN, yet there is no single data source which measures the current prevalence of CAN in the UK.
18. The feasibility study has been ongoing since 2020. It was separated into two main phases:
  - phase one – includes carrying out research to determine whether a survey could be successful (including desk research, literature reviews, stakeholder engagement, qualitative research and a public consultation)
  - phase two – includes designing the survey methodology, safeguarding procedures, designing and testing questions and conducting a pilot survey
19. We are currently mid-way through phase two.

## 1. Phase 1

20. The Phase one research questions were broadly split into 4 main research areas: coverage, methodology, ethical procedures, and accuracy and reliability of the data.
21. We carried out literature reviews, stakeholder engagement and commissioned qualitative research to help us to answer the research questions and determine whether there is value in setting up a pilot survey.
22. In January 2021, we published findings for the research up to that point. The main findings show that to be effective, a survey should:
  - be framed as a survey of child safety
  - be broad in coverage and cover six types of abuse: neglect, physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, child exploitation and exposure to domestic violence or abuse
  - ask about lifetime and past year experiences of abuse
  - be self-completed electronically
  - interview children aged 11 to 17 years and young adults aged 18 to 25 years
  - take place in schools for children aged 11 to 16 years
  - be relatively large, with a minimum of 45,000 respondents needed to produce useful estimates
  - allow parents to remove their child from being included
  - be partially anonymous and adopt a flagging safeguarding procedure, which would be used to assess the level of risk a child is in and apply different levels of safeguarding depending on the circumstances of the abuse reported
23. While this research uncovered many additional challenges and questions surrounding how such a survey could work in practice, there was no evidence that a UK survey to measure child abuse was not feasible. However, we identified some important areas that would need further investigation before a conclusion could be made on whether the survey could be successful. To inform the decision, we held a [public consultation](#) in January 2021, and carried out additional qualitative research.
24. This research 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
  - 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

25. Given these findings, while there are challenges, we were still broadly confident with our proposals for a survey. Therefore, we concluded that phase one of the feasibility research found no fundamental reason not to conduct a survey in this way.

## **2. Phase 2**

26. In phase two we have carried out several rounds of stakeholder engagement, participatory groups, focus groups and cognitive testing which has led to the development of a child abuse prevalence questionnaire and accompanying safeguarding procedure. This has included working with SEND professionals to understand how the survey can also be appropriate for those with SEND. Both the questionnaire and safeguarding procedure are in near final format and are currently being reviewed by the National Statisticians Data Ethics Advisory Committee (NSDEC).
27. During the most recent research, the safeguarding recommendation has evolved from phase 1. The new recommendation is that the survey should be anonymous. We are currently engaging with NSDEC and the Department for Education (DfE) for their endorsement of this approach, which will ensure that children can be honest about their experiences without fear of consequences. However, the survey will have a flagging system to alert respondents if we are concerned by the responses given and there will be extensive opt-in support options offered throughout. No personal identifiable information is collected in the survey, and no safeguarding action will be taken as a result of survey responses alone.
28. However, respondents are encouraged to seek support, particularly if they report abuse during the survey. If a respondent chooses a safeguarding option and during this follow up, discloses abuse, safeguarding actions will take place. This new recommendation gives the control to the respondents and is most likely to result in accurate data, whilst also providing numerous support options for those who are ready to seek help.

## **3. Future developments**

29. We are also working on the methodological and operational elements of the pilot and main survey design. This includes sourcing and preparing the sampling frames. For schools this will be the publicly available list of schools, for 16-25 year olds this could involve following up respondents from another survey or the Personal Demographic Service (Health admin data). In terms of the operational design, we are developing communication strategies which will involve communicating through educational departments, to local authorities, schools, pupils and parents; how the survey will be carried out in a school environment, and what support the schools require to facilitate it. We have also worked closely with NSDEC throughout this process to get advice and to gain acknowledgement of their support for each element of our recommendation. This includes agreeing that the 16-25 year olds survey will be carried out online, and that for the school survey, children 13 and over will be able to give their own consent to take part.
30. Our ambition is to the pilot the Child Abuse Prevalence survey at the end of 2024 early 2025.