

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.

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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 62 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; whilst adolescent homicides are most commonly caused by a stranger, friend or acquaintance.
- 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.

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:	But you can't use it 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.	✗ Give a definitive, overall figure for child deaths by abuse and neglect. 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 62 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), 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

¹ Since 2001 (ICD-10): X85-Y09; Pre 2001 (ICD-9): E904, E960-E969

² Since 2001 (ICD-10): Y10-Y34 and, since 2007, U50.9 in England and Wales; Pre 2001 (ICD-9): E980-E989

³ Since 2001 (ICD-10): Y87.1, Y87.2

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 2018.

- In 2018 there were a total of 58 child (under 15) deaths by assault or undetermined intent in the UK: 54 in England, 2 in Scotland, 1 in Northern Ireland and 1 in Wales.
- For the last five years of available data (2014 – 2018) there was an average of 62 child deaths by assault or undetermined intent a year in the UK
- The average child death rate for the five-year period 2014-2018 was 5.3 per million.

(Sources: Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2019; Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), 2019; National Records of Scotland, 2019)

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 2018/19 there were 94 child (under 18) homicides in the UK: 86 in England, 4 in Northern Ireland, 3 in Scotland, and 1 in Wales.
- In the last five years (2014/15 – 2018/19) there was an average of 84 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), 2019.)

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 (31%) 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 5 offences in the year ending March 2019 (7%).
- As of 5 December 2019, there were 36 victims aged under 16 years (53%) for whom no suspect had been identified. This number is likely to fall as police investigations continue.

(Source: ONS, 2020)

Additional data requested by the NSPCC as part of the How safe are our children? report, which this year focused on abuse of adolescents, shows that, unlike for younger children, adolescent homicides are most likely to be perpetrated by a stranger.

- In England, the most common relationship recorded by the police between victim and perpetrator in homicides of 11- to 18-year-olds was stranger (32%), followed by friend or acquaintance (21%).

(Source: Bentley et al., 2020)

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 (45 per million population)
- followed by those aged 16 to 24 years (18 per million population).

(Source: ONS, 2020)

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 2014-2017, 368 serious case reviews were undertaken of which 206 related to child deaths. Of these:

- 106 (51%) were related to, but not directly caused by, maltreatment (including sudden unexpected death in infancy and suicide)
- 49 (24%) were from fatal physical abuse/physical assault
- 24 (12%) were from deliberate/overt homicide
- 9 (4%) were from severe persistent cruelty
- 6 (3%) were from covert homicide
- 12 (6%) were from other causes/category not clear.

(Source: Brandon et al., 2020)

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, there were 25 significant case reviews (SCRs) completed between April 2015 and March 2018 and submitted to the Care Inspectorate for inclusion in its retrospective review. 11 related to the death of a child, of which:

- 3 (27%) were from physical injuries
- 3 (27%) were related to deaths from sudden unexpected death in infancy (SUDI)
- 3 (27%) were from suicide
- 1 (9%) were from drowning
- 1 (9%) were from murder.

(Source: Care Inspectorate, 2019)

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" (Department for Education (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 3,250 child death reviews completed in England in the year ending 31 March 2019, 965 (30%) were identified as having modifiable factors.

(Source: NHS Digital, 2019)

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 Panel where a looked after child has died, regardless of whether abuse or neglect is known or suspected.

- The Panel received 473 serious incident notifications between 29 June 2018 and 28 June 2019. Of those 473 notifications, 198 were in relation to child deaths.

(Source: Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020)

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 29 June 2018, but about which the Panel was not notified until after that date. Each child death will have its own separate notification.

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+ Further information



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



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