

Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation data captured within Joint Investigative Interviews

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Introduction

To support the work of the National Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (CSAE) Strategic Group, a CSAE Data Short Life Working Group has been established, chaired by the Chief Statistician. It aims to: unlock additional sources of CSAE data held by partners to help build an improved estimate of the scale and nature of CSAE in Scotland; identify and/or develop data indicators/tools that can support prevention and intervention; and improve CSAE data capture and quality.

The key question underpinning the group's work is "*What is the scale and nature of CSAE in Scotland?*".

Defining child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation

To help understand the scale and nature of CSAE, it is first important to understand how child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation are defined in Scotland. The key source here is the [National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021 - updated 2023](#) and the definitions of both CSA and CSE can be summarised as:

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is involving a child in any activity for the sexual gratification of another person. Sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a child to take part in sexual activities; such activities may involve physical contact, including penetrative or non-penetrative acts and they may include non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at or in the production of indecent images, in watching sexual activities, using sexual language towards a child, or encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways.

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is 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 person under 18 into sexual activity in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator.

Interpreting data on CSAE

Decades of research (for example, Christianson & Blake 1990; Cross et al., 2017; Finkelhor, 1994; Jeglic, 2022; Kauffman et al., 1998; Morrison et al., 2018; Ortiz 2024; Pipe et al., 2007; Summit, 1983) provide important insights into why capturing data on the scale and nature of CSAE is difficult. A summary of the research is provided here to help understand and contextualise the available CSAE statistical data.

CSAE is typically perpetrated by someone a child knows well, and often by someone a child loves and trusts. While children can experience sexual abuse through a one-off episode, such as a sexual assault by someone not known to them, most CSAE involves harm occurring within a relationship. Relationships may naturally exist, such as within families or close friend networks, or perpetrators may deliberately develop relationships for the purposes of manipulation, exploitation and abuse.

The purposeful development of these relationships for abuse, whether familial or non-familial, is known as grooming and is a criminal offence.

CSAE typically occurs within relationships and this can create significant barriers to children disclosing the abuse. Children often experience complex and conflicting emotions about their situation and, even when they are able to recognise their experience as abuse or exploitation, it can be psychologically difficult to accept this due to the positive feelings they may have towards the perpetrator. Reconciling these conflicting perceptions can be highly challenging and children can experience a profound sense of psychological discomfort and distress in trying to do so.

CSAE can also involve psychological manipulation and threats, whether to the child or someone or something they love. These deliberate tactics are deployed to silence children, but can also result in profound feelings of guilt, shame and self-blame for children and these contribute directly to the long-term impact of the trauma of child sexual abuse. Relatedly, fear is also a powerful barrier to disclosing sexual abuse. Children may fear not only the potential threats from their perpetrator, but also fear not being believed, being blamed, having their experience minimised, or the repercussions of disclosure, such as the break-up of their family. Children therefore commonly feel responsible for both the abuse they have experienced and for any repercussions from disclosing the abuse. In cases where children do disclose abuse, this is often driven by a strong sense of responsibility and protectiveness. Disclosure may be triggered when the child becomes aware that someone close to them, such as a sibling, has experienced similar harm, prompting them to act out of concern for that other person.

Beyond the dynamics of CSAE, there are additional barriers to disclosure, including that the abuse is usually conducted in private with no other witnesses present; as a society, there can be embarrassment and awkwardness in discussing sexual matters, and perpetrators can exploit this 'secrecy' by telling children that their actions are 'normal'; and children may not have the words to describe their abuse, nor have someone with whom they can share this information.

Where children do feel able to disclose, they may do so in quite obscure ways that are difficult for others to understand. Even where the listener does understand what the child is trying to convey, they themselves may not have the capacity to respond in such a way that the abuse is formally brought to the attention of authorities. In addition, many children who do disclose sexual abuse tell a peer within their friend group or family rather than an adult or via a formal professional route.

The final key feature to highlight is that CSAE is a traumatic experience. Early experiences of trauma impact children's brain development and functioning, making it more difficult to accurately recall memories of abuse and control emotions related to those memories.

Child Protection Registration CSAE data

To date, the main source of CSAE statistical information has been the child protection registration data available in the annual [Scottish Government Child Protection Statistics](#) publication.

While it is a helpful source, the child protection registration data will not capture all incidences of CSAE experienced by children living in Scotland. To explain, decisions about whether a child should be placed on the child protection register are made on a multi-agency basis at a Child Protection Planning Meeting and follow statutory investigations into child protection concerns. A child's name may be added to the child protection register if there are reasonable grounds to believe or suspect that a child has suffered or will suffer significant harm from abuse or neglect and that a Child Protection Plan is needed to protect and support the child. However, if the abuse and exploitation was historic/non-recent (noting many months and years can elapse before a child feels able to recognise and disclose their experience of abuse or exploitation) and/or the perpetrator no longer has contact with the child (which may have been achieved during the course of the statutory investigation), then the child would not need a multi-agency Child Protection Plan and therefore their name would not be added to the Child Protection Register.

With the caveat that the child protection registration data does not capture the full incidence of CSAE experienced by children living in Scotland, the latest data for August 2024 to July 2025 shows that:

- 155 children were registered on the Child Protection Register in 2024-2025 with child sexual abuse (CSA) recorded as a concern. Of these children:
 - 33% were 0-4 years old, 37% were 5-11 years old, and 31% were 12-17 years old.
 - 6% were recorded as disabled.
 - 87% were white.
- 20 children were registered on the Child Protection Register with child sexual exploitation (CSE) recorded as a concern.

The limitations of the child protection registration data mean that to answer "*What is the scale and nature of CSAE in Scotland?*" requires the collation and analysis of other sources of CSAE data captured across Scotland's child protection and justice services. The data collected within child protection Joint Investigative Interviews is one such source.

Joint Investigative Interviews

A joint investigative interview (JII) is a forensic interview carried out by investigative interviewers (one social worker and one police officer who have completed specialist training to undertake that role) for evidential purposes and to assess the need for any necessary protective action in relation to that child, or any other child.

JIIIs are agreed on a multi-agency basis, usually at Interagency Referral Discussion (IRD), and are undertaken as part of a joint investigation into reported child protection concerns.

The planning involved in a JII includes developing a bespoke interview plan and open questioning strategy that takes account of the child's individual needs and captures the key evidential detail required as part of the investigation into the specific child protection concern being investigated.

In situations where CSAE is being investigated, JIIIs usually proceed following an initial disclosure from the child being interviewed, or a substantive concern around which an interview strategy can be structured. JIIIs also only take place when a child agrees to participate and know why they are there and what is going to be discussed. The implication is that the population of children who participate in a JII for CSAE are children for whom there has been a disclosure or clear report of concern, and the child has agreed to be interviewed. As outlined in the 'interpreting data on CSAE' section, this is a very small proportion of all children affected by CSAE.

Joint Investigative Interview data

As part of the Scottish Child Interview Model, the '*Scottish Child Interview Model for Joint Investigative Interviewing – Data Capture Form*' has been developed. It enables all JII partnerships to record information about the child, the concern leading to interview, the interview itself, and the outcome of the interview in a broadly consistent way.

Recognising the value of this data in relation to building our understanding of the scale and nature of CSAE, the National Joint Investigative Interviewing Team and CELCIS worked with JII partnerships to develop a bespoke '*CSAE Data Capture Form*' that would draw CSAE-relevant information from the wider collection. The '*CSAE Data Capture Form*' was endorsed by the Chief Statistician, who wrote to all JII partnerships in March 2026 asking for JII partnerships to provide their aggregate, annual data for August 2024 to July 2025 and return it to the National Joint Investigative Interviewing Team and CELCIS for collation and analysis.

This paper presents the CSAE data provided by the JII partnerships, with returns received from all 19 JII partnerships covering all 32 of Scotland's local authority areas. The data presented aggregates all the returns received to provide a national picture of CSAE within Joint Investigative Interviews. In total, the returns received provide data on 2,975 children, of which 1,434 (or 48% of children interviewed) had CSA or CSE recorded as a concern.

Given the ask of JII partnerships was to provide data that they readily had access to via their local recording systems, there are some data gaps in what has been shared but these should not detract from the national insights the data provide. For each indicator, the total number of children for whom data was provided is given.

To ensure the data returned by JII partnerships is interpreted appropriately within this paper, a workshop was held with JII partnerships following the return and collation of the data to present and discuss the emerging statistical findings. The practice insights provided by the JII partnerships are included within this paper's analysis of the statistical data.

In addition to the practice insights, the JII partnerships shared important contextual information around the CSAE data, with these presented in Box 1.

Box 1: CSAE data context and caveats

In cases of child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSAE), children and young people may not recognise themselves as victims, or they may not feel safe or able to disclose the abuse they are experiencing. As a result, while Joint Investigative Interview (JII) data is a valuable information source, it is likely that CSAE is under-reported within this dataset.

The data presented relates to interviews undertaken using the Scottish Child Interview Model (SCIM), which has not yet been fully implemented across Scotland. In the 2024-2025 reporting year, 84% of all JIIs were undertaken using the Scottish Child Interview Model. There may be limited occasions where a child discloses sexual abuse or exploitation during an interview that was not identified at the point of referral, in which case an alternative (e.g. Stepwise) interview may have been conducted. However, the number of children interviewed for CSAE using an alternative to the Scottish Child Interview Model is understood to be low in number.

Some children aged 16/17 years old who have experienced sexual harm, may be interviewed by a Sexual Offences Liaison Officer (SOLO) or by a Vulnerable Witness Visually Recorded Interview. These interviews are not captured in JII data.

The data also reports on the 166 children for whom a JII relating to CSAE was agreed but did not proceed to interview. This category only includes those who initially agreed to participate in a JII but the interview did not proceed. The most common reason for this is that the child decided they no longer wished to take part in the process. This data does not include all children who, at the point of referral or prior to the Interagency Referral Discussion (IRD), indicated that they did not wish to participate in a JII. At present, there is no mechanism in place to record or report on all such instances.

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Across the 32 local authority areas, 1,313 children (or 44% of the 2,975 children interviewed in total across 2024-25) had CSA recorded as the primary concern.

1,313 children interviewed is notably higher than the 155 children registered on the Child Protection Register with CSA as a recorded concern in 2024-25. In the workshop with JII partnerships, the difference can largely be explained by:

- Child Protection Registration being used when a child is at current risk of significant harm.
- Disclosures, or evidence, of CSA often coming months or years after it was perpetrated, meaning there may be minimal current risk to the child.
- Where there is a recent incidence of CSA that has led to interview, an immediate response of services will most likely be to remove the perpetrator's contact with the child, so reducing the current level of risk to the child.

Victim or witness of CSA

The data provided by the JII partnerships provides further insights into the nature of the CSA. First, children can be interviewed as a victim or a witness of child sexual abuse, and the data shows that:

- 92% of children were interviewed as a victim.
- 8% of children were interviewed as a witness.

Familial or non-familial CSA

The data then provides information on whether the abuse was familial or non-familial. It finds:

- 33% of children experienced/witnessed familial sexual abuse.

- 67% of children experienced non-familial sexual abuse.

Number of children where CSA has been recorded as the primary concern by victim or witness, and familial or non-familial harm, 2024-2025

	Number of children	Percentage
Victim of Familial Harm	348 children	31%
Witness of Familial Harm	20 children	2%
Victim of Non-Familial Harm	685 children	61%
Witness of Non-Familial Harm	62 children	6%
Total	1,115 children	100%

Peer-to-peer CSA

While five JII partnerships (covering eight local authority areas) were not recording this data in 2024-2025, the data provided by the other JII partnerships found that 34% of the children experienced peer-to-peer sexual abuse (whether as a victim or witness).

The workshop with JII partnerships confirmed that peer-to-peer incidents of CSA do make up a significant proportion of JIIs and, indeed, an increasing proportion with social media and the internet facilitating this. However, they added that peer-to-peer CSA rarely requires a child to be registered on the child protection register because the risk can often be quickly responded to, managed and addressed.

Number of children where CSA has been recorded as the primary concern by peer-to-peer incident, 2024-2025

	Number of children	Percentage
Yes	240 children	34%
No	467 children	66%
Total	707 children	100%

Characteristics of the children

The CSAE Data Capture Form asked JII partnerships to provide data (where available) on the gender, age, ethnicity, disability, and care experienced status of the children interviewed.

By gender, girls were found to have been at much greater risk of experiencing CSA:

- 81% of children were female.
- 18% of children were male.

Number of children where CSA has been recorded as the primary concern by gender, 2024-2025

	Number of children	Percentage
Male	220 children	18%
Female	964 children	81%
Transgender	6 children	0%
Non-binary	3 children	0%
Total	1,193 children	100%

By age, the data shows:

- 66% of children were 12-15 years old.
- 22% of children were 5-11 years old.

- 10% of children were 16-17 years old (to note, there may also be 16-17 year olds who are interviewed by a Sexual Offences Liaison Officer rather than a JII).

In the workshop with JII partnerships, the high proportion of children aged 12-15 was viewed as a reflection of the number of peer-to-peer CSA interviews.

Number of children where CSA has been recorded as the primary concern by age, 2024-2025

	Number of children	Percentage
Under 5 years	20 children	2%
5-11 years	263 children	22%
12-15 years	769 children*	66%
16-17 years	122 children**	10%
Total	1,174 children	100%

Note: * in one JII partnership, a 12-16 year old banding is used; ** includes two young people aged 18

By disability, noting that seven JII partnerships (covering 14 local authority areas) were [testing a revised set of disability indicators](#) and consequently the proportion of children recorded as disabled may be higher than in the non-test partnership areas:

- 35% of children were recorded as disabled.
- 65% of children were recorded as not disabled.

With the Census 2022 finding that 10-15% of Scotland's children's population are disabled, 35% of the children interviewed recorded as disabled is in line with the understanding that disabled children are 3 to 4 times at more risk of experiencing harm and abuse than non-disabled children (Jones et al., 2012; Sullivan and Knutson, 2000).

Number of children where CSA has been recorded as the primary concern by disability, 2024-2025

	Disability test partnerships	Non-test partnerships	All partnerships
Yes (one or more condition recorded)	251 children	155 children	406 children
	47%	25%	35%
No	279 children	466 children	745 children
	53%	75%	65%
Total	530 children	621 children	1,151 children
	100%	100%	100%

By ethnicity, 93% of the children interviewed were white.

Number of children where CSA has been recorded as the primary concern by ethnicity, 2024-2025

	Number of children	Percentage
White	985 children	93%
Mixed or multiple ethnic group	11 children	1%
Asian, Asian Scottish or Asian British	17 children	2%
African	10 children	1%
Caribbean or Black	0 children	0%
Other ethnic group	12 children	1%
Choose not to disclose / Not recorded	24 children	2%
Total	1,058 children	100%

By 'looked after' status:

- 85% of children were not 'looked after'.
- Of the 15% of children who were 'looked after', there was a largely equal split across children living in kinship care, foster care, residential care, and at home under compulsory supervision.

Number of children where CSA has been recorded as the primary concern by 'looked after' status, 2024-2025

	Number of children	Percentage
Looked After at Home (Subject to CSO at home)	36 children	3%
Looked after away from home - Kinship	52 children	4%
Looked after away from home - Foster	45 children	4%
Looked after away from home - Residential	48 children	4%
Not Looked After	997 children	85%
Total	1,178 children	100%

Note: 1 child/young person in continuing care was also recorded

Crime type

The final ask within the CSAE Data Capture Form was for JII partnerships to share any data they had on the crime type recorded for the interview. Caution should be taken in interpreting the data as data was not provided by all partnerships and, where it was, it varied in format and wording across the JII partnerships. With this caveat, the main crime types recorded appeared to be:

- Sexual assault (Sexual Offences [Scotland Act] 2009 Section 3 and 20): 400 children.
- Rape or attempted rape (SOSA 2009 Section 1 and 18): 124 children.
- Communicating indecently (SOSA 2009 Section 7 and 24): 33 children.
- Sexual assault by penetration (SOSA 2009 Section 2 and 19): 32 children.

CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Across the 32 local authority areas, 121 children (or 4% of the 2,975 children interviewed in total across 2024-25) had CSE recorded as the primary concern.

The number of children interviewed with CSE recorded as the primary concern is lower than the number of children interviewed with CSA recorded as the primary concern. In the workshop with JII partnerships, the following explanations were offered:

- Children may not recognise their relationship(s) and experiences as exploitation. By not viewing themselves as victims, disclosures of CSE will be low in number.
- A high proportion of the children interviewed with CSA recorded as the primary concern will likely have experienced CSE before the (physical/contact) CSA took place. However, this preceding experience of CSE is not typically recorded within the JII data as the focus is on the primary concern that has led to interview.

Victim or witness of CSE

The data provided by the JII partnerships provides further insights into the nature of the CSE. First, children can be interviewed as a victim or a witness of child sexual exploitation, and the data shows that:

- 94% of children interviewed were a victim.
- 6% of children interviewed were a witness.

Familial or non-familial CSE

The data then provides information on whether the exploitation was familial or non-familial. It finds:

- 18% of children interviewed experienced/witnessed familial sexual exploitation.
- 82% of children interviewed experienced non-familial sexual exploitation.

Number of children where CSE has been recorded as the primary concern by victim or witness, and familial or non-familial harm, 2024-2025

	Number of children	Percentage
Victim of Familial Harm	15 children	16%
Witness of Familial Harm	2 children	2%
Victim of Non-Familial Harm	74 children	78%
Witness of Non-Familial Harm	4 children	4%
Total	95 children	100%

Peer-to-peer CSE

By whether the child experienced peer to peer sexual exploitation (as a victim or witness) and noting that five JII partnerships (covering eight local authority areas) were not recording this data in 2024-2025, 28% experienced peer-to-peer sexual exploitation.

Number of children where CSE has been recorded as the primary concern by peer to peer incident, 2024-2025

	Number of children	Percentage
Yes	15 children	28%
No	39 children	72%
Total	54 children	100%

Characteristics of the children

The CSAE Data Capture Form asked JII partnerships to provide data (where available) on the gender, age, ethnicity, disability, and care experienced status of the children interviewed.

By gender, girls were found to have been at much greater risk of experiencing CSE:

- 80% of children were female.
- 18% of children were male.

Number of children where CSE has been recorded as the primary concern by gender, 2024-2025

	Number of children	Percentage
Male	19 children	18%
Female	82 children	80%
Transgender	2 children	2%
Non-binary	0 children	0%
Total	103 children	100%

By age, the data shows:

- 67% of children were 12-15 years old.
- 18% of children were 5-11 years old.
- 15% of children were 16-17 years old (to note, there may also be 16-17 year olds who are interviewed by a Sexual Offences Liaison Officer rather than a JII).

Number of children where CSE has been recorded as the primary concern by age, 2024-2025

	Number of children	Percentage
Under 5 years	0 children	0%
5-11 years	19 children	18%
12-15 years	69 children	67%
16-17 years	15 children	15%
Total	103 children	99%

By disability, noting that seven of the JII partnerships (covering 14 local authority areas) were testing a revised set of disability indicators and consequently the proportion of children recorded as disabled may be higher than in the non-test partnership areas:

- 38% of children were recorded as disabled.
- 62% of children were recorded as not disabled.

Number of children where CSEA has been recorded as the primary concern by disability, 2024-2025

	Disability test partnerships	Non-test partnerships	All partnerships
Yes (one or more condition recorded)	23 children	16 children	39 children
	47%	30%	38%
No	26 children	37 children	63 children
	53%	70%	62%
Total	49 children	53 children	102 children
	100%	100%	100%

By ethnicity, 90% of the children interviewed were white.

Number of children where CSE has been recorded as the primary concern by ethnicity, 2024-2025

	Number of children	Percentage
White	70 children	90%
Mixed or multiple ethnic group	2 children	3%
Asian, Asian Scottish or Asian British	3 children	4%
African	1 child	1%
Caribbean or Black	0 children	0%
Other ethnic group	1 child	1%
Choose not to disclose / Not recorded	1 child	1%
Total	78 children	100%

By 'looked after' status:

- 79% of children interviewed were not 'looked after'.
- Of the 23% of children who were 'looked after', a higher proportion were living in residential care.

Number of children where CSA has been recorded as the primary concern by 'looked after' status, 2024-2025

	Number of children	Percentage
Looked After at Home (Subject to CSO at home)	5 children	5%
Looked after away from home - Kinship	5 children	5%
Looked after away from home - Foster	4 children	4%
Looked after away from home - Residential	10 children	10%
Not Looked After	81 children	77%
Total	105 children	100%

Crime type

The smaller numbers of CSE cases, combined with the comparability of the data shared by JII partnerships, mean that the crime type data has not been presented.

Contribution of this paper

In striving to answer the question "*What is the scale and nature of CSAE in Scotland?*", there is a need to bring together and analyse different sources of CSAE data captured across Scotland's child protection and justice services. The Joint Investigative Interview data presented in this paper is an important source and finds that 1,434 children (or 48% of the 2,975 children) interviewed in 2024-2025 had CSA or CSE recorded as a concern. The JII data also finds that girls, 12-15 year olds, and disabled children were more likely to have experienced CSAE.

The JII data shows that Scotland's child protection processes are responding to much higher levels of CSAE than the child protection registration data alone might indicate. However, the number of children interviewed with CSAE recorded as a concern must still be considered as representing the 'tip of the iceberg' because of the complex victim-perpetrator relationships in which CSAE take place. Other sources of CSAE data, both quantitative and qualitative, are consequently needed to further build collective understanding of "*What is the scale and nature of CSAE in Scotland?*" but the JII data is an important source and there would be value in repeating this exercise on an annual basis to help assess whether the nature of CSAE is changing over time.

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