

The Rt Hon. The Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top
Chair, Public Services Committee
House of Lords
London
SW1A 0PW

21 April 2021

Dear Lady Armstrong,

I write in response to the Lords Public Services Committee's call for evidence for its inquiry into *Child Vulnerability*.

As the Committee will be aware, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) is the UK's National Statistical Institute and the largest producer of official statistics. The ONS aims to provide a firm evidence base for sound decisions and develop the role of official statistics in democratic debate.

For this inquiry, we have set out the latest data and analysis that we produce relating to child vulnerability, for example on children's well-being, their mental health and what we know about the extent of child abuse. Cross-cutting analysis is required to both identify and support vulnerable children, and so we have highlighted our work with both the Inclusive Data Taskforce and the UNECE taskforce on statistics on Children and Youth.

While we are developing our current statistics relating to child vulnerability, survey data collection for child vulnerability can be difficult, for a variety of reasons. We are working hard to identify and address remaining evidence gaps, particularly by understanding the quality and coverage of administrative data.

I hope this is useful to the Committee, and please let me know if we can provide any further assistance to this inquiry.

Yours sincerely,



Jonathan Athow, Deputy National Statistician and Director General, Economic Statistics
Office for National Statistics

Public Services Committee: Child Vulnerability written evidence

Introduction

In recent years, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has published a range of data and statistics relating to vulnerable children, shining a light on this important issue. We include in this written evidence examples of how we are working hard and in different ways to improve the evidence base. This includes our recent work to explore what matters most to children's well-being and provide insight into loneliness among children and young people, the Centre for Crime and Justice's work to investigate the feasibility of a new survey¹ to measure the current prevalence of child abuse in the UK and the Centre for Equalities and Inclusion's work with both the Inclusive Data Taskforce and the UNECE Taskforce on statistics on children and youth, both of which are considering the issues surrounding data for children.

Collecting data on child vulnerability can be challenging for several reasons. For practical and ethical reasons, children are not routinely questioned in many of our household surveys, other than a small number specifically designed to target children². Where data for children are included, this information is often collected by proxy, an issue that is equally relevant to administrative data. Moreover, some of the most vulnerable children are likely to be part of the non-private household populations, which includes those who are resident in communal establishments, rough sleeping, living in temporary accommodation or staying temporarily with family or friends, populations that are not currently included as part of routine survey data collection.

Therefore, we are exploring the use of administrative data as a way to supplement some of the gaps in the child vulnerability evidence base, both in terms of its potential for producing estimates of population characteristics and outcomes for groups including children, and its use in data linkage.

Children's well-being

In October 2020, the ONS published findings from UK wide focus groups with children aged 10 to 16, including young carers and children with disabilities, around what matters most to their well-being³. These included the importance of positive, supporting, and loving relationships; feeling safe in various contexts; financial security; having a say in issues which affect them and their views being taken seriously; and prospects for a positive future, including opportunities to develop skills to pursue future endeavours and addressing issues relating to the environment, such as climate change. Particularly, the group of young carers emphasised the importance of parents and carers "making space" for their children, including spending quality time together and teaching children important life skills and values. Young carers also described how poor physical health of family members affected their mental health.

From these discussions with children, as well as a literature review, data audit, and stakeholder and expert feedback, we reviewed our indicators for children's well-being⁴ to update the current framework, which is in the process of being finalised following

¹ <https://consultations.ons.gov.uk/external-affairs/child-abuse-survey-consultation/>

² These include the Crime Survey for England and Wales and the Mental Health of Children and Young People's Survey.

³ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/childrensviewsonwellbeingandwhatmakesahappyliifeuk2020/2020-10-02>

⁴ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/childrenswellbeingindicatoreviewuk2020/2020-09-02>

stakeholder feedback via an online consultation. The updated framework will aim to provide a better picture of children at greater risk of disadvantage, disaggregating well-being measures by risk group where possible, including young carers, care experienced children and children with disabilities. The finalised list of children's well-being indicators and update are expected to be published later this year.

The ONS' 2018 release on children's well-being and social relationships noted a significant drop in children's happiness with their friends⁵. This is concerning as during the focus groups, children spoke about the importance of having good friendships and spending time with friends, which were often listed as one of the top three things that matter most for children to live a happy life⁶. In addition, our 2018 analysis of children's experiences of loneliness found that of those children who reported low satisfaction with their friendships, 41.1% reported that they often felt lonely⁷.

We worked collaboratively with The Children's Society⁸ to provide insight into and begin to address the data gap on loneliness among children and young people⁹, through analysis of children's and young people's views, experiences and suggestions to overcome loneliness, using in-depth interviews and the Good Childhood Index Survey. Children who received free school meals and children who reported low satisfaction with their health were much more likely to report that they were often lonely than other children. The stigma around loneliness can worsen children's experiences of loneliness and prevent their situations from improving. In the qualitative interviews, children described embarrassment about admitting to loneliness, seeing it as a possible "*failing*". The intersection of multiple issues and triggers to loneliness, or more extreme and enduring life events such as bereavement, disability, being bullied or mental health challenges, may make it more difficult for children and young people to move out of loneliness without help. Children's suggestions for tackling loneliness included: making it more acceptable to discuss loneliness at school and in society; preparing young people better to understand and address loneliness in themselves and others; creating opportunities for social connection; and encouraging positive uses of social media.

Our weekly Opinions and Lifestyle Survey also recently looked at the well-being of children whilst home-schooling in 2020 and 2021, finding that almost two-thirds (63%) of home schooling parents said that home schooling was negatively affecting their children's well-being in January 2021, compared with 43% in April 2020.

We have recently published data on the worries of parents around their children returning to school, finding almost half (47%) of adults with dependent school aged children were worried (very or somewhat) about their children returning to school or college¹⁰.

⁵<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/measuringnationalwellbeing/march2018>

⁶<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/childrensandyoungpeoples/experiencesofloneliness/2018>

⁷<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/childrensandyoungpeoples/experiencesofloneliness/2018#how-common-is-loneliness-in-children-and-young-people>

⁸ <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/>

⁹<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/childrensandyoungpeoples/experiencesofloneliness/2018>

¹⁰<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/coronavirusandthesocialimpactsongreatbritain/12march2021>

Children's mental health

In addition to our work on children's wellbeing, the ONS and NHS Digital published data last year looking at the mental health of children and young people in England in 2020¹¹. This took a longitudinal look at the mental health of the same group of children in 2017 and 2020, finding rates of probable mental disorders have increased since 2017 (10.8% in 2017, 16.0% in 2020). Children and young people with a probable mental disorder were also more likely to say that lockdown had made their life worse (54.1% of 11 to 16-year olds), than those unlikely to have a mental disorder (39.2%). This study is currently being updated for 2021 and will be published by NHS Digital and the ONS later this year.

Extent of child abuse

The ONS Centre for Crime and Justice measure children's experiences of being a victim of crime, as well as risks of victimisation. The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) asks people resident in households in England and Wales about their experiences of victimisation in the 12 months prior to the interview. Every three years additional questions on experiences of abuse they may have suffered as a child and adverse childhood experiences are included. In households with children aged 10 to 15 years, a child is also interviewed. The 10- to 15-year-olds' questionnaire collects data on the prevalence and nature of a selected range of offences as well their experiences online, of bullying, drinking and drug use, street gangs, and their feelings of safety and risk perception.

Selected data are usually published through our quarterly crime statistics publications¹² and annual nature of crime tables¹³. We also publish ad hoc releases relating to children's vulnerability, such as analysis of the victimisation and negative behaviours of children aged 10 to 15 years living in a household with an adult who reported experiencing domestic abuse, substance misuse and mental ill-health¹⁴.

Analysis of children's experiences meeting and speaking to people online, sending and receiving sexual messages, online bullying and online security are published in *Children's online behaviour in England and Wales, year ending March 2020*¹⁵ and *Online bullying in England and Wales, year ending March 2020*¹⁶. Data from the CSEW is also available to researchers through the UK Data Service and the ONS Secure Research Service.

In January 2020 we also published the first compendium of statistics on child abuse for England and Wales, bringing together a range of different data sources from across government and the voluntary sector¹⁷. Key points from this include that the CSEW estimates that one in five adults aged 18 to 74 years experienced at least one form of child abuse, whether emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, or witnessing domestic violence or abuse, before the age of 16 years (8.5 million people). In addition, an estimated 1 in 100 adults aged 18 to 74 years experienced physical neglect before the age of 16 years

¹¹ <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2020-wave-1-follow-up>

¹² <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/crimeinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2020>

¹³ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/natureofcrimetableschildrenaged10to15years>

¹⁴ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/childhoodvulnerabilitytovictimisationinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2017toyearendingmarch2019>

¹⁵ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/childrensonlinebehaviourinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2020>

¹⁶ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/onlinebullyinginenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2020>

¹⁷ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/childabuseinenglandandwales/january2020>

(481,000 people); this includes not being taken care of or not having enough food, shelter or clothing, but it does not cover all types of neglect. An estimated 3.1 million adults aged 18 to 74 years were victims of sexual abuse before the age of 16 years; this includes abuse by both adult and child perpetrators. Around half of adults (52%) who experienced abuse before the age of 16 years also experienced domestic abuse later in life, compared with 13% of those who did not experience abuse before the age of 16 years.

Childline delivered 19,847 counselling sessions to children in the UK where abuse was the primary concern in the year ending March 2019; sexual abuse accounted for nearly half (45%) of these and has become the most common type of abuse counselled by Childline in recent years.

Ultimately, many cases of child abuse remain hidden: around one in seven adults who called the National Association for People Abused in Childhood's (NAPAC's) helpline had not told anyone about their abuse before.

Finally, we are currently consulting on the feasibility of a new survey¹⁸ to measure the current prevalence of child abuse in the UK and recently published findings¹⁹ to date from the first stages of this research to address this fundamental evidence gap.

Inclusive Data Taskforce

In October 2020, the National Statistician established the Inclusive Data Taskforce with the aim of making a radical step-change in the inclusivity of UK data and evidence. As part of their work, the Taskforce have identified areas where they will focus in greater depth, including data for children.

The Taskforce are currently gathering evidence of perceived gaps in the inclusivity of UK data and evidence generally, including its quality, topic coverage, timeliness, geographical granularity, and accessibility. As part of this, the ONS are conducting an online consultation on behalf of the Taskforce as well roundtable discussions, focus groups and in-depth interviews with: government stakeholders including the Devolved Administrations, central and local government, academics, research funders, learned societies, and civil society organisations representing equalities groups (including children and young people) and members of the public from those groups.

Along with other written evidence and submissions to the Taskforce, the findings from these consultations will inform the recommendations of the Taskforce to the National Statistician, expected in July of this year. If this Committee has identified particular concerns about data for vulnerable children that they would like to share with the Taskforce to inform their recommendations, we would be happy to bring them to their attention.

UNECE taskforce for Statistics on Children and Youth

We are also contributing to the UNECE taskforce for Statistics on Children and Youth. The objective of this taskforce is to prepare guidance to improve the availability, quality and comparability of statistics on children, adolescents and youth towards more harmonised and rationalised definitions, methodologies and approaches across the countries participating in the Conference of European Statisticians. Identified as having significant evidence gaps, the

¹⁸ <https://consultations.ons.gov.uk/external-affairs/child-abuse-survey-consultation/>

¹⁹ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/exploringthefeasibilityofasurveymeasuringchildabuseintheuk/january2021>

priority areas of focus are disability, violence against children, and alternative or out-of-home care.

Administrative Data

As previously mentioned, the ONS is investigating the use of administrative data as a way to supplement some of the gaps in the child vulnerability evidence base. In relation to data linkage, we have partnered with Administrative Data Research UK (ADR UK) as part of the Data for Children Partnership, a strategic partnership which includes the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England, academics, charities and other government departments. This partnership has been developing a dataset which links 2011 Census data to English administrative educational data, to explore the relationship between educational attainment and characteristics that are not routinely included in administrative data and at a more granular level than could be achieved with a sample survey source²⁰.

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²⁰<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/educationandchildcare/methodologies/educationalattainmentandhouseholdcompositionfeasibilityresearchandmethodology>