

Referrals to Children's Social Care services

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In the first two waves of the survey, local authorities were asked to report the number of referrals to children's social care services they received in the last week. From the third wave, local authorities were asked for the number of referrals to children's social care services the week before last to account for the lag in reporting that affected waves 1 and 2. As such, the figures from Wave 3 onwards are not directly comparable to Waves 1 and 2.

From Wave 3 onwards local authorities were also asked to report the sources of their referrals.

In each wave, we have calculated the difference to the 'usual' level of referrals at that point in the year. For the total number of referrals, the 'usual' level is defined as the average of the same week in each year between 2017-20. For each referral source, the 'usual' level is defined as the same week in 2020.

The number of referrals to children's social care services reported in the survey were on average around 9% lower than usual. Overall, it is estimated that there have been around 99,000 fewer referrals between May 2020 and July 2022 compared to 2017-20; this estimate takes into account local authorities that did not respond and weeks not covered by the survey. These estimates are broadly supported by the ['Characteristics of children in need 2020 to 2021 \(opens in a new tab\)'](#) publication which found that referrals between April 2020 – March 2021 were 7% lower than the previous year. In the latest ['Characteristics of children in need 2021 to 2022 \(opens in a new tab\)'](#) publication, referrals between April 2021 and March 2022 returned to pre-pandemic levels and were 1.1% higher than in 2019-20.

During the first wave of the pandemic in late May 2020, referrals were 16% lower than usual. At this time, schools were closed to all children except those who were classed as vulnerable, or whose parents were key workers, and thus referrals from schools were 76% lower than usual. Referrals from health services, individuals and other sources were also lower than usual at 18%, 10% and 5% lower respectively, whereas referrals from police were 16% higher.

Compared to the same time in 2017-20, referrals reached their lowest point in January-February 2021. This coincided with a second period of restrictions where schools were closed in January and February, after reopening in September 2020. Although referrals from all sources were lower than usual at

Some local authorities used the open text question to describe the types of referrals that they were receiving. An increase in cases involving domestic abuse featured in most waves of the survey. In earlier survey waves, local authorities described an increase in the complexity of cases that they were seeing. Examples of increased case complexity included: elevated mental health issues amongst parents and children, increases in cases involving young people self-harming, more cases involving neglect and emotional abuse, increased cases involving non-accidental injury, more cases where there were parental issues relating to alcohol and mental health, increases in the number of new-born children presenting in care proceedings, more referrals where the family were in acute crisis and escalations of risks in cases that are already open to children's social care.

In later survey waves (from June 2021) some local authorities said that issues to do with young people's mental health and social/emotional needs were common features in the referrals that they were receiving. In their responses, some local authorities provided an explanation for the increase in case complexity. Some suggested that it was explained by the reduced availability of some support services at that time and that some services that were having to be provided virtually were not able to adequately support children and families. Some felt that the increase in case complexity was linked to the amount of time that families were spending together, leading to a more pressurised home environment.