

Statistical bulletin

Childhood vulnerability to victimisation in England and Wales: year ending March 2017 to year ending March 2019

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-health (the so-called "toxic trio" factors) based on findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW).



Contact:
Nick Stripe
crimestatistics@ons.gov.uk
+44 (0)20 7592 8695

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1 . Main points

- Parental mental ill-health, domestic abuse and substance misuse have been identified as commonly present in the lives of many vulnerable children; this analysis looks to measure the prevalence of these and victimisation of children aged 10 to 15 where these factors are present in the household.
- An estimated 751,000 (19.3%) children aged 10 to 15 years were living in households with an adult who reported going through one or more of the aspects associated with mental ill-health, domestic abuse or substance misuse in the previous 12 months.
- Children living in households with an adult who reported going through mental ill-health or domestic abuse were more likely to have been a victim of crime in the previous 12 months than children living in households where the interviewed adult did not report mental ill-health (16.7% compared with 10.8%) or domestic abuse (16.1% compared with 10.7%).
- Violent crime was approximately twice as likely to be experienced by children aged 10 to 15 years living in households with mental ill-health (11.6%) or domestic abuse (9.6%) compared with children living in households where the interviewed adult did not report mental ill-health (5.4%) or domestic abuse (5.4%).
- Around one-third of children aged 10 to 15 years living in households with mental ill-health or domestic abuse had been bullied in the last year (32.4% and 29.5% respectively), compared with under one-fifth of children living in households without mental ill-health (18.1%) or domestic abuse (18.1%).

Estimates of the prevalence of these factors should be interpreted with caution. These findings present the best estimates available from the CSEW to help complement available evidence but are not intended to provide a definitive measure of their prevalence in England and Wales. We explain the limitations of the measures in an accompanying [blog](#) and [Strengths and limitations](#).

Statistician's comment

Commenting on today's figures, Sophie Sanders from the Office for National Statistics Centre for Crime and Justice said:

"The Children's Commissioner for England highlighted the need for better evidence about children living in households where an adult has experienced mental ill-health, domestic abuse or substance misuse, the so-called "toxic trio". New research using the Crime Survey for England and Wales suggests that the presence of one or more of these issues could make children more vulnerable to victimisation and more likely to engage in negative behaviours.

"Whilst this may be the case for some children, there are lots of factors which influence childhood experiences. The majority of children living in a household where one or more of the "toxic trio" are present did not report victimisation or negative behaviours in the 12 months prior to being interviewed. Our findings do not provide an indicator of what has happened during the coronavirus pandemic."

2 . Prevalence of the "toxic trio"

Parental mental ill-health, domestic abuse and substance misuse are three factors (also referred to as the "toxic trio") that have been identified as commonly present in the lives of many vulnerable children. This analysis uses responses from the Crime Survey for England and Wales to measure the prevalence of these factors in households with children aged 10 to 15 years, comparing their experiences of victimisation and negative behaviours with children living in households where none of these factors were reportedly present.

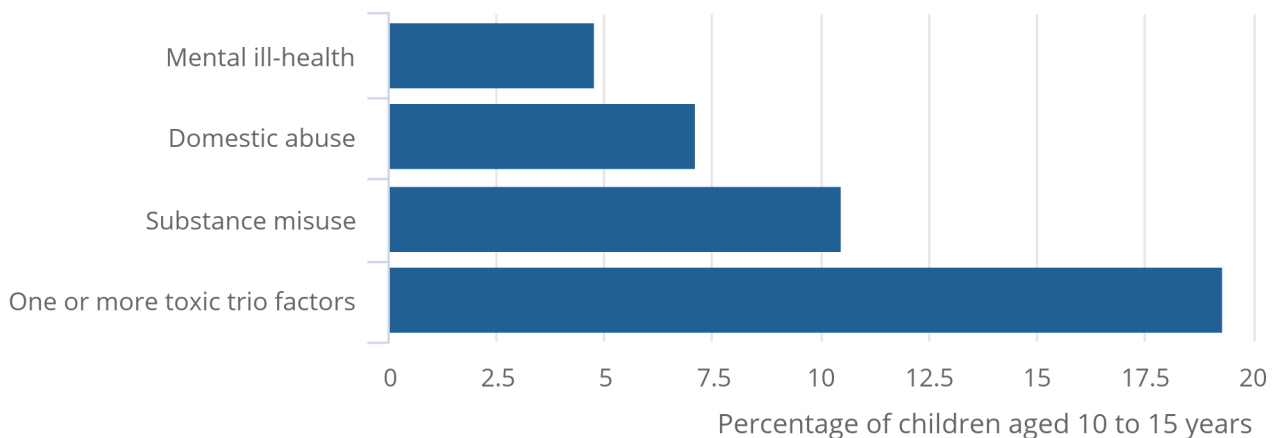
Findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW), for the combined three years ending March 2019, estimated that around 751,000 (19.3%) children aged 10 to 15 years were living in households where an adult^{1, 2} reported experiencing³ one or more⁴ of the three factors of long term mental ill-health⁵, domestic abuse or substance misuse⁶ in the previous 12 months (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Around 1 in 5 children lived in a household with an adult who reported experiencing one or more “toxic trio” factors

Proportion of children aged 10 to 15 years living in households where an adult reported experiencing one or more “toxic trio” factors in the previous 12 months, England and Wales, combined data for year ending March 2017 to year ending March 2019

Figure 1: Around 1 in 5 children lived in a household with an adult who reported experiencing one or more “toxic trio” factors

Proportion of children aged 10 to 15 years living in households where an adult reported experiencing one or more “toxic trio” factors in the previous 12 months, England and Wales, combined data for year ending March 2017 to year ending March 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics - Crime Survey for England and Wales

Notes:

1. Estimates are based on “toxic trio” factors experienced by the adult in the 12 months prior to interview.
2. The sum of the ‘one or more “toxic trio” factors’ category may not be the sum of the sub-categories as some adults may have experienced more than one type of “toxic trio” factor.

Around 84,000 children (2.2%) were estimated to have lived in households where an adult reported experiencing two of the factors⁷ and 6,000 children (0.2%) where all three factors were present.

The proportion of children living in households where an adult reported experiencing one or more of the factors differed by children’s reported ethnicity (Figure 2) and disability status⁸ (Figure 3).

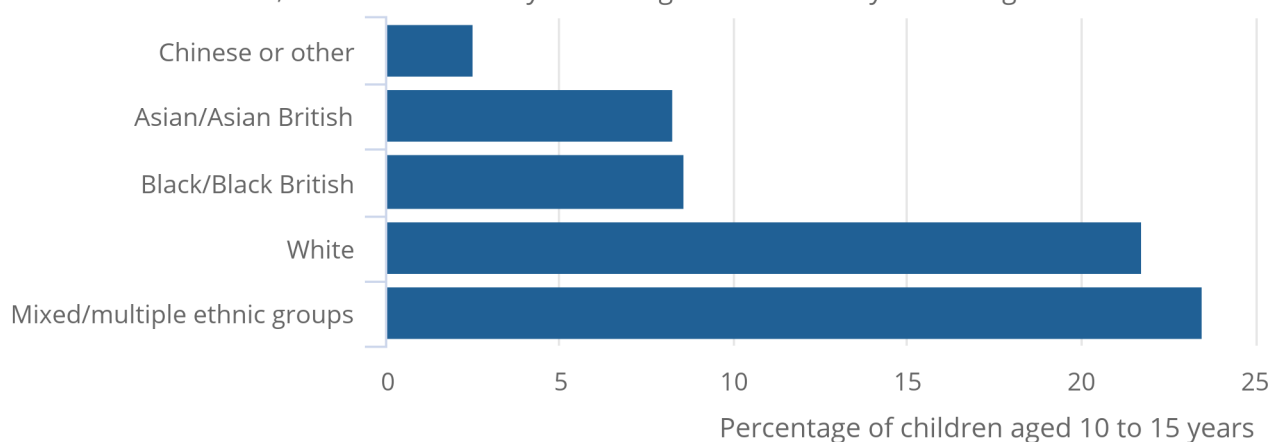
Estimates are based on one randomly selected adult surveyed in each household. Factors not reported to us in the survey or those experienced by other adults in the household are not captured, so estimates of the prevalence of “toxic trio” factors in households with a child aged 10 to 15 years old may be underestimates.

Figure 2: Children from White or Mixed ethnic groups were more likely than children from other ethnicities to live in households with an adult who reported experiencing one or more “toxic trio” factors

Proportion of children aged 10 to 15 years living in households where an adult reported experiencing one or more “toxic trio” factors in the previous 12 months, by ethnic group, England and Wales, combined data for year ending March 2017 to year ending March 2019

Figure 2: Children from White or Mixed ethnic groups were more likely than children from other ethnicities to live in households with an adult who reported experiencing one or more “toxic trio” factors

Proportion of children aged 10 to 15 years living in households where an adult reported experiencing one or more “toxic trio” factors in the previous 12 months, by ethnic group, England and Wales, combined data for year ending March 2017 to year ending March 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics - Crime Survey for England and Wales

Notes:

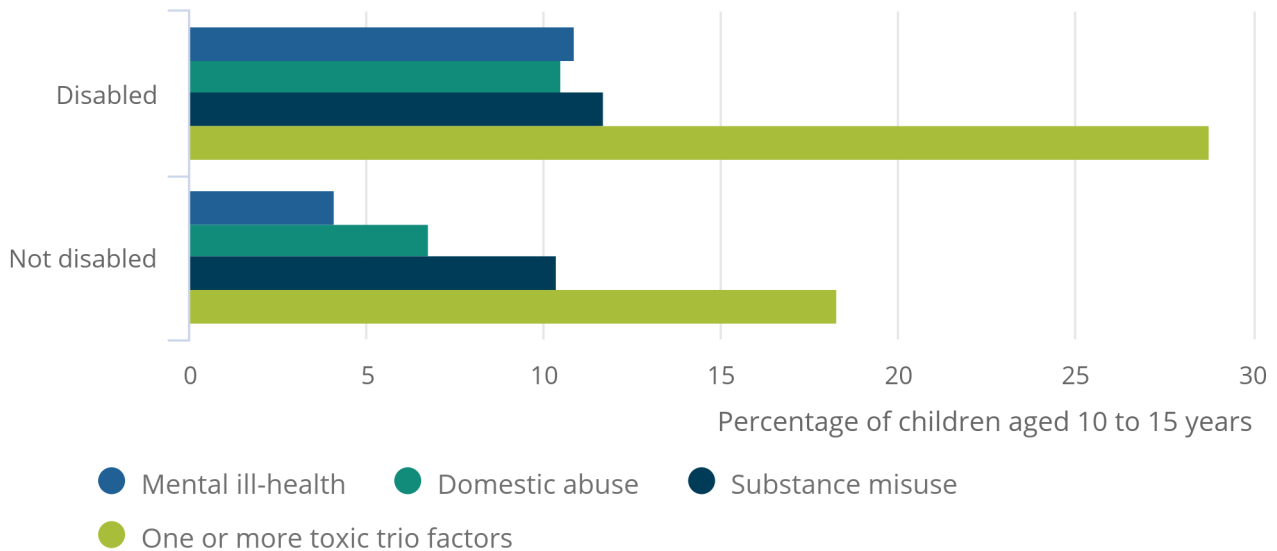
1. Some adults may have experienced more than one type of "toxic trio" factor.
2. Estimates are based on "toxic trio" factors experienced by the adult in the 12 months prior to interview.
3. There was no statistically significant difference in the likelihood of children from a White ethnic background living in households with an adult who reported experiencing one or more "toxic trio" factors compared with those from a Mixed ethnic background.
4. There was no statistically significant difference in the likelihood of children from a Black/Black British ethnic background living in households with an adult who reported experiencing one or more "toxic trio" factors compared with those from an Asian/Asian British ethnic background.

Figure 3: Children with a disability were more likely to live in a household with an adult who reported experiencing one or more “toxic trio” factors

Proportion of children aged 10 to 15 years living in households where an adult experienced one or more “toxic trio” factors in the previous 12 months, by disability status, England and Wales, combined data for year ending March 2017 to year ending March 2019

Figure 3: Children with a disability were more likely to live in a household with an adult who reported experiencing one or more “toxic trio” factors

Proportion of children aged 10 to 15 years living in households where an adult experienced one or more “toxic trio” factors in the previous 12 months, by disability status, England and Wales, combined data for year ending March 2017 to year ending March 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics - Crime Survey for England and Wales

Notes:

1. The sum of the ‘one or more "toxic trio" factors’ category may not be the sum of the sub-categories as some adults may have experienced more than one type of "toxic trio" factor.
2. Estimates are based on "toxic trio" factors experienced by the adult in the 12 months prior to interview.

There was no significant difference in the likelihood of living in households with an adult who reported experiencing substance misuse⁴ between children with a disability and without a disability.

There was no significant difference in the likelihood of children living in households with an adult who reported experiencing one or more of the factors between boys or girls.

For more detailed figures relating to prevalence of "toxic trio" see the accompanying [datasets](#).

Notes for Prevalence of "toxic trio"

1. Adults are defined as people eligible to take part in the adult survey. As such some of the adults used in this analysis may be aged 16 or 17 years.
2. The interviewed adult was the parent of the interviewed child in 88% of cases.
3. The survey covers experiences in the 12 months prior to the interview. Adults were asked about their experiences of the "toxic trio" in the previous 12 months. Children were asked about their experiences of victimisation and negative behaviours in the previous 12 months.
4. Adults counted in this category may have experienced more than one type of "toxic trio" factor.
5. The measure used for mental ill-health only includes long term mental health problems. See [Glossary](#) for the definition used.
6. The measure used for substance misuse only takes into account the frequency of alcohol consumption rather than the amount consumed on each occasion. Furthermore, the measure captures adults who have taken any illicit drug in the last year even if this was just on one occasion. See [Glossary](#) for the definition used.
7. Only adults who have experienced two types of "toxic trio" factor are counted in this category.
8. The definition of disability used is consistent with the core definition of disability under the Equality Act 2010. A person is considered to have a disability if they have a long-standing illness, disability or impairment which causes difficulty with day-to-day activities.

3 . Childhood victimisation and the "toxic trio"

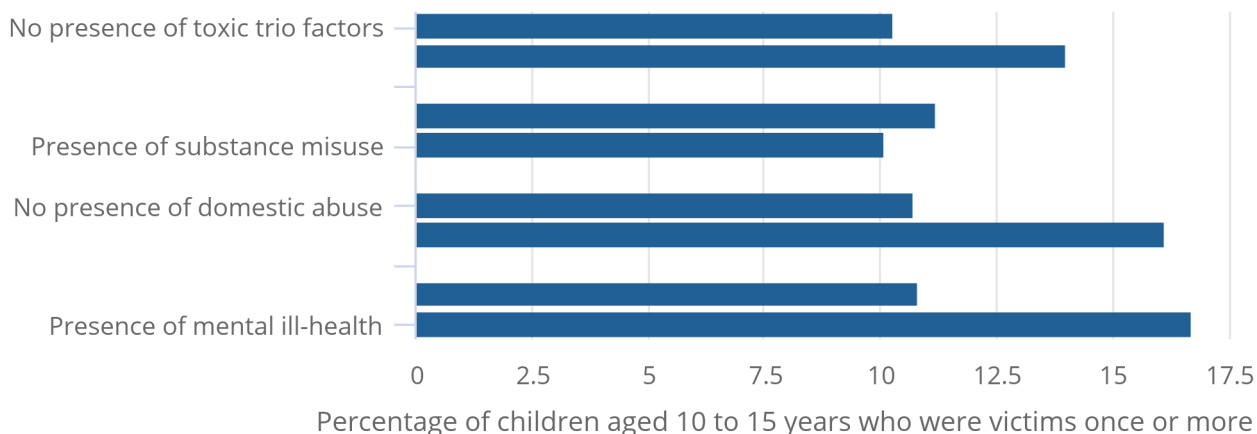
Children living with adults^{1, 2} who reported experiencing³ long-term mental ill-health^{4, 5} or domestic abuse⁵ were more likely to have been a victim³ of crime⁶ (see Figure 4). There was no statistically significant difference in the likelihood of children living in households with substance misuse^{5, 7} being a victim of crime compared with those living in a household where the interviewed adult did not report experiencing substance misuse.

Figure 4: Children living in households with an adult who reported experiencing mental ill-health or domestic abuse were more likely to have been a victim of crime

Proportion of children aged 10 to 15 years who had been a victim of crime, by presence of “toxic trio” factor in the previous 12 months, England and Wales, combined data for year ending March 2017 to year ending March 2019

Figure 4: Children living in households with an adult who reported experiencing mental ill-health or domestic abuse were more likely to have been a victim of crime

Proportion of children aged 10 to 15 years who had been a victim of crime, by presence of “toxic trio” factor in the previous 12 months, England and Wales, combined data for year ending March 2017 to year ending March 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics - Crime Survey for England and Wales

Notes:

1. The sum of the 'one or more "toxic trio" factors' category may not be the sum of the sub-categories as some adults may have experienced more than one type of "toxic trio" factor.
2. The survey covers experiences in the 12 months prior to the interview. Adults were asked about their experiences of the "toxic trio" in the previous 12 months. Children were asked about their experiences of victimisation and negative behaviours in the previous 12 months.

Estimates are based on one randomly selected adult surveyed in each household. Factors not reported to us in the survey or those experienced by other adults in the household are not captured so estimates of the prevalence of "toxic trio" factors in households with a child aged 10 to 15 years old may be underestimates.

Violent crime was also more commonly experienced by children living in a household with an adult who reported experiencing one or more “toxic trio” factors (8.1%) compared with children living in a household where the interviewed adult did not (5.1%). For violent crime with injury, these figures were 6.8% compared with 3.9%.

Children living in households with an adult who reported experiencing mental ill-health⁵ were more than twice as likely to be a victim of violent crime than those in households where the interviewed adult did not (11.6% compared with 5.4%). For violence with injury, these figures were 10.7% compared with 4.1%.

Similarly, nearly 1 in 10 children (9.6%) living in households with an adult who reported experiencing domestic abuse⁵ had been a victim of violent crime compared with 5.4% of children living in households where the interviewed adult did not report experiencing domestic abuse. For violence with injury, these figures were 8.2% compared with 4.2%.

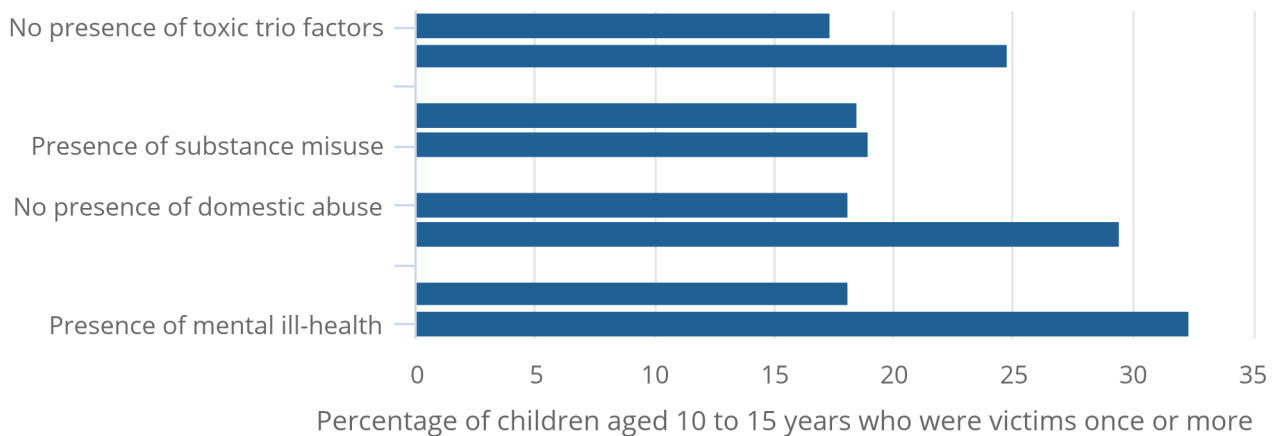
Bullying was also more commonly experienced by children living in a household with an adult who reported experiencing domestic abuse⁵ or mental ill-health⁵ (see Figure 5). There was no statistically significant difference in the likelihood of children living in households with substance misuse⁵ being a victim of bullying compared with those living in a household where the interviewed adult did not report experiencing substance misuse.

Figure 5: Bullying was more commonly experienced by children living in a household with an adult who reported experiencing domestic abuse or mental ill-health

Proportion of children aged 10 to 15 years who had been bullied, by presence of “toxic trio” factor in the previous 12 months, England and Wales, combined data for year ending March 2017 to year ending March 2019

Figure 5: Bullying was more commonly experienced by children living in a household with an adult who reported experiencing domestic abuse or mental ill-health

Proportion of children aged 10 to 15 years who had been bullied, by presence of “toxic trio” factor in the previous 12 months, England and Wales, combined data for year ending March 2017 to year ending March 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics - Crime Survey for England and Wales

Notes:

1. The sum of the 'one or more "toxic trio" factors' category may not be the sum of the sub-categories as some adults may have experienced more than one type of "toxic trio" factor.
2. The survey covers experiences in the 12 months prior to the interview. Adults were asked about their experiences of the "toxic trio" in the previous 12 months. Children were asked about their experiences of victimisation and negative behaviours in the previous 12 months.

For more detailed figures relating to childhood victimisation and the "toxic trio" see the accompanying [datasets](#).

Notes for Childhood victimisation and the "toxic trio"

1. Adults are defined as people eligible to take part in the adult survey, as such some of the adults used in this analysis may be aged 16 or 17 years.
2. The interviewed adult was the parent of the interviewed child in 88% of cases.
3. The survey covers experiences in the 12 months prior to the interview. Adults were asked about their experiences of the "toxic trio" in the previous 12 months. Children were asked about their experiences of victimisation and negative behaviours in the previous 12 months.
4. The measure used for mental ill-health only includes long term mental health problems. See [Glossary](#) for the definition used.
5. Adults counted in this category may have experienced more than one type of "toxic trio" factor.
6. Estimates are based on whether the child was a victim of criminal damage, robbery, theft or violence.
7. The measure used for substance misuse only takes into account the frequency of alcohol consumption rather than the amount consumed on each occasion. Furthermore, the measure captures adults who have taken any illicit drug in the last year even if this was just on one occasion. See [Glossary](#) for the definition used.

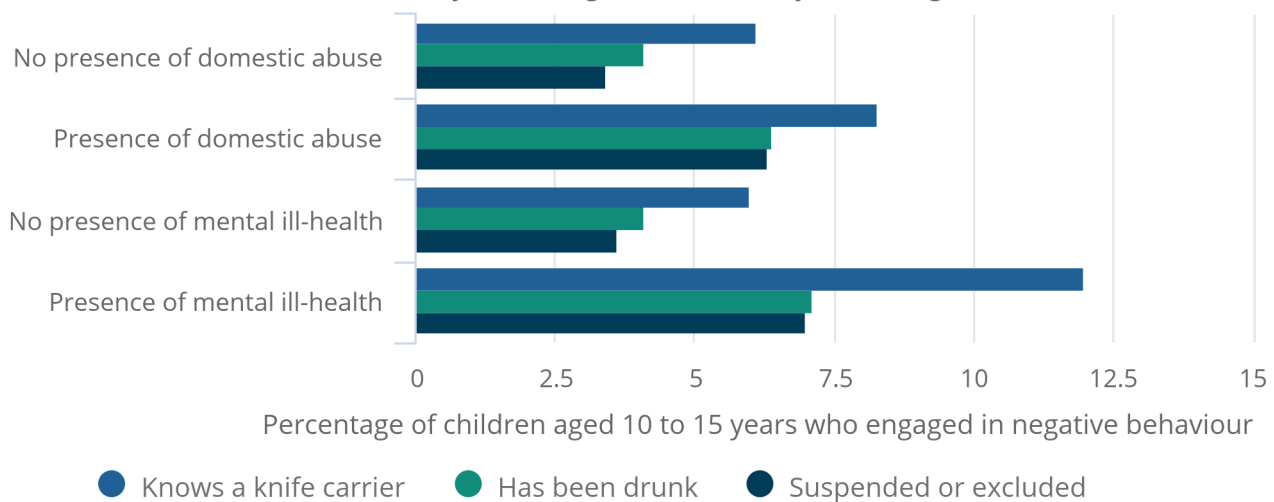
4 . Childhood negative behaviours and the "toxic trio"

Figure 6: Children living in households with an adult who reported experiencing domestic abuse or mental ill-health were nearly twice as likely to have been excluded or suspended from school

Proportion of children aged 10 to 15 years who had engaged in negative behaviours, by presence of domestic abuse and mental ill-health in the previous 12 months, England and Wales, combined data for year ending March 2017 to year ending March 2019

Figure 6: Children living in households with an adult who reported experiencing domestic abuse or mental ill-health were nearly twice as likely to have been excluded or suspended from school

Proportion of children aged 10 to 15 years who had engaged in negative behaviours, by presence of domestic abuse and mental ill-health in the previous 12 months, England and Wales, combined data for year ending March 2017 to year ending March 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics - Crime Survey for England and Wales

Notes:

1. Some adults may have experienced more than one type of "toxic trio" factor.
2. The survey covers experiences in the 12 months prior to the interview. Adults were asked about their experiences of the "toxic trio" in the previous 12 months. Children were asked about their experiences of victimisation and negative behaviours in the previous 12 months.

Estimates are based on one randomly selected adult surveyed in each household. Factors not reported to us in the survey or those experienced by other adults in the household are not captured so estimates of the prevalence of "toxic trio" factors in households with a child aged 10 to 15 years old may be underestimates.

It was more likely that children living in households with an adult^{1, 2} who reported experiencing³ long term mental ill-health^{4, 5} or domestic abuse⁴ had been drunk in the last 12 months (7.1% and 6.4%) compared with households where this was not reported (4.1% for each). Similarly, it was more likely that children living in a household with an adult who reported experiencing substance misuse^{4, 6} had been drunk (8.3% compared with 3.9%).

Children living in a household with an adult who reported experiencing mental ill-health⁴ were twice as likely to know a knife carrier (12.0%) than children living in households where the interviewed adult did not report experiencing mental ill-health (6.0%).

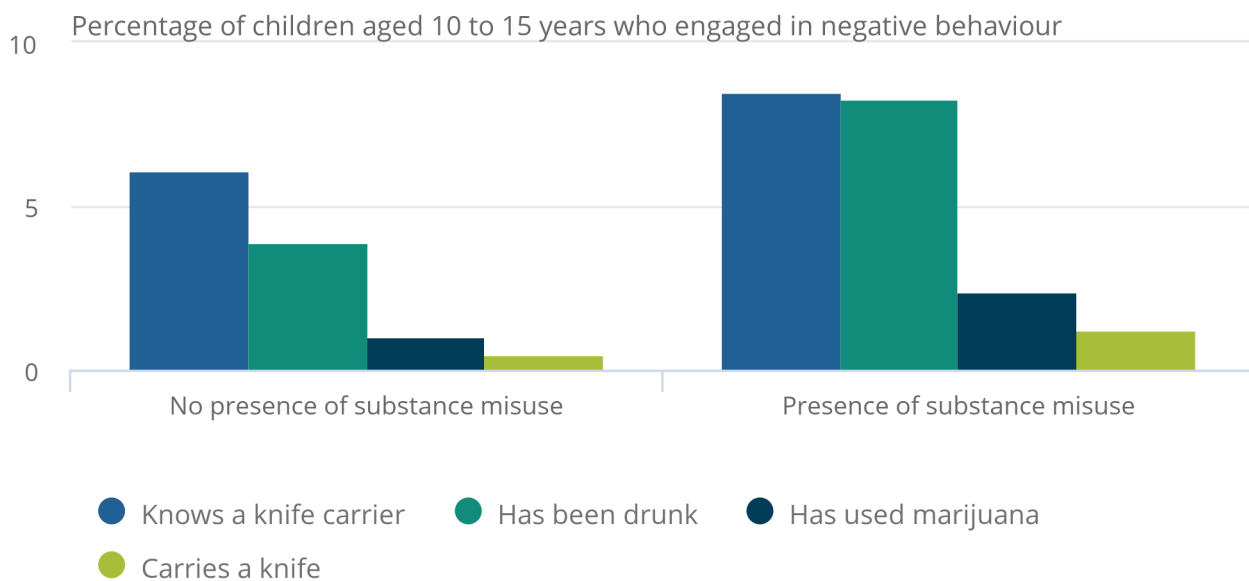
Children were also more likely to know a knife carrier if they lived in a household with an adult who reported experiencing domestic abuse⁴ or substance misuse⁴ (8.3% and 8.5%) than those in a household where the interviewed adult did not (6.1% and 6.1%).

Figure 7: Children living in households with an adult who reported experiencing substance misuse were more than twice as likely to have been drunk, used marijuana, or carry a knife

Proportion of children aged 10 to 15 years who engaged in negative behaviours, by presence of substance misuse in the previous 12 months, England and Wales, combined data for year ending March 2017 to year ending March 2019

Figure 7: Children living in households with an adult who reported experiencing substance misuse were more than twice as likely to have been drunk, used marijuana, or carry a knife

Proportion of children aged 10 to 15 years who engaged in negative behaviours, by presence of substance misuse in the previous 12 months, England and Wales, combined data for year ending March 2017 to year ending March 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics - Crime Survey for England and Wales

Notes:

1. Some adults may have experienced more than one type of "toxic trio" factor.
2. The survey covers experiences in the 12 months prior to the interview. Adults were asked about their experiences of the "toxic trio" in the previous 12 months. Children were asked about their experiences of victimisation and negative behaviours in the previous 12 months.

For more detailed figures relating to childhood negative behaviours and the "toxic trio" see the accompanying [datasets](#).

Notes for Childhood negative behaviours and the "toxic trio"

1. Adults are defined as people eligible to take part in the adult survey, as such some of the adults used in this analysis may be aged 16 or 17 years.
2. The interviewed adult was the parent of the interviewed child in 88% of cases.
3. The survey covers experiences in the 12 months prior to the interview. Adults were asked about their experiences of the "toxic trio" in the previous 12 months. Children were asked about their experiences of victimisation and negative behaviours in the previous 12 months.
4. Adults counted in this category may have experienced more than one type of "toxic trio" factor.
5. The measure used for mental ill-health only includes long term mental health problems. See [Glossary](#) for the definition used.
6. The measure used for substance misuse only takes into account the frequency of alcohol consumption rather than the amount consumed on each occasion. Furthermore, the measure captures adults who have taken any illicit drug in the last year even if this was just on one occasion. See [Glossary](#) for the definition used.

5 . Childhood vulnerability to victimisation data

[Childhood vulnerability to victimisation in England and Wales: year ending March 2017 to year ending March 2019 - Appendix tables](#)

Dataset | Released 5 November 2020

Data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) on victimisation and negative behaviours of children aged 10 to 15 years living in a household with an adult who reported experiencing one or more of domestic abuse, substance misuse and mental ill-health (the "toxic trio" factors)

6 . Glossary

"Toxic trio"

The term "toxic trio" refers to the experience of mental ill-health, domestic abuse or substance misuse by adults in households with children. These three circumstances have been identified by the [Children's Commissioner's Office \(CCO\) \(PDF, 1MB\)](#) as having damaging consequences for the wellbeing and outcomes of children.

Mental ill-health

Adult respondents who reported that they had a mental health condition or illness that had lasted or was expected to last for 12 months or more, and that reduced their ability to carry out day-to-day activities either a lot or a little. This measure does not include mental health problems which are short-term or those that do not have an impact on day-to-day activities.

Domestic abuse

Adult respondents who reported that they had experienced partner abuse (non-sexual), family abuse (non-sexual) or sexual assault by a current or former partner or other family member in the last 12 months. Stalking was excluded from the measure of domestic abuse used in this analysis as it is unlikely to occur within the household.

Substance misuse

Adult respondents who reported that they either had an alcoholic drink five days a week or more, or had taken an illicit drug during the previous 12 months. The amount of alcohol consumed on each occasion is not considered and the measure captures adults who have taken any illicit drug in the last year, even if this was just on one occasion. Therefore, the measure used may not directly align with official definitions of harmful drinking and drug misuse.

7 . Measuring the data

The data included in this release are sourced from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW). This is a face-to-face victimisation survey in which people resident in households in England and Wales are asked about their experiences of a range of crimes in the 12 months prior to the interview. Data are from both the adult CSEW and children's CSEW. The children's survey is conducted in the same household as the adult survey if a child aged 10 to 15 years is present. Approximately 3,100 children are interviewed each survey year.

The questions relating to children's experience of crime and adult's experience of mental ill-health are included in the main interviewer-led parts of the surveys. Questions relating to bullying and negative behaviours experienced by children and domestic abuse and substance misuse experienced by adults are included in the self-completion modules of the children and adult surveys.

The self-completion modules in the adult's survey are only asked to respondents aged 16 to 74 years. For the self-completion questionnaire, respondents are given a tablet computer on which to complete their answers. This is designed to be anonymous, to give the respondent privacy and to encourage full disclosure, but some may still be unwilling to disclose. While the level of disclosure is unknown, it is reasonable to assume some element of under-reporting, which may itself differ by socio-economic and cultural characteristics. The [User guide to crime statistics for England and Wales](#) provides detailed information about the adult's and children's surveys.

The data from the adult's and children's surveys were matched to provide estimates of the number of children living in households where an adult had experienced one or more "toxic trio" factors in the previous 12 months and whether those children were more likely to experience victimisation or negative behaviours. The "preferred" based measure of estimating levels of child victimisation has been used throughout this analysis. This measure is a more focused method, which takes into account factors identified as important in determining the severity of an incident but will still include incidents of a serious nature, even if they took place at school. The User guide to crime statistics for England and Wales provides detailed information about "broad" and "preferred" methods for estimating child victimisation.

Data have been combined for the year ending March 2017 to the year ending March 2019 to create a larger sample size.

All differences reported in this article are [statistically significant](#) at the 5% level unless stated otherwise.

8 . Strengths and limitations

Strengths

This analysis measures the prevalence of long-term mental ill-health, domestic abuse and substance misuse in households with children, and explores the potential relationship these circumstances have with child victimisation and negative behaviours. It helps to address the gap in evidence identified by the Children's Commissioner's Office (CCO) in their reports [Estimating the prevalence of the "toxic trio" \(PDF, 1MB\)](#), [Estimating the prevalence of the "toxic trio" of family issues for each local area in England \(PDF, 1.52MB\)](#) and [Are they shouting because of me? \(PDF, 1.15MB\)](#) and will help to better understand the nature and scale of child vulnerability in England and Wales. It could also help improve understanding of what resources might be necessary to help children affected by these factors.

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) is a large nationally representative sample survey that has used a consistent methodology over time. The survey covers crimes not reported to the police and is not affected by changes in police recording practice; therefore, it is a reliable measure of long-term trends.

Limitations

The CSEW does not cover crimes against those not resident in households. This includes people living in institutions for example, children living in children's homes or the youth secure estate and short-term visitors. The CSEW also excludes homicide and crimes often termed as "victimless" (for example, possession of drugs). The children's survey only captures experiences of children aged 10 to 15 years, therefore estimates do not cover children of all ages.

The CSEW is subject to sampling error as it is based on a sample not a census. Additionally, non-sampling errors in the estimates arise from a range of causes. Further details on sampling and non-sampling errors can be found in the [Crime for England and Wales QMI](#).

The estimates of the prevalence of mental ill-health, domestic abuse and substance misuse are based on whether one randomly selected adult in the household has experienced these factors in the previous 12 months. Factors experienced by other adults in the household or those experienced prior to the previous 12 months are therefore not captured, meaning the estimates may be underestimates. Furthermore, for the estimates discussed in this bulletin there are some cases where the adult interviewed was not the parent of the child. The adult was the parent of the child in 88% of cases.

The estimates of child victimisation and engagement with negative behaviours in the previous 12 months are based on one randomly selected child aged 10 to 15 years in the household. Other children in the household may have different experiences which would not be captured in this analysis.

Although these findings can be used as an indicator of child vulnerability, it cannot necessarily be concluded that a child is more at risk of being a victim of crime or engaging in negative behaviours directly as a result of these "toxic trio" factors. There are many different environmental and social factors likely to have an influence on childhood vulnerability to victimisation and engagement with negative behaviours, which have not been accounted for in the analysis.

The measure used in this analysis for substance misuse does not take into account the amount of alcohol consumed on each occasion. The measure is not an official measure and may not directly align with official definitions of harmful drinking and drug misuse.

The measure for mental ill-health used in this analysis is based on respondents self-reporting mental ill-health rather than specific mental health conditions. The measure does also not include mental health problems which are short-term or those that do not have an impact on day-to-day activities.

We would really value your feedback on the information included in this publication. If you would like to provide us with feedback, please contact crimestatistics@ons.gov.uk.

9 . Related links

[How the ONS crime figures help us to better understand the risks to children](#)

Blog | Released 05 November 2020

[Child abuse in England and Wales: January 2020](#)

Bulletin | Released 14 January 2020

Statistics and research on child abuse in England and Wales, bringing together a range of different data sources from across government and the voluntary sector.

[Domestic abuse in England and Wales overview: November 2020](#)

Bulletin | Released 25 November 2019

Figures on domestic abuse from the Crime Survey for England and Wales, police recorded crime and a number of different organisations.