

Serious Incident Notifications

Methodology and Quality Report

Last updated:

27 October 2017

Introduction

This paper contains methodology and quality information relevant to the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills' (Ofsted) annual release of Serious Incident Notifications (SIN) data from local authorities in England. This methodology and quality report should be read in conjunction with the background notes contained within the statistical first release, as those notes will include helpful information that is not in this report.

The statistical first release (SFR) contains data which is sourced from Local Authorities (LAs), and in some instances, Local Safeguarding Children Boards. The release includes information about incidents of child death or serious harm to children.

The data includes:

- Characteristics of a child
- Nature of the notification
- Characteristics of the incident
- Decisions to conduct Serious Case Reviews

In terms of the period covered by the release, the annual release of SINs in England covers the period between 1 April 2016 and 31 March 2017.

The statistical release is published as a full version annually and contains final (experimental) data.

Ofsted publishes a number of national and official statistics covering children's social care, including fostering, adoption and children looked after placements. These releases can be accessed here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/childrens-social-care-statistics>.

Ofsted welcomes feedback about our statistical releases. If you have any comments, questions or suggestions, please contact the Social Care Data & Analysis Team on: socialcaredata@ofsted.gov.uk.

Relevance

Ofsted regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. Ofsted official statistics are released to promote reform and improvement across government through increasing transparency and citizen participation.

Ofsted uses the SIN data to support inspections of LA children's services. The data is collated and analysed at LA level, and using comparator data, to prompt lines of enquiry that will be followed at inspection. The data is also used to respond to ad hoc requests and to give context to emerging issues or the impact of changes in the sector.

The aggregation of data for official statistics allows Ofsted to communicate to users the key data and messages, for example, by type and cause of incident. The official statistics draw out the key messages and communicate these in an understandable way, appropriate for a wide range of different users. The data may, therefore, be used by stakeholder groups, academics and other interested parties across the sector.

The data drawn from notifications by local authorities in England is held by Ofsted and shared with the Department for Education; alternative sources are not available. This data is widely viewed as a valuable source for information about the quantity and progress of incidents that occur in England.

Some similar data is also published by other sources, such as the Department for Education (DfE), who publish data each year on child death reviews completed in each year ending 31 March.¹²

Meeting user needs

The underlying dataset which normally accompanies the SFR will not be published for 2016-17 due to concerns about confidentiality. Not publishing the underlying data allows Ofsted to provide users with a rich and detailed analysis while minimising the risk of identification of individuals from the core dataset.

Incident reporting to Ofsted by a local authority is a continuous process as and when an incident occurs. From 2007 to 2014, this process was carried out by completing a paper form of the notification and either emailing securely or physically posting the notification form to Ofsted. This was both time consuming and costly to both the

¹ For example, "Serious Case Review Panel" includes two annual reports supporting LSCBs in ensuring that appropriate action is taken to learn from serious incidents in all cases where the statutory criteria are met and to ensure that those lessons are shared through publication of final SCR reports. (www.gov.uk/government/groups/serious-case-review-panel)

² DfE child death reviews for 2016-17 ([here](#)), and for previous years ([here](#))

local authority and Ofsted. In 2014, Ofsted introduced an electronic notification form that is web based.³

The contact details for the SCR / SIN team are given on the notification form website given in the footnote below, and the team are available to provide support to LAs completing the form if required. The form itself also has support to complete it built in, including indication of compulsory fields, guidance notes for selected questions, and a glossary of terms and symbols on the form.

There was an Ofsted-wide user consultation survey in January 2012 on all Ofsted official statistics releases. A report from this consultation can be found here: [webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20141107042920/http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/report-responses-2012-consultation-of-ofsted-official-statistics](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/report-responses-2012-consultation-of-ofsted-official-statistics)

More information about Ofsted's Engagement policy and Confidentiality & Access policy, as well as Ofsted's Statement of Administrative Sources can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-standards-for-official-statistics>. Ofsted also operates under more detailed internal engagement guidance.

Coherence and comparability

Reporting of notifiable incidents to Ofsted is governed by criteria in the statutory guidance 'Working together to safeguard children' 2015 chapter 4.⁴

Ofsted has reported on SIN data in England since April 2012. Over time, the data collection has been developed and improved, primarily through the shift to an online form as described above.

In March 2015, there was a revision to the notification process, which streamlined the criteria, for example it no longer included incidents that attracted media attention or incidents that called into question the quality of professional practice.

Comparable data for other countries, including via the EuroStat database, are not available. Comparison in this SFR has been made against previous years' data.

Comparisons may be adversely affected by different reporting practices across data suppliers; although we are not aware of any specific examples of differences in reporting practices, we have not yet been able to conduct any detailed research into this.

³ Notification form for use by local authorities to tell Ofsted about serious childcare incidents for children living at home or in care (www.gov.uk/government/publications/notify-ofsted-of-serious-childcare-incident-form-for-local-authorities)

⁴ Working together to safeguard children March 2015 chapter 4 para 13-20 (pp.74-76): www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-safeguard-children--2

Accuracy and reliability

Local Authorities should complete and submit serious incident notifications within five working days of becoming aware of the incident, under 'Working together to safeguard children' guidance. However, because serious incidents occur irregularly by their very nature, and Ofsted is not normally aware of any incidents where a notification is not received, it is not possible to calculate a response rate.

The details of an incident are submitted on the web based electronic notification form. Once a local authority has completed the details in the form, it is submitted to Ofsted electronically, and when received are subject to scrutiny by Ofsted. All notification forms received into Ofsted are stored securely and automatically in a system folder in chronological order of receipt. The system folder has strict control to who can view and access notifications, and is accessible to only a limited number of Ofsted personnel. The collated annual dataset is received as a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. No databases are used for the production of these statistics.

Strengths of the data are:

1. The process of notifying Ofsted has now been running for almost a decade, and local authorities are generally familiar with the content of the notification form.
2. The online notification form that has been active since 2014 has made a positive impact on speed of delivery by the supplier and in processing the form by Ofsted.
3. Data collated from notifiable incidents are used as part of Ofsted pre-inspection work of local authority children's services. The content of notification forms may be followed up with local authorities during inspection.
5. The details from incident notification forms are shared with DfE on a regular basis so that officials can alert Ministers to emerging concerns about individual children and also the effectiveness of the child protection system.

Limitations of the data are:

1. There is no expectation that local authorities will inform Ofsted of any updates to an incident, for example, results of a post mortem or police investigation. As a result, our own reporting may not have the full picture at the time of publication and as such our data remains experimental.
2. If a notification form has missing or incomplete data entries, the Ofsted Applications, Regulatory and Contact (ARC) team will request missing or incomplete information from the relevant local authority.
3. Ofsted cannot be certain that all incidents that meet the criteria are notified to Ofsted.

Potential sources of error and bias:

1. Quality of LAs' data: Ofsted has no direct knowledge of local authorities' data storage systems, or the checks and quality assurances they carry out on this, and currently is unable to explore this in any depth due to the time and resource needed. However, we perform extensive quality assurance of data to minimise the impact of this; additionally, collection of SIN has been ongoing for ten years, so it is likely that LAs will have systems in place to collect the required information.
2. Data Cleansing: the annual dataset in Microsoft Excel format is taken through a rigorous check prior to being used for analysis purposes. There are instances where ambiguity occurs with entries, such as the notification being detailed as a child death, but scrutiny of the detail of the case clearly showing this to be an incident of serious harm. In these cases, a panel will decide on how to proceed; for example, they may agree on a change merely based on clear evidence, or decide to go back to the local authority for clarification.⁵
3. Other considerations: reporting serious incident notifications is in statutory guidance therefore there is no risk of sample or response bias in the data.

Timeliness and punctuality

Statistics are produced and published on an annual basis.

Data is published on the date pre-announced in the publication schedule here: www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted/about/statistics. Information on any delay in publication can also be found on the publication schedule. Reasons why a delay may occur include, for example, where more time is necessary to quality assure the data properly to ensure its robustness. Publications are announced on Ofsted's Twitter page and social media channels on the day of release.

The average timescale for production of the SIN data release is approximately five months. This includes approximately three months for quality assurance of the data and follow-up with agencies. A further six weeks of the production involves: the analysis, creating the statistical release, quality assurance of all outputs and publication on the gov.uk website.

Pre-release access is given in accordance with the pre-release access to Official Statistics Order (2008), as detailed in Ofsted's pre-release policy here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-standards-for-official-statistics>.

⁵ The panel normally comprises of a Principal Officer (Safeguarding) and two analytical officers.

Accessibility and clarity

Ofsted releases are published in an accessible format on the gov.uk website. The information is publicly available and there are no restrictions on access to the published data.

Data covering children's social care are held on a collections page on gov.uk:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/childrens-social-care-statistics>

The primary function of the data is to inform the government about concerns about children and the effectiveness of the services that protect them. Part of this function is to meet Ofsted's data requirements for inspections. However, Ofsted publishes the data because of the high level of public interest in concerns about children who are in need of protection, and also for re-use by analysts and researchers as may be required.

Performance, cost and respondent burden

In 2014 Ofsted moved to an automated system by way of an electronic serious incident notification form that is web based. The form has proven to be time saving and more cost effective for local authorities and Ofsted alike.

Confidentiality, transparency and security

Where sensitive or personal data are held by Ofsted, the disclosure control processes we have in place ensure that this data is not published. All data releases follow Ofsted's confidentiality and revisions policies which can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-standards-for-official-statistics>. All staff using sensitive data have been trained in confidentiality and disclosure awareness.

Methodology

The data in the release are from serious incident notifications received by Ofsted between 1 April 2016 and 31 March 2017. Comparison has been made throughout the SFR from previous years' publications.

The number of notifications does not necessarily equal the number of incidents in the time period, as some notifiable incidents occurred before 1 April 2016 but were not notified to Ofsted until after this date.

There has been no suppression applied to the data. All percentages used throughout the SFR have been rounded.

Due to concerns about confidentiality, a decision has been made not to publish the underlying dataset for the SIN SFR for 2016-17, similar to the SIN SFR for 2015-16. Underlying data for previous SFRs remains available online.

The Microsoft Excel spreadsheet of all entries for 2016-17 is checked line by line and cell by cell for any anomalies or discrepancies. This is carried out by cross checking against the original submission of the notification and any other associated documents if any have been submitted, for each and every case. If possible, requests to local authorities for clarification of data are made. A panel reviews any changes to be made to data and these are logged. Once satisfied that data is quality assured sufficiently, it is then used for analysis and the production of the SFR.

The panel also scrutinises each entry for its validity as a notification in accordance with the criteria set out in 'Working together to safeguard children'. Through rigorous scrutiny, it was necessary to remove nine records that did not meet the criteria for this period, leaving a total of 433 records for analysis.

Data processing involves aggregating some of the data items; for example, ages are placed into age groups and individual ethnicities are aggregated to higher level ethnicity group (e.g. white British into white). This processing is done using Excel, and is reviewed and quality assured before the data is used.