16 and 17-year-olds at greatest risk of abuse and neglect – but are failed by the law

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he Children's Society calls for action ahead of key commons debate on the Serious Crime Bill on Monday 23 February

Teenagers aged 16 and 17 who live in England are more likely to be abused or neglected than any other age group, but are given the least protection, according to new analysis by The Children's Society.

Almost 25,000 teenagers aged 16 and 17, the equivalent of 1 in 50, are at risk of abuse or neglect, a higher proportion than any other age group.

They may suffer emotional, physical or sexual abuse or their caregiver may fail to provide them with medical help or adequate food or clothing.

Despite being most at risk of cruelty and neglect, 16 and 17-year-olds are not given the same legal protection as younger children. Existing child cruelty laws allow prosecutions to be brought for neglect, ill treatment and abandonment but only until the child is aged 15.

The Children's Society has released these figures to urge the Government to make changes to the Serious Crime Bill, which includes changes to the law on child abuse and neglect, when it is debated on Monday [23 February 2015].

The charity's calls are backed by parents in England, with 4 in 5 parents (82%) of school age children, saying they thought the law should protect older teenagers.

This would make the law consistent. Currently, while one law acknowledges that 16 and 17 year olds are vulnerable to abuse and should be safeguarded from harm another says that only children under the age of 16 can be victims of child cruelty and neglect, unless they are in care. 16 and 17-year-old victims are falling through the gaps.

Teenagers aged 16 and 17 who are on the cusp of childhood and adulthood face unique challenges that leave them vulnerable to neglect and abuse.

With education or training compulsory until the age of 18, most teenagers live at home and are dependent on their families for emotional and financial support, leaving them open to abuse and neglect. And compared to younger children, they have greater freedom but lack the life experience of adults which makes them a target for predatory adults who may sexually exploit them or involve them in crime.

The Children's Society is calling for Child Abduction Warning Notices, used by police to disrupt the contact between children and harmful adults like drug dealers or sexual predators, to be applicable to 16 and 17-year-olds. Currently, they can only be used to protect vulnerable children aged 15 and under, unless they are in local authority care. It is also calling for child cruelty and neglect laws to apply to 16 and 17-year-olds.

Lily Caprani, Strategy and Policy Director of The Children's Society, which helps victims of child abuse and exploitation, says:

"It is nonsensical that children aged 16 and 17 are at most risk of abuse and neglect, and yet aren't given the same legal protection as younger children. Victims of cruelty and abuse can experience devastating mental and physical harm that can blight the rest of their lives. In the eyes of the law, they are children until they are 18 yet the law does not sufficiently protected from abuse and cruelty.

"We are urgently calling on the Government make it a criminal offence for a parent or guardian to abuse or neglect any 16 or 17 year old who lives with them, and for Child Abduction Warning Notices to apply to 16 and 17 year olds.

"Time is running out. This is the Government's last chance before the election to protect vulnerable 16 and 17 year olds from abuse and neglect and keep them safe."

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