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Threats, Abuse, Violence and Intimidation in Child Protection Work: A Comparative Study of Three Occupational Groups in England

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ABSTRACT

Child protection social work in England is increasingly associated with workforce instability, burnout and difficulties retaining experienced practitioners. Although previous research has highlighted the prevalence of threats, abuse, violence and intimidation directed towards child protection social workers, little comparative research has examined whether these experiences are unique to social work, shared across safeguarding professions or reflective of wider occupational experiences. This paper presents findings from a comparative study involving child protection social workers ($n = 207$), other professionals working within child protection contexts ($n = 52$), and workers employed outside child protection occupations ($n = 56$). Drawing on data from three linked online surveys, the study examined exposure to 21 forms of threats, abuse, violence and intimidation, including harassment, physical violence, stalking, misinformation campaigns, malicious online communications and AI-generated 'deepfake' content. Statistical analysis demonstrated that child protection social workers experienced significantly higher levels of exposure across most categories of abuse than both comparison groups. The findings suggest that occupational hostility towards child protection social workers represents a significant workforce and practitioner safety issue with important implications for recruitment, retention, wellbeing, organisational support and contemporary child protection policy and practice.

1 | Introduction

England's statutory child protection system continues to experience significant workforce instability, characterised by high vacancy rates, a reliance on agency staff and rising levels of sickness absence amongst practitioners (Murphy 2025a, 2025b, 2026). These challenges have become particularly acute within child protection social work teams, where workforce pressures are repeatedly linked to concerns regarding practitioner wellbeing, retention and the quality and continuity of services delivered to children and families (Murphy and Bedford 2024; Murphy et al. 2024, 2025; Department for Education (DfE) 2025). In response, national policy initiatives have increasingly sought to better understand the lived experiences of professionals working within child protection contexts, with a view to improving recruitment, retention and practitioner support (Research in Practice 2024).

One emerging area of concern relates to the extent to which child protection practitioners are subjected to threats, abuse, violence and intimidation in the course of their work (Murphy and Ravalier 2026). Existing international literature suggests that violence towards social workers is both longstanding and widespread, particularly amongst those engaged in statutory child protection practice (Díaz Bórquez et al. 2023; Lamothe et al. 2018; Littlechild 2002, 2005a; Shin 2011; Radey et al. 2020).

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Recent research within the English context has similarly highlighted the frequency with which child protection social workers encounter verbal abuse, intimidation, harassment and physical violence, alongside the detrimental impact these experiences can have upon practitioners' physical health, emotional wellbeing and willingness to remain within frontline practice (Murphy and Ravalier 2026; Murphy 2023, 2025a, 2025b). However, despite increasing recognition of the issue, there remains limited understanding as to whether these experiences are unique to child protection social work, reflective of wider experiences across child protection professions more broadly or representative of occupational experiences encountered across the workforce more generally.

This question is particularly significant because child protection social workers occupy a distinct position within England's safeguarding system. Unlike many other professionals involved in child protection, social workers frequently undertake statutory interventions that involve investigating abuse, assessing parental capacity and, where necessary, initiating court proceedings or removing children from parental care (Ferguson 2026). These responsibilities may heighten the likelihood of conflict with service users and expose workers to greater levels of hostility, resentment and aggression (Littlechild 2002, 2005b). At the same time, commentators increasingly argue that longstanding negative portrayals of social workers within sections of the British media and political discourse have contributed to a social environment in which hostility towards child protection practitioners has become normalised (Murphy and Ravalier 2026; Murphy 2022, 2023). However, to date, there has been little comparative research examining whether child protection social workers experience threats, abuse, violence and intimidation at different rates to either other professionals working within child protection systems or workers outside of child protection occupations altogether.

Questions regarding occupational safety and protection are therefore increasingly important within professions involving work with individuals who may respond to professional intervention with hostility or aggression. While employers have established responsibilities for protecting workers from occupational risks, emerging research suggests that conventional approaches to workplace safety may not always adequately reflect the changing nature of occupational abuse. For example, Humphreys et al. (2024), writing in the context of domestic abuse services, highlight the challenges of protecting practitioners where perpetrator tactics can extend beyond conventional workplace boundaries and expose workers to ongoing and evolving forms of risk. Such concerns have particular relevance to child protection social work, where practitioners may encounter threats, harassment and intimidation associated with the exercise of statutory authority. This raises important questions regarding whether existing organisational and legislative protections adequately reflect the risks encountered by contemporary child protection practitioners and the potential implications of such experiences for workforce wellbeing and retention.

This paper addresses that gap in the literature by presenting findings from a comparative study involving the following three occupational groups: (1) child protection social workers; (2) other professionally qualified practitioners working within child protection contexts (including professionals from health, education, policing and probation); and (3) workers from occupational backgrounds outside child protection practice. Drawing on data from three linked surveys, the paper examines both the prevalence and frequency of 21 different forms of threats, abuse, violence and intimidation experienced during day-to-day work activities. In doing so, the paper seeks to provide one of the first empirical comparisons of occupational exposure to these behaviours across child protection and nonchild protection professions within England.

By situating child protection social work alongside comparable occupational groups, this paper aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the risks associated with contemporary child protection practice. In doing so, it also seeks to inform ongoing debates regarding workforce wellbeing, practitioner safety, retention and the broader structural conditions shaping England's child protection system.

2 | Methodology

The study received ethical approval from Edge Hill University's Health-Related Ethics Committee and endorsement from the Association of Child Protection Professionals (AoCPP). This paper reports the findings of one part of a larger research project comprising multiple surveys and interviews.

Data collection took place across 2024 and 2025. Stage 1 comprised three online surveys hosted on the JISC Online Surveys platform. The aim of each survey was to explore the extent to which different groups of workers had experienced threats, abuse, violence and/or intimidation during their day-to-day work activities. 'Survey 1' targeted current and former child protection social workers; 'Survey 2' targeted other professionally qualified workers (i.e., those outside of social work) who were working or who had worked, in a child protection context (e.g., police, health, education, probation, etc.); and 'Survey 3' targeted other workers who did not, and had not, worked in the field of child protection.

Specifically, each survey asked participants to rate (by way of a six-point Likert Scale) the extent to which they had experienced 21 different types of threats, abuse, violence and intimidation (adapted from an initial list produced by the Local Government Association)—ranging from *'Never' to* 'Too many occasions to count' (see Appendix 2 for details). The overall aim was to provide statistical analyses of the three groups, so as to identify whether any group was more likely to experience these behaviours and, if so, at what frequency. The study gathered demographic information about gender, employment status and job role and length of time working in their respective sector.

Participants were recruited for each survey via social media platforms (e.g., 'X' and 'BlueSky'), including by asking contacts on the platforms to share with their followers and professional networks. A call to complete Survey 1 was also made through the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) and Social Workers' Union (SWU) and likewise, a call to complete Surveys 1 and 2 was made through the Association of Child Protection

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Professionals (AoCPP). Recruitment also relied on a degree of snowball sampling, in which participants who had completed a survey were encouraged to share the survey with other suitable participants within their social and professional networks. Survey 1 received responses from 207 participants; Survey 2 from 52 participants; and Survey 3 from 56 participants. Demographic information for these groups is reported below.

Data from the surveys were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29). Analyses compared the following three occupational groups: firstly, child protection social workers (Survey 1), secondly, other child protection professionals (Survey 2) and, thirdly, workers from other occupational backgrounds outside child protection (Survey 3) and their rate of experiencing the different types of threats, abuse, violence and intimidation. Because survey responses were measured using ordinal frequency scales and distributions were nonnormal, nonparametric statistical tests were used throughout.

An overall exposure score was created by summing responses across the 21 items assessing experiences of threats, abuse, violence and intimidation and internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. Differences in overall exposure between occupational groups were examined using Kruskal–Wallis tests with Bonferroni-adjusted post hoc comparisons. To examine differences in the likelihood of experiencing specific behaviours, individual items were recoded into binary variables indicating whether participants had ever experienced each behaviour (experienced at least once vs. never). Chi-square tests of independence were used to compare prevalence across groups, with Fisher's exact test applied where test assumptions were not met. Differences in the frequency of exposure to each behaviour were examined using Kruskal–Wallis tests applied to the original ordinal response scales. Effect sizes (ε^2) were calculated for nonparametric analyses, and Bonferroni corrections were applied to account for multiple comparisons. Analyses were conducted using available cases, and all tests were two-tailed.

The analysis aimed to answer the following three research questions:

1. Do levels of overall exposure to threats, abuse, violence and intimidation differ across the three occupational groups?
2. Are there differences in the likelihood of experiencing specific forms of threats, abuse and intimidation across the three occupational groups?
3. Are there differences in the frequency of exposure to specific forms of threats, abuse, violence and intimidation across the three occupational groups?

TABLE 1 | Current work status of Survey 1 and Survey 2 respondents.

Current work status	Social workers (Survey 1)	Other professionals (Survey 2)
'Currently working within child protection practice'	70% (n145)	56% (n29)
'Still in practice but no longer in child protection'	21% (n44)	21% (n11)
'No longer in practice but not retired'	8% (n16)	10% (n5)
'Retired'	1% (n2)	13% (n7)

3 | Results

3.1 | Demographic Information

Table 1 documents the work status of the 207 current/former child protection social workers who participated in 'Survey 1' and the 52 child protection practitioners from other professional backgrounds who participated in 'Survey 2'. Similarly, Table 2 documents the length of time holding their respective qualification for Survey 1 and 2 respondents; and Table 3 documents the time spent in child protection practice for Survey 1 and 2 respondents.

Figure 1 documents the professional background of the Survey 2 respondents (i.e., the other child protection workers) and Figure 2 outlines the occupational background of the Survey 3 respondents (i.e., those who worked outside of child protection). Table 4 records the gender identity of respondents across all three groups.

TABLE 2 | Length of time qualified for Survey 1 and Survey 2 respondents.

No. of years qualified	Social workers (Survey 1)	Other professionals (Survey 2)
Less than 1 year	6% (n12)	7% (n3)
1–3 years	38% (n79)	55% (n29)
4–7 years	29% (n60)	19% (n10)
8–10 years	11% (n23)	7% (n4)
11–15 years	5% (n10)	4% (n2)
More than 15 years	11% (n23)	8% (n4)

TABLE 3 | Length of time spent in child protection (including previous experience) for Survey 1 and Survey 2 respondents.

Time in child protection	Social workers (Survey 1)	Other professionals (Survey 2)
Less than 1 year	7% (n14)	0% (n0)
1–3 years	55% (n114)	12% (n6)
4–7 years	19% (n40)	23% (n12)
8–10 years	7% (n14)	31% (n16)
11–15 years	4% (n8)	10% (n5)
More than 15 years	8% (n17)	24% (n13)

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3.2 | Overall Exposure to Threats, Abuse, Violence and Intimidation

Descriptive analysis demonstrated marked differences in both the prevalence and frequency of threats, abuse, violence and intimidation across the three occupational groups. Child protection social workers reported particularly high levels of exposure, with 99% having experienced intimidation, 99% verbal abuse, 97% threats of harm, 89% harassment and 86% acts of physical violence against themselves on at least one occasion. Exposure was also frequently recurrent rather than isolated: 58% of social workers reported experiencing verbal abuse on 'too many occasions to count,' while the equivalent figures for intimidation and threats of harm were 24% and 9%, respectively. Social workers also reported substantial exposure to behaviours extending beyond direct workplace encounters, including stalking or being followed (77%), misinformation about them (83%), character assassination (85%) and malicious or grossly offensive communications (73%).

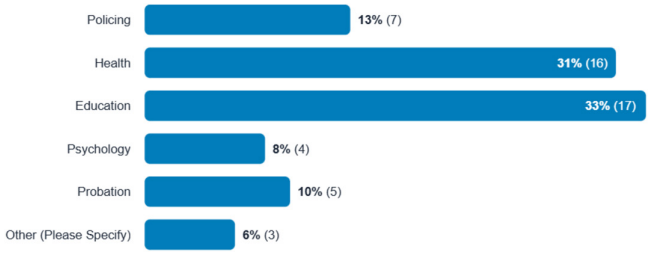


FIGURE 1 | Professional background of Survey 2 respondents.

Other child protection professionals also reported substantial exposure to some forms of hostility, most notably threats of harm (99%), verbal abuse (98%), threats against property (92%), intimidation (88%) and harassment (73%). However, several behaviours were considerably less prevalent amongst this group than amongst social workers, particularly stalking, misinformation, character assassination, malicious communications and behaviours directed towards workers' families. Participants working outside child protection generally reported lower levels of exposure, although verbal abuse (87%), threats of harm (60%), intimidation (55%) and harassment (54%) remained relatively common. The full distribution of responses across all six frequency categories and 21 forms of threats, abuse, violence and intimidation is provided in Appendix 2. Figure 3 provides an overview of the proportion of participants in each occupational group who reported experiencing each behaviour on at least one occasion.

The 21 items assessing experiences of threats, abuse, violence and intimidation demonstrated excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.95$) and were combined into a single overall exposure score. Median overall exposure scores differed across

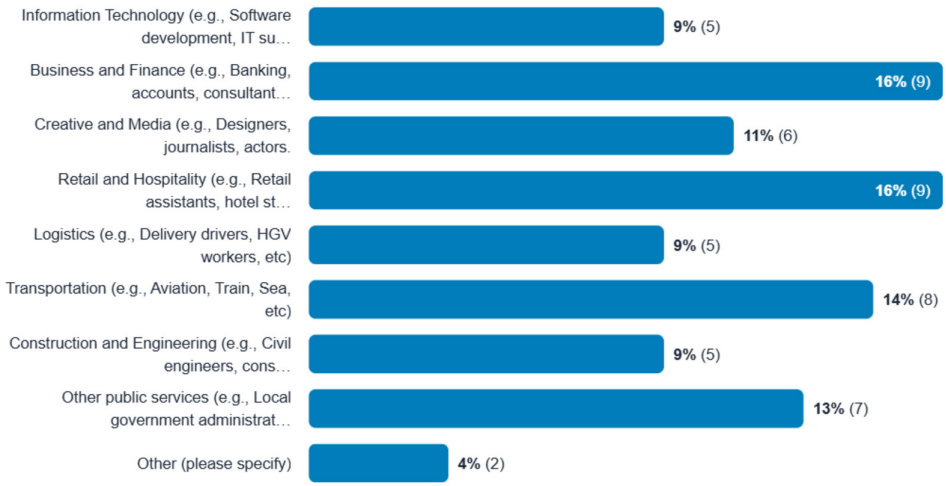


FIGURE 2 | Occupational background of Survey 3 respondents.

TABLE 4 | Gender identity of survey participants.

% identifying as	Social workers (Survey 1)	Other professionals (Survey 2)	Other occupational background (Survey 3)
'Female'	88% (n182)	54% (n28)	38% (n21)
'Male'	12% (n25)	44% (n23)	55% (n31)
'Transwoman'	0% (n0)	0% (n0)	4% (n2)
'Transman'	0% (n0)	2% (n1)	2% (n1)
'Nonbinary/genderqueer/agender/ gender fluid'	0% (n0)	0% (n0)	2% (n1)

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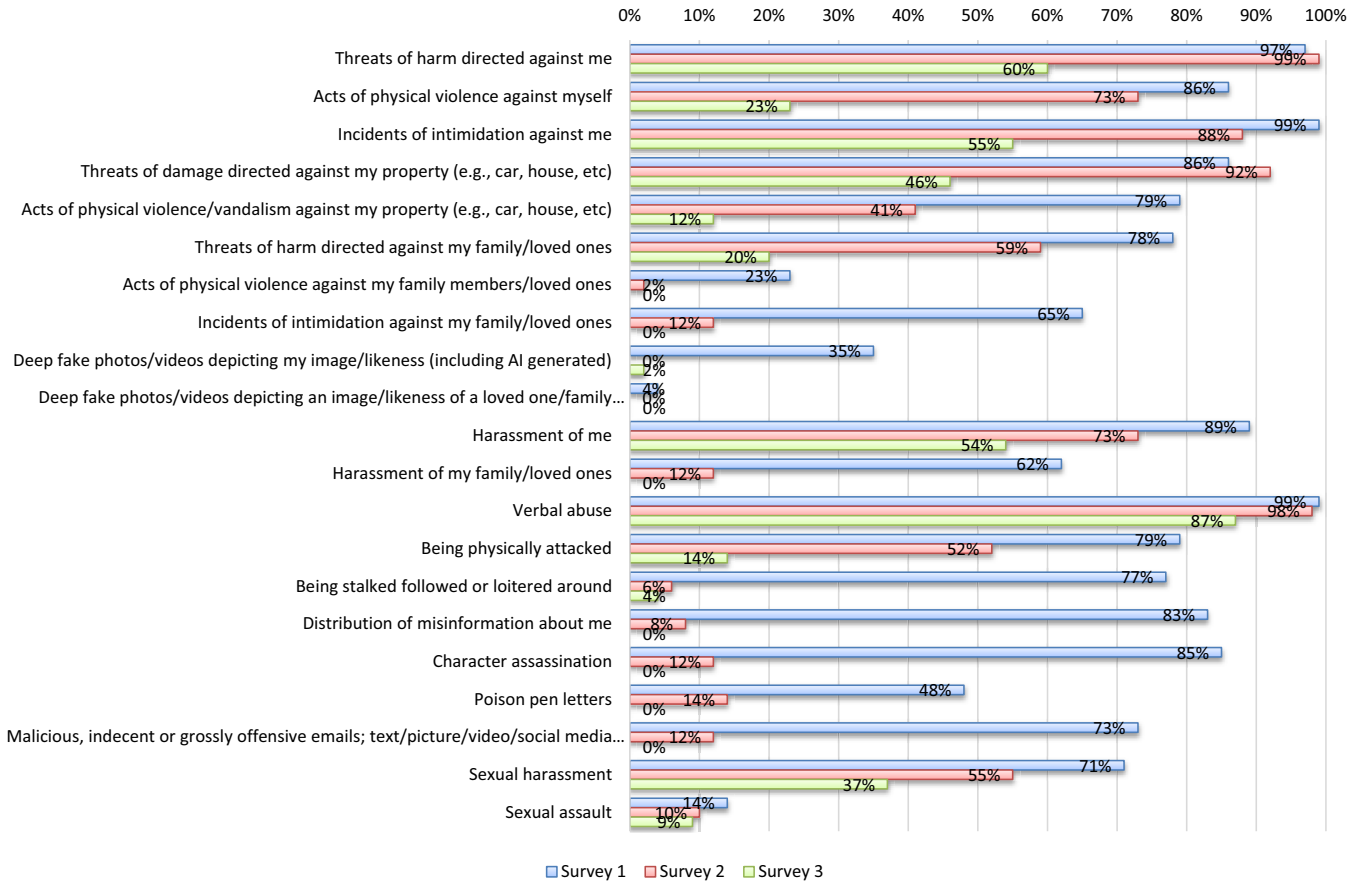


FIGURE 3 | Percentage of participants who had experienced at least one occasion of the specified incident.

occupational groups, with social workers reporting the highest levels of exposure (Mdn = 56.00), followed by other child protection professionals (Mdn = 37.50) and nonchild protection workers (Mdn = 27.00). A Kruskal–Wallis test indicated that these differences were statistically significant, $H(2) = 157.01$, $p < 0.001$, $\varepsilon^2 = 0.50$, indicating a large effect. Post hoc pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni adjustment showed that all groups differed significantly from one another, with social workers reporting significantly higher exposure than both comparison groups ($p < 0.001$), and other child protection professionals reporting higher exposure than nonchild protection workers ($p = 0.002$).

3.3 | Likelihood of Experiencing Specific Forms of Threats, Abuse and Intimidation

Chi-square tests of independence were conducted to examine whether the likelihood of experiencing each of the 21 forms of threats, abuse and intimidation differed across occupational groups. Responses were recoded to indicate whether participants had ever experienced each behaviour (experienced at least once vs. never experienced). To account for multiple comparisons, a Bonferroni-adjusted significance threshold of $p < 0.002$ was applied. Where expected cell counts violated chi-square assumptions,[1] Fisher's exact test was used.

Occupational group was significantly associated with the likelihood of experiencing the majority of behaviours assessed (Table 5). Social workers generally reported the highest prevalence across almost all forms of threats, abuse and intimidation, followed by other child protection professionals, while nonchild protection workers reported substantially lower exposure rates. After Bonferroni correction, group differences were not statistically significant for deepfake incidents involving family members or for sexual assault. Although social workers showed the highest prevalence for most behaviours, other child protection professionals reported slightly higher rates for threats directed at the worker and threats to property. Particularly large group differences were observed for stalking, misinformation, character assassination and intimidation.

3.4 | Frequency of Exposure to Specific Forms of Threats, Abuse, Violence and Intimidation

To examine differences in the frequency with which behaviours were experienced, Kruskal–Wallis tests were conducted using the original ordinal response scale for each behaviour. Consistent with the overall exposure findings, significant differences between occupational groups were observed for the majority of behaviours assessed (see Table 6). After Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons, social workers generally reported higher frequency of exposure than both comparison groups across most forms of threats, abuse and intimidation.[2]

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TABLE 5 | Likelihood of experiencing specific forms of threats, abuse and intimidation by occupational group.

Type of incident	Social workers % experienced	Other CP professionals % experienced	Other workers % experienced	$\chi^2(2)$	*p*
Threats of harm directed against me	97.1	98.1	60.4	n/a	<0.001
Acts of physical violence against myself	86.4	73.1	23.2	89.07	<0.001
Incidents of intimidation against me	99	88.5	55.4	89.73	<0.001
Threats of damage directed against my property (e.g., car, house, etc.)	86	92.3	46.4	46.46	<0.001
Acts of physical violence/vandalism against my property (e.g., car, house, etc.)	78.7	41.2	12.5	91.044	<0.001
Threats of harm directed against my family/loved ones	78.3	69.2	19.6	68.063	<0.001
Acts of physical violence against my family members/loved ones	23.3	1.9	0	27.01	<0.001
Incidents of intimidation against my family/loved ones	64.7	11.5	0	102.12	<0.001
Deep fake photos/videos depicting my image/likeness ...	35	0	1.8	46.02	<0.001
Deep fake photos/videos depicting an image/likeness of a loved one ...	3.9	0	0	n/a	0.104
Harassment of me	88.8	73.1	53.6	35.708	<0.001
Harassment of my family/loved ones	61.7	11.5	0	92.784	<0.001
Verbal abuse	98.5	98.1	87.5	n/a	0.001
Being physically attacked	79.1	51.9	14.3	82.783	<0.001
Being stalked followed or loitered around	76.6	5.8	3.6	146.729	<0.001
Distribution of misinformation about me	82.6	7.7	0	179.603	<0.001
Character assassination	85.3	11.5	0	185.42	<0.001
Poison pen letters	48	13.5	0	56.808	<0.001
Malicious, indecent or grossly offensive emails ...	73.3	12.4	0	116.986	<0.001
Sexual harassment	71.5	53.8	37.5	23.755	<0.001
Sexual assault	14.1	9.6	8.9	1.524	0.467

Median frequency scores were generally highest amongst social workers, often followed by other child protection professionals, while nonchild protection workers typically reported the lowest levels of exposure. For some behaviours, median scores were similar across occupational groups, reflecting lower overall frequency or limited variation in responses. Notably, for several behaviours the pattern of frequency differences was stronger than differences in simple prevalence, indicating that although some behaviours were experienced at least once across multiple occupational groups, social workers were more likely to experience these incidents repeatedly.

4 | Discussion

This study provides one of the first empirical comparisons of threats, abuse, violence and intimidation experienced by child protection social workers, other professionals working within child protection contexts, and workers employed outside child protection occupations in England. In doing so, the findings make an important contribution to a relatively underdeveloped area of literature concerned with occupational hostility towards child protection practitioners. While previous research has identified that social workers frequently

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TABLE 6 | Frequency of exposure to specific forms of threats, abuse and intimidation by occupational group.

Type of incident	Social workers Mdn	Other CP professionals Mdn	Other workers Mdn	H(2)	*p*	ε^2
Threats of harm directed against me	4	3	2	119.00	<0.001	0.*375*
Acts of physical violence against myself	3	2	1	79.17	<0.001	0.*247*
Incidents of intimidation against me	4	3	2	118.42	<0.001	0.*373*
Threats of damage directed against my property (e.g., car, house, etc.)	3	3	1	81.62	<0.001	0.*255*
Acts of physical violence/vandalism against my property (e.g., car, house, etc.)	3	1	1	101.44	<0.001	0.*319*
Threats of harm directed against my family/loved ones	3	2	1	83.61	<0.001	0.*262*
Acts of physical violence against my family members/loved ones	1	1	1	26.91	<0.001	0.*080*
Incidents of intimidation against my family/loved ones	2	1	1	98.23	<0.001	0.*308*
Deep fake photos/videos depicting my image/likeness ...	1	1	1	44.60	<0.001	0.*137*
Harassment of me	4	3	2	96.92	<0.001	0.*304*
Harassment of my family/loved ones	2	1	1	89.86	<0.001	0.*282*
Verbal abuse	6	4	3	104.22	<0.001	0.*328*
Being physically attacked	2	1.5	1	82.62	<0.001	0.*258*
Being stalked followed or loitered around	3	1	1	137.08	<0.001	0.*433*
Distribution of misinformation about me	3	1	1	158.02	<0.001	0.*500*
Character assassination	3	1	1	164.07	<0.001	0.*519*
Poison pen letters	1	1	1	55.67	<0.001	0.*172*
Malicious, indecent or grossly offensive emails ...	3	1	1	105.96	<0.001	0.*333*
Sexual harassment	3	2	1	41.19	<0.001	0.*126*

encounter abuse and intimidation during frontline practice (e.g., Littlechild 2002, 2005a; Murphy 2023; Radey et al. 2020), the comparative nature of the present study enables a more nuanced understanding of the extent to which these experiences are distinctive to child protection social work, shared across safeguarding professions more broadly or reflective of wider occupational experiences.

The findings suggest that child protection social workers experience substantially higher levels of threats, abuse, violence and intimidation than workers outside child protection occupations, and in many instances, at higher rates than other professionals working within child protection systems. Particularly significant was the extent to which child protection social workers reported repeated experiences of threats of harm, intimidation, verbal abuse, harassment, stalking behaviours, misinformation campaigns and malicious online communications. Moreover, the data indicated not simply isolated or infrequent incidents, but patterns of repeated exposure that, for many practitioners, had become normalised within day-to-day practice activities.

The potential normalisation of such experiences is important. Smith and Humphreys (2019), in their study of child protection practice involving fathers who use domestic violence, similarly identify the extent to which practitioners may come to anticipate and accommodate abusive behaviour as part of their work. While arising from a different practice context, their findings raise a broader concern regarding the extent to which repeated exposure to hostility can become accepted as an expected feature of child protection practice. The findings of the present study suggest that this concern may extend beyond work involving domestic violence, with the frequency and diversity of threats, abuse and intimidation reported by social workers raising questions about whether behaviours that would be regarded as unacceptable in many occupational settings have become increasingly normalised within statutory child protection work. This finding reinforces earlier

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arguments made in a separate paper that hostility towards child protection social workers has become embedded within the occupational realities of contemporary statutory practice (see Murphy and Ravalier 2026).

The comparative findings are particularly important because they challenge any assumption that exposure to abuse and intimidation is merely an inevitable feature of all public-facing professions (see Radey et al. 2020). While workers across many sectors may encounter occasional hostility, the frequency, intensity and diversity of incidents experienced by child protection social workers appeared qualitatively different. The findings therefore support the argument that statutory child protection social work occupies a uniquely conflictual position within England's safeguarding landscape (Parton 2014). Unlike many other professionals, child protection social workers routinely exercise statutory powers that can fundamentally alter family life, including initiating court proceedings, recommending child removal and making highly intrusive assessments of parenting capacity (Murphy and Murphy 2025).

These statutory responsibilities may therefore provide one explanation for the particularly high levels of exposure reported by social workers, but they are unlikely to account for the full pattern of differences observed. Professionals working within policing, health, education and probation occupy different organisational and relational positions within the child protection system, and further research is required to understand how factors such as the nature and duration of contact with families, professional role, organisational context and available safety protections may shape their differential exposure to, and experiences of, occupational hostility.

At the same time, the findings suggest that occupational exposure to hostility cannot be understood solely through the lens of statutory authority. Rather, the study adds weight to emerging concerns regarding the broader social and political positioning of child protection social workers within England (see Murphy 2023). As argued elsewhere, social workers frequently operate within a national environment in which high-profile child protection tragedies are intensely scrutinised by sections of the media and political commentators, often resulting in simplified or hostile depictions of practitioners as incompetent, negligent or harmful (Murphy 2022, 2023; Ayre 2001). The findings from the present study arguably demonstrate the practical consequences of these wider narratives. Incidents involving verbal abuse, character assassination, misinformation campaigns, social media harassment and threats directed towards workers and their families suggest that hostility towards child protection practitioners may increasingly extend beyond immediate practice encounters and into broader public and digital spaces.

One particularly novel aspect of the findings relates to the extent of technologically mediated abuse experienced by child protection social workers. While existing literature has predominantly focused upon face-to-face violence and intimidation, this study identified growing concerns regarding malicious online communications, unauthorised filming and photographing of practitioners, social media harassment and the creation of AI-generated 'deepfake' content (see Murphy and Ravalier 2026). The emergence of these forms of abuse is significant because they represent evolving mechanisms through which practitioners may be intimidated, publicly discredited or psychologically harmed (Murphy 2023). Importantly, these behaviours blur the distinction between workplace violence and personal victimisation, particularly where incidents extend into workers' private lives, homes, families and online identities (Murphy 2025b). The findings therefore suggest that traditional organisational understandings of workplace safety may no longer be sufficient in the context of contemporary child protection practice.

The study also raises important questions regarding the emotional and psychological burden associated with repeated exposure to hostility. Although this paper did not directly measure practitioner wellbeing or retention intentions, the findings strongly support wider workforce literature linking abusive working environments to burnout, emotional exhaustion, sickness absence and workforce attrition (e.g., Özer and Escartín 2023; Rasool et al. 2021; Iqbal et al. 2024; Radey and Wilke 2018). Indeed, the findings align closely with the arguments advanced in a separate paper, which contended that repeated exposure to threats, abuse, violence and intimidation may be contributing to practitioners becoming 'scared out' of frontline child protection practice altogether (Murphy and Ravalier 2026). In this respect, the study has significant implications for understanding contemporary workforce instability within England's child protection system. National policy discussions concerning recruitment and retention have frequently focused upon workload pressures, bureaucracy, administrative burden and supervision arrangements (MacAlister 2022; Research in Practice 2024; Department for Education (DfE) 2023). While these factors are undoubtedly important, the present findings suggest that practitioner safety and occupational hostility must also be understood as central workforce issues rather than peripheral concerns.

The implications for policy are therefore substantial. First, there is a need for national recognition that threats, abuse, violence and intimidation towards child protection practitioners constitute a systemic workforce issue rather than isolated incidents requiring localised responses. Current national workforce reform agendas have paid comparatively little attention to practitioner safety despite growing evidence regarding the prevalence of hostility experienced by social workers. Future workforce strategies should therefore incorporate explicit commitments to improving practitioner safety, strengthening reporting mechanisms and establishing clearer organisational responses to incidents of abuse and intimidation.

Second, the findings bring into focus the decision by the previous UK government to exclude social workers from the new legal protections offered to other 'emergency workers' as stipulated within Britain's Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act (2022). Given the data reported here, and the hugely important role social workers play in society—not least in seeking to protect children from harm—this decision looks increasingly controversial, especially in the context of government endeavours to improve the stability of the statutory children's social work workforce (see Department for Education (DfE) 2023). It also emphasises not only the importance of policy makers recognising the extent of the issue facing the workforce, but also the need to improve both local and national policy initiatives that seek to

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enhance the sense of safety amongst social workers delivering child protection services. Moreover, there is a need to hold to account those who are found to engage in threatening, intimidating or violent behaviour towards these workers—for example, by extending the scope of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act (2022) to include social workers under the umbrella term of 'emergency worker'.

Thirdly, the findings suggest a need to reconsider how child protection social work is publicly represented within political and media discourse (Hanley 2025). While scrutiny of safeguarding systems remains essential within democratic societies, persistent hostile depictions of social workers may contribute to the legitimisation or normalisation of abusive behaviour towards practitioners (Murphy 2023, 2025b). This is not to suggest that services should be immune from criticism, but rather that public commentary should remain proportionate, evidence-informed and mindful of the potential consequences for frontline workers (Munro 2011; Murphy 2025a). Policy makers, employers, professional bodies and media organisations may therefore need to engage more proactively in challenging inaccurate or inflammatory portrayals of child protection practice.

Fourth, the findings highlight the need for employers to develop more robust organisational responses to incidents of threats, abuse, violence and intimidation. This includes ensuring that practitioners are adequately supported both immediately following incidents and over longer periods of time. The findings reported separately (see Murphy and Ravalier 2026) suggested that some practitioners felt unsupported or expected to simply accept hostility as 'part of the job' (see also Radey et al. 2020). The present study indicates that such normalisation may be particularly problematic given the frequency and severity of incidents reported. Organisational cultures that minimise or individualise experiences of abuse risk further compounding practitioner distress and undermining retention efforts (Murphy and Ravalier 2026).

In practical terms, employers may need to strengthen risk assessment procedures, lone working protocols, digital safety guidance and mechanisms for responding to online harassment. Training programmes should also move beyond traditional approaches to conflict management and incorporate contemporary risks associated with social media, surveillance technologies and digitally mediated abuse. Moreover, reflective supervision processes should provide meaningful opportunities for practitioners to discuss the emotional impact of hostility and intimidation, rather than focusing exclusively upon case management and performance targets (Murphy 2025b).

The findings additionally have implications for interprofessional safeguarding practice. Although other child protection professionals also reported exposure to threats and intimidation, the markedly higher rates experienced by social workers suggest that multiagency systems may distribute risk unevenly across professional groups. This raises important questions regarding how statutory responsibilities are allocated and supported within safeguarding systems. Greater recognition may therefore be required regarding the disproportionate emotional and physical risks borne by child protection social workers within multiagency practice arrangements.

Finally, the study contributes to wider sociological discussions regarding the changing nature of professional risk within public service occupations. The findings suggest that contemporary child protection practice increasingly occurs within an environment characterised by heightened distrust of professionals, intensified public scrutiny and expanding opportunities for harassment through digital technologies (Murphy 2023). As such, threats, abuse, violence and intimidation towards child protection social workers should not be understood simply as interpersonal conflicts between individual workers and service users, but as phenomena shaped by broader structural, political and technological conditions.

5 | Limitations

There are several limitations to the study. The research relied upon self-report survey data and therefore reflects participants' subjective accounts of their experiences. Recruitment through professional networks and social media may also have resulted in self-selection bias, particularly amongst individuals who had strong feelings regarding the issue. In addition, the comparatively smaller sample sizes for Surveys 2 and 3 may limit the generalisability of comparisons across groups. Nevertheless, the consistency and scale of the findings indicate that threats, abuse, violence and intimidation represent a significant and underrecognised feature of contemporary child protection social work practice in England.

A further limitation concerns the heterogeneity of the professional groups included within the study. In particular, the 'other child protection professionals' category incorporated practitioners from a range of professional backgrounds, including policing, health, education and probation. While the present analysis demonstrates important differences between this group and child protection social workers, the sample size did not permit meaningful profession-specific comparisons within this category. Consequently, the study cannot determine the extent to which the observed differences reflect particular features of social work practice or wider differences in professional role, statutory authority, patterns and duration of contact with families, organisational setting, public perceptions or the protections available to different occupational groups. Future research would benefit from larger profession-specific samples capable of examining how these contextual and organisational factors shape both the nature and frequency of occupational hostility experienced across the different professions involved in child protection. Qualitative research may be particularly valuable in exploring why ostensibly similar encounters are experienced, interpreted and responded to differently across professional groups.

Another area not specifically examined within the present study concerns the potential use of formal complaints processes as a mechanism of occupational hostility. While the survey captured related experiences including misinformation, character assassination and malicious communications, it did not examine whether practitioners had experienced complaints that they perceived as being deliberately used to intimidate, harass or discredit them. Importantly, this should be distinguished from the legitimate right of children and families to raise concerns or

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challenge professional practice. Future research could usefully examine practitioners' experiences of aggravated or deliberately malicious complaints, including how organisations distinguish these from legitimate complaints and the implications for practitioner wellbeing and professional practice.

6 | Conclusion

Overall, the study demonstrates that child protection social workers experience exceptionally high levels of occupational hostility relative to both other safeguarding professionals and workers outside child protection contexts. The findings therefore reinforce growing concerns that practitioner safety represents a critical workforce issue with important implications for recruitment, retention, wellbeing and ultimately the quality and continuity of services provided to vulnerable children and families. Addressing these issues will require coordinated responses at organisational, professional, political and societal levels if England's child protection workforce is to feel genuinely safe, supported and sustainable in the future.

Ethics Statement

Ethical approval was provided by Edge Hill University's Health-related Ethics Committee.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

[1] This happened for threats to the worker, verbal abuse and deepfake incidents involving family members. Here, the behaviours were either very common or very rare across groups, which makes chi-square less reliable.

[2] Mdn = median score on 6-point ordinal scale. $H(2)$ = Kruskal–Wallis i statistic with 2 degrees of freedom. ε^2 = epsilon-squared effect size. Bonferroni-adjusted significance threshold: $p < 0.002$. Deepfake images of family and Sexual assault excluded from table: group differences were not statistically significant after Bonferroni correction.

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Appendix 1: Questions for Survey 1, 2 and 3.

Instructions for participants:

Surveys 1 and 2: 'Thinking about your time in child protection practice please indicate the types of behaviour that you have been subjected to in respect to the following:'

Survey 3: 'Thinking about your time in your current area of work please indicate the types of behaviour that you have been subjected to in respect to the following:'

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Appendix 2: Full Distribution of Survey Responses Across the 21 Forms of Threats, Abuse, Violence and Intimidation

		% of responses																	
		Never			One occasion			A few occasions (2–3 times)			Several occasions (4–7 times)			Many occasions (8+times)			Too many occasions to count		
	Survey no.	***1***	***2***	**3**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**1**	**2**	**3**
Type of incident	Threats of harm directed against me	3%	1%	40%	2%	10%	33%	29%	60%	25%	44%	29%	2%	13%	0%	0%	9%	0%	0%
	Acts of physical violence against myself	14%	27%	77%	31%	27%	20%	48%	44%	4%	6%	2%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Incidents of intimidation against me	1%	12%	45%	2%	15%	38%	25%	35%	14%	35%	35%	4%	13%	3%	0%	24%	0%	0%
	Threats of damage directed against my property (e.g., car, house, etc.)	14%	8%	54%	6%	38%	32%	39%	50%	14%	27%	4%	0%	9%	0%	0%	5%	0%	0%
	Acts of physical violence/ vandalism against my property (e.g., car, house, etc.)	21%	59%	88%	15%	25%	12%	38%	14%	0%	23%	2%	0%	3%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Threats of harm directed against my family/loved ones	22%	41%	80%	14%	32%	18%	33%	27%	2%	23%	0%	0%	4%	0%	0%	4%	0%	0%
	Acts of physical violence against my family members/loved ones	77%	98%	100%	22%	2%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Incidents of intimidation against my family/loved ones	35%	88%	100%	32%	12%	0%	28%	0%	0%	5%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Deep fake photos/videos depicting my image/ likeness (including AI generated)	65%	100%	98%	23%	0%	0%	12%	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Deep fake photos/videos depicting an image/ likeness of a loved one/ family member (including AI generated)	96%	100%	100%	4%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Harassment of me	11%	27%	46%	4%	15%	30%	30%	52%	23%	25%	6%	0%	19%	0%	0%	11%	0%	0%
	Harassment of my family/ loved ones	38%	88%	100%	35%	12%	0%	23%	0%	0%	4%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

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	% of responses																	
	Never			One occasion			A few occasions (2–3 times)			Several occasions (4–7 times)			Many occasions (8+times)			Too many occasions to count		
Verbal abuse	1%	2%	13%	0%	0%	7%	3%	12%	45%	16%	38%	29%	22%	15%	3%	58%	33%	3%
Being physically attacked	21%	48%	86%	32%	31%	14%	43%	21%	0%	4%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Being stalked followed or loitered around	23%	94%	96%	11%	6%	4%	37%	0%	0%	26%	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%
Distribution of misinformation about me	17%	92%	100%	16%	4%	0%	54%	4%	0%	11%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%
Character assassination	15%	88%	100%	21%	12%	0%	44%	0%	0%	13%	0%	0%	4%	0%	0%	3%	0%	0%
Poison pen letters	52%	86%	100%	25%	10%	0%	21%	4%	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Malicious, indecent or grossly offensive emails; text/picture/video/social media messages/posts	27%	78%	100%	10%	4%	0%	50%	16%	0%	10%	2%	0%	1%	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%
Sexual harassment	29%	45%	63%	15%	35%	18%	22%	12%	10%	26%	8%	9%	7%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%
Sexual assault	86%	90%	91%	14%	10%	7%	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

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