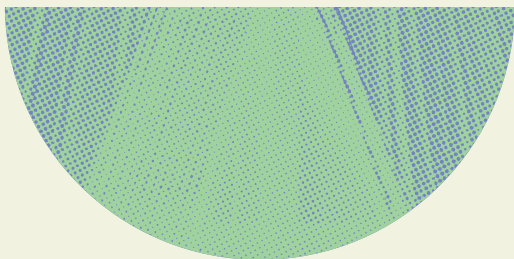




**National Centre for Action
on Child Sexual Abuse**



The Australian child sexual abuse attitudes, knowledge and response study



**Report 1:
Executive Summary
October 2024**

Executive Summary

About the study

The *Australian child sexual abuse attitudes, knowledge and response study* is a multi-phase mixed-methods project. The first phase involved the first wave of a comprehensive survey of the Australian community's knowledge, attitudes and responses regarding a range of topics focused specifically on child sexual abuse. The purpose of the study was to measure and benchmark Australians' attitudes towards, knowledge of, and responses to:

- child sexual abuse
- victims and survivors' experiences and needs
- harmful sexual behaviours in children and young people.

This report presents the results from the first wave of the study in the form of descriptive statistics, providing an indicator of the current status of community attitudes, knowledge, and capability in the Australian context. It is exploratory, uniquely providing benchmarking and novel insights to inform prevention, intervention, and support efforts at various levels of society. The National Centre will conduct this survey periodically to track attitudes, knowledge, and responses over time and measure the effectiveness of any programs designed to change and enhance these outcomes.

Methodology

A tailored questionnaire was developed and piloted extensively before collecting data online through a network of established research panels across all Australian states and territories in December 2023. A total of 4,055 respondents aged 18 years and over completed the questionnaire. Four jurisdictions were oversampled.* Weightings were developed and applied to create a nationally representative sample.

The questionnaire captured data on key demographic variables and eight topics related to child sexual abuse: prevalence; attitudes and myths; awareness and knowledge; discovery or disclosure of current or recent child sexual abuse; awareness and understanding of lived and living experiences; capacity to understand and respond to adults with lived experience; prevention; and harmful sexual behaviours. For some topics, a split questionnaire approach was used meaning that some sections of the survey were randomly presented to only half the sample.

* Tasmania, Western Australia, Australian Capital Territory, and South Australia.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics are presented on each item in the questionnaire. In addition, a series of factor and Rasch scale scores were constructed and used in regression analyses. As an extension to base descriptive analysis of the data, more complex exploratory analyses were also performed. This involved executing a series of hierarchical linear regressions to determine which demographic, situational and experiential factors were associated with each of the key 'outcome' variables (i.e., constructed scale scores).

Given the developmental work required to construct the questionnaire items and associated scales, the research is considered exploratory providing initial benchmarks and first stage analysis in the Australian community.

Key findings

The community's awareness of child sexual abuse as a prevalent issue and knowledge of certain characteristics is high. For instance:

- **89%** agreed/strongly agreed that there are many more victims and survivors in the community than people realise
- **86%** agreed/strongly agreed that child sexual abuse is much more common than most people realise
- **62%** reported it as likely/very likely/certain that someone they knew had been sexually abused as a child.

Moreover, there was relatively sound knowledge of the:

- prevalence of child sexual abuse for boys (**average estimate: 21%**) and girls (**average estimate: 33%**)
- main types of perpetrators of boys (another relative: **44%**; parent or step-parent: **43%**) and girls (parent or step-parent: **55%**; another relative: **51%**)
- main locations where children are at risk of experiencing child sexual abuse (home of relative or friend: **54%**; child's home: **48%**).

However, many also think it is not an issue they need to personally worry about. For instance:

- About one-third (**31%**) agreed/strongly agreed that child sexual abuse doesn't directly impact them, and 3 in 10 (**30%**) were neutral ('neither agree nor disagree') on the topic
- More than half (**56%**) did not agree that child sexual abuse happens in the area where they live
- About 1 in 6 (**17%**) agreed/strongly that there are many more urgent issues facing Australia than child sexual abuse
- The same proportion (**17%**) reported it as unlikely/very unlikely that anyone they knew had been sexually abused as a child.

The levels of victim-blaming and problematic attitudes towards victims of child sexual abuse—particularly adolescent victims—are concerning, although not held by the majority of community members. The most alarming finding was that 4 in 10 (**40%**) respondents agreed/strongly agreed that older children have a responsibility to actively resist adults' sexual advances. About 1 in 8 (**12%**) also agreed/strongly agreed that adolescent girls who wear very revealing clothing are 'asking' to be sexually abused.

Some community members don't believe or are uncertain if they should believe children when they disclose being a victim of child sexual abuse. Namely, about 1 in 5 (22%) are neutral that children should always be believed if they disclose and almost 1 in 5 (18%) are neutral that children are too unreliable to take their word over an adult's.

Community members' recognition of sexualised behaviours as child sexual abuse varied and was influenced by the age of the child, nature of the behaviour, and who else was involved (i.e., adults, children or adolescents). For instance, though most respondents believed the following scenarios always constitute child sexual abuse, some indicated uncertainty or ambivalence ('can be child sexual abuse but is not always'):

- Two adults sharing pictures or videos of children engaged in, or depicted in, sexual activity online (about 1 in 14 [7%])
- Taking photographs of a naked 13-year-old with their parents'/carers' knowledge and consent (1 in 6 [16%])
- An adult viewing material where adults are engaged in sexual activity with children (almost 1 in 10 [9%]).

Most Australian adults have never discovered or received a child's disclosure about child sexual abuse (80%) or harmful sexual behaviours (86%). Of those who have, less than half provided support to the child and/or reported to authorities. Most community members reportedly didn't know what to do or were not confident in acting or providing support if a child was to tell them, or they discovered, a child was being sexually abused. A considerable proportion reported the lowest levels of confidence ('not at all confident') for the following critical actions:

- knowing how to talk to the parent or carer of a child that they suspected had been sexually abused (31%)
- knowing how to start a conversation with a child they suspected had been sexually abused (28%)
- recognising the signs or behaviours of when a child has been sexually abused (23%).

Most community members were aware of direct impacts on the victim and survivor, but fewer recognised long-term impacts on basic needs throughout adulthood. For instance, there were high levels of agreement/strong agreement that victims and survivors:

- can experience ongoing impacts whether they have disclosed or not (91%)
- often experience difficulties with personal relationships over their life (89%)
- often experience poor mental health over the lifespan (87%)
- often experience alcohol and/or substance use issues across the life course (85%).

However, there were lower levels of agreement that victims and survivors often experience some of the less well-known impacts (e.g., disruptions to cultural connections: 68%; poor physical health: 65%; financial insecurity: 56%). About 1 in 8 (13%) agreed/strongly agreed there are no ongoing impacts of child sexual abuse. Overall, only two-thirds (66%) agreed/strongly agreed that they understood the impacts well enough to respond appropriately to an adult victim and survivor who discloses to them.

Australian adults are more likely to have received an adult's rather than child's disclosure of child sexual abuse (**35% vs 9%**). They were generally more confident and comfortable supporting an adult victim and survivor, however not all would provide support or respond compassionately towards adult victims and survivors. For example, most respondents agreed/strongly agreed they were confident to talk to an adult disclosing childhood sexual abuse (**79%**) and to provide comfort (**74%**). However, substantial proportions were less confident ('neither agree nor disagree') in undertaking a range of actions including determining their legal obligations to report to police (**32%**), practically supporting the adult (**26%**), and finding help for them (**23%**). Although rare, some (**5%**) reported they would try to avoid an adult friend who disclosed child sexual abuse.

Critically, most Australian adults don't know how to prevent or keep children safe from child sexual abuse. Less than half (**48%**) agreed/strongly agreed they know what to do to help keep children known to them safe from child sexual abuse. Respondents viewed many parts of society and the community as playing a preventative role, and generally wanted more to be done. Educating children, parents/carers and raising community awareness had strong support. Overall, respondents thought it was more appropriate for educators to deliver prevention-related topics to younger children in an educational setting than it was for caregivers to discuss such information with their children. There was also support for more services to help adults at risk of perpetrating child sexual abuse, with about two-thirds of respondents considering it would be very/extremely helpful (**68%**).

Most (**75%**), but not all, Australian adults recognised grooming as a form of child sexual abuse. Some established grooming behaviours made most adults suspicious a child was at risk, including:

- an adult sharing pornography with a child (**88%**)
- an adult asking a child to keep secrets from other adults (**82%**)
- discovering dishonesty about the nature or frequency of interactions with the child (**76%**).

However, less than half of the respondents identified other common grooming behaviours would make them suspicious:

- an adult giving gifts to a child (**36%**)
- an adult's preferential treatment of a child (**42%**)
- an adult encouraging a child to believe they were special (**43%**).

The most identified online activity that respondents thought made a child very/extremely vulnerable to grooming was accepting friend requests from strangers (**77%**).

Most Australian adults had very limited awareness and understanding of harmful sexual behaviours. Only **7%** correctly identified harmful sexual behaviours as describing behaviours amongst children only. About one-quarter (**24%**) reported being unsure about its prevalence compared to adult perpetrated child sexual abuse. Even after being given a definition of harmful sexual behaviours, there was a high level of uncertainty in responses to harmful sexual behaviours-related questions, with high levels of neutral ('neither agree nor disagree') responses reported for many questions. Despite this, **81%** considered harmful sexual behaviours to be a serious problem.

Regression analysis

A series of regression analyses were performed on the following constructed scales: harmful myths and problematic attitudes; confidence in responding to current child sexual; knowledge of child sexual abuse impacts; compassionate responses to victims and survivors; confidence in community prevention measures; perceived appropriateness of prevention measures; and perceived efficacy of eSafety measures.

Summarising key effects across these analyses revealed that those who worked with children held more problematic attitudes towards victims than those not working in child-related sectors.

Respondents who identified as parents/carers and victims and survivors scored lower on the myths and problematic attitudes scale. These two cohorts, plus those who work with adult victims of abuse, were more confident in responding to child sexual abuse, were more knowledgeable about the impacts of child sexual abuse, and were more compassionate. Those who worked with children were also more confident in responding to child sexual abuse. Nonetheless, the scores of these outcomes were relatively low overall across all cohorts.

In highlighting these exploratory findings, it should be noted that the proportion of variance explained by the combined set of demographic and cohort variables for each of the scale measures tested in the regression analyses was low (range: 4-12%). This indicates that additional research is needed to identify other variables associated with each of these outcomes. In addition, the findings also point to a need for ongoing refinement to improve the sensitivity of the outcome measures.

Implications

Findings from this study will inform the National Centre's work to foster understanding and build capability in the community as captured by the seven challenges outlined in Here for Change - its five-year-strategy¹, as well as guide the work of other key stakeholders.

Our findings suggest that the community supports and expects action to address child sexual abuse and harmful sexual behaviours, although their understanding of some aspects is limited and needs to be extended. They expect action from government (including public information campaigns) and see an important role for educators and parents/carers.

We also have evidence there is a need for prevention initiatives to focus on enhancing capability and confidence of all adults, but particularly parents/carers, so they are more aware of, and can detect child sexual abuse risks. Initiatives need to enhance the community's confidence to intervene to protect children and young people, to assist them to be safe if being harmed or in unsafe situations, and to prevent child sexual abuse from occurring.

Initiatives are also needed to enhance capability and instil confidence across the community in how to appropriately support victims and survivors, and to respond compassionately where there is disclosure or discovery of child sexual abuse. Our findings suggest there is a high likelihood that disclosing children go unbelieved and unsupported, while some adult victims and survivors also go unsupported after a disclosure.

To create change, we need to implement evidence-based, effective strategies to build confidence and capability and shift negative and problematic attitudes towards children and victims and survivors of child sexual abuse.

We also need to further explore additional factors that might better account for variance in the outcomes measured and tested in this study. Furthermore, this work should also look to refine and improve measures for each of these outcomes as well as testing pathways between these measures (e.g., problematic attitudes and compassion) using more complex analytic methods. There is also a pressing need for further research about harmful sexual behaviours in the Australian context to inform awareness and understanding of that topic. Qualitative research is also needed to deepen understanding of the barriers to enhancing capability and confidence in preventing, intervening in, and responding to child sexual abuse among critical adults in children’s lives.

Finally, now that we have this important population benchmarking data, future waves of this study should be conducted to assess whether the policy- and practice-related initiatives are effectively shifting and enhancing the various child sexual abuse related outcomes.

