

Understanding the experiences of child sexual abuse disclosure in Australia in the wake of the Royal Commission

Summary Report

Key Findings and Implications from Research Activities and Manuscripts

Overview

This project set out to examine contemporary disclosures experiences of survivors of child sexual abuse. Historically, the focus on disclosure of child sexual abuse has been primarily on the initial disclosure, whether it occurs during childhood, requiring protective and supportive actions, or in adulthood, where challenges may arise in feeling safe to disclose. Attention in the literature often obscures the fact that disclosure is a process that occurs throughout a survivor's life. The context was to understand how responses to disclosures of child sexual abuse may have changed in the wake of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (RC).

A full review of available academic and grey literature was conducted. Analysis was conducted on the pre-existing evidence from the RC and the Tasmanian Commission of Inquiry (COI) on child sexual abuse in institutional settings to understand disclosure as a process over time. Each of these research activities together with consultation with the project's Advisory Group made up of people with lived experience and advocates helped shaped two primary research activities consisting of qualitative interviews and a survey of survivors.

The project is closely aligned with 'challenges' identified by the National Centre as areas of priority for research to improve responses across policy and practice to improve the lives of survivors. This project addressed the following 'challenges' in various ways:

- Child sexual abuse and its effects across the life course are not well understood or identified in the community.
- People with lived and living experiences of child sexual abuse are often not believed and responded to with compassion.
- Children, young people and adults with experiences of child sexual abuse are often not identified or are not well supported when they raise concerns or disclose.
- Victims and survivors of child sexual abuse are often unable to access the support and resources that meet their changing needs at different times in their lives.

Recognising these issues is critical for better supporting survivors throughout their life course. Disclosure is an important mechanism not only to break the silence, stigma, blaming, and shaming that often occur in the context of power and

grooming in child sexual abuse but also as a vehicle to address justice and essential needs for healing. To achieve this and address changing needs and triggers across the life course, ongoing disclosures are sometimes necessary, whether repeated to people or shared for the first time to raise awareness or seek support or consideration in how survivors wish to be treated and related to. There is also a powerful sense of solidarity in making disclosures and sharing experiences with other survivors and supporters. This process serves as a step in healing and a catalyst to make the journey of disclosure safer for other survivors.

The research conducted in this project revealed that survivors face many ongoing challenges in being heard and believed when making a disclosure. When disclosures are met with belief, empathy, and support that acknowledge the courage it takes to talk about child sexual abuse, survivors can begin to connect to safety and healing. However, when these responses do not occur or only happen partially or conditionally, it can have devastating impacts on survivors' well-being. Surviving and continuing to disclose requires resilience, courage, and the unique skills to manage how people respond. Survivors often must educate and manage family, friends, professionals, organizations, and systems when disclosing, even though it is not their responsibility. This highlights the immense value of lived experience and underscores the need to improve responses to survivors across society.

The results of the project have covered various aspects of disclosure, contributing valuable insights into how disclosure occurs throughout the life course. The findings suggest that responses have generally improved since the conclusion of the Royal Commission, particularly in professional settings. However, there are inconsistencies and fragmentation in responses to victim-survivors' disclosures within service systems, communities, and personal relationships. Often past negative responses to disclosure have seen victim-survivors building knowledge on how to manage both who they respond to and guiding the response of recipients. It is important to be clear that this is not responsibility that victim-survivors should be holding. At the same time, it is testimony to their survival that victim-survivors have often had to be adept at managing individuals and systems in order to be safe. It is critically important to acknowledge that the research shows that the burden of responsibility still often rests on victim-survivors in educating and improving responses to disclosure of child sexual abuse. This is unacceptable. Victim-survivor expertise for improving responses is critical but the accountability for making responses safe, empathetic, and helpful is the broader societal and system responsibility. There are different needs for victim-survivors and their decision to disclosure is an individual choice and not a requirement or expectation. As such this decision needs to be respected and honoured. This highlights why it is essential for systems and individuals to be equipped to respond supportively to victim-survivors' needs. There is significant room for enhancing the disclosure experience, regardless of age, gender, identity, culture, or location, for both initial and subsequent disclosures.

Research Design

Central to the design of this research has been the expertise from our Advisory Group which is made up of people with lived experience, together with advocates and supporters. The research utilised a mixed method approach. Multiple sources of data and evidence were accessed. It commenced with a systematic review of recent literature together and analysis of grey literature and two Australian public inquiries into child sexual abuse. This gave a basis to have an up-to-date knowledge base on disclosure of child sexual abuse as well as identifying gaps in knowledge. These activities set the basis for designing and implementing a methodology to address our research questions. The main research question of the project was:

- What is the contemporary disclosure experience of victims and survivors of child sexual abuse?

There two sub-research questions were:

- Have there been changes in disclosure experience associated with improved community awareness and professional responses? and
- What are the current gaps in response?

To address these questions, two studies were conducted. First, a qualitative study with in-depth interviews with 26 survivors was conducted. This was followed by a second study which undertook a survey with 86 participants who were invited to give both quantitative and qualitative responses.

This project has addressed the research questions and contributed to knowledge by reviewing grey literature, public inquiries, and international academic literature on the disclosure of child sexual abuse. The lived experiences of victim-survivors have been crucial in understanding how society responds to disclosures of child sexual abuse over time and ways we can best respond to key findings. While the contemporary experience of disclosure has shown some improvement over time, many victim-survivors still do not receive helpful or supportive responses, leading to negative consequences for their well-being. There are gaps in responses within systems and institutions, as well as a lack of community knowledge on how to best support victim-survivors.

Summary of Main Findings and Recommendations

Each of the sections below detail key findings and implications that have been elucidated from research activities and manuscripts from this project. The core aspects of this have informed the development of facts sheets.

Manuscript #1. Australian Approaches to the Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse: Reviewing the Grey Literature (Thain, E., Perfect, D., Collins, A., Borges, A., Bromfield, L., & O'Leary, P. (2025))

Key Observations

1. The majority of the grey literature concentrated on strategies for supporting children and young people during the disclosure process, with limited attention given to supporting adults who disclose.

2. Both the "how-to" guides for reporting and supporting disclosures emphasised the importance of formal reporting procedures and record-keeping as key considerations.
3. The literature provided insights into the reactions and care required from those receiving disclosures.
4. Barriers to disclosure were identified, not only in terms of initial disclosure but also in how reactions to a disclosure can influence the likelihood of further disclosures.

Conclusion and Implications

- Research, policy, and practice exploration on disclosure in the grey literature is often limited in its scope.
- Knowledge on disclosure requires a dynamic understanding of the multifaceted effects, processes, considerations, and barriers. This acknowledges that there is ongoing change in culture and attitudes towards disclosing and pursuing justice. There are gaps in knowledge of this dynamic aspect of disclosure and its impact.
- Disclosure can occur multiple times across a survivor's lifetime. Research has not adequately conceptualised this process across the life course.
- The process of disclosure is often a continuous and often complex experience that relies not only on the active components of abuse or psychological readiness, but also on recipient understanding, reaction, and follow-through.
- There are clear components to what a positive and constructive response to disclosure of child sexual abuse entails. These responses are contextual to numerous factors, such as, age, relationship, place, needs, safety, roles etc.
- Inconsistency in response to disclosure complicate and further traumatise survivors.
- Central to responses to disclosure is being believed and supported with attention to immediate needs and ongoing ways the victim-survivor can be supported.
- There are numerous gaps across community, family, systems, and professional responses. This requires more work to improve the ability of potential and known responders to build capacity to effectively respond to disclosures of child sexual abuse at different life stages and circumstances.

Manuscript #2. The Process of Disclosing Child Sexual Abuse in Australia: Evidence from Two Inquiries (Preparation Continuing)

Key Findings

- The impact of disclosures good or bad can have an array of consequences. This can be felt in childhood, adolescence, and throughout adulthood. Effective responses from public inquiries are powerful validation to victim-survivors' disclosure often in the midst of past denial, punishment, and minimisation from previous attempts to tell their story.
- Victim-survivors across their life make decisions about who to disclose to and make assessments about how individuals and institutions may respond.

- Disclosure is a complex process across different points of victim-survivors' lives. It can be influenced by a range of issues, such as situational factors, motivation to protect others, protection of identity, wanting to change culture and recognition of child sexual abuse, and seeking justice.
- Change especially in the community has been slow in how child sexual abuse is understood. This has led to inconsistency and fragmentation in responses to disclosures at all levels. Progress in reforming and improving systems has not been incremental to the knowledge and recommendations from inquiries.
- More reform is needed across the community and systems to recognise the healing and sense of being heard that can come from effective responses to disclosure. This requires further work in conceptualising disclosure as a process that occurs across the life course and has different purposes according to multifaceted issues and contextual factors.

Manuscript #3. Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse across the Life Course: A Systematic Literature Review

Key Findings

1. Disclosure of child sexual abuse is a process which takes shape and evolves across a victim/survivor's life, with past disclosure experiences influencing future disclosure thoughts and behaviours.
2. There was an inverse relationship between themes for facilitators and barriers, and positive and negative disclosure experiences.
3. Themes associated with disclosure/non-disclosure and more positive/negative disclosure experiences could be categorised into five domains: (i) internal motivators/barriers; (ii) external facilitators/barriers; (iii) positive/negative responses experienced to a past disclosure; (iv) positive/negative internal outcomes of disclosure; and (v) positive/negative external responses following disclosure.
4. Past positive disclosure experiences, a safe and trusting relationship, being believed, and being supported constitutes a helpful disclosure process for all ages and genders. Negative and unsupportive responses cause further harm and often deter victim-survivors from making future disclosures.
5. Fear and shame were dominant factors inhibiting disclosure among all ages and genders.
6. The dynamics of believability, instances and prevalence of being believed, and the subsequent effects of being or not being believed were central to the experience of disclosure.
7. Motivations for disclosure, disclosure recipients and positive and negative disclosure experiences varied by life stage (childhood, adolescence, adulthood).
8. Evidence of disclosure as a process is largely implicit within the literature, with only a few recent articles comprising an explicit life course perspective.
9. Findings suggest specific attributes of disclosure for men and women, however male and female victim/survivors are subject to negative responses to disclosure stemming from gendered societal stereotypes.
10. There is a gap in the literature relating to the experience of disclosure for people who identify as non-binary and gender diverse.

Key Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

1. Disclosure needs to be recognised as an ongoing process across the life course, impacted by unique features, triggers/events, and characteristics of different life stages, with past disclosure experiences intrinsically linked to future disclosure beliefs, feelings and propensity. Research needs to evolve its conceptualisation of disclosure to reflect the experience of disclosure as a process evolving across the life course. Service providers and systems need to modify their practice depending on the life stage of victim/survivors.
2. Preferred disclosure recipients for children and adolescents were mothers and peers respectively, highlighting the importance of community members in responding to disclosure. Children and adolescents were likely to disclose to a trusted person in a context in which they felt safe or when they were directly asked. Negative disclosure experiences were harmful in their own right, with more negative disclosures and the experience of being disbelieved occurring during childhood and adolescence. These findings highlight the importance of resources for parents and education for adolescents in responding to peer disclosures.
3. Adult survivors were more contemplative and purposeful about their disclosure choices and consequently experienced more positive responses from disclosure recipients, however negative experiences were still frequent, including by professionals. A recent review of grey literature (Perfect et al, 2024) identified the vast majority of disclosure resources, training and practice guidance focussed on responding to children; there were very limited resources and practice guidance for supporting positive disclosure experiences for adult victim/survivors, noting for victim/survivors disclosure responses extend to the days, weeks and months following the initial sharing of the experience and that the outcomes of disclosure could directly impact positive or negative feelings about the disclosure.
4. There was clear evidence to show gender specific myths and stereotypes impacted disclosure experiences for men and women, highlighting the importance of community awareness raising to educate the community on child sexual abuse and dispel stigma. These myths and stereotypes were pervasive and for some victim/survivors, impacted identity formation and feelings of shame and self-blame. These are important findings to highlighting therapeutic contexts.
5. There is evidence to suggest heightened risks of sexual violence, including child sexual abuse, for members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Discrimination and further vulnerability can exist for LGBTQIA+ victim-survivors when disclosing and navigating service systems. There is an urgent need to address the research gap in disclosure experiences for victim/survivors identifying as LGBTQIA+. Likewise, service systems require significant improvements to better respond to LGBTQIA+ victim-survivors.
6. A key objective of this systematic review was to assess the extent to which existing evidence could shed light on whether disclosure experiences and recipient responses had changed over time, particularly in light of the increased public awareness of child sexual abuse as a consequences of public inquiries, such as the Australian Royal Commission and social movements such as

#LetHerSpeak/#LetUsSpeak and #metoo. It was not possible from existing research to draw conclusions about change over time, highlighting the need for disclosure research to be more specific about the time period in which disclosure experiences reported in research occurred. The lack of specificity regarding time period of disclosure is a significant limitation of existing disclosure research as it restricts the potential for research to inform policy priorities, particularly whether policy settings are effective in increasing positive disclosure experiences.

Manuscript #4. Perspectives of Victim/Survivors Experiences of Disclosure Over Time: An Australian Qualitative Study (Draft attached)

Executive Summary

This qualitative study explores the lived experiences of 26 adult victim-survivors of child sexual abuse in Australia, focusing on their disclosure journeys over a life course. The research was commissioned by the National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse and guided by a lived experience Advisory Group.

Key Findings

- **Disclosure as a Lifelong Process:** Understanding child sexual abuse disclosure as an interconnected process that unfolds over the life course is a critical finding. Rather than a single event, disclosure was experienced as an evolving, non-linear process. Participants described multiple disclosures across their lifespan, often shaped by life events, personal development, and shifting social contexts.
- **Disclosure is a Two-Way Street:** Disclosure occurs within the context of relationships and heavily depends on the recipient's response, rather than being a one-way process of information sharing. The initial response to disclosure will also often determine if the victim/survivor chooses to disclose again. Better equipping professional and community members to provide more supportive responses to disclosure is critically important.
- **Control as Central to Positive Experiences:** A consistent theme was the importance of agency. Disclosures made in high-control environments (where participants could choose the timing, recipient, and content) were more likely to result in positive outcomes. Conversely, low-control disclosures, especially in childhood, often led to distress and long-term harm.
- **Improvements Over Time:** Participants generally perceived that responses to disclosures have improved, particularly from helping professionals such as psychologists. Whilst justice systems were still seen as having significant challenges and police were seen as having improved responses. These improvements were attributed to increased public awareness, institutional reforms following the Royal Commission, and the availability of trauma-informed services.
- **Persistent Systemic Challenges:** Despite progress, significant barriers remain. The criminal justice system was frequently cited as retraumatizing, with participants reporting feelings of powerlessness, disbelief, and procedural failures. Some disclosures still resulted in negative or dismissive

responses, particularly from family members or institutions with vested interests.

- **Barriers to Disclosure:** Key obstacles included fear of not being believed, lack of emotional readiness, absence of trusted adults, and societal norms (especially around masculinity) that discouraged vulnerability. Grooming and manipulation by perpetrators further complicated the ability to disclose. Gender stereotypes and myths about child sexual abuse can have a significant impact on victim-survivors. For instance, males may feel stigmatised, while other victims may experience shame when deciding whether to disclose the abuse.
- **Diverse Trajectories:** Participants' experiences varied widely based on gender, age, abuse context (familial vs. institutional), and cultural background. Notably, the study had limited representation from Aboriginal and culturally and racially marginalised (CARM) communities, highlighting the need for more inclusive research and inclusive ways to initiate and welcome disclosures.

Recommendations

1. **Embed control and agency into the disclosure process:** Design disclosure-related services and systems to prioritise victim-survivor control, autonomy and choice that foster environments that prioritise safety and trust. As disclosure unfolds over a life course, having agency over that process is fundamental to positive outcomes.
2. **Strengthen professional capacity to receive disclosure:** Mandate ongoing training for professionals across health, justice, education and social services in trauma-informed, disclosure-sensitive practices to avoid re-traumatisation with the disclosure process (particularly in justice systems).
3. **Gender, sexuality, context, and era strongly shape disclosure experiences:** Whilst many experiences for victim-survivors have similarities, it is important to better understand how gender, sexuality, context, age, and culture can shape disclosure outcomes. This includes considerations for non-binary and gender diverse victim-survivors. Research is needed to improve responses that are sensitive and practical to these factors. Recognition of barriers are needed in service systems practices, such as different challenges for men, women, non-binary and gender diverse victim-survivors.
4. **Expand culturally safe and inclusive disclosure pathways:** Develop and fund culturally responsive disclosure pathways, particularly for First Nations and CARM communities. Tailored approaches are essential to ensure accessibility and trust in the disclosure process, especially given the distinct historical and socio-cultural challenges these marginalised communities already face.

Manuscript #5. Trajectories Paper (Preparation Continuing)

This paper involved the research team translating the narratives from each of the participant transcripts into maps that describe the timeline of incidents of abuse,

the effects of abuse, instances of disclosure (and their sentiment and effect), and other significant life events. This was to provide a more comprehensive summary of the interaction between disclosures and life events, and in particular illustrate the volume of 'disclosure events' reported by participants.

- **Prevalence of "Disclosure Events":** Most participants (19 of 26) reported having "disclosure events" as children. These were not always direct disclosures but often indirect and non-verbal attempts, misinterpreted events, or partial disclosures. Some participants reported many disclosure events, which in some instances resulted in direct disclosures.
- **Negative Childhood Experiences of Disclosure:** Childhood disclosure attempts were frequently missed, misinterpreted or dismissed and overwhelmingly reported as negative experiences. Harmful responses like disbelief, denial, and victim-blaming led half of those who disclosed as children to not disclose again until adulthood.
- **Four Survivor Typologies:** The life-course mapping revealed four broad typologies of disclosures:
 - **Long Silence:** A long gap between the abuse and disclosure, with survivors masking internal distress until symptoms or external events prompt a disclosure.
 - **Chain of Betrayal:** A repeating pattern of disclosure attempts met with disbelief or blame, which impeded help-seeking.
 - **Institutional Gauntlet:** A prolonged struggle against institutions that enabled the abuse.
 - **Relational Betrayal:** Family members not responding in a supportive or protective way that led to intense grief and loss for survivors.
- **Long-Term Sequelae:** The analysis observed that long-term symptoms (e.g., eating disorders, self-harm, substance use) often became the focus of their interaction with services. This approach obscured the underlying trauma, which continued to impact relationships, trust, and intimacy – but these interactions could lead to seeking services to directly address the abuse when the survivor was ready.
- **Contrasting Adult Disclosures:** Unlike the negative childhood events, disclosures made later in life were much more likely to be positive. These positive experiences were typically in the context of a therapeutic relationship, a supportive partner, peer validation from other survivors, or systemic validation like the Royal Commission.

Manuscript #6. Recommendations Paper (Preparation Continuing)

For context, this paper examined all instances in the qualitative interviews where participants talked about what they wanted to be different based on their experience of disclosure. Some interpreted this in terms of what the person receiving a disclosure should know, while others wanted to talk more about the systems and structures around the response to disclosures.

- **Create a Safe and Believing Space:** The most fundamental need for survivors is a safe space to disclose. This includes a quiet, private physical environment and, most importantly, the explicit act of being believed.

Survivors also stressed the critical need for the recipients of disclosures to actively remove blame by reassuring them "It's not your fault".

- **Prioritise Listening Over Responding:** A powerful theme was the need for disclosure recipients to simply listen rather than trying to offer solutions or ask questions. Many survivors just want to be heard. Unhelpful questions (like "Why didn't you say no?") are harmful as they can imply blame and make the survivor feel they aren't believed. It is important for recipients to respond if there are safety concerns or mandatory reporting responsibilities that may require timely protective action.
- **Manage Personal Reactions and Invite Conversation:** A recipient's non-verbal reactions, like visible shock, can be misinterpreted by the survivor as judgment and silence them. Disclosure is often a cautious process of "testing the waters". Recipients should recognise these tentative openings and use open questions to gently invite the conversation, rather than closing it down.
- **Implement Genuine Trauma-Informed Care:** Participants called for a systemic shift from superficial, protocol-driven interactions to genuine trauma-informed care. This requires specific training for professionals on the complex psychological and physical impacts of trauma and the need to recognise the "inner child", namely the vulnerable, younger self within the adult survivor.
- **Restore Agency and Control:** A core principle of trauma-informed practice is restoring agency to the survivor. Since abuse is an experience of powerlessness, all support systems must actively work to maximise the survivor's "choice and control" over the pace, setting, and direction of their disclosure and recovery process.
- **Re-Engineer Harmful Systems:** Participants identified that justice, child protection, and support systems are often not just unhelpful but actively harmful and re-traumatising. Key failures include intimidating and adversarial justice system environments, a lack of confidential spaces for children in foster care to speak safely, and significant barriers to support, such as high costs and a lack of accountability or complaints processes.

Manuscript #7. Disclosures of child sexual abuse in Australia through the life course: Survey results (Preparation Continuing)

This online survey had 86 participants (82% women; 13% men; 5% non-binary) who all identified as victim-survivors of child sexual abuse. Results shows that most recent disclosures as an adult were more positive than initial disclosure experiences.

- Over 75% of participants first disclosure was as a child.
- Initial disclosures were most often made to a parent.
- The trigger for the initial disclosure was most often related to seeking safety or needing support with the impact.
- Most responses to initial disclosures were negative such as disbelief or no protective action.

- Across the life course disclosures move from parents and child friends to romantic partners and adult friends or relatives. Professionals have a consistent role in disclosures across the life course.
- Men were less likely to disclose than women.
- Recent disclosures by adults were most often made to professionals with the aim of both seeking help with impacts and breaking the silence. There were also triggers to disclose because of not coping and wanting to seek closure.
- Older victim-survivors often seek support to deal with the impact of child sexual abuse from professionals as the first point for disclosure.
- Accidental disclosure most often occurred in childhood.
- The majority of recent disclosures were met with believing, supportive, empathetic or kind responses.
- More recent disclosures since the conclusion of the Royal Commission have improved, with 79% receiving at least one supportive response. However, this is most attributable to professionals rather than responses from personal relationship such family or friends.
- As victim-survivors move through the life course they make disclosures often to seek justice and with the aim of breaking societal silence on child sexual abuse.

Briefing Paper

Project Activities and Outputs

Introduction

This project has undertaken the following project and research activities in line with the original proposal:

1. Formation and ongoing consultation with an Advisory Group made up of people with lived experience together with advocates and supporters.
2. Systematic review of academic literature on disclosure from 2012 to 2023.
3. Review of available grey Australian literature on disclosure.
4. Analysis of the information on the disclosure in the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (RC) and the Tasmanian Commission of Inquiry (COI).
5. Presentation of key knowledge arising from this project.
6. Design of two primary data studies.
7. Conducting a qualitative study with in-depth interviews with survivors.
8. Administering a survey on disclosure with quantitative and qualitative responses.
9. Analysis and synthesis of data into findings and manuscripts.
10. Development of fact sheets and presentation material.

The main research question of the project was:

- What is the contemporary disclosure experience of victims and survivors of child sexual abuse?

Two sub-research questions were:

- Have there been changes in disclosure experiences associated with improved community awareness and professional responses? and
- What are the current gaps in response?

Outputs and deliverables have occurred across the conduct of the project. Initially this was the delivery of a webinar and other presentations in conjunction with the National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse (National Centre) on the emerging results from the research. Each activity has resulted in manuscripts being drafted with the view for publication and dissemination. Accompanying fact sheets that detail key learnings and implications have also been produced. We have delivered all the outputs set out in the research agreement and in many cases have exceeded these deliverable requirements. Several presentations have taken place in conjunction with the National Centre including a webinar. There is a range of presentation material including slides and short videos detailing various findings and recommendations. It was expected that we deliver two to three manuscripts, but we have drafted seven manuscripts. One manuscript is already published, and another was submitted to a journal but was not accepted for publication and will be revised and submitted to alternative journal. The remaining five manuscripts are still in preparation with at least two likely to be submitted before the end of November.

Remaining manuscripts are still intended to be submitted with acknowledgement that they were as a result of this research project commissioned by National Centre.

The project is closely aligned with 'challenges' identified by the National Centre that it identified as areas of priority for research to improve responses across policy and practice to improve the lives of survivors. This project addressed the following 'challenges' in various ways:

- Child sexual abuse and its effects across the life course are not well understood or identified in the community.
- People with lived and living experiences of child sexual abuse are often not believed and responded to with compassion.
- Children, young people and adults with experiences of child sexual abuse are often not identified or are not well supported when they raise concerns or disclose.
- Victims and survivors of child sexual abuse are often unable to access the support and resources that meet their changing needs at different times in their lives.

Deliverables

The following deliverables were agreed upon in the Research Agreement. In the table below we detail these outputs. In many cases we have been able to deliver additional outputs.

Knowledge Translation/ Product	Description and Output
Report and Publication on the Review of Current Knowledge on Disclosure	Brief report on current state of knowledge Development of a Fact sheet based on the brief report Peer reviewed paper on current literature on Disclosure Actual Outputs <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. See fact sheet on systematic literature review and fact sheet on grey literature review and inquiry analysis. 2. One manuscript has been published online: <i>Australian Approaches to the Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse: Reviewing the Grey Literature</i> (Thain, E., Perfect, D., Collins, A., Borges, A., Bromfield, L., & O'Leary, P. (2025). Australian Approaches to Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse: Reviewing the Grey Literature. University of South Australia, Australian Centre for Child Protection: South Australia); https://find.library.unisa.edu.au/discovery/fulldisplay/alma9916941533001831/61USOUTHAUS_INST:ROR (see Appendix 1).

	<p>3. One manuscript was submitted but now is undergoing revisions for new resubmission: <i>Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse across the Life Course: A Systematic Literature Review</i> (see Appendix 2) New target journals: Child, Abuse & Neglect; Child Maltreatment; Journal of Child Sexual Abuse.</p> <p>4. One manuscript is in preparation for submission to the Journal of Child Sexual Abuse: <i>The Process of Disclosing Child Sexual Abuse in Australia: Evidence from Two Inquiries</i> (submission to occur for final report)</p>
<p>Disclosure Symposium</p>	<p>A symposium or seminar potentially in collaboration with other projects in disclosure to better resource professionals in the area. The Symposium can be a blueprint for training development.</p> <p>Actual Outputs</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Webinar presented on the 21st of August 2024: Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse Through the Life Course – First findings from the literature Flyer (see Appendix 3a) Slides (see Appendix 3b) 2. Presentation presented for National Centre Emerging knowledge series - Session 3: Disclosure and Community Responses. (Slides: see Appendix 3c) 3. In Conversation: Understanding and responding to disclosures of child sexual abuse from children and young people on the 14th March 2024 (see Appendix 3d)
<p>Victim/survivor summary</p>	<p>A summary of the research findings in an accessible format for the National Centre but also survivors who participated in the research which will also be a resource for use in a range of other knowledge translation activities.</p> <p>Actual Outputs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Four draft fact sheets have been produced ▪ A series 6 short scripted videos about summaries of research findings and themes (See link attached to email) ▪ Transcripts from presentations (See Appendix 4)
<p>Policy / Practice Brief</p>	<p>A Brief summarising the key findings and policy / practice implications of the project intended for policy makers and frontline practitioners. Peer reviewed and open access paper on key findings. Other paper on results submitted (at least two academic papers but aiming for more).</p>

	<p>Actual Outputs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ See summary of research findings brief ▪ This briefing paper <p>One published peer reviewed paper:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Australian Approaches to the Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse: Reviewing the Grey Literature</i> Thain, E., Perfect, D., Collins, A., Borges, A., Bromfield, L., & O’Leary, P. (2025) <p>Six manuscripts in progress:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>The Process of Disclosing Child Sexual Abuse in Australia: Evidence from Two Inquiries</i> ▪ <i>Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse across the Life Course: A Systematic Literature Review</i> (resubmission) ▪ <i>Perspectives of Victim/Survivors Experiences of Disclosure Over Time: An Australian Qualitative Study</i> ▪ <i>Trajectories Paper</i> ▪ <i>Recommendations Paper</i> ▪ <i>Disclosures of child sexual abuse in Australia through the life course: Survey results</i>
<p>Presentation</p>	<p>A PowerPoint presentation summarising the research including methods, key findings and policy and practice implications to be used as the foundational communications collateral for oral dissemination of project findings.</p> <p>Actual Outputs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A series 6 short scripted videos about summaries of research findings and themes (See link attached to email) ▪ Slides from presentations (see Appendix 4)

The project did experience some unexpected delays, and these are detailed in previous reports. We are grateful for the National Centre’s understanding and flexibility in changing the key dates for milestones due to these challenges.

Key Activities and Outputs

This research project conducted the following activities with corresponding outputs:

1. Conduct of a systematic review around academic literature of survivors' experience of disclosure across the life course.
 - Manuscript (see previous report), currently being revised for resubmission for publication in a different journal
 - Material for Webinar Presentation
 - Fact sheet

2. Convening the Advisory Group
 - Met seven times with one more meeting scheduled to consult on final project outcomes on 11th of November 2025. Meetings were held at the following times:
 - 19 October 2023
 - 12 February 2024
 - 20 March 2024
 - 11 April 2024
 - 3 June 2024
 - 14 October 2024
 - 23 September 2025
 - 11 November 2025 (upcoming and final meeting)

3. Review of grey literature on disclosure
 - Manuscript (see previous report)
 - Publication (see previous report)
 - Material for Webinar Presentation

4. Review and analysis of the RC and COI evidence
 - Manuscript, being prepared for publication in a journal
 - Material for Webinar Presentation

5. Qualitative study and interviews with 26 survivors
 - Manuscript on overall themes (see attached)
 - Manuscript in preparation on life course patterns of disclosure

6. Survey on Disclosure with 86 victim-survivor participants
 - Manuscript on quantitative and free text results

7. Synthesis of results
 - Briefing paper
 - Manuscript on victim-survivors' recommendations from the primary data
 - Series of fact sheets
 - Series of brief videos detailing results for broad audience
 - Summary presentation with slides summarising key findings and implications

Fact Sheet 1

Key Learnings from Grey Literature and Public Inquiries in Australia

Key Learnings

- Most of the grey literature concentrated on strategies for supporting children and young people during the disclosure process, with limited attention given to supporting adults who disclose.
- Both the "how-to" guides for reporting and supporting disclosures emphasised the importance of formal reporting procedures and record-keeping as key considerations.
- The literature provided insights into the reactions and care required from those receiving disclosures.
- Barriers to disclosure were identified, not only in terms of initial disclosure but also in how reactions to a disclosure can influence the likelihood of further disclosures.
- The impact of disclosures good or bad can have an array of impacts. This can be felt in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Effective responses from public inquiries are powerful validation to victim-survivors disclosure often in the midst of past denial, punishment, and minimisation from previous attempts to tell their story.
- Victim-survivors across their life make decisions about who to disclose to and make assessments about how individuals and institutions may respond.
- Disclosure is a complex process across different points of victim-survivors' lives. It can be influenced by a range issues, such as situational factors, motivation to protect others, protection of identity, wanting to change culture and recognition of child sexual abuse, and seeking justice.
- Change especially in the community has been slow in how child sexual abuse is understood. This has led to inconsistency and fragmentation in responses to disclosure at all levels. Progress in reforming and improving systems has not been incremental to the knowledge and recommendations from inquiries.

Conclusion and Implications

- Research, policy, and practice exploration on disclosure in the grey literature is often limited in its scope.
- Knowledge on disclosure requires a dynamic understanding of the multifaceted impacts, processes, considerations, and barriers. This acknowledges that there is ongoing change in culture and attitudes towards disclosing and pursuing justice. There are gaps in knowledge of this dynamic aspect of disclosure and its impact.
- Disclosure can occur multiple times across a survivor's lifetime. Research has not adequately conceptualised this process across the life course.
- The process of disclosure is often a continuous and often complex experience that relies not only on the active components of abuse or psychological readiness, but also on recipient understanding, reaction, and follow-through.

- There are clear components to what a positive and constructive response to disclosure of child sexual abuse entails. These responses are contextual to numerous factors, such as, age, relationship, place, needs, safety, roles etc.
- Inconsistency in response to disclosure complicate and further traumatise survivors.
- Central to responses to disclosure is being believed and supported with attention to immediate needs and ongoing ways the victim-survivor can be supported.
- There are numerous gaps across community, family, system, and professional responses. This requires more work to improve the ability of potential and known responders to build capacity to effectively to disclosures of child sexual abuse at different life stages and circumstances.
- More reform is needed across the community and systems to recognise the healing and sense of being heard that can come from effective responses to disclosure. This requires further work in conceptualising disclosure as a process that occurs across the life course and has different purposes according to multifaceted issues and contextual factors.

Fact Sheet 2

Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse across the Life Course: A Systematic Literature Review

Key Findings

1. Disclosure is a process which takes shape and evolves across a victim/survivor's life, with past disclosure experiences influencing future disclosure thoughts and behaviours.
2. There was an inverse relationship between themes for facilitators and barriers and positive and negative disclosure experiences.
3. Themes associated with disclosure/non-disclosure and more positive/negative disclosure experiences could be categorised into five domains: (i) internal motivators/barriers; (ii) external facilitators/barriers; (iii) positive/negative responses experienced to a past disclosure; (iv) positive/negative internal outcomes of disclosure; and (v) positive/negative external response following disclosure.
4. Past positive disclosure experiences, a safe and trusting relationship, being believed, and being supported constitutes a helpful disclosure process for all ages and genders. Negative and unsupportive responses can cause harm.
5. Fear and shame were dominant factors inhibiting disclosure among all ages and genders.
6. The dynamics of believability, instances and prevalence of being believed, and the subsequent effects of being or not being believed were central to the experience of disclosure.
7. Motivations for disclosure, disclosure recipients and positive and negative disclosure experiences varied by life stage (childhood, adolescence, adulthood).
8. Evidence of disclosure as a process is largely implicit within the literature, with only a few recent articles comprising an explicit life course perspective.
9. Findings suggest specific attributes of disclosure for men and women, however male and female victim/survivors are subject to negative responses to disclosure stemming from gendered societal stereotypes.
10. There is a gap in the literature relating to the experience of disclosure for people who identify as non-binary and gender diverse.

Key Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

1. Disclosure needs to be recognised as an ongoing process across the life course, impacted by unique features, triggers/events, and characteristics of different life stages, with past disclosure experiences intrinsically linked to future disclosure beliefs, feelings and propensity. Research needs to evolve its conceptualisation of disclosure to reflect the experience of disclosure as a process evolving across the life course. Service providers and systems need to modify their practice depending on the life stage of victim/survivors.
2. Preferred disclosure recipients for children and adolescents were mothers and peers respectively, highlighting the importance of community members in responding to disclosure. Children and adolescents were likely to disclose

to a trusted person in a context in which they felt safe or when they were directly asked. Negative disclosure experiences were harmful in their own right, with more negative disclosures and the experience of being disbelieved occurring during childhood and adolescence. These findings highlight the importance of resources for parents and education for adolescents in responding to peer disclosures.

3. Adult survivors were more contemplative and purposeful about their disclosure choices and consequently experienced more positive responses from disclosure recipients, however negative experiences were still frequent, including by professionals. A recent review of grey literature (Perfect et al, 2024) identified the vast majority of disclosure resources, training and practice guidance focussed on responding to children. There were very limited resources and practice guidance for supporting positive disclosure experiences for adult victim/survivors, noting for victim/survivors disclosure responses extend to the days, weeks and months following the initial sharing of the experience and that the outcomes of disclosure could directly impact positive or negative feelings about the disclosure.
4. There was clear evidence to show gender specific myths and stereotypes impacted disclosure experiences for men and women, highlighting the importance of community awareness raising to educate the community on child sexual abuse and dispel stigma. These stereotypes were pervasive and for some victim/survivors impacted identity formation and feelings of shame and self-blame highlighting the importance of these findings in therapeutic contexts. There is evidence to suggest heightened risks of sexual violence across the life course, including child sexual abuse, for members of the LGBTQIA+ community, an urgent need was identified to address the research gap in disclosure experiences for victim/survivors identifying as LGBTQIA+.
5. A key objective of this systematic review was to assess the extent to which existing evidence could shed light on whether disclosure experiences and recipient responses had changed over time, particularly in light of the increased public awareness of child sexual abuse as a consequences of Public Inquiries, such as the Australian Royal Commission and social movements such as #metoo. It was not possible from existing research to draw conclusions about change over time, highlighting the need for disclosure research to be more specific about the time period in which disclosure experiences reported in research occurred. The lack of specificity regarding time period of disclosure is a significant limitation of existing disclosure research as it restricts the potential for research to inform policy priorities, particularly whether policy settings are effective in increasing positive disclosure experiences.

Fact Sheet 3

Perspectives of Victim/Survivors Experiences of Disclosure Over Time: An Australian Qualitative Study (Preparation Continuing)

Executive Summary

This qualitative study, conducted by the Australian Centre for Child Protection and Griffith University's Disrupting Violence Beacon, explores the lived experiences of 26 adult victim-survivors of child sexual abuse in Australia, focusing on their disclosure journeys over a life course. The research was commissioned by the National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse and guided by a lived experience Advisory Group.

Key Findings

- **Disclosure as a Lifelong Process:** Understanding child sexual abuse disclosure as an interconnected process that unfolds over the life course is a critical finding. Rather than a single event, disclosure was experienced as an evolving, non-linear process. Participants described multiple disclosures across their lifespan, often shaped by life events, personal development, and shifting social contexts.
- **Disclosure is a Two-Way Street:** Disclosure occurs within the context of relationships and heavily depends on the recipient's response, rather than being a one-way process of information sharing. The initial response to disclosure will also often determine if the victim/survivor chooses to disclose again. Better equipping professional and community members to provide more supportive responses to disclosure is critically important.
- **Control as Central to Positive Experiences:** A consistent theme was the importance of agency. Disclosures made in high-control environments (where participants could choose the timing, recipient, and content) were more likely to result in positive outcomes. Conversely, low-control disclosures, especially in childhood, often led to distress and long-term harm.
- **Improvements Over Time:** Participants generally perceived that responses to disclosures have improved, particularly from professionals such as psychologists and police. These improvements were attributed to increased public awareness, institutional reforms following the Royal Commission, and the availability of trauma-informed services.
- **Persistent Systemic Challenges:** Despite progress, significant barriers remain. The criminal justice system was frequently cited as retraumatizing, with participants reporting feelings of powerlessness, disbelief, and procedural failures. Some disclosures still resulted in negative or dismissive responses, particularly from family members or institutions with vested interests.
- **Barriers to Disclosure:** Key obstacles included fear of not being believed, lack of emotional readiness, absence of trusted adults, and societal norms (especially around masculinity) that discouraged vulnerability. Grooming and manipulation by perpetrators further complicated the ability to disclose.

Gender stereotypes and myths about child sexual abuse can have a significant impact on victim-survivors. For instance, males may feel stigmatised, while other victims may experience shame when deciding whether to disclose the abuse.

- **Diverse Trajectories:** Participants' experiences varied widely based on gender, age, abuse context (familial vs. institutional), and cultural background. Notably, the study had limited representation from Aboriginal and Culturally and Racially diverse (CARM) communities, highlighting the need for more inclusive research and inclusive ways to initiate and welcome disclosure.

Recommendations

1. **Embed control and agency into the disclosure process:** Design disclosure-related services and systems to prioritise victim-survivor control, autonomy and choice that foster environments that prioritise safety and trust. As disclosure unfolds over a life course, having agency over that process is fundamental to positive outcomes.
2. **Strengthen professional capacity to receive disclosure:** Mandate ongoing training for professionals across health, justice, education and social services in trauma-informed, disclosure-sensitive practices to avoid re-traumatisation with the disclosure process (particularly in justice systems).
3. **Gender, sexuality, context, and era strongly shape disclosure experiences:** Whilst many experiences for victim-survivors have similarities, it is important to better understand how gender, sexuality, context, age, and culture can shape disclosure outcomes. Research is needed to improve responses that are sensitive and practical to these factors. Recognition of barriers are needed in service systems practices, such as, different challenges for male and female victim-survivors.
4. **Expand culturally safe and inclusive disclosure pathways:** Develop and fund culturally responsive disclosure pathways, particularly for First Nations and CARM communities. Tailored approaches are essential to ensure accessibility and trust in the disclosure process, especially given the distinct historical and socio-cultural challenges these marginalised communities already face.

Fact Sheet 4

Disclosures of CSA in Australia through the life course: Survey results

This online survey had 86 participants (82% women; 13% men; 5% non-binary) who all identified as victim-survivors of child sexual abuse. Results shows that most recent disclosures as an adult were more positive than initial disclosure experiences.

- Over 75% of participants first disclosure was as a child.
- Initial disclosures were most often made to a parent.
- The trigger for the initial disclosure was most often related to seeking safety or needing support with the impact.
- Most responses to initial disclosures were negative such as disbelief or no protective action.
- Across the life course disclosures move from parents and child friends to romantic partners and adult friend or relative. Professionals have a consistent role in disclosures across the life course.
- Men were less likely to disclose than women.
- Recent disclosures by adults were most often made to professionals with the aim of both seeking help with impacts and breaking the silence. There were also triggers to disclose because of not coping and wanting to seek closure.
- Older victim-survivors often seek support to deal with the impact of child sexual abuse from professionals as the first point for disclosure.
- Accidental disclosure most often occurred in childhood
- The majority of recent disclosures were met with believing, supportive, empathetic or kind responses.
- More recent disclosures since the conclusion of the Royal Commission have improved, with 79% receiving at least one supportive response. However, this is most attributable to professionals rather than responses from personal relationship such family or friends.
- As victim-survivors move through the life course they make disclosures often to seek justice and with the aim of breaking societal silence on child sexual abuse.