

# Childhood Sexual Abuse

## Executive Summary

**Note:** This is one of three Bar Book chapters considering the specific impacts of different forms of child abuse and neglect. This chapter should be read in conjunction with the [‘Child Abuse and Neglect’](#) and [‘Childhood Exposure to Family Violence’](#) chapters.

A ‘robust body of research evidence now clearly demonstrates the link between child sexual abuse and a spectrum of adverse mental health, social, sexual, interpersonal and behavioural as well as physical health consequences’.<sup>1</sup> The impacts of childhood experiences of sexual abuse manifest differently in each individual and may change over time.<sup>2</sup> However, mental health disorders associated with experiences of child sexual abuse are often lifelong.<sup>3</sup>

Girls are twice as likely as boys to experience child sexual abuse. More than one in three (37.3%) girls in Australia, and almost one in five (18.8%) boys, experience child sexual abuse. Reported rates are consistent across age groups from youth aged 16–24 years to adults aged 65 years and above.<sup>4</sup>

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse found that the impacts of child sexual abuse are ‘interconnected in complex ways’, making specific impacts difficult to isolate.<sup>5</sup>

The trauma caused by child sexual abuse may interrupt normal psychosocial development in victims and affect the biological, social and psychological development of a child:

Child sexual abuse can result in profound trauma, affecting the chemistry, structure and function of the developing brain and potentially interrupting normal psychosocial development at every critical stage of a child’s formative years.<sup>6</sup>

Significant negative mental health effects that have been consistently associated with child sexual abuse include post-traumatic symptoms, major depression, substance use disorders, helplessness, negative attributions, aggressive behaviours and conduct problems, eating disorders and anxiety.<sup>7</sup> Increased risk of alcohol and drug dependence<sup>8</sup> is often reported as a means of coping with the psychological trauma of having been abused.<sup>9</sup>

Women survivors of child sexual abuse are five times more likely to experience revictimisation in adulthood, mostly through interpersonal crimes, and men are seven times more likely to be revictimised compared to women and men in the community with no known history of child sexual abuse.<sup>10</sup>

Survivors of child sexual abuse may also be at greater risk of engaging in risky behaviours, particularly risky sexual behaviours, during both adolescence and adulthood.<sup>11</sup> Other adverse consequences may include:

- negative health outcomes;<sup>12</sup>
- poor educational outcomes;<sup>13</sup>

- underemployment;<sup>14</sup>
- housing insecurity;<sup>15</sup> and
- ongoing distrust and fear of institutions and authority, especially where the abuse occurred in an institutional context.<sup>16</sup>

The potential relevance of evidence of childhood sexual abuse in sentencing proceedings includes an assessment of *moral culpability*; moderating the weight to be given to *general deterrence*; and determining the weight to be given to *specific deterrence* and *protection of the community*. There may also be issues relating to the likelihood of *hardship in custody*, a finding of *special circumstances* and the shaping of conditions to enhance prospects of *rehabilitation*.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Family Studies, '[The Long-Term Effects of Child Sexual Abuse](#)' (CFCA Paper No 11, January 2013) 23.

<sup>2</sup> Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Final Report* (2017) [vol 3](#), 25.

<sup>3</sup> Divna Haslam et al, '[The Prevalence and Impact of Child Maltreatment in Australia: Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study](#)' (Brief Report, Australian Child Maltreatment Study, Queensland University of Technology, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* 17–18.

<sup>5</sup> Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (n 2) [vol 3](#), 11.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>7</sup> Australian Institute of Family Studies, '[The Long-Term Effects of Child Sexual Abuse](#)' (n 1) 8.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>9</sup> Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (n 2) [vol 3](#), 11.

<sup>10</sup> Nina Papalia et al, '[Child Sexual Abuse and Risk of Revictimization: Impact of Child Demographics, Sexual Abuse Characteristics, and Psychiatric Disorders](#)' (2020) 26(1) *Child Maltreatment* 74, 80.

<sup>11</sup> Australian Institute of Family Studies, '[The Long-Term Effects of Child Sexual Abuse](#)' (n 1) 13.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid* 18.

<sup>13</sup> Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (n 2) [vol 3](#), 146.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid* [vol 3](#), 152–3.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid* [vol 3](#), 155.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid* [vol 3](#), 138. The Royal Commission reported that 32.7% of survivors who gave evidence to the Royal Commission in private sessions discussed a lack of trust in authority as a result of their experiences of abuse.