The impacts of institutional child sexual abuse: A rapid review of the evidence

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ABSTRACT

While awareness of institutional child sexual abuse has grown in recent years, there remains limited understanding of its occurrence and outcomes as a distinct form of abuse. Drawing on research commissioned by the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, this article presents a rapid review of available evidence on the impacts of institutional abuse on victim/survivors. Literature searches identified 75 sources spanning international peer reviewed work and reports to Government that document or quantify the impacts of mostly historical child sexual abuse occurring in religious, educational, sporting and residential or out-of-home care settings. Consistent with child sexual abuse in other contexts, institutional child sexual abuse is found to be associated with numerous, pervasive and connected impacts upon the psychological, physical, social, educative and economic wellbeing of victims/survivors. Further, institutional child sexual abuse is associated with vicarious trauma at the individual, family and community level, and with impacts to the spiritual wellbeing of victims/survivors of abuse that occurs in religious settings. The identified literature suggests the trauma of institutional child sexual abuse may be exacerbated by the interplay of abuse dynamics in institutional settings, which may reduce or impede circumstances supporting disclosure, belief, support and protection from future harm. Acknowledging the limitations of the present study and the available evidence, this narrative synthesis provides insights into the complex impacts of institutional child sexual abuse.

1. Introduction

Awareness of child sexual abuse has grown exponentially over the past five decades. Studies of both intra-familial and extra-familial child sexual abuse have strengthened public and professional understandings of the occurrence of abuse and its outcomes for victims/survivors. Despite diverse foci, methods and scope, research consistently finds a “significant link between a history of child sexual abuse and a range of adverse impacts both in childhood and adulthood” (Cashmore & Shackel, 2013, p. 2). Systematic and meta-analytic reviews demonstrate that child sexual abuse is associated with negative impacts to both psychological (e.g., Carr, Martins, Stingel, Lemgruber, & Juruena, 2013; Maniglo, 2012); and social wellbeing (e.g., DiLillo & Damashek, 2003; Noll, Shenk, & Putnam, 2008) as well as physical health (e.g., Hulme, 2011; Irish, Kobayashi, & Delahanty, 2009) and educational and economic outcomes (e.g., Paolucci, Genuis, & Violato, 2001). By contrast, while abuse and neglect of children in institutional contexts has been documented since the early 1900s (e.g., Bryce, 1907, 1909, 1922), and identified as a social problem since the 1970s (Gil,
1.3. Characteristics of institutional child sexual abuse

While primarily distinguished from intra-familial or extra-familial child sexual abuse by the physical settings in which abuse...
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