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Research article

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,

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1975), the impacts of this distinct form of abuse are relatively unknown. Described as a field in its “relative infancy” (Fogler, Shipherd, Clarke, Jensen, & Rowe, 2008, p. 349), existing research on institutional child sexual abuse has tended to focus on issues of conceptualization, quantification and the description of cases. Research focused on the impacts of institutional abuse has been limited, despite evidence to a growing number of inquiries worldwide of the common and often damaging experiences of victims/survivors (e.g., Sköld 2013; Wright, 2017, *this issue*).

The research presented herein draws upon a larger report commissioned by the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (Australian Government, 2013). It documents the results of a rapid review and narrative synthesis of the available evidence on the impacts of institutional child sexual abuse on victims/survivors. Guided by the research question; “what impacts does institutional child sexual abuse have on victims/survivors?” this review aimed to identify key findings relating to the impacts of child sexual abuse perpetrated in schools, foster care and out-of-home care, residential schools and care facilities, sporting organizations, hospitals and religious institutions. Drawing on data from international peer reviewed journal articles and reports to government and public inquiries, a rapid review method was adopted (Ganann et al., 2010). Conducted with a specific focus on documented impacts of institutional abuse, this accelerated approach to evidence synthesis (Kelly & Moher, 2016), provided timely evidence on the known impacts of institutional child sexual abuse and highlighted gaps in the existing evidence base concerning effective responses. Providing context and background to the review, the following sections outline the definition of institutional child sexual abuse adopted, information on the scope and scale of the problem and data regarding the characteristics of institutional child sexual abuse.

1.1. Definition of institutional child sexual abuse

Institutional child sexual abuse is distinguished from other forms of child sexual abuse by the situations and settings in which perpetrators come into contact with their victims. This rapid review was framed by the working definition of institutional child sexual abuse adopted by the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual abuse in its Terms of Reference (Australian Government, 2013). Therein child sexual abuse happens in an institutional context, if for example;

- i. it happens on premises of an institution, where activities of an institution take place, or in connection with the activities of an institution; or
- ii. it is engaged in by an official of an institution in circumstances (including circumstances involving settings not directly controlled by the institution) where you consider that the institution has, or its activities have, created, facilitated, increased, or in any way contributed to, (whether by act or omission) the risk of child sexual abuse or the circumstances or conditions giving rise to that risk; or
- iii. it happens in any other circumstances where you consider that an institution is, or should be treated as being, responsible for adults having contact with children.

The definition adopted covers a wide spectrum of abuse acts and behaviours, a range of locations or settings in which abuse can occur – including but not limited to religious organisations, childcare and educational settings, out-of-home care (including kinship, foster and residential care), health settings and sporting and community organisations.

1.2. Scope of the problem

Little is known about the incidence and prevalence of institutional child sexual abuse. Consistent with abuse in other settings, reported estimates are influenced by methodological issues including definitions used, populations studied and the data collected (Biehal, 2014; Daly, 2014; Goldman & Padayachi, 2000). The largest and most comprehensive studies of institutional child sexual abuse are those which have focused on abuse perpetrated by representatives of religious orders. Studies conducted by John Jay College (2004a, 2004b) found that between 1950 and 2002 in the United States, 4392 priests representing 4% of clergy were the subject of child sexual abuse allegations involving 10,667 victims/survivors. Langeland, Hoogendoorn, Mager, Smit, & Draijer, 2015) estimate 1.7% of Dutch citizens experienced child sexual abuse by representatives of the Catholic Church during the period 1945–1989, with those in institutional care (e.g., orphanages, boarding, reformatory and trade or training schools and foster care) reporting rates of abuse more than six times greater than those not in institutional care.

Across the literature, some of the highest reported rates of institutional child sexual abuse are those based on evidence provided to government or public inquiries. In Australia, 20.9% of the 889 respondents to the “Forgotten Australians” inquiry reported experiencing sexual abuse whilst in institutional care between 1940 and 1980 (Australian Senate, 2004). In Ireland, “more than half” of over 1000 informants to the Confidential Committee of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse reported experiencing child sexual abuse in institutional settings between 1914 and 2000 (CICA, 2009, p. 13). While government or public inquiries may constitute a particular context for reporting institutional abuse, given the known significant barriers and obstacles to disclosure, it is likely that understandings of the scope and scale of the problem derived from such sources underestimate its occurrence (Fogler et al., 2008; Parkinson, Oates, & Jayakody, 2009; Parkinson et al. 2012; Smith & Freyd, 2013).

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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