



## Research article

# Reporting rates of child sexual abuse in Indigenous communities in two Australian jurisdictions



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## ABSTRACT

Child sexual abuse is a significant problem in many Indigenous communities; there is also evidence of chronic under-reporting of this crime. This study aimed to compare reporting rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cases of child sexual abuse across two Australian jurisdictions. Datasets comprising child sexual abuse reports from the Police Information Management Systems of the two jurisdictions were used to calculate reporting rates, and to compare case characteristics and case progression. Results indicated that the reporting rate for child sexual abuse of Indigenous children was between two and four times that of non-Indigenous children. In the Indigenous cases, the second jurisdiction had lower reporting rates than the first jurisdiction. Further analysis of the Indigenous cases only found that cases in the second jurisdiction were more severe, more likely to have a forensic interview, and more likely for the suspect to be charged, than in the first jurisdiction. However, there were no significant differences in conviction rates between the two jurisdictions. Differences observed in severity and case progression suggest that the lower reporting rates observed in the second jurisdiction may be due to comparatively high levels of under-reporting, rather than lower actual levels of child sexual abuse. In conclusion, reporting rates of child sexual abuse can be better understood when further information, such as case characteristics and case progression rates, is available.

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## 1. Introduction

High rates of child sexual abuse are a significant problem in Indigenous minority communities globally (Blackstock, Trocmé, & Bennett, 2004; Calma, 2006; Gordon, Hallahan, & Henry, 2002; Guthridge, Ryan, & Bromfield, 2012; Trocmé, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004; University of Auckland, 2008; Wild & Anderson, 2007). Further, rates of under-reporting in these communities are estimated to be significantly higher than in non-Indigenous communities, where issues with reporting child sexual abuse to authorities are exacerbated (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2009; Bromfield & Holzer, 2008; Stanley, Tomison, & Pocock, 2003). The New South Wales Ombudsman described the number of reported cases of child sexual abuse in Indigenous communities as “only the ‘tip of the iceberg’” (2012, p iv).

Addressing child sexual abuse in Indigenous communities is of great concern to both Indigenous community leaders and to government (Aboriginal Child Sexual Assault Taskforce, 2006; Berlyn, Bromfield, & Lamont, 2011; Blackstock et al., 2004; Coorey, 2001; Daly & Bouhours, 2010; Funston, 2013; Gordon et al., 2002; Mulligan, 2008; Stanley et al., 2003; Trocmé

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et al., 2004; Wild & Anderson, 2007). Despite enquiries and reforms, child sexual abuse in Indigenous communities has continued to be a problem, highlighting the complex and multifaceted nature of this issue (Calma, 2006). Data required to adequately investigate these issues have been difficult to obtain (Kerr, 2003; New South Wales Ombudsman, 2012). Furthermore, literature describing the intent, impact and practical implementation of reforms has been scarce (Thompson, Greville, & Param, 2008).

A primary focus of reform in the policing of sexual abuse in Indigenous communities has been to increase reporting rates, so that cases can be brought into the criminal justice system (Mace & Powell, 2012). Police and child protection workers form a dual investigation system in Australia. They are the entry point into the criminal justice system and are crucial in the detection and successful prosecution of child sexual abuse cases (Taylor & Gassner, 2010). In effect, these professionals act as 'gatekeepers' for victims access to this system (Kerstetter, 1990). Taylor and Gassner found that victims generally have lack of confidence in both the police and the criminal justice system, which reduces the likelihood of reporting sexual abuse.

Lack of confidence in the criminal justice system is particularly felt by Indigenous victims, for whom barriers to reporting sexual abuse are compounded by the often poor relationships of Indigenous communities with police and welfare agencies (Australian Government Department of Social Services, 2012; Hunter, 2008). Relationships between Indigenous communities and service providers have been adversely impacted by the removal of children over generations. The effects of the stolen generation and high rates of out of home care are still significantly affecting Indigenous children (Aboriginal Child Sexual Assault Taskforce, 2006; Bromfield & Holzer, 2008; Dudgeon et al., 2014; Funston, 2013; Willis, 2011). The likelihood of disclosing abuse is increased when the victim has some expectation that their complaints will be acted upon in an appropriate manner, and increase their safety rather than diminish it (Malloy, Brubacher, & Lamb, 2011). Reporting abuse is increasingly challenging if children fear that it could result in them being removed from their homes (Pipe, Lamb, Orbach, & Cederborg, 2013). For Indigenous families, feelings of distrust and of there being nowhere to turn have been exacerbated by both historic and contemporary instances of children being taken by authorities.

In order to increase reporting rates, a proactive, whole of government, community engagement approach has been adopted for trial in some areas (Bailey, Mace, & Powell, 2016; Mace & Powell, 2012; Mace, Powell, & Benson, 2015). Evaluations of these interventions have been promising, with an increase in reporting and arrest rates observed in intervention areas (Bailey, Mace, Powell, & Benson, 2015), and strong support for the program from Indigenous stakeholders (Bailey & Powell, 2016). Consideration of the best ways for the criminal justice system to respond to Indigenous child sexual abuse is crucial in order to improve outcomes for Indigenous children, and to try to break the cycles of abuse.

Whilst there is evidence that there are differences in the progression (or attrition) of Indigenous versus non-Indigenous cases through the criminal justice system (Bailey, Powell, & Brubacher, 2017), what is not known is whether these characteristics are similar across jurisdictions, or whether policing and prosecution differences are apparent for Indigenous children in different jurisdictions. This question is important, as reform in policing in this area has been on the agendas of many jurisdictions.

In the current study, data from two Australian jurisdictions were analysed. Both jurisdictions were very large in size, and sparsely populated. They had a different demographic spread, with Indigenous persons contributing to 3–4% of the population in Jurisdiction A, and approximately 30% of the population in Jurisdiction B (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Jurisdiction A had approximately ten times the population, and a higher proportion being urban, compared to Jurisdiction B (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). These differences suggest that the exosystems of the jurisdictions may differ (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). Both Indigenous peoples, and their exosystems are heterogeneous, and these two jurisdictions have been studied within this context; for instance, where Indigenous representation is large (30%) and small (4%).

The overall aim of the current study was to compare reporting rates and criminal justice responses to cases of child sexual abuse, between two Australian jurisdictions. The first specific aim was to compare reporting rates of cases of child sexual abuse between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children and across the jurisdictions. Secondly, the study aimed to compare case characteristics and case tracking, in order to provide context for differences found in reporting rates between groups.

## 2. Method

The current study has been conducted in line with the principals of the Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2012), and within the ethics guidelines as outlined in the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (2013) report: *Researching Right Way; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research Ethics: A Domestic and International Review*. This analysis has not added to the research burden on Indigenous Australians, as it has used information that had been collected for administrative purposes. Further, it is strongly hoped that the dissemination of this information will enable a more targeted and effective policy approach.

### 2.1. Procedure

Data collection was approved by the University Human Research Ethics Committee and the research committees associated with the relevant jurisdictions. Data were obtained from a search of the police information management systems of two jurisdictions for all cases of child sexual abuse for the allocated time frames, by setting parameters for date and type of offence, and collating the relevant case identification numbers. Each case was then read in its entirety and the relevant data

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