



MEDIA REPORTING OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN AUSTRALIA 2020-2022: RESEARCH REPORT



UNIVERSITY OF
CANBERRA

| NEWS AND MEDIA
RESEARCH CENTRE

MEDIA REPORTING OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN AUSTRALIA 2020-2022: RESEARCH REPORT

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND TERMINOLOGY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The University of Canberra and the National Office for Child Safety acknowledge the Ngunnawal people, traditional custodians of the lands where we work and live. We wish to acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and contribution they make to the life of Canberra and the region. We also acknowledge all other First Nations Peoples who may engage with these Guides.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND THANKS

We acknowledge and pay our deep respects to those people who have been impacted by child sexual abuse and any people that may be impacted by this document. We thank the victims and survivors, advocates, service providers and media professionals who gave their valuable time and insights to contribute to the development of the Guides.

A BRIEF NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

In this report we use the term 'victims and survivors' to describe people who have been subjected to child sexual abuse. In line with a trauma-informed approach, we acknowledge that as part of the informed consent process, victims and survivors have the right to define their identity and the terms 'victim' and 'survivor' can for some be considered as existing on a continuum of recovery. We also recognise that some people may not identify with either of these terms.

FUNDING NOTE

The project was commissioned by the National Office for Child Safety (National Office), Commonwealth Attorney General's Department. The views expressed in this report are the authors own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Office. Background research was conducted through the Australian Research Council funded *Breaking Silences: Media and the Child Abuse Royal Commission* project (DP190101282).

WHERE TO GET HELP

Please note that this document includes material about child sexual abuse and its portrayal in media that some people might find disturbing. Help is available if you or someone you know has experienced, are experiencing, or are concerned a child or young person may be at risk of harm including child sexual abuse. If you need assistance or support, the National Office for Child Safety support services page provides a list of dedicated services at <https://childsafety.gov.au>.

Bravehearts – 1800 272 831

Blue Knot Foundation – 1300 657 380

SAMSN Survivors & Mates Support Network – 1800 472 676

Lifeline – 13 11 14

Kids Helpline – 1800 55 1800

13YARN – 13 92 76

QLife – 1800 184 527

1800RESPECT – 1800 737 732

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

News media are a powerful social institution that both constructs and reproduces public understanding of key social issues. When done well, reporting can inform public understanding, increase community awareness, provide accurate information and convey the views and experiences of those impacted by child sexual abuse. However, the literature shows media reporting has contributed to the denial and taboo associated with child sexual abuse, and problematic news stories can reinforce stereotypes and cause further harm and trauma.

In 2022, the National Office for Child Safety commissioned the University of Canberra's News & Media Research Centre (N&MRC) to develop evidence-based Guides for journalists and those with lived experience in their dealings with media, supporting key themes from the National Office's work through the *National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021-2030*.

The Media Guides for Reporting Child Sexual Abuse project was conducted by the N&MRC from June 2022 July 2023. Preliminary research informed the development of draft Guides, including: a review of academic literature on the role of media in reporting on and shaping public understandings of child sexual abuse; an evaluation of existing guidance for media and for people with lived experience on related topics, and an analysis of news media reporting from April 2020-March 2022 across print, broadcast and online media.

Following consultation with victims and survivors, advocacy organisations and media professionals the Guides were revised and publicly released in July 2023. Titled: *Reporting on Child Sexual Abuse: Guidance for Media and Engaging with Media about Child Sexual Abuse: For Victims and Survivors* (the Guides), they are available at <https://www.childsafety.gov.au/mediaguides>.

This report summarises the key findings from the Media Analysis phase of the project. A content analysis of 5,873 items of news from April 2020-March 2022 identified the features of reporting, including volume, topic, source, focus, setting, framing, spokespeople and supporting information.

Textual analysis explored the framing of the story and how language was used appropriately or problematically, and identified best practice exemplars of media reporting. The use of exemplar headlines is not designed to call out individual journalists, but to provide examples of best practice and problematic reporting. Nor does it necessarily reflect outlets' reporting of other issues.

This analysis, alongside the other project elements, helped define the core content of the Guides.

MEDIA ANALYSIS - KEY FINDINGS

Episodic and thematic framing. While journalists and news organisations help bring the issue of child sexual abuse to public attention and provide a language to discuss the issue, reporting tends to present child sexual abuse in terms of isolated incidents, individual case studies and discrete events (referred to as ‘episodic framing’), rather than the wider contexts, causes and perspectives of victims and survivors, as well as legislative and/or policy responses (‘thematic framing’).

Across all media platforms the vast majority of news reports primarily framed news about child sexual abuse episodically or as ‘snapshots’ of criminal offending. This included 75% of all online media reports and newspaper articles and 63% of broadcast news. Around 10% of news items were primarily thematic or discussion-based news items.

Best practice reporting is thematic, victim-centred and trauma-informed. Best practice reporting on child sexual abuse is often driven by high profile cases, where journalists are resourced to investigate the causes, experiences and impacts of child sexual abuse on victims and survivors. This reporting addresses the issue at a broader systemic level, considers wider social implications and legal/policy reforms, incorporates a range of perspectives, and foregrounds victims and survivors as sources.

Courts the dominant source of news. Over a third of all news pertaining to child sexual abuse originated from criminal justice or legal proceedings. Legal and criminal justice professionals are the sources most often interviewed, quoted or paraphrased.

News focuses on the perpetrator. In approximately 40% of all news pertaining to child sexual abuse the perpetrator was the main focus of the news.

Celebrities the focus of news stories. Between one quarter and one third of all news reports were about child sexual abuse involving celebrities or other high-profile figures. International news about child sexual abuse by high-profile individuals is often treated without the care and respect given to local cases.

Online/digital the most common location of abuse in media stories. The largest number of stories related to cases of abuse that occurred online or in digital spaces, followed by religious institutions, ‘other’ locations, school, home and sporting locations. This is a significant finding that reflects the high number of criminal cases concerning child sexual abuse material in the digital age.

Overshadowing of priority groups. Just 10% of online and 9% of newspaper items were coded as being about child sexual abuse involving First Nations peoples, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, people with disability, LGBTQIA+ people, and people living in rural and remote communities. This ‘overshadowing’ of abuse among ‘priority’ groups as identified by the National Strategy has potentially significant impacts on public understanding of child sexual abuse.

Limited information about support services. Only a small proportion of media reports about child sexual abuse included information about where to seek help, advice or further information.

Problematic language. We identified a range of problematic language in news headlines and stories. Half of all online news headlines about child sexual abuse were classified as sensational, clickbait or both. We identified widespread use of sensationalist, gratuitous, de humanising, trivialising, glamourising, masking, minimising, sanitising, stigmatising and victim blaming language. The potential impacts of such editing and reporting are profoundly damaging for wider community understanding, and may be harmful and retraumatising for those with lived experience.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The analysis highlighted a range of content and approaches to be considered in the draft Guides that could improve and encourage best practice reporting, minimise harm and encourage the considered public discussion of child sexual abuse.

- Newsrooms should provide training and resources to encourage a victim and survivor-centred, trauma informed and thematic approach to researching and writing news stories. This includes access to accurate research and information about the nature, prevalence and impacts of child sexual abuse.
- Journalists and editors must be made aware that routine practices of reporting newsworthy stories can also be harmful to readers, both those with lived experience and the wider public.
- Reporting of child sexual abuse needs to be reframed to highlight the voices and experiences of victims and survivors rather than perpetrators; to focus on thematic as opposed to episodic reporting; and to always include support services.
- Particular attention should be paid to avoid sensationalist and stigmatising language in news headlines, and care must be taken in the choice and positioning of images and advertising.
- Comprehensive and accessible guidance, such as these Guides, should be made widely available and include supporting information and training for editors and news managers, as well as journalists and journalism educators.
- While it is the news media's responsibility to ensure best practice reporting, it is also important to support victims and survivors in their interactions with news media. Comprehensive and accessible guidance, such as these Guides, should be made available to and victims and survivors, their families and advocates in their interactions with news media.
- The Guides cannot, on their own, change public understanding of child sexual abuse, but their adoption can be part of the wider education and building of awareness among the entire community.

2. BACKGROUND: MEDIA GUIDES FOR REPORTING ON CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE PROJECT

AIMS OF THE PROJECT

The Media Guides for Reporting Child Sexual Abuse project aimed to produce evidence-based guides for journalists reporting on child sexual abuse and to empower victims and survivors in their interactions with media.

We were guided in the development of these resources by a victim and survivor-centred, trauma-informed approach aimed at empowering victims and survivors and encouraging news media to responsibly report on child sexual abuse within the core principles of trust, choice, collaboration, empowerment and respect for diversity.

The project was commissioned by the National Office for Child Safety (National Office) in the Commonwealth Attorney General's Department. The project was approved by the University of Canberra Human Research Ethics Committee (2199, 11/10/22).

PROJECT PHASES AND STAGES¹

1. Review of academic literature on the role of media in reporting on and shaping public understandings of child sexual abuse.
2. **Evaluation of existing media guidelines and guides for people with lived experience on related topics.**
3. **Analysis of news media reporting from April 2020-March 2022 across print, broadcast and online media.**
4. Development of guides for media reporting on child sexual abuse and for victims and survivors in their engagement with media (the Guides; <https://www.childsafety.gov.au/mediaguides>).
5. Consultation with stakeholders from media, and victim and survivor advocacy organisations.

REVIEW OF ACADEMIC LITERATURE

There is an extensive literature across a range of academic disciplines that informs understanding of how news media reports on child sexual abuse and its role in shaping public knowledge. We trace the emergence of the issue on the public agenda and review academic studies of how child sexual abuse is typically framed in news reporting.

REVIEW OF GUIDELINES

As there are currently no existing guidelines for media reporting on child sexual abuse in Australia, the research team undertook a comprehensive review and assessment of media guidelines on related issues. It also reviewed existing guides for victims and survivors of child sexual abuse and related issues in their engagements with news media. Phase 2 is summarised in brief in this Report.

MEDIA ANALYSIS

In this Report we present the findings of a project that analysed contemporary Australian news media reporting of child sexual abuse (Phase 3). The aim of the project was to provide an overview of quantitative features and the qualitative nature of news media reporting on child sexual abuse in Australia. The following research questions guided the research:

1. How was child sexual abuse reported in Australia's news media from 2020-22?
2. What are the key topics, voices and frames in news reporting of child sexual abuse?
3. What guidance is needed to improve reporting of child sexual abuse and to empower victims and survivors in their interactions with news media?

Quantitative media analysis

We undertook a content analysis of 5,873 items of print, online and broadcast media from 1 April 2020-30 March 2022. Data was sourced from the iSentia database and supplemented with material manually collected using the Lexis Nexis database and online news sites.

¹ This report addresses Phases 2 and 3. Phases 1 and 4 were for internal uses only; the summary report of Phase 5 is publicly available at: www.canberra.edu.au/nmrc-media-guides.

A sample of items were coded across 27 variables according to a co-designed coding instrument based on the findings of the academic and guidelines reviews, and quantitatively analysed to identify the key features of reporting, including volume, topic, source, focus, setting, framing, spokespeople and supporting information.

Qualitative media analysis

Based on a scan of all online and print news items we selected exemplar news reports and reporting practices for closer qualitative analysis to explain how the story of child sexual abuse was told. Drawing on the principles of news framing, we identified examples of 'episodic' and 'thematic' reporting, which stories, institutions and individuals received the most attention in the reporting, the voices amplified and the overarching narrative.

The use of empowering or sensationalising and/or minimising language, headlines and imagery was identified and analysed. In line with the project's trauma-informed approach, we were attuned to the experiences of, and impacts on, victims and survivors in their interactions with media.

GUIDES DEVELOPMENT

Based on the review of literature, existing guidelines and media analysis, the N&MRC team developed two complementary Guides. Based on advice from the National Strategy Advisory Group, which provides regular advice and input on implementation of the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021-2030 (National Strategy), the

team developed guides for both media professionals (journalists, editors, managers, photographers and producers) and for victims and survivors, their families, friends, advocates and services providers in their interactions with media.

These are titled *Reporting on Child Sexual Abuse: Guidance for Media* and *Engaging with Media about Child Sexual Abuse: For Victims and Survivors* and are referred to throughout this document as the Guides. The Media Guides can be found at: <https://www.childsafety.gov.au/mediaguides>.

CONSULTATION

A comprehensive consultation process in three phases underpinned the project. We thank the victims and survivors, advocates, service providers and media professionals who gave their valuable time and insights to contribute to the development of the Guides.

Participants provided thoughtful, impassioned and practical feedback that illuminated the complexity, challenge and possibility of this topic at the societal, institutional and personal levels. The Consultation Summary Report can be found at: www.canberra.edu.au/nmrc-media-guides.

INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Together with the review of academic literature, guidelines analysis and consultation, the media content and textual analysis provides benchmark data and insights about how the contemporary Australian media report on child sexual abuse. This evidence was foundational for the development of the Guides.



FIGURE 1: Media Guides Project timeline

3. CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE – DEFINITIONS

Child sexual abuse is a crime. The National Strategy defines child sexual abuse as ‘any act that exposes a child or young person to, or involves a child or young person in, sexual activities that: they do not understand; they do not or cannot consent to; are not accepted by the community; are unlawful’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021, p. 17).

The Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS) estimates that more than one in four (28.5%) Australians have experienced child sexual abuse. Those who identify as female were twice as likely to have experienced child sexual abuse compared to males (37.3% of females compared to 18.8% of males) (Haslam et al., 2023).

The ACMS found that child sexual abuse rarely happens once and often co-occurs with other forms of child maltreatment. Most victims and survivors of child sexual abuse (78%) reported that the abuse occurred multiple times. Around four in ten victims and survivors (42%) experienced child sexual abuse more than six times. Around one in ten victims and survivors (11%) experienced it more than 50 times.

The ACMS further identified the profound impacts of child maltreatment, including on mental and physical health outcomes. When compared with people who have not experienced child maltreatment, those who experienced child maltreatment: are more likely to have a mental health disorder (48%), compared with around one in five (21.6%) of those who did not experience maltreatment; are three times more likely to have Major Depressive Disorder (24.6% compared with 8.1%); are 3.9 times more likely to have self harmed in the past year; and are 4.6 times more likely to have attempted suicide in the past year.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2019) found that 79% of child sexual abuse is committed by a friend, relative, acquaintance or neighbour of the victim and survivor.

The online environment is the fastest growing setting for child sexual abuse. Online child sexual abuse is ‘[t]he use of technology or the internet to facilitate the sexual abuse of a child, including the production and sharing of child sexual abuse material online’ (ACCCE, 2023).

Child sexual offenders increasingly commit crimes online including, but not limited to, child sexual abuse material, interactions through online forums, and live stream webcam sexual offending against children (ACCCE, 2023; Bursztein et al., 2019; ICMEC, 2023).

TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE

Trauma-informed practice is framed within the core principles of safety, trust, choice, collaboration, empowerment and respect for diversity. Based on the foundational principle of ‘Do No Harm’, it is a practice that everyone can adopt, rather than a form of ‘treatment’. Putting these principles into action for journalists, trauma-informed practice:

- Understands how stress and trauma can affect the brain and the body, and that ‘symptoms’ can be a way of coping.
- Considers what has happened to the person (not what is ‘wrong’ with the person).
- Is sensitive to the victim and survivor’s experience when conducting the reporting process.
- Collaborates with the victim and survivor as an expert in their own experience.

4. NEWS MEDIA AND CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

A MEDIA STUDIES APPROACH

Media Studies is an academic discipline concerned with the content, history, and impacts of various media. The role of journalists and journalism is a central object of study, with critical perspectives on the news challenging normative tenets of ‘objectivity’ and neutrality. Rather than passive actors, news media are understood as a powerful societal institution that both constructs and reproduces ‘discourse’.

Mediated language is a powerful tool for raising previously hidden issues on national and global agendas, enhancing understanding and providing a language for public discussion of critical issues. News stories also have the power to silence, alienate, trivialise and stigmatise public discussion of critical issues.

KEY CONCEPTS

Agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) refers to news media's ability to raise an issue on the public agenda by focusing attention on some stories over others.

News values guide the type of stories that will be selected and prioritised, with negative stories about conflict and drama, prominent people and human-interest stories more likely to be written and published.

News framing is a concept that explains how issues are presented and defined in news media (de Vreese, 2005). Journalists and editors are responsible for the decisions and selections they make regarding the way a news story is constructed to evoke a particular interpretation or reaction from the audience (Entman, 1993; Kitzinger, 2004; van Gorp, 2007).

Episodic framing refers to journalistic descriptions that focus on a singular person or incident, framing the problem as a private or individual concern rather than a societal issue. Episodic or incident-based reporting tends to focus on current and/or past incidents as if they are one-off or disconnected events with little information or discussion about the social context in which abuse occurs.

Thematic framing tends to focus on the ‘bigger picture’ by identifying, discussing and debating the systemic issues relating to child

sexual abuse including in institutional contexts, as well as legislative and/or policy responses (See Popović, 2018; Weatherred, 2015). While news framed episodically can be in the public interest and raise community awareness of the issue, it is thematically reported news that deepens public understanding.

Overshadowing refers to the tendency of media to privilege stories about powerful groups and individuals at the expense of the marginalised (Waller et al., 2020). Whose voices and perspectives are included, and whose are left out, and what imagery and headlines support the story are active decisions taken by news professionals that help frame the story.

THE EMERGENCE OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE ON THE PUBLIC AGENDA

An overarching observation in the international literature is that the media is a powerful and critical site for raising awareness, communicating messages, shaping perceptions and breaking taboos about child sexual abuse (Popović, 2022). Döring and Walter (2022) note that media has a sensitising role in bringing a previously hidden issue to the public's attention, sourcing and disseminating information about little understood issues.

Historically, news media were one of the powerful institutions implicated in a culture of denial that kept child sexual abuse a taboo subject and enabled individuals and institutions to perpetrate such crimes against children. Kitzinger's (2004) *Framing Abuse* is the foundational text tracing the emergence of the issue of child abuse on the public agenda. She found that prior to the 1960s, child abuse was a largely unacknowledged issue in news media reporting, and that child abuse emerged as a public issue in the 1980s through a series of high-profile media-driven ‘scandals’ (see also Carment, 1987; Weatherred, 2015).

Revelations of abuse within religious settings in the 2000s were pivotal in raising the issues of institutional clergy abuse on the global agenda (Boston Globe, 2015; Powell & Scanlon, 2015a). In Australia, media attention to the issue was driven by the social activism of victims and survivors and their families in their quest for justice (Foster & Kennedy, 2011), and by the ground-breaking work of some investigative journalists (Muller, 2017; Ricketson, 2022).

ROYAL COMMISSION INTO INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE (2013-17)

Victim and survivor activism and investigative journalism have been attributed with raising the issue of institutional child sexual abuse on the national agenda, triggering the calling of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2013-17) by then Prime Minister, Julia Gillard (Child Abuse Royal Commission). Ground-breaking in its breadth, length and resourcing, the inquiry was a national event that gained unprecedented media attention.

Wright, Swain and McPhillips (2017) found that it was pivotal in shifting public discourse around child sexual abuse, giving the Australian public a language with which to talk about this long-silenced issue. Waller et al. (2020) found that intensive and sustained coverage of the Royal Commission's 57 live-streamed public hearings, particularly by the ABC, was pivotal to raising the issues on the public agenda (McCallum et al., 2022).

In the wake of the Child Abuse Royal Commission, several high-profile mediated events have captured news media and public agendas, including the 2018 National Apology to Victims and Survivors of Institutional Child Sexual Abuse (National Apology), the appointment of child sexual abuse survivor Grace Tame as Australian of the Year in 2021, and the High Court decision to acquit Cardinal George Pell of child sexual abuse crimes.

These issues have taken place in a time of disruption in the news media industries and technological change which has seen the rapid increase of online sexual abuse, and highlight the need for research to assess how Australian news media have portrayed the issue since the Child Abuse Royal Commission.

HOW CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IS FRAMED IN NEWS REPORTING

Episodic framing

While journalists and news organisations helped bring the issue of child sexual abuse to public attention and provided a language to discuss the issue, a range of research finds that reporting tends to focus on single events, perpetrators and solutions rather than the wider societal issues and perspectives of victims and survivors.

That is, they are framed 'episodically' rather than 'thematically' (Reichart Smith & Pegoraro, 2020;

Weatherred, 2015). Popović (2018) also found that reporting of child sexual abuse was predominantly episodic and focused on punishment of the perpetrator through the criminal justice system, rather than the wider systemic issues of cause and prevention.

These findings support earlier work by Kitzinger (2000) that found news was largely drawn from a narrow range of official court, government and police sources. Powell and Scanlon concur, saying that '[t]he sociocultural context of the debate is often lost in the public discourse of condemnation and denial' (2015b, n.p.).

Focus on extreme, high-profile cases

Kitzinger (2004) highlights the news media's role in framing public understanding of child abuse in terms of external threats and dangers by perpetrators unknown to the victim and survivor, in public settings rather than in the home. Journalists can feed into myths and stereotypes about child sexual abuse, for example by reinforcing narrow conceptions of child sex offenders being an older, unknown male, when in reality much child sexual abuse takes place within the home and/or by a person known to them, and juvenile abuse is prevalent (Stelzmann & Ischebeck eds., 2022; see also Collings, 2002).

Journalists' news values privilege reporting extreme, high-profile, or 'attention-grabbing' cases. Stories that frame perpetrators as 'evil monsters' can have the effect of distancing child sexual abuse from its everyday settings, fomenting moral panics around 'stranger danger', and silencing the victim while foregrounding the role of the offender (Powell & Scanlon, 2015b; Weathered, 2015). Waller et al. (2020) found that news media focused on crimes by individuals from powerful organisations that fuelled 'scandal' about religious institutions and prominent schools. This style of reporting risks minimising the severity of the crime of child sexual abuse.

Overshadowing

Research for the Breaking Silences project found that uneven patterns of news attention during the Child Abuse Royal Commission privileged already powerful institutions and overshadowed the voices and stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims and survivors, victims and survivors with a disability, culturally and linguistically diverse victims and survivors, and those living in regional or remote areas (Waller et al., 2020).

This is despite the Royal Commission's final report finding that 14% of private session testimonies were from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island survivors and 43% were from those who had experienced out of home care. Dreher and Waller (2022) found that reporting of the National Apology downplayed this finding by the Child Abuse Royal Commission.

Golding (2018) found the Child Abuse Royal Commission and subsequent media coverage focused on institutional child sexual abuse rather than stories about abuse or neglect in family or out of home care settings. Through the establishment of the National Office in July 2018, the Australian Government's response has been to broaden scope from institutions to child sexual abuse more broadly, including online, in families and private settings.

Problematic language, headlines and imagery

The language used in media reporting and headlines is an important consideration beyond the broader framing of child sexual abuse. Headlines are particularly important, as they frame the story for the reader and can contribute to sensationalising, misrepresenting, minimising or distorting the gravity of sexual abuse crimes.

Imprecise or problematic language to describe child sexual abuse such as non specific terms like 'abuse' or 'molestation' can also distort the nature or severity of the crime (Mejia et al., 2012), while commonly-used phrases such as 'engage in', 'sex', and 'intercourse' imply active participation rather than a unilateral act of violence, harmfully obscuring the offender's exclusive culpability (Powell & Scanlon, 2015b).

At worst, they can provide a 'guide' for other abusers by publishing explicit details and material, including images, photos and statements, which can also be used by perpetrators for gratification. While social advocates such as Grace Tame (Grace Tame Foundation, 2023) and Jane Gilmore (Gilmore, 2019) have raised the issue of inaccurate and damaging language in popular media, there is very little research in the Australian context and a comprehensive analysis is needed.

Victims and survivors engaging with media

There is little previous research about survivors of child sexual abuse and their interaction with the media. Popović (2022), in her major review of child sexual abuse reporting, notes that media coverage can violate the victim and survivor's right to privacy and has the potential to re-victimise.

Problematic reporting of child sexual abuse can cause further harm and re-traumatise victims, survivors, and their families, and further spread misinformation about child sexual abuse (Döring & Walter, 2020; Nair, 2019; Popović, 2018; Weatherred, 2015).

On the other hand, news media reporting can give victims and survivors a language with which to make sense of what has happened to them (Kitzinger, 2004; Wright et al., 2017). Cherry (2021) identified a range of factors that shaped the experiences of survivors of trauma in their interactions with media: the survivor's prior experience with the media; encounters with the media in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event; negative impacts of the media including exacerbation of trauma and misinformation; positive impacts of the media including journalists' empathy and kindness; and advice for others.

Popović (2022) contends that careful journalism is crucial in reporting on difficult and traumatic incidents such as child sexual abuse, while Cherry (2021) found media, service providers and the justice system needed to work more closely together in the interests of survivors.

MEDIA GUIDES FOR REPORTING ON CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Media guidelines are a well-established intervention to shape journalists' reporting practices. While they alone cannot address the underlying power structures and discourses reinforced in news media reporting, they can offer practical resources that provide journalists with knowledge and perspectives about the issue and the impacts of their reporting.

In Australia, representative bodies such as the Media, Arts and Entertainment Alliance (MEAA) and the Australian Press Council (APC) produce Codes of Ethics and reporting guides for their members. Individual news organisations also produce guidance for their staff, and the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) manages community complaints about broadcasting.

Outside of the media industries, non-government organisations produce guidelines and training for journalists on reporting on issues such as mental health and illness (Mindframe, 2022), gendered violence (OurWatch, 2023), Disability (Media Diversity Australia, 2023a) and First Nations (Media Diversity Australia, 2023b).

There are currently no codes of practice, standards or guidelines in Australia that specifically address reporting on child sexual abuse. To address the gap, we undertook a review of academic literature, and an empirical evaluation of international and Australian guides on related issues such as domestic and family violence, violence against women and children, suicide, mental illness, and alcohol and other drugs. The limited literature around resources for victims and survivors in their engagement with media was also assessed.

Several overviews reinforce that guides should be educative and encourage journalists to consider the broader societal issues using thematic framing rather than rely on episodic framing of events (Niederkrotenthaler & Sonneck, 2007; Popović, 2022; Skehan, Paton & Tynan, 2020; Uibu, 2021).

Popović (2022) offers an evidence-informed approach to the development of guidelines. She advises that guidelines should attend to: how media should frame child sexual abuse; sources of information about the dynamics and contexts of the issue; reporting that does not promote moral panic; issues around privacy

of the victim and the presentation of the perpetrator; reporting on legal proceedings; the use of appropriate language; and the inclusion of evidence, statistics and advice.

In relation to the development and implementation of guidelines, Niederkrotenthaler and Sonneck (2007) advise that the most effective guidelines are clear, accessible and understandable. Key to the acceptance of guidelines by reporters and media organisations is to consult media workers from the beginning, and to avoid censoring or attacking editorial independence (Pirkis et al., 2006; Skehan, Paton & Tynan, 2020). Sutherland et al. (2016, p. 14) find that including the media industry is key in ensuring their adoption in practice:

The most promising way forward in promoting long-term change in reporting behaviour ... is likely via approaches that engage with the media industry through consultation, collaboration and investment in training.

The most effective guidelines include a multiple dissemination and implementation plan as well as ongoing monitoring, training and evaluation (Bohanna & Wang, 2012; Flego et al., 2022; Machlin et al., 2012; McTernan, et al. 2018; Pirkis et al., 2006; Skehan et al., 2006; Sutherland et al., 2016).

Bohanna and Wang found that 'guidelines can change reporting style and prevent imitative suicide, but that approaches centered on consultation, collaboration, media ownership, and training are likely to achieve the greatest success' (2012, p. 190). The extensive resources, training and consultation conducted by Everymind for Mindframe (2022) guideline to reporting on suicide provide an exemplary model in the Australian context.

5. MEDIA REPORTING OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE 2020-22

AIMS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The National Office contracted the N&MRC at the University of Canberra to provide an evidence base for the development of the Guides.

The aim of the project was to provide a contemporary overview of quantitative features and the qualitative nature of news media reporting of child sexual abuse in Australia. The following research questions guided the research:

1. How was child sexual abuse reported in Australia's news media from 2020-22?
2. What are the key topics, voices and frames in news reporting of child sexual abuse?
3. What guidance is needed to improve reporting of child sexual abuse and to empower victims and survivors in their interactions with news media?

METHODOLOGY

We conducted a mixed methods media analysis incorporating quantitative content analysis and qualitative textual analysis of news media coverage on the topic of child sexual abuse over a two-year period from April 2020-March 2022.

Media monitoring company iSentia was sub-contracted to collect the data and undertake the quantitative broadcast media analysis. Dr Georgina Sutherland from the University of Melbourne was sub contracted to undertake the quantitative content analysis of print and online media. The N&MRC team conducted the literature review and qualitative analysis and compiled the final report.

QUANTITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

Content analysis is a method of systematically identifying and describing the extant features of news media reports. Items are selected for analysis at the article, headline or paragraph level. Typically, a sample of items is selected for coding, which is undertaken by a team of coders, to enable statistical analysis and presentation of the quantified features of the news content.

Sample

In total, 5,873 news media items relating to child sexual abuse were identified in the study period. This comprised 4,338 articles from a selection of print media over the two years from 1 April 2020 to 30 March 2022. A further 1,091 items were retrieved for quantitative analysis from a selection of online news sites from 1 July 2021 to 30 March 2022 and 444 broadcast news items from 1 January-31 March 2022 (See Appendix 1).

Due to the large volume of items on child sexual abuse identified in print (newspaper) and online news sites, 10% of all online and print media items were randomly selected for in-depth content coding, stratified by media outlet. All broadcast news items were selected for in-depth content analysis. The final content analytic sample, therefore, comprised 439 newspaper articles, 109 online news items and 444 broadcast items including both radio and television news.

Coding

Media items were quantitatively coded according to a coding frame developed for this project (See Appendix 2). Content categories included features such as: news genre; topic of story; main actor; whether the abuse was historical or contemporary; where the story originates; where the abuse took place; the main source, or spokesperson; examples of problematic language; and, whether helplines were included.

Two researchers coded a small subset of media reports and from this a detailed coding manual was developed that included adjustments to codes and coding definitions. Using the coding framework and manual to guide and ensure consistency of coding decisions, one researcher then coded the remaining news items. The researchers met regularly to discuss and resolve any coding difficulties and uncertainties that arose.

While we did not calculate inter-rater reliability estimates, our processes to ensure consistency were rigorous and collaborative. Descriptive statistics were used to explore information about the nature of news media reports. Analyses were undertaken using Microsoft Excel.

Qualitative textual analysis

Following the analysis of the quantitative features of news items in our dataset, the research team closely read all items in the dataset to identify and analyse how the story was framed and the specific language used to tell the story of child sexual abuse.

In addition to items sourced and sampled for the content analysis, online items were retrieved directly from news sites for the period 1 April 2020-30 June 2021. The qualitative analysis is therefore based on media reporting across the full two-year period, including print, online and broadcast media from 1 April 2020-30 March 2022.

We identified stories, institutions and individuals that received attention and identified the news values that drove high-profile stories. We explored the factors that led to the dominance of an episodic framing of news about child sexual abuse, including routine court reporting and the prevalence of print and online stories about digital sharing of child sexual abuse material (CSAM).

We then closely analysed the language used in news reporting, paying particular attention to the story's headline, lead paragraph, imagery and supporting information. The use of problematic language was identified using exemplars to illustrate sensationalist, gratuitous, de-humanising and/or minimising language. Our analyses are supported by quotations from news headlines and stories from across the dataset. These are not designed to call out individual journalists, but to provide examples of best practice and problematic reporting.

Exemplars of best practice thematic reporting were closely analysed. In line with the project's trauma informed approach, we were attuned to the experiences of, and impacts on, victims and survivors in their interactions with media.

The final part of the qualitative analysis considered reporting that amplifies victim and survivor voices, considers broader social, political and contextual factors, and includes information and support advice.

Together, the content and textual analysis provided benchmark data and insights about how the contemporary Australian news media report on child sexual abuse. This evidence was foundational for the development of the Guides.

VOLUME OF COVERAGE

NEWSPAPERS

A total of 4,338 newspaper articles in relation to child sexual abuse were retrieved from 16 different print media outlets. Over the two-year data collection period, this equates to an average of around 41 newspaper articles per week across a selection of national, metropolitan (all major capital cities) and regional newspapers (Katherine, Newcastle, Ballarat).

Coverage by outlets

There was a high volume of reporting on child sexual abuse across most selected newspaper outlets, bearing in mind that not all newspapers were daily publications. The highest volume of content appeared in *The Courier Mail* in Brisbane (12%, 539), *The Australian* (12%, 536) and *The Daily Telegraph* in Sydney (11%, 497). These three newspapers are owned by News Corporation, are daily papers, have high circulation rates and accounted for over a third of all newspaper reporting on child sexual abuse.

Apart from *The Katherine Times*, which was a significant outlier with only 12 relevant news items identified in the study period, Ballarat's *The Courier* had the next lowest number of news reports by volume at 4% of the total collected (194/4,338), noting this was one of the few non-daily newspapers selected for monitoring (see Figure 2).

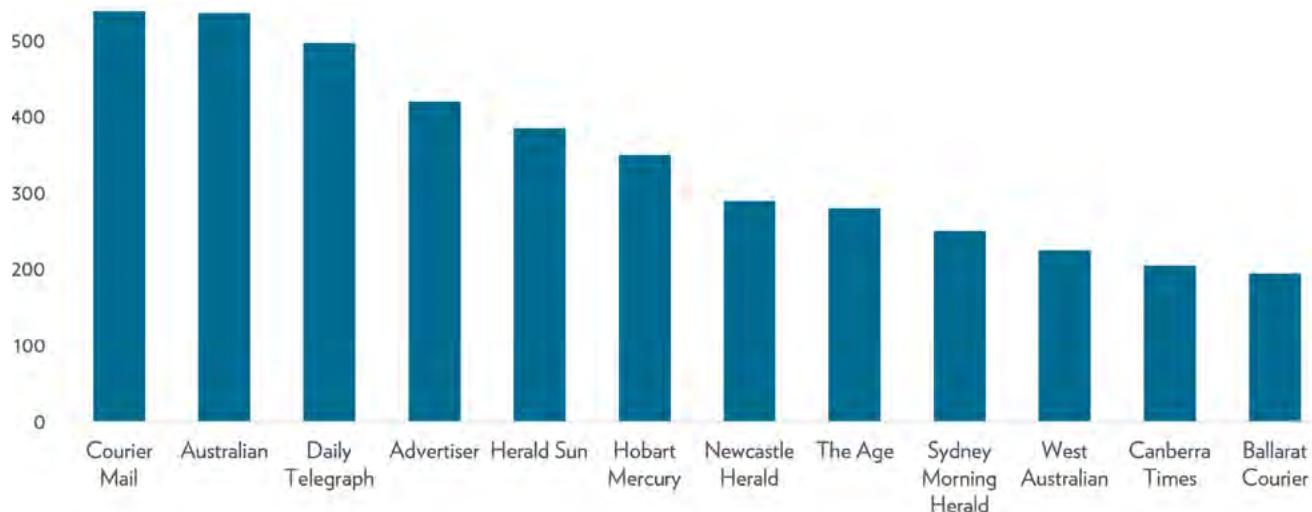


FIGURE 2: Top 12 newspaper outlets by volume of coverage

ONLINE

In the nine-month period of monitoring (July 2021 to March 2023), a total of 1,092 items were captured on child sexual abuse from five online news sites including *Daily Mail Australia*, *news.com.au*, *ABC Online*, *The Guardian Australia* and *World News Australia* (see Figure 3).

Coverage by outlets

Similar to newspaper reporting, there was a high volume of online news reports on child sexual abuse across most sites. The highest number of news reports appeared on *The Guardian Australia* website, accounting for a third of all online news items (33%, 362/1,092), followed by *Daily Mail Australia* (28%, 311) and *ABC Online* (24% 263). Only 29 news reports on child sexual abuse were identified on the *SBS World News Australia* website during the study period (2%).

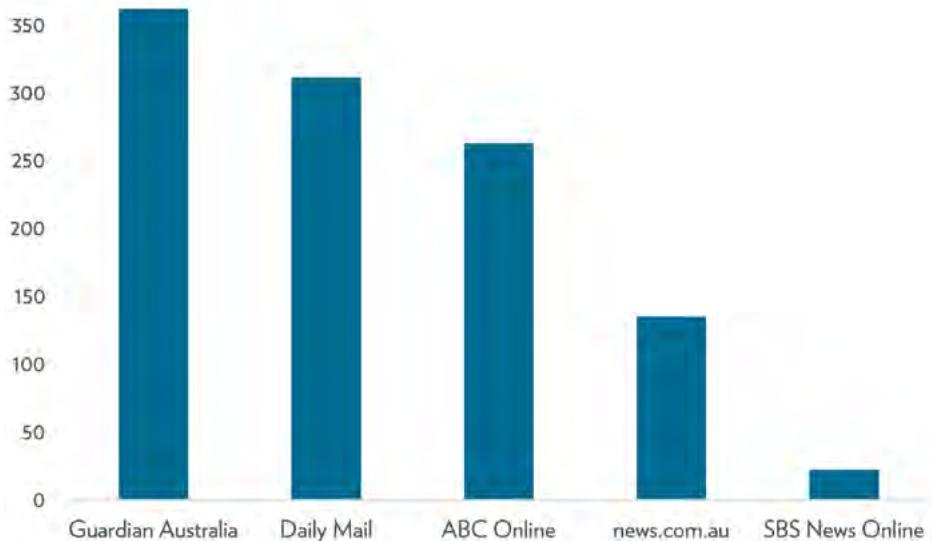


FIGURE 3: Online news coverage, by media outlet

BROADCAST

A total of 444 news broadcast items about child sexual abuse were identified, including 61 radio broadcasts and 383 items screened on television. Radio items were sourced from ABC Melbourne only. Broadcast items were primarily delivered within dedicated news bulletins, but also included interviews and commentaries on news/infotainment programs (e.g., *The Today Show*, *Studio 10*, *ABC Drive*).

QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE RESULTS

To understand the main features of news about child sexual abuse, we coded each sampled print, online and broadcast news item according to type of article or broadcast, source for the story, the main focus or origin of the story including whether the news was in relation to historical or contemporary cases, and the main actors, inclusion of 'priority' groups, and the setting of where the abuse took place.

Story type

Story type refers to different news genres and may include, for example, news articles/bulletins, interviews, features, editorials or investigative reports. News articles/bulletins tend to be the most common mode for news, with a fairly standard format for delivering fact-based information as accurately and objectively as possible.

Other types of news genres, while incorporating elements of news, may be more expansive, expressive, interpretive or opinion based. For example, feature articles or investigative reports are typically longer in length than a standard news article, allowing for more creativity and interpretation.

Results showed that across all media platforms the vast majority of reports about child sexual abuse were contained in news articles (82% online and 89% print) or designated news segments on radio and television broadcasts (77%) (see Figure 4).

The remaining 11% of newspaper articles (after those coded as 'news') were a mixture of feature articles, editorials or opinion pieces; over half of these were in relation to George Pell, the Catholic Church and/or the National Redress Scheme.

Of the items coded, there were only three investigative reports online, all of which appeared on *ABC Online* and three opinion pieces, all of which were on *The Guardian Australia* website. The remaining 12 online reports were feature articles (See Table 3). For broadcast news, the next most common story types (after dedicated news bulletins) were feature articles, commentary and opinion pieces. These types of media items were broadcast on programs that typically offer a portmanteau of news, information and entertainment, such as *The Project*, *The Drum*, *60 Minutes* and *Q&A*.

Source of story

The most common source or origin of evidence for news reports was the courts, with over a third of all news pertaining to child sexual abuse originating from criminal justice or legal proceedings (34% of broadcast news items; 40% of news online; 44% in newspapers) (see Figure 5). A further 15% of newspaper articles, 10% of online, and 7% of broadcast news items originated from an arrest or police conviction (separate from court proceedings).

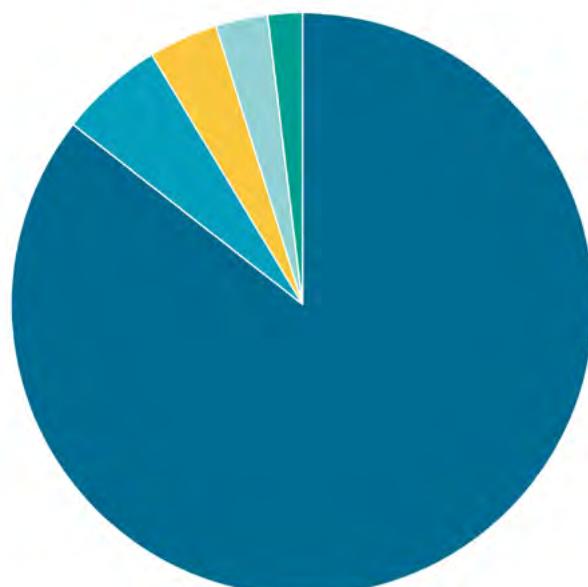


FIGURE 4: Story type (all coded articles)

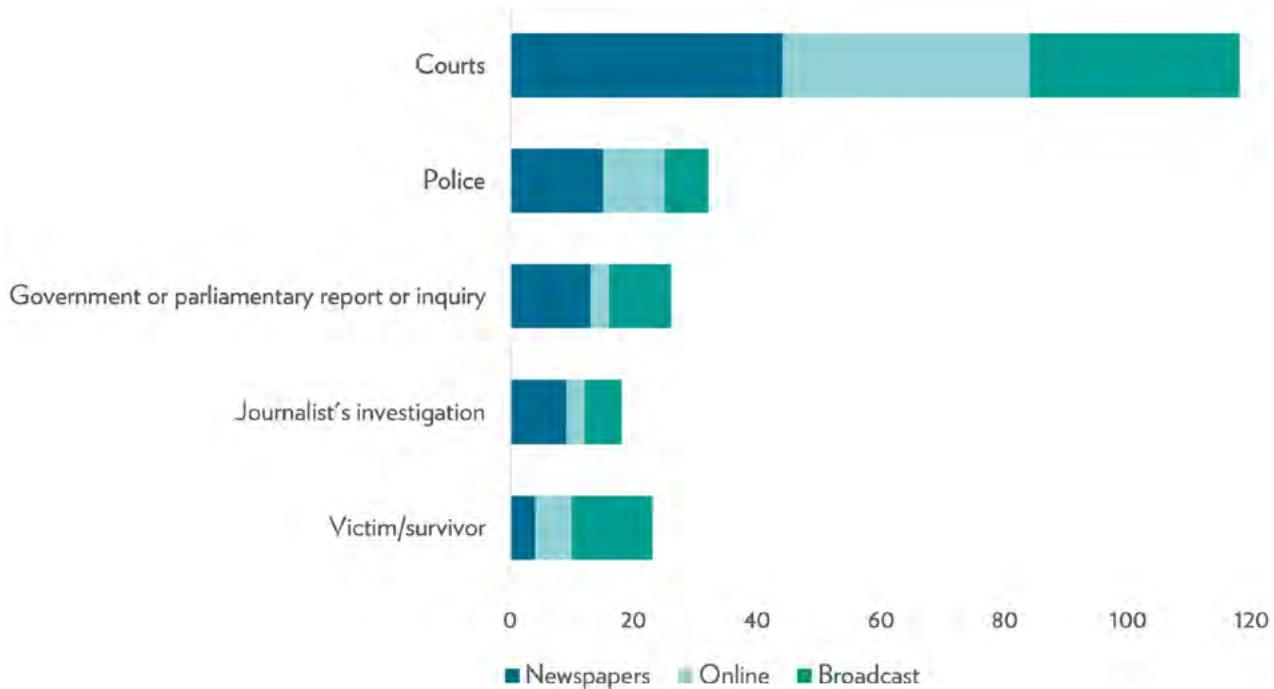


FIGURE 5: Story source – by source and media type (excluding category ‘other’)

Overall, media reporting was most often in the context of criminal offences related to child sexual abuse as they make their way through the criminal justice system, frequently in relation to court-related or legal milestones; for example, arrest, conviction, trial, sentencing or appeal.

As will be discussed throughout this report, court and police reporting in relation to child sexual abuse is a key factor in the predominance of episodic news stories that focus on a single incident or individual, and often amplify the voice of the perpetrator rather than the victim and survivor or wider context of the story.

Approximately 10% of news items across all media platforms emanated from government reports or inquiries. Most of these were in relation to two international stories that attracted domestic coverage – the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in England and Wales and the UK Prime Minister’s (Boris Johnson) claims about an MP’s involvement in the Jimmy Saville child abuse case.

A smaller number again (~7% across all media platforms) were in response to a journalist’s investigation. It should be noted that the study time period did not include the national Child Abuse Royal Commission (2013-17) but did include the Commission of Inquiry into the Tasmanian

Government’s Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Institutional Settings (2021-23).

For broadcast news, the main source or origin of evidence in 13% of reports was victims or survivors of child sexual abuse. A much lower proportion of online news and newspaper articles originated from victims or survivors (6% and 4% respectively; see Figure 5).

Irrespective of the media platform, most news reports, where the story source was a victim or survivor of child sexual abuse, were about Grace Tame (see Figure 5). Without her influential term as Australian of the Year, news coverage of child sexual abuse that takes its cues from victims and survivors would have been rare.

Who speaks in news about child sexual abuse?

As would be expected given the dominance of stories originating from courts and/or police, the sources interviewed, quoted or paraphrased most often in the news about child sexual abuse were legal and criminal justice professionals including police and court personnel such as judges, magistrates or lawyers (33% for both online and newspaper articles).

In most cases, criminal justice professionals spoke about individual cases or crimes and/or court processes rather than about the broader issue of child sexual abuse.

Victims and survivors, their families and advocates representing child sexual abuse support agencies were the second most frequently interviewed, quoted or paraphrased source of information (23% online; 21% newspaper articles).

Not surprisingly, most news reports that drew on the perspective of victims and survivors, families or advocates through direct quotes or interviews were those in which the main source or origin of evidence, and the main actors in the news story, were victims and survivors of child sexual abuse.

Historical or contemporary abuse

Historical cases/crimes of child sexual abuse made up the majority of broadcast news (70%), with a lower proportion of historical cases/crimes reported online (58%) or in print media (44%).

The high proportion of reporting about historical child sexual abuse in broadcast media may reflect the prominence of a small number of stories concerning child sexual abuse by high profile international individuals covered in our timeframe for the broadcast coverage. Without these stories, coverage of child sexual abuse in broadcast media would have been minimal.

Main actors in stories about child sexual abuse

In approximately 40% of all news pertaining to child sexual abuse, the main focus of the news was the perpetrator (50% print, 43% broadcast and 37% online). Victims and survivors were the main actor in a further 22% of news appearing online, 16% of broadcast news and 12% of newspapers articles.

Even though news items varied in relation to the main source or origin of evidence (i.e., courts or government inquiry), there was a degree of uniformity in relation to what or whom the story was about (See Figure 6).

The finding that the perpetrator is the dominant main actor in news stories about child sexual abuse is significant as it correlates with criminal justice as the main source of news, a lack of survivor-centred stories and the predominance of problematic headline language.

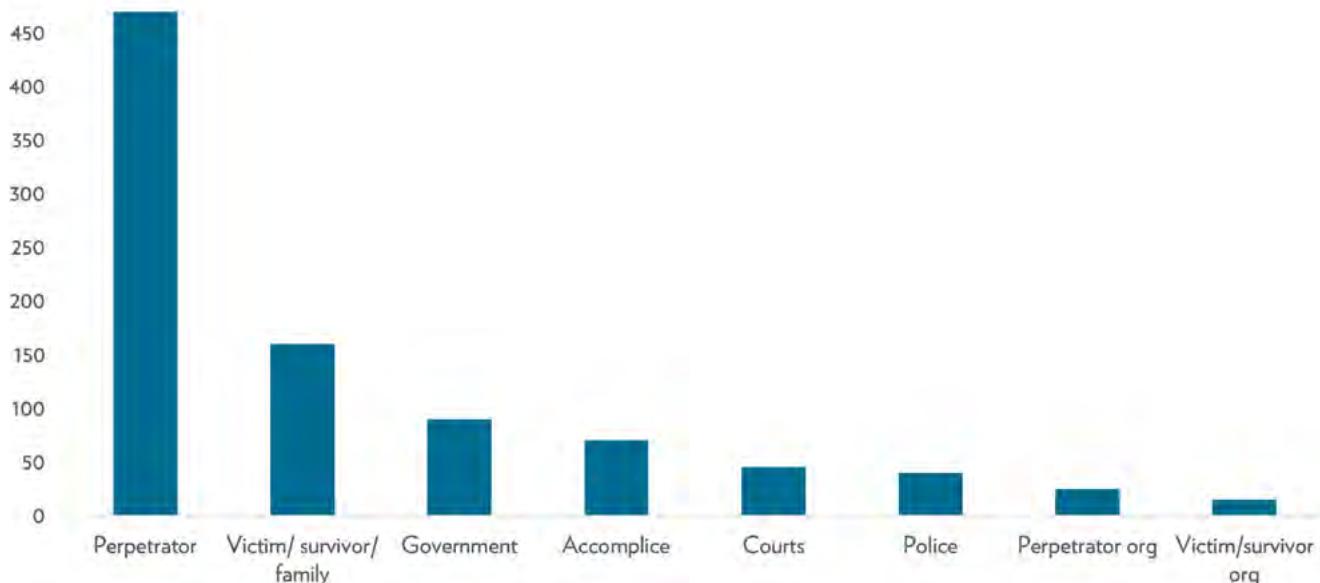


FIGURE 6: Main actor in the story (print, online and broadcast combined)

Setting where abuse took place

An important feature of news about child sexual abuse reporting was the location of the crime; whether it occurred within an institutional setting such as a religious establishment, government, sporting or community organisation, online exploitation involving using a carriage service to share child sexual abuse material (CSAM) or whether the abuse took place within a family setting (see Figure 7).

Table 6 shows that in the 2020-22 period, the largest number of stories were related to abuse that took place online or in digital spaces. This finding is significant in light of the changing digital environment and the predominance of cases of sharing of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) online in the court system.

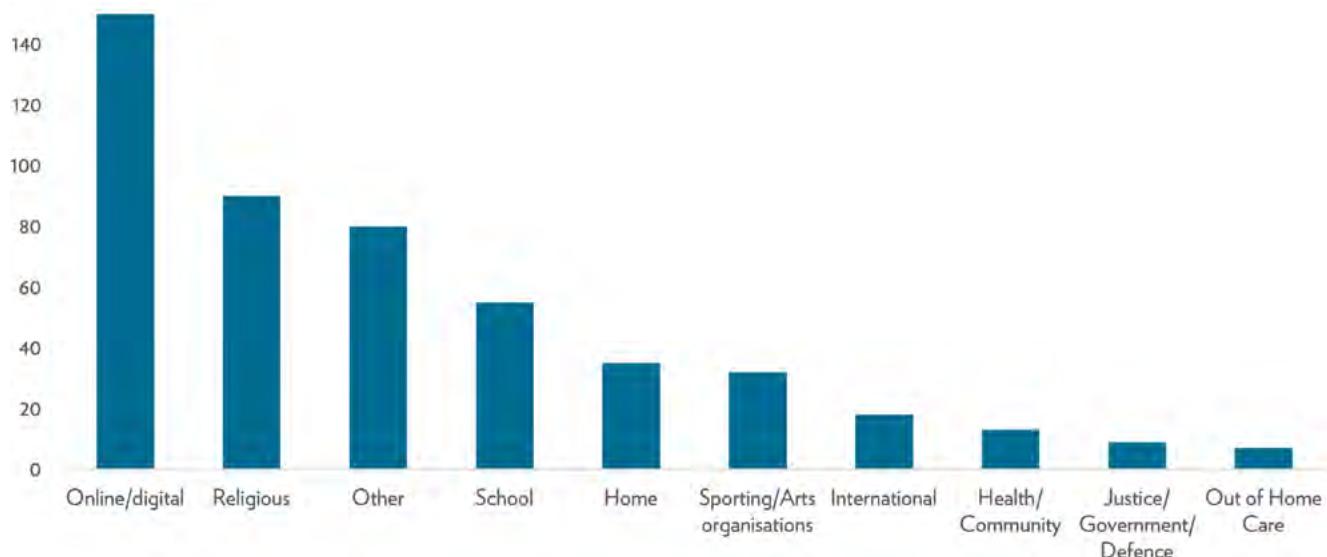


FIGURE 7: Location of abuse

The next most common location for abuse was religious institutions, which had dominated the Child Abuse Royal Commission five years earlier. Just 35 print and online stories (7%) of stories coded in our dataset related to abuse that had taken place in the home. This is despite the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare finding that 79% of child sexual abuse is committed by a friend, relative, acquaintance or neighbour of the victim and survivor.

Under-reporting of some crimes has the potential to distort public understanding of the prevalence of child sexual abuse across institutional, online and familial settings, to keep child sexual abuse out of view and downplay the experiences of victims and survivors in our families and communities.

The high proportion of 'other' in this sample shows the diversity of settings in which sexual abuse against children takes place.

WHO WAS THE FOCUS OF THE STORY?

Celebrities and high-profile perpetrators in news reporting

Between one quarter and one third of all news reports were about child sexual abuse involving celebrities or royalty. While this reflects the high volume of broadcast media coverage of the civil trial against Prince Andrew, reports about celebrities, and identification of both the celebrity perpetrator and their victims or survivors, remained prominent in broadcast, print and online news.

Another 10% of all news reports focused on abuse that occurred in school settings, identifying the perpetrator as teacher, counsellor or other school official. Cases of child sexual abuse that involved a religious leader were the subject of around 7% of news reports.

Newspaper articles and online news, on the other hand, tended to have a greater focus on local stories, largely in relation to child sexual abuse and the Catholic Church.

'Priority' groups in news reporting

In our sample, 10% of online and 9% of newspaper items were coded as being about a 'priority group' as defined by the National Strategy. For online news, four reports in the sample were in relation to people with disability, four on culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, two on regional, rural, or remote communities, and two reports on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

For newspapers we identified 16 stories about regional, rural, or remote communities, 14 about people with disability, six about CALD communities, three about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and one about LGBTQIA+ communities. Only one broadcast item was coded as about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, which was a report on ABC news radio in the context of historical abuse and the National Redress Scheme.

The Child Abuse Royal Commission final report observed that while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are not more susceptible to child sexual abuse, they 'were more likely to encounter circumstances that increased their risk of abuse in institutions, reduced their ability to disclose or report abuse and, if they did disclose or report, reduced their chances of receiving an adequate response' (RCIRCSA Volume 3, 2017 p. 3).

Our findings support the conclusion that the reporting of child sexual abuse against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children by Australian news media is under-reported or 'overshadowed' by reporting of news about celebrities and other high-profile cases, with significant impacts on public understanding of child sexual abuse (Waller et al., 2020; Dreher & Waller, 2022; Dreher & de Souza, 2023).

What sources of support are included in media reports?

Only a small proportion of media reports about child sexual abuse included information about where to seek help, advice or further information. In broadcast news, only 7% of news reports included such information. Each of these news items was broadcast on ABC News – most in relation to Grace Tame's address to the National Press Club in February 2022.

For print news, 9% included information about where to seek help, advice or further information, and were featured primarily in relation to stories about George Pell, the Catholic Church, the National Redress Scheme and Grace Tame. News audiences were directed to a range of services including generic support services such as Lifeline and beyondblue or to specific services for sexual assault and family and domestic violence such as 1800RESPECT.

In comparison to broadcast and print news, online news platforms included help-seeking information about child sexual abuse in one quarter of all news items (25%). Three quarters of all online news that included help-seeking information was published on ABC News Online; most of these news stories featured a 'pulled box' containing the contact details for the following general and specialist services: 1800RESPECT, Bravehearts, Child Wise, Lifeline, Care Leavers Australia Network (CLAN), and PartnerSPEAK.

HOW CHILD ABUSE STORIES ARE FRAMED IN THE NEWS

NEWS VALUES - THE ROLE OF HIGH-PROFILE NEWS STORIES IN REPORTING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Stories about high-profile people, events and news reports raise the issue of child sexual abuse on the public agenda and generate community discussion. The selection and promotion of such stories is related to the news values, practices and sourcing practices of journalists. Stories about celebrity perpetrators can be particularly problematic as the crime of child sexual abuse is often treated as 'incidental' to the entertainment formula of 'gossip and scandal'.

Particularly for online and broadcast media, such stories provide an easily reproducible news item that is perceived more as having entertainment value than impacting or connecting with victims and survivors. From a trauma-informed approach, such reporting can be seen as damaging and counter-productive to informing public understanding of child sexual abuse.

Examples of high-profile news stories prominent in media coverage from 2020-2022 included:

- Reporting of the trial and appeal of Cardinal George Pell on historical child sexual abuse crimes in April 2020. Coverage following the High Court decision that overturned the

conviction of George Pell was intense and polarised across media outlets. Headlines and invited columns and features reinforced the divisive nature of the decision and were driven by the news values of prominence and conflict. Blanket coverage by most news outlets reflected the framing of Pell during the Child Abuse Royal Commission as symbolic of the Catholic Church's failure to address systemic clerical abuse, as well as the significance of the High Court's decision to overturn the jury's unanimous verdict that found Pell guilty of child sexual abuse.

Some news articles, editorials and opinion pieces condemned the legal system and other key actors involved, suggesting Pell supporters had been vindicated. Other reports powerfully conveyed the voices of victims, survivors, advocates and families, foregrounding the disbelief and devastation of victims and survivors of child sexual abuse, their families and advocates at the outcome and the message it sends to victims and survivors, which may stop them from coming forward and seeking justice.

- The appointment of Grace Tame as Australian of the Year in 2021 received intense coverage and generated best-practice news reporting. Tame's ongoing advocacy to raise the importance of prevention and informing Australians about the reality of child sexual abuse was a crucial intervention that raised the issue on the national agenda and amplified the voices of victims and survivors. Such stories raised awareness of the systemic nature of child sexual abuse, the abuse of power it constitutes, the manipulative practices of perpetrators and the need for education and cultural and structural change.
- International news in relation to child sexual abuse was prominent in our dataset, particularly in broadcast news. The majority of these stories were about celebrities and other high-profile individuals, including:
 - Civil lawsuit filed in the US by Virginia Giuffre against Britain's **Prince Andrew**. This story was particularly prominent in the three months' broadcast news coverage we examined.
 - The trial and sentencing of **Ghislaine Maxwell**, associate of **Jeffrey Epstein**, on child trafficking and other charges (conviction December 2021).

- Extradition of former School Principal Malka Leifer from Israel to Australia for historical child sexual abuses in a Melbourne Jewish school.
- Charges against former swimming instructor Kyle Daniels in 2020.

NEWS FRAMING - EPISODIC AND THEMATIC NEWS

As discussed in Key Concepts (page 9), **episodic framing** in the context of child sexual abuse refers to journalistic descriptions that focus on a singular person or incident, which frame the problem of child sexual abuse as a private or individual concern rather than a societal issue. Episodic or incident-based reporting tends to focus on current and/or past incidents as if they are one-off or disconnected events with little information or discussion about the social context in which abuse occurs.

In contrast, **thematic reporting** tends to focus on the 'bigger picture' by identifying, discussing and debating the systemic issues relating to child sexual abuse including in institutional contexts, as well as legislative and/or policy responses. Thematic reporting is more likely to foreground victim and survivor perspectives and experience, the impacts of child sexual abuse on individuals and policies and the wider society.

For the content analysis we coded each print, online and broadcast item according to whether the story was framed in an episodic or thematic way. Results showed that across all media platforms the vast majority of news reports were episodic, focusing on one or more specific incidents or individual perpetrators of child sexual abuse.

This included three quarters of all online media reports and newspaper articles (75%) and 63% of broadcast news (see Figure 8). While court reporting can play an important role in documenting the range and extent of child sexual abuse crimes and at times amplify the victim's story, it drives the prevalence of episodic reporting about specific incidents or individual cases that prioritise the perpetrator in the story.

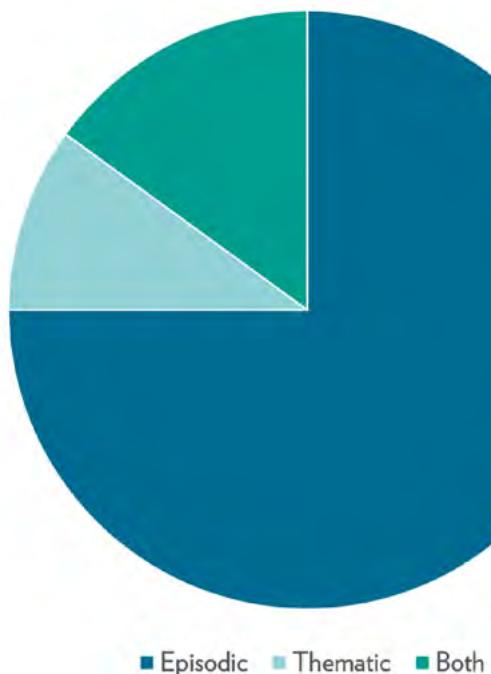


FIGURE 8: Story frame

Around 10% were primarily thematic or discussion-based without detail of a specific incident (10% online; 9% broadcast; 13% newspaper articles). The remaining were classified as being a combination of the two: thematically based items with reference to incidents of child sexual abuse (13% online; 9% broadcast; 10% newspaper articles). There was little variation between media types with online, broadcast and newspaper all primarily framing news about child sexual abuse episodically or as 'snapshots' of criminal offending.

Thematic news items were analysed further to identify any other elements of news reporting that might distinguish thematic from incident-based reporting of child sexual abuse. Although there were few clear patterns in the data in relation to story type, the origin of evidence for thematically based news reports was rarely from court reports, even though news items emanating from court or legal proceedings made up a significant proportion of all news captured in the study period.

We also identified and analysed a small number of thematic feature articles and investigative reports that typically address the issue at a broader systemic level and often incorporate a range of perspectives, resulting in more comprehensive reporting that foreground victims and survivors as sources.

These stories were often examples of best practice journalism.

ROUTINE COURT REPORTING AS THE SOURCE OF EPISODIC NEWS

The predominance of court reporting and criminal investigations helps to explain the prevalence of an episodic style of reporting. More than half of all items analysed were sourced from the criminal justice system, legal proceedings, or an arrest or police conviction.

This amounted to 53% of newspaper articles, 50% of news online and 44% of broadcast news items. In line with this finding, criminal justice professionals including police and court personnel such as judges, magistrates or lawyers were the most frequently quoted sources interviewed in the news about child sexual abuse (33% online and 35% newspaper articles).

The practice of court reporting, which is bound by strict laws governing what can be recorded and spoken about, and rules about maintaining the privacy of victims and survivors, and the accused, means this form of reporting is a highly specialised 'beat' and that court reports often follow an established formula.

Court reports are most likely to be straight news articles recording that day's proceedings. These mundane factors contribute to court reports being characterised by individual incidences or cases of child sexual abuse, focusing on a perpetrator being charged, convicted or sentenced, and relying on police and court sources rather than victims and advocates. Typical of the types of news covered by court or crime reporters:

MAN CHARGED OVER ALLEGED CHILD ABUSE (*Newcastle Herald*, 22/12/2021)

Tasmanian school staff member charged with dozens of child exploitation offences (*ABC News Online*, 21/09/21)

Rugby Australia executive charged with four child abuse picture offences amid AFP investigation (news.com.au, 19/09/21)

The content analysis found that the most common location for abuse to have taken place was online/digital. As most news about child sexual abuse is sourced from the criminal justice system, this finding suggests the majority of crimes reported on, such as police raids and investigations, concern the sharing of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) online.

These are likely to be court reports that drive much of the episodic reporting we identified in the dataset. We did identify some examples of thematic reporting on

police investigations about CSAM that incorporate statistics and discuss the various dimensions of this issue, including for example, the roles and responsibilities of social media companies and search engines, and information and advice to parents about things they can do to ensure their children are safe online.

THE POWER OF LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

The language used in news stories, their headlines and associated imagery can impact the way a story is received by victims and survivors and the wider community. In this section we identify and analyse several types of problematic language across the dataset, paying close attention to crime reporting and international celebrity reporting as two sources of incident-driven news.

Particular attention was given to the story's headline, lead paragraph, imagery and supporting information. Headlines play an important role in setting the tone of the news and may influence the way people read and remember it. Problematic headlines are concerning given their prominence and because readers often may not read the story further. News editors play an important role as they make decisions about how the story is framed – what type of information is emphasised and, in turn, what is absent or downplayed.

Thus, even when the language used in the body of a news report conveys the gravity of the issue, sensational headlines can work to overshadow this and, for online news, this can be seen as a form of clickbait. Sensationalist or trivialising headlines and clickbait can belie an otherwise serious story and can be stigmatising and harmful to victims and survivors; likewise, the choice of image can empower or diminish the victim and survivor in the story.

We noted examples where news outlets reporting on the same case used different language to describe the crime or charges. On occasion it appears that journalists are repeating the language that is used to describe the nature of offences and charges in the law, but we argue journalists and their editors have discretion in their lexical choices.

Media professionals have the choice not to follow legal terminology and can exercise choice and use different terms to more accurately and appropriately describe the crimes, or be clear that terminology is

quoted from legal proceedings. While there is no doubt that finding the 'right' language to describe child sexual abuse is immensely challenging (and perhaps deeply uncomfortable), the news needs to convey the depth, complexity and nature of the problem appropriately, accurately and precisely.

SENSATIONALISM AND 'CLICKBAIT'

Sensationalism in the news is often defined in terms of its capacity to provoke attention and can manifest in a number of ways including what stories are chosen to feature in the news, the type of information included and emphasised, who is named and who remains 'invisible', and the language used. 'Clickbait' is defined as headline language designed to encourage readers to click on the link to engage with the full story.

The uses of sensationalism or clickbait in headlines can be seen as a form of 'tabloidisation', which may involve evocative language or provide unnecessary details in line with the commercial imperative to entertain audiences and sell advertising.

Clickbait is a phenomenon particularly associated with digital journalism, with commercial and tabloid journalism reliant on 'clicks' to drive audiences to their sites. Clickbait was more likely to be used in reports framed as episodic and arising from criminal justice processes (see example below). We identified examples where child sexual abuse was used by news editors to attract readers, even when the body of the story is well-considered and written in the public interest. The reverse can also occasionally be the case, where a headline conveys the gravity of the crime through evocative language, while the language used in the body of the article does not match this.

For each print, online and broadcast item, coders identified key elements of the story related to sensationalism and clickbait in news reporting. These elements included what or who made stories about child sexual abuse newsworthy and the language used in headlines and in the body of news reports to characterise the problem.

Half of all online news headlines about child sexual abuse were classified as sensational (16%), clickbait (13%), or used both sensational language and clickbait (20%). There was a similar proportion for newspaper headlines with 12% classified as sensational, 23% clickbait and a further 20% that used both (see Figure 9).



FIGURE 9: Sensationalist language in news headlines (print and online only)

TYPES OF PROBLEMATIC LANGUAGE

We also identified specific examples of the common and careless use of sensationalist, gratuitous, de humanising, trivialising, glamourising, masking, minimising, sanitising, stigmatising and victim blaming language. The potential impacts of such editing and reporting are profoundly damaging for wider community understanding, and may be harmful and retraumatising for those with lived experience. While all news outlets were found to use sensational language and clickbait in news about child sexual abuse, the following examples demonstrate its prevalence in tabloid and online news, even when those news outlets also feature examples of best practice journalism.

Gratuitous and de-humanising language

Results showed a range of problematic language within news reports with sensational, emotive and dramatic terms used in the headline and body of news reports about child sexual abuse including terms such as 'full depravity', 'notorious paedophile', 'horrific reign of abuse', 'reviled child molester', 'prolific purveyor of child sexual abuse images', 'lurid and salacious case' and 'unspeakable'. The use of such language confirms Kitzinger's (2004) finding that news media framing of child abusers as de-humanised 'monsters' who are strangers unknown to the child, is alive in contemporary news reporting. Typical headline examples include:

MONSTER'S VILE TEXTS (Herald Sun, 27/7/20)

UNMASKED: Monstrous Australian paedophile who created the global online child porn trade and abused underage sex slaves in Asia - and how he was finally caught after 20-year worldwide manhunt (Daily Mail Australia, 17/09/21)

What is notable about these stories is the content of the story typically addresses a serious criminal justice case making its way through the courts. At times the journalist is repeating words used by the prosecutor, the victim or the judge, and the headline is an overlay to the story to attract audiences. However, framing a perpetrator as a monster, as these examples do, can have unintended consequences when repeated in media coverage. Instead of informing and educating the public about the severity of the crime and the prevalence of child sexual abuse, such headlines can have the effect of distancing child sexual offenders from the everyday settings where abuse is most likely to occur. At worst, they 'may discourage the reporting of suspicion on the person that does not fit the description' (Popović, 2022, p. 195).

Language that trivialises the crime or glamourises the perpetrator

It was also common for news reports to describe child sexual abuse ambiguously, even flippantly, including the use of vague, euphemistic language that downplays the severity of the crime rather than precise descriptions of criminal offending. These types of headlines were particularly prevalent on some tabloid online news sites that either used graphic language as clickbait to stories where child sexual abuse was incidental, or neglected to indicate the gravity of the story in headlines that suggested the story was celebrity gossip.

EXCLUSIVE: 'Kinky sex overlord' who is in a sexual relationship with FIVE women faces disturbing new rape and child porn accusations - as slavery charges are dropped (Daily Mail Australia, 8/9/21)

Problematic headlines were common in news about international celebrities and other high-profile individuals. In the following example, the gossipy headline belies the 'incidental' inclusion in the story of the civil case of alleged child sexual abuse against Prince Andrew:

Blooming beautiful! Pregnant Princess Beatrice shows off burgeoning baby bump while enjoying lunch out with husband Edoardo Mapelli Mozzi in London (*Daily Mail Australia*, 15/08/21)

Another story about the trial of Ghislaine Maxwell for her role in facilitating convicted child sexual offender Jeffrey Epstein's sexual abuse of children gives no indication of the serious nature of the story. The 'pedo' in this context is not only inappropriate but further trivialises the crime:

PEDO TO THE METAL: LURID SEX TRIAL REVS UP (*Hobart Mercury*, 30/11/2021)

Similarly, the following headline based on a court case trivialises what are graphic and heinous offenses reported in the body of the report:

x marks the sicko; How US authorities helped stop Coolbinia pervert so brazen his email nickname was 'dreamforpreteen'
(*West Australian*, 11/4/20)

In the following example,

Mum threw baby shower for daughter, 12, with 'boyfriend', 24 (news.com.au, 31/7/21)

The headline and story trivialise the offence of child sexual abuse by ridiculing a US mother for "encouraging and allowing her pre-teen daughter to have a relationship with Juan Miranda-Jara, a man twice her age". Again, such stories contribute little to informing the public about the diverse contexts in which child sexual abuse takes place.

Across print and online datasets headline language was used that promoted the status of the perpetrator while ignoring the victim of the crime altogether. For example, the following headline and lead paragraph prioritises the offender's status at an elite school and his political career, and implies a level of consent through use of terms like 'relationship' and 'had sex with a student', at the expense of the crime against the child:

Elite school coach jailed for sex tryst

A SPORTS coach who once ran in a state election had sex with a student and proposed to the teen after they had been in a secret relationship for four months, a court has heard. (*Courier Mail*, 19/9/20)

Many of the examples of problematic language discussed in this section tell the story from the perpetrator's perspective, rather than the victim or survivor's. While routine court reporting and the focus on celebrities might encourage such reporting, we know from the literature that this can undermine a victim and survivor centred, trauma-informed approach to reporting the serious crime and social impacts of child sexual abuse.

Language that implies consent or blames victims

We identified problematic language across the dataset that implied consent on the part of the child or suggested they were complicit in their own abuse. The language of 'child sex' appears to be part of the journalistic lexicon for reporting on the sexual abuse of children. We identified a range of related problematic terms such as 'sexual intercourse', 'sexual relationship', 'sex acts', 'sexual material', 'inappropriate sexual behaviour', 'teen sex', 'in a sexual relationship', 'sex with teen girl', 'child sex charges', 'sex with a child under 10', 'having sex with a 12-year-old', 'grown men and women having sex with children', and 'very young children having sex with adults'.

While such language may be a direct report from the court of the alleged perpetrator or defence counsel's words its frequent use across the dataset is deeply problematic as it implies some form of consensual relationship between perpetrators and their child victims and shifts the blame from the perpetrator(s) to the victims and survivors of child sexual abuse. Such language implies consent on the part of children or a willing sexual encounter, when it would be more accurate to use the language of 'rape', 'child sexual abuse' or 'persistent sexual abuse of a child'. *The Canberra Times* used problematic language to describe the nature of child exploitation material in one story ('No time in prison for ex-ACT Health manager', 16/7/20) reporting:

"A paedophile who maintained his senior managerial position at ACT Health months after he was arrested for child sex crimes will not spend time behind bars."

Last year, police raided Bradley John Burch's Fyshwick home, where they found images of grown men and women having sex with children."

Such language obscures and minimises crimes committed by adults against children who are not engaging in sex but are being abused and exploited.

In another example, a story headlined ‘Jailed for sex with teen girl’ (*Courier Mail*, 25/9/20) suggests a consensual act and masks the violent nature of the crime, which is described in the body of the article and included the perpetrator threatening to take the girl’s life when she told him to stop or she would call the police.

The frequency with which language such as ‘sexual intercourse with a child under 10’ is used suggests that this is the language that has been used in some jurisdictions to describe police charges. For example, a story headlined ‘Sex offender’s court bid a first for the ACT’ (*Canberra Times*, 12/5/20) appears to attribute the language to a court judgement:

“A judgment published on Monday said the man pleaded guilty in 2003 to six counts of sexual intercourse with his 15-year-old student. The judgment said the man, now 64, was 35 years old when he and the student had a sexual relationship in 1991.”

Masking, minimising or sanitising language

Minimisation occurs through language that obscures or masks the agency of the perpetrator and the nature of the crime. We identified a range of headlines that work to render invisible the nature of the crimes against children that are reported in the body of stories. For example, the following are headlines of stories about a Qantas flight attendant who was jailed for 18 1/2 years for sexually abusing children aged between 12 and 17 in the Philippines:

Sicko loses his wings (*Daily Telegraph*, 1/4/20)

Cabin-crew creep caged (*Herald Sun*, 1/4/20)

These headlines give no indication of the seriousness of the offenses. Emphasising his position as a flight attendant draws focus from his crimes and functions to mask the serious crimes described in the body of the reports. Other examples detract attention away from the crime:

Images land man in court (*The Advertiser*, 1/9/20)

Child abuse material lands pool tech in jail (*Courier Mail*, 1/12/21)

In each case the language suggests that it is the child abuse material, not the procurement of it by the offender, that is responsible for the crime. Agency is given to the material instead of the person accessing

it, even though the lead paragraph of the *Courier Mail* story describes the “abhorrent” nature of the material.

Other headlines sanitised the nature of the crime:

Cop in child sex matter (*Courier Mail*, 20/10/21)

This is the headline of a report about the sentencing of a man for intrafamilial child sexual abuse, which is minimised through the description of ‘child sex matter’, the nature of which is made apparent in the lead paragraph:

“A FORMER Queensland Police officer who was serving at the time of offending has been jailed for vile child sexual offences committed over 15 years, which involved him repeatedly molesting and filming his daughter and stepdaughters.”

We also identified sanitising language that described the perpetrator as “a polite, respectful, humble man who was remorseful” (*ABC Online*, 14/10/21) and “The judge also said Moyle had shown remorse, was at a low risk of reoffending and was a ‘loving father, son and husband’” (*Daily Mail*, 17/9/21).

Incorrect terminology of ‘paedophile’

In our dataset, the term pedophile (or paedophile) was routinely used by journalists and editors as synonymous with child sexual offenders. The medical diagnosis of pedophilic disorder refers to a mental health condition where a person has a sexual preference for children, boys or girls or both, usually or prepubertal or early pubertal age.

Not all individuals who present with symptoms of pedophilic disorder are perpetrators of child sexual abuse or exploitation. This terminology also masks that most child sexual offenders are opportunistic and do not have an exclusive sexual interest in children. According to the Luxembourg Guidelines, ‘The terms ‘paedophile’ and ‘paedophilia’ continue to be overused and misunderstood, often seen as a label for a person convicted of child sexual exploitation or sexual abuse rather than as a term for a clinical condition’ (Greijer & Doek, 2016, p. 86). While some offenders with a medical diagnosis were correctly identified, countless examples of pedophile as shorthand for child sexual abuse offender were noted, including this inaccurate and alarmist headline:

How to spot a PAEDOPHILE: Police issue an urgent warning to Australian parents about the secret code perverts are using to target YOUR kids (*Daily Mail Australia*, 3/02/22)

Also of concern was the shorthand use of ‘pedo’ in headlines to describe perpetrators. Such language is not only inappropriate to describe many perpetrators of child sexual abuse, it can trivialise and minimise the severity of crimes. For example:

PEDO ABUSED WORK MATE'S DAUGHTERS
(*Herald Sun*, 14/08/21)

Inappropriate use of ‘child pornography’

‘Child porn’ and ‘child pornography’ or even ‘child photos’ were frequently used terms to describe images and videos of child sexual abuse. While understanding that ‘porn’ has meaning and resonance in some contexts, and need not be harmful among consenting adults, the use of this language in reports about the sexual abuse of children is offensive, and can distort public understanding of the nature of child sexual abuse crimes. It can imply consent on the part of the child, shift blame from the perpetrator(s) to the victim and survivor, render the victim invisible and equate legal use of pornography among adults with the crime of child sexual abuse material (CSAM).

Indeed, the Luxembourg Guidelines (Greijer & Doek, 2016) clearly state that ‘child porn’ should never be used to describe the crime of child sexual abuse and exploitation material. However, such language was readily used, as in the following indicative headlines:

Man faces kid porn charges (*Courier Mail*, 23/10/20)

Teacher's child porn shame (*Courier Mail*, 13/10/20)

“ICE DROVE ME TO CHILD PORN” (*Daily Telegraph*, 17 October)

These forms of vernacular language can minimise and sanitise not only the gravity of the crime but its impacts on the typically nameless and faceless children who are the ‘invisible objects’ of these news reports. Describing child sexual abuse images and videos as ‘child porn’ or ‘child pornography’ sanitises these crimes and the culpability of those who produce and access content depicting the sexual abuse of children. For example:

Ron Brierley sentenced to 14 months' jail for possession of child pornography (*ABC online*, 14/10/21)

Former police officer charged with distributing child pornography (*news.com*, 4/2/22)

Journalists and editors have a choice to follow court language

In many of the news reports described above, the victims of child sexual abuse are nameless and faceless and the sources used are primarily the police or courts. This highlights the symbiotic relationship between the media and the criminal justice systems. It suggests that the language used by all institutions contributes to the way we talk about child sexual abuse.

Demonstrating the active nature of these lexical decisions, *The Australian* (‘Tyrrell cops look to abuse network’, 6/6/20), instead of referring to ‘sex’ or ‘sexual intercourse’, used the following language:

“Offending included the *rape of young children* and the sharing of images and videos of the abuse among the network, Ms Gale [AFP Assistant Commissioner] said.”

and

“They face a string of charges involving *child rape* and the possession and sharing of images.”

Similarly, referring to the charges against the same two men, *The Canberra Times* (‘Online child abuse spikes in lockdown’, 7/6/20) referred to the following:

“A 26-year-old man was charged with two counts of *raping a child under the age of 10 years* and a 21-year-old man was charged with six counts of raping a child under the age of 10 years in the NSW towns of Kendall and Old Bar.”

However, several other news outlets used the language of ‘sex’ or ‘sexual intercourse’ in reporting on this child sexual abuse network. One story referenced the legal name of the offence in NSW, reporting that one of the men was charged with “six counts of sexual intercourse with a child under 10” (‘Arrests made over alleged child sex abuse ring’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6/6/20); others referred to “counts of sex with a child under 10” (‘Paedophile ring smashed’, *Adelaide Advertiser*, 6/6/20; ‘Nation’s biggest mob of sickos’, *Daily Telegraph*, 6/6/20; ‘William’s town at centre of pedo ring’, *Courier Mail*, 6/6/20; ‘Paedo ring in Tyrrell township’, *Herald Sun*, 6/6/20).

It is important to note that the advocacy of victim and survivor advocates has driven progressive legislative amendments across jurisdictions to remove this sort of language from the statutes.

Even if this is the name of an offence under the law, journalists and their editors can exercise some discretion, and should always make it clear through punctuation that it is the offence name.

Problematic imagery and advertising

The placement of images, advertisements and banners in online stories are significant editorial decisions that shape how a story is framed and can impact on how it is 'read' by the audience. Imagery was often carefully selected and positioned. Because a lot of the articles were about crimes and court reporting, there was a high prevalence of images such as courthouses but there were also other location shots such as hospitals, a main street, and a jail.

Many articles we analysed had shots of the perpetrator or an implied perpetrator (e.g., a back view of a handcuffed man with tattoos) and other images that tied in with the story (e.g., a football when the perpetrator was from Rugby Australia or a mobile phone when social media was involved) but there were also several of frightened children hiding their faces, children in a shadowed doorway and one with a teddy bear.

For stories about celebrities, particularly international and incidental reporting of child sexual abuse, images included both the perpetrator and the victim and survivor. For example, many stories of Prince Andrew included the well used image of him with Virginia Giuffre.

The online context adds complexity and risk in relation to the placement of images and advertising, whereby the live nature of web elements including advertising, videos and current news is difficult to control. This means that a story about child sexual abuse can inadvertently be positioned close to inappropriate content. For example, our dataset covered 2021 and 2022 but were analysed in 2023.

News stories remain accessible, but the webpage elements, including advertisements driven by algorithms, had been updated, meaning that when read in 2023, historical articles were juxtaposed against new advertising content. *The Guardian* had several advertisements that demonstrate the difficulties with online reporting.

A story about Bob Higgins, a football coach charged with the sexual abuse of children in the 1970s and 1980s ('Damning report reveals Southampton FC's 70s and 80s sexual abuse failures') included an advertisement for the FIFA Women's World Cup.

It is unclear whether a keyword from the article (such as football) prompted this advertisement.

An article about Josh Duggar (from US reality show *19 and Counting*) included images of Duggar, and several of his workplace and computer, as well as photos of his wife and children. One article was about his accessing child sexual abuse material

EXCLUSIVE: Josh Duggar's sordid child porn lair revealed: Trash-strewn car dealership office where convicted pedophile secretly downloaded trove of 'worst of the worst' videos is seen for the first time.

When reviewed in 2023, this story included an advertisement for Filmora (video editing software) that showed a man sitting in a car in shadow, an image that may re-traumatise a victim of child sexual abuse. A *Daily Mail* story from February 2022 ('Female Louisiana teacher, 36, pleads guilty to giving her junior high school students cupcakes laced with her husband's SPERM: Couple faces 150 sex-crimes charges for abusing children') had a current story with an image about a woman's breasts being groped by a monkey. While this story and image may have been published for its perceived humour, its proximity to a story about child sexual abuse does not accord with a trauma-informed approach to reporting.

Videos are used on a site so a reader can access more information to have a deeper understanding of a story. news.com often includes a visual element, either a developed video to provide further background or a news broadcast from Sky News and there is typically an advertisement before the video starts.

However, in a similar way to other online elements, advertisements are current and may be inappropriate to the video. One news.com.au article about Brian Houston's arrest for concealing child sexual abuse ('Hillsong founder Brian Houston says he will fight to clear his name') had an advertisement for Miele washing machines that showed a woman caressing her shirt collar. Note that this advertisement came up on several stories that were analysed on the same day.

BEST PRACTICE REPORTING – THEMATIC, VICTIM-CENTRED AND TRAUMA-INFORMED

Along with our analysis of problematic reporting that was mostly episodic in nature, we identified examples of reporting that raised the issue of child sexual abuse and informed public understanding, as well as powerfully conveying the views and experiences of victims and survivors.

Just 10% of items in our dataset were primarily thematic in their framing (10% online; 9% broadcast; 13% newspaper articles), with another 10% of newspaper, 13% of online and 9% of broadcast items classified as being a combination of the two.

While thematic reports were identified across all genres, outlets and news types, they were particularly notable in feature length reports. The voices and views of victims and survivors are elevated in particular stories and some news outlets routinely foregrounded the voice and perspective of victims and survivors and their advocates, and the wider contexts, information, policy and social impacts were discussed.

In this section, we highlight some examples of the different issues and contexts that foreground these sources in news reports. It is important to note that while not all episodic reporting is bad or problematic – indeed court reporting plays an important role in raising the issue of child sexual abuse on the agenda – a thematic style of reporting is most constructive in providing the public with a broader understanding of child sexual abuse.

HIGH PROFILE STORIES THAT AMPLIFY VOICES OF VICTIMS AND SURVIVORS

The role of the high-profile people, events and news reports is significant in terms of their value in generating public discussion about child sexual abuse. However, it is important for reporting to cover a broader range of stories. In this next section we consider in detail some stories that have generated a more thematic style of reporting.

The Pell High Court decision

As discussed, reactions to the High Court decision on George Pell in April 2020 were widely reported across media outlets. While much of this reporting fuelled the conflict frame, and some outlets openly campaigned for Pell against the original conviction,

the high-profile Pell case also generated some best practice, thematic, and victim and survivor-centred reporting.

The Age ('Supporters find relief, abuse victim advocates mull the future; Reactions', 8/4/20) and *Sydney Morning Herald* ("I have no confidence in the legal system": father; Advocates fear victims will be too scared to report abuse', 8/4/20) gave prominence to the reactions of victim advocates and families and their concerns about the potential impact of the High Court decision in discouraging people from coming forward to report their abuse.

These newspapers also published editorials, which focused on the potential for the decision to contribute to the reluctance of victims of child sexual abuse to speak out:

Victims must still feel they can speak out (*The Age*, 8/4/20)

Pell decision must not deter victims from speaking out (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 8/4/20)

Notable about these reports and editorials is that they reflect and project the potential impacts of this decision, not only for those directly involved, but for victims and survivors more broadly and this is reflected in headlines, which in some ways seek to address and show support for victims. Reporting by

The Guardian was notable for its comprehensive coverage of the trial and High Court proceedings, as well as investing in deep, considered news and feature pieces that considered the impacts of the decision on its readers, including those who have suffered as a result of child sexual abuse. For example:

Child sexual abuse victims should not be put off by George Pell decision, experts say (*The Guardian online*, 9/4/2020)

"Victims of child sexual abuse should not be dissuaded from coming forward and reporting perpetrators as a result of the jury conviction of Cardinal George Pell being overturned by the high court, a barrister and professor of law at La Trobe University in Melbourne says."

Ballarat's *The Courier* stood out as the best practice example of reporting on the High Court decision, publishing several lengthy and comprehensive reports. Despite its overall low volume of reporting across the time period, its coverage stood out as being survivor focused and trauma-informed.

Articles typically included helpline details and included support services such as the Ballarat Centre Against Sexual Assault as sources for news reports.

For example, in the lead up to the High Court decision on Pell's appeal, *The Courier* published a report that focused on encouraging people to reach out and seek help if they were distressed by the outcome of the Pell decision. It also included numerous helpline details and the voices of advocates encouraging victims and survivors to reach out ('Reach out': Support still available after Pell decision despite pandemic, 7/4/2020). The following is the headline of a lengthy (4,157 word) and comprehensive report by Rochelle Kirkham:

Ballarat reacts to revelations that Pell knew about paedophile priests (*The Courier*, 8/5/20)

We note the headline inappropriately uses the term 'paedophile' as not all priests in the diocese were diagnosed with pedophilic disorder. However, the feature length report is exemplary in the way that it drew on multiple sources including its Federal member, Deputy Mayor, members of the Catholic Diocese of Ballarat, lawyers and victims' advocates. It focused on victim and survivor reactions to the redaction and gave prominence to and extensively quoted three Ballarat-based survivors, including:

Stephen Woods, Ballarat-based survivor of child sexual abuse: "Each and every time Cardinal Pell's name comes out in the media, every victim of abuse in the Church just winces. He is such a touchstone of everything that has gone wrong with clergy sexual abuse..."

The story also included helpline details early in the story and integrated content about the likely increase in calls to support services in relation to the release of the report, and it sourced the Operations Director of the Ballarat Centre Against Sexual Assault:

"If anyone feels overwhelmed or distressed with the information outlined in these reports, they are encouraged to pick up the phone and seek support. At a time when we are required to distance ourselves from others, reaching out over the phone is vitally important. You are not alone. We are here."

Grace Tame Australian of the Year

We earlier discussed the significance of Grace Tame's appointment as Australian of the Year in raising on the public agenda the issue of child sexual abuse

and the need for legal reform. Here we analyse how some journalists used Tame's appointment to amplify the voices and experiences of survivors and inform the public about the wider contexts of the issue. The Hobart Mercury published Tame's award acceptance speech:

Every voice matters to overcome evil of child abuse (*Hobart Mercury*, 27/1/21)

On the Australia Day announcement, the following headline in *The Age* emphasised Tame's determination to break the taboos around child sexual abuse:

I'm really determined to normalise speaking out (*The Age*, 26/1/21)

This story, which was also published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (with the headline referencing Tame's tattoo), 'Eat my fear: the way to triumph over evil', quoted Tame extensively, including the following:

"The shame sits at the feet of perpetrators of child sexual abuse," she says. "We have to eradicate these cultures of victim-blaming and denial and dismissal, because there are so many structures in our society, both in terms of social attitudes and institutions, that enable predatory behaviour. I'm really determined to encourage and normalise the act of speaking out, because lived experience informs structural change and social change."

An op-ed in News Corp's *Herald Sun* by Nina Funnell emphasised the hope Tame's award represents for victims and survivors:

Grace's honour is a sign of resounding hope (*Herald Sun*, 26/1/21)

Funnell reflected on her encounters with Tame and the work they have done to overturn laws in Tasmania and the Northern Territory that prevent victims and survivors from self-identifying in the media. She described the achievements of the #LetHerSpeak campaign, which she created, and the powerful efforts of Tame and others to raise awareness of grooming and the impacts of trauma.

Other stories on Grace Tame's Australian of the Year award emphasised her role as a voice for victims and survivors. For example, a story in the West Australian ('Amazing Grace our top Aussie; Sex abuse survivor groomed by teacher now on mission to help survivors have a voice') reported:

Ms Tame called for public discussion about the horrors of child sexual abuse. “Yes, discussion of child sexual abuse is uncomfortable but nothing is more uncomfortable than the abuse itself,” she said. “So let us redirect this discomfort to where it belongs - at the feet of perpetrators of these crimes. Together, we can redefine what it means to be a survivor. Together, we can end child sexual abuse.”

VICTIM AND SURVIVOR-CENTRED AND TRAUMA-INFORMED REPORTING

As noted earlier in this report, a trauma-informed approach to journalism is considerate of the experiences of stress and trauma on the person or story they are reporting on and encourages a collaborative approach (Blue Knot, 2023).

While this may at times appear in contrast with the journalistic tenets of objectivity and balance and practices around privacy and source protection, our analysis identified a number of news articles that were not only in the public interest, as they informed readers about the impacts of sexual abuse on victims and survivors, but were victim and survivor-centred and trauma informed.

Victim and survivor responses to historical clerical abuse

An article in the *Newcastle Herald*, ‘Survivor confronts demon’ (25/7/20), exemplified best-practice reporting in its sensitive approach to amplifying the voice of a survivor of abuse by Marist Brothers. The report drew upon the victim impact statement he read in court to foreground the impacts of child sexual abuse on the victim and survivor’s life:

The man said he also told his grandparents and mother, but they said Brother Dominic “was only trying to show his affection” and made him out to be a liar.

He then didn’t tell anyone for 45 years.

“I have been ashamed of myself for most of my life.

“I thought I had done something wrong.”

The story included helpline details for Lifeline and Beyondblue.

Another example came from Ballarat’s *The Courier* who have continued their tradition of community based, survivor-led reporting following the Royal Commission.

LIVES RUINED (*The Courier*, 28/1/22)

This front-page story by Rochelle Kirkham focused on survivors of child sexual abuse by Christian Brother Edward Dowlan. It quoted from victim impact statements that were read in court, referring to the experiences of four victims and survivors who described the impacts of their abuse in terms of drug and alcohol use, and mental health issues among others. It also quoted the judge who addressed them in court and included contact information for the Ballarat Centre Against Sexual Assault, Lifeline, Blue Knot Foundation and Relationships Australia.

Historical abuse in orphanages and Out of Home Care settings

An outstanding example of thematic, historically contextualised reporting that addressed the wider social impacts of child sexual abuse in institutional settings was Charlotte King’s investigatory piece for ABC Background Briefing (radio and online).

The memo that erased a scandal (*ABC Background Briefing*, 24 April, 2021)

Over several years King investigated the case of abuse by Hylton Sedgeman against children who were wards of the state at the Ballarat Orphanage. Actions by the local police meant that despite children declaring their abuse to the local authorities the case had been buried for half a century.

King told the story from the victim and survivors’ perspectives while revealing the wider issues of Australia’s past treatment of children in out of home care settings. She was awarded a Melbourne Press Club Quill Award for the piece.

Sports coaches and institutions

Beyond clergy sexual abuse, we also identified more feature length reports focusing on the experiences of victims of coaches or family members, for example.

My pseudo father, my coach, my abuser (*The Sun Herald*, 16/8/20)

This story, which also appeared in *The Age* (“Courage to confront the past”), provided a detailed account of the experience of Alison Quigley, who was raped by her gymnastics coach as a child, and has become an advocate for the rights of children in sports settings. The story quoted from her victim impact statement, in which she states:

“I was excited by [his] interest in me, which intensified over the years. Intimacy with him meant I was a good person, worthy of his attention. When I found myself, aged 14, alone in his house, I saw it as proof that I was special. I didn't regard his first assault as rape, downplaying it merely as a sexual encounter, the dues to keep his affection.”

This account, as signalled in the headline, points ultimately to the abuse of power that is at the centre of child sexual abuse and how perpetrators exploit these power relationships.

Victim and survivor stories of abuse in families and by close contacts

Our analysis supports the academic literature that finds news media focus on perpetrators who are unknown to the victim, or who operate in institutional, rather than family settings. This is even though much abuse takes place in the home, by family members or close contacts.

However, we did identify some examples of reporting of familial child sexual abuse. For example, a story headlined 'Child sexual abuse tragedy' (*The Courier*, 16/11/21) focused on a victim of child sexual abuse (now in her early 50s with the abuse starting when she was seven) whose perpetrator was her uncle. The lead paragraph offered a good example of emphasising the agency and actions of the perpetrator:

“A MAN'S decision to manipulate, coerce and sexually abuse his niece over a number of years when she was a child in Ballarat has had profound negative effects on the next forty years of her life.”

It reported the woman told the court she has suffered difficulties with mental health, relationships, drugs and alcohol. It detailed the perpetrator's manipulation of the victim and quoted from her victim impact statement:

“As a child I acted out more and more,” she wrote in her victim impact statement. “I was confused, angry and hurt about what you did to me. I was left to blame myself and hate myself and receive no help or understanding for what I had endured. The manner in which you abused me left me a very open target for further abuses ... later in life.”

There were some examples in our timeframe of broadcast media stories that sensitively conveyed valuable victim and survivor-centred information.

An example is a story from *Sky News*, embedded in a news.com piece by Andrea Crothers, which featured abuse survivor Virginia Tapscott describing the familial abuse that resulted in the trauma and death of her sister.

Child sexual abuse survivor speaks out.

“A child sexual abuse survivor has spoken out about her and her sister's experience of abuse in a bid to bring more attention to the plight of abuse victims and how society treats abuse and abusers.” (*Sky News*, 12/10/2020)

The item is impressive in its sensitive treatment of the topic and inclusion of factual information from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, but, like most broadcast items, it did not include helpline information.

The Australian newspaper also published several powerful articles by Virginia Tapscott during the study's timeframe. For example:

My sister was abused. So was I. She's dead. I'm speaking up (19/9/20)

These powerful accounts cast light on the prevalence of child sexual abuse within families, which has tended to receive relatively little attention when compared to the abuse of children within institutions or by perpetrators who are not known to the victim. This is a feature length (2,853 word) account of her experience of being a victim of sexual abuse by her step-grandfather. She wrote about her sister who was also a victim and died of an accidental drug overdose in June:

“Please say her name. I need to tell this story, in all its shocking ugliness, to elicit a reaction. I want people to say my dead sister's name and to openly reject the whole spectrum of predatory sexual behaviours. [...]”

In doing this, we destigmatise the victim and cultivate a culture where talking openly about sexual abuse becomes acceptable.”

This article included details for 1800RESPECT, Lifeline and the Our Watch website.

In another feature article headlined 'Child sex abuse rife in the family' (*Hobart Mercury*, 27/11/20) Blue Knot Foundation founder and long-term advocate of the trauma-informed approach, Cathy Kezelman emphasised the statistics on child sexual abuse within families or where the perpetrator is known to the

victim. She described the many and varied impacts of child sexual abuse but promoted optimism.

Referencing the Child Abuse Royal Commission, Kezelman wrote:

“The Royal Commission showed us the importance for survivors of being listened to, heard, validated and believed. The same applies to survivors sexually abused in the home, family and neighbourhood.”

MEDIATED POLICY AND LEGAL CAMPAIGNS

Several stories during the study’s timeframe reported on more ‘thematic’ law reform issues, including legislation regarding victims and survivors speaking out and changes to the language used to describe child sexual abuse crimes, the National Redress Scheme, and the occasional discussion of policy.

#LetHerSpeak and #LetUsSpeak campaigns

The #LetHerSpeak campaign (which was later named #LetUsSpeak) and the work of Nina Funnell and others has played an important role in bringing about these changes in addition to bringing them to wider public attention through news reporting. This campaign was widely publicised through News Corp outlets, for example:

Historic change powered by advocates (*Hobart Mercury*, 24/4/20)

This story by Nina Funnell is about law changes in Tasmania to allow sexual assault survivors to be named and changes to language used in the law to describe a range of sexual offenses against children. It included quotes from the CEO of Our Watch and Grace Tame, who emphasised the importance of survivors telling their stories and the need for systemic change.

In August 2020, a series of reports were published about changes to the Judicial Proceedings Reports Act in Victoria. Nina Funnell reported:

“Today, the *Herald Sun* launches the #LetUsSpeak campaign in Victoria, to call on the state government to reform the law that has silenced survivors. The campaign has already overturned similar laws in Tasmania and the Northern Territory.” (Sexual assault victims vilified, *Herald Sun*, 26/8/20)

The story gave prominence to the voices of survivors and quoted the chair of Rape and Sexual Assault Research and Advocacy who said: “It’s appalling

that we would erect yet more barriers which muzzle victims” and described the law as “a major victory for offenders”. Victoria’s Attorney-General was also quoted: “I have asked the Department of Justice to urgently look into these cases and consider how future reform could remedy any unintended barriers”.

In an op-ed piece on the same day, Nina Funnell reported that the law makes it “a crime for all rape and sexual assault victims to tell their stories under their real names, once a guilty verdict is in place” (‘Gag law on sex assault victims a crushing blow’, *Herald Sun*, 26/8/20). She wrote:

“It’s a crushing development for survivors, some of whom are just learning that they are no longer able to self-identify in media, despite having already performed years of advocacy around critical issues, including institutional child sexual abuse.”

The story quoted the chair of Rape and Sexual Assault Research and Advocacy, which is a partner of the campaign. It provided statistics showing the higher number of sexual assault victims in Victoria compared to these other jurisdictions and to highlight the larger number of those affected by the law.

Malka Leifer

The story of convicted orthodox Jewish school principal Malka Leifer was typically told through the legal proceedings around her extradition to Australia and court case. However, the case also generated some thematic reporting through the lens of her victims and survivors.

LEIFER FACES SEX-ABUSE ACCUSERS
(*Herald Sun*, 14/9/21)

Another story reported that the three sisters who were sexually abused by Malka Leifer have been the first to be granted permission to identify themselves since new laws enabling victims to be identified were introduced. It quoted the sisters and their barrister along with Nina Funnell who reportedly welcomed the decision but cautioned that less high-profile cases might not receive the same fast-tracked treatment (‘Sisters are winning it for themselves’, 3/9/20).

These examples reinforce the received understanding that ‘speaking out’ is vital to change public discourse and ultimately provide justice for survivors of child sexual abuse.

National Redress Scheme

The Child Abuse Royal Commission continued to be a key reference point for reporting on child sexual abuse during the study's timeframe. Issues surrounding the National Redress Scheme have kept its outcomes on the news agenda. Many such reports are about the negative experiences of victims and survivors seeking to access the Scheme, and its unintended consequences. For example, one story headlined:

'Survivors don't need hush money' (*Newcastle Herald*, 26/9/20)

sourced a survivor who gave evidence to a parliamentary inquiry about the Scheme who said it is causing mental health issues, depression and suicidal thoughts as applications make victims and survivors focus on their trauma. The report included numbers for Lifeline and Beyondblue.

Tasmanian Commission of Inquiry

Our study's timeframe captured the establishment in March 2021 of the Commission of Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Institutional Settings, particularly schools, hospitals and youth detention centres.

Attesting to the power of such inquiries in bringing child sexual abuse to public attention, it generated several news reports highlighting system failures, cover-ups, victims and survivors coming forward to report their abuse and seek damages, and scepticism about how seriously the government is taking the issue.

The inquiry was reportedly prompted by allegations against Tasmanian government staff, particularly a 'paedophile nurse' at Launceston General Hospital, James Geoffrey Griffin, which were aired on *The Nurse* podcast ('Child sex abuse inquiry delayed', *Hobart Mercury*, 3/3/22). Local media, including the *Hobart Mercury* and Channel 7 covered the inquiry intensively, as both a major news story and with a victim and survivor-centred lens.

Child abuse commission open (*Hobart Mercury*, 14/5/21)

This news story reported in the lead paragraphs:

'Victims of child sex abuse have been encouraged to come forward to tell their stories as the Tasmanian Commission of Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse opens.'

On the conclusion of the inquiry, the *Hobart Mercury* reported:

PREMIER STANDS TALL ON ABUSE (*Hobart Mercury*, 12/03/22)

First Nations survivors

Our analyses reinforce that First Nations survivors of child sexual abuse are routinely ignored in news media reporting of child sexual abuse. At worst, child sexual abuse is weaponised against First Nations communities, which can be blamed for the abuse of Indigenous children in a way that news media does not blame the whole community for the abuse of non-Indigenous children.

In a rare example of Indigenous-led reporting, *The Australian* (26/9/20) published a detailed feature by Olga Havnen (chief executive officer of Danila Dilba Health Service in Darwin) headlined 'No justice in ignoring voices of littlest victims'. It confronted systemic problems generally and also in Aboriginal communities, while also suggesting solutions and calling out "knee jerk" reactions from politicians.

It emphasised failures to protect children and support victims, while noting that in 70-85% of cases the perpetrator is known to the victim, which makes it difficult for them to report and seek help. Havnen observed:

'We know the current system creates multiple barriers that make it difficult for victims - especially children and young people - to make disclosures and seek help. Everyone has the right to be safe from violence and abuse, but too often children and young people fall victim to an adversarial legal system of loopholes, uncoordinated services, and staff ill-prepared and inadequately trained to respond.'

The frequent knee jerk responses to media reports by politicians and policymakers [...] have done little to improve child safety. They seem to be driven more by wanting to be seen to do something than by the evidence of what works.'

Havnen wrote that First Nations advocates on the frontline in the Northern Territory have repeatedly brought evidence to decision-makers about "what works" and that lessons can be learned from the Council of Europe campaign to stop sexual violence against children about the need to involve children and young people in the redesign of a system to better protect them.

Support services and helpline information

As the above analyses illustrate, many of the best practice news items we have analysed include comprehensive, relevant support services. Ballarat's *The Courier*, which has developed a practice of including relevant local services in their news stories, and *ABC Online* stand out for their routine and exemplary inclusion of helpline services.

The quantitative analysis found that 25% of online news stories included support services, compared to only 7% of broadcast and 9% of newspaper items. This suggests that production costs are a factor preventing the widespread inclusion of helpline information, but provides an opportunity to normalise the practice given the shift to online digital news production.

6. INSIGHTS AND CONCLUSIONS

This report has provided a comprehensive analysis of contemporary Australian news reporting on child sexual abuse, underpinned by a review of international literature.

News media is significant in building community knowledge and understanding of the complex and poorly understood issue of child sexual abuse. Media have helped to 'break the silence' around the issue, particularly through reporting on the Child Abuse Royal Commission. Media coverage has held accountable powerful institutions and perpetrators, and provided a language with which to discuss child sexual abuse.

Recent major studies conclude that child sexual abuse and child abuse more generally are prevalent in Australian society, and that child sexual abuse intersects with other forms of maltreatment and factors including gender, sexuality, race, disability, age and remoteness.

Our research has found that the story of child sexual abuse is told in particular ways that can shape public understanding. A range of institutional, technological and professional factors contribute to the way child sexual abuse is reported. Industrial and technological changes are impacting on the types of child sexual abuse perpetrated, with online abuse the fastest rising form of child sexual abuse. Digital technology enables the wide dissemination of child sexual abuse material online, and presents considerable challenges to authorities.

News media coverage is tied to technological, industrial and professional trends and factors. It is well established that the news media industries as they have been traditionally conceived – newspaper, radio and television – are in crisis, with falling audiences and loss of advertising revenue.

The emergence of online news formats is ascendant but has not replaced traditional audiences and has fundamentally reshaped the way news is told. While our analysis shows some online reporting allowing more space for deep investigation and the provision of supporting information, digital formats also drive the growth of clickbait headlines that undermine editorial standards and allow the publication of gratuitous, minimising and salacious reporting in the pursuit of clicks.

This presumably drives the prominence of a small number of high-profile stories at the expense of the coverage of a wide range of thematic issues.

We found that the vast majority of reporting was episodic in its framing rather than thematic. High-profile cases and court reporting were drivers of the episodic style of reporting. Courts, police and politics have well established public relations practices that enable a steady flow of information to journalists who are employed by media organisations in established 'beats' and have developed close contacts within those organisations.

Court reporting also focuses on the perpetrator, who was the main focus in approximately 40% of stories, compared with the victim and survivor who were the main actor in just 12% of newspaper articles.

While news framed episodically can be in the public interest and can raise community awareness of the issue, it is thematically reported news that deepens public understanding. Thematic reporting tends to focus on the 'bigger picture' by identifying, discussing and debating the systemic issues relating to child sexual abuse including in institutional contexts, as well as legislative and/or policy responses.

We identified several examples of best practice reporting on child sexual abuse. These were driven by investigatory journalism or high-profile cases, where journalists were resourced to investigate the causes, experiences and impacts of child sexual abuse on victims and survivors. We examined a range of thematic articles that addressed the causes and consequences of child sexual abuse and the related investigations and legislative reforms.

The appointment of Grace Tame as Australian of the Year and the #LetHerSpeak campaign (later #LetUsSpeak) were two prominent examples. As Australian of the Year, Grace Tame used her platform and voice to influence the media agenda, despite some incidental and politically motivated reporting. The significance of survivors writing for the media cannot be underestimated.

We also found examples of advocates such as Olga Havnen who operated as news sponsors to convey the complexity of the issue and advance public understanding.

Digital media has also opened up new forms of thematic journalism for new audiences. A key example is the survivor-driven campaigning journalism. While not all survivor advocacy gets picked up, media campaigns that focus on a particular individual's experience can be used to shine a light on the need for legislative change or uncover injustice.

Inversely, campaigning journalism can also be used to push particular political agendas that may not be beneficial to victims and survivors of child abuse in marginalised settings. Ultimately, the dramatic reduction in the number of journalists employed by news organisations will continue to affect the volume and depth of the stories told.

However, we noted an 'overshadowing' effect (Waller et al., 2020) whereby there was significant over reporting and sensationalising of some high-profile issues and individuals, compared to crimes committed against children in disadvantaged or marginalised settings. The under-reporting of some issues and the over-reporting and sensationalising of others, particularly in light of the media's emphasis on already powerful individuals and institutions, is profound.

When a crime is committed by a powerful individual it is seen to be more consequential than a crime committed within a family or among children in a disability setting. This, of course, is not the case, and the emphasis on political 'scandal' further diminishes the opportunity to increase public understanding.

The emphasis on high profile cases and international celebrity reporting is a significant, distorting and potentially damaging factor in community discussion of child sexual abuse. The 'incidental' reporting of cases of alleged or proven child sexual abuse by high-profile individuals overseas is often treated without the care and respect given to local cases that might be seen to impact on Australian adults and children. This form of reporting distorts and undermines public discussion of child sexual abuse.

Our analysis of the headlines, language and imagery used in print and online news stories offered insights into the way child sexual abuse is reported. The use of problematic language in news headlines is of concern. We identified the common and careless use of sensationalist, gratuitous, de humanising, trivialising, glamourising, masking, minimising, sanitising, stigmatising, victim blaming and inaccurate language in both headlines and the body of stories.

While the online environment encourages this, tabloid print news headlines also used such tactics to attract readers. This highlights the need for guidelines that speak to editors, photographers and news managers, along with the journalists who research and write the stories.

News reporting often reinforces the perception that the risk of child sexual abuse is from strangers or dehumanised 'monsters' rather than from adults known to the child. This has the impact of continuing to hide the true nature of the issue taking place in familiar settings which remains hidden and poorly understood.

A notable finding in our study was the large number of stories emanating from the courts about child sexual abuse material (CSAM). Almost a third of all news stories in our sample were about cases where the location of child sexual abuse was online. Many of these emanated from court reporting about crimes involving CSAM.

This is a significant finding that reflects the high number of criminal cases concerning child exploitation material in the digital age. The telling of such stories is in the public interest, but should not be at the expense of stories that further public understanding of crimes that take place within the confines of homes and institutions.

The establishment of state and national inquiries generates the production of news and makes public issues around child sexual abuse. These events provide an opportunity for news organisations to commit the resources needed for journalists to investigate child sexual abuse more widely. Government agendas, programs and inquiries also provide resources for research that leads to new knowledge about child sexual abuse.

However, our research found little coverage of research or policy initiatives such as the establishment of the National Office for Child Safety and the National Strategy. Agencies associated with the criminal justice system such as the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation, the Office of the e Safety Commissioner and the police were more likely to receive attention. We conclude that it is extremely challenging for official sources to cut through on this issue.

Compared to their use in news about other related issues such as suicide and mental illness, the use of helplines and referrals to support services is not widely used for child sexual abuse. An exception was *ABC Online* where it is routine practice, and Ballarat's *The Courier*, which has developed a practice of including relevant local services in their news stories.

This reflects, but does not excuse, the space constraints of print, radio and online formats, and the shift to digital provides an opportunity for editors to be trained to make the considered inclusion of support services and helplines a standard part of reporting on child sexual abuse.

The Courier's reporting is exemplary of what McCallum, Waller and Myers (2023) have described as 'proximal witnessing', where the local media not only reports on and reveals past events to its audience but walks with the local community through its reckoning and recovery. News organisations that remain close to their communities are more likely to provide localised and relevant support advice.

The reporting of child sexual abuse is a 'story like no other'. The challenge identified in this report is to maintain community discussion, and break taboos and silences while finding constructive ways of talking about the issue of child sexual abuse.

We have found that while child sexual abuse is a relatively prominent topic of news coverage, when we do talk about it, thematic reporting is drowned by gossip, gratuitous, incidental report, and language, or trivialised through the reporting of celebrities at the expense of thematic reporting that considers the wider contexts, policies, evidence and causes.

Child sexual abuse should not be used as a form of 'clickbait' to attract readers, even when the body of the story is well considered and written in the public interest. While journalists and editors may be repeating the language that is used to describe the nature of offences and charges in the law, they have discretion in their lexical choices. The potential impacts of such editing are profoundly damaging for wider community understanding, and may be harmful and retraumatising for those with lived experience.

Importantly, we believe that media guidelines are not the answer to the structural, societal issues that emanate from the prevalence of child sexual abuse in Australian society. They must be part of a broader program of policy, legislation and social practice to support and educate the community to eradicate child sexual abuse.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

- This report makes a range of recommendations for media professionals reporting on child sexual abuse and for victims and survivors in their interactions with the media. Our aim is to provide an evidence base that will encourage best practice reporting that minimises harm and encourages the considered public discussion of child sexual abuse. In doing so, our research provides baseline evidence for the development of the Guides.

For news media professionals:

- Language is everybody's business. The way the public understands issues around child sexual abuse and the language they use to discuss and describe it is influenced by how it is presented in public media. For this reason, and more than other topics, it is crucial that news managers, editors, journalists, photographers and other media professionals take considerable care in the way they report the issue.
- Our research concludes that a victim and survivor-centred, trauma-informed and thematic approach to researching and writing news stories should be encouraged.
- Episodic reporting focuses attention on the perpetrator and can render the child or adult victim and survivor invisible. An orientation to victim and survivor-centred journalism is recommended to shift the focus to those impacted most by the crime. Journalists and editors must be aware that what seem like routine practices of reporting newsworthy stories can also be harmful to readers, both those with lived experience and the wider public. The nature of police and court reporting lends itself to episodic reporting and is the most common source of harmful news headlines. This is not to suggest court reporting itself is harmful; but media professionals must be accountable for the impact of their reporting.
- Reporting of international celebrities, particularly the inclusion of child sexual abuse references incidentally is potentially damaging and editors and news managers should take care.
- All news professionals, including freelance journalists, need access to accurate research and information about the nature, prevalence and impacts of child sexual abuse.

- News editors and digital producers need to take more care than ever about the placement of imagery and advertising that can be potentially harmful.
- Specific guidance and training is needed to recognise and avoid particularly harmful language: sensationalist; gratuitous; de-humanising, trivialising, glamourising, masking, minimising, sanitising, stigmatising and victim-blaming language are all commonly used in news headlines and are particularly problematic. Journalists and editors should be trained in the use or avoidance of specific problematic words and phrases such as 'pedophile', 'pedo', 'child porn', 'child sex' and 'sexual relationship with a child'.
- There is a need for comprehensive and accessible guides, such as the Guides, for journalists reporting on child sexual abuse. These should be made widely available and include supporting information and training for editors and news managers, as well as journalists and journalism educators.

For victims and survivors in their interactions with the media:

- While it is the news media's responsibility to ensure best practice reporting, it is also important to support victims and survivors in their interactions with news media.
- There is a need for comprehensive and accessible guides, such as the Guides, for victims and survivors, their families and advocates in their interactions with news media.
- Specific guidance including information about the routine practices of journalism and support available is recommended.
- Advocacy in relation to awareness raising and legal reform is critical, and specialised training in engaging with news media professionals is recommended.
- Finally, we acknowledge that Guides are not a panacea but their production can be part of the wider education and building of awareness among the entire community about the harms and benefits of public discussion of child sexual abuse.

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9. PROJECT TEAM

Professor Kerry McCallum

Kerry McCallum is Director of UC's News & Media Research Centre (N&MRC). Her research focuses on the impacts of the changing media on public policy, and the media practices of citizens and policymakers. Kerry is lead investigator on the *Breaking Silences: Media and the Child Abuse Royal Commission* project is co-author of *The Dynamics of News and Indigenous Policy in Australia* (Intellect, 2017). Kerry has expertise in qualitative social research methods in media studies, including the supervision of multiple doctoral research projects and the mentorship of emerging researchers.

Dr Kate Holland

Kate Holland is a Senior Research Fellow with the N&MRC. Kate is a communication scholar whose work sits at the intersection of media studies and public health. She has led several collaborative research projects examining media reporting and public understandings in relation to topics such as mental health, infectious diseases, violence against women, obesity, alcohol and pregnancy. Kate specialises in qualitative research methods and has completed major projects for the NHMRC and Australian Research Council on the topics of media, mental health and health communication.

Professor Debra Rickwood

Debra Rickwood is Professor of Psychology and Chief Scientific Advisor to the headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation. She has been Professor of Psychology in the University of Canberra's Faculty of Health since 2006. Professor Rickwood is the author of more than 178 research outputs and has supervised over 170 theses. She has expertise in child and youth mental health as ministerial appointee to the ACT Ministerial Advisory Council on children in out of home care.

Ms Emma John

Emma John is a PhD Candidate and Research Assistant at the University of Canberra's N&MRC. Emma's PhD is attached to the *Breaking Silences: Media and the Child Abuse Royal Commission* ARC Discovery project, and examines the framing of victim-survivors and institutions by journalists in the ABC's coverage of the Royal Commission. Her research aims to provide insight into the efficacy of news media in amplifying the voices of victim-survivors of child sexual abuse.

SUB-CONSULTANTS AND PROJECT RESEARCHERS

Associate Professor Georgina Sutherland

Georgina Sutherland is an Associate Professor in the Disability and Health Unit, Centre for Health Equity, Melbourne University School of Population Health and will be a project advisor. Sutherland has collaborated with Holland for research for ANROWS and Our Watch on media reporting of violence against women, analysis of media guidelines and the impacts of media training.

Dr Janet Fulton

Janet Fulton is an independent researcher in Communication and Media and an associate with the N&MRC. Fulton has worked on projects in journalism, journalism education, media entrepreneurship, social media, creativity and cultural production, and diversity. These projects incorporated both qualitative and quantitative research methods including surveys, content analysis, interviews, observation and desktop research.

Dr Barbara Walsh

Barbara Walsh is Director of Barb Walsh Consulting. She was previously Associate Professor of Communication and Associate Dean of Work Integrated Learning at the University of Canberra. She is a highly experienced Communication professional and educator with specialist expertise in community consultation.

Dr Megan Deas

Megan is the project manager for the ARC-funded Discovery project *Breaking Silences: Media and the Child Abuse Royal Commission*. She is also the program manager for the project *Co-developing a new approach to media literacy in the attention economy*, a joint project between the N&MRC and the Faculty of Education at the University of Canberra. Her research interests focus on visual culture and visual communication, particularly the role press photographs play in shaping public opinion on issues of national interest.

10. APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: SUMMARY OF iSENTIA MEDIA COLLECTION

Collection dates

- 1 April 2020 – 30 June 2021 (Print and online via Lexis)
- 1 July 2021 – 30 March 2022 (Print, online via iSentia)
- 1 Jan 2022 – 31 March 2022 (Television, via iSentia)

Search terms: ‘child sexual abuse’ OR ‘child sex abuse’ OR ‘child rape’ OR ‘child exploitation’ OR ‘child pornography’ OR ‘pedophile’ OR ‘paedophile’ OR ‘Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse’ OR ‘child sex offender’ OR ‘relationship with child’ OR ‘relationship with student’.

TABLE 1: ‘Guidelines coding instrument’ quant media analysis

MEDIUM	DATE RANGE	OUTLETS	SOURCE	# ITEMS
Print	1/4/20-30/6/21 (16 months)	The Australian; The Guardian; the Age; Sydney Morning Herald; Courier Mail; Daily Telegraph; Herald Sun; Hobart Mercury; NT News; West Australian; Adelaide Advertiser; Australian Community Media (Canberra Times; Newcastle Herald; Ballarat Courier; Katherine Times); Financial Review.	Lexis-Nexis	2814
Print	1/7/21-30/3/22 (8 months)	The Australian; The Guardian; the Age; Sydney Morning Herald; Courier Mail; Daily Telegraph; Herald Sun; Hobart Mercury; NT News; West Australian; Adelaide Advertiser; Australian Community Media (Canberra Times; Newcastle Herald; Ballarat Courier; Katherine Times); Financial Review.	iSentia	1524
Online	1/7/21-30/3/22 (8 months)	ABC news online; news.com.au; The Guardian Australia; Daily Mail, SBS Online.	iSentia	1092
	1/4/20-30/6/21 (16 months)	N/A	N/A	
Broadcast	1/1/22-31/3/22	ABC (national news; current affairs); SBS (news and current affairs); 7, 9, 10 (national news); Sky News; ABC radio news Melbourne.	iSentia	444

APPENDIX 2: CONTENT ANALYSIS CODING FRAME

TABLE 2: Metadata (iSentia)

CODE	DESCRIPTOR
Date of publication	Date story first published/republished
Media type	Newspaper, online, TV etc
Location of media	State and town
Media outlet	Name of publication/program
Headline	Main headline
Author/presenter	Story author
Duration or length	Duration of item for TV; length for online and newspaper

TABLE 3: Content specific data

CODE	DESCRIPTOR	DEFINITION/ EXPLANATION	MENU TYPE	DROP DOWN MENU CATEGORIES
Relevance			Drop down (Select one)	
Type of article	News, Feature, Opinion; Editorial; Investigative; Feature, Current Affairs	The genre of news article or story	Drop down (Select one)	News Feature Opinion Editorial Investigative Feature Current Affairs Other
Story topic	Main topic of story	Provide a brief description of the story; note prominent/ newsworthy stories such as Grace Tame/George Pell	Free text (no more than 20 words)	
Main actor	Victim/survivor, survivor organisation; perpetrator; perpetrator organisation; government; courts; family; other	What/who is the main focus of the story? ie What/whom the story is about (not necessarily the main quoted sources)	Drop down (Select one)	Victim/survivor Perpetrator Survivor's Family Survivor support organisation Perpetrator organisation Government Courts Police Other

CODE	DESCRIPTOR	DEFINITION/ EXPLANATION	MENU TYPE	DROP DOWN MENU CATEGORIES
Other main actor		Actor not listed in the drop-down menu above. This should be recorded as 'other'	Free text (Optional)	
Secondary actor	Victim/survivor, survivor organisation; perpetrator; perpetrator organisation; government; courts; family; other	What/who is the secondary focus of the story?	Drop down (Select one)	Victim/survivor Perpetrator Survivor's Family Survivor support organisation Perpetrator organisation Government Courts Police Other
Main actor is priority group	Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples; culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities; people with a disability; LGBTQIA+ people; people living in regional and remote communities	Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander includes First Nations, Indigenous. Only choose an option if priority group is clearly specified in the article/piece	Drop Down (Select one)	None of these/not specified Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities People with a disability LGBTQIA+ people People living in regional and remote communities
Time of abuse	Historic; contemporary; both	Historical = crime that took place > five years ago, even if about contemporary legal case; Contemporary = cases where the crime took place < five years ago; 'both' = stories of past and ongoing abuse (particularly in institutions)	Drop down (Select one)	
Story origin - first	Courts; government; parliament; survivor organisation; journalist; police; report; government inquiry; other	The main source or origin of evidence for the journalists' story ie was it a survivor's story? The release of a government report? Police conviction or court case? Victim/survivor story refers to a story written by the survivor or survivor organisation, rather than a story featured in a journalists' investigation (eg opinion piece by Grace Tame)	Drop down (Select one)	Courts Police Government or parliament Government or parliamentary report or inquiry Journalist's investigation Victim/survivor Other

CODE	DESCRIPTOR	DEFINITION/ EXPLANATION	MENU TYPE	DROP DOWN MENU CATEGORIES
Story origin – second	Courts; government; parliament; survivor organisation; journalist; police; report; government inquiry; other	The main source or origin of evidence for the story ie journalists' investigation into a survivor's story, the release of a government report, police conviction or court case	Drop down (Select one)	Courts Police Government or parliament (other than release of report) Government or parliamentary report or inquiry Journalist's investigation Victim/survivor story Other
Institution – first named	School; home; religious; defence; health; sport; Out of Home Care (OOHC); justice; community organisation; arts; university; international; government; other	Where the abuse took place. Justice covers police, courts and prisons; Government = government department but excludes health and defence; Justice covers police, courts and prisons; Parliament or political includes Parliament House and political parties/organisations Health includes hospitals, psychiatric or disability service Community organisations include NFP, NGO, charity etc but excludes religious organisations OOHC refers to orphanage, foster care; International includes child trafficking	Drop down (Select one)	School Home Religious Government Parliament or political Defence Health Sport Out of Home Care (OOHC) Justice Community organisation Arts organisation University Online International Other
Institution - second named	School; home; religious; defence; health; sport; Out of Home Care (OOHC); justice; community organisation; arts; university; international; government; other	Where the abuse took place. Justice covers police, courts and prisons; Government = government department but excludes health and defence; Justice covers police, courts and prisons; Parliament or political includes Parliament House and political parties/organisations Health includes hospitals, psychiatric or disability service Community organisations include NFP, NGO, charity etc but excludes religious organisations OOHC refers to orphanage, foster care; International includes child trafficking	Drop down (Select one)	School Home Religious Government Parliament or political Defence Health Sport Out of Home Care (OOHC) Justice Community organisation Arts organisation University Online International Other

CODE	DESCRIPTOR	DEFINITION/ EXPLANATION	MENU TYPE	DROP DOWN MENU CATEGORIES
Sources quoted or paraphrased – first source	Victim/survivor, survivor organisation; perpetrator; perpetrator organisation; government; courts; family; other	First person interviewed or quoted in the story	Drop down (Select one)	Victim/survivor Survivor organisation Perpetrator Perpetrator organisation Lawyer for perpetrator Lawyer for victim/survivor Police Government Courts Family Other
Sources quoted or paraphrased – second source	Victim/survivor, survivor organisation; perpetrator; perpetrator organisation; government; courts; family; other	Second person interviewed or quoted in the story	Drop down (Select one)	Victim/survivor Survivor organisation Perpetrator Perpetrator organisation Lawyer for perpetrator Lawyer for victim/survivor Police Government Courts Family Other
Perpetrator	Teacher; religious; celebrity; family; coach; community leader; supervisor; carer; other	Teacher includes school leader or principal; community leader excludes religious; supervisor refers to employer or boss	Drop down (Select one)	Teacher Religious Celebrity Family Coach Community leader Supervisor Carer Other
Other Perpetrator	Other perpetrator not listed	Perpetrator not listed in the drop-down menu above. This should be recorded as 'other'	Free text (optional)	
Victim named	Victim named		Drop down (Select one)	Yes No
Perpetrator named	Perpetrator named		Drop down (Select one)	Yes No
Nature of reporting	Issue based or thematic	Episodic = Story about a specific case (eg court case; inquiry evidence; celebrity) Thematic = Story about systemic issues relating to child sexual abuse, policy, societal issues	Drop down (Select one)	Episodic Thematic Both Unclear

CODE	DESCRIPTOR	DEFINITION/ EXPLANATION	MENU TYPE	DROP DOWN MENU CATEGORIES
Headline language	Includes sensationalist language or 'clickbait' in the headline		Drop down (Select one)	Sensationalist Clickbait Both Neither
Headline language	Examples of sensationalist language or 'clickbait' in the headline	Note examples of quality/problematic language; Clickbait	Free text (if 1, 2 or 3 selected above)	
Free text (if 1, 2 or 3 selected above)	List examples of potentially problematic language used in the body of the story (not the headline)	Examples: Sensationalist – language that dramatizes the story eg 'monster' Trivialising – downplays the severity of the crime. Suggests perpetrator's innocence 'trapped' 'mutual consent' 'relationship' Misleading/inaccurate – relationship cf crime Victim and survivor centred – foregrounds the survivor's words and voice Dehumanising – 'orphan, Indigenous child etc' Victim blaming – suggests victim 'enticed, brought on, appealed' to the perpetrator Othering – particularly in relation to priority groups 'poverty' 'abandoned' Vague – 'relationship' 'pornography'	Free text (include exemplar word or phrase only)	
Imagery	Note examples of imagery used	Examples: Church door or altar; priests' robes without head; empty swings; bike without child. Note where obvious stock imagery is used	Free text (only if image used)	
Inclusion of contact info or links for resources	Yes/no	Helplines; services; etc	Drop down	Yes No
Examples of resources	Names of resources referred to	Note if 'pulled' box or list of help resources eg Lifeline; Kids Helpline; 1800RESPECT; Bravehearts; Beyond Blue	Free text (If yes, list names of help resources listed)	



MEDIA REPORTING OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN AUSTRALIA 2020-22: SUMMARY RESEARCH REPORT

Produced by the News & Media Research Centre at the University of Canberra. Information in this guide is current as of July 2023.

Reporting on Child Sexual Abuse: Guidance for Media and *Engaging with Media about Child Sexual Abuse: For Victims and Survivors* are available online at www.childsafety.gov.au/mediaguides