



**The Role of
Community and
Legal Services
Covering Greater
Western Sydney in
Addressing
Institutional Child
Sexual Abuse: Post-
Royal Commission
to Present**

RESEARCH SUMMARY

WESTIR LIMITED

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Research overview

Background

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a complex social problem that has received increasing public attention in recent years.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (the Royal Commission) focused on this form of abuse in institutional settings. It provides an unprecedented look into the causes, nature, impacts and organisational responses to this phenomenon in Australia. Both prior and since the Royal Commission concluded in 2018, services in the community sector have been critical in supporting victims and survivors of abuse.

In 2021, WESTIR Ltd conducted a qualitative research study. The research aimed to understand the current state of the service system for CSA victim-survivors, through the perceptions and experiences of service staff in relevant community based organisations.

Objectives

The overarching objectives of the research study were as follows:

- Explore how community and legal services that are servicing GWS are addressing institutional CSA.
- Understand how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted delivery of these services.
- Describe the service needs of victim-survivors of institutional CSA in GWS, including current and future demand.
- Investigate the benefits and challenges of service collaboration and coordination to address institutional CSA.
- Understand the strengths and weaknesses of the broader service system of support and how it can be improved.

This document provides a summary of the research project. The full research report is available on WESTIR's website.



Methodology

Approach

This research study adopted a qualitative methodology, which focuses on participants' lived experiences, histories, perspectives, and insights, drawn through their own descriptions of circumstances. The study approach also focused strongly on the principles of action research, where the knowledge produced through research is intended to drive social change.

Methods

The research study was approved by WESTIR Limited's internal ethics approval process. Non-random sampling approaches were used to recruit interview participants. Participants were required to be current or former workers in a community or legal service where institutional CSA was being addressed, whether via prevention, response, or client support.

Interviews were conducted between March and August 2021 via recorded video call. A total of 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of 16 services covering GWS, including 5 group interviews. Participating organisations included not-for-profit community services (n=10), community legal services (n=5), and a local government (n=1).

Interview questions were based on research objectives and linked to four main themes: the role of community and legal services in addressing institutional CSA, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on services, client characteristics and needs, and service responses to institutional child sexual abuse.

Interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed with NVivo. The researchers broadly used the step-by-step approach outlined by Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules (2017) to ensure the thematic analysis undertaken was rigorous, relevant and trustworthy.

15

interviews

16

organisations

21

individual participants



Key findings

1

Role of community and legal services in addressing institutional CSA

This study found that community and legal services covering GWS served several functions when addressing institutional CSA.

Interviews revealed that the community services sector provided a number of services to address institutional CSA in their communities, including secondary and tertiary therapeutic support to victim-survivors and perpetrators, and redress support services.

Many government and non-government organisations working with children and young people undertook prevention activities to stop CSA from occurring in the first place, in line with recommendations from the Royal Commission.

Community legal centres (CLCs) also assisted clients who experienced institutional CSA by providing advice or referral around civil litigation and assisting with applications through the National Redress Scheme (NRS) or victims support schemes. Other important functions that CLCs undertook to address institutional CSA included community legal education and outreach, law and policy reform work, and case management.

2

Impact of COVID-19 on service response

The COVID-19 pandemic was found to have diverse impacts on the services of participating organisations, both for clients and staff.

One factor impacted by COVID-19 was service accessibility, with the shift to digital mediums considered to broaden access for some clients while presenting barriers for others.

Interviewees also noted the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the NRS, including delays with redress applications and changes in how funds were used.

For organisations using digital mediums to undertake service delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic, interview participants identified the need to adapt safety mechanisms for clients and staff, who were often undertaking traumatic work while physically isolated.

3

Client characteristics and service needs

The service needs of victims and survivors of institutional CSA were found to be highly diverse, as were their demographic characteristics.

Interviewees reflected on the demographic trends observed among clients, noting factors such as age, Indigenous status, gender, homelessness, disability, mental health, engagement with institutions, cultural and linguistic diversity, and socio-economic status.

There was widespread agreement that client needs, despite their diversity, had stayed quite consistent since the Royal Commission.

However, for victim-survivors and broader society, awareness of CSA and relevant supports had been impacted by media coverage, social movements, and the occurrence of the Royal Commission.

In addressing the needs of CSA victim-survivors, interviewees noted ongoing challenges, such as the perceived disconnect between institutional and non-institutional abuse and the increasing prevalence of online sexual abuse.

4

Service responses

Interview participants reflected on how community sector services were responding to institutional CSA. One priority raised was the importance of holistic, multidisciplinary support to meet clients' complex needs, including through cross-departmental collaborations and commitments from organisations to become child-safe. For many, the incorporation of client voices and lived experiences were vital components of their service and policy responses.

While many services collaborated well with other organisations, this could also be difficult across fragmented and siloed service systems.

Interview participants shared mixed responses as to whether they thought their services were meeting current service demand or client needs of victim-survivors, as this was largely contingent on their funding and resources.

Service gaps and challenges outlined by interviewees were wide-ranging. Interviews highlighted the need for more long-term service funding, the difficulties in navigating across service systems, the need for more services for both sexual assault victims and perpetrators, the importance of restorative justice mechanisms, and the issue of 'survivor farming'.

Many interviewees reflected on their experiences with the NRS (and subsequent counselling supports through NSW Victims Services), noting that more needed to be done to make the scheme trauma-informed, culturally appropriate, and accessible.

A range of workforce issues were also highlighted, including the need for ongoing trauma-informed training and external supervision, and factors of a workplace's culture that can lead to high staff turnover.



"I cannot understate the resilience of any of my clients. Whether it's [going through] intimate partner violence or family law or really complex child sexual abuse... it's a privilege to have that experience with survivors".

Interviewee 8

"We viewed COVID as sort of another risk, like an offender"

Interviewee 10

"I think services are really tired. I know that we are really tired. And talking to other services, everybody is tired. It's more than the usual 'oh I'm tired' – it's like the dam's about to break"

Interviewee 7



Recommendations

Based on this study, WESTIR make the following recommendations for GWS and beyond:

THEME	RECOMMENDATION
1 – Role of community and legal services	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 1.1. Continue to research how mainstream and specialist services are responding to institutional CSA (such as housing and health) to build a picture of the overall service response.
2 – Impact of COVID-19 on service response	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 2.1. Continue to develop guidance for service providers on how to undertake virtual service delivery safely (online or over the phone) for both clients and workers.• 2.2. Continue to develop frameworks, guidelines, and methods for service providers on how to have effective remote team collaboration for co-regulating, debriefing tasks, and handling the complexity of online service delivery.• 2.3. Undertake research on how COVID-19 related lockdowns and shifts to digital service delivery have impacted service accessibility for different age groups.• 2.4. Consider special training for staff who provide online services to the victims of online CSA, and develop frameworks to help them recognise the requirements of working with victims of online CSA.• 2.5. Develop special consideration for the health and wellbeing of staff who work on sensitive subjects from home and experience social isolation.
3 – Client characteristics and service needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 3.1. Continue to develop understandings among the human service system workforce on the demographic diversity of CSA victim-survivors, including intersectionality and complexity.• 3.2. Continue to support service providers in providing immediate and material support to victims and survivors of CSA, in addition to therapeutic support.• 3.3. Expand the provision of trauma-informed training to the aged care workforce on safely responding to CSA disclosure.• 3.4. Broaden provision of education and resources on online sexual abuse, as well as understanding dynamics of prevention and disclosure in online environments such as social media.• 3.5. Undertake further research into the impact of legal and policy reform processes, and their subsequent media coverage on victim-survivors feelings of safety, belonging, and support.



THEME

RECOMMENDATION

- 3.6. Continue efforts to develop broad social awareness of CSA, both among sector staff and the public, including addressing damaging myths and stereotypes.
- 3.7. Re-invigorate social awareness campaigns regarding the Royal Commission and NRS, to maximise reach and ensure that victims and survivors understand the supports and redress opportunities available.

4 - Service responses to institutional CSA

- 4.1. Provide long-term, non-competitive funding for community and legal services to provide ongoing wrap-around support with victim-survivors, as well as child safety and prevention activities.
- 4.2. Continue to develop mechanisms that encourage service coordination and collaboration, including interagencies and communities of practice.
- 4.3. Ensure the voices and lived experiences of clients are embedded into service delivery and policy development.
- 4.4. Consider alternatives to the adversarial criminal justice system, such as specialised sexual assault courts and restorative justice mechanisms.
- 4.5. Resource shared monitoring and evaluation tools and processes, particularly for Redress support services.
- 4.6. Enhance the capacity of specialist sexual assaults services (particularly for adult victims and survivors), including further funding for case management work.
- 4.7. Develop policy recognition and funding of treatment and support services for perpetrators of sexual abuse and their families.
- 4.8. Undertake a multi-pronged approach to addressing 'survivor farming' including mandatory trauma-informed education, legislative frameworks to regulate costs, information sharing and establishing complaints processes.
- 4.9. Improve the National Redress Scheme process to reflect the scheme's second year review recommendations, including the introduction of impact-based Redress payments and increased access to trauma-informed, culturally appropriate counsellors through Victim's Services.
- 4.10. Invest in ongoing trauma-informed training and external supervision for staff working with victims and survivors.
- 4.11. Continue developing policies, training and resources to help workers in child and youth serving organisations identify possible abuse and support disclosure.
- 4.12. Undertake further research into the overall culture of sexual assault services as a means of contributing to staff turnover.



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The full research is available under Publications at westir.org.au

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