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Fighting child sexual abuse: how Police and Communities can work together

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Key words: child sexual abuse, communities, police, reporting, victim

Abstract

Recently released statistics confirm that one in four young girls and one in seven young boys are currently being sexually abused in Australia. While considered 'conservative', these figures unveil an alarming situation regarding child sexual abuse in this country. Parallel to these figures, a separate research project run by Charles Sturt University has confirmed that child sexual abuse reporting is dramatically low, particularly in regional Australia.

The research project '*Fly a White Balloon and Child Sexual Abuse: a study of community perceptions in regional Australia*', saw the collaboration of two schools (Policing and Community Health) across two faculties at Charles Sturt University, Australia. Conducted in partnership with Upper Hume Community Health Service (UHCHS), the main focus of this research was to evaluate 'Fly a White Balloon Day' (an initiative aimed at raising child sexual abuse awareness), and to map community perceptions of the occurrence and treatment of child sexual abuse in regional Victoria and New South Wales.

Within the bounds of this research project, a survey conducted in regional communities throughout New South Wales and Victoria revealed the disturbing fact that only four out of a total 479 persons surveyed, would directly report an instance of child sexual abuse to police. It was found that numerous variables contribute to, and influence people's conscious decision not to disclose this type of abuse.

In response to these results, a new research project, run in partnership with the New South Wales Police Force (NSWPF), is currently being considered. This research will investigate ways to better recognise and identify child sexual abuse, with the police assuming the key stakeholder role in addressing this problem.

At the time Charles Sturt University (CSU), in partnership with Upper Hume Community Health Service (UHCHS) were about to release a report on regional community perceptions of child sexual abuse in Australia, Child Wise, an Australian child protection agency released statistics that one in four young girls and one in seven young boys are currently being sexually abused in the country (Child Wise, 2008). These figures are considered 'conservative', and our research confirmed that child sexual abuse reporting is dramatically low, particularly in regional Australia.

The main focus of the *'Fly a White Balloon and Child Sexual Abuse: a study of community perceptions in regional Australia'* research was to evaluate 'Fly a White Balloon Day' (an initiative aimed at raising child sexual abuse awareness), and to map community perceptions of the occurrence and treatment of child sexual abuse in regional Victoria and New South Wales. Within the bounds of this research, various facts were revealed, and some of which directly impact the policing industry.

During the research process, a survey run in regional communities throughout New South Wales and Victoria on Fly a White Balloon Day (September 4th, 2007) unveiled the disturbing fact that only four, out of a total 479 persons surveyed, would directly report an instance of child sexual abuse to police (Bartkowiak-Théron, Curtin and Young, 2008). It was found that numerous variables contribute to, and influence people's conscious decision not to disclose this type of abuse. This paper looks at relevant information of use to police and discusses the logistics of a new research project, about to be launched in 2009. This research will investigate ways to better recognise and identify child sexual abuse, with the police assuming the key stakeholder role in addressing this problem.

Child Sexual and Fly a White Balloon: results from a recent regional research

The Fly a White Balloon initiative

'Fly a White Balloon' (FWB) is a community development project which uses (environmentally friendly) white balloons as a way of uniting the community around the statements 'Breaking the Silence on Child Sexual Abuse – Keeping Kids Safe in our Community'. Balloons are displayed throughout the community on Tuesday of Child Protection Week, and are left flying for the remainder of the week. Decisions regarding how and where balloons are used/flown, and the nature of supporting activities in schools, town centres etc, and are made by communities themselves (Young, 2006).

Since 1999, the FWB initiative has grown from three friends and 800 balloons in one small North-East Victorian town, to 15,000 balloons flying across North-East Victoria and Southern NSW. The project is a community owned event that brings together a variety of stakeholders around an issue that is well recognised as concerning communities as a whole. Stakeholder involvement includes: various government agencies, councils, businesses, school children, students, child protection agencies, churches, aboriginal groups, police, jails, health workers, hospitals, the Victoria Department of Human Services, housing networks, domestic violence networks and youth agencies. Growth in this initiative has been largely driven by volunteers in each community, with their work at times facilitated by agency support. The communities of Beechworth, Myrtleford, Rutherglen, Yackandandah, Wangaratta, Tallangatta, Wodonga, Shepparton, Benalla, Howlong, Albury and many other smaller rural communities in North-East Victoria, have been major supporters and participants in the

initiative. In 2004 the event won the Victorian Department of Justice Gold Award for Excellence & Innovation in Community Safety – Crime Prevention (*ibid.*).

The North-East Victoria and Southern New South Wales version of FWB is a growing initiative and, in 2007, was in need of an evaluation in order to design a way forward (*ibid.*). The evaluation required the provision of various perspectives and inputs in order for a newly formed steering committee to improve the provision and articulation of services delivered through FWB. CSU was approached and asked to conduct this research in joint partnership with UHCHS, the agency currently hosting FWB in that region. As community consultation was one of the main foci of this evaluation, this research provided, for the first time (in a formalised holistic format), community feedback as to the needs and perceptions of community members regarding the FWB scheme and child sexual abuse from a more general point of view. The research also analysed the emergence and/or development of the various types of partnerships (community partnerships, business partnerships, coordination of agency services, etc.) related to the scheme.

What is of interest for Police in this research

We believe that police will be interested in specific findings of our research such as the fact that a lack of sexual abuse reporting is, in part, due to a lack of identification and understanding of what exactly constitutes the offence. The confirmation that people are also reluctant to report to authorities for fear of secondary trauma induced by the investigation and then court process will also be of interest to police, as well as the positive identification of the progress that has been made in raising awareness and in fighting false preconceptions about child sexual abuse. These points will now be explored and addressed.

Factors influencing under-reporting

Our research confirmed that the FWB initiative was contributing to progress made in raising issues and encouraging debate regarding child sexual abuse. It also highlighted, however, that there is still limited understanding regarding what actually constitutes child sexual abuse, unfortunately resulting in significant gaps in the identification of the act. This limited understanding should be taken into account when considering the secondary issue of not reporting to authorities. It is very likely that many valid cases of sexual abuse are not reported due to a lack of identification as an inappropriate act, therefore limiting and skewing statistical analysis. For example, acts of presenting pornography or the use of sexually explicit e-images are very rarely identified by respondents as acts of abuse.

The issue of identification comes in addition to reluctance in reporting due to the shame of being tarnished and becoming the target of various well known stereotypes. The fear to confront the aggressor and to face public scrutiny in the community or in the media (cases are sometimes quite heavily broadcast in the press), also often leads to a wish to be 'left alone in order to forget' response (Heenan, 2005; Mullen, 1998; Weiser-Easteal, 1993).

Another factor to be considered regarding the issue of underreporting is the phenomenon of disclosure itself. In order of priority, 'Nobody', 'friends', 'siblings', 'teachers' and 'parents' are (in order of priority) were answers given in response to the researcher's question of who people thought victims turned to for disclosure. What the victim experiences immediately after the disclosure (including body language responses and actual advice) greatly influences the occurrence of further reporting to authorities. In addition, any kind of exaggerated

reaction in response to the disclosure, also negatively influences a victim's inclination to report:

If I knew they would react in such way, I wouldn't have said anything. They *did* deeply care, but they had this slight, almost not perceptible movement of taking a step back, to move away from me. That deeply, *deeply* hurt me. I was the victim, but somehow, I was disgusting. Or at least, that's how it made me feel. (abstract from a conversation with a child sexual abuse survivor)

The option of direct abuse reporting to authorities figured extremely low amongst respondents' answers. Police were rated last as an option of who to turn to for help, with only 4 out of 449 persons surveyed stating that direct reporting to police was a decision to consider. Taking these results into account, one has to wonder about the number of acts not reported at all. These findings are congruent with other pieces of research, which also demonstrate a reluctance to report to authorities and police in general. The main reason for this reluctance appears to be secondary victimisation and the additional trauma caused by investigation processes (see, for example, Weiser-Easteal, op.cit; Read et al, 2007; Dominguez et al, 2002, etc.).

Also impacting underreporting is the reticence of some government workers to mandatory report to higher authorities. Throughout informal conversations during this research, a number of teachers and several representatives of non-government and government agencies, admitted that despite their duty of care responsibilities and mandatory reporting protocols (Higgins et al, 2007), they still avoid reporting some occurrences of abuse to police. Their decision not to report incidences of abuse was, again, usually influenced by issues of stigmatisation and further victimisation by victims going through the investigation and consequential criminal justice process. Facing the offender during a traditional justice process was also a problematic influence in victims considering the option of formal reporting. Interestingly though (and especially in regional settings), the majority of research participants, when asked about their position in regard to the issue, found positive aspects in engaging in restorative justice processes and 'providing some level of closure', to the victim.

Taking into consideration the results of academic multi-disciplinary research on the issue of disclosure, one might wonder whether these newly released figures (already labelled very conservative), are actually severely under representative of the facts than originally suggested, or too much of an assumption to be scientifically looked at.

Wish for community-based responses and recession of myths

The overwhelming response rate to our research surveys demonstrates that given a proper forum, communities are willing to talk about such a taboo issue. The content of respondents' answers also shows that much has been accomplished in the way of fighting stereotypes and preconceptions about child sexual abuse. These responses reveal a great deal, namely that the 'not in my backyard' myth is slowly being deconstructed, despite some caution as to the resilience of paedophilia. They also highlight a re-humanisation of some offenders rather than public behaviours leaning towards demonising all perpetrators. Respondents insisted on the necessity to engage in early intervention and in sharing the message through education at the earliest age possible.

Suggestions from community members support the implementation of extensive holistic multi-agencies approaches and national education campaigns. Responses also suggested

rehabilitative treatment and counselling for perpetrators and their families, although they do still consider incarceration of the most virulent predators/perpetrators. This image of communities' wishes is quite consistent throughout our research and indicates that community are better aware and know that abuse primarily occurs within families, or within an extended circle of acquaintances. The circumstances (social or psychological) of the act are most probably also better known. When one knows that the perpetration of an act can be the consequence of trauma, mental illness or social mal-adaptation, then it is somehow understandable that despite the horror of the act, one might not want a father, a mother, a grand father or any other family member behind bars (but for them to receive proper treatment instead).

The ways forward for Police in addressing child sexual abuse - research perspectives

At this stage, reasons for non disclosure and non reporting to authorities have been clear and consistent amongst research participants. What is unclear, however, is what should be done to better address this issue. One difficulty which has prevented world-wide research from progressing is that we still do not really have an entirely accurate description or mapping of the problem. As a consequence, any attempt to solve this partially defined problem would be equivalent to dealing with only the visible symptoms of a chronic and yet unknown disease.

The research team is therefore now investigating solutions to resolve this problem. The primary focus of this research will be to sharpen the overall picture of child sexual abuse. Evidence suggests that awareness raising is an effective method of addressing this issue, when appropriate emotional literacy is applied. As discussed previously, the limitation of better identification and definition of abuse is, that this alone will not increase the rate of reporting. From a Policing perspective, issues of investigation, questioning and care of victim are to be taken into account. Interestingly, the NSW Attorney General required the NSW Police College to strengthen its syllabus in regards to victim care at the same time FWB report was being finalised.

Our research intends to examine the investigative and interviewing practices used by various key stakeholders who deal with victims and their immediate family: Domestic Violence Officers, School Liaison Police, Youth Liaison Officers, etc. We will attempt to gain a 'cartography' of police and judicial practice in cases of child sexual abuse, with the knowledge that best practice and additional training, in time, may counteract victims' resentment towards judicial 'processing' and minimise secondary victimisation. It is hoped that this analysis will also help to gain a clearer picture of the problem scope.

Research will occur into what authorities can do to help to counteract the multi-faceted culture of silence that still prevails. For example, a major area of the research will be to look at how, when a victim does not want to file a complaint against a family member or other, agencies and authorities can work together to provide sufficient and appropriate care so as to support and bring healing to the victim, when this one wants the offender to receive treatment as well (not to be incarcerated), and makes this a non-negotiable condition for disclosure and discussion with authorities. Basically, the question is 'do we need to increase reporting rates to help identify better ways to address this problem?' indeed we do, or otherwise we will, yet again, fall into the trap of not being able to clearly define it. However, we know that we are certainly stuck in our current reporting situation. What we need therefore, is a new definition for 'reporting', a new form of reporting and therefore, new reporting mechanisms.

Our research is not aimed at increasing current reporting rates for reporting's sake. We 'simply' need to know what's happening, in order to develop better answers. We acknowledge that our key concerns and objectives are to find the most effective means of protecting and supporting the physical and emotional wellbeing of abused victims and ultimately reduce abuse occurrence rates by developing new processes in addressing the problem; but we also realise that for some victims, current ways of reporting maybe harmful and actually counter-productive to our intentions. In stating this, in any case of abuse, we do not deny that a crime has been committed and we realise our responsibilities as researchers, under the Australian Government National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, but rather focus attention on the fact that individual harm has been inflicted. This way of thinking clearly defines the restorative justice paradigm. Through this approach, perpetrator punishment is not precluded, but harm and reparation do become the 'all consuming' foci of the restoration process instead.

To that effect, and considering respondents' positive opinion about restorative practices, our research will also look at how this model of justice may be embedded in NSW judicial practices, in accordance with the model of the Four Circles of Hollow Water, for example (Buller, 2001). This Canadian initiative is considered a model of best practice in addressing sexual abuse in regional (indigenous communities), where the social fabric is closely knit and somehow resembles Australian regional communities. The model aims to appropriately address issues of shame, and to promote a sense of belonging amongst traumatised parties. We will compare various international programs that attempt to address problems of sexual abuse within communities, parallel to, or within traditional justice mechanisms. This is a research program that will, undoubtedly, be time consuming and strenuous in the areas of addressing police practice and government policy. We hope, however, that our findings will be of assistance in not only helping victims recover from abuse and any consequential trauma, but also help in gaining a better picture and developing better ways to address what is considered one of the most problematic criminal issues of our time.

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