

Childhood Sexual Abuse

Executive Summary

Note: This is one of three Bar Book chapters considering the specific impacts of different forms of child abuse and neglect. This chapter should be read in conjunction with the *Child Abuse and Neglect* and *Childhood Exposure to Family Violence* chapters.

A ‘robust body of research evidence now clearly demonstrates the link between child sexual abuse and a spectrum of adverse mental health, social, sexual, interpersonal and behavioural as well as physical health consequences’.¹

The [Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse](#) found that the impacts of child sexual abuse are ‘interconnected in complex ways’, making specific impacts difficult to isolate.²

The trauma caused by child sexual abuse ‘may interrupt normal psychosocial development in victims’ and affect the biological, social and psychological development of a child.³

Childhood sexual abuse is a ‘substantial risk factor for the development of subsequent mental health problems’.⁴ Adverse mental health consequences can include major depression,⁵ increased risk of alcohol and drug dependence,⁶ often as a means of coping with the psychological trauma of having been abused,⁷ aggressive behaviours and social anxiety.⁸

Survivors of child sexual abuse may also be at greater risk of engaging in risky behaviours, particularly risky sexual behaviours, both during adolescence and adulthood.⁹

Other adverse consequences may include:

- negative health outcomes;¹⁰
- poor educational outcomes;¹¹
- underemployment;¹²
- housing insecurity;¹³ and
- ongoing distrust and fear of institutions and authority, especially where the abuse occurred in an institutional context.¹⁴

The potential relevance of evidence of childhood sexual abuse in sentencing proceedings includes an assessment of *moral culpability*; moderating the weight to be given to *general deterrence*; and determining the weight to be given to *specific deterrence* and *protection of the community*. There may also be issues relating to the likelihood of *hardship in custody*, a finding of *special circumstances* and the shaping of conditions to enhance prospects of *rehabilitation*.

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- ¹ Australian Institute of Family Studies, *[The Long-term Effects of Child Sexual Abuse](#)* (CFCA Paper No 11, 2013) 23.
- ² Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *[Final Report](#)* (2017) [vol 3](#), 11.
- ³ *Ibid* 85.
- ⁴ Margaret C Cutajar et al, 'Psychopathology in a Large Cohort of Sexually Abused Children Followed Up to 43 Years' (2010) 34 *Child Abuse & Neglect* 813, 819.
- ⁵ Australian Institute of Family Studies, *[The Long-term Effects of Child Sexual Abuse](#)* (CFCA Paper No 11, 2013) 8.
- ⁶ *Ibid*.
- ⁷ Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *[Final Report](#)* (2017) [vol 3](#), 11.
- ⁸ Australian Institute of Family Studies, *[The Long-term Effects of Child Sexual Abuse](#)* (CFCA Paper No 11, 2013) 8.
- ⁹ *Ibid* 13.
- ¹⁰ Australian Institute of Family Studies, *[The Long-term Effects of Child Sexual Abuse](#)* (CFCA Paper No 11, 2013) 18.
- ¹¹ Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *[Final Report](#)* (2017) vol 3,146.
- ¹² *Ibid* 152–3.
- ¹³ Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *[Final Report](#)* (2017) vol 3,155.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid* 138. The Royal Commission reported that 32.7% of survivors who gave evidence to the Royal Commission in private sessions discussed a lack of trust in authority as a result of their experiences of abuse.