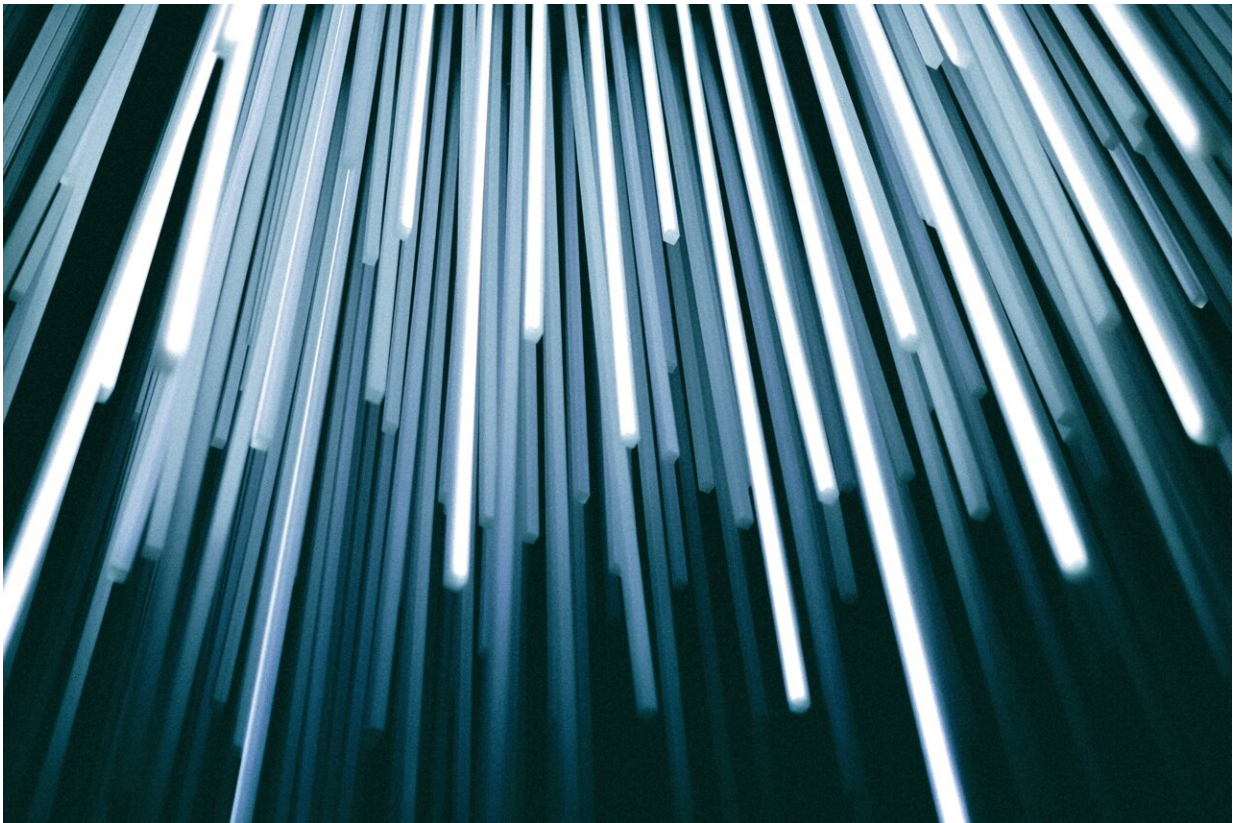


Study: Impacts of child sex abuse material on the families of offenders

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Child sexual abuse material is widely available online, thanks to technological progress and a lack of effective action by internet companies and governments.

Last year, [authorities in the United States](#) received a record-breaking 21.7 million reports of child abuse material.

This year, similar reports to Australia's [eSafety Commissioner](#) were the highest ever recorded, and arrests and charges by the Australian Federal Police for [child sexual exploitation offenses](#) increased by almost 70%.

In the [recently launched](#) national strategy to prevent and respond to child [sexual abuse](#), the federal government committed A\$24.1 million to enhance the Commonwealth's capacity to investigate and prosecute child sexual abusers, with additional funds targeting offenders who use technology to exploit children.

As arrest figures swell, so do the numbers of partners and families of people charged with these offenses. Up to [65% of offenders](#) in treatment have an intimate partner and up to 47% have at least one child, according to the Australian Institute of Criminology.

The partners, families and children of offenders have been described as "[secondary victims](#)". However, this group is not well recognized or supported, despite their significant needs for psychological and practical help.

Our study

In 2020, we conducted an [evaluation](#) of PartnerSPEAK, a non-government organization in Victoria providing peer support and advocacy for the (non-offending) family members of people who access child sex abuse material.

This is the only specialist support service in Australia.

As part of the study, we surveyed 53 PartnerSPEAK clients and

interviewed seven clients. This provided important insights into the needs of this often ignored group.

'The knock on the door'

For 83% of our research participants, the person in their life who accessed child abuse material was a partner or ex-partner. For others, the offender was a parent, child or sibling. Most of these offenders had viewed or accessed abuse material, but some had also committed other offenses, including sexually abusing children and producing and distributing material.

Needless to say, the discovery of a loved one's offending was life-changing, bewildering and profoundly traumatic. One interviewee discovered her partner's offending when the police came to search their house: "[...] something you're never going to forget or put out of your mind, is the knock on the door [...] The way they [the police] presented and when they spoke to me initially, I had no idea. And then when they said the warrant was for—I thought it was for fraud, initially, I just couldn't put the two together. And the fear was that they would label me the same, as colluding with him."

This quote also highlights the intersecting crises that begin with the discovery of a partner's offending. This includes the shock of investigation, and the potentially ruinous implication that she may be a co-offender.

Where to turn to?

For the majority of participants, the discovery of the offending was the beginning of a frightening journey. This included police investigations into their partner and home life, while managing the emotional and

practical fallout of separating in sudden and shocking circumstances.

Participants felt as though they were judged by others in the community for their partner's behavior. They spoke of feeling isolated, even if friends tried to help, they had no "frame of reference." "A lot of my friends—because it's uncharted territory for many of my peer group—just didn't get what I was going through [...] I didn't want a pity party, but I wanted to talk to other people that have had similar experiences to me."

Other interviewees also spoke of the difficulty of working out what to do next and how to get help. "We all have that confusion and hurt and dire need to look after our children. And where to from here, what do I do next? [...] There are lots of things that initially you don't even think of for yourself because you're so worried about your children and where you're going to live and what you're going to do."

The similarities with domestic and family violence

Our study showed a significant overlap with domestic and family violence. In interviews, participants described their relationships with the child sex abuse material offender as characterized by control, secrecy and domestic abuse.

This could include physical assault but also financial abuse and coercive control. One interviewee described how difficult it was to leave the relationship: "I did not know how controlling a marriage I was in until I went to try and open a bank account [...] I was hysterical. I was in the car just screaming in fear. And you go, where is this fear coming from? I don't understand."

At present, child sex abuse material offending is not recognized as a form of abuse against the non-offending partner, despite associated

patterns of manipulation and control, as well as physical violence in some cases.

Many women did not identify they had been in an abusive relationship until after the child abuse offending came to light, and did not know where to turn to for assistance with housing, child support or paid leave to attend court matters.

Our recommendations

As the number of non-offending partners and family members of child sex abuse offenders continues to grow, our study made three key recommendations:

1. Specialist support for non-offending partners and families of child sex offenders needs to be properly funded and nationally available. The recent national strategy has set aside A\$10.2 million for the next four years for just such a support service. This is a good start but mainstream services also need to build their capacity to support this group.
2. Child abuse material offending represents an area in which domestic and family violence services could expand their current offerings, including by clearly identifying themselves as points of contact for non-offending partners.
3. There is a clear need for public education and awareness raising about the scale and impacts of [child abuse](#) material. Our interviewees often felt misunderstood and isolated, which obviously has a big impact on their ability to move on with their lives.

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