

PERSONAL STORIES

Bearing witness to the personal experiences of those affected by child sexual abuse in institutions is central to fulfilling our terms of reference. It helps us to better understand the nature, scale and impact of the sexual abuse of children in an institutional context in Australia. Many survivors have told us that telling their story in a private session helps their recovery process. Every story is important and they will together help us to develop practical recommendations for change.

As at 31 May 2014 we had held 1,677 private sessions. In each session we heard a deeply personal story about a person who suffered from abuse as a child. We have also received 1,632 written accounts from people who have preferred to tell us their story in writing.

Private session with a Commissioner

Private sessions allow survivors, or people who may be aware of the abuse of another, to speak privately with one of the Commissioners.¹ This enables people to tell their stories to someone in authority, without the trauma of giving evidence in public. People attending private sessions are often supported by family members, friends, counsellors or victim support organisations. These sessions are unique to our Royal Commission and required a specific amendment to the *Royal Commissions Act 1902* (Cth) in March 2013.²

The *Royal Commissions Act 1902* (Cth) requires that a session be held in private. Only people who are authorised by the Commissioner can be present.³ Participants are not witnesses⁴ and do not take an oath or affirmation, although they are expected to tell the truth.

There is no set format for a session. The Commissioner will introduce him or herself and explain the purpose of the session. It is then up to each person to decide how to tell their story.

Participants usually share their story of abuse, the immediate response and the impact that the abuse has had on their lives. They are not required to give a detailed account of the abuse, but can if they wish. Commissioners may ask questions to help us understand the story the person wishes to tell. However participants are not cross-examined.

The Royal Commission is careful to support victims before, during and after telling us their stories. By 31 May 2014, we had referred over 160 matters to the police for investigation. We follow-up with victims to check on their welfare after their private sessions and have referred many to counselling, support and other services.

Sharing the stories with Australia

We acknowledge the courage of those people who have taken part in a private

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session or sent in a written account of their experience. Each of these people have made an important contribution to the work of the Royal Commission. They have helped us to better understand the nature and profound impact of the sexual abuse.

This volume includes the stories of 150 people who shared their experience of abuse with us by coming to a private session or providing a written account. They have been chosen as a representative group to assist people to understand the accounts the Royal Commission is receiving.

The real names of individuals have not been used. The real names of all individuals and any other identifying features have been changed, for privacy and fairness reasons and in accordance with the *Royal Commissions Act 1902* (Cth). We have selected substitute names for individuals but the description of a person's position in an institution is real. In some cases the geographical location has been changed.

The stories have been grouped according to the type of institution or circumstances where the abuse took place. The groups are:

- residential care (including orphanages, mission stations, children's homes)

- foster care
- government school
- non-government school
- community (sports and recreation clubs, health services, workplaces)
- church or place of worship and related activities
- juvenile justice.

In addition, this volume includes a selection of poetry given to us by survivors. Through their own words, these poems provide further insight into their experiences of child sexual abuse. They tell both of the harm of abuse and the incredible resilience of survivors. As with the personal narratives, the names of all individuals have been withheld for privacy reasons.

We have shared these stories and poems to give survivors a voice. But each person's story is important to the Commissioners. Anyone who suffers abuse as a child suffers a great wrong. Unfortunately, many in the community do not understand the potential for abuse to occur, the frequency with which it does occur, and its consequences. We present these stories in the hope that they will contribute to a better understanding of the profound consequences of child sexual abuse on the lives of survivors and their families and help us all to make our institutions safe for children in the future.

Commissioners have observed common themes

There are many common themes in the stories we have heard. They are outlined in the table and we examine them in more detail in volume 1 of this report. Many of these themes are being examined in research and are reflected in our public hearings.

Theme	Observations from private sessions
Abuse is often multi-dimensional in nature	Abuse is often reported to be multi-dimensional, involving physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Many survivors reported a culture of fear in institutions created by severe physical abuse. This created an environment in which sexual abuse was both possible and unlikely to be disclosed.
Abuse has long term impacts	Many survivors reported long-term effects of abuse, including on their physical and mental health, their education and career prospects, their ability to form relationships and their faith.
Abuse has ‘indirect victims’	There is often a ‘ripple effect’ of abuse with impacts on people other than the victim. Survivors have reported the impact on their children, partners and parents. Parents and siblings have also reported the impact on the survivor, themselves and other family members. Many ‘indirect victims’ have attended a private session to speak on behalf of a victim who had committed suicide.
Survivors display strength and courage	Many survivors have shown resilience in various aspects of their lives, in spite of dealing with the adverse effects of child sexual abuse. They have displayed incredible strength, kindness and compassion; formed stable relationships; and triumphed over multiple challenges.
Some children are more vulnerable	Some children in institutional settings appear to be more vulnerable to sexual abuse, including those who: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • are in out-of-home care • have a disability • have already been the victims of abuse • are in tightly controlled settings where there is little public scrutiny such as some closed religions.
Repeated abuse and multiple perpetrators are common	Most survivors reported being abused multiple times, and some spoke of multiple offenders in the same residential setting. Children were also sometimes moved from one place to another and abused in both places.

<p>Grooming of victims and family members was common</p>	<p>It was reported that perpetrators commonly prepared a child with the intention of sexually abusing them. They did this by building a relationship of trust with the child and their family or carer and by isolating the child.</p>
<p>There are major barriers to disclosure</p>	<p>Survivors reported that when the abuse occurred, they feared that they would not be believed or would be seen as weak for letting the abuse happen. They worried that disclosure would hurt and distress others. As children, often they:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • did not understand that what was happening was sexual abuse • were not spoken to in private or asked by a trusted, known and sensitive person • were threatened • may have had a complex relationship with the perpetrator. <p>Adult survivors also told us that current barriers to disclosure include them:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • feeling shame, embarrassment, self-blame and self-doubt • deciding that the abuse was not as serious as other forms of abuse happening to other children.
<p>Several factors encourage disclosure</p>	<p>Factors that encouraged children to disclose abuse include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • taking part in school-based prevention programs • being asked in a sensitive and appropriate way by a trusted adult • trusting a peer • feeling concern for other children or younger siblings.
<p>There are barriers to identification and reporting</p>	<p>Many factors undermine the identification and reporting of child sexual abuse, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of training on child sexual abuse • failure to recognise indirect disclosures of abuse • delayed disclosure by victims • adults not recognising concerning or abusive behaviour or rationalising such behaviour because it does not fit their stereotypical view of perpetrators. <p>Some survivors reported that the health and other professionals they had seen had not asked them whether they were abused despite them showing signs of abuse. Survivors said that as a result they often did not disclose the abuse when seeking assistance.</p>

<p>Criminal justice system</p>	<p>Many survivors reported negative experiences of the criminal justice system, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not being believed • limited understanding of child sexual abuse and the needs of victims and survivors • being afraid of or overwhelmed by prosecution and court processes • feeling sidelined and irrelevant to the prosecution process. <p>However many others reported positive experiences of the criminal justice system, with significant changes in the attitudes and responses to abuse over time. Positive experiences included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • feeling supported by the police and at court • police officers who were patient, calm, professional and caring when receiving reports of abuse • being kept well-informed about the progress of their case • referrals to support services.
<p>Responses by adults in authority were ill-informed, inadequate and at times harmful</p>	<p>Survivors reported that they told adults in positions of authority what was happening but those adults did nothing.</p> <p>Many also reported that perpetrators were moved from one region, diocese or state to another in the wake of complaints.</p>

1 *Royal Commissions Act 1902 (Cth) ss 60B(1), 60B(2).*

2 *See Royal Commissions Act 1902 (Cth) ss 60A-60M, inserted by the Royal Commissions Amendment Act 2013 (Cth).*

3 *Royal Commissions Act 1902 (Cth) s 60G.*

4 *Royal Commissions Act 1902 (Cth) s 60C(1).*



