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World's largest child sexual abuse perpetration prevalence study recommends significant investment in early intervention measures

The first nationally representative research into the prevalence of child sexual offending behaviours and attitudes has shed unprecedented light on sexually abusive behaviours and feelings among Australian men. Released today by the University of New South Wales and Jesuit Social Services, the study reveals that, of the community sample surveyed, **one in five Australian men reported sexual feelings towards children and/or have sexually offended against children**, with one-third of those who have thoughts towards children motivated to access help.

The largest study of its kind ever undertaken globally, *Identifying and understanding child sexual offending behaviour and attitudes among Australian men*, measures the prevalence of risk behaviours and attitudes regarding child sexual offending among a representative sample of 1,945 Australian men aged 18 to over 65.

The report provides a new approach for measuring and tracking this issue and includes information that can bolster the service responses and attitudinal changes that help keep children safe from harm.

“This study brings unprecedented visibility to the numbers of undetected child sex offenders in the Australian community,” said lead investigator Associate Professor Michael Salter.

“This study affirms what countless survivors have said – that the men who abused them were well connected and relatively wealthy, and whose behaviour is secretive and easily overlooked.

“By shining a light on the characteristics of individual perpetrators and the broader social and technological patterns that enable their abuse, it is our hope that this research can be the catalyst for change to ultimately keep children safe.”

The study found:

- around one in six (15.1%) Australian men reports sexual feelings towards children
- around one in 10 (9.4%) Australian men has sexually offended against children (including technologically facilitated and offline abuse), with approximately half (4.9%) of this group reporting sexual feelings towards children
- the 4.9% of men with sexual feelings who had offended against children were more likely than men with no sexual feelings or offending against children to:
 - be married, working with children, earning higher incomes
 - report anxiety, depression, and binge drinking behaviours
 - have been sexually abused or had adverse experiences in childhood
 - be active online, including on social media, encrypted apps and cryptocurrency
 - consume pornography that involves violence or bestiality
- Of the men who have sexual feelings, 29.6% of them want help for their sexual feelings towards children, which is 4.5% of Australian men.



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The report affirms the importance of the prevention of child sexual abuse, calling on investment from governments and the private sector to address the risk factors contributing to sexual offending and reoffending in order to reduce sexual violence against children.

“The prevalence of abuse revealed in this report is deeply concerning,” Georgia Naldrett, Manager of Jesuit Social Services’ Stop it Now! Australia service said.

“Our detailed and evidence-based recommendations call for investment in initiatives that address concerning behaviour before it starts, intervene earlier with boys and men who report troubling thoughts and behaviours, and reduce the reoffending risk of those who have already sexually abused children. Investment in these areas can help keep children safe from harm.”

Recommendations include:

- Improving community understandings of the harm of child sexual abuse and challenging attitudes that support child sexual abuse.
- Building safety into online romance and dating sites to reduce offender access to single parents.
- Safeguarding of children in environments that may be deemed particularly risky, including schools, day-care, social groups, clubs and any other activity in which children are present.
- Early intervention services for men with sexual feelings towards children who have not offended, and undetected offenders who want help to stop harming children, such as Stop It Now!.
- Supporting family and friends to identify problematic behaviours.
- The capacity for child protection, law enforcement and the criminal justice system to better target a cohort of men who are a chronic risk to children but are adaptive in their efforts to avoid detection and prosecution.

The study was produced by UNSW academics in association with the Australian Human Rights Institute and Jesuit Social Services’ child sexual abuse prevention service, Stop It Now! Australia. Funding was provided by Westpac’s “Safer Children, Safer Communities” program as part of a collaborative research project between academia and civil society. Subsequent publications from this study will provide comparative data between Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom.

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