

Irish Attitudes to Tackling Child Sexual Abuse. A Whole of Society Approach

Dr. Karen Hand, May 2025



Dr. Karen Hand: Strategy & Research

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Reading this report may cause distress or bring awareness to a situation regarding child sexual abuse. If you or somebody you know need help on any aspect of childhood sexual violence, please contact the 24 hour Helpline on 1800 778888 or www.rapecrisis.ie



Foreword

Many will find this report a distressing read and will be alarmed by its findings. Yet, it is a must read for parents and all who work with children and young people.

We are reminded that sexual violence in childhood is a systemic problem directly experienced by 29% of adults and even higher numbers of younger adults. It exists on and offline and is in the words of author Karen Hand ‘hijacking the sexual expectations’ of young men and women.

Community Foundation Ireland is proud to partner with One-In-Four in undertaking this research as part of our mission of Equality For All in Thriving Communities. That mission cannot be achieved when the youngest members of our society are under threat.

The recommendations made must now be considered by all policymakers. Not least the call to face the reality and begun a long overdue national conversation on sexual abuse to build wellbeing, development and healthy boundaries for all.

What is clear is that responsibility for ending this crisis does not lie with any single agency, profession or sector. It must involve us all.

The findings are clear. What is needed is for all to work collaboratively as a united front against those who seek to abuse or profit from the abuse of our children.

On behalf of the Community Foundation and our philanthropic donors who make such pioneering research possible I want to thank Karen and One-In-Four for this powerful call to action.

It is our hope that it will spark conversations from the corridors to power to classrooms, workplaces as well as in those agencies charged with offering protection and safety.

Denise Charlton,
Chief Executive
Community Foundation

Preface

Child sexual abuse remains one of the most pervasive and devastating issues in Irish society, yet it is often shrouded in silence and shame. Survivors repeatedly tell us about the challenges they face in discussing their experiences with family and friends, and many report that they have never shared their experience outside of therapeutic settings. This silence isolates survivors, perpetuates harm within families and communities, and creates significant barriers to meaningful change.

In response to these consistent messages from survivors, One in Four convened the National Child Safety Summit in 2022, bringing together 60 multidisciplinary experts to address the societal silence surrounding child sexual abuse. This summit was a working event designed to identify actionable priorities for change. Building on this foundation, we commissioned comprehensive research to understand Irish attitudes toward child sexual abuse, recognising that effective prevention requires broad societal engagement.

This research provides critical insights into the necessary shifts in how we approach child sexual abuse in Ireland, drawing from in-depth interviews with 58 experts including policy makers, psychologists, legal professionals, educators, and survivors. The findings reveal fundamental transitions in how we perceive visibility, boundaries, identity, community belonging, resilience, responsibility, and prevention - representing a complete reimagining of how Irish society addresses this issue.

The Red C poll commissioned as part of this research validates these shifts, showing that over 90% of the public believe Irish society has historically failed to adequately address this issue, while 94% recognise its devastating impact. The public shows strong support for a comprehensive approach to prevention and supports the need for a national conversation to surface and tackle sexual violence in childhood.

It is clear we cannot continue to view child sexual abuse as something confined to the past or to certain institutions. It is happening today, in homes, schools, sports clubs, peer to peer and increasingly, through online spaces. Our collective inability to confront this uncomfortable reality has allowed it to persist, causing immeasurable harm.

Addressing child sexual abuse effectively will require unprecedented collaboration across society - a truly inter-departmental holistic approach that integrates mental health services, education systems, media engagement, and community involvement.

It is time we move beyond paralysis, denial and silence and take shared responsibility for tackling this issue. Only by facing this issue collectively and head-on, with empathy for survivors and a commitment to prevention, can we create a safer future for all children.

Deirdre Kenny
Chief Executive Officer
One in Four

Acknowledgements

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to our funders, the Department of Justice and the Community Foundation, whose generous support made this crucial research possible. Their commitment to addressing child sexual abuse in Ireland has been instrumental in bringing this work to fruition.

We would like to express our deepest appreciation to Karen for her incredible work and endless energy throughout this project. Her dedication and expertise have been invaluable in shaping the outcomes of this research and driving our mission forward.

We wish to express our appreciation to colleagues in CHI for their dedicated work with young people affected by this issue and their valuable contributions to advancing our shared goals.

Finally, we are profoundly grateful to all the participants who generously gave of their time and shared their expertise. Their insights, experiences, and commitment to creating a safer society for children have been the cornerstone of this research.

‘It is time we move beyond paralysis, denial and silence and take shared responsibility for tackling this issue.

Only by facing this issue collectively and head-on, with empathy for survivors and a commitment to prevention, can we create a safer future for all children.’

Deirdre Kenny

**Chief Executive Officer
One in Four**

Executive Summary

Child sexual abuse is a serious societal issue which has historically been extremely hard to detect, repair and prevent in Ireland, and around the world.

- The lifetime impacts of child sexual abuse include physical and mental health, emotional wellbeing, addiction and social problems and interpersonal and intergenerational effects.
- Tackling child sexual violence effectively will reduce the economic and systemic costs incurred in individuals, groups and state expenditure (Letourneau et al., 2018*.)

In 2022, One in Four initiated a National Child Safety Summit in Dublin, to convene experts from multiple agencies and disciplines to work together on what it would take to keep every child in Ireland safe and protected.

- Coming out of this summit, it was agreed that there was a strong need for research to explore and understand societal attitudes around tackling sexual violence in childhood.
- The researcher collaborated with One in Four and Children's Health Ireland research teams, as well as the emerging National Child Safety Taskforce.

This mixed methods research applied a social systems lens to understanding the complex factors that interact to block us all from combatting child sexual violence, at an individual, family, community, culture and societal level.

- This research triangulated literature, expert interviews from policy, health, social work, justice, education, psychology and survivors and focus groups with citizens, families and young survivors to uncover barriers and opportunities in this space.
- These insights and possible societal approaches were then explored in quantitative polling with a nationally representative sample of adult citizens.

The Sexual Violence Survey (CSO, 2022) provides clear evidence that 29% of Irish people - across all age-groups - have experienced sexual violence in childhood, in person and on-line.

- This rises to 41% amongst the younger age group of adults - 18-24 year olds - which would indicate that the problem may be worsening rather than improving over time (CSO, 2022).
- In the majority of cases of child sexual violence across all age-groups and contexts, the offender is already known to the child (versus a stranger). There is already an existing relationship dynamic between the two people - which complicates and compounds the damage done, (Roopesh, 2022).
- The offender patterns within child sexual violence have changed markedly over time. Changes in society and culture mean that people who offend are now less likely to be authority figures, but the majority of people who offend are now themselves young people.

In understanding complex social systems like child sexual violence - we seek to identify the key factors that are influencing the problem at all levels - within individuals, within groups, within communities, across culture (including the internet) and within societal and state structures.

- The synthesis of the literature coupled with expert interviews and qualitative research with survivors, families and citizens - has identified seven key barriers that are influencing and compounding the problem of sexual violence in childhood within our society.
- These seven themes - Invisibility, Collapsing Boundaries, Splitting, Outcasts, Explosiveness, Buck-passing and Inevitability - can interact to make people, policy makers and politicians feel that child sexual violence is too complex for us to collectively tackle.

Tackling Sexual Violence in Childhood requires us to take a Whole of Society Approach and to harness all of our systems and structures to build wellbeing, sexual development and healthy boundaries for all.

- This highlights the need for a comprehensive curriculum for all primary/secondary school children, parental education/support, systemic training for all front-line professionals in primary care, mental health, education, sport, community work, NGO's, social work, police and justice system.
- There is also a need for serious engagement, investment and leadership from technology providers, government and civil society to create on-line environments that minimise harmful experiences or toxic influences.
- There is a need to integrate the research and evidence for better insight and foresight around sexual violence in childhood - National Research (including Sexual Violence Survey, Growing Up in Ireland, On-Line Safety Monitor, Anti-Bullying. Mental Health etc) and Front-line Insight (trends/patterns from children's health, education, child welfare, NGO's, counselling /trauma services, justice systems, Barnahus etc.).



Research Background & Methodology

A Preventative Public Health Framework approach represents global best practice in tackling sexual violence in childhood.

- Primary Prevention - Responses aimed at the whole community which address the underlying causes of child sexual abuse.
- Secondary Prevention - Aims to address the early warning signs of child sexual abuse and change the end result for people who are at risk of experiencing or instigating child sexual violence.
- Tertiary Intervention - Aims to respond to child sexual abuse and prevent it from happening again.
- Quaternary Prevention - Evaluates how effective tertiary interventions are to make sure they are delivering the right results.
- The overall power of the preventative public health framework will depend on the shared vision, leadership and integrated resources supporting it.

A National Conversation about Tackling Child Sexual Violence needs to be led by a broad coalition of stakeholders, agencies and NGO's to help build collective wellbeing, healthy development and respectful boundaries for all for all people - young and old.

- This starts with facing up to the reality of the situation and accepting the shared responsibility to tackle this situation.
- It requires us to understand vulnerability at a psychological, social and cultural level - and developing prevention, early intervention and national programmes to support individuals, families, friend groups and communities.
- This includes understanding factors and toxic influences that have hijacked the sexual expectations of young men and young women - including 'Red Pill' discourses, unhealthy pornography, objectification of 'self' / 'others' and the gamification of sexuality.
- It requires briefing key agencies, media outlets and professional bodies to align and engage them to work collaboratively as a united front.

More research is needed to ensure we are connecting our data and insights and delivering rolling measurement and evidence around this issue:

- (a) Integrating national data and evidence - through key surveys.
- (b) Integrating front-line insight trends - in aggregated formats.
- (c) Helping to unlock barriers/commitment of policy makers/politicians.
- (d) Helping to unlock barriers/commitment of front-line professionals.
- (e) Ensuring the adult and child survivor voices are taken seriously.
- (f) Ensuring that all children/young people voices are respected and listened to.

*Letourneau, E.J., Brown, D.S., Fang, X., Hassan, A., Mercy, J.A. (2018) The economic burden of child sexual abuse in the United States. *Journal of Child Abuse and Neglect.* (79),413-422.



Introduction

1. Childhood sexual abuse is a highly harmful experience for children and young people which has historically been ‘hidden from sight’, hard to detect and difficult to repair. In Ireland, at least 25% of all adults have reported experiencing unwanted sexual experiences in childhood at least once (SAVI; McGee et al., 2002, Vallieres et al., 2021, Sexual Violence Survey; CSO, 2022). These offences can take place in person or on-line and the majority of offenders are already known to the child or young person whether family members, authority figures, neighbours, peers. Increasingly, these offenders can also themselves be young people, whether these are friends, romantic partners or siblings.

2. There is a consensus amongst global and Irish experts that secrecy, shame, blame, fear and denial can combine to prevent people from disclosing child sexual abuse experiences and seeking help and support. At a cultural level, Irish people have also struggled to challenge and confront authority figures in church, state, communities and families. There is also societal reluctance to openly discuss and support healthy sexual development for young people and to empower children, young people and adults to navigate healthy boundaries. Many professionals, parents and members of society feel overwhelmed by the idea of child sexual abuse and it can feel as though it is a highly emotional, intractable and inevitable problem that cannot be faced or tackled.

3. The long-term economic impacts on society due to child sexual abuse are profound and multi-faceted, including health care, productivity, social services and criminal justice. The German Trauma Consequence Study estimated that each case of child sexual abuse costs society between €400,000 and €1.2 million in direct and indirect life-time costs. The Australian Child Maltreatment Study (2023) correlated sexual abuse in childhood with a higher likelihood of health risk behaviours (binge drinking, cannabis dependence, smoking, obesity, self-harm and suicide attempts) and mental health disorders over lifetimes. Adjustments for childhood and current financial hardship and current socio-economic status did not significantly attenuate associations. Costs to a person’s self-esteem and identity can be significant and there is recent evidence of intergenerational ramifications from parents who experienced child sexual violence onto their children (Moog et al., 2023).

4. In May 2022, One in Four convened a National Child Safety Summit and brought together key stakeholder and experts to exchange insights and ideas and work together on a shared direction to tackle child sexual abuse. The experts worked collaboratively over two days to identify a shared vision to ‘co-create a society where no child was sexually abused’. The summit was designed using a social systems lens where experts tackled the problem from multiple angles of victims, offenders and citizens. A National Child Safety Taskforce was recommended to tackle this problem collaboratively and systemically.

5. The National Child Safety Taskforce identified a clear need to understand societal attitudes around child sexual violence. This societal research sought to understand (a) the current understanding of the Irish public around child sexual abuse as a phenomenon (b) the emotional, cultural, psychological and identity barriers to supporting systemic change around child sexual abuse (c) recommendations for how to frame and harness societal supports around tackling child sexual abuse. The research design and methodology built upon previous experience of reframing complex societal issues like sexual consent, child resilience and reproductive rights.

Research Challenge, Objectives & Methodology

Research Challenge

To explore current understanding of child sexual abuse as a phenomenon, the personal and collective barriers to systemic change and the possible framing and actions to build broader collective connections and support for change.

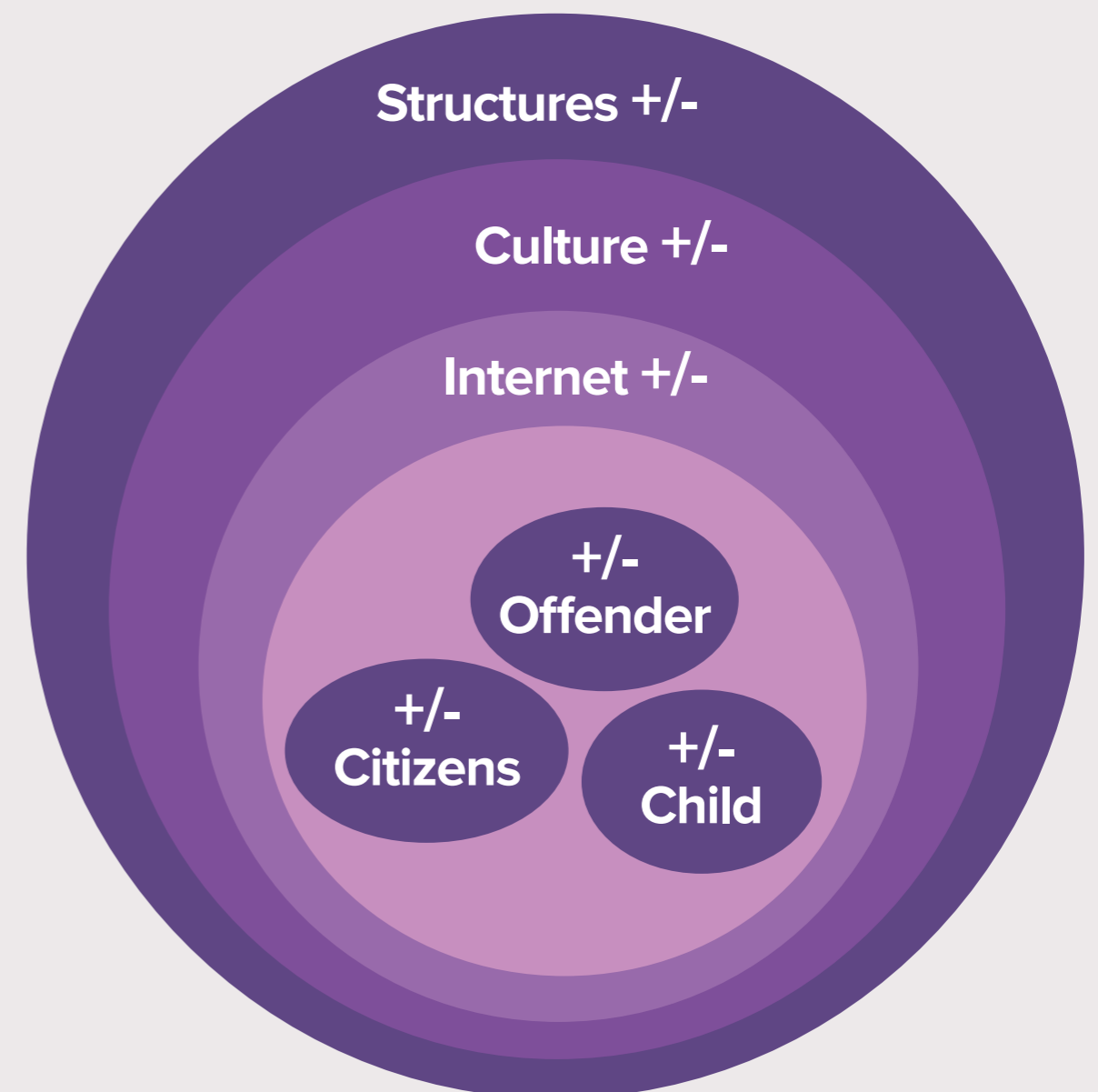
Research Objectives

- To clearly articulate the current level of unwanted sexual experience in Irish childhood.
- To uncover cultural themes that are holding us back from tackling child sexual abuse and sexual violence in childhood.
- To propose the reframed cultural themes that could support us to collectively tackle child sexual abuse and sexual violence in childhood.
- To recommend the key approaches, frameworks and actions that would support these cultural themes and help us build and strengthen child and young person wellbeing and empower healthy development.

Research Methodology

- To triangulate (i) literature/global best practice with (ii) Irish and global experts and (iii) qualitative research with citizens, families and adult and young people survivors and quantitative national polling with representative Irish citizens.
- This research was led by Dr. Karen Hand - independent social psychologist - in collaboration with the emerging National Child Safety Taskforce, the One in Four leadership team and Children's Health Ireland - Alders Unit research team.
- In all research, people were alerted to the sensitive subject matter and relevant support was offered if required by any research participant.
- It was conducted over a 14 month period from October 2023 to December 2024.

Child Sexual Abuse - A Social Systems View*



* Ecological Systems View - following Bronfenbrenner (1979)

Social Systems are inherently complex and interconnected (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), involving numerous aspects of individuals lives; from relationships, communities, institutions and policies that together interact and influence each other in multi-faceted ways. Systemic thinking helps us understand these factors holistically and how they shape the overall behaviour of the social system. Cultural norms influence individual identities and expectations which create feedback loops and resilience trade-offs with our actions, interaction and reactions.

Research Methodology & Timings*

Literature Review	Expert Interviews	Public Research
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global Best Practice • Academic Review • John Hopkins School of Public Health, Frameworks, NOTA Thought Leadership • Government Policy: Ireland, UK, Australia, New Zealand, EU, US • TO ZERO - Global Project to End Child Sexual Abuse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 58 Interviews: • Global Policy, Academic NGO & Best Practice • Irish Experts & Policy Leaders & Advocacy • Legal, Judiciary, Children, Education, Therapists, Prevention, Media, Psychologists, Social Policy, Social Work, Survivors, Families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public Research on Framing Child Sexual Abuse: • 6 x 2 hour workshops - adults • 3 x Youth 2-hour Workshops • 6 x front-line workers - teachers, youth workers, Garda etc. • 3 x mini-focus groups Child Survivors - CHI • Public Polling 1000 sample: Red C
Analysis	Debrief & Report	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis of All Research • Synthesis • Implications for Campaigns, Advocacy Resourcing and Framing in Practice • Recommendations • Next Steps 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation to National Child Safety Summit Task Force • Presentation to other stakeholders in Government/system • Presentation to other international collaborators and interviewees 	

*This research was iterative and took place over a 14 month period from October 2023 to December 2024.

Research Specifics

Research Specifics - Literature Review

The literature review included material from leading global and Irish academics, along with key evidence from Ireland, Australia, United States, United Kingdom, Germany and beyond. (For more detail see References and Appendices)

Research Specifics - Expert Interviews

The expert interviews included 58 in-depth interviews with policy makers, politicians, Non Government Organisations, academics, global experts, solicitors, barristers and judges, therapists and psychologists, children, social work and education, journalists, statisticians, front-line child professionals and adult survivors*.

*Organisations included John Hopkins Moore Centre for Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse (USA), Charite School of Public Health (Germany) Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse (UK), Together for Childhood/NSPCC (UK), Lucy Faithful Foundation (UK), NOTA (UK), National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse (Australia), Ofcom (UK), International Consortium of Investigative Journalism (Global), CUAN (Department of Justice), Community Foundation Ireland, Children's Rights Alliance (Ireland), Rape Crisis Network Ireland, Cyber-Safe (Ireland), CARI (Ireland), Pavee Point (Ireland), Akidwa (Ireland), Safe Ireland, University of Queensland, University College Cork, University of Limerick, Dublin City University, Politicians, Judiciary, Department of Justice, Department of Children, Department of Education, Department of the Taoiseach, Ombudsman for Children, Child and Family Agency (Tusla), Children's Health Ireland (CHI), Central Statistics Office, Independent researchers, therapists, journalists and social workers.

Research Specifics - Public Qualitative Research

This included 14 focus groups - which included 6 x 2 hour groups with citizens from 18 to 80 years in Dublin, Cork, Mullingar, 3 x 2 hour groups with young people from 12 to 18 years, 2 x 1 hour groups with families of survivors and families of offenders (with One in Four) and 3 x 1 hour mini-groups with young survivors (with CHI Alders Unit) - and also 6 in-depth interviews with front-line professionals: teachers, public health nurse, therapist, advocacy and police. Recruitment and fieldwork expertly managed by GRO Fieldwork.

Research Specifics - Quantitative National Polling

This was national polling conducted by Red C with quota controls to ensure representative data across gender, age, region and social class in line with CSO projections. There were 1000 in the fieldwork from 17th-22nd May in 2024. There was an 82% response rate (n=834) and people could opt out of certain questions.

Expert Interviews - Sample



Public Research Design

- 6 x Adult 2 hour workshops
- 3 x Youth 2 hour workshops
- 6 x Local Experts - interviews
- 3 x Child/YP Survivor Focus Groups - Children's Health Ireland

National polling - 1000 representative sample - Adults 18+

In Summary

Child sexual abuse is a serious societal issue which has historically been extremely hard to detect, repair and prevent in Ireland and around the world.

In 2022, One in Four initiated a National Child Safety Summit in Dublin, to convene experts from multiple agencies and disciplines to work together on what it would take to keep every child in Ireland safe and protected.

Coming out of this summit, it was agreed that there was a strong need for research to explore and understand societal attitudes around tackling sexual violence in childhood.

This mixed methods research applied a social systems lens to understanding the complex factors that interact to block us all from combatting child sexual violence, at an individual, family, community, cultural and societal level.

This research triangulated literature, expert interviews from policy, health, social work, justice, education, psychology and survivors and focus groups with citizens, families and young survivors to uncover barriers and opportunities in this space.

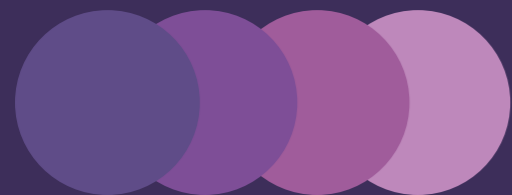
These insights and possible societal approaches were then explored in quantitative polling with a nationally representative sample of adult citizens.

This research was conducted over a 14 month period from October 2023 to December 2024.

2

Facing the Issue

Sexual Violence Survey, Central Statistics Office, Ireland, 2022.



Introduction

It is important to anchor the societal research in reliable quantifiable data which measures the prevalence of child sexual violence within Irish society - in person and on-line.

The Sexual Violence Survey (SVS) was conducted by the Central Statistics Office in 2022, to ascertain the prevalence of sexual violence in adulthood and childhood, within a national representative sample of Irish adults.

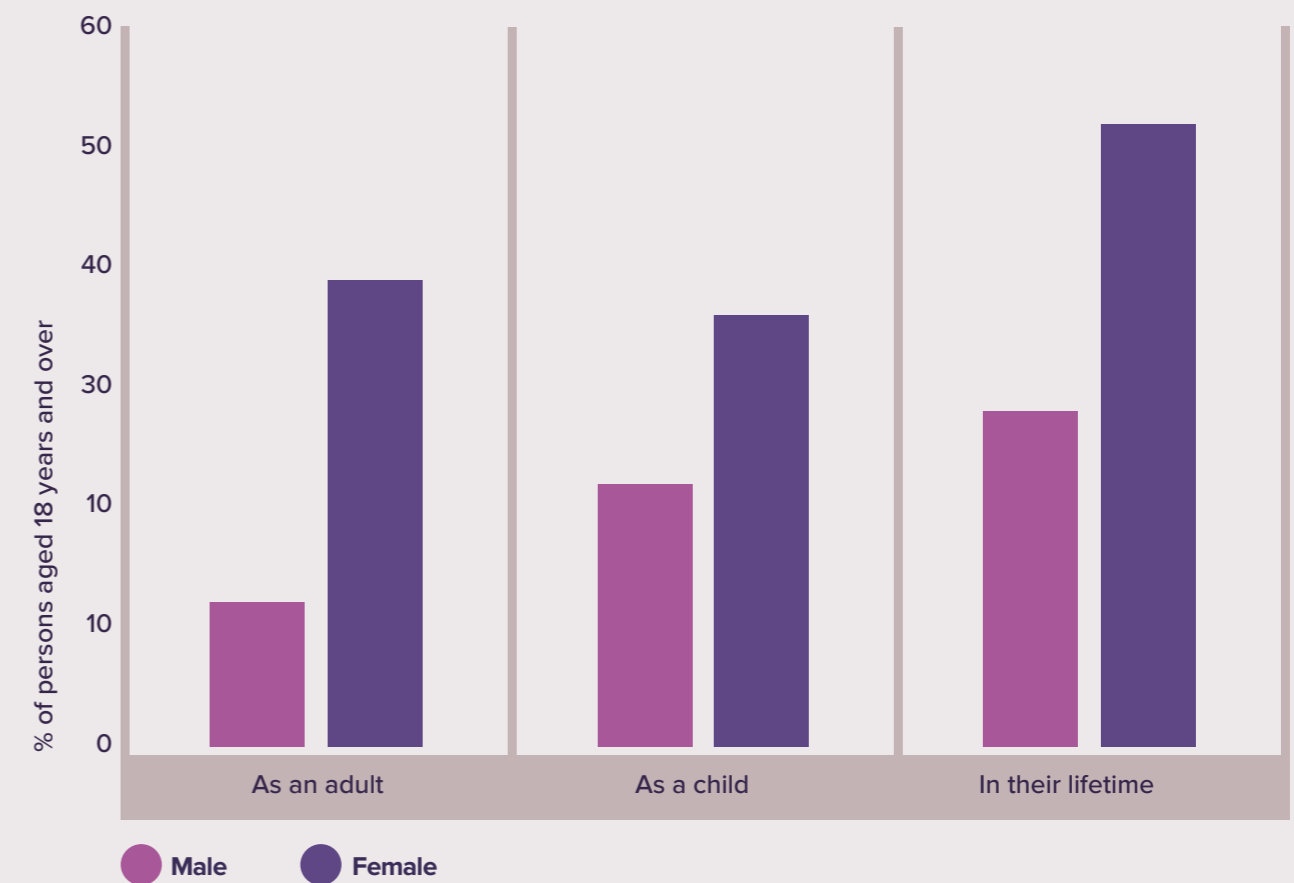
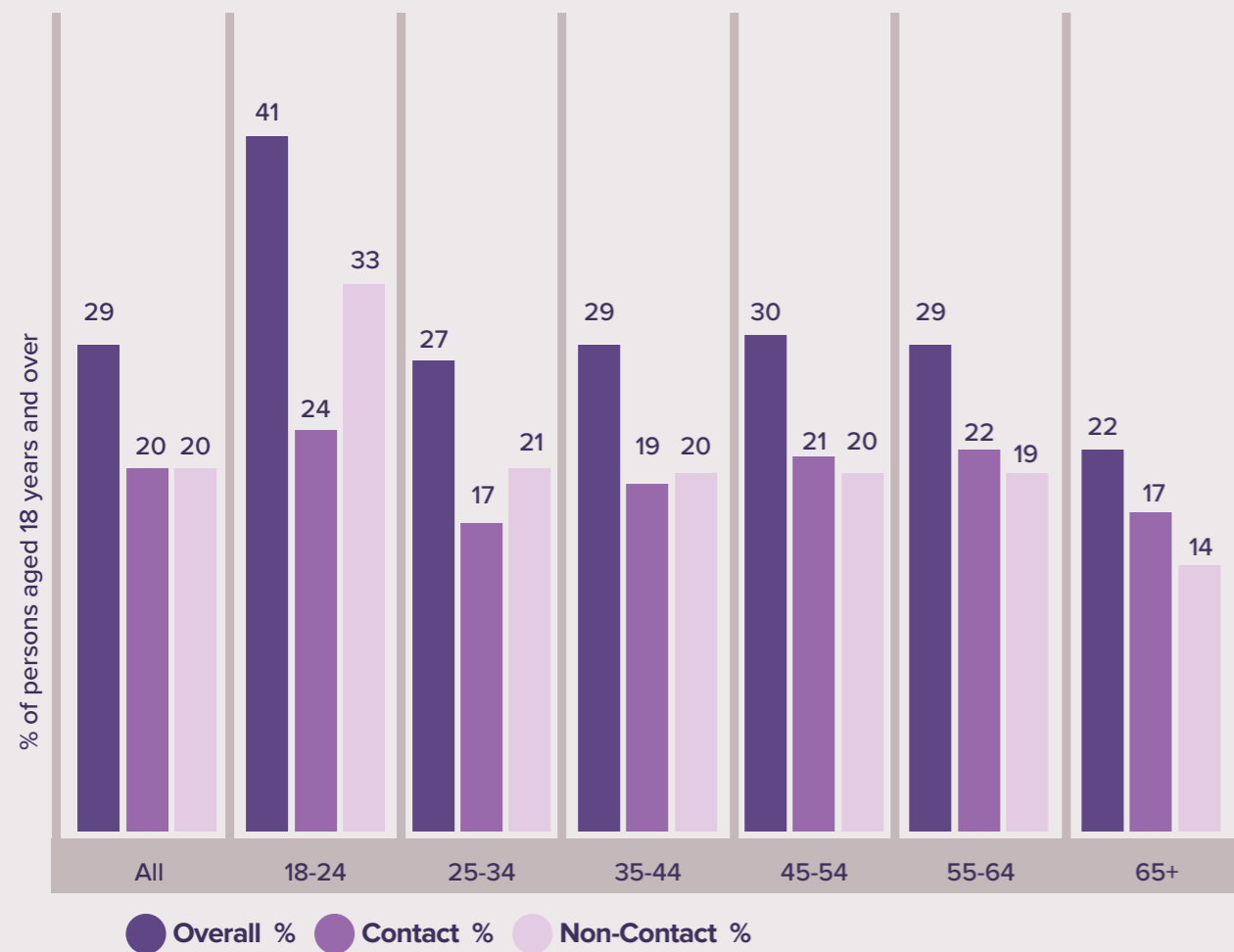
This survey built on the learnings from the ground-breaking SAVI (Sexual Assault and Violence in Ireland) survey which was conducted in 2002, and first quantified the prevalence of child sexual abuse experienced by the Irish adult population as 'One in Four'.

Methodologically the two surveys are different - SAVI used randomised land-line telephones to collect data - whereas the Sexual Violence Survey used a combination of direct researcher contact with participants - who then completed an on-line survey in confidence.

The Sexual Violence Survey was co-created and designed with key stakeholders and experts in sexual violence in childhood. Global best practice would highlight that there is always a degree of under-reporting in these surveys, in light of complex cultural dynamics.

Childhood sexual violence was operationalised in the Sexual Violence Survey as 'unwanted sexual experiences in childhood'* - whether this included physical contact or was a non-contact sexual abuse (which could include exposure to a person's body, imagery, pornography or on-line content).

*Please note. In terms of chronicity of the experience - in the Australian Maltreatment Survey (2023), it was found that when child sexual abuse had occurred, for 78% of people, it had happened more than once.



Irish People: % Experience of Sexual Violence in Childhood in Their Lifetime

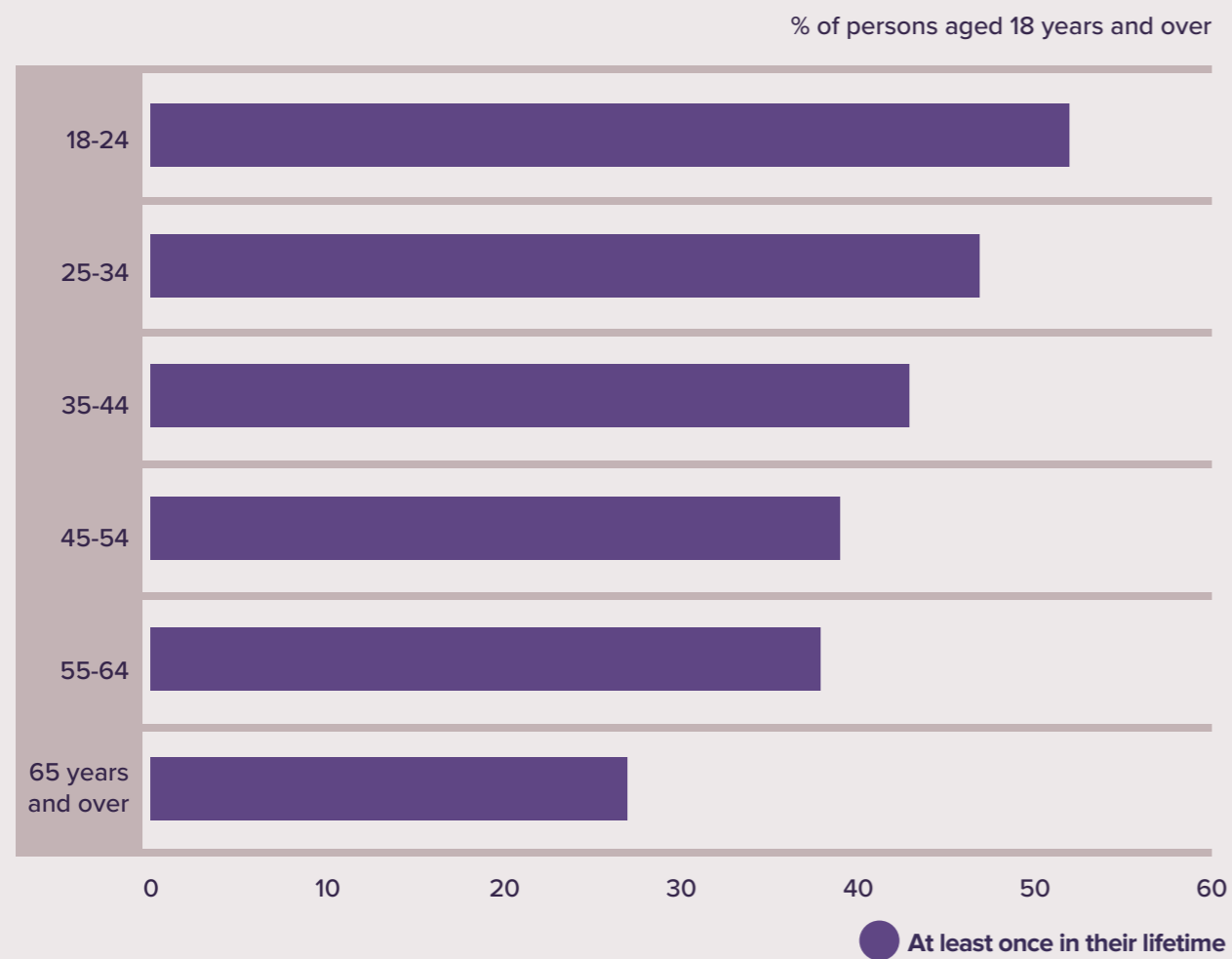
29% of Irish people across all ages have experienced child sexual violence in person and on-line - overall 20% at contact and 20% at non-contact experiences.

This rises to 41% of the 18-24 year old age group - where overall experience is higher than older groups in case of both contact and non-contact child sexual violence.

Experience of sexual violence by sex, 2022

Irish females experiencing child sexual violence at 36%, which is broadly in line with female adult sexual violence at 39%.

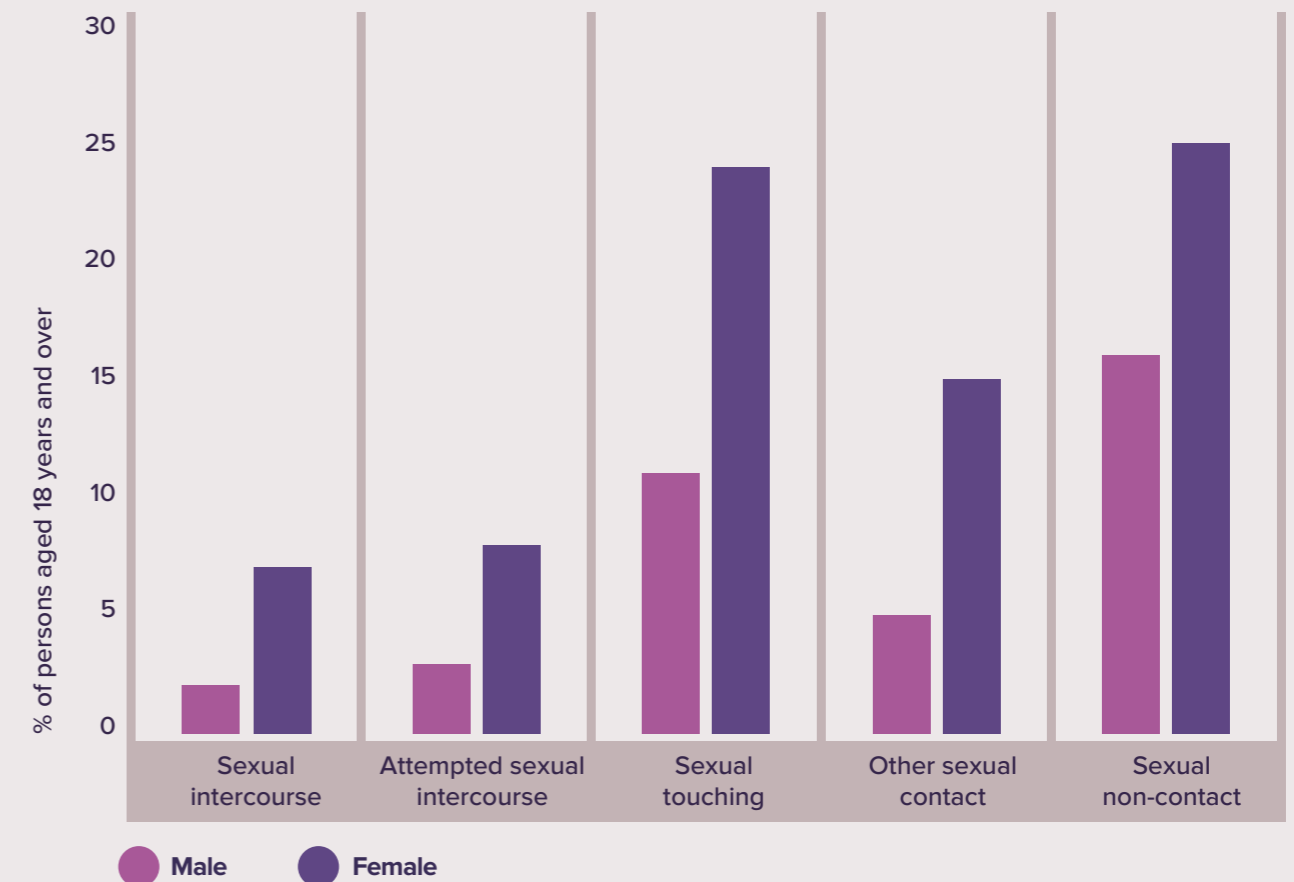
Irish males experiencing child sexual violence at 22%, almost double the level of male adult sexual violence at 12%.



Experience of sexual violence in their lifetime by age group¹, 2022

¹ Age group refers to the person's age when they responded to the survey.

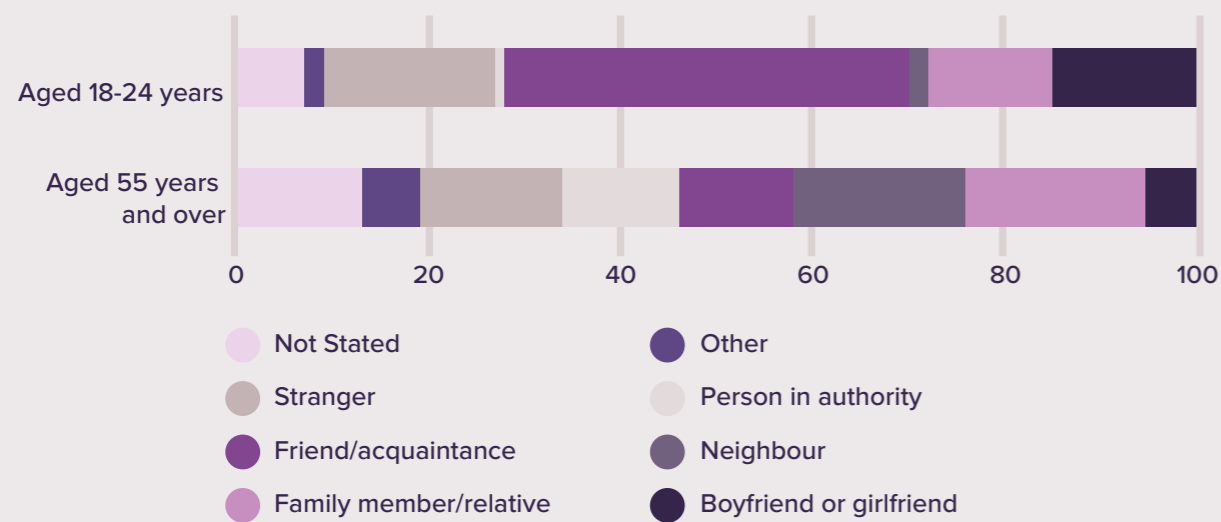
Lifetime experience of sexual violence (as a child and/or as an adult) has affected all age groups of Irish society and it is increasingly experienced by younger age groups.



Childhood experience of unwanted sexual violence by type of experience and sex, 2022

Irish females are twice as likely to experience many types of child sexual violence versus males.

However the gap between males and females is less pronounced in the area of non-contact child sexual violence (which includes on-line experiences).



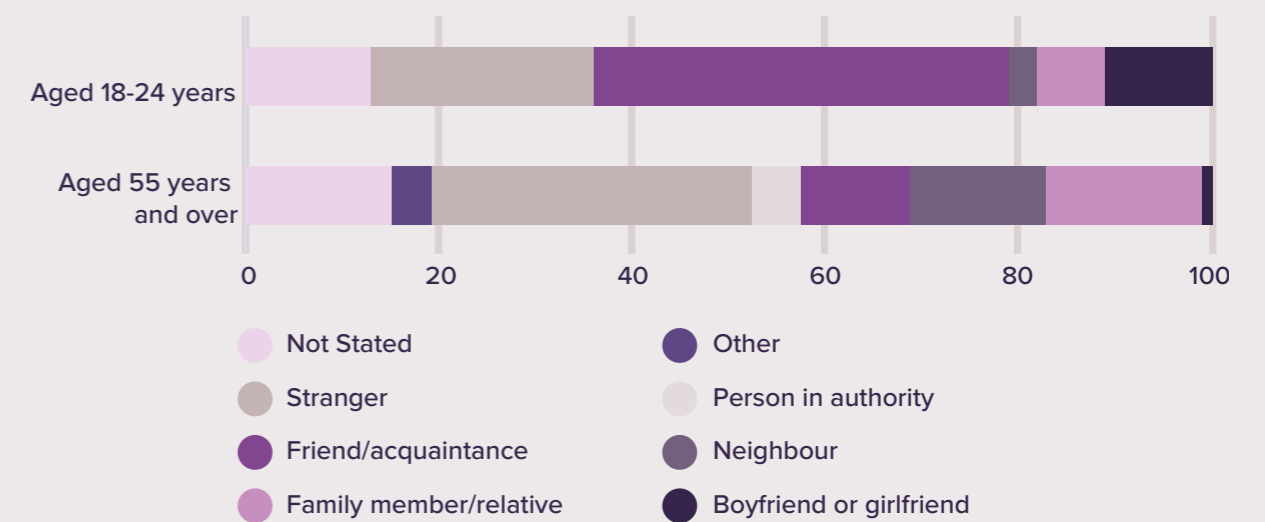
Percentage of persons aged 18 years and over with childhood experience of unwanted contact sexual violence by nature of relationship with perpetrator and age group¹, 2022

¹ Age group refers to the person's age when they responded to the survey.

The majority of contact offenders remain known to the victims (at around 80%) which means existing relationships are impacted.

In older age groups (over 55's), Authority Figures feature at around 12% of offenders which decreases to 1% in younger (18-24 year old) adults.

With 18-24 year olds, the majority of people who offend include friends and romantic partners who are likely to be young people themselves.



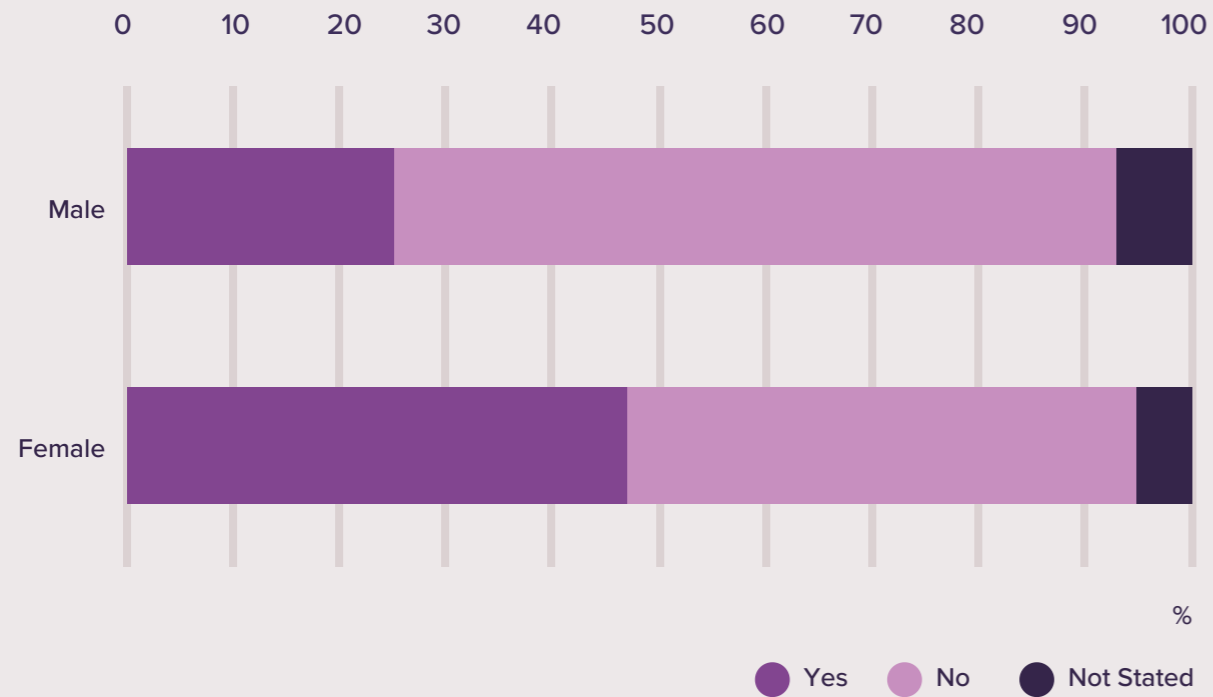
Percentage of persons aged 18 years and over with childhood experience of unwanted non-contact sexual violence by nature of relationship with perpetrator and age group¹, 2022

¹ Age group refers to the person's age when they responded to the survey.

The majority of non-contact offenders remain 'known' to the victims (at around 70%) which means existing relationships are impacted.

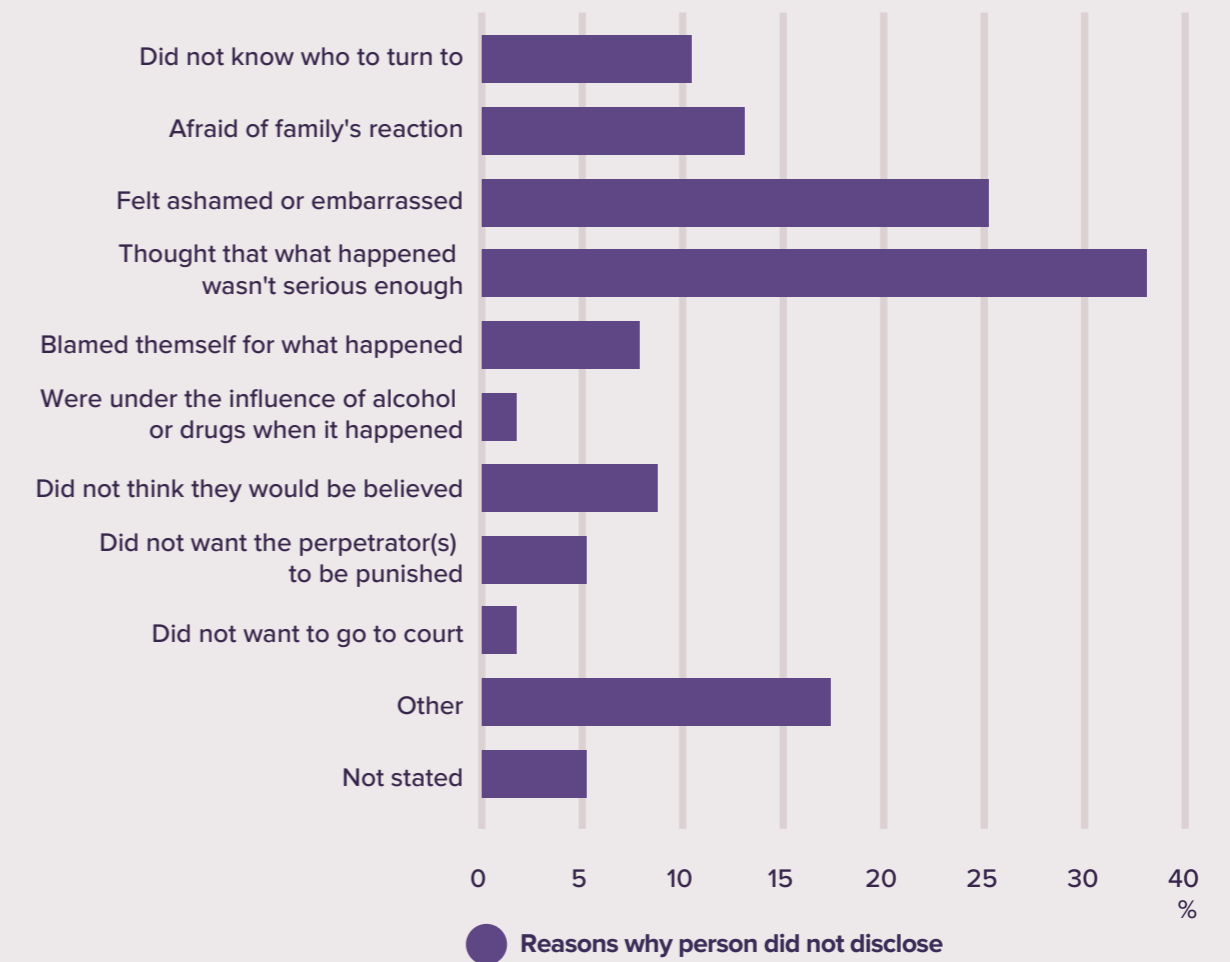
In older age groups (over 55's), Authority Figures featured at 11% of offenders which decreases to almost 0% in younger (18-24 year old) adults.

With 18-24 year olds, the majority of people who offend include friends and romantic partners who are likely to be young people themselves.



Those who experienced sexual violence as a child by sex and whether they ever disclosed a childhood sexual violence experience, 2022

The majority of adults have not disclosed child sexual violence to anyone. Females are broadly twice as likely to disclose child sexual violence versus males.



Those who experienced sexual violence as a child and did not disclose to others by the reasons for not disclosing, 2022

There are complex social reasons why the majority of adults do not disclose child sexual violence including fear, shame, self-blame or reaction of others and importantly not knowing who to turn to for advice or information.

In Summary

The Sexual Violence Survey (CSO, 2022) provides clear evidence that 29% of Irish people - across all age-groups- have experienced sexual violence in childhood, in person and on-line.

This rises to 41% amongst the younger age group of adults - 18-24 year olds which would indicate that the problem may be worsening rather than improving over time.

In the majority of cases of child sexual violence across all age-groups and contexts, the offender is already known to the child (versus a stranger). There is already an existing relationship dynamic between the two people - which complicates and compounds the damage done.

The offender patterns within child sexual violence have changed markedly over time. This is encouraging when certain offender types have been significantly reduced, but changes in society and culture have now opened up other pathways for people who offend.

For over 55's, Authority Figures were a sizable group of people who offend - at around 10% of people who offend in contact and non-contact child sexual violence. This is now reduced to almost 0% of offenders for younger 18-24 year old age group.

For 18-24 age groups, the majority of people who offend are themselves young people - whether these are friends, romantic partners and (some) family members. This offender pattern is present in the case of both contact and non-contact child sexual violence.

Around half of adults DO NOT disclose child sexual violence - which is defined as telling one person in their life. This lack of disclosure is more pronounced within older age-groups versus younger age groups and within males versus females.

3

Understanding & Reframing the Issue.

Expert Interviews and Focus Groups



Introduction

Systemic social psychology offers a powerful approach to exploring the factors within complex social systems, whether these are consciously or unconsciously influencing and being influenced by people at all levels within the system.

A synthesis of the literature, expert interviews and qualitative research with survivors, families and citizens - helps to surface the key themes that are interacting and influencing the whole system and blocking us from collectively tackling sexual violence in childhood.

These themes are directly and indirectly experienced across the system in which victim/survivors, offenders, citizens, culture and structures are all inter-related, interconnected and interdependent.

If we can reframe the challenge of sexual violence in childhood, we can build collective ownership around the problem and support conversations, interventions and structures which empower every person within the system to tackle this issue together.

Reframing the challenge can help us (a) adopt a Whole of Society Approach, (b) face the issue, systemically prevent and repair the issue across all age groups using a Preventative Public Health Framework and (c) cultivate a National Conversation which supports positive cultural norms, shapes realistic identities and expectations, empowers mutually respectful actions, interactions and reactions and supports healthy boundaries across the board.

Seven Key Themes* - Societal Barriers to Tackling Child Sexual Abuse

Invisible -

Suppression, Denial, Silence

Collapsing Boundaries -

Power Abuse, Over-Sexualisation, Objectification

Splitting -

Unspeakable, Unbearable, Trauma

Outcasts/Exiles -

'Bad Apples', 'Lost Causes'

Explosive -

Damaging, Scarring, Salacious, Burn-Out

Passing the Buck -

Blaming, Shaming, Divisive

Inevitable -

Overwhelming, Intractable, Hopeless

*These barrier themes echo the work of Dr. Richard Schwartz (1999) on Internal Family Systems (IFS) - this framework co-developed on healing work with child sexual abuse survivors.

Invisible - Suppression, Denial, Silence

This theme speaks to the fact that child sexual violence happens 'out of sight', that 'stereo-types' of child abusers prevent us from seeing the variety of offender types and that people struggle to discuss and disclose these experience to loved ones.

*We know it as a general matter of fact that it happens across different classes. In terms of people who abuse children, those who have higher status are better able to keep the secret because of that **stereotype about sex offenders who are middle aged, poor and strangers**. Nobody can imagine that the man could be a CEO or a university professor...
(Expert – Psychologist)*

*There's a massive silencing thing. If we just talked about it, that would be a massive first step. **(Expert, CSA)***

*He was **our cousin and he lived next door and worked on my Dad's farm and he was abusing me and my two younger sisters for years** - even when my first sister spoke up, I still said nothing... until I ended up in therapy with a gambling addiction and depression and it all came out. **(Local Expert- Male Survivor)***

*Who's going to tell their Mam at 14, that there's this boy is after doing this to me or I'm dating this boy and he raped me - or I was walking home and this boy dragged me into a bush **like there's a big stigma about it**. **(Young Person – Female Survivor)***

Collapsing Boundaries - Power Abuse, Objectification, Over-Sexualisation

This theme highlights the fact that child sexual violence violates the physical, psychological, relational and cultural boundaries within a child or young person, in person or on-line.

*I was sent to stay with my uncle and aunt each summer as a child - **at night I would wake to find my Uncle in my room...**I never mentioned it to anyone until I married years later. **(Female, 50-70, Athlone, BC1)***

*This **adult man was chatting to my 9 year old sister on snap-chat** and asked to meet her in Centra - we could see him on snap-maps and told her not to go. **(Girl 13-15, Dublin, BC1)***

*The Internet can collapse boundaries at many levels, internationally, societally, and at the level of the individual. It has become the dominant location for the sexual abuse of children. **(Brown & O'Neill, 2024)***

*Take away social media - I think it's a huge factor of like how boys and girls perceive things and its completely not true to the real world. I wouldn't give it to anyone until they're over 15 because that's when your brain starts to understand what's real and what's not and not just sponge everything that you see. I had social media since I was like 8/9, and that's very very young and it was the same with most of the kids in my primary school, the boys as well and they were learning mad things at such a young age that just weren't true and us girls had to believe that that was true and live up to that, **like the girls that they saw on their phones**.
(Female Young Person Survivor)*

Splitting - Unspeakable, Unbearable, Trauma

This theme focuses on the idea of a cultural protection mechanism where 'saving face' of some adult or group identity gets social preference over supporting and validating a young person's harmful experience because of their standing within the particular community or network.

Talking about community, they might protect someone like that. There's a bit of power trip there as well, but I think that's a bit of naivety. **'Don't disgrace his name, he's from this family', whereas the child would be seen as collateral damage. (Male, 25-35, Athlone, C2D)**

We have this glorified view of mothers. I don't see protective mothers. Often, I see mothers who are standing with the perpetrator. **There are so many cases of mothers standing with their new man. Even the idea that a mother would stand with her son, instead of her daughter... That's not our vision of family, and it's not our discussion about family. (Expert, Legal)**

Another protection thing. It's about understanding how you protect yourself. We were all being abused. **I knew they were being abused, but I wouldn't allow myself to know that. It's psychological. It goes on in any household where it is taking place because it is about your survival. (Female Adult Survivor)**

Outcasts/Exiles - 'Bad Apples', 'Lost Causes'

This theme concentrates on the cultural discomfort around facing child sexual violence and our shared shame around this. It is sometimes seen as easier to remove the 'problem' person from view or demonise them completely than to confront the complex reality of what has happened.

A lot of the time I see somebody [victim] who who becomes isolated... becomes isolated from their family and extended family. **They are the person who's not invited to the family event because the stepfather or the father or the uncle or the cousin or the brother is going to be at it. She's now the one who is isolated and not supported. (Expert, Legal)**

It was really 50/50 - cause it was like 'a session group of friends' - some believed me and some said I was lying and then the boys were all like with him because like once all the boys band together you haven't a hope with the girls. **(Female Young Person Survivor)**

The media and the overall cultural discourse tends to demonise the abuser. As a result people mentally distance their families, their circles of friends, their colleagues, their cherished religious leader from that stereotypical perception of the 'monstrous child molester'. **They presume that those people are not around them because of the perception of the abuser, which is unrealistic. As a result, they fail to predict and prevent abuse or respond to abuse effectively. (Expert, Global CSA)**

Explosive - Damaging, Scarring, Salacious, Burn-Out

This theme uncovers to the emotionally charged nature of child sexual violence; the trauma of the victim, the power of toxic narratives and the emotional cost of facing the reality for everyone.

I think the most fundamental thing about inappropriate sexual experiences, whether they are intentionally abusive or not, is that in a person who is young, they are a very highly charged experience. It really leaves a deep impression on the brain, the soul, and the heart. Particularly, it corrupts the very natural desire and longing in all of us to be connected in an intimate way to another person. It corrupts that with an experience of premature sexual arousal, which is an extraordinarily highly charged combination. (Expert, Psychologist)

It's nerve racking to think of the consequences, where you have somebody like Andrew Tate who gets an audience because of the outrage of what he does and what he says and there's a following, there's an appetite for it. Rather than saying, well, we protect women, what are we doing to prevent this contagion? How are we involving young boys in those conversations and recognizing their vulnerabilities as well? (Expert, Policy)

[Community Health] practitioners' feelings about how survivors, non-abusing family members, and perpetrators should be understood, were rarely debated in training or in practice. The emotional cost to the practitioners of engagement with sexual abuse, and their need for spaces of reflexivity and structures of support, were ignored. (Beecher, 2024)

Passing the Buck - Blaming, Shaming, Divisive

This theme identifies our need to have clear monsters and villains to blame for this emotionally complex problem and the need to have 'others' to blame.

The vast majority of CSA, both contemporary and historic [is happening] in the family setting. Families are not necessarily safe places to be. We as a society really need to start that debate. We need to start talking about what happens to a victim of CSA in the family dynamic, where all the family side with the perpetrator. (Expert, Legal)

A man in our community was found to have abused four girls. He went to England and never came back. But his own family here - his sisters and brothers and wife - they bore the shame. (Expert, NGO)

Young men - my age - are being drawn into the 'manosphere', 'looksmaxing', going to the gym, listening to Andrew Tate - it can really alienate you from girls - I found it really damaging when I was with my ex-girlfriend - had to get out of it. (Young Person - Male Survivor)

Be careful of being 'deterministic' on the inevitable long term damage of CSA. This is also the risk of over pathologizing and over stigmatising victims and creating social stigma around childhood victimisation. (Expert, Global CSA)

Inevitable - Overwhelming, Intractable, Hopeless

There can be a strong sense that child sexual violence is beyond our collective control and this theme focuses on this. When everyone believes that something is impossible to prevent, there can be a tendency to blame others and bury our heads in the sand.

“

We were told as children, this is not fixable. You may as well crawl under a rock somewhere because you're not going to get better. They are unfixable. It's a write-off. We believed that for the longest time. We were promoting it. They're never going to change, they're only going to get worse. It's unhelpable, unfixable, and also our life is just miserable forever. (Female Adult Survivors)

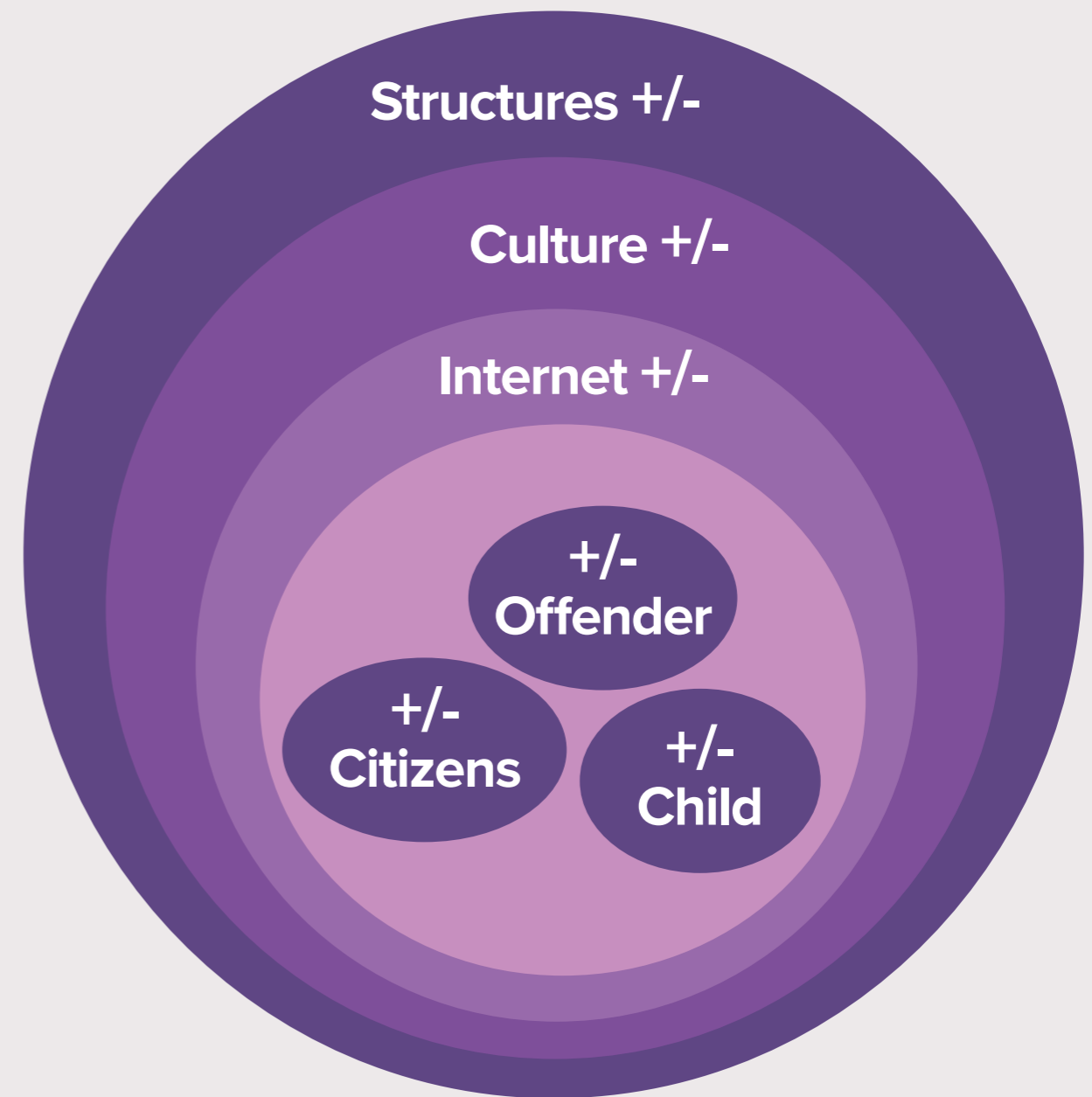
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“

I was always wondering why there is so much emphasis on empowering children... Most of the time, the person is a caregiver or somebody close to the child. We cannot necessarily expect the child to say no or avoid that situation if it happens at home. It doesn't sit well with me. (Expert Psychologist)

”

Child Sexual Abuse - A Systems View*



* Ecological Systems View - following Bronfenbrenner (1979)

Reframing Child Sexual Abuse?

FROM:

Invisible - Suppression, Denial, Silence

Collapsing Boundaries - Power Abuse, Over-Sexualisation, Objectification

Splitting - Unspeakable, Unbearable, Trauma

Outcasts/Exiles - 'Bad Apples', 'Lost Causes'

Explosive - Damaging, Scarring, Salacious, Burn-Out

Passing the Buck - Blaming, Shaming, Divisive

Inevitable - Overwhelming, Intractable, Hopeless

TO:

Visible - Seen, Heard, Supported

Healthy Boundaries - Vulnerability, Mutual Respect, Integrity

Whole Selves - 'No Bad Parts'

Shared Humanity - Belonging, Restorative

Resilient - Post-Traumatic Growth, Repair

Collective Responsibility - Realism, Accountability

Preventable - Detection, Empowerment, Hope

Visible - Seen, Heard, Supported

This new theme asks that every child and adult survivor would be recognised and heard in a non-judgmental way that reflects their individual experience and character.

“
*There are people who can tell anybody sympathetic, but put them in a formal setting, in front of a Garda officer, giving a formal interview, or in a courtroom, and they freeze. **The response has to be tailored to the individual, because there's no such thing as a generic victim.** That's the one thing I'd really like to hammer home to all of them.*
(Expert, Legal)”

“
*Kids don't want to talk to their parents some of the time and it can be heavy on them and the parents. Sometimes it can be difficult to say things to a parent because some are close to them and it could break all of the hearts. **At least when people are here [CHI - Alders Unit], they're used to hearing people say those things. So it is easier for them to have a good response that won't make anything awkward or anything.***
(Female Young Person Survivor)”

Healthy Boundaries - Vulnerability, Mutual Respect, Integrity

This new theme asks us to support and empower every child, young person and citizen around the value of healthy boundaries, bodily autonomy and deep respect for ourselves and others.

“
***Respect is a big thing** even with the teachers and stuff like that the teachers in my school are just pushovers .. [our female teacher] the boys are so disrespectful to her - **it's these kind of gender roles that people are taught from a young age** that if you're a boy you have to act this way, if you're a girl you have to let them act this way.'*
(Female Young Person Survivor)”

“
*Boys have **a lot of poor role models** there's **nothing to stop them getting really really bad habits and perceptions of women**, their peers and specifically point out guys - there's nothing in place in school to tell you this is how you deal with consent, this is how you approach consent - there's just nothing.*
(Male Young Person Survivor)”

Whole Selves - 'No Bad Parts'

This new theme asks that we collectively acknowledge the complex dynamics behind child sexual violence and seek to understand how adverse experiences can influence our harmful actions, interactions and reactions.

*I suppose **the big thing is that the children who commit crimes are nearly all the most vulnerable kids in the country.** [Regarding] the sexual offence ones, they tend to come from very highly criminalised or very highly deprived backgrounds. They have no parental supervision. The hardest thing is to get someone say we'd have children homeless..... And the other problem, of course, is that we have children who have very special needs. You know, these would be children who could have been physically abused themselves or sexually abused... **(Expert, Legal)***

*A lot of girls and guys who have no idea what a normal healthy standard for a relationship is and have no idea what is or isn't normal to do with a girl or a guy - cause there's nothing there to tell them that. **(Female Young Person Survivor)***

Shared Humanity - Belonging, Restorative

This new theme encourages us to empathise with people as human beings first, rather than as one dimensional stereo types and labels. If we look to see what connects us and unifies us within stories of child sexual violence we can start to own these stories as part of our collective learning.

*The fact that we couldn't get over our past until we understood it. **We don't believe abusers can get through what they've done until they've understood it.** They have to not only understand what they've done and the enormity of the impact they've had on an individual human being. They have to also understand why they did it. And you have to do all that without removing some hope of a possible life at the end of it. Or why would they bother? **(Female Adult Survivors)***

*Much more support for organisations with a systematic ethos. **More openness and the viewing of abuse as a much broader issue than individual things that happen. It's a societal system of power structures.** It is important that everyone working with children is properly trained and educated. **(Expert, Psychologist)***

Resilient - Post-Traumatic Growth, Repair

This new theme asks us to help repair individuals families and communities after child sexual violence experiences. If we support people in the aftermath of these experiences, the solidarity can help deliver post-traumatic growth.

*When we find out about it, we can deal with it. You can work with people to stop them from offending. You can work with family members to move forward from things, there is hope. **This is something that happens a lot and people do live with it and recover from it. (Expert - CSA)***

*We're here to tell them the importance of what they're doing, the value of what they're doing, and how this is going to change the world. If they can give one perpetrator a sense of hope for the future. These programmes have changed so many lives without even realising it. **The 'ripple effect' of turning around one abuser, if they've changed that, it's immeasurable the difference they can make. (Female Adult Survivors)***

*Families come to you – and their kid is 'acting out' - when you spend time with them and build trust - you can sometimes find there has been unwanted sexual experience there. **(Expert, Family Therapist)***

Collective Responsibility - Realism, Accountability

This new theme challenges us to take shared ownership of the issue of child sexual violence and collectively support education, intervention, prevention and accountability to detect, repair and heal the people directly and indirectly involved.

*If we were serious about doing something, we would have to start with 'Stay Safe'. It has to aim at the parents too. When a child thinks of who they will disclose to, that person has to be trained and vetted. If the child comes to you with a disclosure about a family member, what are you going to do? Who are you going to go to? We need to put this into the public. I come across it in every type of family. It's nothing to do with class, or education. **(Expert, Legal)***

*There has to be careful curation of progressive change in this area. Knowing how we measure it and that it's a shared success. **Getting values right at the start is more critical than who's in charge and I think that that's a lesson to be learned.** Leadership is great but leadership doesn't happen when somebody walks in and says 'we're the leaders and we're going to pull it together', instead of facilitating it and letting leaders emerge. **(Expert, Policy)***

Preventable - Detection, Empowerment, Hope

This final theme is critical to enable us to collectively tackle child sexual abuse. Global best practice has identified programmes and interventions that can help shape the culture to seriously reduce child sexual violence. As a society we need to feel hope, support and empowerment to deliver this systemic change.

“

*The focus, when it's reported in the media and all that, the focus is on the sexual act as in - 'oh my God, how horrible this is'. That's actually the easiest bit to get over. **If you don't start teaching people about the psychological impact** - which we didn't even know, and we're living it - we didn't know that was connected to our abuse - **that's the bit that needs education.** (Female Adult Survivors)*

”

“

Many of the judges have now gone through training - and they are understanding these issues from the angles of victims and survivors - really important to keep us these initiatives if we want to help society and culture understand how child sexual abuse plays out.' (Expert, Legal)

”

“

*You need to paint a bigger picture of why we need this. **How does it relate to the majority of children in Ireland - why is it important for politicians and the public?** If it is about the safety and wellbeing of all children - it is more likely to stick. (Expert, Policy)*

”

‘Having worked in child safeguarding and policing for 35 years, I have reached the conclusion that ‘We Cannot Arrest Our Way Out of Child Sexual Abuse’ - we need a broader societal, preventative, collaborative, integrated, data driven approach’

Simon Bailey

**Simon Bailey (QPM, CBE) former child protection lead with the UK National Police Chiefs Council, at the Moore Center's Envision 2024 event.*

1. Whole of Society Approach

Implication

1. Tackling a truly Systemic Problem like Child Sexual Abuse, requires a Whole of Society, Whole System Approach.

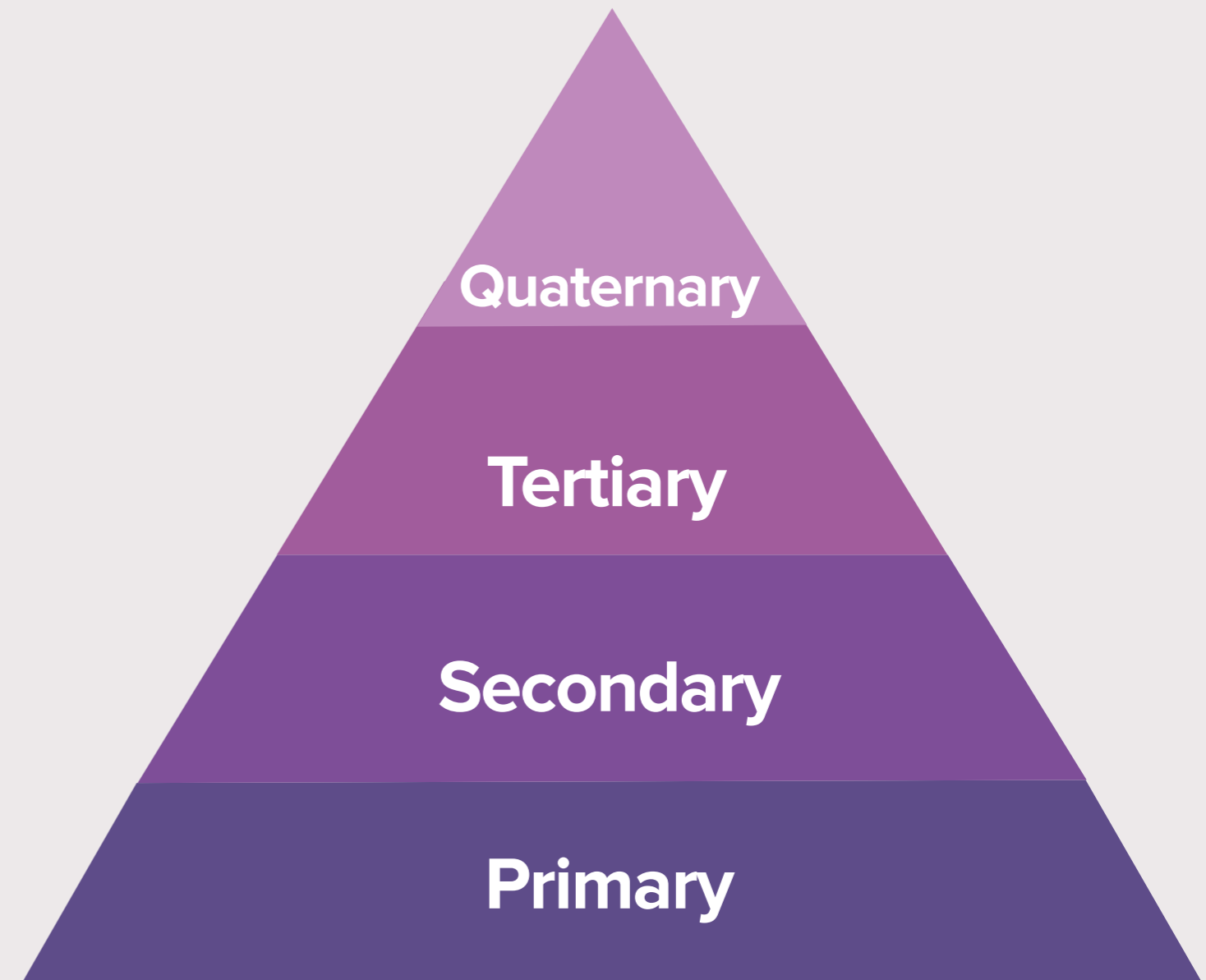


These integrated child-centred approaches fit with the Public Health Framework and also with global best practice - Australia National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021- 2030 (2021) and New Zealand Child and Youth Strategy (2024 - 2027).

Implication

2. A Preventative Public Health Framework represents global best practice in tackling sexual violence in childhood.

Public Health Framework



Primary Prevention - Responses aimed at the whole community which address the underlying causes of child sexual abuse.

Secondary Prevention - Aims to address the early warning signs of child sexual abuse and change the end result for people who are at risk of experiencing or instigating child sexual violence.

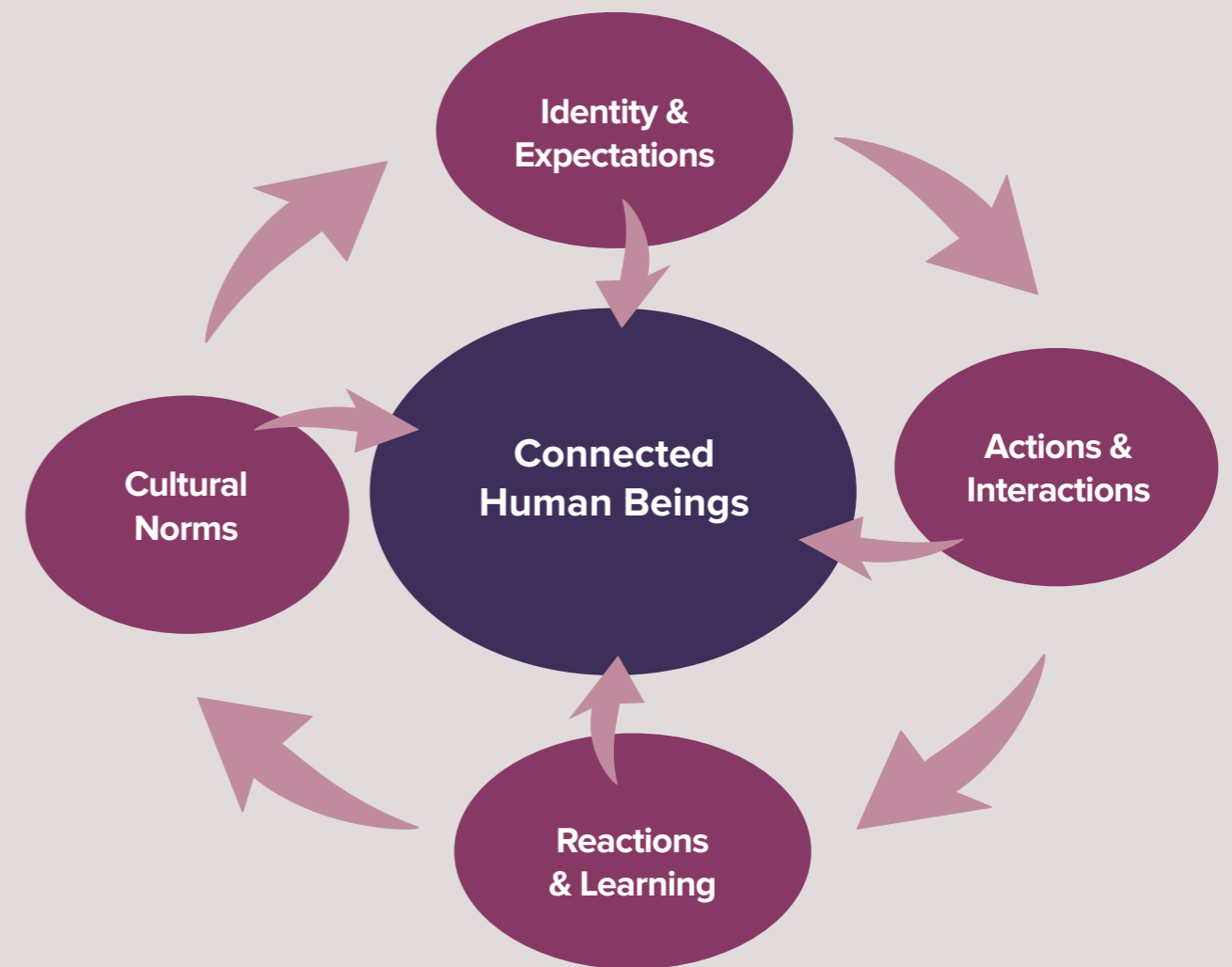
Tertiary Intervention - Aims to respond to child sexual abuse and prevent it from happening again.

Quaternary Prevention - Evaluates how effective tertiary interventions are to make sure they are delivering the right results.

Implication

3. A National Conversation about Tackling Child Sexual Violence needs to be led by a broad coalition of stakeholders, agencies and NGO's to help build collective wellbeing, healthy development and respectful boundaries for all young people and citizens.

3. A National Conversation



As we collectively start to acknowledge, understand and discuss child sexual violence as a shared responsibility we will start to change the cultural narrative from 'Fragmented Selves' to 'Connected Human Beings'.

In Summary

In understanding complex social systems we need to try and identify the key factors that are influencing the problem at all levels - within individuals, within groups, within communities, across culture (including the internet) and within societal and state structures.

Synthesis of the literature, expert interviews and qualitative research with survivors, families and citizens - has identified seven key barriers that are influencing and compounding the problem of sexual violence in childhood within our society.

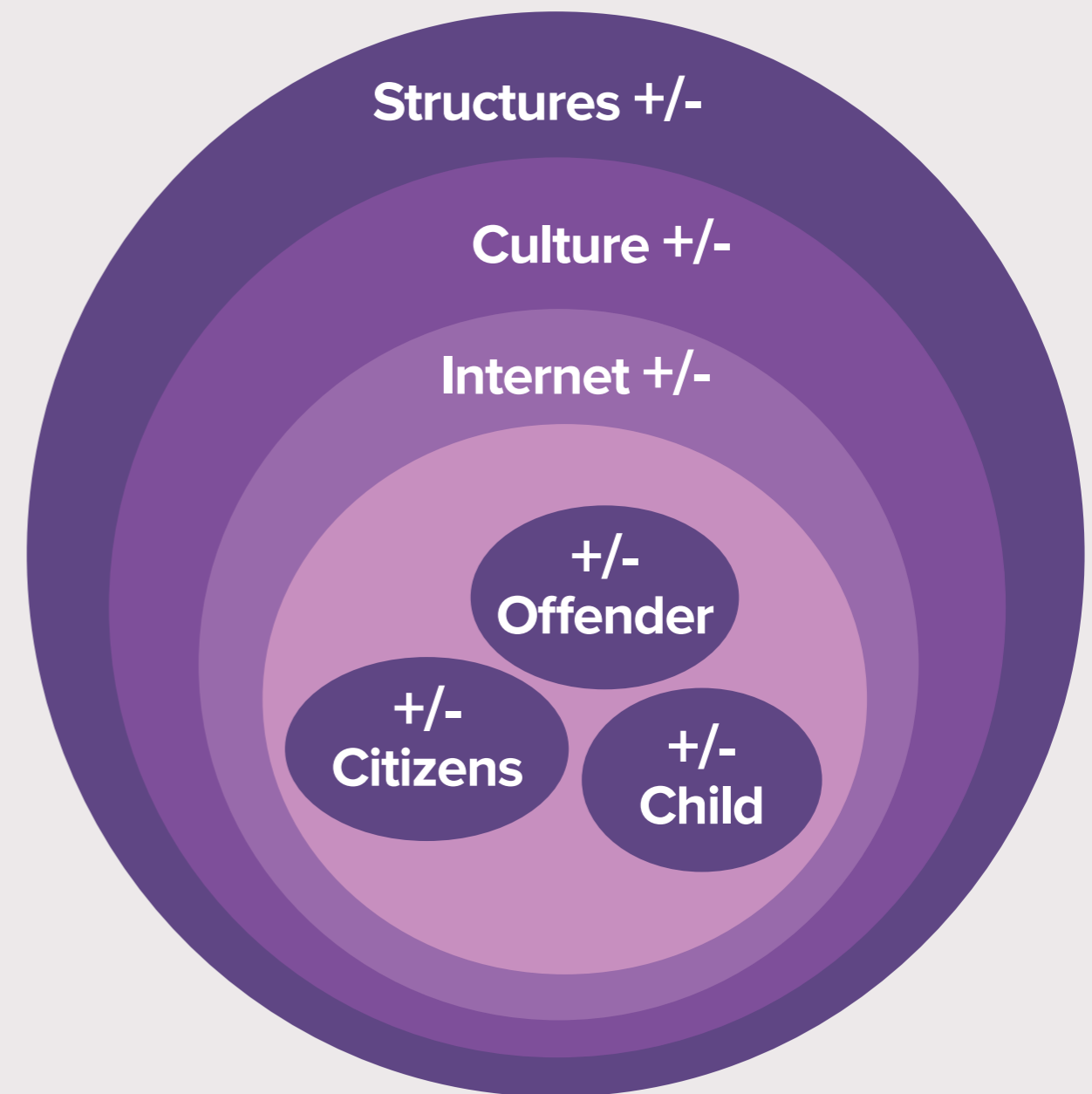
These seven themes - Invisibility , Collapsing Boundaries, Splitting, Outcasts, Explosiveness, Buck-passing and Inevitability - can combine to make people, policy makers and politicians feel that child sexual violence is too complex for us to collectively combat.

Reframing these themes challenges us to take a transformative Whole of Society Approach - to collectively acknowledge the reality of child abuse - in person and online - to show courageous leadership and take shared responsibility for detecting, repairing and preventing sexual violence in childhood.

Global best practice identifies a Preventative Public Health Framework as the multi-level approach that can deliver this whole of society response across all age groups.

A National Conversation is a critical ingredient to surfacing the problem and our national commitment to moving from Fragmented Selves to Connected Human Beings transforming our cultural norms, shaping our identities and expectations of others and supporting our actions, interactions and reactions around health, sexuality and relationships.

In Summary. Child Sexual Abuse - A Systems View*



* Ecological Systems View - following Bronfenbrenner (1979)

4

Tackling The Issue Together: Red C National Polling 2024



Introduction

It was important to quantitatively explore the societal attitudes of Irish citizens towards sexual violence in childhood, their understanding of the systemic factors underpinning it and their support for systemic approaches to support and empower child safety and wellbeing.

This allowed us to triangulate this attitudinal data both with the self-reported data in the Sexual Violence Survey (CSO, 2022) and with the barriers and recommended approaches identified by the synthesis of literature, expert interviews and focus groups.

A national poll was commissioned with Red C in May 2024 amongst nationally representative Irish adults, with data weighted to reflect gender, age, region and social class to align with latest CSO projections. The fieldwork went to 1021 participants with a response rate of n=834 (82%).

The research applied language and questions that related to the questions in the Sexual Violence Survey (CSO, 2022) to allow the findings of citizens' perceptions of the prevalence of child sexual violence and likely offenders of child sexual violence to be compared with the self-reported prevalence data in the Sexual Violence Survey.

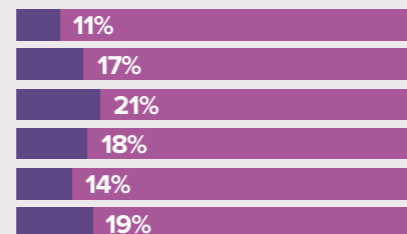
This national poll explored (a) their perceptions of the prevalence of child sexual violence in person and on line (b) their understanding of the systemic factors that are blocking us from collectively tackling the issue and (c) their support for a Whole of Society Approach, their agreement with specific elements underpinning a Preventative Public Health Framework and their endorsement of the need for a collective National Conversation.

The polling also investigated which societal groups would be most trusted to tackle sexual violence in childhood and which groups would be preferred to show leadership in this area.

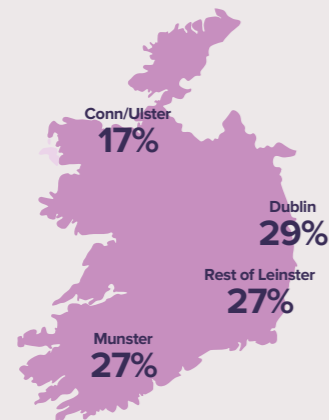
Gender



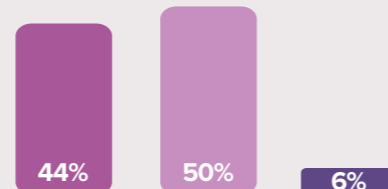
Age



Region



Social Class



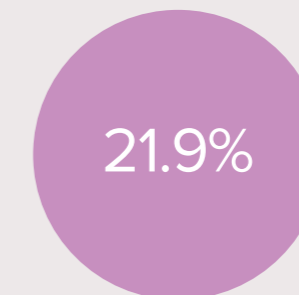
Irish adults estimate that 36% of adults experienced sexual violence as a child

It is further estimated that 22% of Irish adults experienced contact child sexual violence while they estimate that 27% experienced non-contact sexual violence.

Experienced Sexual Violence Overall



Experienced Contact Sexual Violence



Experienced Non-contact Sexual Violence



Red Line Methodology

- Research was conducted using RED C's online omnibus, the RED Line.
- Through an online panel of over 45,000 members, RED Line allows us to reach a representative sample of the adult population 18+ across Ireland in a cost effective and timely manner.
- Quota controls are used to ensure a nationally representative sample of ROI adults aged 18+, with interlocking quotas to provide extra confidence in sample profile.
- Data was weighted across gender, age, region and social class so as to ensure a nationally representative sample based on latest CSO projections.
- 1,021 respondents took part with fieldwork taking place from the 17th – 22nd May 2024.
- 82% (n=834) of total respondent chose to answer this section and there was also an option available for individuals to opt out of answering specific questions.

% estimate of Irish adults who experienced unwanted sexual violence during their childhood

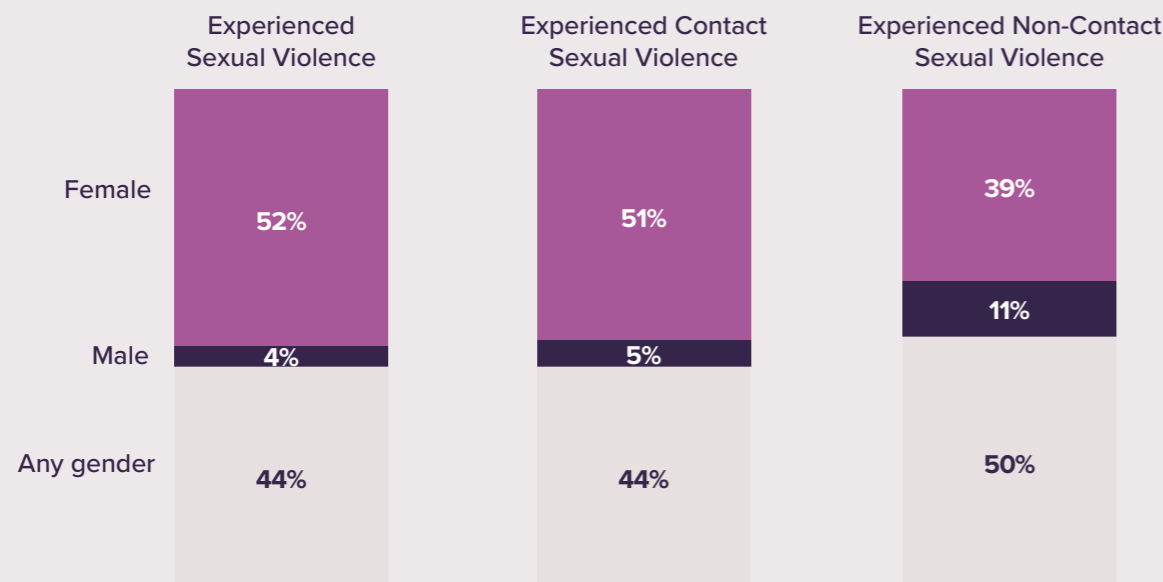
Q1: If you had to guess or estimate, how many of the Irish Adult population who are over 18, have ever experienced an unwanted sexual experience during Childhood, under 18?

Note: full explanation of contact & non-contact sexual violence was presented within the question text.

(Base: All Irish adults 18+; n=564) Margin of error +/- 4.1%

Over half state females are most likely to experience sexual violence

44% feel either gender child could experience sexual violence while just 4% believe males are most likely to experience it.



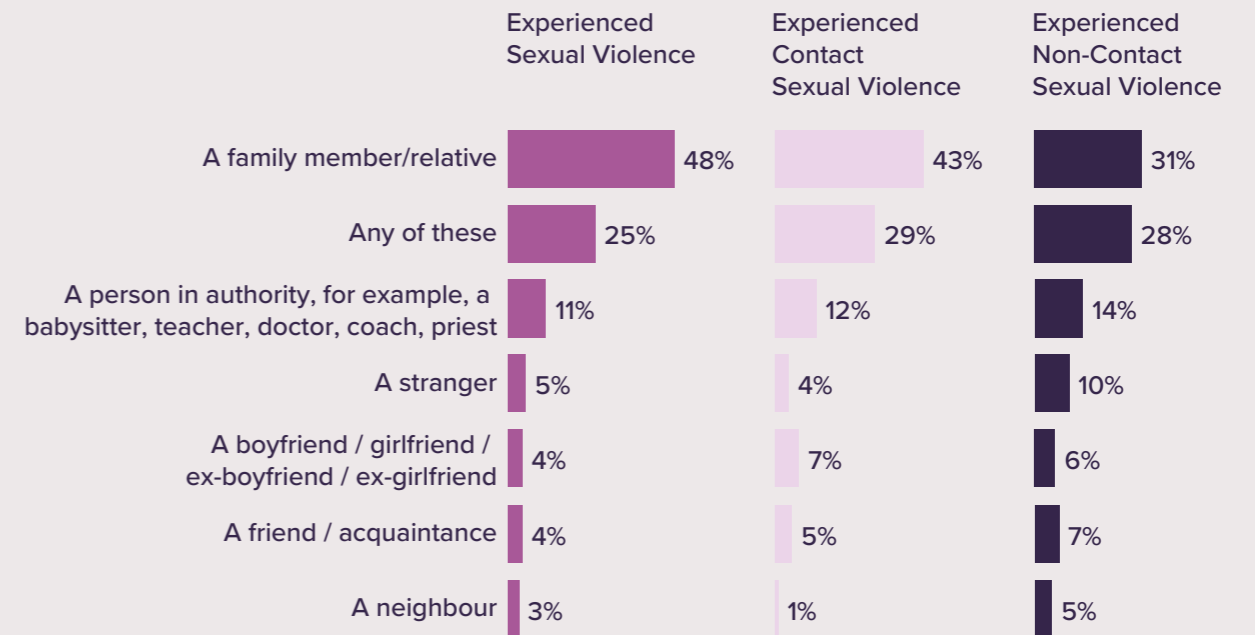
Opinion on which gender is most likely to experience sexual violence in childhood

Q: In your opinion, which, if any of these genders would be Most likely to experience Sexual violence in Childhood? (Base: All Irish adults 18+; n=834)

Margin of error +/- 3.2%

Nearly half specify a family member/relative as most likely to commit the offence

1 in 4 however believe that anyone can be an offender.

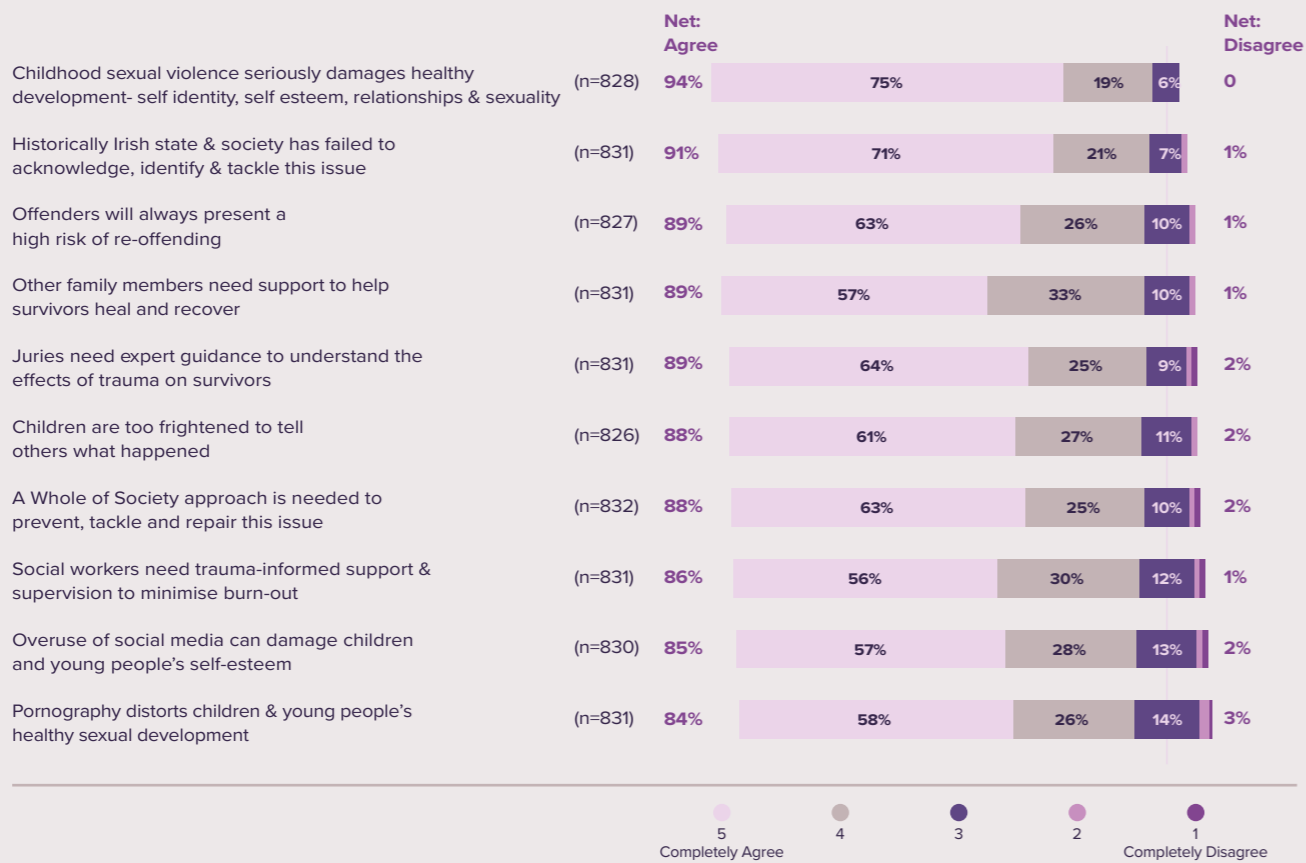


Opinion on who is most likely to commit an offence of sexual violence in childhood

Q: In your opinion, which if any, of these categories of person would be Most Likely to be commit an offence of Sexual Violence in Childhood. (Base: All Irish adults 18+; n=831)

Margin of error +/- 3.4%

Over 90% agree that the state & society has failed to acknowledge the situation

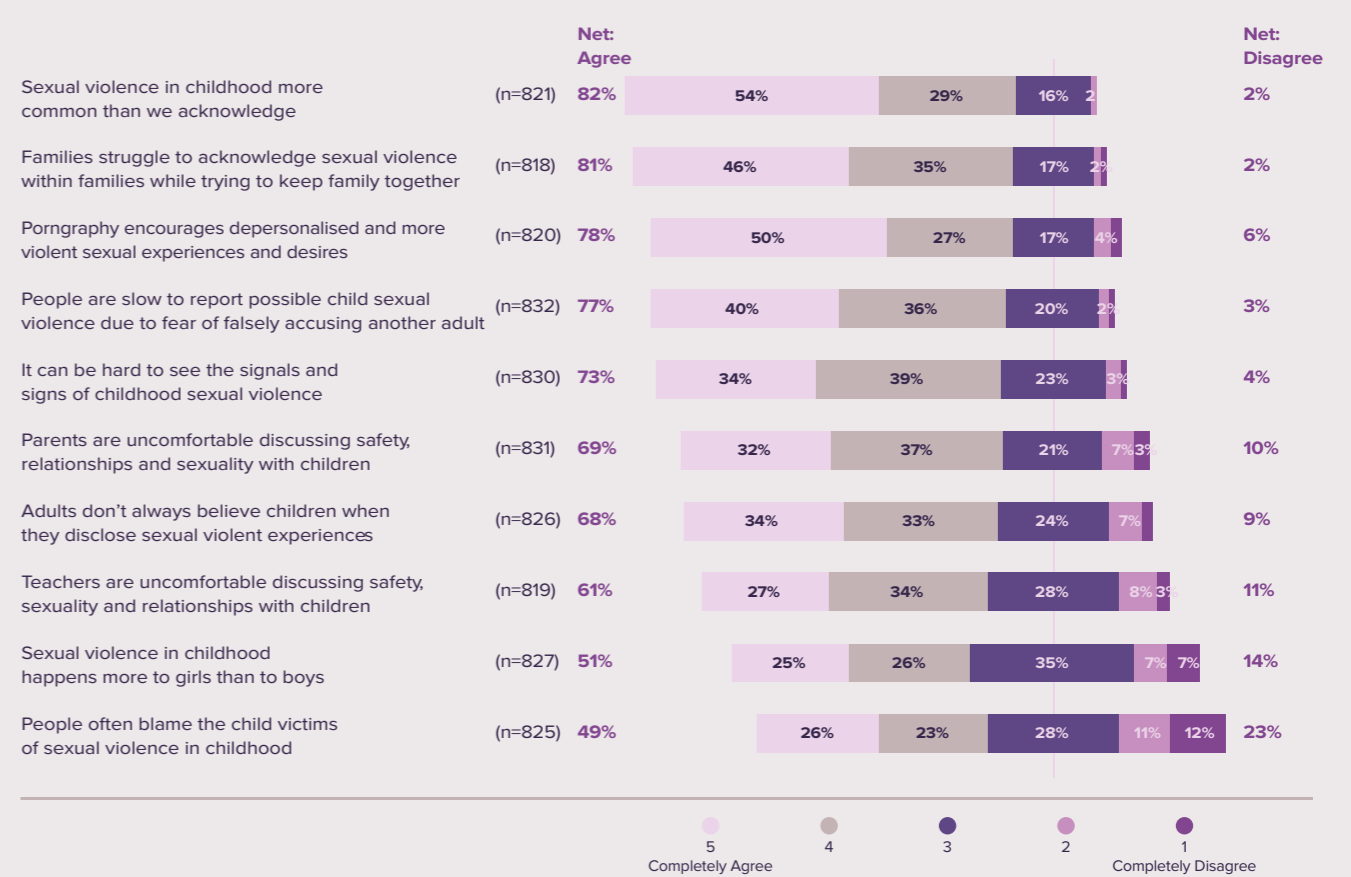


Agreement to attitudes on sexual violence in childhood

Q Below are a number of statements that others have made about Attitudes to Sexual Violence in Childhood. Please read each one and indicate whether you agree or disagree using a scale of 1-5 where 1 means you completely disagree and 5 means you strongly agree?

(Base: All Irish adults 18+) Margin of error +/- 3.4%

82% agree that sexual violence in childhood is more common than we acknowledge



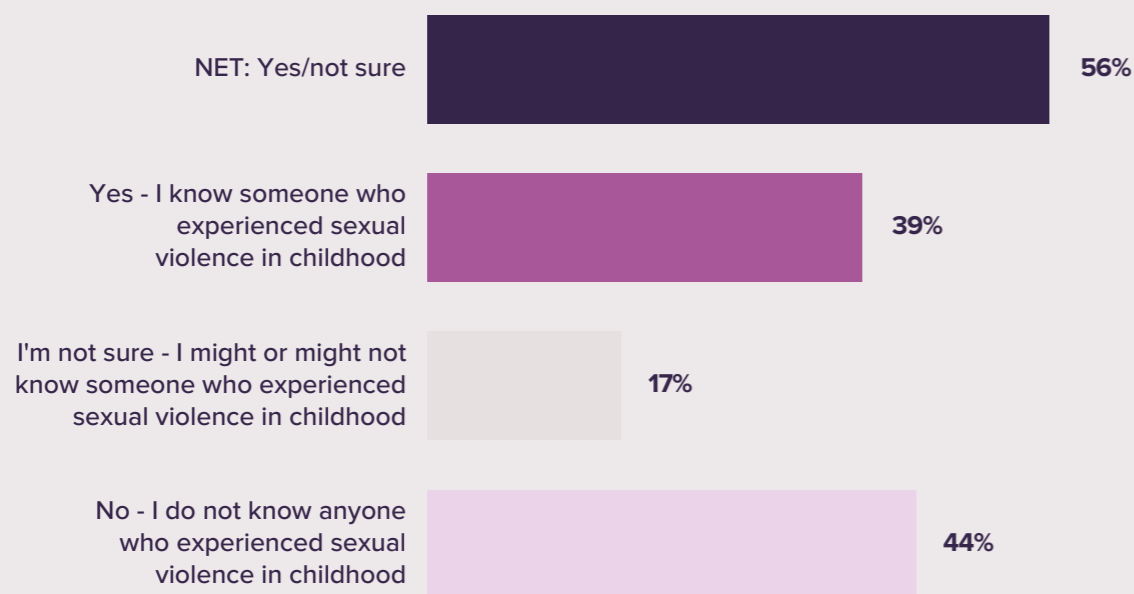
Agreement to attitudes on sexual violence in childhood

Q Below are a number of statements that others have made about Attitudes to Sexual Violence in Childhood. Please read each one and indicate whether you agree or disagree using a scale of 1-5 where 1 means you completely disagree and 5 means you strongly agree?

(Base: All Irish adults 18+) Margin of error +/- 3.4%

2 in 5 Irish adults know someone who experienced sexual violence as a child

This is significantly higher among females and those living in Dublin.

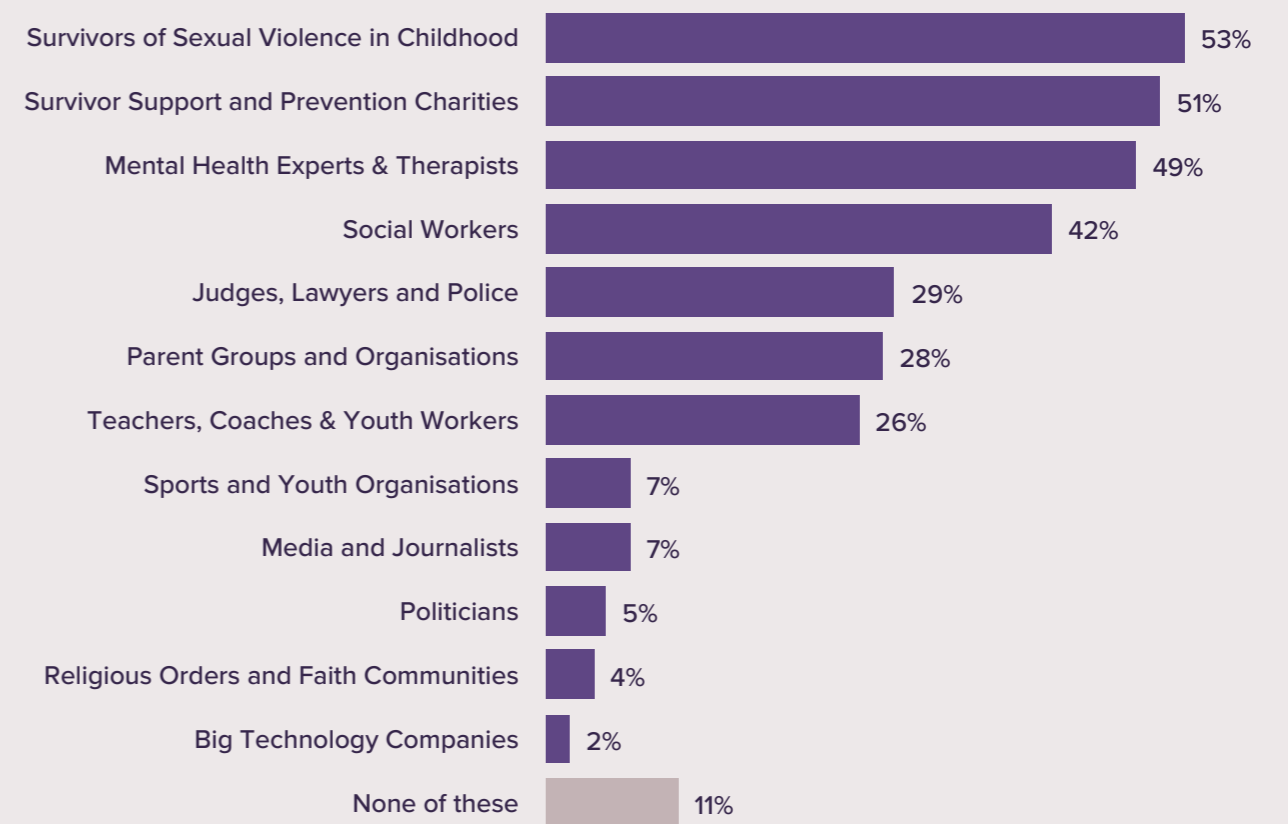


% who personally know someone who experienced sexual violence in their childhood

Q Do you know anyone personally who has ever experienced sexual Violence in Childhood?

(Base: All Irish adults 18+; n=819) Margin of error +/- 3.4%

Survivors are felt to be the most trusted group to tackle sexual violence in childhood.



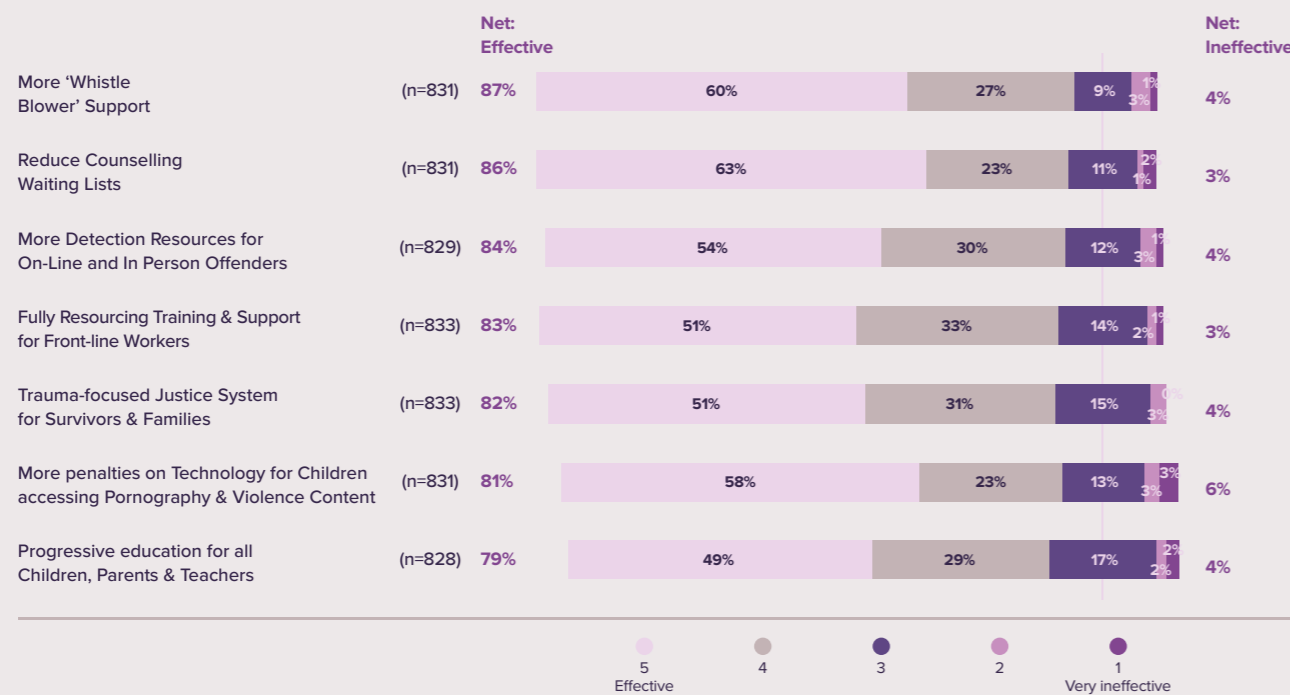
Groups trusted to tackle sexual violence in childhood

Q Please review the list of groups below and select which, if any you would trust to tackle Sexual Violence in Childhood. Please select all that apply, or even none at all.

(Base: All Irish adults 18+; n=809) Margin of error +/- 3.4%

Very strong support noted across all initiatives.

Greatest support is given to enabling more whistle blowers.

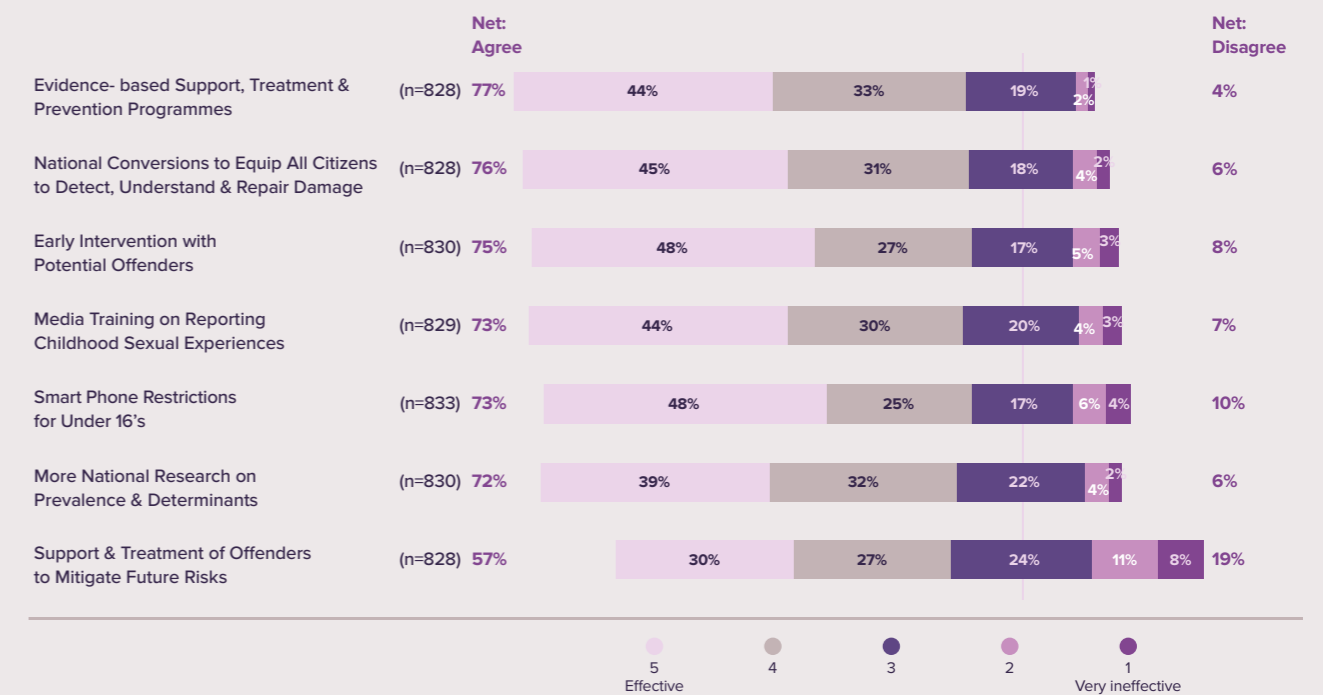


Effective Actions to Prevent /Tackle Sexual Violence in Childhood (i)

Q For each of the statements below, can you please indicate how effective, if at all, you believe they would be in Preventing and Tackling Sexual Violence in Childhood. (Base: All Irish adults 18+)

Margin of error +/- 3.4%

57% of ROI adults suggest support & treatment of offenders is an effective means of tackling sexual violence in childhood.



Effective Actions to Prevent /Tackle Sexual Violence in Childhood (ii)

Q For each of the statements below, can you please indicate how effective, if at all, you believe they would be in Preventing and Tackling Sexual Violence in Childhood. (Base: All Irish adults 18+)

Margin of error +/- 3.4%

In Summary

The National Polling with representative Irish adults was conducted in May 2024 to explore their (a) awareness and understanding of sexual violence in childhood and (b) views and support of a Whole of Society Approach, the key elements of a Preventative Public Health Framework and the need for a National Conversation.

These Irish Citizens' perception of the prevalence of sexual violence in childhood was broadly in tune with the overall reported experience of childhood sexual violence - in person and on-line. Half of respondents felt that females were more likely to have these experience but almost half felt that that 'any gender' could be directly affected.

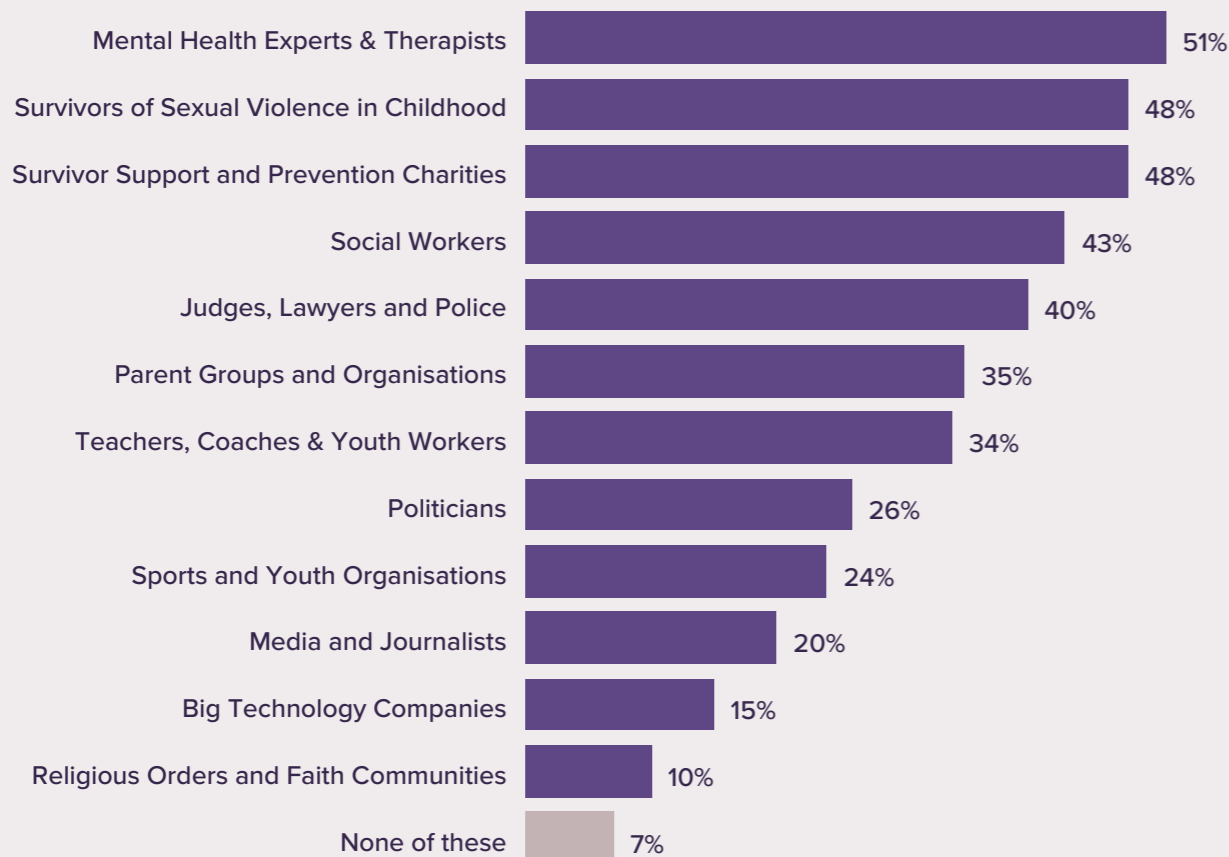
The polled cohort of citizens believed the family members would be the most likely people to offend at 48%, with low levels of assumption around friends and partners. This could mean a collective 'blind spot' around the likely age groups of offenders today - where people to offend and victims can both be children/young people.

These citizens strongly agreed at 91% that state and society had failed to do enough to tackle this problem and 94% agreed that childhood sexual violence can seriously impact the healthy development of self-identity, self-esteem, relationships and sexuality.

There was strong support for a Whole of Society Approach and for the multi-level approach of a Preventative Public Health Framework. Citizens saw the value in prevention at every level - educating and supporting young people, parents, professionals but also providing early intervention and support for possible offenders and working to prevent people who offend from re-offending using evidence-based approaches.

Citizens supported the need for a National Conversation to surface and tackle sexual violence in childhood and saw Mental Health Professionals and Survivors as the most important leaders of systemic change along with health, education, justice, politicians, parents, young people and the media.

Mental health experts together with survivors are preferred to show leadership



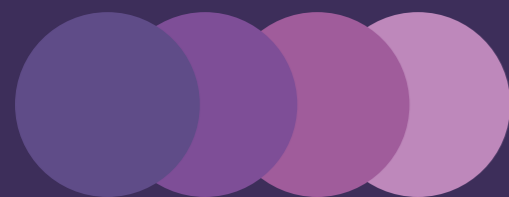
Organisation preferred to show Leadership for Resources, Campaigns, Constructive Discussions and Laws in Tackling Sexual Violence in Childhood

Q Which, if any of the following organisations would you prefer to see showing Leadership for Resources, Campaigns, Constructive Discussions and Laws in Tackling Sexual Violence in Childhood. Please select as many or as few as you like, or even none at all.

(Base: All Irish adults 18+; n=806) Margin of error +/- 3.4%

5

Conclusions & Recommendations



Conclusions & Recommendations

Child sexual abuse is a serious societal issue which has historically been extremely hard to detect, repair and prevent in Ireland, and around the world.

- The lifetime impacts of child sexual abuse include physical and mental health, emotional wellbeing, addiction and social problems and interpersonal and intergenerational effects.
- Tackling child sexual violence effectively will reduce the economic and systemic costs incurred in individuals, groups and state expenditure (Letourneau et al., 2018*.)

In 2022, One in Four initiated a National Child Safety Summit in Dublin, to convene experts from multiple agencies and disciplines to work together on what it would take to keep every child in Ireland safe and protected.

- Coming out of this summit, it was agreed that there was a strong need for research to explore and understand societal attitudes around tackling sexual violence in childhood.
- The researcher collaborated with One in Four and Children's Health Ireland research teams, as well as the emerging National Child Safety Taskforce.

This mixed methods research applied a social systems lens to understanding the complex factors that interact to block us all from combatting child sexual violence, at an individual, family, community, culture and societal level.

- This research triangulated literature, expert interviews from policy, health, social work, justice, education, psychology and survivors and focus groups with citizens, families and young survivors to uncover barriers and opportunities in this space.
- These insights and possible societal approaches were then explored in quantitative polling with a nationally representative sample of adult citizens.

The Sexual Violence Survey (CSO, 2022) provides clear evidence that 29% of Irish people - across all age-groups - have experienced sexual violence in childhood, in person and on-line.

- This rises to 41% amongst the younger age group of adults - 18-24 year olds - which would indicate that the problem may be worsening rather than improving over time (CSO, 2022).
- In the majority of cases of child sexual violence across all age-groups and contexts, the offender is already known to the child (versus a stranger). There is already an existing relationship dynamic between the two people - which complicates and compounds the damage done, (Roopesh, 2022).
- The offender patterns within child sexual violence have changed markedly over time. Changes in society and culture mean that people who offend are now less likely to be authority figures, but the majority of people who offend are now themselves young people.

In understanding complex social systems like child sexual violence - we seek to identify the key factors that are influencing the problem at all levels - within individuals, within groups, within communities, across culture (including the internet) and within societal and state structures.

- The synthesis of the literature coupled with expert interviews and qualitative research with survivors, families and citizens - has identified seven key barriers that are influencing and compounding the problem of sexual violence in childhood within our society.
- These seven themes - Invisibility, Collapsing Boundaries, Splitting, Outcasts, Explosiveness, Buck-passing and Inevitability - can interact to make people, policy makers and politicians feel that child sexual violence is too complex for us to collectively tackle.

Tackling Sexual Violence in Childhood requires us to take a Whole of Society Approach and to harness all of our systems and structures to build wellbeing, sexual development and healthy boundaries for all.

- This highlights the need for a comprehensive curriculum for all primary/secondary school children, parental education/support, systemic training for all front-line professionals in primary care, mental health, education, sport, community work, NGO's, social work, police and justice system.
- There is also a need for serious engagement, investment and leadership from technology providers, government and civil society to create on-line environments that minimise harmful experiences or toxic influences.
- There is a need to integrate the research and evidence for better insight and foresight around sexual violence in childhood - National Research (including Sexual Violence Survey, Growing Up in Ireland, On-Line Safety Monitor, Anti-Bullying. Mental Health etc) and Front-line Insight (trends/patterns from children's health, education, child welfare, NGO's, counselling /trauma services, justice systems, Barnahus etc.).

A Preventative Public Health Framework approach represents global best practice in tackling sexual violence in childhood.

- Primary Prevention - Responses aimed at the whole community which address the underlying causes of child sexual abuse.
- Secondary Prevention - Aims to address the early warning signs of child sexual abuse and change the end result for people who are at risk of experiencing or instigating child sexual violence.
- Tertiary Intervention - Aims to respond to child sexual abuse and prevent it from happening again.
- Quaternary Prevention - Evaluates how effective tertiary interventions are to make sure they are delivering the right results.
- The overall power of the preventative public health framework will depend on the shared vision, leadership and integrated resources supporting it.

A National Conversation about Tackling Child Sexual Violence needs to be led by a broad coalition of stakeholders, agencies and NGO's to help build collective wellbeing, healthy development and respectful boundaries for all for all people - young and old.

- This starts with facing up to the reality of the situation and accepting the shared responsibility to tackle this situation.
- It requires us to understand vulnerability at a psychological, social and cultural level - and developing prevention, early intervention and national programmes to support individuals, families, friend groups and communities.
- This includes understanding factors and toxic influences that have hijacked the sexual expectations of young men and young women - including 'Red Pill' discourses, unhealthy pornography, objectification of 'self' / 'others' and the gamification of sexuality.
- It requires briefing key agencies, media outlets and professional bodies to align and engage them to work collaboratively as a united front.

More research is needed to ensure we are connecting our data and insights and delivering rolling measurement and evidence around this issue:

- (a) Integrating national data and evidence - through key surveys.
- (b) Integrating front-line insight trends - in aggregated formats.
- (c) Helping to unlock barriers/commitment of policy makers/politicians.
- (d) Helping to unlock barriers/commitment of front-line professionals.
- (e) Ensuring the adult and child survivor voices are taken seriously.
- (f) Ensuring that all children/young people voices are respected and listened to.

*Letourneau, E.J., Brown, D.S., Fang, X., Hassan, A., Mercy, J.A. (2018) The economic burden of child sexual abuse in the United States. Journal of Child Abuse and Neglect. (79),413-422.

6

References & Appendices Global Best Practice

Definitions

We recognise the need for some working terminology so we propose these terms:

Child/Young Person: somebody who is aged between 0 and 18 years old.

Child Sexual Violence: this includes unwanted sexual experiences in childhood, in person or on-line. This includes contact sexual experiences like unwanted sexual intercourse, sexual touching or attempt to force sexual contact. It also includes non-contact sexual experiences like being forced to watch pornography, coercion to pose for photos and videos or forced exposure to other's bodies.

Contact Child Sexual Violence: this includes unwanted sexual experiences such as being touched in a sexual way, being persuaded or forced to have sexual intercourse or any other attempt to have unwanted sexual contact.

Non-Contact Child Sexual Violence: this includes unwanted sexual experiences such as being forced to watch pornography, coerced to pose for photos or videos, somebody exposing themselves or masturbating in front of a child.

Person who has Offended: this is the person who instigated the unwanted sexual experience with the child/young person. This experience may have taken place in person or on-line and the person who has initiated this unwanted experience may themselves be a young person or child.

Victim/Survivor: people who have experienced child sexual violence and child sexual abuse. We recognise that not every person who has experienced child sexual abuse may identify with these terms.

Please note:

These terms are aligned with the Luxembourg Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (2016), the Sexual Violence Survey (CSO, 2022), global policy best practice and A Vision to Zero (2025), a global coalition building a roadmap to ending childhood sexual violence.

These terms are constantly evolving as new pathways for child sexual violence emerge within our societal systems.



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Deeper Prevalence Data - Children



Truth Project - UK (2021)

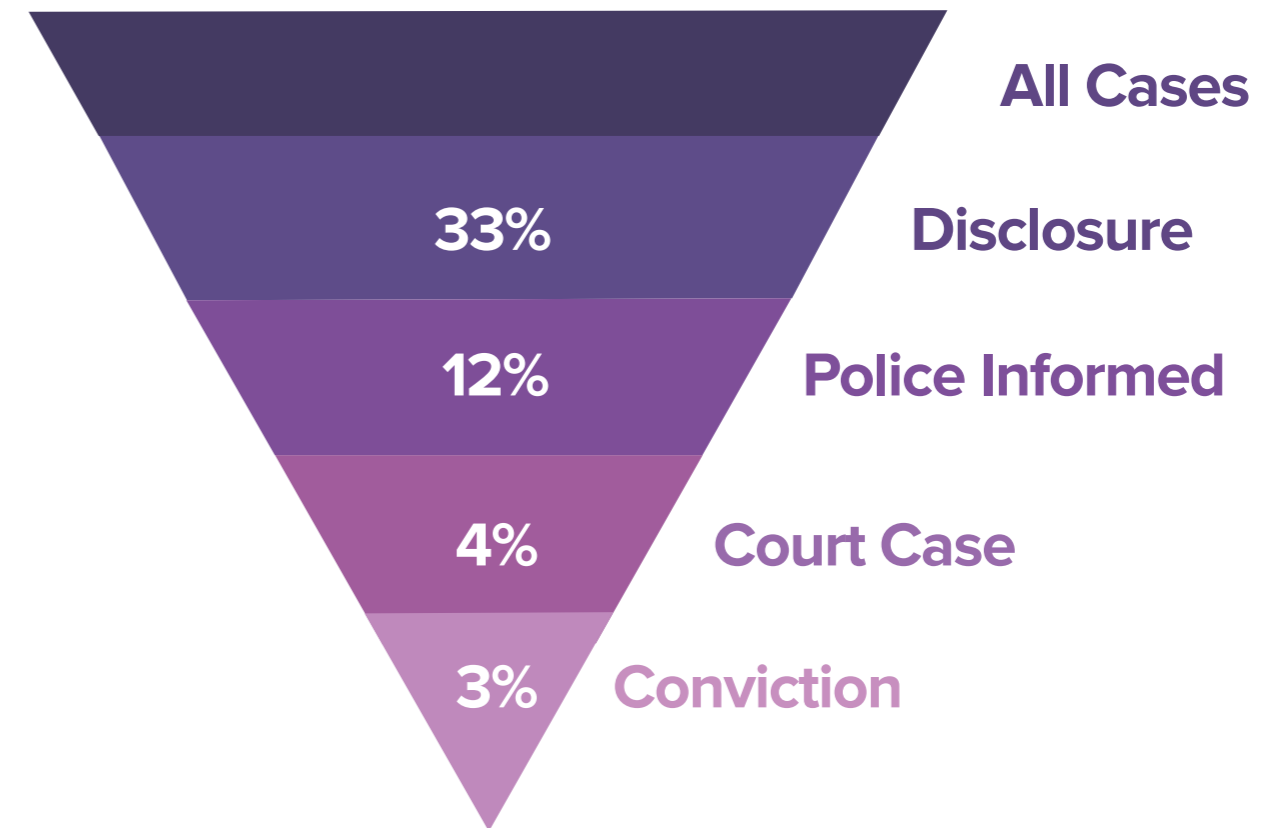


Figure 7.1 Suggestions for change made by Truth Project participants

Lundy (2007) - REAL Child-Centred Participation

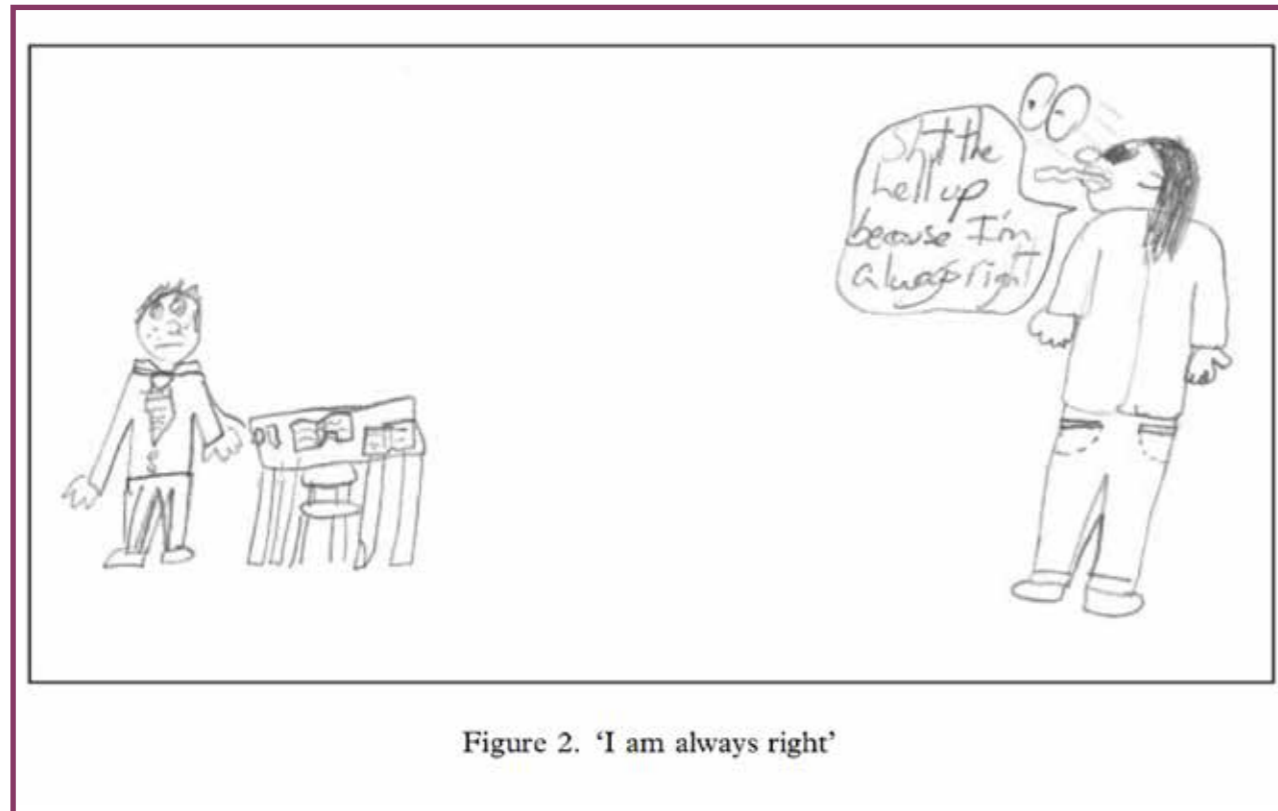
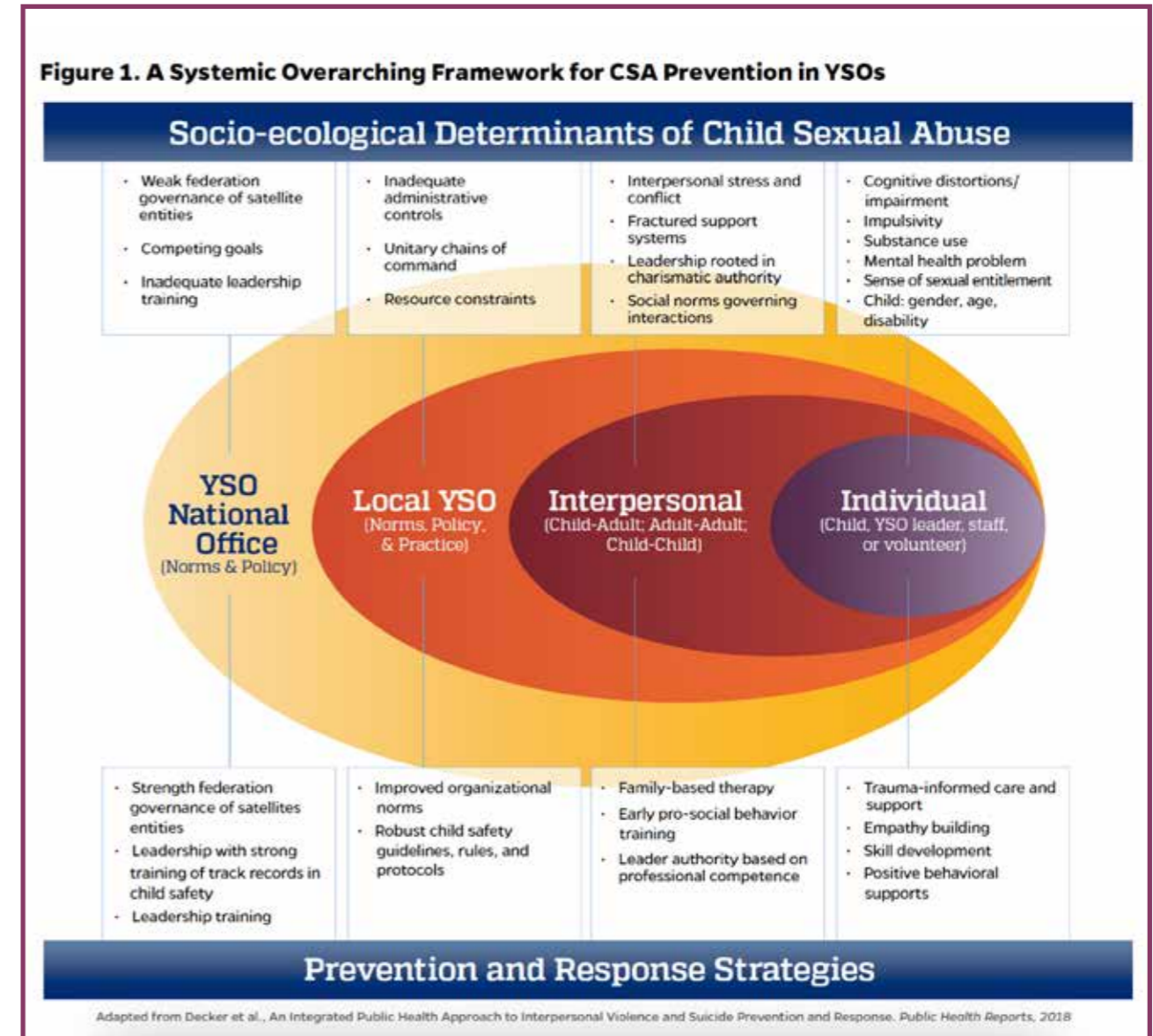


Figure 2. 'I am always right'

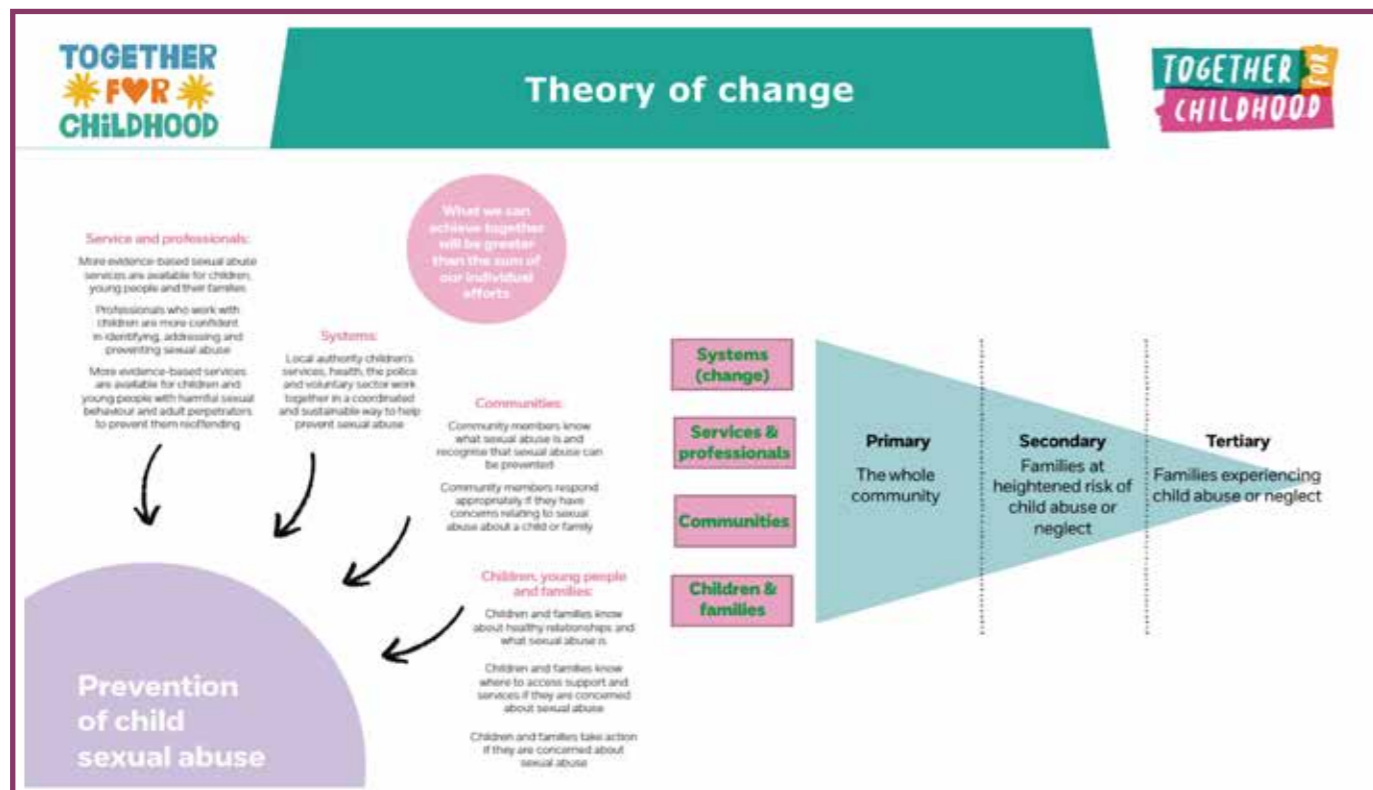
Laura Lundy's (2007) human-rights model around children and young people fully participating in decisions and processes that affect their lives. This four part model requires Space, Voice, Audience & Influence.

US - Systemic Framework for CSA Prevention in Youth Serving Organisations

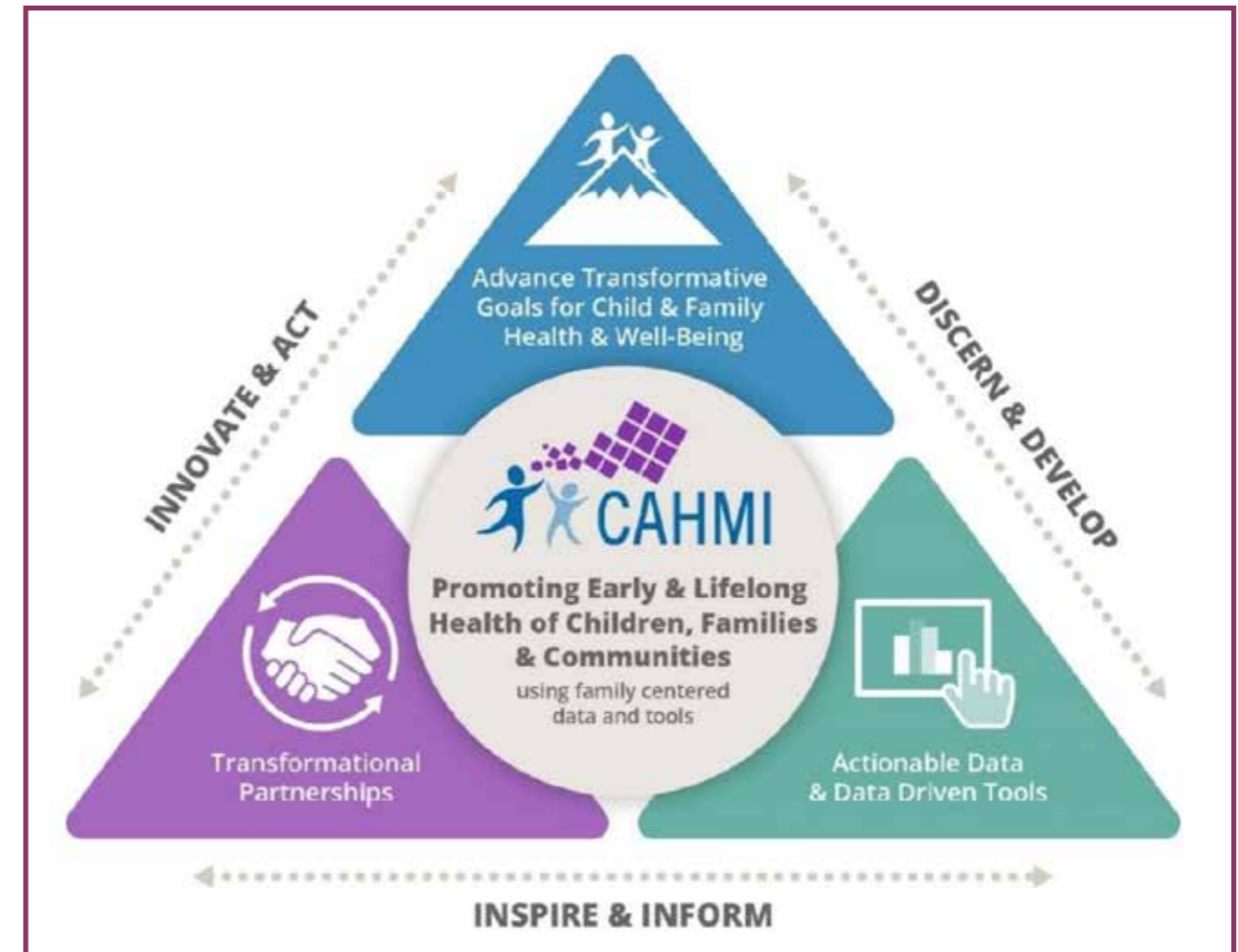


This systemic framework was developed by Dr. Elizabeth Letourneau with colleagues (2020) to help Youth Serving Organisations in the US fully understand the multiple factors that can enable child sexual violence and to collaboratively work across the organisation to combat this.

Together for Childhood (UK) - Collaborative Community Approach



Bethell (2023) - Relational Health Care



Bethell et al. (2023). Scaling Family Voices and Engagement to Measure and Improve Systems Performance and Whole Child Health: Progress and Lessons from the Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative - Maternal and Child Health Journal

Together for Childhood is an innovative community based approach to tackling child sexual violence and neglect. There are a range of local partnerships between social care, schools, health, voluntary and community groups working alongside police, NSPCC and communities. It applies primary (universal), secondary (targeted) and tertiary (specialist) interventions to help prevent, detail and repair child sexual violence.

‘Now is the time to change this sense of fatalism, to reject the stigma associated with childhood sexual violence and to come together to build a pathway to the future. Childhood sexual violence is preventable and, by working collectively and by pressurising and incentivizing others such as government, industry and institutions, we can and will prevent it.’

Seán Coughlan

**Director
To Zero (2025)**

