

Research Report

Realities of Child Sexual Assault: Findings from data collected from Bravehearts' Therapeutic Clients



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About the Authors

Carol Ronken is Bravehearts' Research and Policy Development Manager. After seven years at Griffith University as a casual staff member and Associate Lecturer in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Carol joined Bravehearts in early 2003. Carol has a Bachelor of Arts (psychology) and Masters in Applied Sociology (social research). In 2011 she received an award from the Queensland Police Service Child Protection and Investigation Unit for her contribution to child protection. Carol has also co-authored *The Bravehearts Toolbox for Practitioners working with Child Sexual Assault* (Australian Academic Press, 2011).

Dr. Nadine McKillop specialises in the prevention of sexual violence and abuse. Working within a holistic framework her experience includes the clinical assessment and treatment of victims and offenders of crime; their families and criminal justice personnel. She also provides professional supervision, training and consultation. Nadine is actively engaged in research, presenting her findings in peer-reviewed journals and at conferences both nationally and internationally. Nadine has also co-authored *The Bravehearts Toolbox for Practitioners working with Child Sexual Assault* (Australian Academic Press, 2011).

This research paper has been prepared by:

Bravehearts Inc

PO Box 575

Arundel BC, Qld 4214

Phone: 07 5552 3000

E-mail: research@bravehearts.org.au

Web: www.bravehearts.org.au

About Bravehearts Inc.

Founded in 1997 by Hetty Johnston, Bravehearts Inc. has evolved into an organisation whose purpose is to provide therapeutic, support and advocacy services to survivors of child sexual assault. We are also actively involved in education, prevention, early intervention and research programs relating to child sexual assault.

Bravehearts operates from our Head Office on the Gold Coast, advocating and lobbying nationally, with branches across the country.

The work of Bravehearts in the community includes:

- **The Ditto® Suite of Programs:** Includes *Ditto's Keep Safe Adventure* - CD ROM and Ditto's in-school protective behaviours education program.
- **Research:** Bravehearts is actively involved in research and policy development that prevents, responds to and ultimately reduces the incidence of child sexual assault.
- **Lobbying and Campaigning:** Bravehearts advocates for survivors directly and more broadly, through participation in State and Commonwealth government committees, inquiries and working parties, media, community debate and legislative review and reform.
- **Bravehearts Online:** Our online partnerships with Google and YouTube, together with our presence on other social networking sites such as Facebook, provides for the sharing of information, advice and support directly to young people and those who care for them.
- **Practitioner Workshops:** Bravehearts provides a suite of workshops tailored to provide specialist professional development education to therapists.
- **Supporting Hands:** This program provides valuable and effective training and awareness workshops on risk management for staff and volunteers in organisations that have contact with children, including teachers.
- **Community Awareness Campaigns:** Now partially funded by the Commonwealth Government, National White Balloon Day® is our signature awareness campaign. Held annually since 1997 in September during Child Protection Week Visit: www.whiteballoonday.com.au
- **Risk Audit:** Bravehearts provides a specialised Physical and Policy Risk Management Audit service for community groups, sporting clubs, retail and commercial sites that engage with children.
- **Counselling and Support Programs:** We provide counselling and support to children, adolescents and adult survivors of child sexual assault, as well as their family members.
- **Sexual Assault Disclosure Scheme:** SADS successfully encourages survivors to overcome the barriers to disclosure and as such, protects thousands of children from those who, through SADS, become known predators.
- **Telephone Crisis and Advocacy:** Bravehearts currently provides a Freecall 1800 BRAVE 1 (1800 272 831) crisis-support and advocacy line. We receive more than 80 phone calls each week from people who need timely accurate advice, assistance or referral in times of crisis.

Abstract

The data reported in the following paper is based on a preliminary analysis of information collected from 556 clients who have attended Bravehearts therapeutic service between 2002-2008.

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Interim Findings

Victims

Research, both nationally and internationally, has consistently shown that girls are more likely than boys to be victims of child sexual assault. Those who work in the sector agree that this is more likely to be due to likelihood or willingness to disclose, rather than actually victimisation. A national survey in the US conducted through researchers in South Carolina found that more females (74%) than males (46.5%) disclosed having been sexually assaulted. The study showed that the gender of the adolescent is related to disclosure of sexual assault with boys less likely to speak out (Hanson et al, 2003).

Official sexual assault data in Australia show that the high rate of sexual assault recorded for girls 10-14 years of age (at 516 per 100,000 females in that age group). For males, rates were highest for those aged 10-14 (88 per 100,000) and under 10 (70 per 100,000). Males made up 30% of sexual assault victims aged less than 10 years and 15% or less in older age groups (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2006).

Research on the average age when sexual assault first occurs consistently shows that for most victims the first incident occurred prior to puberty. While sexual assault is most commonly reported by teenagers, studies show that they have often been victimised for many years prior to reporting (Daugherty, 2007):

- The average age for first sexual assault is 9.9 years for boys and 9.6 years for girls (Finkelhor, 1986)
- Average age: 8.47 years (65% 10 years of age or younger) (Lang, Rouget & van Santen, 1988)
- Victimization occurs before age eight in over 20 percent of the cases. Another study found 24 percent of female child sexual assault survivors were first assaulted at age five or younger (Boyer & Fine, 1992)
- The most vulnerable ages for children to be exposed to sexual assault appears to be the ages from three to eight years of age, with the majority of onset of sexual assault happening between these ages (Browne & Lynch, 1994)
- Age of victim: 0-8 (24.6%); 9-12 (36.6%); 13-16 (39.0%) (Smallbone & Wortley, 2000)
- 0-3 y/o: 10% of victims; 4-7 y/o: 28.4% of victims; 8-11 y/o: 25% of victims; 12 and older: 35.9% of victims (Putnam, 2003))

Bravehearts Clients

Our client demographics show that:

- 72 % of our clients are female, 28 % male
- The average client age at time of intake (counselling) 8.88 years
- The average age at time of the reported sexual assault was 6.59 years

Offenders

Generally trying to define who are and who are not likely to sexually offend against a child is complex:

- There is no 'simple' or single profile of who child sex offenders are.
- There is no one cause or reason for sexually offending against a child.
- There is no test or easy diagnosis to predict who will offend against a child or predict future behaviour.
- Child sex offenders range in age, socio-economic background, sexuality, race, religion and personality type.

International research suggests that sex offenders are generally older than most other types of offenders. Hanson et al (2002) found the mean age of over 9,000 sex offenders to be approximately 36 years. A Queensland study found that the average age of offenders when they first had sexual contact with a child varied between 29.4 years and 33.1 years (Smallbone & Wortley, 2000).

Studies suggest that males are more likely to offend than women, with Child Wise reporting that female offenders were responsible for 6% of all reported child sexual assault matters (The Australian newspaper, 7th March 2006). Finkelhor and Russell (1984) found that approximately 5% of female victims and 20% of male victims experience sexual assault perpetrated by a female.

Bravehearts Clients

Our client's alleged offenders very much fit the "profile" we can put together from the research:

- Average age of the alleged perpetrators was 30.57 years
- 27% of alleged perpetrators were under the age of 16, with 9% under the age of 12.
- Of the alleged perpetrators 3.5% female, 96.5% male

Offences

Child sexual assault is a hidden but significant problem in every community in Australia. Experts estimate the prevalence ranging between one in five children (Australian Institute of Criminology, 1993) to one in seven children experiencing some form of sexual assault before they reach the age of 18 (James, 2000). These include a continuum of offending behaviours; based on a review of research conducted on child sex assault cases over an 8 year period, researchers estimated that between 5 and 10% of girls and up to 5% of boys are exposed to penetrative sexual assault, and up to three times this number are exposed to any type of sexual assault (Gilbert, Spatz-Widom, Browne, Fergusson, Webb & Janson, 2009).

Bravehearts Clients

In relation to the alleged offences reported by Bravehearts' clients,

- 66.6% of our clients reported experiencing multiple incidences of child sexual assault

The majority of alleged offences included contact assaults:

- Predominantly fondling / touching 53.2%
- Attempted / actual rape or sodomy 27.3%
- Oral sex 17.6%
- 1.9% of clients disclosed only non-contact behaviours such as witnessed acts/exposure/being shown pornography

Offender-Victim Relationships

Most children are sexually assaulted by someone they know and trust, although boys are more likely than girls to be sexually assaulted by someone outside of the family. Estimates vary, but research typically suggests that between 10 and 30% of child sex offenders are strangers (National Child Protection Clearinghouse, 2005).

A study in three US states (Langan & Wolf Harlow, 1994) found 96 percent of reported rape survivors under age 12 knew the attacker. Four percent of the offenders were strangers, 20 percent were fathers 16 percent were relatives and 50 percent were acquaintances or friends (Langan & Wolf Harlow, 1994).

Bravehearts Clients

Information on the relationship between survivor and alleged offender through our client data supports the research that the offender is more likely to be known to the victim. Our clients' experience also appears consistent with research that indicates the offender usually (70% of the time) does not live in the house with the child but is someone known, trusted and often loved by the child and child's family. Only 2.8% of alleged offenders was a stranger. Our client data shows that the highest percentage of alleged offenders were parents or step parents (including partners of a parent).

Our client base is derived in large part (72.6%) from Government and non-government referrals and this impacts substantially on this particular statistical analysis. Our statistics in relation to 'relationship to offender' are weighted toward residential family members as 33.1% of our client base are being referred to Bravehearts through the statutory child protection department.

- Parent or step parent 37.2%
- Sibling 11.0%
- Other relative 20.2%
- Known to the child/family 28.8%
- Stranger or someone met on the internet 2.8%

Impacts of Child Sexual Assault

Children and adolescents who have been sexually assaulted can suffer a range of psychological and behavioural problems, from mild to severe, in both the short and

long term. These problems typically include depression, anxiety, guilt, fear, sexual dysfunction, withdrawal, and acting out. Depending on the severity of the incident, victims of sexual assault may also develop fear and anxiety regarding the opposite sex or sexual issues and may display inappropriate sexual behaviour (Briere & Elliot, 2003; Roberts et al, 2004; Spataro et al, 2004; Cutajar et al, 2010).

The initial or short-term effects of sexual assault usually occur within 2 years of the termination of the abuse. These effects vary depending upon the circumstances of the assault and the child's developmental stage but may include regressive behaviours (such as a return to thumb-sucking or bed-wetting), sleep disturbances, eating problems, behaviour and/or performance problems at school, and nonparticipation in school and social activities.

Bravehearts Clients

Some of the common presentations we have seen in our clients include:

- Aggressive behaviours (42.7%)
- Nightmares (37.8%)
- Fearful / avoidant (32.8%)
- Sexualised behaviours (29%)
- Suicidal ideation (15.8%)
- Bedwetting (15.1%)
- Self-harming behaviours (11.3%)

Also common are safety concerns, shame, anger, reduced self-esteem, negative thoughts, inaccurate perceptions of responsibility, betrayal, self-blame and loss of trust.

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