

# ROYAL COMMISSION INTO DOMESTIC, FAMILY AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

## SUBMISSION TO ISSUES PAPER

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## BACKGROUND

SAMSN is the leading specialist service in Australia supporting male survivors of child sexual abuse, their families, loved ones and supporters.

SAMSN is based in Parramatta New South Wales.

SAMSN believes male survivors can heal from child sexual abuse, support others to thrive and be leaders for change. SAMSN offers a range of professional and peer support services and resources to assist adult male survivors and their families. Combining a lived experience and professional service model, SAMSN has established itself as an essential service that is in high demand. SAMSN provides tailored training to health professionals, community organisations and government departments that are supporting people impacted by childhood trauma.

SAMSN is funded primarily through the NSW Government, through the Department of Communities and Justice and through NSW Health. SAMSN also receives Commonwealth Government funding through the Department of Social Services to support survivors living in NSW to apply for redress and funding to capacity build Redress Support Services in South Australia and Tasmania.

SAMSN's expertise and hence submission to this Issues Paper, addresses the questions in relation to the issue of sexual violence. This has been done through the lens of the experiences of male survivors of child sexual abuse.

Child sexual abuse occurs in many settings.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (the Royal Commission) in its report in December 2017 found of the 8013 people who had private sessions, 64.3% of those survivors were men.<sup>1</sup> These men had been abused within institutional settings.

In April 2023, The Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS) studying 8500 people, found that 28.5% of those surveyed reported having been sexually abused as a child with 18.8% of the men reporting having been sexually abused as a child.<sup>2</sup> The ACMS study looked at both institutional and non-institutional settings of the abuse.

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<sup>1</sup> Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse – Report December 2017 Executive Summary at page 8

<sup>2</sup> Australian Child Maltreatment Study – The Prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study 2023, at page 17



## ISSUES

### PREVENTION

#### **1. What causes domestic family and sexual violence?**

What we know is that sexual violence against children occurs in many settings. Historically police have refused to believe children, they have refused to investigate their complaints and for those cases that made it to the courts, there were many barriers to the successful prosecution of the perpetrators.<sup>3</sup>

The Royal Commission found that boys were more likely to be sexually abused within institutional settings than non-institutional settings, with 64.3% of people attending a private session being men.<sup>4</sup>

The Royal Commission in its Report detailed the factors that enabled the sexual abuse of children to occur. These factors included unsupervised one-to-one access to a child, spiritual or moral authority over a child, opportunities to become close to a child or their family and specialist expertise such as medical practitioners enabling them to disguise sexual abuse.<sup>5</sup>

A further report released in July 2024 analysing the ACMS 2023 study data, found that boys were more often than girls victimized in organizational settings, especially the Catholic Church. The risk of abuse was because of the cultural, environmental and spiritual features of the religious organization. These features enabled perpetrators to prey on the vulnerability of boys.<sup>6</sup>

There is also a worrying number of people, mainly boys being abused through sextortion. The Australian Federal Police (AFP) have noted that the access to social media and online financial transactions has enabled criminal gangs to prey on vulnerable cohorts.<sup>7</sup>

#### **2. What works, or will work, to prevent domestic, family and sexual violence?**

What we now know is that there has been a decline in institutional sexual abuse of children.

<sup>3</sup> Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse – Report December 2017 Executive Summary at pages 6 and 7

<sup>4</sup> Ibid at page 8

<sup>5</sup> Ibid at page 10

<sup>6</sup> Elsevier Child Abuse & Neglect, July 2024 The prevalence of child sexual abuse perpetrated by leaders or other adults in religious organisations in Australia, at page 8

<sup>7</sup> Recent media release from the Australian Federal Police

<https://www.afp.gov.au/news-centre/media-release/promising-results-sexortion-reports-drop-concern-child-abuse-remains>



The findings in July 2024 by the ACMS highlighted the generational decline in the number of men reporting being sexually abused within institutional contexts. This, the report noted was due in part to the decline in religious observance and engagement across the Australian population, to the general secularization of Australian society and the resulting loss of respect for religious institutions and the decline in the number of male priests and ordained clergy. Also importantly as a result of the Royal Commission all institutions have been required to adopt more robust preventative polices and responses to allegations of child sexual abuse.<sup>8</sup>

In relation to sextortion and the decline in the monthly number of reported cases of sextortion, the AFP have noted that:

*“Increased public awareness, especially of parents and young people themselves, combined with the AFP’s work with partners like AUSTRAC are likely making it harder for criminal to exploit children online.”<sup>9</sup>*

SAMSN’s expertise is within the area of child sexual abuse, specifically of boys, supporting them in their adult lives. SAMSN does not specifically work in the prevention space. However, with the expertise it does possess, SAMSN makes the following comments in relation to this question.

The Royal Commission found that survivors who spoke at private sessions took on average 23.9 years to tell anyone of the abuse, with men taking longer to disclose, at 25.6 years.<sup>10</sup> Many survivors recounted that they did not have the language or the knowledge of what was happening to them, to be able to report the abuse to a trusted adult.

One very clear way to overcome this knowledge and language vacuum, is to ensure that there is age-appropriate sex education available to all children. This education would give children the language to explain what was happening to them and the knowledge of what constitutes healthy sexual relationships and what does not.

It is also important to remember that in relation to answering questions about whether something bad is happening to them, children are more likely to provide a false negative rather than false positive response.

<sup>8</sup> Elsevier Child Abuse & Neglect, July 2024 *The prevalence of child sexual abuse perpetrated by leaders or other adults in religious organisations in Australia*, at page 8

<sup>9</sup> Recent media release from the Australian Federal Police

<https://www.afp.gov.au/news-centre/media-release/promising-results-sextortion-reports-drop-concern-children-remains>

<sup>10</sup> Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse – Report December 2017 Executive Summary at page 23



### **3. What existing initiatives are directed at addressing the attitudes and systems that drive domestic, family and sexual violence? Are they effective?**

SAMSN does not possess the expertise to be able to make submissions in answer to Question 3.

## **EARLY INTERVENTION**

SAMSN does not possess the expertise to be able to make submissions in answer to Questions 4, 5 or 6.

## **RESPONSE**

### **7. What are the barriers to reporting domestic, family and sexual violence to police or seeking support from domestic, family and sexual violence services?**

For all survivors of child sexual abuse the barriers to reporting the abuse are the same – shame, guilt, confusion, fear and embarrassment.

Questions male survivors will ask themselves in relation to disclosing the abuse will include will I be believed? will I be judged? be seen as less of a man? will they think I will go on to abuse children? The overwhelming fear for male survivors being the possibility of being seen as future perpetrators of sexual violence against children, is one of the most common reasons why a disclosure is not made.<sup>11</sup>

Worryingly where male survivors do disclose and receive a poor response, there is the feeling of not being believed, shutting down further attempts at disclosure.

As a society, we need to understand that disclosure of sexual violence is not a ‘once off’ event. We need to know that disclosure can and will occur across a life-time.<sup>12</sup>

One of the most concerning developments over the past few years has been sextortion or image-based abuse, particularly of boys and young men. There is a worrying increase in the number of young men dying by suicide because of sextortion. The recent findings by the Victorian Coroner, [REDACTED] into the death of [REDACTED] details what could be done by all of us to reduce the impact of sextortion.

<sup>11</sup> Elsevier Child Abuse & Neglect, July 2024 *The prevalence of child sexual abuse perpetrated by leaders or other adults in religious organisations in Australia*, at page 2

<sup>12</sup> Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse – Report December 2017 Executive Summary at page 22



*“ We need to empower our young people to speak up about what has happened to them, to talk about a shameful or embarrassing situation before those feelings compound into something they perceived as impossible to confront...If a young person finds themselves in a situation like ██████ did, the most important thing is that they know they have not done anything wrong, that they are a victim, that there is help and resources available to them, and the situation will not define the rest of their lives.”<sup>13</sup>*

The conclusion by the Coroner could and should apply to all situations where a child or young person finds themselves the victim of sexual abuse.<sup>14</sup>

- 8. What are the elements of a best practice crisis response which will meet the needs of:**
- a. a victim-survivor?**
  - b. a victim-survivor who is a child?**
  - c. a perpetrator (acknowledging that one need is to hold a perpetrator to account for their use of violence)?**
- 9. What are the elements of a best practice health response?**
- 10. What are the elements of a best practice police response?**
- 11. What are the elements of a best practice justice system response?**
- 12. Taking into account your response(s) to questions 8 to 11, which elements are already in place in the domestic, family and sexual violence systems in South Australia?**

The programs offered by SAMSN do not provide a crisis response. SAMSN does not have the expertise to respond to questions 8 to 12.

## RECOVERY AND HEALING

- 13. Acknowledging that every victim-survivor will have different needs depending on their personal circumstances, are there universal needs that will arise for all victim-survivors?**

The impact of child sexual abuse will be different for each survivor. However, what we now know is that the impact is not restricted to mental health disorders. The impact can also include difficulties in maintaining relationships, completing education and gaining meaningful employment and attending to physical health issues.

In relation to mental health disorders, survivors of child sexual abuse often have negative self-images and carry a burden of guilt and shame. They may distrust others and may be overly self-

<sup>13</sup> Coroners Court of Victoria, Finding into Death Without Inquest COR 2022 0041812 dated 5 July 2024, at page 10

<sup>14</sup> Recent media release from the Australian Federal Police <https://www.afp.gov.au/news-centre/media-release/promising-results-sex-tortion-reports-drop-concern-children-remains>



conscious.<sup>15</sup> We know there are common feelings experienced by survivors of child sexual abuse that lead to increased suicidal thoughts and action – there is a loss of hope, a high level of anxiety, isolation and loneliness.<sup>16</sup>

Programs that address loneliness, reduce anxiety and provide a sense of hope can reduce suicidality without the need for the survivor to disclose sexual abuse.

In addition, we now have a better understanding of how a person’s physical health can be impacted by the abuse – an increase in heart issues (cardiovascular stress and failure) gastrointestinal, gynaecological, cervical and prostate issues, soiling and defecation pain and chronic and somatic pain.

Many survivors will fear being touched. This will mean there will be a reluctance to visit a doctor or a dentist. Managing health issues will be a crisis response.

To encourage preventive responses to health issues, doctors, dentists and allied health professionals must ensure they have a better understanding of the impacts of trauma on the person seeking medical or dental intervention, especially where that person has experienced child sexual abuse.

#### **14. What are the best practice approaches to supporting a victim-survivor to recover from trauma and the mental, physical emotional and economic impacts of violence?**

For men who have been sexually abused as children, providing targeted information that helps reduce the sense of isolation and self-blame is an important starting point. Many organisations have accessible information available on their website. SAMSN is one of those organisations, see [SAMSN's resources](#).

It is also important that male survivors develop life skills which will address the impact of the sexual abuse – that men learn to identify triggers and manage the distress caused.

Men will find talking to someone who has encountered a similar event extremely helpful. Many men first contact SAMSN through the Peer Support Phone Line. This is not a crisis line, but a program that enables a survivor to speak to a fellow survivor. Often the men after the call, will want to engage further with SAMSN either by accessing one-on-one support through Planned Support or by joining one of the Eight-Week Support Groups. Details of SAMSN’s programs [can be found here](#).

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<sup>15</sup> Australian Child Maltreatment Study – The Prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia: Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study 2023, at pages 24 – 27

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, at pages 28 -30



A client who recently completed his second Eight-Week Support Group made the following observations (details provided with consent)

*My first encounter with SAMSN was in 2017, when I attended a support group for male survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Whilst I found the group initially very challenging, frightening and a little overwhelming. I realised that nearly all the men in the group were feeling similar emotions or a myriad of other just different to mine.*

*I had never been in a group like this, didn't really want to be, and wasn't thrilled at having to participate in a group to deal with the repercussions of what somebody else had done to me. And it all felt rather bizarre, because also what was done to me wasn't my fault.*

*But the group facilitators were incredible at creating a very safe container for us to talk about our stories and so I slowly began to thaw and realised I wasn't alone and that other men had experience sexual abuse as well. Each of our stories unique, And our responses and the way we coped with it was also different but there were some significant themes through all our stories, we all seemed to resonate with shame and Isolation and a deep anger at the innocence that had been stolen.*

*The group was incredibly helpful; the drive home difficult, but by the third week I felt safe enough as I was talking with one of the other participants and we exchanged phone numbers after discussing our challenging drives home. We would call and talk while driving home not so much about the group, but it was very helpful for both of us as a way of grounding ourselves.*

*For me personally the group broke some of the shame, isolation and fear of no one knowing, and by the end I felt I was able to breathe deeper than I had previously been able to, and hearing the other men's stories helped me not feel so isolated and alone.*

*Jump 7 years later and in the beginning of 2024, I had some flashbacks of sexual abuse whilst at boarding school. It sent me in a whirlwind spiral of panic and overwhelm and dread. I rang SAMSN about attending another support group as I really wasn't coping despite seeing my counsellor. I was eventually slotted onto an online group. This was an incredible experience as well and meant I didn't have to drive anywhere and I was in the safety of my own home. For me personally the online group was more impacting than the face to face, maybe because I'm also an introvert but the raw vulnerability and support really got me through a very rough patch. I saw my counsellor during the group which also kept me grounded. But I remember one particular night a group member shared something I'd been struggling with for years but never knew other men did. It was for me a major game changer within the context of my story and recovery.*



*The support SAMSN is offering men, should never be underestimated. There are men alive today because of the very practical support they give. An organisation like this gave me and others support in helping us as men remove the cloak of secrecy and shame off a taboo topic. They then helped me to discover and reclaim my masculine self and to start treating him with greater kindness. I also discovered a greater assertiveness and confidence in knowing I'm not a victim but a survivor and a bloody good man.*

SAMSN's programs have been independently evaluated and have been accredited by Suicide Prevention Australia.

**15. Taking into account your response to question 14, what best practice approaches are already in place in the domestic, family and sexual violence systems in South Australia?**

SAMSN is not aware of any similar programs to those set out in answer to question 14 being available in South Australia. SAMSN receives funding from the Commonwealth Department of Social Services to provide some of its programs in South Australia. The purpose of this funding is to deliver workshops to capacity build staff working with survivors of child sexual abuse.

SAMSN is also assisting the Redress Support Services in South Australia where they have not been able to support male survivors of institutional child sexual abuse because of extensive wait-lists or where there might be a conflict of interest. SAMSN is currently supporting several men in prison in South Australia. To alleviate the pressures being experienced by the South Australian Redress Support Services, SAMSN has made available to male survivors of child sexual abuse appointments with peers through the Peer Support Phone Line.

In March this year, SAMSN appeared before the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee of the Western Australian Parliament at the inquiry into the options available to survivors of institutional child sexual abuse in Western Australia who are seeking justice.<sup>17</sup>

In the Committee's report at page 52, the Committee noted:

*It is not the norm for a Committee to recommend individual organisations as potential 'solutions' in areas as complex as child abuse. However, the evidence in this case leads us to suggest that one such organisation be invited to help establish a much-needed service in WA. The Survivors and Mates Support Network (SAMSN) is the only dedicated specialist support for male survivors operating in Australia based on a professionally facilitated peer support model. SAMSN is a not-for profit charity founded in 2011 by a small group of male survivors of child sexual abuse, for male survivors, their supporters, family and friends. The service arose from its creators' identification of a lack of support for survivors in New South Wales. Since its*

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<sup>17</sup> Community Development & Justice Standing Committee Legislative Assembly Western Australia Report 6 Seeking justice: improving options for survivors of institutional child sexual abuse Volume 2 at page 53



*inception it has grown into a support service offering a range of professional and peer support services and resources including an eight-week group program for men, monthly support meetings, individual planned support, counselling and practical support. SAMSN also provides tailored training to health professionals, community organisations and government departments that support men impacted by childhood trauma. It is seen as a lifesaving and lifechanging service by the men that access the service. SAMSN understands the need for a service like theirs in other States and has been approached by many in this regard. They were supportive of replicating the model they had developed in other jurisdictions, of sharing the programs they have developed, and of supporting, training, mentoring and supervising.*

The Committee in its Report made 21 recommendations. Recommendation 20 related specifically to SAMSN.<sup>18</sup>

#### *Recommendation 20*

*That the WA Government:*

*Invites SAMSN to facilitate the establishment of a gender-specific service in Western Australia to allow it to offer immediate services to Western Australian victim/survivors. This should include SAMSN bringing local victim/survivor groups such as Survivors of Child Abuse in the planning and operation of the WA program; and provide long-term funding for this service.*

SAMSN subject to the receipt of funding, would be able to deliver in South Australia the programs outlined in response to question 14.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid at pages 53 and 54

