



UNIVERSITY OF  
**CANBERRA**

NEWS AND MEDIA  
RESEARCH CENTRE

# **MEDIA GUIDES FOR THE REPORTING OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: CONSULTATION SUMMARY**





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### Attribution

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND TERMINOLOGY

## CONTENT NOTE

This document includes material about child sexual abuse and its portrayal in media that some people might find disturbing.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT AND THANKS

The team from the News and Media Research Centre (N&MRC) acknowledge the experiences and resilience of victims and survivors of child sexual abuse and express our gratitude to all those who participated in this consultation process.

We are enormously grateful to the journalists, editors, podcasters, academics, policy professionals and researchers who have their time to give us honest and detailed feedback on the drafts of *Reporting on Child Sexual Abuse: Guidance for Media* and *Engaging with Media about Child Sexual Abuse: For Victims and Survivors* (the Guides).

We are also indebted to the victims and survivors and advocates who gave us generous and constructive feedback on both Guides and shared their experiences and advice to share with others.

Thank you to the consultation participants who shared their personal stories with bravery and generosity in the belief that Guides such as these are important and necessary. We hope that the first published iteration of these Guides honours their contribution and is a positive first step towards more sensitive reporting of child sexual abuse and empowerment of victims and survivors of child sexual abuse in the process. A particular thank you to the following:

National Office for Child Safety

Laurel House

LOUD Fence

Survivors & Mates Support Network (SAMSN)

The National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse Advisory Group

The National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse, and its Survivor-Led Adult College

Blue Knot Foundation.

## A BRIEF NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

In these Guides we use the term ‘victims and survivors’ to describe people who have been subjected to child sexual abuse. In line with a trauma-informed approach, we acknowledge that as part of the informed consent process, victims and survivors have the right to define their identity and the terms ‘victim’ and ‘survivor’ can for some be considered as existing on a continuum of recovery. We also recognise that some people may not identify with either of these terms.

## WHERE TO GET HELP

This consultation summary may bring up strong feelings and questions for many people. Help is available if you or someone you know has experienced, are experiencing, or are concerned a child or young person may be at risk of harm including child sexual abuse. If you need assistance or support, the National Office for Child Safety Support Services page (<https://www.childsafety.gov.au>) provides a list of dedicated services.

Bravehearts – 1800 272 831

Blue Knot Foundation – 1300 657 380

SAMSN Survivors & Mates Support Network – 1800 472 676

1800RESPECT – 1800 737 732

Lifeline – 13 11 14

Kids Helpline – 1800 55 1800

13YARN – 13 92 76

QLife – 1800 184 527

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In June 2022, the National Office for Child Safety at the Attorney-General's Department commissioned the University of Canberra's News & Media Research Centre (N&MRC) to develop evidence based media guides to encourage responsible reporting on child sexual abuse, and a companion guide for victims and survivors engaging with the media.

To support the development and refinement of the Guides, the N&MRC research team conducted a multi-faceted, phased consultation program on the Media Guides for the Reporting of Child Sexual Abuse (the Guides) to ensure they were informed by the voices of victims and survivors, advocates, and media professionals.

The first two consultation phases, which ran in parallel with the Literature and Guideline Review and Media Analysis to inform development of the draft Guides, included over 50 participant contributions in workshops, meetings, individual interviews and an online survey.

In the third phase of the consultation, the team sought stakeholder and targeted community feedback on the draft Guides. All participants were provided with both draft Guides, together with a summary of the first stage of research that informed their development. The process was based on the principles of collaboration, choice, empowerment and safety and built on the knowledge and contacts established in the first two phases. During this time the team held face to face and online workshops, small group sessions and individual meetings with over 100 victims and survivors, advocates, journalists, editors, podcasters, academics, and policy and research staff.

The consultation process was iterative and responsive to advice and requests from victim and survivor advocates, policy professionals and media regarding format, time, place, and approach. The focus shifted from more structured consultation forums to collaborative yet structured small workshops and individual meetings that were gentler and more informal, clearly explained upfront and focused on simple points of feedback. All groups (except for more formal stakeholder meetings) were kept small to ensure that all voices were heard and ran between 1.5 and 2 hours.

What was originally planned as 10 workshops became 28 workshops, small consultations and individual meetings with over 100 participants, held online and face to face as requests and needs arose. The team worked closely with the team from the National Office for Child Safety (National Office) and sought guidance from them throughout.

Throughout this process we heard from journalists committed to reporting on this issue and from victims and survivors who strongly believe in the power of media to bring about change. We also heard from those who had been harmed by the media process or who had learned through trial and error and emerged as experienced advocates.

The personal stories from victims and survivors, journalists and editors highlighted the challenges of reporting in this area, and illuminated the many dimensions of this reporting in the context of a powerful media system that both reflects and shapes society, and is driven by often competing ethical, ideological, and commercial imperatives.

Although the response to the concept of Guides for media and victims and survivors around the reporting of child sexual abuse was overwhelmingly positive throughout, the thoughtful, impassioned and practical feedback also illuminated the complexity and potential of this topic at the societal, institutional and personal levels, prompting a significant reworking of both draft Guides in response. This Summary summarises the experiences, perspectives and suggested amendments to the Guides shared by participants in this final consultation phase.



# KEY CONSULTATION THEMES

## TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE

One of the most consistent themes in the consultation was the need for greater understanding of trauma.

Media and victims and survivors alike called for more information on trauma upfront in the Media Guide so that journalists can better understand the potential for profound ongoing and multi-fold impacts of trauma across the lifespan. This includes how trauma can compound or result in other risk factors and mental health, life and social issues, manifest in the behaviours of victims and survivors, and how media interactions and coverage can be re-traumatising if not handled sensitively.

Participants also suggested that the term 'trauma-informed' should be simply explained and that practical information on how journalists can interact in a trauma informed way should be included. Many journalists who had worked extensively with victims and survivors had learned these principles intuitively on the job and did not want others to have this experience.

Safety and care for the victim and survivor was raised consistently throughout the consultations and is included here under the heading of trauma-informed practice, but also relates to readiness to disclose and informed consent. Media, victims and survivors and advocates noted that the trauma that may be experienced by child sexual abuse victims should not be under-estimated, that the dangers of going public through the media are real, and that extreme care and thought needs to go into protecting victims and survivors.

Journalists also noted that the empathy, consideration and skills needed to interview and work with victims and survivors for stories were unique, suggesting that guidance and preparation was needed for journalists to minimise learning on the job, where all parties may be inadvertently harmed.

It was suggested by media and policy participants that acknowledgement of survivors and support services should be included at the start of both Guides, together with context to orient the reader and explain why the Guides were produced.

It was also noted by victims and survivors that trauma-informed communication needed to be

simple given the potential impact of trauma on cognitive functioning and the difficult nature of media interactions.

## VICARIOUS TRAUMA

Participants from all sectors suggested support for journalists was fundamental when reporting in this space. Many wanted training and support to help journalists understand trauma in victims and survivors, but to also help them identify and manage vicarious trauma.

Trauma was discussed in terms of how it can severely impact journalists who may be covering child sexual abuse cases through the courts or other areas, covering many months of commissions or inquiries or undertaking extensive investigations into child sexual abuse. Journalists who had extensively covered these areas talked openly about the impact of this on their mental health.

Senior journalists and editors noted that they often supported younger journalists who may be working on a child sexual abuse story, or who might unexpectedly have victims and survivors disclose to them, and that resources to support these conversations would be invaluable. Younger journalists talked about needing mentoring and support; of wanting to sit down with their editors or more experienced journalists to talk through what they were hearing and experiencing.

It was noted that the discussion of vicarious trauma in the Guides needed to be expanded to include the fact that vicarious trauma can be experienced by anyone involved in the reporting and production of child sexual abuse stories, including camera people and sound recordists; that it can occur from just one exposure; and that journalists need to be mindful of the prevalence of child sexual abuse in the community and of the impact producing the story may have on themselves or their colleagues who may be victims and survivors.

Journalists also talked about the impact that trauma can have on a journalist's ability to empathise. This damage can be caused by local or regular news reporting such as ongoing coverage of child sexual abuse, homicides or reporting from local magistrates' courts on sensitive matters.

## READINESS TO DISCLOSE – AND TO REPORT

Victims and survivors, and media, noted that it is a profound and brave decision to go to the media, and one not to be taken lightly. Advocates recommended the Victim and Survivor Guide emphasise that media reporting was one of the key vehicles for victims and survivors to shine a light on child sexual abuse, but that it was essential that victims and survivors fully understood the processes and impacts of going public through the media. To this end the Guide should explain informed consent in detail, how it needed to be considered upfront, and how difficult the process and outcomes could be if not handled well.

Participants noted that in deciding whether to go to the media, victims and survivors should consider their readiness to disclose. Participants suggested that, when deciding whether they are ready to go to the media, victims and survivors think about factors such as: whether they were seeking justice through the courts; whether they had previously disclosed their abuse, and whether they felt supported and prepared to engage with media.

Media and victims and survivors noted the importance of journalists or reporters also being ready to report on child sexual abuse – that they ideally would have undertaken some form of training, be more experienced in the field or in journalism generally or be funded and properly prepared by their outlet to do the story justice.

## AGENCY AND CONTROL

The interconnected issues of agency, control and informed consent were raised consistently throughout the consultations and prompted much discussion.

It was pointed out early in the consultation that the draft Guides gave mixed messages about the right to agency and control for victims and survivors, and that transparency and consistency was needed across both Guides. Ideally, the victim and survivor has full agency and control over telling their story through the media.

However, for most, this is not the reality. There can be respectful negotiations and give-and-take around approval over quotes, and even proofs of the story, if in print; an experienced and attentive journalist supported by these Guides can keep victims and survivors informed of publication or broadcast dates, and so on.

Yet, each journalist, like each story, is different and it is impossible for the Guides to cover every point of nuance around the interaction of media and victims and survivors.

The point was consistently made that at some stage the victim and survivor will lose control of their story to the journalist, or a sub editor, or to other media who may pick up the story, or to online or social media, where the story will ‘live forever’. Participants said the Guides should outline a range of ways in which respectful handling of a story can support all parties, but they also wanted the Guides to make clear that full control and agency for the victim and survivor is never guaranteed.

## CLARITY AND INFORMED CONSENT FROM THE OUTSET

The key to true informed consent is that the journalist is explicit about the process and consequences of their reporting upfront, that the victim and survivor understands this clearly from the outset, and that this understanding is constantly checked as the process unfolds. This focus on understanding and clarity at the start, about all aspects of the process, was emphasised by media and victims and survivors alike.

A key element of this initial informed consent was understanding how the media works, what the impacts of public storytelling will be, and the fact that once the story is out there, it cannot be taken back. Media and victims and survivors highlighted that clarity and deep understanding around the process from start to finish – and beyond – was necessary at the start to ensure that victims and survivors went into the process with full knowledge and awareness of what they could control and what they couldn't.

Informed consent with people who are suffering from complex trauma, however, is not a simple equation. It was highlighted that trauma can impact cognitive ability, behaviours, and the process of disclosure can be long, non linear, and rarely fits with media cycles. Great understanding, empathy and time is needed by journalists to ensure full consent, although this is challenging given time pressures in the media industry.

It was noted that once stories were out in the public realm they are there indefinitely, and victims and survivors needed to understand the import and gravity of this, as well as the deliberations, processes and information required, before going to the media

or before giving full informed consent for a story to go ahead. The point was also made that no-one can really know how they will feel about their decision to tell their story to the media into the future.

Media professionals expressed diverse views about the withdrawal of consent throughout the media process and late requests to take down stories, highlighting the diverse media policies and sometimes subjective treatment of these issues.

The responsibility for the wellbeing of the victim and survivor post-publication was noted by some as being another grey area, where the journalist may often take on a supporting role but that the media outlet did not necessarily provide and pay for therapeutic support.

## EXPECTATION MANAGEMENT AND PREPARATION

Informed consent aligns with the need for clarity in expectation management and is consistent with a trauma informed approach. Journalists experienced in reporting on child sexual abuse talked of the importance of being honest with victims and survivors upfront about the impacts of media disclosure. They spoke about the need for both parties - victims and survivors and journalists - being fully prepared, and the importance of open and constant communication. They believed it was crucial that victims and survivors understand how news works.

A consistent theme from both victims and survivors and media was that the impact of the story being published (or 'going public') should be outlined clearly in the Victim and Survivor Guide.

The first impact that was stressed repeatedly by both media and victims and survivors was the knowledge that once the story is public it can never be taken back, and that it will be out there 'forever', as previously noted.

The second was that 'going public' would inevitably mean others would disclose their experience of abuse to both the journalist and the victim and survivor. This requires careful management and both journalists and victims and survivors noted it could be overwhelming.

To this end, journalists asked for a list of support services they could include in out of office emails, wording to ensure that those coming forward felt supported, and ways they could assist without overstepping into a therapeutic role. Victims and survivors and advocates suggested including advice

for others, such as a list of support services in social media profiles after the story is released, closing off profiles for private messaging and having a public and a private profile.

## CHANGES TO PRINCIPLES

Both draft Guides provided to consultation participants included key principles which formed the basis of the advice outlined in the draft documents. As a result of feedback through the consultation program, these core principles were subsequently significantly reworked. The principles in both Guides are crucial, as they both provide the structure and feel of the Guides and dictate the content, but also act as the top line 'snapshot' of advice for those who need information quickly and simply.

There was discussion throughout the consultations around the principles, with participants noting that: the principles shouldn't be numbered, as this suggested a weighting; that some were unclear, and repetitive; that they needed to apply to all circumstances, not just some (i.e., for court reporters as well as longform journalists, TV as well as print) and that the language of both sets needed to be supportive, not punitive, with enough clarity so they could be understood if they stood alone.

The principles for both victims and survivors and media professionals also needed to elevate and reflect the key themes that came up again and again in the consultation as being of prime importance. These include: fully understanding, upfront, the ramifications of speaking out; trauma-informed approaches throughout; being aware and educated about media as part of the informed consent process; prioritising the decision-making before and at the start of media engagement; and ensuring that informed consent involves victims and survivors understanding they have agency and control at the start but not throughout the process.

## UNDERSTANDING THE MEDIA

The section on 'How News Works' was universally well received by both media and victims and survivors in the spirit of expectation management and mutual understanding. Some media suggested including more information about news values, legal requirements and limitations of journalism, and about why it is not always possible to run stories of disclosure because it's legally not possible, runs contrary to the

news values of their media outlet, or a multitude of other reasons.

There were many suggestions from both media and victims and survivors about being aware of how the media works – from deadlines, to the requirements of different formats of media, to syndication and understanding how a story can continue to circulate in the media ecosystem. Media and victims and survivors wanted this framed in terms of how to develop a productive working relationship, as opposed to preparing for an adversarial interaction.

## **ADVOCACY AND MOVING TO THEMATIC, NOT EPISODIC, REPORTING**

Some victims and survivors expressed their desire to see the issue of child sexual abuse reported on as a wider social issue, beyond episodic individualised stories. The draft Media Guide had suggested including social context in reporting, however this is not always possible given limitations of time, space, and legal requirements (such as court reporting).

Victims and survivors talked about the importance of including references to statistics that gave a more accurate picture of the issue of child sexual abuse beyond the personal story, and wanting reporting about the issue of child sexual abuse for community awareness and education that wasn't hinged on an individual case.

Consultations identified the important role played by advocates engaged with media to cast light on child sexual abuse for the purposes of policy or legislative change or social advocacy, beyond individual stories. These advocates called for more advanced support and guidance, but also had much to offer others in terms of their media experience.

It was suggested that media often need third party quotes or commentary in stories to give other perspectives and that if a list of media-trained advocates, people with lived experience or representatives of policy or research organisations was easily accessible, then this may encourage journalists to seek comment from them, thereby incorporating the broader perspective in individual stories.

## **MEDIA LIAISON AND SUPPORT**

The systemic absence of media liaison and support for most victims and survivors when dealing with the media was acknowledged by victims and survivors and media alike as a service gap. Some journalists said that they were aware when a victim and survivor had no media support and believed there was more of a power imbalance in these circumstances. Victims and survivors suggested that this gap could be filled in a number of ways.

Firstly, it was often noted that organisations in the space between victims and survivors and media – government agencies, advocacy organisations, court media liaison officers, victims of crime media liaison officers, and media and communication professionals across these organisations – needed to be trained and equipped to support and advise victims and survivors in their interactions with media. Although the Guides will be useful for these intermediaries, it became clear that more support and training is needed around media liaison or 'supported storytelling'. Organisations that provide such services could become a network of media advice for victims and survivors.

Secondly, many victims and survivors also highlighted the importance of talking with people experienced in the media space before they embarked on telling their own story. To this end, they also recommended the development of a peer network of media-savvy victims and survivors who could provide assistance and mentoring.

Other ideas included training for public relations agencies to undertake trauma-informed pro bono media support for victims and survivors, or the establishment of a foundation that could directly support victims and survivors and oversee train-the-trainer programs for advocacy organisations.

It was also noted that specific guidance might be needed for victims and survivors who wanted to become advocates and to appear more regularly in media. This included: advice for advocates who may be negotiating payment for their story; provision of ready reckoners or sample scripts to help when responding to a media request; and guides for how to develop key messages.

There was recognition that this kind of detailed information and support would likely sit best in further iterations of the Guides, or ideally be a feature of the program supporting the rollout of the Guides.

## TAILORING AROUND DIFFERENT MEDIA COHORTS AND ‘ENTRY POINTS’

Participants emphasised that both Guides should acknowledge the different roles in a newsroom (i.e., journalists and sub-editors), and that journalists work across different formats and on different rounds (i.e., print journalists v radio or television journalists; longform feature writers v court or news reporters). It was noted that the principles offered in the Draft Guides did not apply to all forms of media. For example, Principle 7 in the draft Media Guide – Understand and address the broader social context – was not practicable in court reporting.

There are also different entry points into the media that will impact guidance for both victims and survivors and media. Victims and survivors may approach the media to tell their story, which is a common occurrence; media may approach victims and survivors for their story. Court reporters may write about a case and not engage at all with the victim and survivor, or they may interview the victim and survivor after the case concludes.

To this end, participants suggested the Media Guide needed to offer a simplified set of general principles and information that applies to all; and for victims and survivors, information about different forms of media that may be engaged depending on experience and confidence. Some victims and survivors recommended, for example, that print or pre-recorded pieces were safer if victims and survivors are just starting out in their media engagement, and that television or live to air radio should only be for those who are more experienced.

It was also noted by advocates that it would be useful to include information on media practice around why a victim and survivor might be approached for a quote, which may or may not be used, or may relate to another story entirely.

## ACCOUNTABILITY OF MEDIA AND OTHER INSTITUTIONS

Media and victims and survivors alike raised a range of issues around the accountability of media organisations. Firstly, their social responsibility to educate and support their journalists to accurately and fairly report on child sexual abuse; secondly, to ensure that victims and survivors are treated with sensitivity

and dignity; and, thirdly, to ensure that their journalists are supported emotionally and psychologically when reporting on child sexual abuse.

The concept of a charter or agreement that media organisations could sign up to was raised in some sessions, as victims and survivors suggested individual journalists should not carry all the responsibility for the sensitive reporting of child sexual abuse. They believed that targeting journalists through guidance for media did not get to the root of the problem which lies with the structural nature of the news media industries, news ideology and values and editorial decision-making of media owners.

Journalists stated that editors needed to be aware that they couldn't, and shouldn't, deploy journalists to report on cases or commissions into child sexual abuse for months at a time; that they shouldn't push reluctant journalists to cover stories of child sexual abuse; or that they only approach older or more experienced journalists (or those who had done requisite training) to report on child sexual abuse, to ensure good reporting and minimise the possibility of vicarious trauma.

Media and victims and survivors also stressed that child sexual abuse stories cannot be produced quickly so need appropriate care, funding and time, which requires commitment and consideration at every level of the decision-making chain.

Victims and survivors also pointed out that ‘going public’ in the media about abuse in an institution, or representative of that institution, is a serious undertaking that needed to be carefully considered. Public disclosures of this type may result in legal and personal ramifications for the victim and survivor, due to the power of that institution and responses from members of the community, including family, who may be deeply vested in it.

## CLEAR BOUNDARIES AND PARAMETERS

Many victims and survivors and journalists raised the complexities of navigating their professional relationships during and after the process of developing a story for public release, as this may involve many intense and personal conversations and heightened vulnerability.

Clarity around personal and professional boundaries was raised as an important issue that both parties

should be aware of, and to transparently discuss upfront at the start of any media interaction.

It was strongly suggested that more guidance is needed about how journalists can, from the outset, set up clear parameters for engaging with victims and survivors in a trauma-informed and sensitive way that protects both parties. It was stressed that guidance is also needed for victims and survivors and journalists to reinforce the professional nature of their relationship, as journalists are not trained or equipped to support victims and survivors in a therapeutic way.

## **INTERSECTIONALITY AND DIVERSITY**

### **FIRST NATIONS**

While some participants in the consultation identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and many participants (especially advocacy and service providers) shared views about the particular needs of First Nations victims and survivors, a tailored First Nations engagement was not held. Likewise, we did not engage specifically with First Nations journalists who have unique experiences around the reporting of child sexual abuse.

Given the cultural sensitivity around child sexual abuse in these communities, stakeholders and consultation participants suggested that a discrete and culturally safe consultation process is undertaken by a First Nations body, and that feedback is incorporated into a tailored version of the Guide that is designed by and for First Nations communities.

### **INTERSECTIONALITY IN GUIDES AND REPORTING**

It was noted that the draft Guides needed to elevate the importance of intersectionality and considering the identity of victims and survivors in their totality. For example, if reporting on child sexual abuse of a child with a disability, the language on disability may be correct but incorrect around child sexual abuse, or vice versa. Intersectionality needs to be considered and all parts of the story treated appropriately.

### **VICTIMS AND SURVIVORS ARE NOT A HOMOGENOUS GROUP**

The consultation process, and feedback in it, highlighted that the victim and survivor community is not a homogenous one, and can't be reported on as such. Media noted that this is a complexity requiring

judgement in reporting, for example, recognising that quoting one victim and survivor may not necessarily represent the views or experiences of others. Victims and survivors noted that journalists need to know that every victim and survivor is different, and every story is different.

### **CONFLATION OF LGBTQIA+ ISSUES AND CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN REPORTING**

Some participants raised the issue of media conflating or sensationalising the two complex and unrelated areas of sexual orientation or gender identity and child sexual abuse.

It was requested that there be a specific note in the Media Guide to educate journalists that these two issues are separate and that conflation of these can be distressing and victim-blaming. It was suggested that a similar note is included in the Victim and Survivor Guide to stress that victims and survivors should not feel pressured to disclose their sexuality or gender identity in the context of child sexual abuse.

## **PRACTICAL FEEDBACK ON LANGUAGE AND STYLE**

The language, tone and length of the Guides was a focus of much discussion across the consultations.

### **LANGUAGE, LENGTH AND TONE**

There were varying views on the strength of language to be used for the Media Guide. Victims and survivors wanted to emphasise the importance of the topic, the sensitivity required in the approach, and the potentially severe impact on victim and survivors if the Media Guide wasn't followed – that the tone should be 'you must', as opposed to 'you can'. It was recognised, however, that these Guides are voluntary so will be most effective if presented as a tool for support, not enforcement.

Although much of the feedback was positive about the length of the guides, there was also a strong theme that the media Guides, in particular, were too long and should be edited for length, repetition or vague words. Many participants suggested that the language in both Guides could be simplified to be less formal and academic.

The media needed their Guide to: be clear and concise; focus on offering useful advice and information to enable better reporting (as opposed to dictating what not to do); and provide more

information and detail if needed. A common suggestion was that the principles be condensed into pithy, succinct points that can be distributed or pinned up by journalist's desks, with the URL of the website where the Guides and other resources sit for more information if needed. It was also recognised that clever design will make the Guides easier to read and access.

Victims and survivors also need simplicity and clarity in their Guide, as lengthy or wordy documents can be overwhelming. Many participants also identified the need for a 'plain English' version of the Guide.

Many victims and survivors, and media, participants felt that some of the language and tone in the Victim and Survivor Guide was harsh and presented encounters with the media as being 'scary'. A number of victims and survivors saw the Guide as suggesting that everything was 'on them' – the choice of interacting with the media, the preparation, the seeking out of help, etc.

Media and policy representatives also thought that the language in the Victim and Survivor Guide (particularly the 'Principles in Practice: Interview advice') was setting the media interaction up to be adversarial, or that media were out to 'trick' victims and survivors.

It was suggested that these sections needed to be framed more gently as considerations, but not certainties – that the Guide needs to balance the need for clarity and 'hard truths' around what is involved with telling your story publicly in the media with information on what to look for and how to recognise positive interactions.

## QUOTES

Both media and victims and survivors wanted the voices and views of participants to be a presence in these Guides in the spirit of peer advice, collaboration and support – learning from others' experience. The Victim and Survivor Guide in particular needed to feature their voices throughout, but it was suggested that both media and victims and survivors' voices are heard through both Guides.

## IMAGERY

The choice of imagery was also raised in both media and victim and survivor consultations, with media suggesting that clear guidance on 'Do's and Don'ts' about the choice and placement of imagery would

be useful. Victims and survivors believed that stock images of scared children were damaging to victims and survivors and appealing to perpetrators, as were stock images or artwork of shadowed figures in doorways. Victims and survivors wanted strong images of other victims and survivors, where appropriate, to reinforce the message of resilience.

## SPECIFIC LANGUAGE SUGGESTIONS AND TERMINOLOGY

Views varied regarding the term 'victims and survivors', with many suggesting victim-survivors or victims and survivors, many suggesting neither, and many suggesting that the solution was simple - victims and survivors should always be asked how they would like to be referred to.

Given the diversity of opinion it was subsequently decided that, for consistency, the Guides maintain the National Office's position on terminology but encourage journalists to ask victims and survivors how they would like to be referred to, and victims and survivors to clarify this upfront.

The table on language 'do's and don'ts' was universally well received (with some detailed feedback about terms). Victims and survivors also noted that perpetrators were often written about in "positive, praising language" in the media, lauding them as good people whose actions were one-off incidents that were out of character. This, combined with language and framing that victim-blames, was particularly traumatising. Victims and survivors wanted perpetrators to be termed as convicted criminals or child sexual abusers, not valorised or presented as 'pillars of the community'.

## TOPICS TO BE EXPANDED

### COURT REPORTING

The Media Analysis conducted for the Media Guides Project highlighted that 38% news stories were sourced from the criminal justice system or legal proceedings. Participants noted that there are a range of complexities that are unique to court reporting, and unique to a victim and survivor's experiences in court, indicating that a separate section on court appearances and court reporting was warranted.

The variety of feedback included:

- Journalists are confined in their reporting to matters that have been raised in the courtroom in fair coverage of proceedings, so the inclusion of broader social context is not legally possible.
- Court reporting doesn't have to be just what's happened that day – context can include what has been said in previous days in court but has to be restricted to that.
- Just because it has been reported in court doesn't necessarily mean it is appropriate to report. Journalists gave many examples of being discreet with the reporting and leaving out distressing details to protect victims and survivors. There are ethical as well as legal constraints. However, sometimes it is important that these details are reported on.
- Explanation is needed as to why 'alleged' must be used in legal terms. This word can be insulting to victims and survivors, as can be 'claimed', as it indicates that the story is fabricated.

## LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

Media noted that it is important for journalists to know they were required to check with the legal team before commencing any kind of story on child sexual abuse. Sometimes, a story simply cannot be told for legal reasons.

Victims and survivors and advocates also noted that basic legal explainers (not legal advice) should be included in the victim and survivor guide, suggesting that they may seek independent legal advice, and recommending that they check with their lawyer about media engagement if already represented, e.g., in civil litigation.

## REPORTING ON AND SUPPORTING CHILDREN IN THE MEDIA

It was highlighted that the issue of reporting on children and supporting children and young people to speak to the media if they are legally allowed to do so, requires specific guidance in both Guides. This is a fraught legal and ethical area, with varying laws in States and Territories around the naming of children and informed consent.

Some advocates noted that the Guides should include explicit advice on informed consent and legal parameters for children, for young people, and for parents or carers speaking on their behalf, and should

include reference to sites or contacts where legal advice can be sourced.

Some advocates stressed that children and young people are far more media-savvy than older generations and are more prepared to tell their story their way through social media but need guidance and support to do this.

## TENSIONS

### MEDIA INDUSTRY 'MACHINE' VS. NEED FOR TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE

As previously noted in this report, there are core tensions between the drivers and pace of the media industry and the need for careful and considered trauma-informed practice in reporting on child sexual abuse.

Media and victims and survivors alike suggested that victims and survivors think carefully about why they want their story published, and to talk this through with personal and professional support networks. It was suggested that journalists are similarly restrained, careful and considered in their decision to take on a story of child sexual abuse, and to then allow the process this same time and respect throughout.

It was acknowledged that this was at odds with the time and resource pressures of newsrooms and the media industry, where stories had to be produced quickly, where newsrooms are dominated by real-time dashboards tracking which stories are trending and which aren't, and journalists are under pressure from their editors and media owners to use language and images that sensationalise.

Journalists experienced in reporting in this space, however, stated that they gave victims and survivors plenty of time for these stories, sometimes in their own time, despite the pressures of their media organisations. Freelancers specialising in reporting on child sexual abuse noted that they could spend this time, as they didn't have the pressures to produce two or three stories a day like journalists employed by large media organisations.

Some media agreed with a victims and survivor's assertion that if a story needed to be produced quickly, then that story should not be about child sexual abuse.



## ADVOCACY VS FAIR AND BALANCED JOURNALISTIC PRACTICE

The consultations revealed the tensions between the requirements for standard journalistic practice versus the victims and survivor's desire for advocacy and some degree of agency over the media process. These manifest in interactions such as negotiations over approval of quotes, review of stories before release, and use of interview, images or angle of the story, and can result in mismanaged expectations, re-traumatisation, or withdrawal of consent.

Feedback in the consultations suggested that these tensions are resolved on a case-by-case basis, with journalists using their experience, judgement, influence with their editors, and their own sense of ethics to navigate the sometimes competing needs of victims and survivors and those of managing editors and media owners. It must be noted that the experiences of newsroom journalists were different to advocacy journalists, who had developed their own protocols and worked collaboratively on stories with victims and survivors.

No guides can resolve these tensions; they can only provide tools and advice to help victims and survivors and journalists navigate this territory.

## SIMPLE GUIDES FOR COMPLEX REPORTING

Reporting on child sexual abuse is an important, challenging and complex space but any guides, if they are to be useful, need to be simple and concise.

Media raised a range of issues around the nuance and sensitivity required in reporting on child sexual abuse, from setting up personal and professional boundaries to liaising with victims and survivors sensitively around anonymity or identification, the nature of disclosure, legal ramifications and other issues discussed in this report.

The complexity noted by media was not restricted to ensuring sensitive and responsive interactions with victims and survivors. It included recognising that victims and survivors do not all speak with one voice; that they are all different, with different experiences, and different goals for engaging with the media. There are also, political, ethical, legal and policy domains that need to be considered.

A small number of journalists were concerned that if publicly released guides were too onerous or demanding, this might have a 'chilling' effect, resulting

in the coverage of fewer child sexual abuse cases. Reasons for this included that journalists might be deterred because they perceived the Guides to be too detailed and they didn't have the time to read or remember them, or they feared they would be the focus of a social media 'pile-on' if they didn't get it right, or that victims and survivors would be damaged in the reporting process.

## CITIZEN JOURNALISM AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media was a consistent theme throughout the consultations. Social media resulting from public disclosures through traditional media for victims and survivors could result in ugly responses, spinoffs into other media outlets with different takes on the story, or numerous disclosures from other victims and survivors, all of which needed to be managed.

For journalists, social media was another form of distribution for their outlet, but also an opportunity for a 'pile-on' by readers if journalists didn't get language right or had 'clickbait' headlines added by subeditors that then caused them grief.

As mentioned previously, after the release of a story on child sexual abuse, many journalists experienced significant numbers of readers reaching out to disclose their own stories – more stories than could be pursued or told by one journalist.

Citizen journalists were also raised as a cohort of often very useful, but untrained, producers and commentators of news filling the space left by underfunded and short-staffed media organisations. These commentators can hold traditional media to account but are not bound by the Australian Press Council and would be unlikely to seek out Guides such as these.

Likewise, issues around the training of, and protection for, freelance journalists was an issue raised by senior media industry professionals.

Specific guidance on social media and citizen journalism was out of scope for this project, although the guidance provided in the Guides is applicable to both.

## FEEDBACK ON DELIVERY AND ONGOING SUPPORT

Nearly all consultation participants emphasised that they wanted the Guides released in mid-2023 to be the first iteration, and that these be refined over time. They stressed that to be effective, the Guides should be flagship resources that will evolve as they are used, couched in a long-term and multi-faceted program of stakeholder engagement, communication and awareness, industry and community education and training, and monitoring and evaluation.

We conclude that the Guides on their own, distributed as a one-off through intermediaries, will be insufficient to affect change in reporting on child sexual abuse and to improve the experiences and outcomes for victims and survivors engaging with media.

Outlined below are suggested approaches and recommendations for program delivery of the Guides that arose throughout the consultations.

### GUIDES OWNERSHIP

Many participants asked where the Guides would be housed, and who would be responsible for their rollout. Discussions highlighted that it is crucial for accountability and effectiveness that an entity in some form (single organisation, team or consortium) is responsible for overseeing the continued development of the Guides, offering an accompanying program of support and industry/ community education, and to be a point of contact for media, victim and survivor advocacy groups and related stakeholders. This entity would also manage a dedicated website for the Guides.

### STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

There are many organisations doing extraordinary work in the sector and engagement with these groups through advisory committees and an ongoing outreach program is essential.

Relationships also need to be fostered with key media associations, training and regulatory bodies to incorporate the Guides into existing codes of practice, awards and training programs for media. For example, many journalists are freelance and can only access support for issues such as this through the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), meaning engagement with these bodies is crucial for socialisation and adoption.

It was suggested by some victims and survivors that they would want to see the Guides supported by public commitment by media to more sensitive and responsible reporting of child sexual abuse, so that the onus for their adoption extended beyond committed champions, journalists or sub-editors.

### FORMATS

Media believe the Guides will be more likely to be used if they are clear, useful and transparent, not overly prescriptive, and are presented as both succinct principles and as part of resources to support safe storytelling.

Participants from media, victims and survivors, and advocate sectors asked for a hierarchy of information in both Guides – from the top level ‘snapshot’ or postcard of the key Principles, through to a single, self contained ‘booklet’ that included layered supporting information and additional resources that they could explore when needed.

The Guides and supporting information should also be incorporated into a dedicated website as ‘one source of truth’ with the URL included on all hardcopy materials, communication channels, and linked to from other key stakeholder sites and advocacy services. Some journalists highlighted that there are many different Guides for journalists to follow, and that keeping abreast of all requirements could be daunting. It was suggested that there could be a portal or website that housed these, or links to them, for easy access.

Participants suggested that the Victim and Survivor Guide, or at a minimum the Principles, be published in accessible formats to ensure they are accessible for all. This included:

- Plain or simple English, to acknowledge the potential cognitive impact of trauma and accommodate the complex intersection of trauma and disability.
- Text translations or short videos in key languages.
- Animations and social media tiles.
- Videos and the use of visual communication in terms of diagrams and infographics.

It was also suggested that the Guides be supported by accessible resources and content that explained them in more detail and provided examples and case studies for journalists and victim and survivor advocacy groups.

These resources should be in a range of accessible formats such as short videos, infographics and links to related information.

## VICTIM AND SURVIVOR GUIDE SUPPORT AND DELIVERY

### *Provision of media liaison support and training for victim survivors*

The absence of media training and support, or supported storytelling, for victims and survivors was raised consistently throughout the consultations. The development of these guides opens the door for a corollary service to fill this gap by contextualising the guides for victims and survivors and providing practical support and advice, but also providing training for advocates, advocacy organisations, public relations agencies or media relations specialists who may want to provide pro bono assistance. This service could link organisations who are already working in this space, and also auspice a peer mentor network of media savvy victims and survivors who could provide advice and support to others.

### *Pre-service training for child sexual abuse service providers*

Victims and survivors noted that the Victim and Survivor Guide could be promoted through training modules and a supported educational program for psychology, social work and counselling educators in the higher education sector, based on the successful Mindframe model.

### *Communication and promotion to all audiences*

Participants emphasised that a longer-term communication strategy to support the ongoing promotion of the Guides is needed beyond the launch and initial dissemination. This should include reaching a variety of audiences including culturally and linguistically diverse people, people with disabilities, youth and older people.

As previously noted in this report there can be cultural sensitivity around child sexual abuse in First Nations communities, and as a result this consultation process did not hold specific engagements with these communities. Stakeholder feedback strongly suggests that a targeted and culturally safe consultation process is undertaken by a First Nations body, and that feedback is incorporated into a tailored version of the Guides that is designed by and for First Nations communities.

### *Dissemination (hardcopy and web URL)*

Participants recommended distribution of victim and survivor Guide via:

- Journalists,
- Sexual assault and child sexual abuse support services
- Directors of Public Prosecution (DPPs),
- Victims of Crime Liaison Officers,
- Court Media Liaison Officers,
- Medicare offices, Social Security offices,
- Doctors surgeries,
- Mental health youth organisations.

They also recommended distribution of both Guides via key stakeholders, sexual assault and child sexual abuse advocacy organisations nationwide, Community Legal Centres, Legal Aid, and legal firms such as knowmore.

## GUIDES SUPPORT AND DELIVERY

### *Media Advisory Group*

It was noted by media that Guides such as these should be presented as a useful resource to support good reporting – not as a prescriptive dictate - if they are to be adopted. They also need to be socialised well with journalists and editors, reflect as well as guide good practice and involve media throughout all iterations, and through associated development and education, through a mechanism such as a Media Advisory Group.

### *The Mindframe model - Pre-service and in-service training, monitoring and support*

Mindframe was regularly mentioned by journalists as being a program that had changed the way they reported on suicide. This program, which has grown over the last 20 years, has a multi-faceted program of education, awareness, training, evaluation and ongoing monitoring of reporting and in-time support provided to journalists. There is much that can be learned from this model, particularly from its extensive program of pre-service education run in collaboration with university journalism and communication educators around Australia.

It was also highlighted that it would be useful to align with similar bodies working in related areas, running similar programs, such as OurWatch.

### **Media champions and mentors**

Some journalists involved in the consultation phase suggested that they would be open to being advocates for the Guides in their news organisations. Many suggested that identifying journalists in newsrooms who are familiar with the guides and with reporting of child sexual abuse could act as champions in newsrooms, supporting younger journalists and being a point of contact for the national entity. It was also mentioned that it would be useful to have a peer network or community of practice for journalists reporting in this space.

### **Best practice, award and reward schemes**

It was consistently raised through the consultation that the promotion and rewarding of best practice for media would be useful. Suggestions include: development of best practice case studies for the program website; inclusion of best practice reporting on child sexual abuse categories in existing awards schemes; and curation, public acknowledgment and promotion of good in reporting on child sexual abuse.

### **Dissemination**

Participants recommended distribution of the Guides through managing editors, editors, newsroom champions and court and crime reporters, and related advocacy and peak bodies such as Mindframe, the MEAA, Walkley Foundation, DART Asia-Pacific, etc. (It must be noted that the consultations did not extend to discussing or agreeing this with these bodies).

## **ONGOING RESEARCH AND EVALUATION**

Participants expressed an interest in the baseline evidence that underpinned the development of the Guides. Following the publication, socialisation and implementation of the Guides, evaluation should be embedded in the program rollout. This should take account of both the practices of journalism and the content produced by journalists about child sexual abuse, and the usefulness of the Guides for victims and survivors.

# **CONCLUSION**

The N&MRC team is enormously grateful to all those who gave feedback on *Reporting on Child Sexual Abuse: Guidance for Media* and *Engaging with Media about Child Sexual Abuse: For Victims and Survivors* (the Guides).

The consultations highlighted that media involved in this space, together with victims and survivors, advocates, academics and those involved in policy and research, believed that supporting guidance to help media and victims and survivors navigate telling their story publicly could be enormously useful. They also believed that Guides such as these could be an important first step in sensitive reporting on child sexual abuse that empowered victims and survivors in the process, if supported by an ongoing program of advocacy, awareness and education.





## **MEDIA GUIDES FOR THE REPORTING OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: CONSULTATION SUMMARY**

Produced by the News & Media Research Centre at the University of Canberra. Information in this guide is current as of July 2023.

*Reporting on Child Sexual Abuse: Guidance for Media* and *Engaging with Media about Child Sexual Abuse: For Victims and Survivors* are available online at [www.childsafety.gov.au/mediaguides](http://www.childsafety.gov.au/mediaguides)