

Truth Project Thematic Report

Child sexual abuse in the context of schools

Executive summary

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 INDEPENDENT INQUIRY
CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

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This research report has been prepared at the request of the Inquiry's Chair and Panel. The views expressed are those of the authors alone. The information presented in Truth Project research outputs does not constitute formal recommendations by the Inquiry's Chair and Panel and is separate from legal evidence obtained in investigations and hearings.

This report contains descriptions of child sexual abuse. Reading the report can have an emotional impact. There are some support organisations that it may be helpful to contact if you have been affected by any of the content in the report: www.iicsa.org.uk/help-and-support-0

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Executive summary

Introduction

The Truth Project is a core part of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse ('the Inquiry') alongside public hearings and research. It was set up to hear and learn from the experiences of victims and survivors of child sexual abuse¹ in England and Wales. With the consent of participants, the Inquiry uses Truth Project information in a variety of ways, including for ongoing research and data analysis carried out by the Inquiry's Research Team. By doing so, Truth Project participants choose what they wish to share and make an important contribution to the work of the Inquiry.

Education is a central feature of children and young people's lives and development, with important consequences for their future lives and careers. Children have the right to receive education in a safe environment. However, some children experience abuse and harm. This report presents the Inquiry's research findings about experiences of victims and survivors of child sexual abuse in the context of schools and the responses of institutions to such abuse. It describes the experiences of Truth Project participants sexually abused in the context of schools between the 1940s and 2010s, with the most recent case in our sample beginning in the early 2010s.

We have used the term 'in the context of schools' in this report to refer to child sexual abuse that occurred in schools or colleges,² or was perpetrated by a member of staff who worked in them, or other students. Schools include special schools, state and independent institutions, day and boarding (residential) schools and colleges.³ Staff include teachers, headteachers and support staff such as administrators or caretakers and cooks. Sexual abuse that occurred on trips organised by the school or staff at the school was also included, as was sexual abuse perpetrated by staff working at sites/premises where such trips were held.

This is the sixth research publication in a series of thematic reports examining the experiences of victims and survivors of child sexual abuse that have been shared with the Truth Project. We have previously published research reports on child sexual abuse in religious institutions, children's homes, and residential care, custodial institutions, sports and healthcare.

¹ Child sexual abuse refers to sexual abuse that began when the victim and survivor was under the age of 18 years.

² Sixth form colleges (for 16 to 19 years) and further education colleges (for 16 to 25 years and adult learning) provide a range of academic and vocational teaching and training.

³ Excluding nursery schools/pre-school care for children from birth to 5 years old.

Sample and methods

We have used a mixed methods approach, analysing both quantitative and qualitative information for this report. The quantitative information is based on a sample of 4,269 participants who took part in the Truth Project between June 2016 and June 2020. Of these, 691 individuals (16 percent) shared an experience of child sexual abuse that occurred in the context of schools. Quantitative data from these participants are shown alongside the quantitative data from the 3,578 participants whose experiences of sexual abuse did not occur in the context of schools, to draw out themes, commonalities and differences.⁴

The qualitative information is drawn from 17 of the 691 Truth Project accounts relating to child sexual abuse in the context of schools. These 17 accounts were randomly selected within a sampling framework designed to ensure we included a range of characteristics and circumstances, covering the time period in which the sexual abuse occurred, victim age and victim sex.^{5,6} The wider analysis of Truth Project accounts is ongoing and we will publish a full report with a bigger sample size covering different contexts of child sexual abuse at the end of the Inquiry.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Inquiry's Research Ethics Committee prior to the collection and analysis of the data and information is included in this report only where Truth Project participants have agreed to their accounts being used for research purposes.

Key findings from the research

Sexual abuse occurred in a range of schools from state day schools to independent residential schools, and it happened to both girls and boys from a range of family backgrounds. While the analysis of Truth Project data is ongoing, this report highlights some specific features and characteristics from this research about child sexual abuse in the context of schools.

- The majority of perpetrators reported by participants sexually abused in the context of schools were male teachers or other educational staff. Perpetrators often manipulated and groomed children and young people, staff and parents in order to facilitate sexual abuse, and often had good reputations with staff and parents, or were seen as 'cool' by pupils. Some victims and survivors believed that they were in 'relationships' with the perpetrators, some of which extended for years after the participants had left school. These participants were conflicted for many years into adulthood about the 'relationship' and recognising it as sexual abuse. Some 6 percent of participants reported that they did not disclose the sexual abuse because they thought the perpetrator loved them.

⁴ The participants in this report are individuals who have chosen to take part in the Truth Project. This sample is not random, and therefore the statistics produced are not representative of the general population. The experiences of sexual abuse in the context of schools described in this report may not reflect current day experiences as the majority of cases for which we have details about the sexual abuse began prior to 1990. Nevertheless, we aimed to identify common themes among participants' experiences across all time periods that the accounts cover.

⁵ Some of these 17 accounts form a subset of the overall qualitative sample, discussed further in *Truth Project Research: Methods* (King and Brähler, 2019).

⁶ The term sex refers to the biological sex of participants as children when the sexual abuse occurred. Participants are also asked their gender as adults at the time of attending the Truth Project.

“ I'd thought, well, you know, I'd assimilated this experience and I was in control, but then you realise, when you are [the same age of perpetrator], that 15's – they're children. ... The, kind of – like I say, the, sort of, crashing realisation that ... no, it wasn't a relationship; I was groomed as a child and groomed into thinking that it was fun and secretive and that it was completely okay.

Truth Project participant sexually abused in the context of schools

- Fifteen percent of participants reported sexual abuse perpetrated by peers or older children, the second most frequently reported perpetrator type in the context of schools after teachers and educational staff.
- Sexual abuse perpetrated in residential schools was disproportionately higher in accounts from Truth Project participants compared to the proportion of these types of schools in England and Wales, and the percentage of children who attended them. A greater proportion of participants who were sexually abused in residential schools reported sexual abuse perpetrated by their peers, than participants who attended non-residential schools. They also reported higher proportions of physical abuse, psychological abuse and bullying. Perpetrators (staff and peers) in residential schools had constant access to children who boarded, both in and out of school time. Some participants reported that the only time they felt safe was when they were away from school.

“ Much of my time was spent avoiding them [perpetrators] which was difficult in such a closed environment.

Truth Project participant sexually abused in the context of schools

- Sexual abuse in independent and special schools was disproportionately higher in participants' accounts. There were also higher levels of physical and psychological abuse reported in these two school types, compared to state schools.
- Participants sexually abused in school contexts reported less penetrative sexual abuse, and less physical and psychological abuse but more bullying, compared to other institutional contexts.
- Fifty-four percent of the participants sexually abused in state schools were female. Over three-quarters of participants sexually abused in independent and special schools were male. Female participants accounted for almost 58 percent of the participants sexually abused in 'other' school types.
- Forty-two percent of participants sexually abused in the context of schools were aware of other victims of sexual abuse, which was higher than those sexually abused in other contexts at 23 percent. Almost a third of participants reported that other people were aware of the sexual abuse: 32 percent, compared to 26 percent in other contexts. In some instances this awareness was because participants were part of a group of children whom the perpetrator sexually abused, or because disclosures by other victims revealed the sexual abuse. Participants also talked about suspicion or rumours in schools surrounding the perpetrators, resulting in many missed opportunities for safeguarding.

“ I have often asked myself “Where were the teachers?”, how could pupils be in music rooms every break experimenting sexually without anyone knowing. We were just juniors.

Truth Project participant sexually abused in the context of schools

- For participants sexually abused in the context of schools, levels of disclosures during childhood were similar to those in other institutional contexts. When participants did disclose during childhood, it was more frequently to a person in authority within the institution compared to disclosures of sexual abuse in other institutional contexts. In some cases, when participants were asked by parents or teachers whether they were being sexually abused, they denied the sexual abuse to protect the perpetrator and/or the environment the perpetrator created. This was exacerbated by the perpetrators' manipulation of participants.
- As might be expected, the sexual abuse experienced in the context of schools had more impacts on schooling and employment than sexual abuse in other institutional contexts. More participants in this group talked about a lack of trust for those in authority compared to those sexually abused in other contexts.

Reference

King, S. and Brähler, V. (2019). *Truth Project Research: Methods*. London: Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. [Online]. Available at: www.iicsa.org.uk/document/truth-project-research-methods [Accessed 16 November 2020].

Note on language

Please see Appendix A for a glossary which contains definitions of various terms used throughout this report.