



Primer on Child Sexual Abuse

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Children are sexually abused [more than any other demographic](#) in the U.S. — estimates are that as many as [one-in-five](#) girls and [one-in-six](#) boys will be the victims of child sexual abuse (CSA) before they turn 18 years old. Children most often [spend time with people they know](#) and should be able to trust. At home, it is parents, siblings, extended family, babysitters and family friends; outside the home, there are day care providers, teachers, coaches, religious figures, trusted neighbors, etc. From [studies of perpetrators](#), researchers know that “child sex offenders either seek out or take advantage of opportunities to molest children with whom they are familiar.”

More than half of perpetrators are [family members](#), and less than 25 percent are strangers. They know whom they are attacking. It appears that generally, U.S. adults are very aware that strangers are not the main perpetrators of the abuse. A compilation of results from 10 local [surveys](#) across six states from 1997-2007 shows that 95 percent of adults believe that child sexual abusers know the children they are abusing, and 72 percent believe there is a likelihood that an adult who has sexually abused children lives nearby. And yet, only 44 percent see child abuse as a major problem within their own communities. Among respondents, 91 percent said they would intervene if they witnessed or became aware of a situation involving child sexual abuse...but 22 percent did nothing when confronted with just that.

These moments of disconnection — between knowledge, understanding and action to prevent child sexual abuse — are the focus of this primer. Re:Gender wants to pull at the thread of what it means that most perpetrators of CSA know their victims, that they more than likely share a community in common. We will look at recent research to lift up questions about why sexual abuse persists, even as people have the knowledge that could help them act in better ways — i.e., to create an affirming context that supports exposing sexual abuse, involving authorities, ensuring that victims are not forced to share space with their perpetrators and showing victims that disclosing can be a positive action, among many other possible outcomes. A window into the common ground literally occupied by both victim and perpetrator is meant to highlight the repeated opportunity the latter has to reach victims. This potential conundrum has real consequences. If adults deny or reject a child’s disclosure of sexual abuse, it is very likely that the victim and perpetrator will continue to have contact. As CSA researcher Susan Clancy has said in a [radio interview](#), victims have relayed to her things like, “I told my family what happened and they still invite him to Thanksgiving dinner...” David Finkelhor, Director of Crimes Against Children Research Center, [notes](#) that too many prevention strategies are built around a model of “stranger danger” rather than the fact that perpetrators know their child or teen victims.

How, then, can a prevention strategy develop based on the actual dynamics of child sexual abuse? Beyond the victim and perpetrator, what role does the rest of the community play? Re:Gender wants to pose questions throughout this primer, and its companion [Gender Stat on Child Sexual Abuse](#), to prompt your thinking and ours about what it will take to fix this enduring problem. The Gender Stat is a snapshot of what is actually known about CSA through the data collected by government agencies and advocates. These two publications are the first in a larger series on sexual violence. This particular primer focuses on CSA in acknowledgement that, contrary to the media’s current

focus, sexual violence begins long before college. We hope you will join the discussion by sharing your comments, perspectives and information with Gail Cooper, Re:Gender's VP for Programs: gcooper[at]regender.org.

1. Why is it so hard to talk about sexual violence?
2. What do we talk about when we talk about sexual violence?
3. Who is responsible for ending sexual violence? Where do you fit in? What about the rest of us?
4. What are we as a society getting out of not ending sexual violence?

Why is it so hard to talk about sexual violence?

For victims, telling someone about the sexual abuse is not easy. Psychologist Susan A Clancy, in a National Public Radio [interview](#), described interviewing CSA victims while researching her book, *The Trauma Myth: The Truth About the Sexual Abuse of Children—and Its Aftermath*. Most wanted to talk about being sexually abused but “[They] wanted to talk about it to someone who would not judge them. It is tremendously damaging to have a secret that you are carrying around with you.” Some had disclosed abuse to their families at or near the time it occurred, Clancy continued, but “they said that the worst part of the sexual abuse was not the abuse. It was what happened when they told. It was the betrayal that they experienced at the hands of their family members and the people that said, ‘I don’t believe you’ or denied it.” Some never spoke about what happened to them because their abuse did not match what professionals commonly described as CSA — i.e., violent, frightening, physically and emotionally traumatic events that rearranged their understanding of their worlds. Instead, few had been afraid or uncomfortable at the time of the incident (often with a trusted adult or peer family member), only realizing many years later the full magnitude of the sexual abuse and the perpetrator’s betrayal. As Clancy’s research showed, “We as a society have been ‘inundated’ with information about sexual abuse, but it is about a specific type of sexual abuse, one that involves trauma. Professionals rarely discuss or highlight explicitly the type of nontraumatic abuse most victims experience — one in which victims are confused and trusting, do not resist, and care for and love the perpetrators. As a consequence, most people in the general population do not know this sort of abuse exists.” (154) A review of [studies on disclosure](#) of CSA found that “fewer than 10% of respondents who acknowledge abuse in population surveys state that their disclosure was reported to authorities.”

The context in which a victim discloses that sexual abuse occurred, whether as a child or as an adult, makes all the difference. Too often, the receiver of the information — nuclear or extended family members, those children perceive as caretakers or protectors, authority figures in all variety of institutions — responds in a way that denies, rejects or wards off the telling. Disclosures can be mediated with disbelief (from a [focus group with deaf survivors](#) of CSA, “people don’t believe deaf people. They think I’m sick or mentally disabled.”) and blame (from the same focus group, “One survivor told her mother about abuse by her stepfather, and the mother replied ‘if they [the authorities] take your sister and brother, it’s your fault.”). They can also be confirmed in a way that implies helplessness and inevitability: “A survivor who was molested by her grandfather when she was 3 or 4 had an intergenerational story of child sexual abuse. ‘I never told anyone because I love my grandma so much. I never wanted to hurt her. She was a beautiful lady.’ When she finally told her mom about the abuse, as an adult, her mother told her that she had to face him (her abuser) and confront him. Her mother told her that her grandfather had sexually abused her (the mother) also.”

In talking about her [studies on teen girls and sexual violence](#) (particularly by other youth), Heather Hlavka found that “Girls normalized their experiences of sexual harassment and abuse because they were so common and indiscriminate; ‘that’s what boys do’ and ‘they do it to everyone.’ Given expectations of, and experiences with, male aggression, young women were then consistently positioned as the gatekeeper of sexual activity and aggression. Girls in this study said they did not want to make a ‘big deal’ out of their experiences and rarely told anyone. Charged with self-protection and silence, girls also criticized each other for not successfully maneuvering men’s aggressive behavior or for speaking up; if they complained about men’s abusive behaviors, they were disbelieved and policed by their peers through rumors and slander.” (Notably, Hlavka concludes in part that “there is very little incentive for young women to name or to tell anyone about their experiences of abuse.”)

Such responses are mirrored in the public sphere when CSA involving famous people comes to light. The coverage is dominated by equivocation (“How can anyone other than the two people involved ever really know?”) and a “he said/she said”-style standoff. For example, when Oregon’s former governor Neil Goldschmidt publicly admitted to sexually abusing a 14 yearold girl, the [headline](#) in the state’s largest newspaper, [The Oregonian](#), initially characterized his sexual abuse as “an affair,” later describing it as “a relationship.” At the press conference he held to announce his resignation, Goldschmidt exhibited relief at putting down the burden he had been living with: “I’m just living with this personal hell,” he said with a lot of emotion. “The lie has gone on too long.” By presenting the situation in this light, the newspaper, and Goldschmidt himself, turned attention from the crime he committed — which, by the way, he admitted to once the statute of limitations [had expired](#) — and focused instead on his personal wellbeing, without attention to that of his victim. The comments by then-governor Ted Kulongoski in the same article — “His [Goldschmidt’s] health is his priority right now and I think that he has made the right decision. We owe him a great debt for his service” — show his willingness to give public validation and loyalty to the perpetrator (also his friend) rather than publicly support the victim.

Other stories — at [Penn State University](#), involving [Catholic priests](#), the recently revealed cases in [Rotherham, England](#) —highlight these themes at an institutional level. In each situation, regular people were called on to do “the right thing,” i.e., stop the abuse directly, or bring it to the attention of appropriate authorities until they did something directly to stop the abuse. In each of these cases, there has been a collective failure. There were people who did not intervene in abuse that took place in front of them, did not follow up on allegations brought to them by victims and their parents, did not report abuse to authorities at their institutions or in law enforcement or child welfare, and more. As a man convicted of child sexual abuse told Susan Clancy, “This is a good crime for people who are deviant types. Compared to many other crimes, you have a good chance of getting what you want and getting away with it.” (159) Dr. Allen R. McConnell, writing for *Psychology Today’s The Social Self* column, likens the cover-up and ignoring of children being sexually abused at Penn State to psychological experiments conducted to see if people will “do the right thing” or act in opposite ways. He suggests that community members may know but not report child sexual abuse because of a confluence of elements. In particular, he cites Dr. Stanley Millgram’s famous [experiments](#) at Yale in the 1970s on what people are willing to do when coerced, and the bystander experiments that Princeton’s Dr. John Darley and Dr. C. Daniel Batson, conducted to explore when [“helping behavior”](#) breaks down and people assume that others will take responsibility for fixing a problem and therefore will not do so themselves.

While that might be operating in how community members respond to CSA, it is only a piece of the puzzle. The organization 1in6, which assists men who have been victims of child sexual abuse, has devoted its energy to exploring the cultural, personal and institutional habits embedded within CSA. In the [report](#) “Stories of Strength: Report on Child Sexual Abuse and Community Recommendations for Prevention,” the organization emphasizes what stands in the way of effective, sustained public dialogue on fixing CSA: “The systemic problems evidenced in the recent coverage of high profile child sexual abuse cases underscore the need to more critically examine not only our society’s response to child sexual abuse, but why child sexual abuse has not been eradicated given the universal moral disapproval. It calls into question our current systems and suggests that truly removing child sexual abuse from our cultures requires more than simply incarceration and mandatory reporting.” Among its many recommendations, 1in6 suggests engaging “communities in deeper conversation around gender norms, perceptions of masculinity and femininity, and how that relates to child sexual abuse and healing for survivors: this includes socialization of male violence and privilege that contributes to the victimization of girls and women, as well as taboo and less talked about issues, such as male victims of child sexual abuse, and framing and responding to female perpetration of child sexual abuse.”

What do we talk about when we talk about sexual violence?

Mythologies are underneath what we talk about when we talk about CSA

When the subject of CSA comes up, the comments and responses can seem almost scripted; they are spoken so quickly and decisively and are common across communities, institutions, incidents, etc. Many researchers attribute

this to evolving social (and criminal) ideas about sexual violence, gender, race, class, etc. Joanna Bourke in her book, *Rape: Sex, Violence, History*, uses a “historical paradigm” (p7) to explore the ways in which “rape and sexual violence are deeply rooted in specific political, economic and cultural environments.” (p7)

Researchers from David Finkelhor to Bourke to Susan Clancy identify several mythologies that are invoked in the present day responses to CSA. The following [list](#) from the Rape and Abuse Crisis Center aggregates many CSA myths found around the web. (The list does not include every eventuality.) There is a common myth that juveniles cannot sexually abuse other juveniles (Fact: According to Finkelhor, one-third of CSA perpetrators are other juveniles, including family members [siblings, cousins, etc.] but the assumption is that all perpetrators are adults). Likewise, there is a common myth that men who sexually abuse boys are homosexual (Fact: Although 96–98 percent of child sexual abuse is committed by men, most [male perpetrators identify as heterosexual](#) and engage in consensual relationships with women.)

Myth #1: Child sexual abuse occurs only among strangers. If children stay away from strangers, they will not be sexually abused.

Fact: Statistics show 93% of juvenile sexual assault victims know their attacker. Family members account for 34.2% of all perpetrators, and acquaintances account for 58.7%. Only 7% of perpetrators are strangers to their victim.

Myth #2: Children provoke sexual abuse through displaying seductive behavior.

Fact: Seductive behavior is not the cause. Responsibility for the act lies with the offender. Children are not psychologically prepared to cope with repeated sexual stimulation. Sexual abuse, therefore, exploits children who are not developmentally capable of understanding or resisting the abuse.

Myth #3: The majority of child sexual abuse victims tell someone about the abuse.

Fact: It is estimated that 73% of child victims do not tell anyone about the abuse for at least a year and 45% of victims do not tell anyone for at least 5 years. Some never disclose. Child sexual abuse has been reported up to 80,000 times a year, but the number of unreported instances is far greater because children are afraid to tell anyone what has happened.

Myth #4: Men and women sexually abuse children equally.

Fact: Studies have shown the majority of child sexual abusers are men. Men sexually abuse both female and male children, and despite a common myth, homosexual men are not more likely to sexually abuse children than heterosexual men.

Myth #5: If the children did not want the abuse, they could tell their perpetrator to stop.

Fact: Because children are often taught the importance of obeying adults, they generally do not question the behavior of an adult. Children are often coerced with bribes, threats, or use of a position of authority.

Myth #6: All sexual abuse victims are female.

Fact: Studies indicate that female children are abused more often than male children. It is estimated between 25–33% of women have been sexually abused during childhood. Estimates for men are 10–16%. Therefore, male children are also victims of sexual abuse.

Myth #7: Family sexual abuse is an isolated, one-time incident.

Fact: Child sexual abuse is usually a situation that develops gradually over a period of time and occurs repeatedly.

Myth #8: In family sexual abuse, the “non-offending” parent always knows what has happened.

Fact: While some “non-offending” parents know and even support an offender’s actions, because of a lack of awareness, many suspect something is wrong, but are unsure what to do.

Myth #9: Family sexual abuse only happens in low-income families.

Fact: Family sexual abuse crosses all classes of society. There is no race, social, or economic class that is immune to family sexual abuse.

Myth #10: Non-violent sexual behavior between a child and an adult is not damaging to the child.

Fact: Nearly all victims will experience confusion, shame, guilt, anger, and suffer from a poor self-image. Child sexual abuse can result in long-term relationship problems as well. The long-term emotional and psychological damage of sexual abuse can be devastating.

The data in the following section refutes many of these mythologies, as do victims’ stories and perpetrators descriptions of how they commit the sexual abuse.

Prevention and responses do not focus on actual experiences

According to *The Prevention of Childhood Sexual Abuse*, a [research article](#) by David Finkelhor, mythologies about CSA get in the way of developing effective and relevant prevention strategies. For example, many popular strategies do not actually help prevent CSA. Under Finkelhor’s umbrella of misguided interventions are offender registries, community notification programs (to alert neighbors when a convicted sex offender has moved into the community), background checks to ensure sex offenders are not working with children and receiving extra prison sentences to keep them removed from the larger community. These efforts, based on an “overly stereotyped,” mischaracterized offender, conjure an image of “exclusively adult men who are sexually oriented to pre-pubescent children (that is, pedophiles) and who thus are strongly motivated to offend. These men are seen as being guileful and skilled in relating to children, likely to prey on children they encounter in public environments, generally resistant to treatment, deterrence, or rehabilitation, and thus highly likely to offend again.” In fact, according to Finkelhor, research shows that most offenders are not strangers to their victims, at least one-third are other juveniles and they are at low-risk to offend again.

Similarly, Susan Clancy believes that the way advocates describe trauma does not always resonate with the experience of CSA victims. For some victims, CSA is physically violent and frightening at the time that it occurs, and would rightly be called traumatic. And yet, as Clancy describes in [The Trauma Myth](#), “In their well-meaning efforts to raise awareness that sexual abuse is damaging and is never the child’s fault, they have chosen to emphasize characteristics and dynamics of abuse (such as trauma, fear, violence, force, and threats) that do not characterize the experiences most victims have.” (p. xiv) Among the 200 adult women (65 percent) and men (35 percent) Clancy interviewed about their experience of CSA, only 10 percent said the actual experience was “traumatic, terrifying, overwhelming, life-threatening, or shocking at the time it happened.” (35) They knew their perpetrator and the perpetrator’s sexual abuse was not physically painful at the time. In fact, most of the interviewees reported being confused at the time because they did not have adequate cognitive understanding to have words for what was happening, even though they had a sense that it was wrong, in part because of how the perpetrator was behaving. Rather than being frightened, the victims “went along — did what was asked of them. In their own words, they ‘participated,’ ‘consented,’ and ‘allowed it.’ In fact, of those who sensed the behavior was wrong, only 5 percent tried to stop it — by saying no, running away, or telling a parent.” (41) Many said that they were used to being obedient and respectful of authority even when asked to do something unpleasant (hence lack of resistance), did not have the words to articulate what was happening (hence their lack of resistance) and their participation was often rewarded with treats or simply the kind of attention no one else was offering.

The sense of trauma, however, does not come into play until later when “Victims reconceptualized the formerly ‘confusing and weird experiences’ and understood them for what they were — sexual in nature and clearly wrong. Only at this point — when the sexual abuse is fully apprehended — does it begin to damage victims.” With this

realization, Clancy says, victims try to find an adequate explanation for why they were targeted for the abuse. This process is accompanied by a sense of horror, betrayal, shame, low self-worth, heightened feeling of self-blame, guilt, etc. Unfortunately, because their actual experiences do not align with the trauma model most popular among CSA advocates, these negative feelings grow stronger. Victims see themselves as different from classic victims — that is, complicit in their victimization because they did not experience trauma at the time of the abuse. And thus they are reluctant to disclose the abuse once they become adults and understand what happened to them. Clancy, like Finkelhor, urges advocates to turn to different strategies to assist victims of CSA.

Media reporting paints a misleading picture of CSA

One of the few public conversations about CSA that takes place in the U.S. occurs through news reportings. This has been underscored by the frequent reports about CSA in the [Catholic Church](#), the New York City private school [Horace Mann](#), and in connection with politicians from [Oregon](#) to [Colorado](#) to [Virginia](#). As a [Ms. Foundation study](#) found, coverage of these types of cases may help in the short run by contributing to revisions of institutional policy and providing support in civil suits that victims bring against perpetrators, etc. In the long run, however, the report finds that the news coverage treats CSA as isolated incidents rather than showing its “prevailing patterns.” Out of 348 articles on CSA from 2007 to 2009, 236 (or 91 percent) focused on specific events, rather than fostering a space for ongoing public discussion about the topic. The majority of stories (33 percent) reported on CSA cases that were in the criminal justice system, followed by incidents of CSA in educational settings (12 percent).

Who is responsible for ending sexual violence? Where do you fit in? What about the rest of us?

We know that knowledge does not automatically lead to action. As reported by the anti-violence group [Safe Horizon](#), there is a “[bystander action gap](#)” that shapes how ordinary people respond to the most common aspects of CSA. For instance, although 95 percent of Americans say that CSA is a major problem that should be solved, less than 20 percent have contacted authorities or acted to stop the abuse when actually confronted with a situation. The attention given to bystander interventions in [popular media](#) and [advocacy](#) circles is turning the focus away from what victims should do to protect themselves and instead hones in on ideas of collective responsibility and what the surrounding community can do. Looking at these current interventions has led Re:Gender to ask more generally, whose responsibility *isn't* it to help end CSA and sexual violence in general? We invite you to share your thoughts and join our exploration of these ideas through our larger series on sexual violence by emailing Gail Cooper, VP for Programs: [gcooper\[at\]regender.org](mailto:gcooper[at]regender.org)

What are we as a society getting out of not ending sexual violence?

We know there is no single or simple answer to this question, and that in fact it generates more questions. As we contemplate CSA through a prism of legal, economic and community concerns, there is immediately an overarching question: Are the interventions we use to solve the problem of CSA (and sexual violence more generally) limiting our collective ability to do just that? For example, what can it mean that prosecuting sexual violence cases focuses almost exclusively on cases prosecutors think they can win? What message is that sending to victims unlikely to be compelling to a jury but who nevertheless want and deserve redress? Economic realities being what they are, when people choose not to see the signs of CSA by keeping quiet or staying close to a perpetrator who is a critical component in household economic stability — are we focusing on the wrong question? Should we be asking, “What keeps you here?” instead of “Why didn't you leave?” Or, how can the quick-acting push to protect reputations — of families and other institutions — be deconstructed to show how damaging it is to the whole entity when the group itself is privileged over any one of its constituent parts? What is even possible in the face of these kinds of deeply entrenched gender-based group dynamics? Finally, to what extent is the intractability of the problem propped up by fear? If the numbers are accurate, we are all touching upon a very large, very damaging problem for which there is no clear end in sight.

All of these questions are rich areas for future research and contemplation. Pulling those working on the leading edge as advocates and service providers, policy makers in search of a rallying piece for legislation, and individual and institutional researchers looking for a cutting edge project could yield transformative results. Re:Gender hopes to play

a role in raising questions like these by gathering across sectors, surfacing existent and prompting new research as a lively tool in the push for gender equity.