

5 August 2025

Welcome to today's webinar

**Safeguarding as mission: Preventing child sexual abuse by
changing practice from simple protocol to embedding in mission**

**Presented by Gabrielle (Gabby) Hunt
Research Associate, Institute of Child Protection Studies
Australian Catholic University**



Safeguarding as Mission

Evidence on current barriers and what this means for prevention

Gabrielle R. Hunt

Research Associate | Registered Psychologist

Australian Catholic University

Email: gabrielle.hunt@acu.edu.au

5 August 2025



In recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's spiritual and cultural connection to Country, and in continuing ACU'S commitment to Reconciliation, we would like to acknowledge the First Peoples and Traditional Owners and custodians of the Country where ACU campuses are located.

We respectfully acknowledge our Elders, past and present, and thank them for their guidance as we walk in their footsteps.

Prioritising Wellbeing

Australian National Support Services	
Lifeline	13 11 14
13 Yarn	13 97 76
Bravehearts	1800 272 831
1800RESPECT	1800 737 732
Blue Knot Foundation	1300 657 380

This presentation discusses sensitive topics such as child abuse and neglect.

Some content may be distressing or triggering.

Take breaks and reach out to friends, family, or professional resources for support.

Overview

1. Understand new data on child maltreatment.
2. Examine barriers and enablers to effective safeguarding in faith-based settings.
3. Identify practical strategies to enhance safeguarding (prevention and response) efforts.



Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS)

- First nationally representative study in Australia on the prevalence of child abuse and neglect, and their associated health outcomes
- 8,503 participants aged 16 to 65+ reporting on their experiences in childhood



Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS)

- These experiences are chronic and disproportionately effect girls compared to boys (especially in the case of sexual and emotional abuse)

1 in 4

Almost 1 in 4 have experienced 3-5 types of maltreatment (23.3%)



CSA in Religious Organisations



1 in 250 Australians experienced CSA by a leader or other adult in a religious organisation.

This represents approximately **87,000 Australians.**

CSA in Religious Organisations

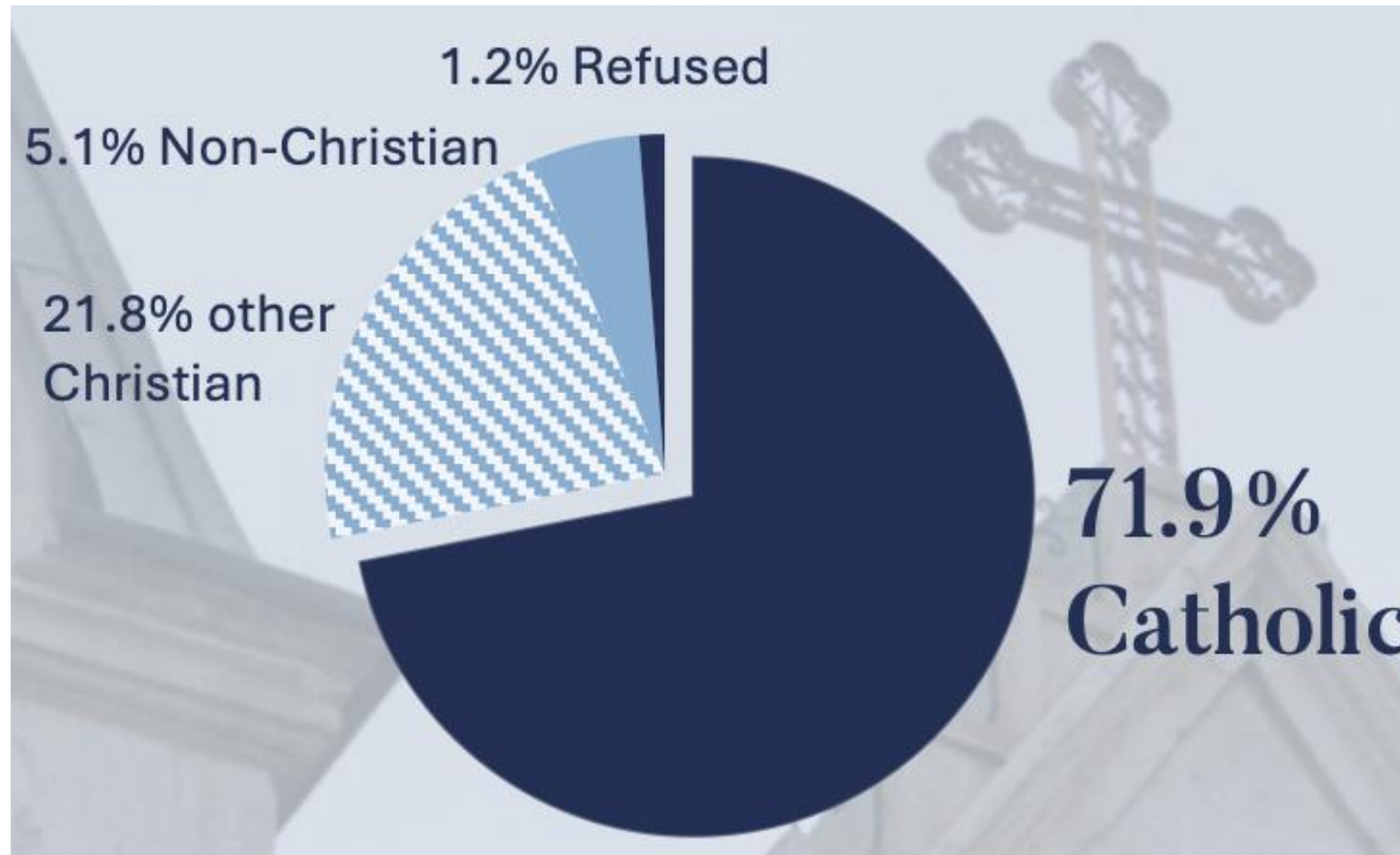
Nationally, more men (0.8%) have experienced CSA by these perpetrators than women (0.1%).

This was an **endemic problem** in former times for male victims.

**1 in 45 men (2.2%)
aged 65 and over**

experienced child sexual abuse by this type of perpetrator.

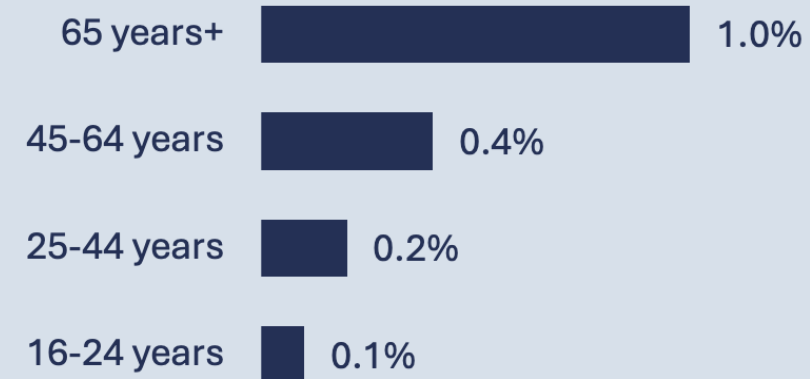
CSA in Religious Organisations



CSA by Religious Perpetrators

- National prevalence indicates tens of thousands of Australians have been affected
- Declines in recent decades for men are encouraging
- Those with lived experience deserve support and appropriate response
- Efforts must continue to further reduce the prevalence of all types of abuse, neglect, and adversity in religious organisations

Prevalence by age group shows **an encouraging decline** in CSA by adults in these organisations.



The Role of Religious Organisations in Safeguarding

- Occupy a unique and influential role in many communities.
- These settings can create conditions that enable abuse.
- Perpetrators can exploit positions of trust, authority, and access to children, under the guise of care or leadership.
- Sexual abuse in religious organisations involves a tripartite abuse of power: sexual, religious, and institutional power
- **Opportunities for early prevention and intervention**

Religious Leaders Perspectives on Safeguarding

- 20 semi-structured interviews with Christian religious leaders
- Asked about strengths, weaknesses, barriers, and future directions
- Participants
 - Denomination
 - 35% Catholic, 20% Anglican, 45% other Christian denominations
 - Role
 - 60% in a ministry leadership role
 - 40% in a safeguarding management role
 - Gender
 - 55% women



Strengths of Safeguarding Practices

1. Leadership commitment

“We will do what’s required, it’s our responsibility.”

- *Matured processes*

“We have very well formulated and benchmarked policies and procedures”

2. The Royal Commission recommendations into practice

“The outcome of the Royal Commission has been ... now they’re wouldn’t be a diocese ... that doesn’t have some form of office of safeguarding”

Limitations and Challenges

"It's a cultural issue. A cultural issue within the organisation"

Compliance and 'box-ticking'	Theological or doctrinal understandings	Generational or multicultural divides
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "[it has] become a tick 'a' box ... It's just another thing they need to do, it's not actually changing their behaviour." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Authority and power The nature of sin Tradition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Expectations cross culturally are different." "Quite difficult for people in the older generations".
Safeguarding fatigue	Safeguarding as external regulation	Denial of abuse in the church
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "But it is at times onerous for parishes." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Legislative requirements around child safety can be seen subtly as the state infringing on the Church." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "This couldn't happen here."

Future Directions

1. Safeguarding as mission
2. Enhanced and rigorous training and support for leadership
3. Shared learning and collaboration
4. The inclusion of adults in consideration of safeguarding
5. Voices of children and survivors
- 6. Addressing gendered dimensions of safeguarding**
- 7. Reframing prevention: From perpetrators to contexts**

Addressing gendered dimension of safeguarding

- Safeguarding responsibilities may be disproportionately taken on by women
 - Women described themselves as predominant drivers for safeguarding
 - “salespeople”
 - “careful about their messaging”
 - Male leaders as “aggressive”, “angry”, and “resistant”

Administration has historically been seen as ‘women’s work’, with male leadership perceiving their role as “pastoral care and preaching and leadership and ... not about the administrative responsibilities.”

Reframing prevention: From perpetrators to contexts

- Gains in preventing adult-perpetrated child sexual abuse across society
- Current strategies are primarily aimed at:
 - Preventing “bad adults” from joining leadership or volunteer roles
 - Training adults on identifying abuse early
 - Responding to abuse which has already occurred
- **Safe environments, safe communities**
 - Considering other forms of maltreatment and adversity
 - Risks between peers
 - Supporting parents and families
 - ***Contextual safeguarding***

About **1 in 5** Australians aged
16-24 years experienced
sexual abuse by another child
or young person

Contextual Safeguarding – Culture and Planning Strategies

Embedding safeguarding in mission

- How is safeguarding talked about in your organisation? Regulation or mission?
- What resource constraints can be addressed?

Challenging cultural norms and teachings

- What attitudes are present that cause harm or enable abuse? How can these be challenged?
- Do religious teachings address abuse?
- Does everyone understand the expectations of them?
- Are there clear, well-communicated processes for reporting concerns, and are they trusted?

Contextual Safeguarding – Culture and Planning Strategies

Leadership and decision-making

- Who holds positions of power – spiritually, administratively, and culturally?
- Who is responsible for safeguarding, and are they empowered and resourced to act?
- Are diverse voices represented in leadership?

Training, awareness, and accountability

- Is our training practical, engaging, and relevant?
- Do participants leave feeling confident, informed, and committed?
- What mechanisms are in place to evaluate the effectiveness of training?

Contextual Safeguarding – Environments

Creating safer environments and surveillance

- What do our physical spaces communicate about safety and oversight?
- Are two adults always present? Can ‘out-of-sight’ areas be modified?
- Have we risk-assessed activities such as camps, youth groups, and informal gatherings?

Clear codes of conduct and recruitment

- Are behavioural expectations clearly documented and understood?
- Are there robust recruitment, screening, and supervision processes in place?

Contextual Safeguarding – Young people and survivors

Responding to risk between peers

- Have we proactively addressed peer risks in our policies and practices?
- Are children educated about respectful relationships, consent, and boundaries?
- Do children have someone they can report concerns to?
- How are we monitoring peer spaces?

Listening to children and survivors

- Whose voices shape our policies and practices?
- Have we meaningfully involved children and survivors in decision-making processes?

Summary

- Child maltreatment and adversity are common in Australia
- We have seen encouraging declines in adult perpetrated sexual abuse
- We are seeing increasing rates in peer inflicted harm
- Religious organisations play an important role in prevention and response
- Safe environments, safe communities
- Safeguarding as mission and a whole of community responsibility



References and Other Resources

<https://www.acms.au/>

- Hunt, G. R., Mathews, B., Higgins, D. J., Finkelhor, D., Willis, M. L., Haslam, D. M., Lawrence, D., Meinck, F., Thomas, H. J., Malacova, E., Pacella, R. E., & Scott, J. G. (2024). The prevalence of child sexual abuse perpetrated by leaders or other adults in religious organizations in Australia. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 155, 106946.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2024.106946>
- Hunt, G. R., Higgins, D. J., & Willis, M. L. (2025). “Just tick the box and move on”: Australian Christian religious leaders reflect on safeguarding practices in their setting. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 167, 107591.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2025.107591>
- Mathews, B., Pacella, R., Scott, J. G., Finkelhor, D., Meinck, F., Higgins, D. J., Erskine, H. E., Thomas, H. J., Lawrence, D. M., Haslam, D. M., Malacova, E., & Dunne, M. P. (2023). The prevalence of child maltreatment in Australia: findings from a national survey. *The Medical Journal of Australia*, 218 Suppl 6(Suppl 6), S13–S18.
<https://doi.org/10.5694/mja2.51873>
- Practice Guide for Contextual Prevention:
<https://www.acu.edu.au/-/media/acu/institutes/contextual-prevention---going-beyond-individual-prevention-handout.pdf?rev=28cf37256a5946d3a9f3e733b2a7758b&hash=919E20283A0367C3AD962AB8F96C989F>