

Part

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Examining the context

Are our children safe?

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Are our children safe?

Child sexual abuse in contemporary Australia

Despite increasing attention and investment by government, the media and the community more broadly, we still do not have a strong foundation to understand or respond to child sexual abuse.

Under the Review terms of reference, the Child Death Review Board (the Board) was tasked with identifying the context of child sexual offending in Queensland, including historical and current rates of extra-familial offending and changes in our understanding of the nature of this offending. This has not been an easy task.

There is no single dataset that provides a longitudinal view of child sexual offending at a state or national level. The data that is publicly available is high level and fragmented. While it tells us part of the story, it does not represent a complete picture of what is happening in Queensland.

Most available data is administrative and drawn from government systems. This means it is not always fit for purpose and can be difficult to extract and analyse. While some self-report surveys are available, these often provide us with a point in time snapshot. This limits the translatability of findings over time or with different cohorts.

Challenges also exist with the methods and quality of studies that attempt to generate reliable data on prevalence, including the use of instruments which do not have demonstrated validity and reliability, and the use of questions that are too vague, narrow or otherwise inappropriately constructed to capture nuanced and accurate data.¹⁰

Community understanding of child sexual abuse has changed over time. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (the Royal Commission) of 2017 helped lift Australia's understanding of the historical risks and damage caused by abuse, and the landmark 2023 Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS) shocked the community by confirming the ongoing rates and prevalence of child sexual abuse today.

During the conduct of this Review the community conversation was amplified because of similar high-profile matters occurring in other jurisdictions in early child education and care (ECEC) settings. This has resulted in urgent calls to act to tighten regulation and reduce vulnerabilities in this sector. While this report similarly considers these vulnerabilities it also addresses a confronting but critical truth that we must contend with and that this review has laid bare:

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Child sexual abuse is occurring at far higher rates, in more common places, and to children closer to us than the community expects.

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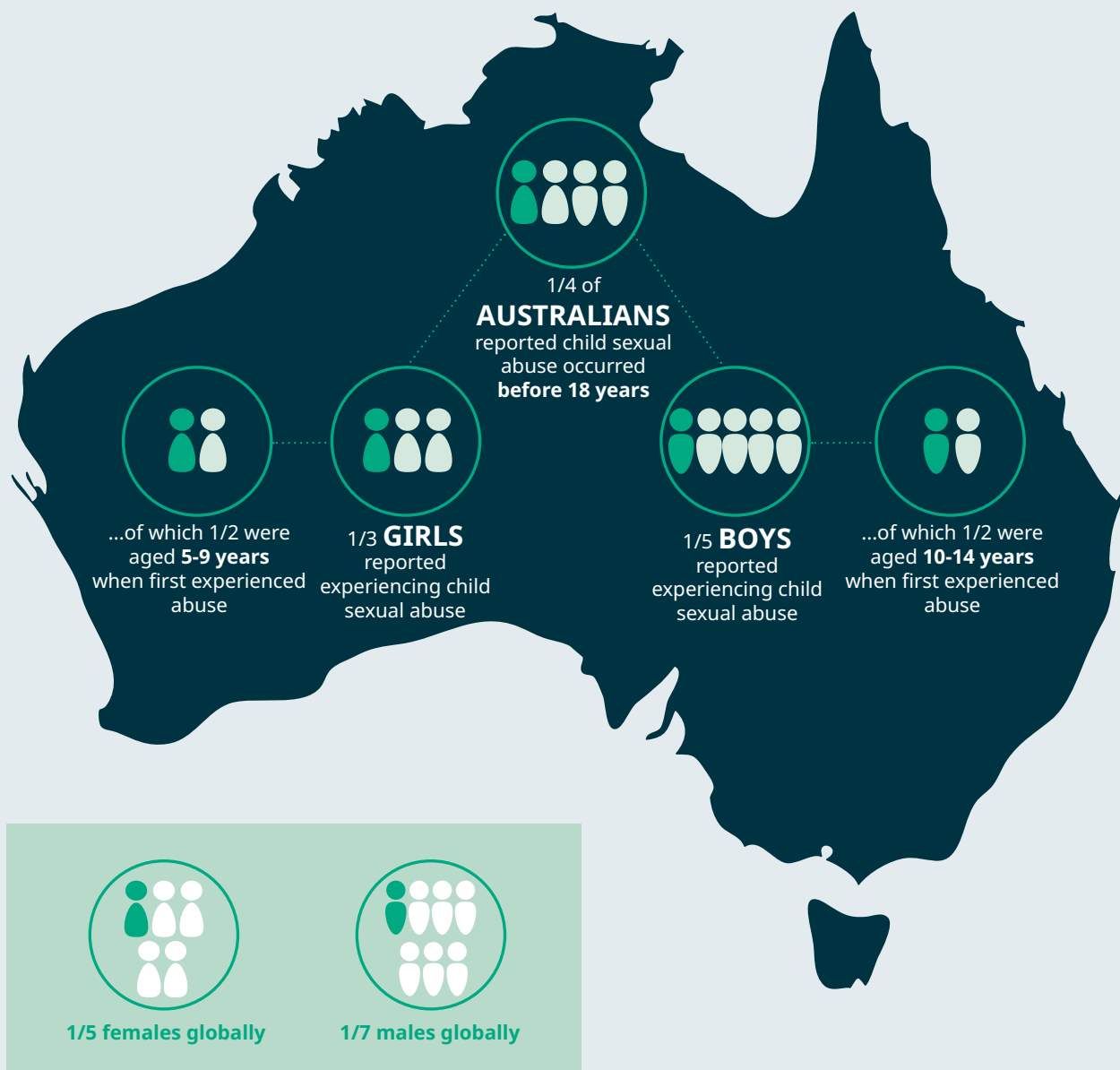
Prevalence of child sexual abuse

There is no single public source of data that shows the true prevalence of child sexual abuse in Queensland or Australia, the proportion of cases that come to police attention, or the number of matters that are prosecuted. Concerns with the lack of data have been raised previously, with the Royal Commission's Final Report stating:

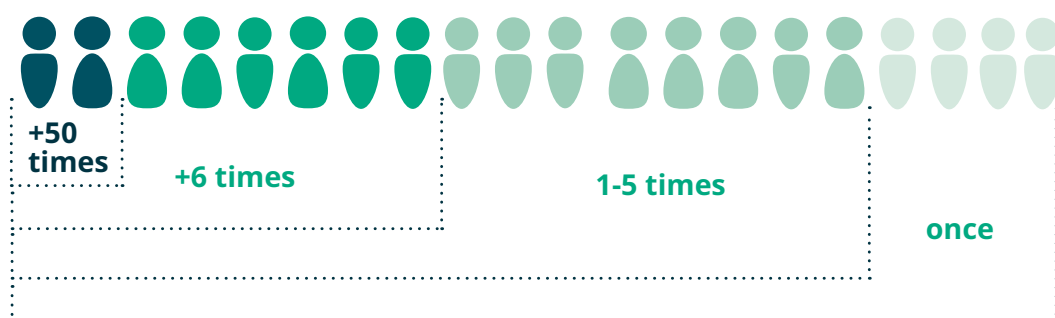
Without this data, policymakers and researchers are not able to measure the effectiveness of policy interventions designed to protect children. Without a nationally representative prevalence study, it will not be possible to determine how the extent of child sexual abuse in institutional contexts changes over time, or to compare the prevalence of child sexual abuse in Australia to other developed countries¹¹.

A desktop analysis of public data sources relating to child sexual abuse was completed to inform the Review, which was supported by engagement with Professor Ben Mathews from the Queensland University of Technology about the ACMS. Data was also requested from the Queensland Police Service (QPS), Queensland Courts and the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation (ACCCE) to try and piece together a full picture of the prevalence of child sexual abuse in Queensland and nationally.

Reported experiences of child sexual abuse



Frequency of abuse



**Sourced from UNICEF, Australian Child Maltreatment Study and Australian Bureau of Statistics*

Reports, charges and prosecutions of child sexual abuse offences

We know that most child sexual abuse offences are never reported to formal services like police or courts. The Australian Institute of Family Studies told the Review that:

The sensitive nature of child sexual abuse means that victims and survivors may be reluctant to disclose their experiences. A recent study found that disclosure of child sexual abuse in Australia has been infrequent, with only 54.8% of all those who experienced [child sexual abuse] ever telling anyone anything about it.

There are a range of cultural, economic, societal, religious, familial and institutional factors, alongside recollection and detection challenges, that likely contribute to underreporting of child sexual abuse.

Underreporting is particularly likely for men and for victims and survivors who experienced child sexual abuse perpetrated by a parent or adult family member, a caregiver in an institutional setting, or a known adolescent they were romantically involved with.

There are multiple and intersecting barriers to reporting faced by victim-survivors. Reporting may be delayed, it may occur in a staged way, or victim-survivors may not feel safe to disclose a full account of the abuse they have experienced. Where a victim-survivor's initial disclosure is not believed or supported they are less likely to seek help or try to report the abuse in the future or to other people.

Of the offences that are reported to police, most will never proceed to the conviction of a perpetrator. An inability to meet the requisite threshold to prove an offence beyond a reasonable doubt is a key barrier in pursuing child sexual offences through the criminal justice system. This does not mean that the offence did not occur.

The threshold for pursuing matters through the criminal justice system is high. The result however is difficult to contend with, as the reality is that most perpetrators may never come to the attention of the law, or be held to account for the abuse they have committed.

It is impossible to piece together a full picture of how many instances of child sexual abuse are reported, charged and prosecuted when using publicly available data. Information provided by the QPS, Courts Services Queensland and the ACCCE has helped the Board develop an understanding of child sexual abuse reported to or detected by law enforcement entities or dealt with by the court system.

Prevalence of child sexual abuse in the public narrative

Most people do not directly observe the justice system and instead rely on the media to communicate about it. The media's reporting, including tone, framing and frequency, strongly influences how people perceive crime, and its severity.

As part of this review, we completed a desktop analysis of Queensland media reports relating to child abuse, including sexual, physical and online offences. This analysis provides insight into patterns of prevalence and information informing public awareness. Media coverage, while not a complete or definitive source of data, provides a valuable lens through which the scale and nature of child sexual abuse is discussed in the public domain and provides insight into the narrative built around child sexual abuse that feeds the public's understanding.

The aim of this methodology was twofold:

1. to identify the extent to which incidents of child sexual abuse are visible in the public sphere
2. to understand how media narratives shape perceptions of prevalence, accountability, and institutional responsibility.

While official statistics and administrative records remain the most reliable indicators of prevalence, they are often fragmented, delayed, or inaccessible. By contrast, media reporting reflects cases that penetrate the threshold of public attention, usually because of the seriousness of allegations, the involvement of institutions, or the criminal justice outcomes, and the emotive public response that cases can evoke.

Our analysis focused on Queensland-based offending, reported in Australian media outlets across print, online and broadcast platforms over the duration of the review period (1 January to 23 October 2025). Media items were identified through keyword searches (e.g. child sexual abuse, child exploitation) using a media monitoring database. While some cases were reported across multiple outlets, our analysis counted only the individual perpetrators involved. In this sense, our analysis represents not the volume of overall reporting, but the individual cases reported.



Data snapshot: Reports, Charges and Prosecution Data



Between 2015–16 and 2024–25, 43,812 child sexual abuse offences were reported to or identified by QPS. Of the offences that were reported to QPS, 80 percent did not proceed to an arrest, notice to appear, summons, or other criminal justice outcome.

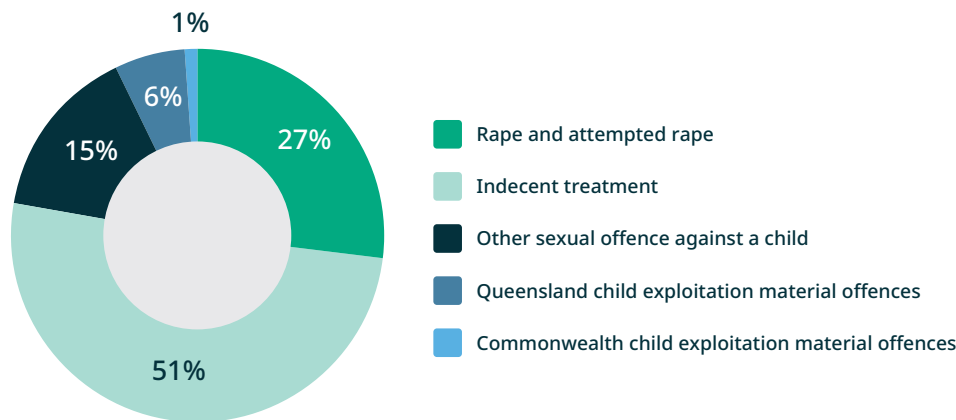


The majority of these offences (approximately 51%) were classified as indecent treatment offences.



15 per cent of sexual offences were not classified as rape, indecent treatment or child exploitation material (CEM) offences. These include offences against a child such as unlawful carnal knowledge, sexual assault, and certain offences involving the taking or distribution of intimate images.

Figure 6: Proportion of all child sexual abuse offences reported to QPS between 2015–16 and 2024–25 (n=43,812)



Between 2016 and 2025, approximately 82 per cent of victim-survivors were girls.



Between 2016 and 2025, nearly one in five victim-survivors were aged under five- years (14.7%). Nearly one in two were younger than 12-years (48.5%).



In 2024–25, ACCCE received 82,764 reports of online child sexual abuse.
• 96.1 per cent of reports in 2024–25 were received from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC).



In Queensland in 2024, ACCCE made 327 referrals to Queensland law enforcement. These included:

- 47 referrals for Joint Anti-Child Exploitation Team investigations
- 196 QPS Child Protection Investigation Unit referrals
- 84 requests to QPS for welfare checks.

Findings from the media analysis were not treated as a definitive prevalence measure but as an important supplementary source. They helped the Board to:

- illustrate the gap between actual prevalence (as indicated in research and administrative data) and what is visible to the public
- identify recurring institutional contexts where abuse was reported
- understand how public awareness of child sexual abuse is shaped by the media environment.

This approach allowed us to situate official data and stakeholder evidence within a broader societal context, acknowledging that media coverage plays a powerful role in defining public understanding of child sexual abuse.

The analysis recorded 129 events of child abuse reported in Queensland over the period of our review. This represents one case reported every two days. This is well below the actual number of offences that occur in Queensland, but remains shocking.

Of all child abuse cases, 114 related to child sexual abuse, and almost three-quarters of those involved online child sexual exploitation and CEM.

While the vast majority of child sexual abuse perpetrators were male (94%), other demographics were broad: ages ranged from between 19 and 98 years and professions spanned the employment spectrum, including volunteer, community, blue- and white-collar workers, public servants, and executives. Over the review period, cases we recorded included:

- **A 50-year-old senior banking executive** was charged with using electronic communication to procure an under-aged girl for sex in a Brisbane hotel room.
- **A 26-year-old surfing coach** from the Sunshine Coast was arrested on 33 charges including indecent treatment of children, wilful exposure, using a carriage service to access child abuse material, and grooming.
- **A 43-year-old former employee of Queensland's Department of Education and Corrective Services** was convicted of possessing more than 2000 CEM files, including hundreds of the worst category.
- **Four cases of police officers** possessing CEM. The offenders ranged in ages between 21 and 54 years.
- **A 50-year-old former sports coach** from Townsville filmed three children using a hidden mobile phone, with the intention to distribute to others.
- **A 21-year-old former Scouts Queensland leader** was arrested on suspicion of looking at children in a campground bathroom in Landsborough, north of Brisbane, and taking underwear from their tents. He was charged with 17 offences including unlawful entry, stalking, indecent treatment of children, and observations in breach of privacy.
- **A 30-year-old teacher** from Brisbane was charged with 25 offences against children interstate, including grooming, using the internet to procure children, and possessing CEM. Media reports indicate he was dismissed from his employment when the allegations came to light, and his teacher registration suspended two days later.
- **A 51-year-old journalist** from Brisbane was charged with more than 60 offences relating to CEM. He was also charged with three counts of failing to comply with reporting obligations and one count of giving false or misleading information. He was accused of allegedly failing to notify about a device, social networking site and carriage services.
- **A former youth worker in his 20s** was charged with possession of more than 2000 CEM files which the magistrate described as "some of the worst examples of this material" and which featured children from infancy upwards. He was also charged for filming himself molesting a four-year-old boy and sending the footage to an online contact. He received a nine-year jail term but is eligible for parole 10 months after sentencing, with two years spent in pre-trial custody considered time already served.
- **A 43-year-old Gladstone man** was charged with possessing CEM after police found images on his device while investigating him for strangulation (domestic violence offence). His previous criminal history included an assault occasioning bodily harm. While the judge described the CEM as "pretty sick stuff" the offender was sentenced to two and a half years' jail, suspended for five years, with 302 days' pre-sentence custody considered time already served.
- **21-year-old childcare worker** was charged with indecent treatment of a four-year-old child in a centre where he worked. He had a current and valid Working with Children Check. He was given conditional bail ahead of his court appearance.
- **A 51-year-old former swim coach** who pleaded guilty to eight sexual offences including trying to procure a 13-year-old for sex acts while already on bail, avoided a jail term and having any convictions recorded.

While the offences in these cases were not dissimilar, the coverage was hugely varied. The media tends to report on cases considered exceptional, rather than typical or common. While 114 reports of child sexual abuse were recorded across the period, our analysis found media coverage in most cases was limited to the local or regional area in which the case occurred. Generally, only high-profile cases—which are often characterised by a high number of victim-survivors or offences or by unusual demographics of the perpetrator—gain extensive state-wide or national attention across media outlets. This means the public is unlikely to appreciate the true prevalence of child sexual abuse, nor have an informed understanding of the circumstances in which it occurs. These high-profile cases are also likely to contribute to the public's misconception that child sexual abuse cases are extraordinary, misconstruing how common or statistically representative a case may be.

Very few cases of intra-familial child sexual abuse were reported over the period. This under-reporting may be due to sensitivity around these cases, or courts suppressing the release of details to media to protect the identities of victim-survivors and families involved. Evidence shows that most child sexual abuse is perpetrated by a family member or someone known to the child. The media under-reporting is likely to influence the public's understanding and awareness of the contexts and settings in which child sexual abuse commonly occurs.

Public perception about the severity of a crime can be influenced by media reports of sentencing. Around half the items recorded in our analysis reported on perpetrators' sentences. Most sentences included probation, suspended sentences, and imprisonment of between one and six years, although most jail sentences were reported to be suspended or perpetrators time awaiting sentencing was declared time served. The cases involving CEM were particularly insightful, particularly those where perpetrators were found guilty of possessing, creating and sharing hundreds of images and files, which extended into the thousands in some cases.

We recorded three cases of perpetrators possessing up to thousands of CEM files that were classified as the worst category:

- ***One perpetrator received no jail term and was released on a two-year probation order.***
- ***Another was sentenced to 18 months' jail, suspended after four months, receiving two years' probation and a three-year \$500 good behaviour bond.***
- ***The third was sentenced to five years' jail and eligible for parole within five months, after serving one-third of his sentence, with his pre-sentence custody declared as time already served.***
- ***A former sports coach was sentenced to four and a half years' jail, which was suspended, and he was given probation of two years. The judge recognised his pre-sentence custody as time already served, and he was returned to the community immediately.***

While sentencing is a matter for the courts, it's important to consider how this information contributes to the story told about the severity of child sexual abuse and the consequence for action, particularly those reported as extreme.

Finally, almost all reports we recorded were factual accounts of the criminal justice process and no reports featured perspectives from victim-survivors. While this is not always possible or appropriate in media reporting, the effects need to be highlighted. An absence of victim-survivors' perspectives can perpetuate the stigma known to exist around child sexual abuse. Victim-survivors are more likely to speak about their experiences if they see stories validating their experiences.

Media plays a critical role in shaping public opinion and its influence should be harnessed. Child sexual abuse is grossly under-reported in the media when compared with its actual occurrence, which can contribute to a distorted public perception of the facts. This includes the misplaced focus on stranger-danger or sensationalised stories that have greater news appeal, which can misrepresent the fact that most abuse is perpetrated by someone known to the child. Media can be a critical opportunity for public education about the warning signs of child sexual abuse, including grooming, as well as an opportunity to promote prevention strategies and reduce stigma for victim-survivors.

While the media plays a vital role in raising awareness of child sexual abuse and compelling institutional accountability, its coverage is often incomplete and sensationalised. This creates a significant gap between victims' experiences and what the public understands to be true — a gap that has real consequences for prevention, justice and healing.¹²

Australian's attitudes, knowledge and response to child sexual abuse

Although recent research and media reporting have heightened public awareness that child sexual abuse is prevalent in Australia, there remains a significant gap in understanding its impact. Many Australians accept that such abuse is not rare, yet the depth of its consequences on children's health, development, relationships, and long-term wellbeing remains less well appreciated. This is compounded by a striking dissonance in community attitudes. Most Australians (89%) agree there are many more victim-survivors in the community than people realise, and similarly high numbers (86%) acknowledge that child sexual abuse is more common than is generally understood¹³. A majority (62%) even recognise it is likely that someone they know has experienced abuse. Yet more than half (56%) do not believe child sexual abuse happens where they live¹⁴. This tendency to view the problem as distant—prevalent but not proximate—creates barriers to honest dialogue, limits community ownership of the issue, and risks reinforcing stigma and silence for those living with its effects.

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Too often, child sexual abuse is viewed as rare, exceptional, or confined to particular settings, rather than recognised as a significant and systemic issue. This warped understanding has consequences: it dulls the urgency of reform, diminishes support for victim-survivors, and allows the conditions that enable abuse to remain insufficiently challenged.

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Understanding of child sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse can occur in any institution where children are present, however, research indicates that certain factors can increase the likelihood of abuse occurring. While the presence of these risk factors does not guarantee that abuse will occur, early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions and other organisations responsible for children should assess the risks relevant to their context and implement targeted strategies to mitigate them.

Research highlights how opportunity for abuse in ECEC settings and similar institutions is shaped by imbalances of power among children, parents, staff, the local community, and external regulators. Perpetrators often actively identify and exploit vulnerabilities in both children and their environments as part of their offending patterns.

While child sexual abuse reporting generally rises with age, with most reports received for children between the ages of eight and 15, preschool-aged children are particularly vulnerable to abuse due to their developmental stage, characterised by:

- emotional dependence
- need for personal/intimate care
- limited cognitive capacity
- physical vulnerability
- inability to recognise and report sexual abuse.

These factors contribute to a significant power imbalance between young children and perpetrators that is further amplified in contexts where situational and systemic factors reduce protection or increase access. Individual, situational and contextual risk factors intersect as perpetrators exploit specific characteristics or circumstances that facilitate abuse.



Data snapshot: Community awareness of child sexual abuse

The Australian child sexual abuse attitudes, knowledge and response study developed by the National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse is the first of its kind in Australia. It investigated the knowledge, attitudes and responses of a community sample on child sexual abuse topics of 4,055 Australian adults including 601 Queenslanders. This survey, conducted in December 2023, found that the community recognises that child sexual abuse is a prevalent and current issue.

Survey participants reported a relatively accurate understanding of prevalence and reported that they believed that 21 per cent of boys and 33 per cent of girls experience child sexual abuse. For both boys and girls, most participants believed the main abusers were parents or stepparents (**43% for boys, 55% for girls**), or other relatives (**44% for boys, 51% for girls**), and that children were more at risk in their own home or in the homes of relatives or friends.

Key findings of the survey included:



Most participants (**89%**) agreed or strongly agreed there are more victim-survivors than people realise.

Similarly high numbers (**86%**) agreed or strongly agreed that child sexual abuse is more common than people realise.

Many people (**62%**) thought it was likely, very likely, or certain that someone they knew had experienced child sexual abuse.



Despite this, over half (**56%**) did not agree that child sexual abuse happens where they live.



Participants reported that their awareness of abuse most commonly came from the media (**81%**) or social media (**37%**).

Australians also reported wanting more action from government. 83 per cent of participants agreed that governments should do more to respond to the needs of victim-survivors.

There was evidence of victim-blaming or problematic attitudes towards victim-survivors, particularly teenagers. As an example, 40 per cent of participants believed that older children have a responsibility to actively resist adults' sexual advances.

Further analysis also showed that people who work with children scored higher on myths and harmful attitudes than those not working with children. Parents and carers, and victim-survivors of child sexual abuse held less harmful myths and attitudes than others.

While around half (48%) of participants agreed they know what to do to keep children safe, about 80 per cent agree there are things we can do as a community to reduce child sexual abuse. Most participants agreed it would be helpful to have greater community awareness about grooming indicators (81%) and more public awareness campaigns about how to prevent child sexual abuse (78%).

Most participants also agreed it would be helpful if:

The survey also showed that the community is unsure if perpetrators can be rehabilitated, however, about two-thirds believe that perpetrator focused services would be helpful in preventing child sexual abuse. This includes for **adults at risk of perpetrating child sexual abuse (68%)** and for **young people who display harmful sexual behaviour (77%)**.

Known risk factors for child sexual abuse

Research shows that there are a number of factors that may increase a child's risk of experiencing sexual abuse or increase the risk of child sexual abuse occurring. Many of these factors, especially individual and family factors, are characteristics or circumstances that cannot be or are not easily changed.

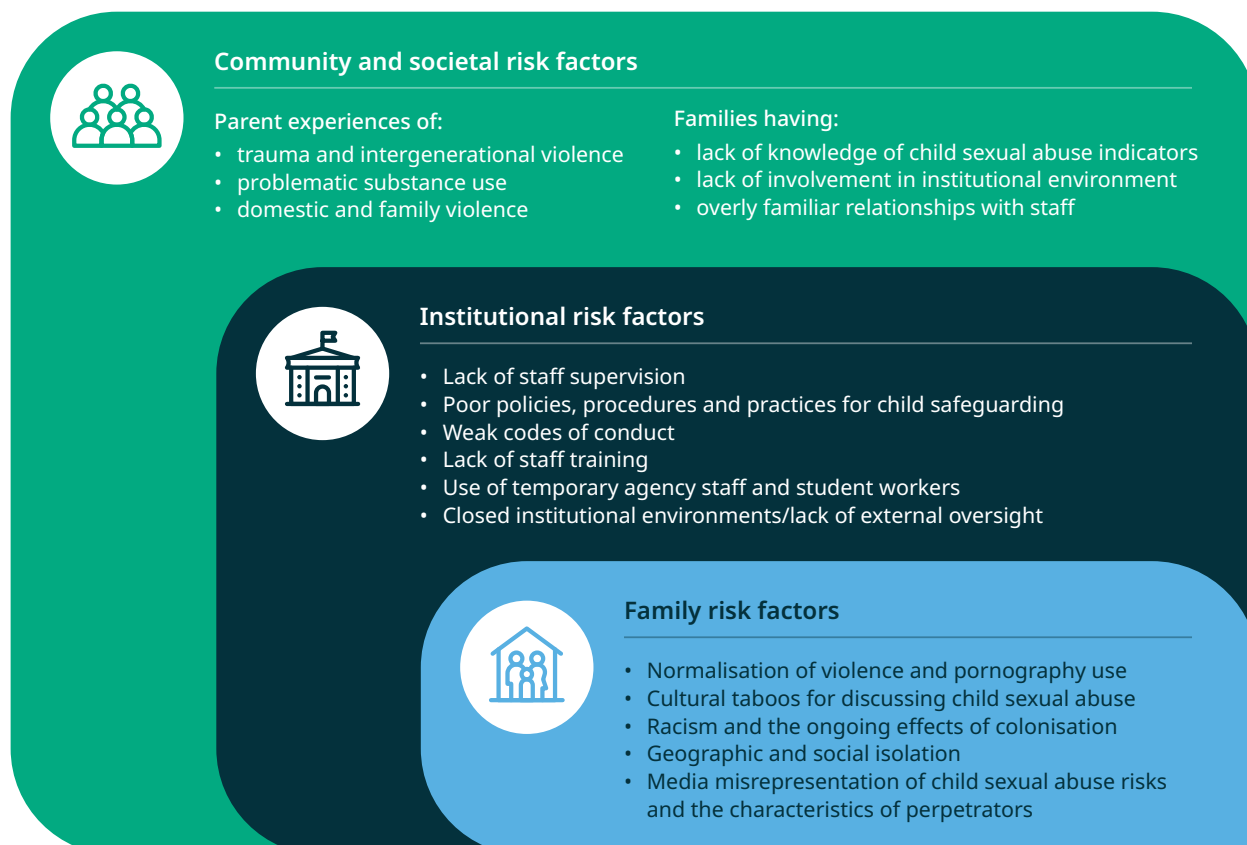
The sex of a child is a significant and consistent risk factor for child sexual abuse, with girls being up to three times more likely than boys to experience abuse. This disparity is evident even among preschool-aged children. A 1998 study found that, of 1,639 children sexually abused in daycare settings, 62 per cent were girls and 38 per cent were boys.¹⁵ Likewise, research from 2001 reported that 60 per cent of the 74 victims aged two to five were girls.¹⁶ The Royal Commission also found that the majority of survivors whose abuse began in childcare settings were female (62%).

Furthermore, children with a disability are 3.4 times more likely to be subjected to sexual abuse than their non-disabled peers, with preschool-aged children facing the highest rates of abuse among all age groups of these children.¹⁷ Perpetrators may deliberately target children with disability, as certain aspects of their support needs can make the abuse less likely to be detected. These factors include increased dependence on caregivers for personal care and greater difficulty in recognising and/or disclosing abuse, particularly among children with:

- visual impairment
- hearing impairment
- cognitive impairment
- behavioural disability.

It is important to understand that risk factors are not the cause of child sexual abuse. While a person may identify with or experience circumstances or characteristics that heighten their risk of experiencing child sexual abuse, the offender is always responsible for the abuse regardless of how many risk factors are present. Perpetrators target children with identified risk factors to increase their opportunity to offend and to remain undetected.

Figure 7: Risk factors for child sexual abuse



Online environments

Over the past 20 years, access to the online environment has increased for all Australians, including children. Between 2004–05 and 2016–17, the percentage of Australian households with access to the internet increased from 56 to 86 per cent. For households with children under the age of 15, 97.1 per cent have internet access. 98 per cent of 15- to 17-year-olds used the internet, compared to 55 per cent of those aged 65 and over.¹⁸

Increased access to social media, online games, chat rooms and forums and encrypted messaging apps has allowed children to communicate with known, unknown and anonymous people. This can occur with limited to no supervision or knowledge by parents and guardians. This provides a perfect opportunity for perpetrators to target children and create opportunities for abuse to occur through grooming, coercion and extortion.

“Child sexual abuse has always been a complex, murky, widespread problem. Thanks to the unbridled technological evolution, the nature and scale is worsening by the minute.”¹⁹

There is a growing body of evidence suggesting a pathway between the consumption of particular types pornography and the escalation to CEM for some individuals. While not all people who view pornography progress to illegal behaviours, research indicates that regular consumption can desensitise individuals to extreme or violent sexual content. This desensitisation can create a tolerance effect, where increasingly explicit or taboo material is sought to achieve the same level of arousal. For a minority of users, this trajectory can extend into accessing CEM, representing a significant public safety risk. A study conducted by Childlight of approximately 4900 men across Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States of America found that as the frequency of pornography watching increased, the probability of child sexual offending also increased. It found men who watched rough or violent pornography were 4.91 times more likely to commit a child sexual abuse offence.

The accessibility of online pornography has amplified these risks. With vast volumes of content freely available and algorithms designed to encourage continued consumption, users may be inadvertently exposed to content that normalises harmful behaviours. This can foster distorted beliefs about sexuality, consent, and the acceptability of taboo material. In some cases, curiosity about 'forbidden' material, particularly when combined with pre-existing risk factors such as deviant sexual interests, trauma history, or social isolation, can lower inhibitions and act as a stepping stone to viewing CEM.

“Prepubescent children represent the largest group depicted in [CEM]; however, determining the specific proportion of preschool-aged children is challenging due to variations in age categories and the different [CEM] detection methods employed across various reporting systems.”

A recent report by the New South Wales Parliamentary Standing Committee on Social Issues, *Impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health*, found most boys by the age of 13 years have interacted with pornography in some way, and girls soon after. Pornography is considered harmful when problematic themes are normalised, such as violence, misogyny, a lack of consent, racism, and illegal activities such as child abuse and incest. Exposure to this content may lead to unhealthy social and intimate relationships, sexual objectification of women, and in some instances the exploitation of children.

Law enforcement agencies and child protection experts have repeatedly highlighted this progression. The QPS note that a proportion of offenders under investigation for CEM began with adult pornography use and escalated over time to illegal material. This is reinforced by international research showing that online forums and dark web communities actively encourage progression, with perpetrators often reporting that their first access to CEM followed a period of escalating pornography use.

Recognising this pathway is essential for prevention. Education about healthy sexual development, early intervention programs for individuals displaying concerning patterns of pornography use, and stronger regulation of online platforms are all critical steps. By addressing the risk factors that may drive escalation, from pornography to CEM, systems can reduce the likelihood of children being harmed and intervene earlier in the cycle of offending.

Reported child sexual abuse in the online environment



The Childlight - Global Child Safety Institute estimates that in the past year, **over 300 million children** were subject to abuse behaviours online.²⁰

eSafety reported that close to **half of young people aged 14–17** in Australia had received a sexual message from someone online in the past year.²¹

Conversations with children on social gaming platforms can escalate into high-risk grooming situations **within 19 seconds**, with an average grooming time of **just 45 minutes**.²²



According to the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF), the most severe category of CEM has **doubled since 2020**.²³

Quarterly sextortion reports to eSafety **increased from 600 in 2022 to 1700** in the same quarters of 2023.²⁴



In 2022, the IWF confirmed a total of **255,570 URLs** contained images or videos of children suffering abuse.²⁵



Available data indicates that reports of sextortion to the eSafety Commission have **increased 1,300 per cent** since 2018.²⁶

Harm in the digital world

1. **Exposure to harmful sexual content:** Widespread availability of violent and degrading pornography and CEM normalises harmful behaviours and distorts children's understanding of healthy sexuality and consent.
2. **Online grooming:** Among the most frequently reported harms, offenders use digital platforms to build trust with children to facilitate sexual exploitation, both online and offline.
3. **Self-generated sexual content:** Children are pressured, coerced, or encouraged to create explicit material, often believing they are in a relationship or under threat of exposure.
4. **Image-based abuse:** Non-consensual sharing of intimate or sexual images, or threats to share them, is a highly prevalent form of abuse with severe psychological and reputational impacts.
5. **Sexual extortion (sextortion):** Increasingly reported by AFP and eSafety, offenders blackmail children with threats to release explicit material unless further content, sexual acts, or money is provided.
6. **CEM:** The possession, sharing, or creation of CEM remains a core offence type, with large volumes distributed through the dark web and encrypted platforms.
7. **AI-generated abuse material:** An emerging harm, where artificial intelligence is used to create or "deepfake" images and videos of child sexual abuse, sometimes based on real children.
8. **Live-streamed abuse:** Real-time exploitation of children, frequently organised and paid for by offenders, though less prevalent than image-based or grooming offences.
9. **Sadistic or extreme exploitation:** A smaller but deeply harmful category, involving organised online communities coercing children into producing increasingly violent or degrading content.
10. **Peer-to-peer exploitation:** The trading of CEM across networks, sometimes involving young people themselves. While less visible, this reflects both offender activity and the complicity of peers.

A new and rapidly emerging risk in the online child abuse landscape is the creation of deepfake or AI-generated CEM. Using artificial intelligence, perpetrators can now produce realistic images, videos, or audio that appear to depict children in sexual contexts, even where no direct abuse of a child has occurred. This technology poses multiple dangers: it can be based on real children's likenesses, creating unique harms for victim-survivors whose images are manipulated; it lowers the barriers to offending by allowing individuals to create CEM without physical contact with a child; and it fuels demand within perpetrator communities for increasingly extreme or novel material. Law enforcement agencies and child protection experts warn that this development expands the scale of harmful content online, and risks normalising abusive behaviour in ways that can escalate to contact offending. In 2024 global reports of AI-generated CEM increased by 1325 per cent from the previous year²⁷.

*“App stores are brimming with AI tools that enable instantaneous, prolific creation and distribution of increasingly realistic material. So-called “fake” content isn’t victimless; it is trained on images of real children — not to mention it also extends the limits of violence.”*²⁸

An emerging concern in online child safety is the use of AI-powered chatbots and conversational tools by perpetrators to groom children. Perpetrators are increasingly experimenting with generative AI to simulate the tone, style, and interests of peers in order to build trust with young people. These tools can operate at scale, enabling an offender to engage with multiple children simultaneously, while also masking linguistic errors or behavioural cues that might otherwise raise suspicion. In some cases, chatbots can be customised to sustain long-term grooming conversations, reinforcing deception and emotional manipulation. The risk is heightened by the ability of AI systems to access, adapt, and respond instantly, making them powerful tools for social engineering. Experts warn that this technology could significantly expand the reach of grooming behaviour, increase children’s vulnerability in online spaces, and create new challenges for detection and law enforcement.

*“Offenders are prompting software to automate grooming and advise them on how to avoid detection, and innovators are prioritising profit over protection as they rush to establish market dominance in a lawless, borderless domain. There is no ceiling for depravity.”*²⁹

The Darknet

The darknet is the part of the internet that is intentionally hidden and cannot be accessed through standard web browsers or search engines. It exists on encrypted networks, most commonly accessed using specialised software such as Tor (The Onion Router) or I2P (Invisible Internet Project), which anonymise users’ identities and locations. Unlike the ‘surface web’ (websites indexed by Google and other search engines) and the ‘deep web’ (online content behind logins, databases, or paywalls), the darknet is designed to provide privacy, secrecy, and anonymity. While it has legitimate uses including protecting political dissidents, journalists, or whistleblowers from surveillance, it is also widely used for illegal activity. This includes black markets for drugs, weapons, and stolen data, as well as forums and marketplaces for CEM, grooming networks, and live-streamed abuse.

The anonymity offered by the darknet lowers the risk of detection, meaning perpetrators view it as a safer place to access CEM. The darknet also allows perpetrators to share information on offending methodologies and concealment. These communications can occur on online forums, which act not only as repositories of information but also as a place for pro-offending views to be propagated.³⁰

A recent survey of 1,546 CEM users on the darknet found 42 per cent had communicated with other CEM viewers³¹. It is therefore important to understand how child sexual abuse perpetrators engage with each other on the darknet, as this will help inform detection and intervention. Several studies have analysed darknet chat forums focused on child sexual offending, finding that users of such forums develop their own culture that can normalise, justify and endorse offending against children. In support of such findings, a survey of 459 individuals in the community found those who had visited online chat forums that discussed child sexual abuse were significantly more likely to report intentional viewing of CEM after first exposure than those who had not visited these online forums.³²

Technology itself has no moral compass; it is a tool that can be harnessed for immense social good or exploited for profound harm. The same digital innovations that connect communities, expand knowledge, and foster creativity can also be manipulated by those with criminal intent to exploit and abuse children. This reality demands that we remain vigilant, informed, and adaptive in our responses.

Safeguarding children in the digital world requires not only awareness of the evolving risks but also a commitment to innovation, developing smarter protections, stronger systems of accountability, and resilient support structures that ensure technology serves the best interests of children rather than those who would do them harm.

Conclusion

The evidence is clear: child sexual abuse in Australia is not rare or exceptional, it is widespread and persistent. Prevalence studies, administrative data, and victim-survivor accounts all converge on the sobering truth that many thousands of children experience sexual abuse, often at the hands of trusted adults or peers. While prevalence estimates vary depending on methodology, the weight of the evidence establishes that child sexual abuse is a common reality in the lives of Australian children.

Yet prevalence data only tells part of the story. Detecting and responding to child sexual abuse is uniquely complex. Victim-survivors may be too young to disclose, too fearful to speak, or too uncertain to be believed. Families, institutions, and authorities often struggle to interpret signs, while systemic barriers—stigma, inadequate training, fragmented information sharing, and legal thresholds—can delay or prevent protective action. As a result, the true scale of abuse is likely to remain under-reported and underestimated.

This reality underscores the need for a coordinated, whole-of-society response. Protecting children cannot rest solely with police or child protection agencies. It requires the active vigilance of families, communities, schools, religious institutions, sporting organisations, digital platforms, workplaces and governments. A shared recognition of prevalence, combined with collective responsibility for prevention, early detection and compassionate response, is essential if Australia is to reduce the burden of child sexual abuse.

Only through coordinated effort—cutting across sectors, systems and communities—can the widespread prevalence of child sexual abuse be addressed, its detection improved, and its devastating impacts mitigated.

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Child sexual abuse is a common reality in the lives of Australian children.

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The systems that are meant to protect children

The role of legislation, strategic frameworks, government agencies and programs

Child sexual abuse is a profound violation of children's rights and dignity, with lifelong consequences for victim-survivors and ripple effects across families, communities, and society as a whole. Preventing it is one of the most complex and urgent responsibilities that governments must shoulder.

For many decades, the response to child sexual abuse in Australia, as in most common law jurisdictions, was framed almost entirely through the lens of the criminal justice system. The process was conceived as a linear sequence: either a child disclosed abuse or an adult witnessed an incident, the disclosure was reported, police investigated, charges were laid, the matter went to court, and the offender was sentenced or found not guilty.

In theory, this pathway offered clarity and justice—an offender identified, a verdict reached, and punishment delivered. In practice, this traditional criminal justice approach has deep structural limitations, relying on a strictly legal approach to such complex and sensitive harm.

The traditional criminal justice model embodies society's clearest expression of condemnation, promising punishment for those found guilty. At the same time, it exposes the gulf between the lived experience of abuse and the demands of a legal process designed for adversarial testing of evidence.

For many victim-survivors, the lineal progression—disclosure, investigation, prosecution, trial, and sentencing—is less like a path to justice than a series of hurdles, each one higher than the last, with outcomes uncertain until the very end.

Australia has recognised that this approach alone, would not protect children, and prevention services and programs, safeguarding policies and practices, and protective awareness raising formed part of a broader response to the protection of children. To this end, legislatures across the country have enacted mandatory reporting laws for certain professionals, established working with children checks, and in some cases mandated that organisations implement child safe standards.

In Queensland this shift toward more complex and risk-focused child safeguarding can be seen in the findings and recommendations of major inquiries, including:

- the Commission of Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions (Forde Inquiry) which delivered its report in 1999 focused on the incidence and impact of abuse of children in institutional care throughout Queensland's history
- the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry (Carmody Inquiry) which delivered its report in 2013 conducted a 'root and branch' review of the child protection system in Queensland
- the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (the Royal Commission) which considered what could be done to protect children against child sexual abuse in an institutional context, as well as how to alleviate or address the impact of past abuse (from 2013–17).

Our contemporary approach to protecting children from sexual abuse is now based on the acceptance that no single institution, professional, or level of government can bear this responsibility alone. Preventing child sexual abuse in Australia requires a whole-of-system, whole-of-society response. Legislation provides the legal framework, strategies chart the path, agencies deliver services and enforce standards, and programs engage directly with children and families. These elements are interdependent and must function coherently for protection to be effective.

An effective and coherent response depends on the alignment of multiple components: Legislation, strategic planning, government agencies, and programs across the three tiers of government are the building blocks of protection. When properly harmonised, they allow for a consistent and sustainable approach to protecting children, detecting threats and responding to harm.

Federalism

Australia's political and governmental landscape adds both richness and complexity to the task of protecting children. The nation's federal system features three tiers of government—federal, state, and local. This division of power and responsibility creates opportunities for tailored responses, innovation, and shared accountability, but also introduces difficulties in coordination, duplication, and inconsistency.

To effectively protect children, legislation, strategic plans, agencies, and programs must work in concert, guided by the lessons of inquiries such as the Royal Commission and Carmody Inquiry, and underpinned by national strategies and frameworks. Prevention efforts must be sustained beyond political cycles, embedded into the core business of governments and organisations, and be responsive to the diversity of Australian society.

Federalism, with its strengths and weaknesses, is central to how Australia organises its response to child protection and safeguarding. The law enforcement agencies and central and service delivery departments that administer laws and policies must be understood within their position within federalism as well as the social context of Australian society. Governments and agencies do not act in isolation: they are shaped by, and in turn shape, the cultural, political, and social norms of the community.

A homogeneous response to child sexual abuse does not mean uniformity in every detail; rather, it means coherence, collaboration, and shared commitment. Ideally it means no gaps between systems and no ending of responsibility for the primacy of protecting children simply because of boundaries and borders.

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Borders don't stop paedophiles. I will keep saying this to whomever until we can get something done. Public submission

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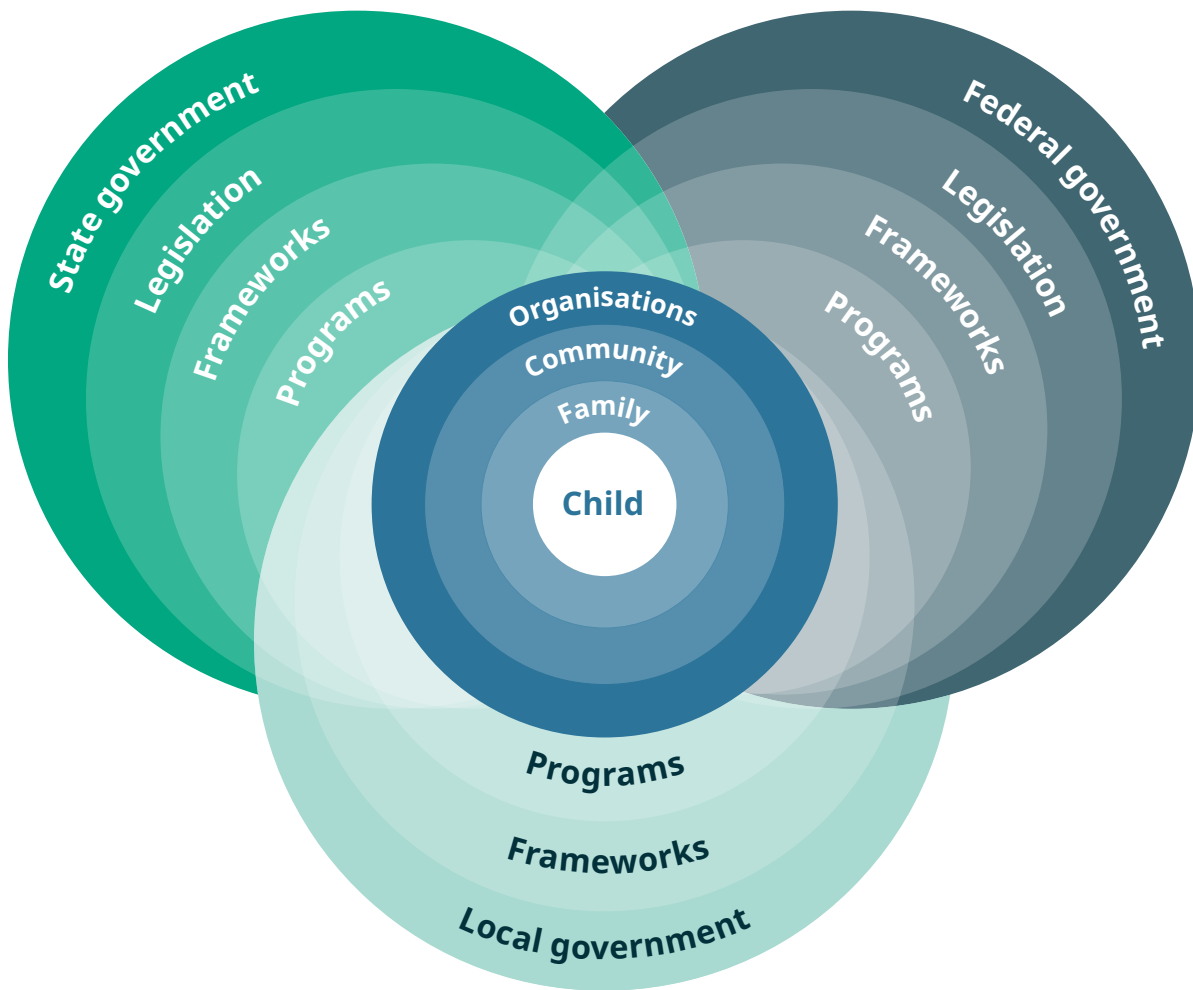
The central challenge in preventing child sexual abuse is to achieve coordination across Australia's three tiers of government. Each tier has a different role, and yet they are all implicated in the safety and wellbeing of children. The federal government leads on national policy, oversees matters of cross-border or international concern, and has a convening power to bring states and territories together. State and territory governments carry the primary responsibility for statutory child safeguarding, policing, courts, health, and education. Local governments, while not always formally recognised in child safeguarding frameworks, are critical actors because they are embedded in communities, operate services such as libraries, sports and recreation centres, and family support programs, and can foster safe environments in everyday spaces where children live and play.

The strength of this system is that it allows for diversity and local responsiveness. States and territories can design child protection systems that reflect their specific demographics, geographies, and communities. For example, remote communities in the Northern Territory require very different service models compared to metropolitan Sydney or Melbourne. Local councils in regional areas can design community programs that build on local strengths and partnerships. However, the weakness of this system is its fragmentation. A child living in one jurisdiction may experience very different protections and supports compared to a child living elsewhere.

Australia's federal structure provides both opportunities and obstacles to a homogeneous response. On the one hand, federalism encourages innovation, allows policies to be adapted to local contexts, and creates multiple avenues for accountability. On the other hand, it can foster fragmentation, duplication, and inequity.

The Royal Commission noted that inconsistencies between jurisdictions were a persistent challenge in areas such as criminal law, child protection systems, and regulatory regimes for institutions. Mechanisms for intergovernmental cooperation, such as the Council of Attorneys-General and the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), now replaced by National Cabinet processes, provide a means of coordination, yet success ultimately depends on political will, sustained investment, and a shared recognition that child safety must transcend partisan and jurisdictional divides.

Figure 8: Placing the safety of children within the context of Australian Federalism



The Royal Commission highlighted the challenges of federalism and the need for a coherent and nationally consistent approach. It found that institutional abuse had been facilitated by fragmented laws and uneven oversight, and it called for nationally consistent approaches in areas such as working with children checks, criminal laws, and child safe standards. Its recommendations were clear: prevention requires cooperation, harmonisation, and a shared vision that transcends state borders. The Royal Commission did not propose abolishing federalism, but rather urged that it be used more effectively, with the federal government providing leadership while respecting the responsibilities of states and territories.

In response, the Australian Government created the National Office for Child Safety (NOCS) in 2018, and tasked it with coordinating child safety initiatives across jurisdictions and leading national reforms. Importantly, it has an outward-facing role, engaging with communities, victim-survivors, and organisations to build trust and drive cultural change. This office symbolises the recognition that child safety requires national leadership, even in a federal system where most service delivery sits with states and territories.

One of the most significant legacies of the Royal Commission is the development of the *National Principles for Child Safe Organisations*. Endorsed by the COAG in 2019, these principles provide a nationally consistent approach for institutions working with children. They outline what organisations should do to create child safe cultures, including leadership, participation of children, staff training, and effective complaint processes. The principles are not legally binding in themselves but are being embedded through state and territory legislation and regulatory frameworks. For example, Victoria legislated mandatory compliance with child safe standards through the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic), while New South Wales created a Child Safe Scheme under the *Children's Guardian Act 2019* (NSW). These examples show how federal leadership through shared principles can cascade down into local legislation and practice, gradually creating coherence across jurisdictions.

The federalist system brings complexity but also opportunity, as long as governments cooperate and share responsibility. Bureaucracies must be child-centred and accountable, and social norms must continue to shift towards openness and support for victim-survivors. A homogeneous response is not about rigid uniformity; it is about coherence, collaboration, and a shared national commitment to the safety and wellbeing of children. The lessons of the Royal Commission, the inquiries that preceded and proceeded it, and the policies now in place show that progress is possible. But the challenge is ongoing, and only a sustained and integrated, response will ensure that children in Australia are truly safe.

Role of the Australian Government

The Australian Government plays a central role in both the prevention of, and response to, child sexual abuse. While primary responsibility for child safeguarding sits with states and territories, the Commonwealth has enacted key measures that address child sexual abuse across different contexts. The Commonwealth Criminal Code contains offences that apply to abuse committed online, via postal services, and overseas where the alleged perpetrator is an Australian citizen. The growing incidence of such crimes heightens the federal responsibility to act decisively. Australia's national measures are framed within its international obligations. As a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, Australia has committed to upholding children's rights and to preventing and responding to child sexual abuse in line with international human rights standards. These frameworks reinforce the principle that child safeguarding is not only a national responsibility but a global imperative. In recognition of this responsibility, specialist agencies and initiatives have been established:

- The NOCS, created in 2018 following the Royal Commission, provides national leadership to strengthen child safety policies and reduce harm, with a particular focus on child sexual abuse. It oversees the implementation of the *National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse*.
- The Australian Federal Police (AFP) has a central role in responding to child sexual abuse, especially where cases cross state, territory, or international borders. The AFP investigates Commonwealth child sexual abuse offences, including crimes committed online, through the postal system, or overseas by Australian citizens.
- The Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation (ACCCE), established in 2018, drives a collaborative and connected national response to online child sexual abuse.
- The eSafety Commissioner promotes online safety, provides education to children, families, and educators, and offers complaint and reporting processes for serious cyberbullying and illegal online content.

Beyond these specialist entities, several Commonwealth departments contribute to child protection through broader portfolios. The Department of Social Services oversees national frameworks, including *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children*, the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children*, and the *National Disability Strategy*. Other departments manage policies relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, family law, technology-facilitated crime, migration, workplace protections, and health. The National Children's Commissioner provides independent advocacy, research, and education, ensuring that children's voices are heard and that Commonwealth legislation, policies, and programs uphold children's rights.

Role of state and territory governments

State and territory governments are responsible for the direct protection of children who are experiencing, or at risk of, abuse and neglect. They hold legislative and service delivery responsibility for a wide range of child safety measures, including criminal offences relating to child sexual abuse, child protection systems, and courts with jurisdiction over crime, family and child matters.

State and territory police departments are the first agency expected to act once concerns are reported, carrying the dual responsibility of protecting children while gathering evidence strong enough to withstand the demands of the courtroom. Police decisions shape whether a case advances or stalls: they determine how a disclosure is recorded, whether witnesses are interviewed, what forensic or digital material is pursued, and ultimately whether a brief is sent to prosecutors. In this way, the pathway from an allegation to potential conviction rests heavily on the quality and focus of state and territory police work.

While the state's role in the protection of children is undisputed, a single point of responsibility for the safety of children is hard to find. It is shared across state government portfolios and is not the responsibility of one department but of many: police, health, education, justice, housing, and community services all play a part. Through these systems, states and territories maintain frontline responsibility for responding to allegations of child sexual abuse, supporting victim-survivors, and preventing harm. One of the most profound realisations is that each state's Department of Child Safety or Child Protection rarely serves their role, and is more often restricted to a limited focus on children who are not safe with their parents. Child protection departments do not hold responsibility for the overall safety of children. Effective prevention requires collaboration across silos. This is easier said than done, as bureaucracies often protect their own territories, funding, and priorities. Strategic reforms such as New South Wales' *Their Futures Matter* initiative or Queensland's *Supporting Families Changing Futures* demonstrated attempts to break down these silos through cross-agency collaboration. However, these initiatives also show how challenging it is to sustain such collaboration over time.

In Queensland, the Ministers with responsibility for administering these protective functions have shifted on numerous occasions during the last 25 years, specifically the early childhood education and care (ECEC), and blue card systems. The shifts acknowledge that while housed within one Minister's portfolio, these functions are inextricably linked with those of other agencies. Prior to their transition to the Department of Justice and Department of Education, blue cards and ECEC regulation were the responsibility of the Public Safety Business Agency and the Minister for the Department of Families, respectively.

Role of local governments

Local governments play an important role in promoting community safety, particularly in ways that affect children and young people. Their functions include the provision of services such as libraries, pools, childcare, holiday programs, and community facilities. These services can foster safe environments for children and provide opportunities to identify risks or concerns. Local governments also have the capacity to impact community safety through their role in planning and development. The design and evaluation of settings in which children are present becomes a critical component in preventing harm. In many regional and remote communities, local governments are the primary service providers and central points of contact for families, increasing their importance in ensuring protective environments for children.

The role of local government in building and sustaining strong communities should also be recognised. While not always formally part of child protection and safeguarding systems, local councils provide vital infrastructure for prevention. They operate libraries, sports facilities, community centres, and local networks that engage children and families. Councils often run programs for families, youth, and early childhood development. Because they are embedded in local communities, councils can respond to specific needs and build partnerships that make national strategies meaningful at the grassroots. This third tier of government is often overlooked but should be better integrated into national child safety efforts.

Legislation

Legislation is the cornerstone of protection efforts, setting out both the criminal prohibitions against child sexual abuse and the regulatory expectations placed on professionals, organisations and the community.

Legislation is often the most visible form of government action. It reflects society's values and sets the legal boundaries for behaviour. In Australia, responsibility for child sexual abuse offences is shared between state and territory governments on one hand, and the Commonwealth on the other. Each plays a distinct role in the broader legal framework.

At the state and territory level, criminal law sets out the main sexual offences against children, prescribes penalties, and defines the powers of police and child protection agencies. These laws also establish mandatory reporting requirements for professionals, regulate working with children checks, and shape the systems of child protection that operate on the ground. Because most child sexual abuse occurs within families, communities, or institutions located within a single jurisdiction, state and territory laws are the foundation of the response.

The Commonwealth's role is more targeted but increasingly important in the digital age. Under the *Criminal Code Act 1995* (Cth), the federal government legislates for offences with national or international dimensions. These include online grooming, child exploitation material (CEM), and extraterritorial offending. For example, offences committed overseas by Australian citizens or in cross-border digital environments are a Commonwealth responsibility. This reflects the reality that child sexual abuse is no longer confined by geography and requires national laws that can operate across jurisdictions and in cooperation with other countries.

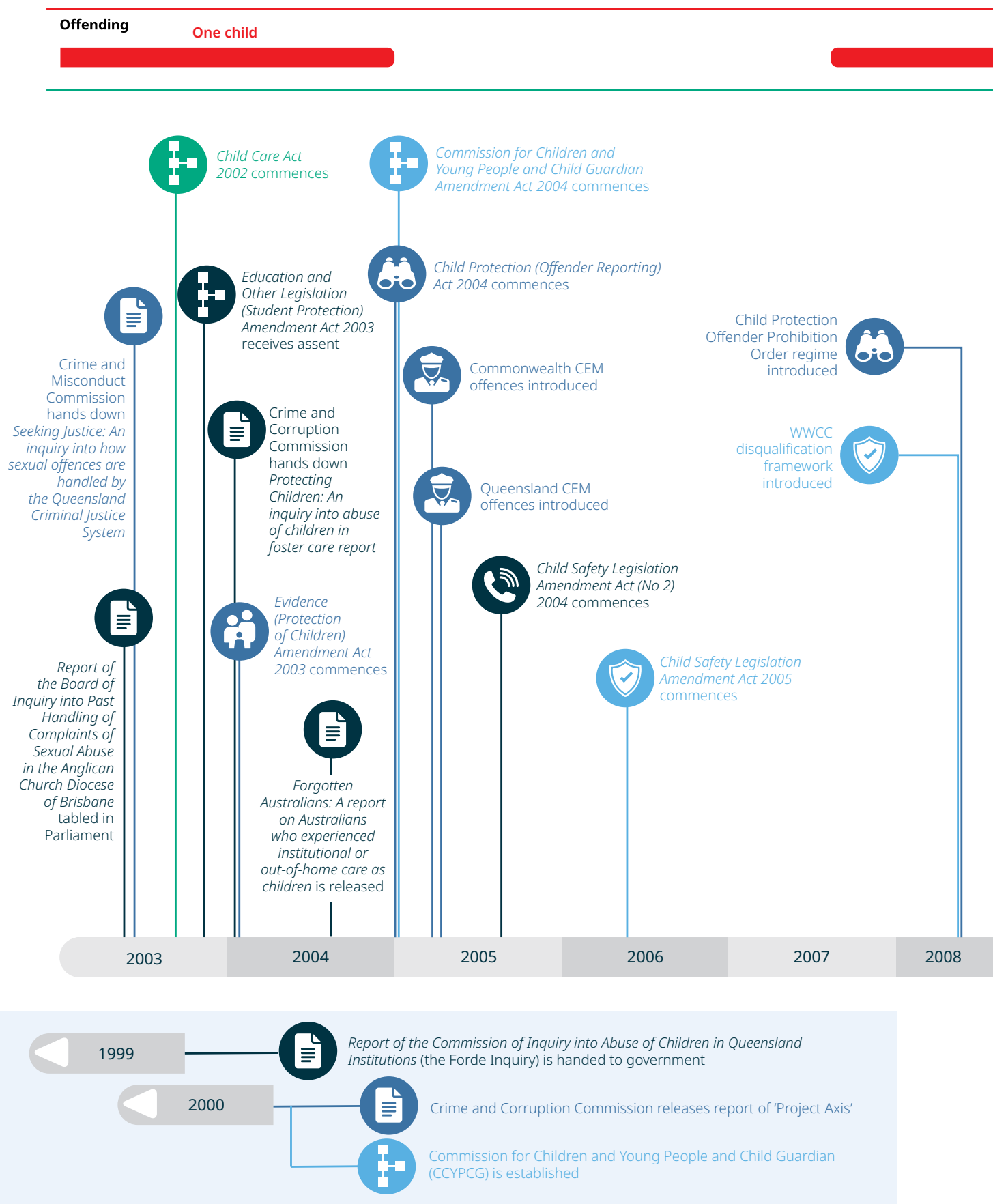
Legislation also extends beyond the criminal sphere. States and territories have developed civil and regulatory frameworks designed to create safer environments for children. Victoria's *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005*, which mandates compliance with child safe standards, and New South Wales' *Children's Guardian Amendment (Child Safe Scheme) Act 2021*, which established a child safe scheme, are two examples. These reforms highlight a preventive focus, recognising that child safety requires not only criminal sanctions but also organisational responsibility. At the national level, the endorsement of the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations in 2019 sought to bring greater coherence to these state-based schemes and establish a common foundation for safeguarding across Australia.

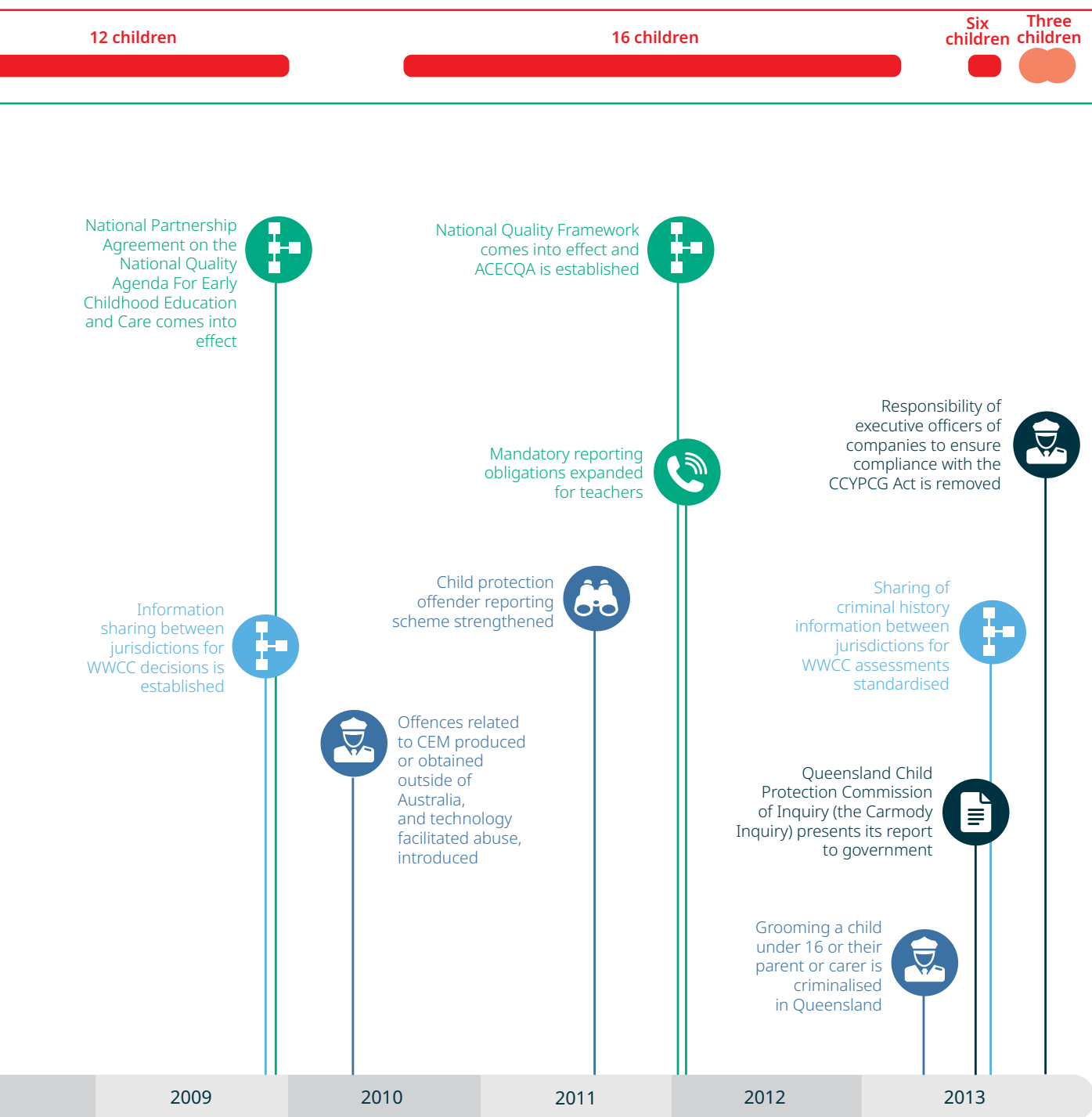
Despite these advances, inconsistency between jurisdictions remains a persistent challenge. Definitions of offences, reporting obligations, and regulatory regimes vary, as do the operation of working with children checks. The Royal Commission emphasised the risks this creates, both in confusing organisations and professionals and in leaving gaps in protection. While progress has been made, such as the intergovernmental agreement on nationally consistent working with children checks (WWCC), full harmonisation has yet to be achieved.

To aid our understanding the Board commissioned Queensland law firm Marrawah Law and Advisory to analyse the legal frameworks in place in Queensland that aim to protect children from sexual abuse across the ECEC, police and blue card systems. This review found that:

In the 25 years to 2025, more than 26 pieces of legislation have impacted Queensland safeguarding systems, including at least 12 entirely new principal Acts. In addition, during this time hundreds of amendments to relevant Acts, Regulations and other statutes were progressed.

Figure 9A: Timeline of legislative and policy changes, 1999–2013





Offending

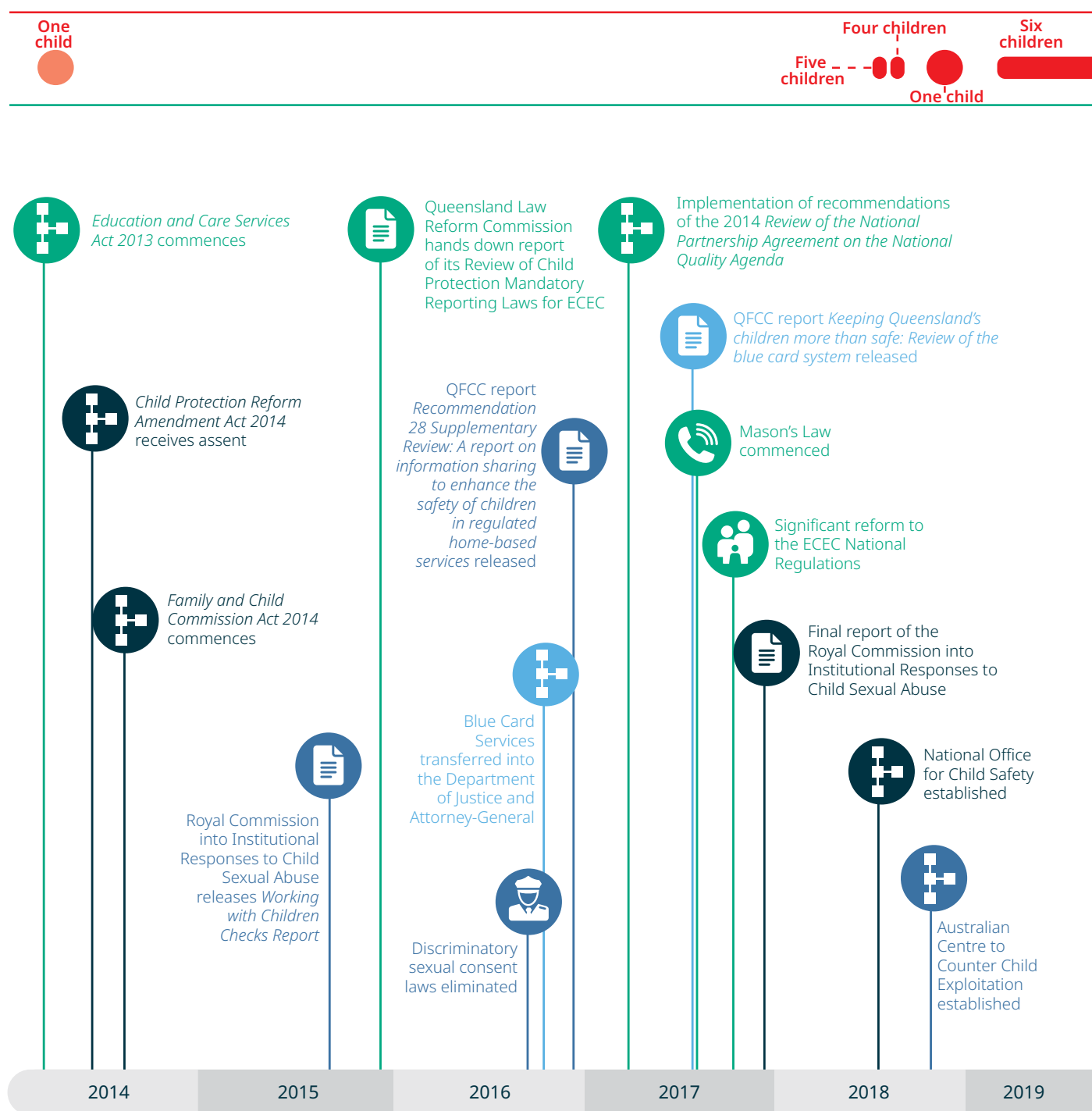
Offending event or period

Legend

Early childhood
 Blue card
 Criminal justice
 Other / multiple

Screening Safeguarding Offences Sentencing Monitoring Systems Reviews Reporting

Figure 9B: Timeline of legislative and policy changes, 2014–25



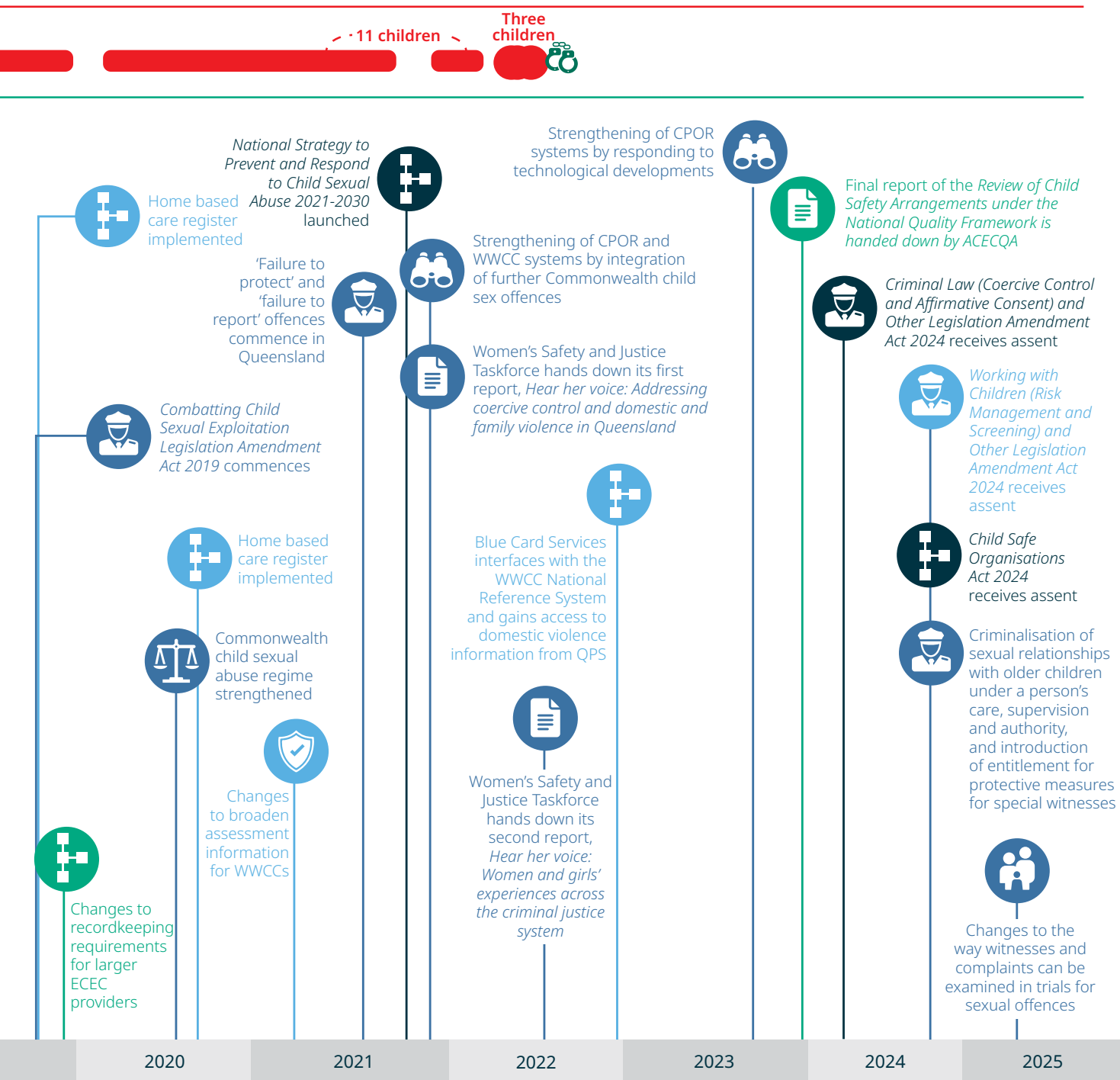


Table 1: Key legislation in Queensland to protect and respond to child sexual abuse

Act (Year, Qld)	Focus / Key points
<i>Criminal Code Act 1899</i>	Core criminal law defining sexual offences against children (rape, indecent treatment, maintaining sexual relationships with a child). Sets penalties and aggravating circumstances.
<i>Evidence Act 1977</i>	Provides protections for child witnesses (e.g. video link, recorded statements, limits on cross-examination). Recognises children's vulnerability in court processes.
<i>Police Powers and Responsibilities Act 2000</i>	Framework for police powers in Queensland. Covers investigation processes, arrest, search, seizure, surveillance, and child interview procedures. Provides the authority underpinning police investigations of child sexual abuse.
<i>Child Protection Act 1999</i>	Establishes the child protection system. Allows investigation, removal, and intervention when children are at risk of harm (including sexual abuse). Defines 'best interests of the child' as paramount. Includes mandatory reporting obligations.
<i>Working with Children (Risk Management and Screening) Act 2000</i>	Creates the blue card system. Requires screening of people working with children. Disqualifies individuals with child sexual abuse offences. Aims to prevent unsuitable people from working with children.
<i>Child Protection (Offender Reporting and Offender Prohibition Order) Act 2004</i>	Establishes a child sex offender register. Imposes ongoing reporting obligations (addresses, travel, internet use). Allows prohibition orders to restrict high-risk offender behaviour.
<i>Child Protection (Offender Prohibition Order) Act 2008 (later incorporated into 2004 Act)</i>	Strengthens police ability to seek court orders restricting high-risk offender activities to prevent conduct that could lead to reoffending.
<i>Education (General Provisions) Act 2006</i>	Governs the safety of children in schools. Obligates teachers and staff to report suspicions of harm. Provides powers to exclude risky individuals from schools.
<i>Child Protection (Offender Reporting and Offender Prohibition Order) Amendment Act 2014</i>	Tightens offender reporting laws and expands police monitoring powers (travel, online accounts) to reflect digital risks and repeat offending.
<i>Child Safe Organisations Act 2024</i>	Introduces obligations for certain organisations to implement child safe standards and risk management strategies to reflect a preventative, systems-based approach to the safety of children.

Over 25 years the Queensland Government has made:



32 Amendments to Chapter 22 of Queensland's Criminal Code

33 Amendments to the *Child Protection (Offender Reporting and Offender Prohibition Order) Act 2004* (originally the *Child Protection (Offender Reporting) Act 2004*)

83 Amendments to the *Working with Children (Risk Management and Screening) Act 2000* (originally the *Commission for Children and Young People Act 2000*)

Changes to legislation in many cases reflected a move towards consistency across jurisdictions, acknowledging not only the shared responsibility framework but also the transiency of workers. While legislative change was motivated at least in part by this common goal, review of the legislative framework has found that it is expansive, complex, crowded and fragmented. Marrawah Law and Advisory advised the review that:

“

Legislative changes to achieve various objectives related to children's safety over the study period have been numerous and frequent. In some cases, the frequency and volume of legislative change has added to the complexity of legislation.

- Marrawah Law and Advisory

”

Recent alarming cases of child sexual abuse in ECEC are a critical reminder: the capacity of any one safeguarding mechanism or scheme to protect children in high-risk child-related settings is, in isolation, limited. Instead 'a more holistic and integrated, rather than piecemeal, reform approach will assist to minimise unnecessary regulatory duplication. More importantly, such an approach will assist to maximise the interoperability of laws for more effective safeguarding'.³³

Strategic frameworks

Legislation alone cannot drive reform or protect children. Strategic frameworks are essential for setting shared goals, aligning priorities, and ensuring that commitments are translated into practical action. They also provide continuity in a policy space where political leadership can shift quickly, bridging the gap between short electoral cycles and the long-term work of prevention. Yet strategies must be supported by resources and accountability if they are to move beyond rhetoric.

The first *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020* was a landmark in uniting governments and the community sector around a common agenda. It introduced the principle that “protecting children is everyone's business” and promoted prevention, early intervention, and cross-sector partnerships. However, evaluations found progress uneven, limited by weak accountability and inconsistent implementation across jurisdictions.

Its successor, *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031*, seeks to overcome these shortcomings. It builds on the findings of the Royal Commission, sets clearer priorities, and emphasises joint accountability. Importantly, it has been co-designed with children, families, and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership Group, reflecting the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* and responding to past critiques that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives were marginalised.

The national strategy and related action plans

The *National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021-2030* is a 10-year strategic framework based on a public health approach which responds to over 100 recommendations from the Royal Commission. It includes measures to better prevent, identify and respond to child sexual abuse and establishes a vision for all children and young people to be protected from sexual abuse and feel supported.

The national strategy has five themes:

1. Awareness raising, education and building child safe cultures
2. Supporting and empowering victims and survivors
3. Enhancing national approaches to children with harmful sexual behaviours
4. Offender prevention and intervention
5. Improving the evidence base.

These strategies have two related action plans: the *First National Action Plan* which includes Australia-wide actions and commitments that the Australian, state and territory governments will deliver together and the *First Commonwealth Action Plan* which includes specific measures for the Commonwealth to address. The national strategy is also supported by a monitoring and evaluation framework to ensure implementation is accountable and transparent, and to track progress against short, medium and long term outcomes.

These strategies are also aligned with the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020*, *Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031*, and the associated action plans that sit under these.

The National Principles for Child Safe Organisations

Based on its findings about the risks of child sexual abuse in institutional settings, as well as the prevention, identification and response, the Royal Commission set out 10 child safe standards that were intended to be applied by all state and territory governments as mandatory minimum requirements for institutions that provide services to or care for children. The Australian Human Rights Commission formulated the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations (the National Principles) to give effect to the standards and these principles were endorsed by the Prime Minister in February 2019.

At the state and territory level, national objectives are interpreted through local reform programs. For example, Queensland's *Supporting Families Changing Futures* program emerged from the Carmody Inquiry and shifted the focus towards prevention and earlier intervention. Victoria's *Roadmap for Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children* emphasised integrated services and community-based supports, while New South Wales adopted *Their Futures Matter*, aimed at system redesign through cross-agency collaboration. These state strategies demonstrate how national and state inquiries drive localised reform agendas, while still contributing to a broader national direction. This jurisdictional-specific action can also create unevenness. A child's experience of support and protection can vary significantly depending on where they live, raising questions about equity and national responsibility.

Queensland's safeguarding strategies

Queensland has adopted a suite of strategies that, while distinct in scope and application, collectively seek to form a framework to prevent, detect, and respond to sexual violence and child sexual abuse. These strategies translate high-level policy commitments into practice, providing agencies and communities with structured approaches for protecting children and supporting victim-survivors. They include:

- **Prevent. Support. Believe. Queensland's framework to address sexual violence** - The *Prevent. Support. Believe.* framework represents Queensland's overarching whole-of-government strategy for responding to sexual violence. It sets out the vision of a society free from sexual violence in all its forms—spanning child sexual abuse, youth sexual violence, sexual harassment, and technology-facilitated abuse. The framework establishes strategic priorities and supports detailed action plans for the period 2023–28, ensuring a coordinated, system-wide response (Queensland Department of Families, Seniors, Disability Services, and Child Safety).
- **Interagency Guidelines for Responding to Sexual Assault or Child Sexual Abuse** - Updated in January 2024, these guidelines provide the foundational practice framework for agencies that respond to sexual assault and child sexual abuse. They articulate expectations for delivering trauma-informed, timely, and coordinated services, ensuring victim-survivors are met with consistent standards of care and support regardless of which agency they first engage with. These guidelines operationalise collaboration across government and non-government partners (Queensland Department of Families, Child Safety, Seniors and Disability Services).
- **Department of Education's "Aware. Protective. Safe." Strategy** - The Department of Education has developed the *Aware. Protective. Safe.* strategy as its core response to the findings of the Royal Commission. It aligns schools and early childhood services with national child safe principles, embedding a culture of safety through structured cycles of reflection, embedding, and continuous improvement. This strategy is tailored to ensure Queensland's education system proactively prevents and addresses risks to children (Queensland Department of Education).
- **Child and Youth Risk Management Strategies (blue card system)** - Operating under the Blue Card framework, Child and Youth Risk Management Strategies are mandatory for organisations working with children. They provide a practical safeguard by requiring organisations to establish commitments to child safety, codes of conduct, recruitment and training processes, and risk management plans. These strategies ensure frontline services working with children in Queensland maintain consistent, preventative safeguards (Queensland Department of Justice).
- **Our Way: A Generational Strategy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families** - Queensland has also adopted long-term strategies addressing the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system. *Our Way* (2017–37), co-designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, is a generational strategy that focuses on cultural responsiveness, self-determination, and community-led service design. It explicitly seeks to eliminate overrepresentation by addressing systemic drivers of risk and harm for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families (Queensland Department of Families, Child Safety, Seniors and Disability Services).
- **Child Protection Framework (Family Support and Child Protection System)** - The state's Child Protection Framework establishes the practice continuum across early intervention, statutory child protection, and family support services. It defines stages, expectations, and outcomes for children at risk of or experiencing harm, aiming to build consistency in how the system supports families and protects children. This framework provides the operational backbone for frontline workers and agencies delivering child protection services (Queensland Government, *Our Performance*).

- **Queensland Police Service Sexual Violence Response Strategy 2025-29** - The QPS has also embedded an operational strategy to ensure victim-centred, trauma-informed policing in cases of sexual violence. The *Sexual Violence Response Strategy 2025-29* seeks to deliver effective policing responses and prevention approaches to sexual violence, ensuring victim survivors are safe and feel safe. The strategy commits to a range of actions under the four pillars of a healthy and engaged workforce, community safety, engaged and trusted relationships, and effective and efficient service delivery.

These frameworks collectively shape Queensland's strategic vision for preventing and responding to child sexual abuse through:

- whole-of-government coordination (e.g. *Prevent. Support. Believe.*)
- operational consistency across agencies (e.g. Interagency Guidelines)
- sector-specific safety strategies (Education Department's *Aware. Protective. Safe.*)
- cultural and community-led approaches (Our Way strategy)
- regulatory standards to prevent harm (blue card system)
- embedded system design in child protection services (Child Protection Framework)
- law enforcement commitments to trauma-informed practice (QPS Strategy).

Government departments and their programs

Government agencies are the machinery that turns law and strategy into practice. They are the operational arms of government.

State bureaucracies balance legal requirements, resource limitations, and public expectations. They operate within broader cultural and social contexts, reflecting prevailing attitudes towards children, families, and abuse. Community expectations are also central. Within this context, challenges remain in sustaining protection initiatives beyond political cycles. Governments change, budgets are reallocated, and priorities shift. This is a recurring problem in social policy: programs that are effective in the long term may be vulnerable to short-term funding decisions. For example, evaluations of the first *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children* showed that many successful programs were unable to be scaled or sustained due to funding uncertainty. Ensuring long-term investment requires embedding the safety of children into the core business of government, rather than treating it as a temporary priority.

The question of bureaucracy and culture is important. Bureaucracies are often structured to minimise risk and comply with rules, but this can sometimes lead to rigidity and a failure to respond flexibly to children's needs. Families often describe systems as intimidating, confusing, or unresponsive. The Royal Commission highlighted how institutional cultures that prioritised reputation over children's safety enabled abuse to persist.

Independent oversight bodies provide a counterbalance to bureaucracies, ensuring that systems remain accountable and responsive. State children's commissioners and guardians, such as the Queensland Family and Child Commission and the Victorian Commissioner for Children and Young People, monitor system performance, advocate for children's rights, and conduct systemic inquiries. The Commonwealth has established a National Children's Commissioner within the Australian Human Rights Commission, giving children representation at the national level. Oversight bodies such as ombudsmen and child death review boards contribute by investigating complaints, identifying systemic issues, and recommending reforms. These mechanisms reflect the Royal Commission's emphasis on transparency and accountability as foundations for restoring trust.

At the federal level, agencies such as the AFP, the eSafety Commissioner, and the ACCCE focus on areas of national concern for children, particularly online safety and offences that cross borders. The NOCS provides leadership, coordination, and oversight, aiming to ensure that the Royal Commission's recommendations are implemented consistently. At the state and territory level, child protection departments, police, and education and health agencies are frontline actors. They respond to reports, investigate concerns, deliver services, and regulate compliance.

Commonwealth entities that protect children

Australian Federal Police

The AFP is established under the *Australian Federal Police Act 1979*, which sets out its structure, powers, and functions. It operates as the Commonwealth's principal federal law enforcement agency. Under section 8 of the Act, the AFP's functions include:

- providing police services in the Australian Capital Territory, Jervis Bay Territory, and to enforce Commonwealth laws, safeguard Commonwealth property, and protect Commonwealth interests
- investigating state offences with a federal aspect, administering witness protection under the *Witness Protection Act 1994*, and enforcing the *Proceeds of Crime Act 2002*
- performing protective and custodial roles as directed by the Minister
- cooperating with domestic and foreign law enforcement, intelligence, and regulatory agencies, and contributing to international peace, stability, and security, including overseas operations.

The National Office for Child Safety

The NOCS is a dedicated office within the federal Attorney-General's department which provides national leadership on child safety and works to implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission.

The key responsibilities of NOCS include:

- coordinating the implementation of the National Strategy and Monitoring and Evaluation Framework
- leading the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations
- engaging with stakeholder and advisory groups
- leading the Commonwealth Child Safe Framework
- reporting on the progress of implementation of recommendations from the Royal Commission
- guidance for media on reporting on child sexual abuse
- establishing Minimum Practice Standards for services responding to child sexual abuse.

The National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse

Since its establishment in 2021, the non-government National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse (National Centre) has laid solid foundations for an effective and innovative organisation. In 2025–26, the Board endorsed three strategic impact goals:

- Empower victims and survivors by embedding lived and living experience across all facets of its work—this includes a new framework, deeper community partnerships, and workforce capability-building.
- Build sector capability and responsiveness by translating research into practice and enabling professionals, organisations, and communities to deliver trauma-informed responses to child sexual abuse.
- Drive policy, systems and culture reform by mobilising its maturing research base to inform national policy, shape reform agendas, and support long-term cultural change.³⁴

Over the last four years the National Centre has:

- invested nearly \$3 million in research, commissioning over 40 projects
- delivered Australia's first Community Attitudes Study on child sexual abuse
- launched *The Change Academy*, a professional learning hub for practitioners and communities
- developed evidence-informed tools for trauma-aware practice
- engaged thousands through webinars, events, and campaigns, building a strong, connected community.

eSafety Commissioner

The Australian Government established the Office of the eSafety Commissioner (eSafety) in 2015 via the *Enhancing Online Safety Act 2015*. eSafety describes itself as the 'world's first government regulatory agency committed to keeping its citizens safer online.'³⁵ The powers and responsibility of the eSafety Commissioner as an independent statutory office holder were increased by the *Online Safety Act 2021* (Cth).

The *Online Safety Act 2021*, effective from 23 January 2022, established and consolidated the Commissioner's regulatory powers across three schemes: protecting children from cyberbullying, safeguarding adults from severe online abuse, and managing non-consensual intimate image sharing. Under this Act, the Commissioner is empowered to:

- issue takedown notices for harmful content, including child cyberbullying and severe abuse, across all relevant online services—not just social media
- enforce industry codes and standards, such as new codes addressing 'lawful but harmful' content and emerging technologies
- obtain necessary information, including subscriber data for investigations, and address image-based abuse through expanded information-gathering powers.

At the state and territory level the primary agencies that protect children are state and territory departments responsible for child safety. These departments receive notifications of suspected abuse, assess risks, intervene to protect children, and support families. They work closely with police, education, health, and non-government organisations. Historically, state child protection agencies in Australia have fluctuated in the scope of services they provide to protect children, balancing responsibilities between primary prevention—supporting all children and communities to prevent harm—and secondary or tertiary interventions, focused solely on responding when abuse or neglect by a parent or primary carer is identified. At various points, agencies have implemented programs aimed at strengthening parenting, early childhood wellbeing, and community capacity building, reflecting a broader protective role that extended beyond immediate parenting. These periods of expansive engagement often coincided with societal recognition of the value of upstream investment in child safety, where resources were allocated to support all children, not only those already at risk. Over time, however, contemporary legal interpretations and statutory frameworks have increasingly narrowed the operational remit of child protection agencies. The emphasis is now on protecting children from harm arising primarily within the parental or caregiver relationship, as enshrined in legislation such as the *Child Protection Act 1999* (Qld). This shift has reduced the scope for agencies to provide primary or universal preventive services, meaning that children's protection increasingly relies on the direct intervention of parents and families, rather than systemic supports provided by the state. As a result, while demand for services continues to grow—particularly in the context of complex social issues and heightened awareness of child abuse—statutory and legal parameters constrain agencies' capacity to address risk in the broader population or to proactively prevent harm in children who are not yet identified as at risk.

“

It is a concerning truth that the Department of Child Safety has no role in protecting children from paedophiles that are not their parents.

”

Other departments play a secondary role in child protection and safeguarding, often connected to their primary portfolio purpose. Police investigate crimes against children. Health services are often the first to identify concerns, providing not only medical treatment but also therapeutic supports. Education systems are critical because schools are one of the few universal services that reach almost all children. Teachers, counsellors, and principals are mandated reporters, and schools are vital sites for prevention education.

Queensland state entities that protect children

Queensland Police Service

The Queensland Police Service (QPS) is constituted under the *Police Service Administration Act 1990* (Qld) and guided by the *Police Powers and Responsibilities Act 2000* (Qld), which together provide the legal framework for policing functions across the state. Its remit spans crime prevention, community safety, criminal investigations, and law enforcement, alongside collaboration with other state, federal, and international agencies. The QPS Strategic Plan 2025–29 sets priorities to deliver rights-respecting, community-centred policing, build a capable and resilient workforce, and strengthen trust in policing institutions. Complementing this are dedicated strategies for domestic, family, and sexual violence that emphasise improved investigative capacity and enhanced victim support, including reforms to the way QPS disrupts sexual violence and related harms.

Queensland Department of Child Safety

The Department of Child Safety, Seniors and Disability Services derives its statutory mandate primarily from the *Child Protection Act 1999* (Qld), which establishes the legislative framework for protecting children who have been harmed or are at risk of harm from their parent or caregiver. The Act underpins the Department's legal responsibilities to investigate concerns, intervene where necessary, and ensure the safety and wellbeing of children in Queensland. Strategically, the Department's Strategic Plan 2024–28 sets a vision of ending violence against women and children and transforming the child protection system through prevention and early intervention. In the context of child sexual abuse, this means embedding trauma-informed practice, reducing over-representation of vulnerable groups, and implementing the Sexual Violence Prevention Framework, which coordinates whole-of-government action to strengthen prevention, reporting, and responses to child sexual abuse and sexual violence.

Queensland Department of Justice

The Queensland Department of Justice operates under a range of legislation, and provides legal, policy, and administrative support to the Attorney-General in discharging their statutory responsibilities. Its legal basis encompasses advising government on legislation, representing the state in civil and criminal matters, administering the justice system, and ensuring compliance with Queensland's laws and regulatory frameworks. Strategically, the Department prioritises maintaining access to justice, strengthening the integrity and efficiency of courts and tribunals, supporting victims of crime, and developing laws and policies that enhance public safety and protect vulnerable populations—including children at risk of abuse.

Queensland Health

Queensland Health operates under the *Hospital and Health Boards Act 2011* (Qld), which establishes the legal structure of the Department of Health and the system of independent Hospital and Health Services that deliver public healthcare across the state. The Act provides the statutory foundation for Queensland Health's role in service delivery, governance, accountability, and clinical safety. Within this framework, Queensland Health has a frontline role in responding to child sexual abuse: public hospitals and health services provide immediate medical care, forensic and sexual health services, and crisis support for victim-survivors. Its policies, including the "just-in-case" forensic examination directive, ensuring evidence can be preserved while safeguarding survivor choice.

Queensland Department of Education

The Queensland Department of Education operates primarily under the *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006* and the *Education (General Provisions) Regulation 2017* which outlines the management of educational facilities including compliance and regulation, the rights of students, and compulsory schooling requirements. The legislative framework for the Department of Education includes the requirement of staff to report child sexual abuse or suspected child sexual abuse. The *Aware. Protective. Safe. Strategy* established in 2020 and updated in 2021 sets out the department's commitment to the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations and to keeping children safe in educational environments. The Department of Education also incorporates regulatory bodies such as the Early Childhood Regulatory Authority, which provides oversight of ECEC services in Queensland, ensuring their compliance with the National Quality Standards.

Victims' Commissioner

The *Victims' Commissioner and Sexual Violence Review Board Act 2024* (Qld) establishes the independent statutory role of the Victims' Commissioner, tasked with advocating for victims of violent crime and overseeing systemic reviews of sexual violence through the Sexual Violence Review Board. In the context of child sexual abuse, the Commissioner's role is to ensure the justice system better reflects the dignity, safety, and evidence of victims, while amplifying victim-survivors voices in law reform and policy development. The Commissioner's Strategic Plan 2024–29 commits to a trauma-informed, rights-based, and person-centred approach, seeking to dismantle barriers to justice and ensure victims—including children—receive respectful and consistent support across police, health, legal, and social service systems.

Queensland Family and Child Commission

The *Queensland Family and Child Commission Act 2014* (Qld) establishes the Queensland Family and Child Commission as a statutory body with functions centred on systemic oversight, research, advocacy, and promoting the safety and wellbeing of children and young people. Importantly, the Act does not confer on the Commission any operational child safeguarding responsibilities. Its role is to monitor, advise, and support improvement across government and non-government systems rather than intervene directly in individual cases. This distinction will shift with the commencement of the *Child Safe Organisations Act 2024* (Qld), which introduces a new regulatory role for the Commission. Under this scheme, the Commission will be responsible for monitoring and enforcing compliance with legislated child safe standards across organisations that engage with children in Queensland, marking its first direct role in operational child safeguarding. Critically on 1 July 2026 the Commission will become responsible for operating a reportable conduct scheme in Queensland.

The effectiveness of government entities depends not only on structures but also on culture. The Royal Commission revealed that many institutions prioritised their reputations over children's safety. This culture of denial and defensiveness allowed abuse to persist and discouraged victims from coming forward. Transforming agencies requires cultural change as much as structural reform. Agencies must move from being compliance-driven and risk-averse to being genuinely child-centred, transparent, and accountable. This involves leadership, training, and engagement with children and victim-survivors.

Current programs that protect children

Programs bring all of these elements—laws, strategies, agencies—into the lives of children and families. Government programs are where children and families encounter the system most directly. They can empower children, support families, and reduce risk. Yet programs are vulnerable to funding cuts and political shifts. A program may be highly effective but discontinued when a government changes or budgets tighten. This instability undermines prevention and leaves communities without consistent support.

Prevention programs in schools, such as respectful relationships education and protective behaviours curricula, equip children with knowledge and skills to recognise unsafe situations. Community programs, often delivered by non-government organisations with government funding, support families to build resilience and reduce risk factors associated with abuse, such as social isolation, poverty, or parental mental health issues. The Bravehearts Ditto's Keep Safe Adventure Show, for example, delivers protective behaviours education to young children in schools and early learning centres across Australia. Australia's Biggest Child Safety Lesson, an annual initiative by the Daniel Morcombe Foundation, stands as a pivotal national effort in child safety education. This live-streamed event, conducted during National Child Protection Week, delivers age-appropriate safety messages to children aged 4 to 12 years. The lessons focus on empowering children to recognise, react to, and report unsafe situations, thereby promoting personal safety and consent. By engaging thousands of students across the country, it fosters a culture of awareness and proactive safety among young Australians. Through these efforts, the foundation has significantly contributed to raising awareness and providing resources that empower children to protect themselves, ensuring that Daniel's legacy continues to inspire and safeguard future generations.

Therapeutic programs for victim-survivors, such as those funded through the National Redress Scheme, provide counselling and support services.

Perpetrator-focused programs are another crucial component, though often less visible. Programs such as New South Wales' Cedar Cottage, which offered treatment for intrafamilial offenders as an alternative to incarceration under certain conditions, aim to prevent reoffending by addressing underlying behaviours. Similarly, the federal government has funded initiatives to prevent online child sexual exploitation, recognising the growing risks posed by digital environments. These programs show that prevention must operate on multiple fronts: reducing risks for children, supporting families, and intervening with those who pose threats.

Creating child safe bureaucracies requires more than compliance; it requires cultural change towards openness, listening, and accountability. Training, leadership, and survivor engagement are all necessary for shifting cultures from defensive to child-centred.

Role of community and private organisations

Both private and non-government organisations are critical to preventing and responding to child sexual abuse. They are often the first point of contact for children and families and therefore have a responsibility to operate in a child safe manner. Schools, ECEC services, sporting organisations, hospitals, disability services, and community health providers all occupy positions of trust that enable early identification of risks and direct support to children.

Organisations also have legal and ethical responsibilities, including mandatory reporting obligations in many jurisdictions and in many cases obligations under their relevant regulatory regime. More broadly, they are expected to implement the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations, embedding child safety into governance, culture, and practice. Organisations also contribute by raising awareness, conducting research, and providing direct services to victim-survivors and their families.

Communities

Finally, the broader social context cannot be overlooked. Governments and organisations operate within a society that holds certain beliefs, values, and attitudes about children, sexuality, authority, and institutions. Stigma, silence, and shame surrounding sexual abuse have historically discouraged disclosure and reporting. The Royal Commission found that many victim-survivors carried their experiences in silence for decades. Changing this culture is a long-term project, requiring public education, survivor advocacy, and community conversations. Government campaigns, non-government leadership, and media engagement all play roles in shaping a culture where abuse is no longer hidden but recognised and addressed.

The Australian community as a whole has a shared responsibility to promote child safety. Families, communities, and individuals play a crucial role in recognising signs of harm, understanding the risks and protective factors associated with child sexual abuse, and knowing how to respond to concerns.

Australians demand that governments protect children, yet also value family autonomy and privacy. Navigating these expectations requires careful policy design and clear communication.

Community awareness and vigilance underpin broader safeguarding and prevention strategies. By fostering safe and supportive environments, individuals and communities contribute to resilience and wellbeing, helping to prevent abuse before it occurs.

Trust is central. When communities trust government and institutions, they are more likely to report concerns, engage with services, and support prevention initiatives. When trust is broken, as it was in many institutions exposed by the Royal Commission, rebuilding it is a long and difficult process. Transparency, accountability, and meaningful engagement with victim-survivors are essential for restoring trust. The establishment of the National Redress Scheme was one attempt to provide recognition and support to victim-survivors, though it has faced criticism for complexity and delay. Nevertheless, it demonstrates a national acknowledgment of institutional failures and a commitment to providing some measure of justice. The role of trust cannot be overstated. When communities lack trust in government or institutions, they may hesitate to report abuse or engage with services.

Social features of the Australian community shape how governments and bureaucracies operate. Attitudes towards authority, children, and family influence both the demand for services and the willingness to engage with them. Historically, silence and stigma around sexual abuse meant that many victim-survivors did not disclose until decades later. The Royal Commission documented this in harrowing detail, showing how victim-survivors felt silenced by shame, disbelief, or fear of retribution. Public awareness campaigns and survivor advocacy have begun to shift this culture, but stigma and reluctance remain significant barriers. Government has a role to play in continuing to normalise conversations about the safety of children and in creating safe avenues for disclosure.

Conclusion

One of the most striking lessons from the Royal Commission is that failures were not confined to a single sector or type of organisation. Abuse occurred in churches, schools, sporting clubs, government institutions, foster care, and online environments. This finding reinforced the point that prevention must be systemic and societal.

“

No single set of laws, no single agency, and no single program can create safety alone. Instead, a whole system must work together, with each component reinforcing the others.

Legislation provides the binding framework, strategies give direction, agencies operationalise policy, and programs bring interventions into lived reality. When any of these components are weak or disconnected, the entire system is compromised.

”

Looking forward, achieving a homogeneous response to preventing child sexual abuse requires several key commitments. First, legislation must continue to evolve to close gaps and ensure consistency across jurisdictions. This includes harmonising definitions, strengthening mandatory reporting, and ensuring all organisations that engage with children adhere to child safe standards. Second, strategic plans must provide continuity and accountability, ensuring that prevention remains a national priority across political cycles. Third, agencies must pursue cultural change as well as structural reform.

Building genuinely child-centred bureaucracies requires leadership, training, and ongoing engagement with children and victim-survivors. Fourth, programs must be sustained and embedded, rather than subject to the vagaries of funding cycles. Prevention must be treated as core business, not as an optional or temporary initiative. Fifth, communities and local governments must be engaged as active partners. Prevention is most effective when it is grounded in local realities and supported by strong local networks.

Finally, the broader cultural shift towards openness, awareness, and accountability must continue. The Royal Commission changed the national conversation, but cultural change takes generations. Governments, institutions, communities, and families must continue to challenge stigma, break silences, and promote child safety as a shared responsibility.

Case study

Prevent. Support. Believe: Queensland's Framework to address sexual violence

Queensland's Framework sets a vision for everyone in Queensland to live free of the fear, threat or experience of sexual violence. The Framework's three priorities are:

1. **Prevention:** everyone works together to bring about cultural, behavioural and structural change to prevent sexual violence.
2. **Support and healing:** all people who are impacted by sexual violence are believed and supported to recover and heal.
3. **Accountability and justice:** the justice system is responsive to the needs of victims and survivors, and perpetrators are held to account for their actions.³⁶

The framework identifies priority areas for action and strategies to prevent and respond to all people who experience sexual violence, including children and young people. It also recognises that sexual violence is a gendered issue with the majority of victim-survivors being women and girls.

Implementation of the framework is being delivered through a series of whole-of-government Action Plans (2021–22, and 2023–24 to 2027–28). The current second Action Plan aims to progress measures to increase knowledge and understanding of the drivers of sexual violence, and challenge attitudes, practices and structures which enable violence to occur and prevent people from speaking out against it. The Department of Families, Seniors, Disability Services and Child Safety is responsible for the delivery of these action plans.

Actions currently being progressed include:

- Continuing to strengthen support for people who are impacted by sexual violence to navigate the criminal justice system and investigating the expansion of alternative justice responses by continuing the witness intermediary pilot program in relation to child sexual offence prosecutions, to assist witnesses and victim-survivors with communication difficulties to give their best evidence.
- Continuing to review and evaluate justice processes and relevant laws in Queensland to ensure that victim-survivors of sexual violence are supported and perpetrators are held accountable to ensure that the sexual abuse and exploitation of children is addressed in a way that is consistent with community standards.

Chapter

03

The systems under review: The Queensland early childhood education and care system

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The Queensland early childhood education and care system

Over the past 25 years, Australia's early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector has undergone a dramatic transformation. Shaped by policy changes, rising workforce participation, shifting social expectations, and significant investment, the ECEC sector has expanded in scale and seen major shifts in usage patterns.

Today ECEC is a foundational part of Australian social infrastructure. In 2025, approximately 1.44 million children from around 1.02 million families regularly access government-approved care,³⁷ up from about 1.27 million children and 874 000 families in 2016.³⁸

Australian Bureau of Statistics survey data shows that in 1999, 17 per cent of Australian children aged zero to 11 attended formal care, being either outside school hours care, long day care, family day care, occasional care or other formal care.³⁹ For children aged zero to four, this proportion was 27 per cent.⁴⁰ By 2017, the proportion of zero- to 12-year-olds who attended formal care had risen to 27.2 per cent, and to 42 per cent for zero- to four-year-olds.⁴¹ In 2025, the proportion of children aged zero to 12 years who attend a Child Care Subsidy approved service is 35 percent, and 50.8 per cent for zero- to five-year-olds⁴². This shift reflects parents' growing reliance on formal childcare to support workforce participation.

ECEC services, include:

- long day care
- family day care
- preschool/kindergarten
- outside school hours care (OSHC).⁴³

Most children attending these services are under the age of five, with long day care being the most common arrangement.

Nationally, there are more than 17,000 approved services.⁴⁴ Over half are operated by for-profit providers, including large corporate chains and private equity-backed operators.⁴⁵ The sector is supported by approximately \$15 billion in combined annual government subsidies and employs over 250,000 workers.⁴⁶ The workforce is overwhelmingly female, with only 7.6 per cent of employees being male.⁴⁷



Data snapshot – The ECEC system



3302 approved ECEC services operated in Queensland as of 31 December 2024.



54 per cent of the national ECEC market is run by for-profit providers, approaching **70 per cent** in centre-based services. The **majority** of OSHC and family day care services are operated by for-profit providers.



1 per cent of providers are considered large (operating 25+ services), yet they manage **36 per cent** of all services.

Since the introduction of the National Quality Framework (NQF) in 2012 the number of approved ECEC services across Australia has increased from just over 14,116 in 2013⁴⁸ to 17,842 in 2024.⁴⁹ The vast majority of these services are centre-based with family day care currently representing only two per cent of approved ECEC services.⁵⁰

Funding and profitability of the sector

IBISWorld Industry market research reports that Australia's ECEC services industry revenue is projected to reach \$22.3 billion in 2025–26, up from about \$21.4 billion in 2024.⁵¹ Forecasts show an expected continuation of this increase into the late 2020s, reaching around \$25.7 billion by 2030.⁵²

The childcare industry is heavily reliant on government funding and therefore changes in government policies can have a significant impact on the industry's performance. The impact of the government's 2023 Cheaper Child Care policy which sought to provide cost-of-living relief to Australian families by reducing the cost of ECEC services is an example of this. In 2023–24, total Australian, state and territory real government recurrent and capital expenditure on ECEC services was \$18.2 billion.⁵³ The expenditure on child care subsidies represented \$14.11 billion of this spending.⁵⁴ This represents a 26.0 per cent rise in funding of child care subsidies relative to the previous year.⁵⁵ More subdued growth of 4.4 per cent was foreshadowed in the 2024–25 Federal Budget.⁵⁶

Private for-profit providers hold the largest proportion of the sector, representing 54 per cent of services.⁵⁷ This proportion has risen slightly over the last ten years from 46 per cent.⁵⁸ While most approved providers only hold one service (79%), one per cent of approved providers hold more than 25 services each and as a result, this one per cent holds 36 per cent of approved services.⁵⁹

Of the top ten for-profit childcare providers four are owned by private equity companies, two are listed on the Australian Stock Exchange and two others are listed on foreign stock exchanges.⁶⁰

National workforce

Australia's ECEC workforce is made up of approximately 268,050 employees. Women make up the majority of the employees in all service types except OSHC. OSHC employees are also younger than the general labour force, with most other service types having a similar age profile to other sectors. Family day care employees have an older age profile.

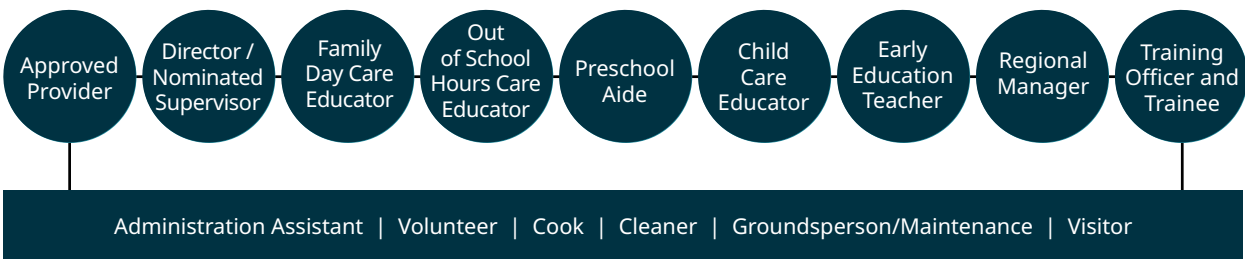
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up a higher proportion of employees in ECEC than in other sectors, though they are not well represented in higher paying roles in the sector. The ECEC workforce also has a higher proportion of employees born overseas, with many temporary staff on study visas, and very few on temporary skilled visas.

When comparing the ECEC workforce with similar sectors such as aged care and disability care, ECEC staff on average work more hours but are paid at similar rates. Further, lower level ECEC staff have lower average weekly earnings than 'storepersons' and 'general clerks' despite requiring higher levels of education. Early childhood teachers are also paid significantly less than primary school teachers despite similar qualification requirements.⁶¹

In Queensland the ECEC workforce is similar demographically to the national workforce. Over 52,000 staff were employed across services in Queensland in 2024, more than 92 per cent of whom were women. The majority of workers are employed in long day care, kindergarten, and OSHC, with a smaller proportion in family day care and occasional care.

Workforce mobility is significant, with staff moving between services and jurisdictions, reflecting the national portability of qualifications and the relatively high turnover in the sector compared to other areas of education.

Figure 11: Scope of the ECEC Workforce



The qualification profile of the workforce reflects the requirements of the NQF, which mandates minimum educator-to-child ratios and qualification levels. Nationally, around 81 per cent of paid contact staff hold an ECEC-related qualification, ranging from a Certificate III to a bachelor's degree. Almost 15 per cent of the workforce hold a bachelor's degree or higher, often employed as Early Childhood Teachers (ECT). In Queensland, registration with the Queensland College of Teachers (QCT) is not required for ECTs in most services, though many voluntarily maintain their registration. Training requirements also include ongoing professional development, first aid, child protection awareness, and health and safety modules, which are embedded in service approval and staff obligations under the NQF.

Despite high levels of qualification, the workforce faces challenges of retention and tenure. Average tenure is relatively short, with a significant proportion of staff leaving within five years of entering the sector, citing workload pressures, limited pay progression, and the emotional demands of the work.

Recruitment and retention pressures are heightened in regional and remote areas, where services often experience chronic shortages of qualified educators. Workforce mobility—while offering flexibility and career progression—also impacts service continuity for children and families. These dynamics have led to calls for more structured career pathways, greater investment in professional development, and national strategies to stabilise and strengthen the workforce.

There are significant pressures on providers and government to ensure a sufficiently sized workforce. The *Future of the Early Childhood Education Profession* report by Skills Australia in 2024 found that:

Current workforce levels are not sustainable to even meet current levels of demand taking into account numerous factors including:

- *evidence of overtime being worked*
- *insufficient provision for ongoing professional development*
- *increasing reliance on trainees to meet workforce requirements, given their 20% allocation of paid work time for off-the-job learning*
- *time spent by more established staff recruiting and onboarding new staff and providing on the job supervision to trainees*
- *the high and increasing use of waivers by services not meeting National Regulations regarding staffing arrangements.*⁶²

It also found that:

In order to meet the various policies already committed to by Commonwealth, State and Territory governments, the ECEC workforce will likely need to increase by an annual average growth rate of 1.9 per cent per year overall and by 3.2 per cent per year for Early Childhood Teachers.⁶³

And:

When examined at the regional (SA4) level workforce shortages are apparent in most regions across major cities, regional and remote Australia and are forecast to persist over the next ten years.⁶⁴

Another key feature of the ECEC sector is the increased use of labour hire. A labour hire firm is a company that recruits and employs workers, then supplies them to client organisations on a temporary or contract basis. The workers are technically employees of the labour hire firm, but they perform work under the direction and supervision of the client organisation. Labour hire arrangements are common across sectors with fluctuating workforce needs, including healthcare, construction, hospitality, and early childhood education. These arrangements provide a flexible solution for organisations that face short-term surges in demand or skills shortages, without the administrative burden of direct employment.

The benefits of labour hire are particularly evident in sectors experiencing high workforce demand. For example, organisations can rapidly scale staffing levels to meet peaks in service delivery, access specialised skills that may be scarce locally, and reduce recruitment and training costs. Labour hire can also improve operational efficiency by allowing permanent staff to focus on core responsibilities while temporary staff cover gaps, and it can facilitate workforce diversity and mobility by introducing staff with varied experiences and expertise into the organisation.

However, labour hire arrangements also introduce risks and challenges. One of the most significant concerns is the dilution of worker–organisation accountability. Because the worker is formally employed by the labour hire firm, the client organisation may have less control over performance management, supervision, and compliance with organisational policies. This can be particularly problematic in sectors involving vulnerable populations, such as children or older people, where adherence to safeguarding protocols, mandatory reporting, and behavioural standards is critical. There is also the risk that organisations may rely too heavily on labour hire staff to fill gaps in permanent staffing, potentially undermining organisational culture, continuity of care, and systemic oversight.

Effective governance, clear contractual obligations, and strong induction and supervision processes are essential to mitigate these risks and ensure that labour hire staff uphold the same standards as permanent employees.

Data snapshot – ECEC Workforce

In Queensland **52,377** staff were employed across ECEC services in 2024. Over **40,000** (80%) worked in long day care, limited hours care, and occasional care

91.2% female

81% of paid contact staff nationally held an ECEC-related qualification (Certificate III to degree)

15% held a bachelor's degree or higher

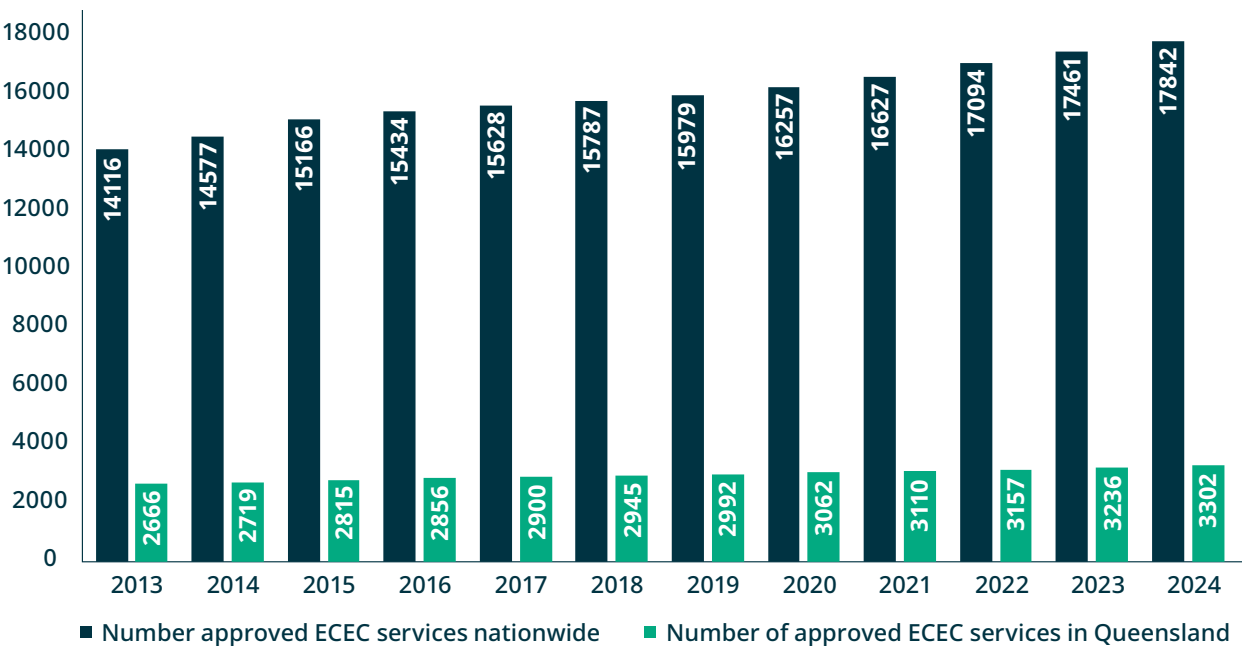
Queensland's ECEC system

Queensland's ECEC sector encompasses a range of service types, including family day care, long day care services, kindergarten, and OSHC. As of 31 March 2025, there were 3,355 approved ECEC services in Queensland, reflecting a diverse and growing sector.

Queensland represents just under 20 per cent of all ECEC services nationally.⁶⁵ Services are provided by a mix of for-profit and not-for-profit providers. While the number of not-for-profit providers has remained relatively stable over the past decade, their market share has declined, reflecting the expansion of for-profit operations, particularly in centre-based services.

Figure 12: Number of approved ECEC providers

Source: ACECQA NQF Snapshots 2013 to 2024



Legislative and regulatory framework for ECEC in Queensland

ECEC services in Queensland operate within a legislative and regulatory framework designed to ensure high-quality service delivery and safeguard the safety, health, and wellbeing of children. The sector is primarily regulated under the NQF, which provides a national approach to regulation, assessment, and continuous quality improvement across Australia. The NQF comprises three key elements:

1. *Education and Care Services National Law Act 2010* (National Law) – establishes the legal basis for the regulation of ECEC services.
2. Education and Care Services National Regulations (National Regulations) – details operational and compliance requirements for services.
3. National Quality Standard – sets benchmarks for service quality across seven quality areas, including educational programs and practice, health and safety, and governance and leadership.

While the NQF encompasses multiple domains of quality and compliance, child safeguarding and wellbeing remain central objectives.

The Early Childhood Regulatory Authority (ECRA) is the statutory authority responsible for administering the NQF in Queensland.

ECRA has a range of compliance and enforcement powers. For service providers, these include compliance directions or notices, enforceable undertakings, amendments, suspensions or cancellations of service approvals, and prosecution. Where offences are committed by individual educators, ECRA may issue enforceable undertakings, impose prohibitions, or initiate prosecution.

ECRA operates within the Queensland Department of Education. It is responsible for regulating ECEC services across the state, including those operating under the NQF and the *Education and Care Services Act 2013* (ECS Act). ECRA's primary functions encompass the following:

- **Regulation and compliance:** monitoring and enforcing compliance with the NQF and ECS Act, including service approvals, amendments, and waivers.
- **Assessment and rating:** evaluating services against the National Quality Standard and national regulations to determine service ratings.
- **Investigation and enforcement:** investigating complaints and incidents, and taking appropriate enforcement actions such as compliance notices, enforceable undertakings, and, where necessary, prosecution.
- **Support and guidance:** providing information, advice, and resources to service providers to support compliance and continuous improvement.

ECRA has narrow powers to share information with other government agencies but must share information in relation to prescribed statutory compliance action with Blue Card Services (BCS).⁶⁶ In exercising the functions of the regulatory authority, ECRA and its officers must have regard to the objectives and guiding principles of the National Law including that the rights and best interests of the child are paramount.

ECRA undertakes its regulatory role using the Regulating for Quality (R4Q) risk-based framework. The R4Q risk-based approach is aimed at identifying and assessing risks to the quality of ECEC services to ensure that ECRA focuses its efforts effectively on areas that present the greatest risk to the health, safety and wellbeing of children.⁶⁷

Striving for quality education in care

The NQF came into effect in Queensland and most other states and territories on 1 January 2012. It is a national approach to regulation, assessment and quality improvement which comprises the National Law, the National Regulations, and the National Quality Standard.

Prior to the commencement of the NQF in 2012, the ECEC sector operated under separate, state-based regulatory regimes. In Queensland, this was under the *Child Care Act 1991* and the *Child Care Act 2002* (the Child Care Acts). From 1 September 2003, the *Child Care Act 2002* replaced the 1991 Act for the regulation of ECEC in Queensland.

In 2009, the Council of Attorneys-General endorsed the *National partnership agreement on the National quality agenda for early childhood education and care* as the first step for a nationally harmonised system of regulating ECEC. This emerged from the *Early Childhood Development Strategy*, endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in 2009, which committed the Commonwealth, states and territories to standardised measures and outcomes for early years health, development, learning and wellbeing.

To coincide with this agreement, the responsibility for ECEC in most jurisdictions shifted to the Education Minister's portfolio. This was the case in Queensland with the responsibility for ECEC shifting to the Department of Education and Training (as it then was) in 2009. Prior to this, from the early 2000s until 2004, ECEC sat within the responsibilities of the Minister for Families at which point it shifted to the Minister for Communities.

The NQF and its administering authorities now operate within a legally defined structure that balances compliance, quality assurance, and improvement. This structure ensures:

- consistent standards across Queensland and Australia
- clear accountability for providers, educators, and regulatory bodies
- oversight mechanisms that prioritise child safety and wellbeing alongside service quality.

While the qualification requirements for educators and programming requirements were not substantially altered as part of the shift to the NQF, the introduction of the National Quality Standards (NQS) has seen a significant emphasis on the oversight of educational programming. The objectives of the National Law, as compared to the Child Care Acts also reflect this change.⁶⁸

The National Law and the National Regulations are Victorian and New South Wales legislation, respectively. The *Education and Care Services National Law (Queensland) Act 2011* applies both the National Law and National Regulations in Queensland. Unlike most subordinate legislation, the National Regulations are exempt from expiry. The National Regulations include exceptions for individual jurisdictions to accommodate differing state-based regulatory schemes, made as concessions during negotiations over the National Regulations in 2011.

On 1 October 2017, significant changes were made to the National Regulations.

- these changes included modified requirements for qualifications held by educators, extension of the complex rest period supervision ratios previously in the Child Care Act and provided exceptions to ratio and qualification requirements for rest pauses or other absences of less than ten or five minutes respectively
- these arrangements were intended to expire at the end of 2019; however, several continue to operate.

Together, ECRA and the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) provide an integrated system of state and national governance, ensuring ECEC services are safe, effective, and aligned with contemporary educational and care standards.

Services approved under the National Law are assessed and rated against the NQS. The rating report provides the service with a detailed assessment of its quality including strengths and areas for improvement, against each of the 15 standards within the NQS. It also provides a rating for each quality area and an overall rating for the service.

Publication of service ratings provides families objective information about service quality to inform their decisions about their children's education and care. These ratings must be displayed at the entrance of the service⁶⁹ and are published on the ACECQA website.⁷⁰ Services can receive a rating of Excellent (awarded by ACECQA), Exceeding, Meeting, Working Towards or Significant Improvement Required.



Data snapshot – The quality of ECEC sector as of 31 March 2025, in Queensland



94% of services have a quality rating



89% of services are rated exceeding or excellent⁷¹

The NQF sets no requirements regarding how often services must be visited. Under the ECS Act, services need to be visited by ECRA at least once every three years.⁷² In 2023–24, ECRA ensured that all approved ECEC services received at least one monitoring visit during the year.⁷³ ECRA receives intelligence regarding possible breaches of the legislation by way of prescribed notifications under the National Law and through direct complaints.

Where a breach of the National Law or National Regulations is substantiated, ECRA may take enforcement action. There are a range of compliance actions against a provider available to ECRA including compliance directions or notices, enforceable undertakings, amendments, suspensions or cancellations to service or provider approvals, or prosecution.⁷⁴

If an offence is committed by an educator, the compliance actions available to the ECRA are an enforceable undertaking, prohibition or prosecution.



Data snapshot – Compliance issues in Queensland ECEC services



620 breaches of the National Law and Regulations in Queensland involved inadequate supervision of children in 2023–24.



478 breaches involved failure to protect children from harm and hazards.



247 breaches involved failure to notify certain information to ECRA.

Table 2: Statutory enforcement actions undertaken by ECRA, 2023-24

Source: Department of Education (September 2024). Regulatory data: 2023–2024 FY summary.⁷⁵

Statutory enforcement actions	Number of actions
Compliance notice issued	681
Compliance direction issued	160
Emergency action notice issued	58
Enforceable undertaking accepted	20
Prohibition notice issued	13
Prosecution initiated	4
Condition imposed	2
Inappropriate person excluded	1
Notice of suspension	1
Total	940

Licensing

Operating an ECEC service under the NQF requires a provider approval and a service approval, both of which are assessed, granted and monitored by ECRA. ECRA also assesses a range of other applications including but not limited to amendments and internal reviews.

In the 2023–24 financial year, ECRA received 2079 applications with 190 being for provider approval and 130 for service approval.⁷⁶

The provider approval assessment considers the suitability of the persons in management or control of the service, including their Working with Children Check (WWCC) and their history of compliance with the National Law.⁷⁷ Under the NQF the provider of the service is legally responsible for the operation of the service. Therefore, the provider is accountable in some capacity for failures to comply with the legislation including notifying ECRA.

The service approval assessment considers the suitability of the service premises and the proposed policies and procedures of a service.⁷⁸

ECRA plays no role in the approval of other positions. When the National Quality Framework (NQF) commenced in 2012, approval from ECRA was required for a person to be placed in day-to-day charge of an education and care service through the issue of a supervisor certificate. This assessment considered an individual's fitness and propriety, as well as whether they met minimum qualification and experience requirements.

However, this provision was repealed on 1 October 2017 to reduce the administrative burden on services and regulatory authorities. The supervisor certificate was removed so service providers had more autonomy in deciding who could be the responsible person in each service. Under the current National Law and Regulations, approved providers are responsible for ensuring that:

- a nominated supervisor is appointed for each service
- the nominated supervisor and any person in day-to-day charge of the service are fit and proper, have suitable skills, experience, and knowledge of the service's operations, and can meet its obligations under the National Law
- the approved provider keeps records of the person's qualifications, experience, and evidence of their suitability for the role.

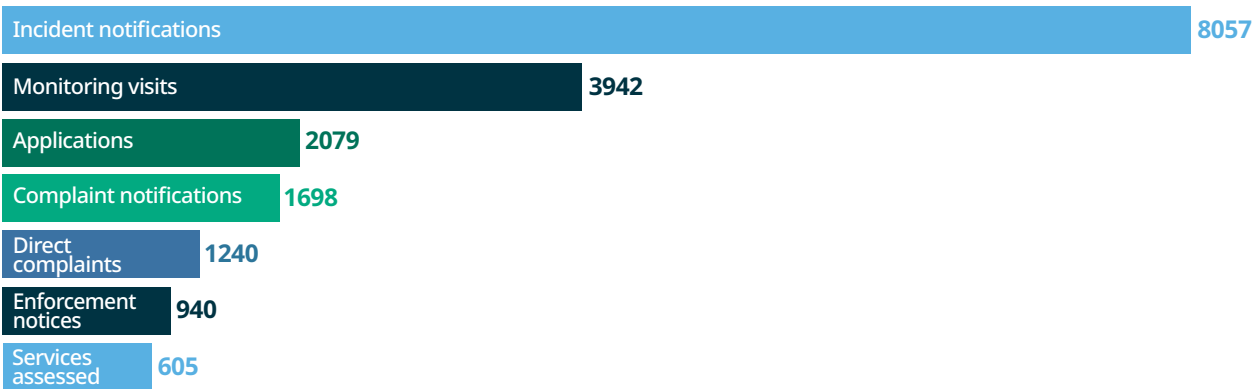
Ensuring the safety, health and wellbeing of children attending ECEC services is one of the objectives of the NQF. While the NQF sets out clear expectations for providers of services, both from a compliance and quality perspective, child safeguarding practice is just one of many areas of focus.

Authorised officers from ECRA visit services to assess their compliance with regulatory requirements. Visits may be announced or unannounced. They may be proactive and consider a range of compliance requirements or target a particular area of concern or risk in response to a notification or complaint. Entry powers coincide with both situations.⁷⁹ These visits also provide an opportunity for guidance to support compliance and promote improvement.

Current resourcing and workload

ECRA is supported by a dedicated workforce of over 250 staff within the Department of Education located across 13 regions in addition to the central office in Brisbane. In August 2025, the Queensland Government announced a \$12.7 million investment over four years to employ an additional 29 full-time early childhood regulatory officers. This initiative aims to enhance the capacity of ECRA to oversee the growing sector and ensure the safety of children.

Figure 13: ECRA workload 2023–2024 financial year⁸⁰



ECRA collaborates with various stakeholders, including approved providers, peak bodies, and ACECQA, to improve service quality and compliance.

Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority

At a national level, ACECQA provides independent oversight and guidance. It is the statutory authority established by Australian governments in 2012 to oversee the implementation of the NQF. While each state and territory has its own regulatory authority for ECEC services, ACECQA provides national leadership and coordination, ensuring a consistent and high-quality approach across jurisdictions.

ACECQA is accountable to the nation’s education ministers, who collectively set strategic priorities through the Ministerial Council. It is governed by a nationally appointed board, which guides its strategic direction and ensures alignment with broader education and care policies. ACECQA’s core mandate is to support governments and the sector in delivering on the objectives of the NQF. Its functions extend across multiple areas, including:

- maintaining national registers of services and providers, enhancing transparency for families and regulators
- managing the National Quality Agenda IT System, a secure platform for information-sharing between providers and regulators
- providing resources, training and professional development to support regulatory officers and service providers
- conducting second-tier reviews of service quality ratings and awarding the prestigious ‘Excellent’ rating,
- publishing national data, research, and guidance materials, such as the NQF Snapshot, to monitor sector performance and inform policy development.

ACECQA also plays a crucial role in policy reform and capacity-building. It develops professional resources for both regulators and providers, supports family engagement through public-facing platforms such as StartingBlocks.gov.au, and advises governments on emerging priorities in quality, safety, and workforce development. Its recent work has focused on strengthening the child safety and safeguarding content in ECEC qualifications, ensuring the workforce is better equipped to respond to contemporary challenges.

Strategically, ACECQA positions itself as both a regulator and enabler of quality improvement. It applies child-centred principles, supports cultural inclusion, including recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, and promotes equity and access across the early learning sector. By working in partnership with state regulatory authorities, ACECQA ensures that while regulatory responsibilities remain decentralised, the standards and expectations applied to ECEC services remain consistent, transparent, and nationally coherent.

Response to child sexual abuse

Any adult, regardless of their position in an ECEC service, who reasonably believes that a child sexual offence is being or has been committed at the service must report the information to the police as soon as possible.

If an approved provider of an ECEC service reasonably believes that child sexual abuse is occurring or has occurred while a child is being educated and cared for by the ECEC service, they must notify ECRA within 24 hours of developing that belief.

If an approved provider of an ECEC service receives any allegations that child sexual abuse is occurring or has occurred while a child is being educated and cared for by the ECEC service, they must notify ECRA within 24 hours of receiving the allegation.

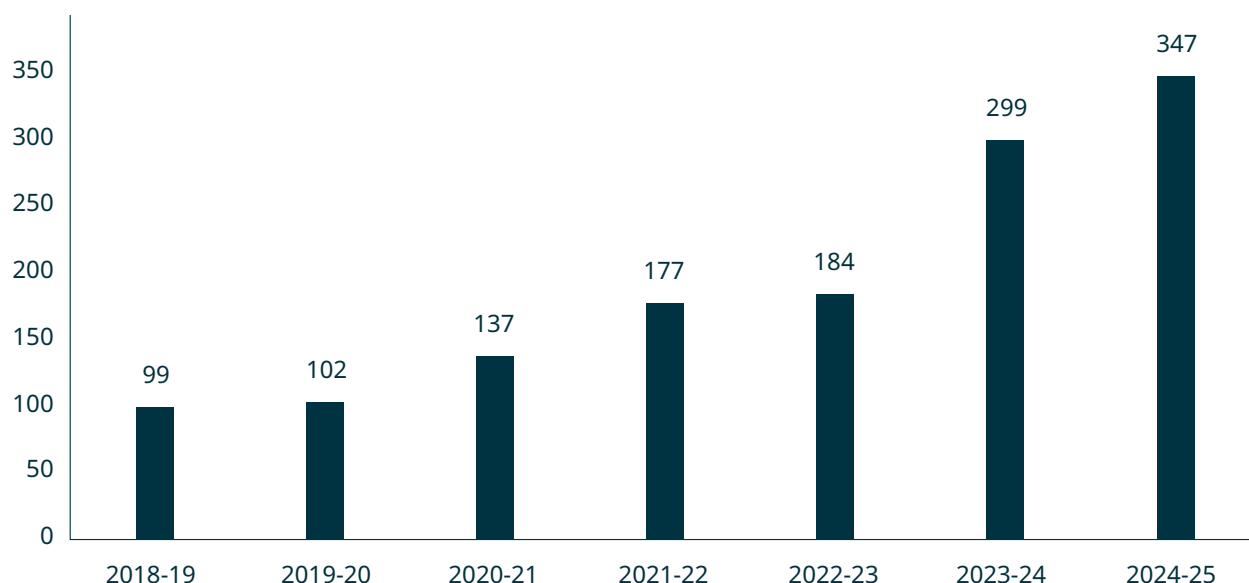
If an ECRA officer receives information that causes them to develop the reasonable belief that a child sexual offence is or has been committed at a service, they must report the information to police as soon as possible. If the ECRA officer believes that the offence has already been reported to police, for example if the approved provider has indicated that they have reported the matter to police, then they are excused from complying with this requirement. Compliance with this requirement would not give rise to a breach of the confidentiality provisions in the National Law.

If a notification regarding child sexual abuse is received by ECRA, a risk assessment is undertaken to determine what happens next. If more information is required an investigation may be conducted. If an investigation is conducted, the scope would be confined to determining whether an offence has been committed against the National Law or National Regulations.

If ECRA is satisfied that non-compliance is substantiated, a risk assessment is undertaken to determine an appropriate and proportionate regulatory response. This action can range from providing information and advice where non-compliance is low-risk and the approved provider is willing and able to address the non-compliance, to high level statutory sanctions when the non-compliance involves serious harm to children and/or significant negligence on the part of the approved provider. If ECRA takes prescribed statutory action such as amending, suspending or cancelling an approval or prohibiting a person involved in the provision of education and care, it must give written notice of this action to BCS.

Specific requirements to notify incidents and allegations of physical and sexual abuse came into effect from 1 October 2017, following the introduction of Regulations 175(2)d and 175(2)(e) of the National Regulations (Figure 14). Sexual abuse allegations and incidents notified include reports of both child sexual abuse and harmful sexual behaviours in children.

Figure 14: Notification of physical or sexual abuse occurring in ECEC services in Queensland



Reforms to the ECEC system

In 2023, ACECQA undertook a *Review of the Child Safety Arrangements under the NQF* (Child Safety Review). The Child Safety Review sought to identify new or refined systemic safeguards needed to support ECEC services to protect children, with a focus on reducing harm, abuse and neglect. It also extended to inter-related child safeguarding mechanisms such as WWCC and teacher registration.

The Child Safety Review found that while the NQF is a robust regulatory scheme, it exists in the context of a broad, interconnected child protection landscape, often at the jurisdictional level, which can be confusing to navigate and results in overlap. It also identified that many large providers operate across multiple states and territories and face ongoing challenges with high demand and a lack of educators and teachers.

Some recommendations from the Child Safety Review have been implemented, having taken effect from 1 September 2025. This includes a reduction in notification timeframes for reporting allegations or incidents of physical or sexual abuse from seven days to 24 hours. Stronger protections around digital technology use have also been implemented, with services required to have clear policies on taking photos and videos of children, including in obtaining parent consent, CCTV use and using service-issued devices.

The Australian Productivity Commission recently undertook an inquiry into the ECEC sector in Australia. The final report, *A path to universal early childhood education and care* highlighted the need for access to quality ECEC education for all children and a larger ECEC workforce. In its 2025–26 Budget, the Australian Government announced wage increases for ECEC educators and incentives to increase the supply of high-quality ECEC places, especially in priority and under-served markets.⁸¹ Implementation is also focused on strengthening integrity across the care economy, including greater powers to respond to providers who pose a potential integrity risk, persistently fail to meet minimum standards and/or who commit egregious or continued breaches.

As part of the current *Delivering quality care more efficiently inquiry*, the Productivity Commission is also considering reform of quality and safety regulation to support a more cohesive care economy through an examination of:

- ways to improve how regulators work together, including how they share information and recognise each other's decisions
- opportunities to streamline processes to reduce duplication across sectors
- how safety and quality regulations could be better aligned or made more consistent across the care economy to drive improvements in safety and quality.⁸²

The Productivity Commission is due to deliver its final report in December 2025.

Conclusion

While many children receive high-quality care, the ECEC system faces well-documented challenges, including high staff turnover and understaffing, inconsistent regulatory oversight, and limited mechanisms for identifying and escalating serious risks. The increasing commercialisation has also generated concerns about balancing financial objectives with child wellbeing.⁸³

These systemic pressures create an environment in which safeguarding failures can occur, including in relation to child sexual abuse. The risks are heightened by the fact that:

- signs of child sexual abuse in early childhood can be subtle
- victim-survivors are often too young to disclose
- institutional responses to concerns remain inconsistent.

Research commissioned by the Board for this Review found:

Barriers to reporting CSA [child sexual abuse] in ECEC are distinct from risk factors but often interact with them to delay detection and response, thereby enabling abuse to continue undetected. Barriers to CSA identification and response in ECEC also operate across multiple, interconnected ecological levels. These include:

- *Individual barriers: Young children, particularly those under five, can lack the verbal, cognitive, and emotional capacity to recognise or disclose abuse. Feelings of shame, fear, and trauma related dissociation can further inhibit purposeful disclosure.*
- *Relationship-level barriers: Children may be silenced by the grooming behaviours of offenders, feelings of loyalty or fear, or concerns that they will not be believed. Some parents may misinterpret or dismiss signs of abuse or lack the knowledge or confidence to act.*
- *Institutional barriers: Within ECEC settings, poor staff training, unclear reporting protocols, and fear of consequences can lead to missed signs and failures to act. Staff may lack the knowledge or confidence to escalate concerns or may be actively discouraged from doing so.*
- *Societal barriers: Cultural taboos, racism, and prejudicial beliefs about the credibility of very young children can prevent disclosure. Broader mistrust in institutions may also discourage reporting.*

These barriers do not simply delay disclosure, but they also create an environment in which abuse can continue without detection or accountability. ...these barriers manifest across ecological levels, reinforcing the need for system-wide reforms that address not only risk but also the conditions that allow harm to remain hidden.⁸⁴

The sexual abuse of children in ECEC settings is a crime that profoundly breaches community trust. These are environments where children are meant to be safe, nurtured, and supported. Exploitation of their vulnerability within such contexts stands in direct opposition to societal expectations of care and protection.

“*ECEC services play a vital role in the lives of Australian children and their families. While many children receive safe and nurturing care in ECEC, the sector faces several safeguarding complexities, including high staff turnover, inconsistent staff oversight, and limited pathways for identifying and escalating risks. These factors can interfere with the prevention, detection and responses to child sexual abuse.⁸⁵*

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The systems under review: The Queensland blue card system

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The Queensland blue card system

The Queensland blue card system is a statutory framework designed to promote safe environments for children and young people by regulating who may work or volunteer in child-related employment, or operate a regulated business involving children. It operates under the *Working with Children (Risk Management and Screening) Act 2000* (WWC Act) and is administered by Blue Card Services (BCS) within the Department of Justice.

Working with Children Checks (WWCCs) are undertaken to ensure people meet the eligibility requirements needed to participate in child-related work. If an applicant is assessed as eligible, they are issued a working with children clearance. In Queensland, this is referred to as a blue card.

The blue card system includes three key components:

- **Employment screening:** a point-in-time employment screening process which issues either a 'Working with Children Clearance' (previously known as a 'positive notice'), or a 'negative notice' barring the applicant from child-related work.
- **Daily monitoring:** daily ongoing monitoring by police of blue card holders for changes in their Queensland criminal history, and monitoring of changes in other information such as disciplinary information and adverse working with children decisions made in other states and territories.
- **Risk management:** a system of risk management by organisations undertaking regulated child-related employment, which is overseen by BCS.
- **Compliance:** auditing and monitoring of individual and employer compliance with blue card system requirements.

The blue card scheme requires that any individual undertaking *regulated employment* or operating a *regulated business* involving children must hold a working with children clearance. Regulated activities are prescribed in Schedule 1 of the WWC Act and include a wide range of settings where children are present, such as childcare, education, health services, residential facilities, sporting organisations, religious institutions, and cultural programs. The requirement applies to both paid workers and volunteers, with limited statutory exemptions (for example, some parent volunteers). The WWC Act lists categories of regulated employment, which includes educators and carers in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Police and registered teachers are not required to hold a blue card for their regular duties as Queensland Police Service (QPS) and the Queensland College of Teachers (QCT) conduct their own screening of prospective employees.

Decisions on whether to issue a clearance rest with the chief executive of the Department of Justice or their delegate. The governing test is whether, based on the information available, 'there is a real possibility that the person will pose a risk to the safety of children'. Arrangements are in place to provide for the exchange of information nationally when a person applies for a WWCC which ensures that relevant criminal history information from outside Queensland can be shared with BCS.⁸⁶ A person with an adverse interstate WWCC decision is unable to receive a blue card in Queensland. Some offences lead to automatic exclusion from eligibility. Persons convicted of *disqualifying offences* listed in Schedule 4, including child sexual offences, serious violent crimes, and offences involving child exploitation material (CEM), must be issued a negative notice which prohibits them from engaging in regulated child-related work or business.

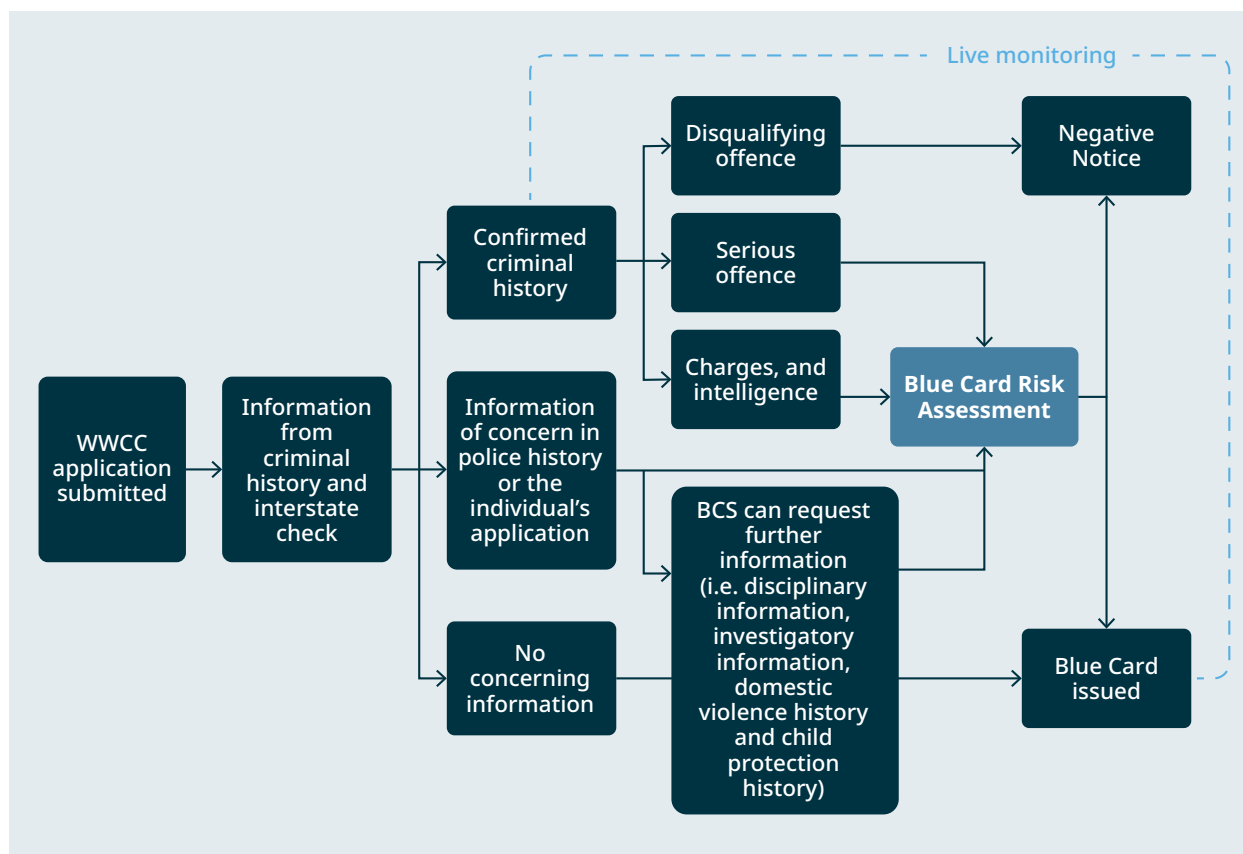
In other cases, the decision is discretionary. Where an applicant has been charged with or convicted of a *serious offence*, or where concerning information is provided by police or other relevant bodies (including charges, disciplinary information or investigatory information), the chief executive must conduct a risk assessment. This assessment balances protective factors, such as evidence of rehabilitation, against potential risk factors, with the welfare and safety of children as the overriding consideration. Affected individuals may seek merits review of the decision in the Queensland Civil and Administrative Tribunal (QCAT) under Chapter 9 of the WWC Act.

The scheme is not limited to a one-off application process. Cardholders are subject to continuous monitoring. The QPS provides BCS with daily updates on changes to a cardholder's Queensland police information. Where new information suggests a potential risk to children, the chief executive has powers under sections 294 to 304A of the WWC Act to suspend or cancel the clearance.

The scheme also places direct obligations on organisations that provide regulated services. Employers and volunteer coordinators must ensure that all personnel engaged in regulated activities hold a valid clearance (s 175). In addition, organisations are required to develop and implement a child and youth risk management strategy tailored to their operations (s 171). Engaging a person in regulated child-related work without a valid clearance is a criminal offence under section 175.

The WWC Act prescribes a range of offences and penalties for non-compliance. These include significant criminal sanctions for individuals who undertake regulated employment without a clearance, for organisations that allow this to occur, and for any misuse of information. Strong enforcement powers and a monitoring, audit and compliance function underpin the scheme to ensure its integrity and effectiveness in protecting children.

Figure 15: The Blue Card decision making process



The WWCC Act contains a dedicated set of information-sharing powers that support the blue card system. These provisions are designed to balance child safety with privacy protections and include powers to obtain and to disclose information. With respect to obtaining information:

- BCS can request and use information from QPS (including charges, convictions, investigative information, and spent convictions).⁸⁷ If interstate charges are disclosed as part of this request, BCS may request the information from an interstate police commissioner.⁸⁸ QPS and interstate police services are authorised to disclose this information.⁸⁹
- BCS can receive information about court outcomes (including findings of guilt, not guilty by reason of mental illness, and charges dismissed).⁹⁰
- BCS can request information regarding a person's mental health in certain circumstances.
- Regulators of education (including ECEC and schools) and disability services can provide disciplinary information.
- The WWCC Act authorises use of information about custodial status, parole, and certain child protection findings.

Other legislation, such as the *Education and Care Services National Law (Queensland) Act 2011* (National Law) also specifies the compulsive requirement to notify BCS regarding certain compliance activities.⁹¹

Eligibility assessment considers information collected about and from a blue card applicant, to assess their risk to children in regulated employment. Since 2021, BCS has been able to use 'other information about the person that the chief executive reasonably believes is relevant' to trigger an in-depth WWCC assessment or reassessment. Information currently able to be considered as part of an assessment of eligibility includes:

- police investigative information (where the Police Commissioner or their delegate has made a determination)
- disciplinary records from across the ECEC, education, child protection and health sectors
- domestic violence orders (since 2022)
- mental health reports
- adverse interstate WWCC decisions (since 2022).

While these changes were introduced to facilitate the use of information provided by disability services under the National Disability Insurance Scheme in assessing a person's eligibility, they also permit the consideration of reportable conduct matters provided to BCS under section 51 of the *Child Safe Organisations Act 2024* when it commences in Queensland in July 2026.



Data snapshot – the blue card system



In March 2025 over **one million Queenslanders**, or nearly **one in five** people in Queensland, held a blue card.³⁴



A total of **385,161** blue card applications were finalised during the 2024–25 financial year, including **3712** outcomes which prohibited the applicant from working with children.³⁵



Less than 1 per cent of applications are refused/not approved.



In 2024–25, BCS cancelled or suspended **758** blue cards as a result of their ongoing monitoring.



In 2024-25 **17.5 per cent** of negative notice decisions reviewed by QCAT were overturned.

BCS currently sits within Queensland Worker Screening Services, part of the Department of Justice's Harm Prevention and Regulation division.

Publicly available information about the exact staffing profile and dedicated budget for BCS is limited. Funding for the scheme is included within the broader departmental allocations, rather than reported as a discrete line item. However, past government announcements provide some insight. In 2018, \$17 million over three years was committed to support reforms, including the introduction of the No Card, No Start policy and improvements to the online application system. This indicates the scale of investment required to maintain and enhance the scheme's infrastructure.

BCS operates as a regulatory body rather than a frontline service, with its resources concentrated on the assessment of known relevant information (such as criminal history, disciplinary and domestic violence information), information gathering, compliance activities, and organisational support. The unit also plays a role in community education.

The operational volume of BCS is considerable. As of mid-2025, there were 1,029,960 current blue card holders in Queensland and a further 12,493 applicants being actively monitored. The system also tracks 1,000,924 live links between card holders and employers or volunteer organisations, ensuring that clearance information is tied to specific roles so that updates about a person's blue card status can be provided to employers and action can be taken to ensure compliance.

In a recent reporting period, 758 cards were suspended or cancelled due to new police or disciplinary information, as part of its continuous monitoring capabilities demonstrating the responsiveness of the system to emerging risks.

The scale of this workload highlights both the protective value of the scheme and the significant administrative and investigative capacity required to sustain it. The ongoing challenge for BCS is to balance timely processing of applications with rigorous risk assessment, ensuring that decisions remain firmly grounded in the best interests of children.

Reviews of Blue Card Services decisions

If a person is issued a negative notice (i.e. they are refused a blue card) by BCS, they may have an opportunity to seek an administrative review of the decision at the QCAT. In making a decision, QCAT reconsiders whether the WWCC Act was applied correctly given the facts and evidence available and may confirm, set aside, or vary the original decision, substitute its own decision, or return it to BCS to reconsider.⁹²

Not all adverse decisions made by BCS are reviewable by QCAT. For example, a disqualified person does not have the right to seek a review of a decision to issue them a negative notice, or refusal to cancel a negative notice, made by BCS.⁹³

Blue card matters make up a small fraction of QCAT's workload, which also includes a range of other administrative reviews and minor dispute resolution matters. The five years to 30 June 2024 saw a decrease in the number of appeals lodged for blue card decisions (from 310 to 160), however the number of matters pending have increased as a proportion of total active matters and received each year (from 52.89% to 62.53%).⁹⁴

The Queensland Family and Child Commission's 2017 review of the blue card system found that between 2011–12 and 2015–16, 25 per cent of negative notices were overturned by QCAT on review.⁹⁵ In 2024–25, of the BCS matters before QCAT, 17.5 per cent of reviews were successful, 16.5 per cent were unsuccessful, one per cent were referred back to BCS for reassessment and 65 per cent were withdrawn. The reasons for negative notices being overturned by QCAT vary significantly and were not considered by the Review. The Commission suggested that a contributing factor to the relatively large proportion of cases overturned on review may have been that important mitigating evidence is often not provided to BCS because of the opaqueness of the WWCC process. The Commission recommended that BCS implement an internal merits review process to reduce the number of matters which proceed to QCAT and are overturned. To date this recommendation has not been completed.⁹⁶

A history of evolution

During the 1990s, Queensland and other Australian jurisdictions faced heightened community concern about child sexual abuse in institutions, sporting clubs, churches, and community organisations. Reviews and inquiries emphasised the need for preventative measures, not just reactive responses. In September 1998, the Queensland Government commissioned an independent review of the *Children's Commissioner and Children's Services Appeals Tribunals Act 1996* (Qld). The review was completed, and a report and recommendations were submitted to government in April 1999. At the same time, the Commission of Inquiry into the Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions (the Forde Inquiry) was established to report on the care and treatment of children in out-of-home residential facilities and juvenile detention centres.

The recommendations of these reports were largely accepted by the Queensland Government and reflected in the introduction of the *Commission for Children and Young People Act 2000* (now known as the WWCC Act). This legislation also saw the establishment of the Commission for Children and Young People. Its mandate included developing a screening system for child-related employment.

Since its inception in 2001, the blue card has become a fundamental component of seeking child-related employment or volunteering in Queensland.

WWCCs are administered separately in every state and territory. The Royal Commission found that the various schemes, including Queensland's, were inconsistent and did not regularly share information. Individual jurisdictions also apply different standards to the types of criminal history and other information considered in assessments.

As such, the Royal Commission made multiple recommendations to strengthen WWCCs and move towards national coordination of systems, facilitated by the Commonwealth.

In its *Working with Children Checks Report* published in 2015, the Royal Commission made the 36 recommendations in relation to WWCCs, some of which were jurisdictionally specific. The general recommendations (one to four) were given an implementation window of 12–18 months. Despite these implementation timeframes, many of the Royal Commission's recommendations are still in the process of being implemented. A summary of status of implementation of these recommendations in Queensland is outlined in Table 3.

The Royal Commission made multiple recommendations to strengthen WWCCs and move towards national coordination of systems, facilitated by the Commonwealth. To further prevent people who present a risk of harm to children from moving between jurisdictions without scrutiny, the Royal Commission recommended that WWCC decisions should be shared between jurisdictions.

The *Intergovernmental Agreement on National Exchange of Criminal History Information for People Working with Children* was made permanent by Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in 2013. It provides for the exchange of information on a national basis when a person applies for a WWCC. This ensures that relevant criminal history information from outside an applicant's jurisdiction can be shared with the administering body.

Queensland has responded to the Royal Commission recommendation to prevent people who present a risk of harm to children from moving between jurisdictions by implementing mutual recognition of adverse outcomes from other states and territories. This was operationalised in December 2022.

Table 3: Royal Commission recommendations about WWCCs and their implementation status

No	Recommendation summary	Queensland implementation status
1	State and Territory governments should amend laws to implement national standards for WWCCs and enable the recognition of decisions from other jurisdictions.	<p>The Standing Council of Attorneys-General (SCAG) is overseeing reforms to WWCCs through a working group. On 15 August 2025, the SCAG agreed to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • work towards mutual recognition of negative notices between jurisdictions by the end of 2025, noting that this requires full integration of all jurisdictions into the National Reference System (NRS) • remove barriers to information sharing including in relation to the National Redress Scheme • assess the technical requirements for the establishment of a National Continuous Checking Capability (NCCC), leveraging existing systems where possible.⁹⁷ <p><i>The National Standards for Working with Children Checks</i> were agreed upon in 2019.</p> <p><i>The Working with Children (Risk Management and Screening) and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2024</i> has brought Queensland broadly into line with the National Standards.</p>
3	<p>The Commonwealth should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • establish a centralised WWCC decision database • develop consistent terminology with the States and Territories • enhance the monitoring of national criminal histories of WWCC cardholders • explore making international criminal records more accessible. 	<p>From December 2022 the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission (ACIC) commenced operation of the NRS, which gives BCS and other bodies administering WWCCs access to the decisions made in other jurisdictions.</p> <p><i>The Child Protection Reform and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2022</i> amended the WWC Act to allow BCS to take information from the NRS into account in employment screening.</p>
4	Governments should review the terminology in the National Exchange of Criminal History Information for People Working with Children to ensure that information sharing is consistent across jurisdictions.	Queensland participated in a review of, and was satisfied with, the use of the terms used.

No	Recommendation summary	Queensland implementation status
5-14	<p>Governments should amend WWCC legislation to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> incorporate a nationally-consistent definition of child-related work provide that contact with children is required for the definition of child-related work define contact broadly and standardise this definition define child-related work regardless of capacity and rewards, and standardise the categories of work define exemptions for WWCCs and ensure those denied a WWCC cannot rely on exemptions. 	<p>The Department of Justice reports that implementation is complete as part of the delivery of recommendations from the Queensland Family and Child Commission's (the Commission's) blue card review, including through the <i>Working with Children (Risk Management and Screening) and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2019</i>.</p>
15	Governments should standardise exemption categories.	<p>The <i>National Standards for Working with Children Checks</i> were agreed upon in 2019 and include definitions for exemptions.</p> <p>The <i>Working with Children (Risk Management and Screening) and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2024</i> has brought Queensland broadly into line with the National Standards.</p>
16	Governments should amend WWCC legislation to include a consistent list of offences relates to breaches of the employment screening system.	Offences in Queensland's WWC Act already exceeded national requirements.
17-18	Governments should amend WWCC legislation to include a standard definition of criminal history including charges and convictions, and facilitate police sharing criminal history and other information with administering agencies.	This was already part of the WWC Act in Queensland
19	Governments should amend WWCC legislation to include and standardise the reporting and consideration of disciplinary and misconduct information in WWCC, including where this arises from a reportable conduct scheme.	Departmental advice indicates that implementation is complete as part of the delivery of recommendations from the Commission's Blue Card review, and the commencement of the <i>Child Safe Organisations Act 2024</i> .
20	Governments should amend WWCC legislation to implement consistency in how WWCCs respond to criminal history and other information.	The Department of Justice has advised that implementation is complete.
21	Governments should amend WWCC legislation to implement consistency in what criminal information will be considered in a WWCC assessment.	This was already enacted in the WWCC Act in Queensland.

No	Recommendation summary	Queensland implementation status
22	The Commonwealth should lead the identification of what offences should be included in the consideration of an applicant's criminal history.	The <i>National Standards for Working with Children Checks</i> were agreed on in 2019. The <i>Working with Children (Risk Management and Screening) and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2024</i> has brought Queensland broadly into line with the National Standards.
23	Governments should amend WWCC legislation to standardise the criteria for assessing risk to children when considering a criminal history.	The <i>Working with Children (Risk Management and Screening) and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2024</i> , has brought Queensland broadly into line with the National Standards.
24	Governments should amend WWCC legislation to ensure the best interests of children are paramount to a WWC decision.	This was already part of the WWC Act in Queensland.
25	Governments should amend WWCC legislation to permit an applicant to begin child-related work while their application is being progressed, as long as certain safeguards are met.	The <i>Working with Children (Risk Management and Screening) and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2019</i> established the 'No Card, No Start' requirement which exceeds the protection provided by this recommendation.
26	WWCC applications should be processed online.	This has been implemented.
27	WWCC applications should be processed within specified timeframes.	This has been implemented.
28	Governments should amend WWCC legislation to ensure WWC decisions are made on the basis of the individual and not on their employment, and there should be no conditional clearances.	This was already part of the WWC Act in Queensland.
29	Governments should amend WWCC legislation to ensure applicants have an avenue for appeal to an independent body, except in cases where the person has a conviction for a particularly severe child-related offence.	This was already a part of the WWC Act in Queensland.
30	Governments should amend WWCC legislation to recognise a WWCC in another jurisdiction.	The <i>Child Protection Reform and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2022</i> amended the WWC Act to allow BCS to take information from the NRS into account.
31	Governments should amend WWCC legislation to ensure consistency in the length of a WWC clearance, and responsibilities of employers, cardholders, and the administering body to share information on employment and WWC status.	The Department of Justice reports that implementation is complete as part of the delivery of recommendations from the Commission's Blue Card Review.
32-33	Governments should amend WWCC legislation to ensure administering bodies have powers to monitor WWCC compliance and compel the production of information.	The Department of Justice reports that implementation is complete as part of the delivery of recommendations from the Commission's Blue Card Review.

NOCS initially led the implementation of many of the Royal Commission's recommendations and has developed National Standards for WWCCs. The National Standards seek to 'establish nationally consistent parameters for the screening of persons who propose to engage in child-related work'. In 2019, state and territory ministers endorsed the National Standards and committed to working toward its implementation in their respective jurisdictions. The Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department now leads the implementation of outstanding recommendations, coordinating via the Standing Council of Attorneys-General.

In practice, Queensland already exceeds some of these standards. For example, amendments to the WWC Act in 2019 established the 'No Card, No Start' requirement. This means that individuals cannot work with children or young people until their blue card application has been approved. Prior to the No Card No Start amendments in 2019 people could start working in regulated employment without a blue card, provided they had applied for one.

Amendments to the WWC Act in 2019 and 2024 were intended to bring Queensland broadly into line with the National Standards and implement recommendations from the Commission, particularly in relation to:

- preventing organisations from allowing employees to work with children in regulated activities without a blue card ('No Card, No Start')
- removing the eligibility declaration regime, which provided disqualified persons the opportunity to work in regulated employment in certain circumstances
- decoupling the current 'risk management' in the WWC Act from the child safe standards under a new regulator
- introducing obligations for applicants to disclose child-protection, domestic violence, and adverse interstate WWCC decision information.

These amendments made significant changes to the capacity and capability of the system and brought it into alignment with the other states and territories, however, there is currently no system for the mutual recognition of positive WWC clearances between jurisdictions. From December 2022 the ACIC commenced operation of the NRS which allows regulators to access decisions made in other jurisdictions to refuse a WWCC.⁹⁸ The WWC Act was amended in 2022 to allow BCS to take information from the NRS into account.⁹⁹ If an adverse WWCC decision is recorded from another state or territory, applications are refused, and the applicant is prohibited from working with children unless and until the bar is resolved.

Initially narrow in scope, Queensland's blue card system has expanded over the past 25 years to cover more employment types, use broader categories of risk-related information, and include stricter exclusion criteria, however, 10 years on from the publication of its *Working with Children Checks* report in 2015, recommendations from the Royal Commission have not yet fully been enacted.¹⁰⁰

Delayed action on Recommendation 3

National WWCC system

In 2017, the Royal Commission recommended that within 12 months of the publication of the report, the Australian Government should facilitate a model for National WWCCs. Despite this, the development of a national system has been slow and piecemeal.

To meet the intent of the recommendation, the Commonwealth Government established the WWCC NRS, a centralised database housed and operated by the ACIC. The NRS for WWCC was established in July 2019 following a joint project by the Commonwealth Department of Human Services and the ACIC.

During this period, the Queensland Government participated in discussion regarding the integration with the WWCC NRS at a national working group, chaired by the federal Department of Home Affairs.

Once established, jurisdictions were required to undertake necessary development work to integrate their WWCC systems with the NRS, including both internal operation processes and legislative amendments to enable the sharing of information between jurisdictions. While relevant amendments to Queensland's WWCC legislation commenced on 2 December 2022, as of mid-2025 not all jurisdictions have made the necessary statutory or policy changes to access and contribute to the NRS. However, in August 2025 the Australian Government committed to ensuring that all jurisdictions' WWCC systems were integrated with the NRS by the end of 2025. No information available to the Board provides insight regarding the protracted timeline for the implementation of this element of the recommendation.

The NRS however has limitations as it is a barring system not a proactive intelligence system. While it shares decisions such as a determination to suspend or cancel a current working with children clearance or to impose a temporary bar on a person from holding a clearance it does not share other intelligence that may have informed these decisions for example, the criminal history check. This must be gathered manually via the interstate agreement. National Continuous Checking Capability of WWCC cardholders' records will ideally fill this void.

National continuous checking capability (NCCC) of WWCC cardholders' records: Systematising national criminal history sharing

Currently, the daily QPS monitoring of blue card holders will not alert BCS to a charge or conviction for an offence—even a disqualifying offence—if it occurs outside Queensland. If the person attempts to renew their blue card upon expiry, the automated criminal history check will reveal such criminal history information.

This is despite the Royal Commission's recommendation for the continuous monitoring of WWCC cardholders. Relevant WWCC reforms are currently being considered by NOCS under Measure 3 of the First National Action Plan of the *National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021–2030*.

As part of this, the Australian Attorney-General gave ACIC funding in November 2023 to scope design and pilot a NCCC. It was announced on 13 November 2025 that the pilot will receive \$37 million from the federal government over five years, with the NCCC to be ready for states and territories to join by the end of 2025¹⁰¹.

This mechanism is intended to ultimately fulfill the intent of recommendation 3 of the Royal Commission WWCC report, by facilitating real-time monitoring of the national criminal histories of WWCC cardholders throughout Australia.

The Council of Attorneys-General, met in August 2025 and agreed to accelerate the development of the NCCC with a view to the Council considering a technical assessment of the requirements for the proposed system in late-2025.

In 2016, the Commission was asked to undertake a review into information sharing to protect children in regulated service environments. The *Recommendation 28 Supplementary regulated Commission service* made multiple findings and recommendations primarily in relation to family day care services. Key changes for the blue card system included:

- legislative changes to establish a register of home-based carers, hosted by BCS
- BCS and QPS reaching an agreement to support automatic sharing of any international criminal history information held by police for assessments
- family day care educators and carers, and all adult household members and regular visitors to such centres, are required to hold to the same eligibility screening and monitoring standards as foster carers.

The preference for a stronger screening system has led to unintended consequences. For example, responsibility for screening of foster and kinship carers was transferred to the WWCC system in 2006. In 2023, a Commission report recommended that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship carers be excluded from the requirement to hold a blue card. This is because the existing system was unfairly and unreasonably limiting the ability of kin to care for children under the supervision of Child Safety authorities.

The *Child Safe Organisations Act 2024* came into effect on 1 October 2025. With all Child Safe Organisations required to comply with the Child Safe Standards by 1 April 2026. Queensland is one of the last jurisdictions in Australia to implement a Reportable Conduct Scheme, as recommended by the Royal Commission. This scheme aims to improve the way institutions manage complaints about child sexual abuse and encourage improvements in:

- institutional complaint handling policies and procedures
- investigation standards
- reporting where abuse is known or suspected.

The Reportable Conduct Scheme commences from 1 July 2026. While the CSO Act as passed incorporated a staged rollout of the scheme, on 17 October 2025 amendments were made to commence the entire scheme early, in response to the increased urgency of addressing child sexual abuse which emerged from several highly-publicised instances of abuse, including those in ECEC.

Australia's child safeguarding framework has several robust elements, and Queensland's blue card system is widely regarded as one of the strongest in Australia. Several features underpin its effectiveness:

- **'No Card, No Start' Requirement:** Applicants, whether in paid or volunteer roles, are prohibited from commencing child-related work until a clearance has been issued. This ensures that all individuals are screened before contact with children occurs.
- **Comprehensive Information Consideration:** Queensland's assessment process draws on a broad range of information. This includes criminal history and police records (charges and convictions), disciplinary information from sector regulators, offender monitoring data, domestic violence information, adverse WWCC decisions in other jurisdictions and other relevant information (such as child protection information and information of concern from members of the public or employers).
- **NRS Integration:** The system incorporates information from other participating states and territories via the National Reference System, capturing any adverse WWCC decisions made elsewhere.
- **Consideration of Domestic Violence and Investigatory Information:** Queensland is unique in explicitly allowing the inclusion of domestic violence histories and other police investigative information in risk assessments, providing a more nuanced and protective assessment.
- **Organisational Safeguards:** Beyond individual screening, Queensland requires organisations that employ blue card holders to implement child and youth risk management strategies. This adds an additional layer of prevention and embeds safeguarding within the organisational culture.
- **Risk-based escalating compliance model:** BCS supports voluntary community compliance with blue card system requirements through extensive engagement and education activities, and undertakes reactive and proactive audits of high risk organisations, industries and individuals, using a range of information and data sources to assign resources to compliance activities according to risk identified.

Collectively, these features make Queensland's blue card system a comprehensive and proactive model of child protection, combining rigorous individual assessment with organisational accountability.

Inconsistencies in Working with Children Checks

Reviews and inquiries have consistently highlighted the critical importance of strong information sharing practices across WWCC schemes to prevent abuse and respond to harm. All jurisdictions have processes in place to share information, including with other states and territories, however, they are often governed by complex legislative and procedural requirements. In practice these requirements act to inhibit, not facilitate, effective information sharing processes.

Australia does not have a nationally consistent or harmonised WWCC system. While some information is exchanged between jurisdictions, the criteria for assessment and the thresholds applied vary considerably. In practice, this means that a person who is denied a clearance in one state may not be automatically prevented from obtaining one elsewhere.

Several specific weaknesses flow from this fragmentation:

- **Delayed information sharing:** Police information is not exchanged in real time across jurisdictions. As a result, relevant information may not come to light until a clearance is due for renewal.
- **No mutual recognition:** Positive WWCC clearances are not consistently recognised across jurisdictions, requiring separate applications when people move interstate.
- **Variation in assessment processes:** The categories of information considered during screening, and the manner in which risk assessments are conducted, differ between states and territories.

The Royal Commission recommended the development of National Standards for Working with Children Checks to address these gaps. All governments agreed to these standards in 2019, but implementation has been uneven and incomplete.

In Queensland, legislative amendments were passed in 2024 to bring the state's WWCC system into closer alignment with the National Standards. These amendments have now commenced, though the lack of nationally consistent implementation continues to present risks. As of November 2025, Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania all recognise interstate decisions and prevent people from working with children if they have been denied a clearance in another state or territory. The Australian Capital Territory, Northern Territory and Western Australia have committed to introducing bills to align with the other states by the end of 2025.¹⁰²

In August 2025, the Standing Council of Attorneys-General agreed to strengthen and improve consistency for a national approach to WWCCs, based on mutual recognition, including removing barriers to information sharing and establishing consistent risk assessment frameworks and exclusion criteria. It was also agreed to work towards implementing, by the end of 2025, mutual recognition of negative notices across all Australian jurisdictions. The Standing Council of Attorneys-General met again in November 2025, confirming the readiness of the NCCC by the end of 2025.¹⁰³

Expectation and design misalignment

At its simplest form, a person who wants to work in child-related 'regulated employment' is required to hold a blue card. While WWCCs are a key part of a child safeguarding system, they can only screen out people who have previously been charged or convicted of a criminal offence, or where other relevant matters which raise concerns have been provided to the regulator.

On this basis, the blue card system is fundamentally a mechanism for assessing a person's *past conduct* to determine their eligibility under the legislation to work with children. While reforms to the legislation have introduced a more sophisticated risk assessment framework, the decision-making process remains anchored in an evaluation of historical information.

A perpetrator who avoids detection, who has never been charged for an offence, will not come to the attention of employment screening authorities like BCS.

The starting point for every application is a person's criminal history and other recorded interactions with regulatory and enforcement bodies. Automatic exclusions are triggered by past convictions for certain *disqualifying offences*, regardless of any subsequent rehabilitation or current circumstances. Where discretion is available, the risk assessment still relies heavily on past events—such as criminal, disciplinary, domestic violence and child protection information—to form a view of future risk.

Even the continuous monitoring element of the scheme is retrospective in nature. Police notifications to BCS are based on new charges or convictions which then feed into an assessment of whether the person's past conduct signals a present or future risk. The protective intent of the scheme is forward-looking, but its evidentiary foundation is necessarily backward-looking. In this way, the blue card system reflects a broader principle of child safeguarding regulation: the most reliable indicator of future behaviour is past behaviour.

This misalignment between name and function can generate unrealistic expectations among parents, organisations, and the wider community. Many assume that a person with a blue card has been actively 'checked' in their day-to-day interactions with children, or that the clearance signifies an endorsement of character. The scheme does not—and cannot—guarantee that a person poses no risk. It simply means that, on the basis of available historical information, no real and appreciable risk to children has been identified.

Both the Royal Commission and the Queensland Family and Child Commission have highlighted the risks of over-reliance on a WWCC as a guarantee of ongoing safety by parents and carers, employers and co-workers, and by society more broadly. The blue card system is an important part of safeguarding children across child-related industries and activities however, it is not a substitute for effectively creating a child safe environment, and for ongoing diligence in the activities of employees who hold a blue card.

As was so aptly highlighted in the 2016 South Australian Royal Commission report, *The Life They Deserve*, pre-employment screening is not intended to be a fail-safe measure in its own right. That report said:

“*Gaining clearance does not mean that a person has been deemed safe or suitable to work with children. It simply means there is no available history to suggest they pose a threat.*”

The risk of false confidence is well recognised in child safeguarding policy. When organisations or parents rely too heavily on a clearance, they may under-invest in broader protective strategies such as supervision, child-safe cultures, and active risk management. Clearer communication about what the blue card represents—and, importantly, what it does not—would help recalibrate community understanding. The name 'Working with Children Check' has utility as a simple and accessible label, but it inadvertently obscures the scheme's limits as a backward-looking assessment of eligibility rather than an ongoing guarantee of suitability and safety.

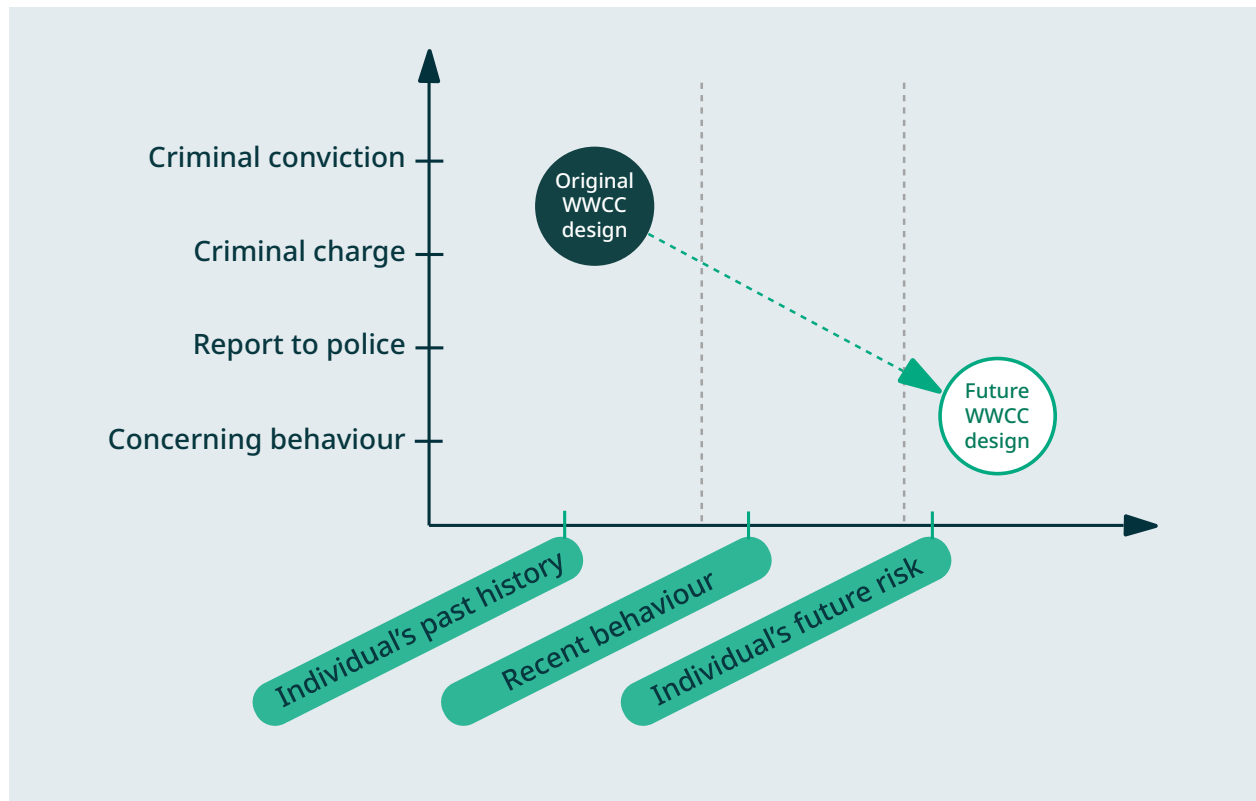
“*While an important tool, WWCCs – in the absence of broader child-safe strategies – do not make organisations safe for children. In fact, an over-reliance on WWCCs can be detrimental to children's safety. They can provide a false sense of comfort to parents and communities, and may cause organisations to become complacent due to the belief that people who have undergone WWCCs do not pose any risks to children – this is not the case.*¹⁰⁴”

The system can only screen out individuals who are assessed to be a risk because they have previously been charged or convicted for an offence, or where other information exists which raises concerns. Community education is necessary to ensure an appropriate weight is placed on WWCCs as one element of a safeguarding system.

“*Working with children checks and employment screening are a necessary part of institutional safeguarding, but we cannot rely on them.*¹⁰⁵”

In 2024, Queensland legislation was amended to improve the ability of BCS to undertake risk assessments. This amendment acknowledged the issues with arbitrary consideration of past charges. Into the future the Queensland blue card scheme must become better enabled to make predictive risk assessments.

Figure 16: Strengthening our blue card system



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The working with children check is not a guarantee of a person's suitability to work with children, proof of good character, or confirmation that they do not pose any risk. It is one tool in a broader system to promote child-safe environments and works alongside other government agencies, such as the Queensland Police Service, Department of Education, Early Childhood Regulatory Authority, and Child Safety, as well as child-related organisations and people who run child-related businesses, to protect the safety and wellbeing of children. – Department of Justice

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The systems under review: The Queensland police system

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The Queensland police system

Police officers are agents of the law, charged with the responsibility of upholding and enforcing legislative requirements. Their role necessitates a strictly legalistic approach, where compliance with statutory provisions is paramount and discretion is exercised within tightly defined parameters. Accordingly, police processes are highly procedural, reflecting the structured nature of the legislation they administer and enforce.

This procedural orientation is critical to ensuring consistency, accountability, and fairness in the enforcement of laws. By operating within clear legislative frameworks, police minimise the risk of arbitrary decision-making and provide transparency in the exercise of state authority. These processes also serve an evidentiary function, ensuring that investigative steps are properly documented and capable of scrutiny in judicial proceedings.

However, the structured nature of policing has important implications for the delivery of justice. On one hand, it promotes the rule of law by applying the same standards to all individuals, regardless of circumstance. On the other hand, the emphasis on procedural compliance can create tensions in contexts where the complexities of human behaviour, vulnerability, or trauma require more nuanced responses. For example, in cases of child sexual abuse, rigid adherence to procedure may safeguard due process but can risk overlooking broader welfare or safeguarding considerations.

In this way, policing forms a foundational but not exhaustive component of justice delivery. The justice system relies not only on procedural enforcement but also on the interpretative and discretionary roles of prosecutors, courts, and support services. While the police ensure that the law is applied consistently, the broader justice system must reconcile procedural integrity with the substantive goal of achieving fair and just outcomes for individuals and communities.

This strong relationship with the crafting and wording of law is important in the context of child sexual abuse. The detection and enforcement of child sexual abuse related offences including child exploitation material (CEM) shifted and changed in line with the digital world and societies deeper understanding of child abuse. Over the last 25 years:

- there has been an increase in the specificity and volume of criminal offences
- this includes multiple new principal Acts and amendments to existing laws, significantly expanding the legislative framework since 2000
- offences against children have become more detailed, including new offences relating to grooming, coercive control, and online abuse
- federal reforms introduced a broader range of offences related to overseas child sexual exploitation, and the number and scope of relevant offence provisions, especially in the Criminal Code of Queensland and Commonwealth law, have increased dramatically.

Frequent changes have been made since 2000 to increase the number of offences related to child abuse and the penalties for this offending. For example:

- Possessing, distributing, accessing and producing CEM was only made an explicit criminal offence in 2005.
- Further changes were made over the 2010s to Commonwealth legislation relating to CEM, sex trafficking, and sex tourism.

This reflects:

- an increasing community awareness of the harms associated with child sexual abuse
- attempts to improve perpetrator accountability
- increased complexity in offending associated with online child sexual exploitation and associated enforcement across state, national and international borders
- relevant recommendations from major inquiries and reviews.

Coordinated law enforcement response to child sexual abuse in Australia

The response to child sexual abuse in Australia involves multiple agencies operating at both federal and state levels, each with distinct but complementary roles. Together, these entities form an interconnected system of prevention, investigation, enforcement, and victim-survivor protection.

The interaction between federal and state authorities is critical. The Australian Federal Police (AFP) and Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation (ACCCE) provide national coordination, specialist intelligence, and global links, while the Queensland Police Service (QPS) and other state police services maintain operational primacy for most investigations under state criminal law. The co-location of QPS Argos officers and victim identification experts within the ACCCE, the operation of Joint Anti-Child Exploitation Teams (JACETs), and shared intelligence platforms all ensure that investigations can move seamlessly across jurisdictional boundaries.

This integrated framework enables Australia to respond effectively to both traditional forms of child sexual abuse and emerging threats, particularly those facilitated by technology, organised networks, and transnational offending.

Table 4: Police organisational roles and interactions

Entity	Role in child sexual abuse response
AFP	Coordination of multi-jurisdictional investigations; investigation of Commonwealth offences
ACCCE	National hub for strategic coordination, embedding a range of government and law enforcement agencies, victim-survivor identification, cross-sector collaboration including housing specialist capabilities
JACETs	Investigative task teams combining AFP and state/territory police expertise
State/Territory Police	Primary investigation and enforcement authority within jurisdiction
International Bodies	Global collaboration through AFP and state and territory police including links to National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) INTERPOL, Europol and other foreign law enforcement agencies.

This collaborative framework brings together investigative capacity, strategic oversight, intelligence sharing, and public engagement to confront and disrupt all forms of child sexual abuse, particularly in the digital domain.

Joint teams – where Federalism works

ACCCE performs the role of national coordination of operations and targeting opportunities, and receives and processes information from foreign law enforcement agencies, NCMEC and others on behalf of Australian law enforcement. JACETs (or the Child Protection Operations team in NSW) are located in each state and territory and include members of AFP and the state/territory police of that jurisdiction. JACETs ensure that intelligence and operational responses are integrated across jurisdictions.

Queensland Police Service

At the state and territory level, police services hold statutory responsibility for investigating sexual assault and child sexual abuse offences under state criminal laws.

In Queensland, QPS is responsible for:

- investigating complaints of sexual assault or sexual abuse and establishing whether an offence has been committed
- protecting victim-survivors of sexual assault or sexual abuse from further victimisation
- identifying, apprehending, and charging perpetrators.

All QPS officers share a duty to respond to reports of child sexual abuse, but specialist units have dedicated responsibilities:

- **Child Protection Investigation Units (CPIUs):** Local CPIUs are the primary units for investigating reports of child sexual abuse, alongside other crimes related to children. Where no CPIU is available, investigations are undertaken by the Criminal Investigation Bureau or by first response officers with remote support until specialist investigators arrive.

- **Argos – Child Abuse and Sexual Crime Group:** Formerly Taskforce Argos, this specialist unit investigates organised child sexual abuse, including technology-facilitated offending. Argos targets online platforms, networks, and offenders, focusing both on the identification of victim-survivors and the disruption of organised abuse. Members of Argos are co-located at the ACCCE, ensuring close operational ties between QPS and AFP efforts.
- **Child Protection Offender Registry (CPOR) - Child Abuse and Sexual Crime Group:** QPS manages Queensland's contribution to the Australian Child Protection Offender Reporting Scheme, established under the *Child Protection (Offender Reporting and Offender Prohibition Order) Act 2004*. The scheme requires reportable offenders to notify police of personal details and their movements for a defined period following conviction and release. The scheme aims to reduce reoffending and support the investigation and prosecution of any future crimes. Local police manage registered offenders within communities, balancing monitoring obligations with broader community safety objectives.

While individual investigations vary, police take a number of steps after they receive a complaint of child sexual abuse.

1. **Complaint received:** QPS general duties officers or Policelink staff receive a complaint from an individual or organisation. The unit responsible for investigating (typically CPIU) is notified.
2. **Assessment:** Investigating officers consider the report to determine what steps should be taken. This may include interviewing a child victim-survivor, a suspect and/or witnesses, or contacting other agencies for information relating to the report of sexual abuse.
3. **Charge and prosecution:** To arrest and charge a suspect, the investigating officer must be satisfied that certain conditions are met. This includes:
 - that an offence has been committed (and each element of an offence has been satisfied) and
 - there is sufficient and admissible evidence to prove the offence.

Evidence can be collected through interviews, statements, collection of any physical evidence and possibly medical examinations.

QPS and the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (ODPP) share the role of prosecuting perpetrators. The nature and complexity of the offending, and the court in which the matter is heard, will determine which agency undertakes the prosecution.

4. **Discontinuance:** If investigating officers are not satisfied sufficient and admissible evidence can be obtained to prove an offence beyond reasonable doubt, QPS must inform the child's parents/guardians of this outcome as soon as practicable.

As a law enforcement agency, QPS must operate in the bounds of the criminal justice system and cooperate with other entities such as the ODPP, Queensland Court Services and Queensland Corrective Services.

“*The role of QPS as investigators is to build a case against a suspect, which is sufficient to be able to determine that the offence occurred beyond a reasonable doubt.*”

The rules of evidence, including what can and cannot be brought before a court in a prosecution, are complex and governed by legislation including the *Evidence Act 1977* and common law. In addition, QPS must operate within relevant legislation and policy, such as the Criminal Code of Queensland, *Police Powers and Responsibilities Act 2000* (the PPRA) and the QPS Operational Procedures Manual (OPM).

As part of an investigation, officers may interview child victim-survivors. The purpose of this interview is to not only uncover facts, but to test their veracity and reliability. Consequently officers are required to ask questions to test the sufficiency of the child's evidence as it relates to the complaint. These interviews, and any statements made, may be recorded and used in court instead of the child having to testify. This is permitted under section 93A of the Evidence Act, with the statements referred to as '93A statements'. Although this often provides an alternative to having a child witness give testimony in court, the Evidence Act requires that if a 93A statement is tendered as evidence the child must also be available to testify.

Judges retain a broad discretion to exclude statements from juries, and they are mostly subject to the same rules of evidence as other testimony. 93A statements are intended to protect the integrity of evidence.

The OPM requires that where possible, a support person should **not** be present during an interview with a child unless this is unavoidable, in which case there are strict rules about a support person's conduct.

Parents and guardians, who the child has made a disclosure to, cannot act as a support person. In practice this means that children may find themselves in police stations with adults that they have just met, without any other supports. Regardless of the skills and capacity of the investigating officer, this is not an ideal environment to facilitate a disclosure, particularly when having regard to what is known about how, why and when victim-survivors, particularly children may choose to disclose their experiences of abuse.

While the OPM requires officers to interview child victim-survivors in a way that ensures the trauma to a child is minimised, no further guidance is provided about how to do so. Guidance is instead provided through operational training such as Interviewing Children and Recording Evidence (ICARE). This guide steps through:

- **Risk assessment framework:** How to apply professional judgment to analyse individual and environmental factors to assess the impact and potential impact of harm on a child.
- **Standard of proof:** How to gather enough evidence to have the best opportunity of satisfying the elements of a criminal charge beyond reasonable doubt.
- **Legalities:** Overview of the relevant legislation, gathering evidence such as s93A and witness statements, particularising events and competency of children to give evidence.
- **Understanding children:** Overview of how children recall events and how factors such as memory, conceptual development, suggestibility and language formation can impact this.
- **Interviewing model:** Identifying the major steps of the interview model and making links between them.
- **Pre-interview planning, opening and preparation:** Identifying the key tasks and pieces of information required before interviewing a child, such as appropriate questions and designing the interview in a way that minimises trauma, and how to successfully open an interview with a child by way of introduction, setting ground rules and building rapport.
- **Questioning during interview:** Identify legal issues such as leading questions and suggestive statements and develop knowledge of appropriate questioning techniques.
- **Interviewing framework:** This incorporates effective interviewing, free narrative, introducing the topic of concern, questioning techniques, barriers to disclosure, and interview strategies.
- **Interview closure:** This covers the importance of closing an interview in a positive manner and ensuring protective strategies are implemented and key concepts of safety and networks have been identified.

Australian Federal Police

At the federal level, the AFP holds responsibility for investigating Commonwealth child exploitation offences, particularly those involving online environments, cross-border offending, or matters that require national and international coordination.

The AFP leads the ACCCE, a national hub based in Brisbane that brings together law enforcement agencies, intelligence bodies, government departments, and non-government partners. The ACCCE focuses on coordination, intelligence sharing, victim identification, community engagement, and international collaboration. It does not generally lay charges but enables and enhances the investigative work of the AFP and state and territory police.

The ACCCE is a national hub for receiving and triaging reports of online child sexual exploitation, many of which come from overseas partners such as the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC)

Currently, ACCCE also collaborates with organisations like AUSTRAC to target financial technology-related exploitation. For example, on 1 July 2022, the ACCCE in partnership with AUSTRAC announced the national operational strategy, Operation HUNSTMAN, to counter the dramatic increase in online sexual extortion of Australian children. Phase 1 was a financial disruption strategy enacted against over 1,500 Australians, to prevent offshore offenders being able to access any funds garnered from the online sexual exploitation of Australian children.

The AFP has a central role in responding to online child sexual abuse, especially where cases cross state, territory, or international borders. The AFP investigates Commonwealth child sexual abuse offences, including crimes committed online, through the postal system, or overseas by Australian citizens. These investigations often involve serious and organised offending that cannot be managed by state and territory agencies alone. In Queensland, JACETs, bring the AFP and QPS together in coordinated responses to address child sexual abuse.

The AFP also works closely with international partners through agencies such as INTERPOL and Europol to track offenders across borders. It uses prevention and disruption strategies, to stop abuse before it escalates.

Alongside enforcement, the AFP contributes to education and awareness through programs like ThinkUKnow, which provides online safety education to children, parents, and educators. In short, the AFP provides national leadership in tackling online exploitation and other child sexual abuse offences under Commonwealth law, while working with states, territories, and international partners to protect children and prevent harm.

The AFP is responsible for 14 measures under the *National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse*.



Data snapshot – the police system



Most cases of child sexual abuse never come to the attention of police. Indeed, the Australian Bureau of Statistics found that **84 per cent** of women and **99 per cent** of men never reported their experiences of sexual abuse as children to police.¹⁰⁶ Of those that are reported to police, a substantial proportion do not proceed to the investigation or prosecution stages.



In 2023–24 approximately **34 per cent** of sexual assault and related charges against adults (for both child and adult victim-survivors) did not proceed to trial or sentencing.¹⁰⁷ Of those that did proceed to trial or sentencing, **80 per cent** resulted in a conviction.¹⁰⁸

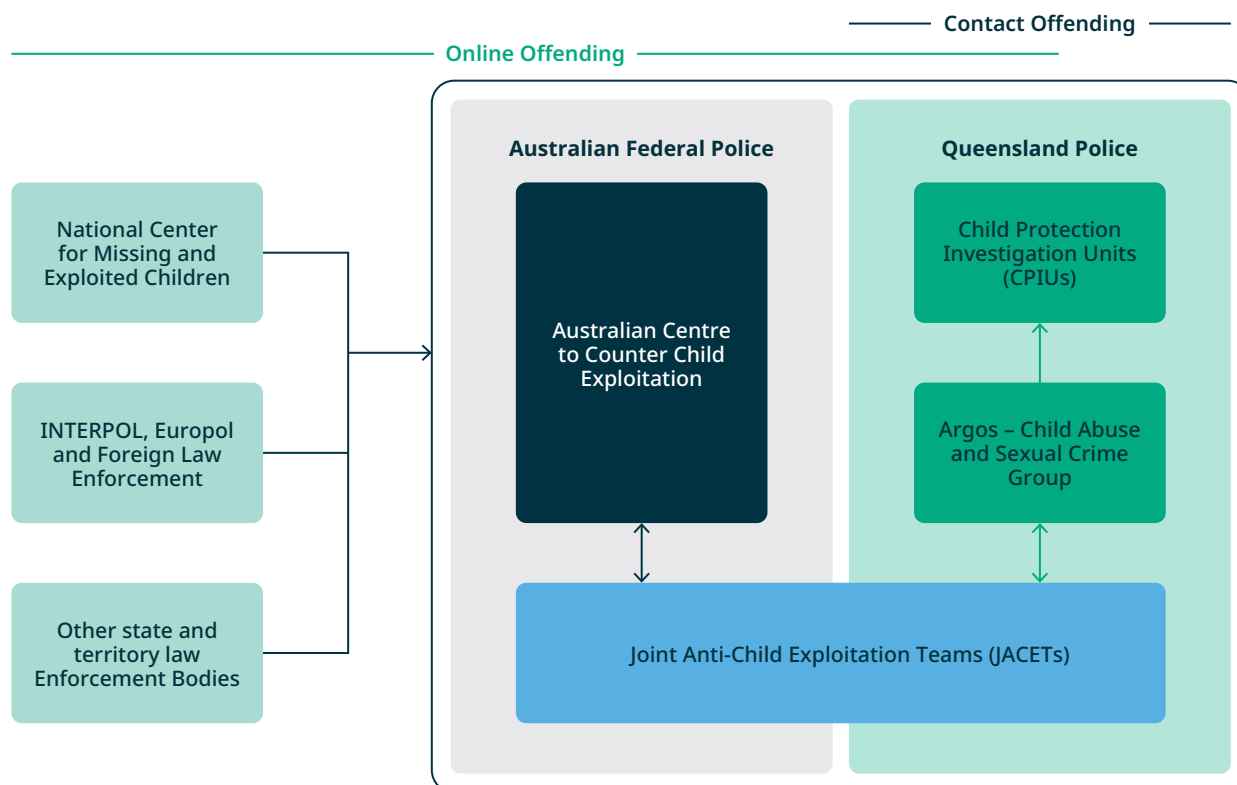


Between 2015–25, approximately **52 per cent** of child sexual abuse offences reported to or identified by QPS did not proceed to any criminal justice outcome.



Of the QPS cases that proceed to court, **51 per cent** of CEM offences, **60 per cent** of contact offences and **62 per cent** of grooming-related offences resulted in conviction.

Figure 17: The structure of policing



Recent reforms to the police system

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (the Royal Commission) released its *Criminal justice* report in August 2017, which made 19 recommendations focused on improving police responses which sought to:

- encourage reporting by victim-survivors
- improve police investigative interviewing techniques and training
- address identified issues with the response by police to reports of historical child sexual abuse and reports of child sexual abuse made by people with disability.

The Queensland Government accepted or accepted in principle all recommendations made relevant to the police, with 14 of these being recorded as complete as of 2022. Although not directly targeted towards the police, the Royal Commission made other recommendations which were intended to also influence police practice, by making the criminal justice system more accessible and responsive to victim-survivors of child sexual abuse.

The Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce (the Taskforce) released its second report in 2022, which considered the experiences of women and girls across the criminal justice system in Queensland, including their experiences as victim-survivors of sexual violence. The report highlighted the high number of women and girls who experience child sexual abuse, and the low percentage of reports that make it through each stage of the criminal justice process.⁵⁴

The Taskforce found that the current system and related processes are difficult to navigate, retraumatising for victim-survivors and lacking in adequate and appropriate support. Many factors which discourage and prevent victim-survivors from reporting sexual violence were identified, including:

- myths and stigma about sexual violence
- overlapping structural inequality within the police and criminal justice system
- outdated legislation
- lack of support
- difficulty navigating the system.

The Taskforce made multiple recommendations to improve policing responses including by:

- developing a collaborative model across agencies to respond to sexual violence

- improving practice to deliver victim-centric and trauma-informed responses to victim-survivors
- continuing to implement evidence-based and trauma-informed training for all staff, and ensuring only specialist trained officers interview victim-survivors.

The Queensland Government supported or supported in principle nearly all Taskforce recommendations directed at the QPS.

In 2024 the Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC) undertook a review of *Justice Responses to Sexual Violence* in Australia to identify what was needed to improve justice system responses to sexual violence. The ALRC found similar themes to the other reviews and inquiries discussed above, including:

- few victim-survivors engage with the criminal justice system due to significant barriers to engagement
- victim-survivors who do engage with the criminal justice system are not engaged in a safe, informed and supported way and often encounter myths and stigma about sexual violence
- people who use sexual violence often face no consequence for their actions.

The ALRC review resulted in 64 recommendations to various agencies, mostly the federal, state and territory governments. Again, most recommendations, if implemented, seek to influence police practice to improve processes and outcomes for both adult and child victim-survivors. Six recommendations were made directly to state and territory police services including:

- improving education and training to ensure police practice is trauma-informed, culturally safe and evidence-based, with specialist staff receiving tailored training
- reviewing and updating guidelines and processes for responding to sexual violence, including timeframes, interviewing, record-keeping, communication throughout the process, accessibility and complaints processes
- ensuring information about sexual violence criminal justice processes is accessible and publicly available
- involvement in a national taskforce for quality assurance of police interviewing for sexual violence victim-survivors
- ensuring interview spaces are safe and appropriate for all victim-survivors.

Recommendations from the ALRC review align closely with those made by the Royal Commission and the Taskforce, highlighting ongoing national issues in police responses to child sexual abuse and adult sexual violence.

National registration and monitoring of child offenders

Australia operates a system of national registration and monitoring for individuals convicted of serious offences against children. Although each state and territory is responsible for implementing the relevant legislation within its jurisdiction, the system is coordinated centrally through the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission. This centralised administration enables information to be shared across borders, ensuring that offenders remain subject to monitoring even if they move between jurisdictions.

The purpose of the scheme is to support law enforcement agencies in managing risk. The scheme requires child sex offenders to keep police informed of their whereabouts. It provides police with a legal framework to monitor known offenders. By requiring offenders to remain visible to authorities, the scheme seeks to reduce opportunities for reoffending and enhance community protection.

In Queensland, the *Child Protection (Offender Reporting and Offender Prohibition Order) Act 2004* establishes the state's Child Protection Offender Reporting Scheme. Under this legislation, convicted child sex offenders and other categories of serious offenders against children are legally required to keep police informed of their whereabouts and certain personal information, such as changes of address, employment, or travel plans. The QPS manages the scheme, which forms part of its broader child protection responsibilities. Its central aim is to safeguard children by ensuring that high-risk individuals are subject to ongoing oversight and accountability.

Monitoring of released offenders who are considered as presenting a significant and ongoing risk to the community has increased. Legislation such as the *Dangerous Prisoners (Sexual Offenders) Act 2003* and the *Child Protection (Offender Reporting and Offender Prohibition Order) Act 2004* enabled extended detention, supervision and mandatory reporting for offenders. Over time, judicial discretion has been replaced or constrained by statutory obligations. The introduction of monitoring legislation, including the offender prohibition orders through the *Child Protection (Offender Prohibition) Act 2008* has strengthened the controls placed on released offenders and enabled critical information sharing between the child protection and blue card systems.

Chapter

006

People that abuse children

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People that abuse children

“

Every society tells itself comforting lies about child abuse. That it is rare. That it is perpetrated only by monsters lurking in dark alleys. That the danger exists “out there”, beyond the family home, beyond the school gates, beyond the places we attend and consider safe. These lies, though soothing, are deadly. They obscure the truth: that those who abuse children are often ordinary in appearance, adept at camouflage, and deeply strategic in the way they infiltrate families, institutions, and communities.

”

When confronted with the horror of child sexual abuse, our instinct is often to look away. We prefer to focus on the bravery of victim-survivors, the resilience of families, or the systems that failed to protect. These are important, vital stories, but they are only a part of the story. To stop abuse before it begins, we must confront the other half: the perpetrators themselves. It is a dark and uncomfortable undertaking. To step into the mind of someone who manipulates, grooms, and exploits children is to look into areas that most people would rather never approach. Yet if we are serious about prevention, we must resist the temptation to avert our eyes. We must ask, relentlessly and without sentimentality: *who are these people, how do they think, and why do they do it?*

This is not morbid curiosity. It is necessity. The safety of children depends on our willingness to understand the people who seek to harm them.

The scale of child sexual abuse is staggering. In every jurisdiction, in every decade, child sexual abuse has been more widespread than authorities dared to admit. Inquiries around the world—from Ireland to Canada, from the United Kingdom to Australia—have peeled back the veneer of denial, exposing how institutions, governments, and communities consistently underestimated the prevalence of abuse and the cunning of those who perpetrated it. Why do these failures keep happening? Because systems are not built with a deep understanding of perpetrator behaviour at their core.

Children pay the price for adult discomfort. Each time a warning sign is dismissed, each time a disclosure is disbelieved, each time a complaint was smothered by organisational bureaucracy, another child is delivered into the hands of a perpetrator who has mastered the art of appearing trustworthy.

Risk assessments often rely on crude stereotypes: the 'dangerous stranger', the 'loner', the 'monster'. In reality, many perpetrators are skilled social operators. They cultivate reputations as helpers, carers, coaches, teachers, mentors, positions that disarm suspicion and provide legitimate access to children. They learn the weaknesses of organisations: the overburdened supervisor, the undertrained volunteer coordinator, the fragmented lines of accountability, and they exploit them with surgical precision.

When law enforcement, child protection agencies, or community leaders fail to integrate knowledge of these perpetrator characteristics into their strategies, children remain exposed. It is like trying to cure a disease without studying the virus.

“

*If you want to protect children more globally in this ECEC space, you're going to have to start asking some of these more difficult questions. We're so embarrassed to ask these questions. We've got to get over our embarrassment about this.*¹⁰⁹

”

One of the greatest barriers to progress is our collective reliance on caricature. We imagine child abusers as a separate species, inhuman, visibly deviant, incapable of blending into society. This caricature comforts us because it draws a neat line: they are 'other', and therefore easy to spot, easy to exclude, easy to contain. But research and lived experience tell us otherwise. Many perpetrators are outwardly ordinary. They are neighbours, colleagues, relatives, faith leaders and police officers. They sit on boards, lead scout groups,

volunteer at schools, or work in childcare centres. They often present as generous with their time, patient with children, reliable in moments of crisis. Some cultivate reputations of near saintliness, knowing that the more trusted they appear, the less likely anyone will suspect their darker motives.

By understanding this duality—the respectable façade and the predatory core—we begin to unravel the central paradox of child sexual abuse: that harm often comes not from those society teaches us to fear, but from those it teaches us to trust.

To stop child abuse, we must ask one of the hardest questions imaginable: *why would anyone choose to harm a child in this way?* Motivations vary. For some perpetrators, the drive is sexual gratification, entangled with distorted beliefs about children's capacity to consent. For others, it is about power and control, a sadistic assertion of dominance over the most vulnerable. What unites them is not a single motivation but a pattern of method. Perpetrators are strategists. They invest time and energy into breaking down barriers of suspicion, both around the child and around the child's ecosystem of protection. They groom not just victim-survivors but also parents, colleagues, and organisations, carefully crafting an environment in which abuse can occur unnoticed or unchallenged. This manipulation of context, the weaponising of trust, is what makes child sexual abuse uniquely difficult to detect and prevent. And it is precisely why studying offender behaviour is indispensable.

Every perpetrator leaves a trace. They may test boundaries with inappropriate jokes, or manufacture opportunities for one-on-one contact with children. They may volunteer for roles that give them unsupervised access, or cultivate relationships with families under the guise of mentorship or support. These patterns, when understood and recognised, become warning signs. But without a framework for analysis, signals are easily dismissed as quirks, eccentricities, or harmless enthusiasm. Too often, the pieces of the puzzle are scattered across different agencies, different contexts, different timeframes, never assembled into a coherent picture until it is far too late.

To analyse perpetrators is not to sympathise with them. It is to strip them of the shadows in which they thrive. Each insight into how they think and operate becomes a tool of prevention. A rigorous study of perpetrator pathways allows us to connect these fragments, to see the architecture of abuse before it is fully constructed. It empowers professionals, institutions, and communities to act earlier, with greater confidence, and with a clearer sense of what they are confronting.

To look directly at perpetrators—coldly, rigorously, without flinching—is to arm ourselves with the knowledge necessary to protect.

The bias of basing studies only on who you catch

Our understanding of people that abuse children is largely drawn from administrative criminal justice data. This means that we mostly know about perpetrators who have been caught.

When studies of child sexual abuse rely only on detected perpetrators, those who are charged, convicted, or otherwise caught, we risk a fundamental methodological bias. This is akin to the problem identified during World War II, when analysts initially proposed reinforcing the areas of returning aircraft that showed the most bullet holes. The statistician Abraham Wald famously pointed out the flaw: the bullet holes were on the planes that made it home. The critical areas were the ones with no damage on returning planes, because aircraft hit there had not survived to be counted. In the same way, if we build our understanding of child sexual abuse solely on perpetrators who are caught, prosecuted, or publicly exposed, we are studying the 'planes that made it home'. These individuals represent only a subset of all abusers, often those who were less skilled at concealing their actions, those who made mistakes, those who offended in ways that left clearer evidence, or who operated in contexts where detection was more likely.

This creates several distortions:

- **Over-representation of certain perpetrator types:** Opportunistic or less sophisticated perpetrators may be caught more often, skewing data away from highly organised, manipulative perpetrators who evade detection.
- **Underestimation of institutional grooming:** Perpetrators who succeed in embedding themselves in institutions, cultivating trust, and silencing victim-survivors may remain hidden for years or decades.
- **Misleading risk profiles:** By studying only those apprehended, we risk drawing conclusions about 'what perpetrators look like' that reflect detection bias, not the full spectrum of perpetrator behaviour.
- **System blindness:** Reliance on known cases hides the far larger number of undetected perpetrators, which research suggests is substantial. This limits the ability to design systemic safeguards that address the full risk environment.

Perpetrators are also unlikely to provide an accurate recall of their criminal histories particularly when it involves the sexual abuse of children. Criminal justice data and forensic studies have been critical in shaping our understanding of known perpetrators, including their motivations, methods, and risk factors. The true challenge however is not only to analyse those we catch, but to recognise the biases in that sample and to seek evidence, from victim-survivor disclosures, research, and systemic reviews, about those who remain undetected.

Much of what we know about child sexual abuse perpetrators is derived from clinical or forensic samples, individuals who have been charged, convicted, or treated in therapeutic settings, however this is a clear risk that such samples represent only a fraction of those who offend.

Most perpetrators will pass criminal history background checks, including WWCC, as they do not have prior criminal records. While they are an important part of a child safeguarding system, WWCC assume that risk is correlated with known histories of offending, but emerging research challenges that assumption. Most motivated child sexual abuse perpetrators, particularly those who operate online, those in positions of authority, and those who have adapted their offending to avoid detection, will pass these checks with ease.

Background checks such as WWCC are only effective when the individual in question has a known criminal history. This fact alone requires a paradigm shift in how we conceptualise risk and prevention. It calls for robust safeguarding systems that are proactive and informed by broader behavioural and environmental indicators, rather than being narrowly reactive to prior convictions or substantiated reports.

Based on population level surveys, and research, we also know that:

- there are people with a sexual interest in children who have yet to and may not commit offences
- there are people who have committed or continue to commit sexual offences against children who have yet to be detected for their offending
- there are people who have been convicted for sexual offences against children whose risk of reoffending can be managed, when they have access to an appropriate mix of interventions, ongoing monitoring and rehabilitation support.

While this is an uncomfortable conversation, by focusing on abusers, we seek to make the invisible visible, to better understand how to protect children and prevent future abuse.

Types of offenders

There is a community perception that every person who sexually abuses a child is a paedophile. This is not correct. Not all child sexual offenders are paedophiles. Rather paedophiles are a sub-set of child sexual offenders.¹¹⁰ Most child sexual offenders who come to police attention are opportunistic or situational perpetrators who do not meet the clinical diagnostic criteria for paedophilia. Opportunistic or situational perpetrators often do not have a sexual interest in children and engage in child sexual abuse when an opportunity arises and/or due to the circumstances they are in.¹¹¹ They are more likely to lack appropriate personal controls and be impulsive.¹¹²

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (the Royal Commission) noted some key differences between the two. They considered that:

- Opportunistic perpetrators may be more likely to be involved in general offending other than child sexual abuse, they are less likely to intentionally create situations where abuse occurs and be less likely to use grooming strategies.¹¹³ They will abuse children where there is an opportunity to do so.
- Situational perpetrators tend to abuse children in response to things that are occurring in their own life.¹¹⁴ This might include a lack of positive adult relationships, low self-esteem or social isolation.¹¹⁵

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th edition) describes a person as having Paedophilic Disorder when they have intense and recurrent sexual urges towards, and fantasies about, prepubescent children that have either been acted upon or which cause the person distress or interpersonal difficulties.¹¹⁶ They can also be referred to as fixed or persistent perpetrators.¹¹⁷

Put simply, paedophilia is a sexual preference for prepubescent children.¹¹⁸ The person can be either attracted specifically to males or females, or both.¹¹⁹ One indicator of paedophilic disorder is the extensive use of child exploitation material (CEM) given individuals usually choose the kind of pornography that resembles their sexual interests.¹²⁰

People usually become aware of their sexual interest in children around the time of puberty and it appears to be a lifelong condition.¹²¹ Most of what we know about paedophiles comes from clinical or criminal justice samples, from men who have already committed sexual offences against children.¹²² Given the known underreporting of child sexual abuse, the prevalence of paedophilia in the general population is largely unknown with the highest possible reported prevalence in the male population being approximately three to five per cent.¹²³

Paedophiles have a higher recidivism rate compared to opportunistic or situational offenders due to their sexual preference towards children.¹²⁴ However, if a perpetrator is ready, willing and able to engage in sexual offender programs they can learn to manage their thoughts, feelings and behaviours towards children and lead a healthy lifestyle. There are significant challenges to building our understanding of how to intervene or work with people that abuse children.¹²⁵ This is impacted by inaccurate self-reporting by perpetrators who have been caught, including about other abuse they may have previously committed which has not been disclosed or detected.¹²⁶ This has serious implications for approaches to risk assessment, treatment planning, sentencing decisions and supervisory conditions.¹²⁷

Women who sexually abuse children

Most research in this area has predominately focused on men who sexually abuse children. There is little research about women who sexually abuse children. QPS data indicates that of all reported sexual offences alleged to have been committed against children in Queensland between 2015–25, only 8 per cent involved a female perpetrator. Women who sexually abuse children are a heterogeneous group and given the limited research, and comparatively lower rates of detected offending, caution is required when interpreting any female offenders profile.¹²⁸ The true prevalence of female-perpetrated sexual abuse is unknown, possibly due to under reporting. Some recent studies indicate between 5 per cent and 21 per cent of child sexual abuse is perpetrated by female offenders.^{129 130} Little is also known about the characteristics of women who sexually abuse children, such as their motivations, psychopathology, risk factors and treatment needs.¹³¹ One recent study found that female perpetrators engage in grooming behaviours similar to male perpetrators, however the sexual grooming model used for this study is validated only for use with men.¹³² The community is less likely to recognise women as sexual offenders and instead sees them as caregivers, nurturers or victims. This means that child sexual offences committed by women may be minimised or go undetected.¹³³ Further, victim-survivors who do come forward to report abuse by a female offender may be met by disbelief by family, professionals and police.

Research on hidden perpetrators

A study by Professor Michael Salter in 2023 offers valuable insight into a hidden population of perpetrators. The research focused on child sexual exploitation and abuse across three countries, with a particular emphasis on Australia. This large-scale survey explored the characteristics, motivations, online behaviours, and social environments of men who have sexually abused or exploited children, or who have a sexual interest in doing so, despite not necessarily having been detected or charged by authorities.

Within the Australian component of the study, a nationally representative sample of 1939 adult men was surveyed. The findings revealed approximately five per cent of survey respondents admitted to having a sexual interest in, feelings for, or motivation to offend against children. While not all people with a sexual interest in children go on to offend, the data indicated a significant population of motivated offenders operating outside the reach of the criminal justice system.

This data highlights the extent to which these individuals were present in child-related occupations. Of the surveyed sample, 16.3 per cent reported that their current employment involved working with children.

Furthermore, those who were identified as motivated offenders were found to be 3.17 times more likely to be employed in roles that involved direct access to children. This overrepresentation of motivated offenders in child-related roles challenges many foundational assumptions within safeguarding frameworks. It raises critical questions about how people may intentionally seek out employment or volunteer roles that provide both access to children and the necessary authority to deflect suspicion.

These types of roles also provide perpetrators with opportunities to build trust with children, families, and communities. Trust that can be strategically exploited to enable offending and reduce the likelihood of detection.

The findings reveal a pattern of risk among motivated offenders working with children, including demographic, behavioural, psychosocial, and attitudinal domains. These men were more likely to be older, married or cohabiting, living with children, and earning higher incomes. They also demonstrated frequent

use of encrypted digital platforms, daily consumption of pornography (including violent or illegal content), and engagement with offender networks. Psychosocial vulnerabilities, including anxiety, depression, and adverse childhood experiences, were significantly elevated. Importantly, many held beliefs that minimised the harms of CSA [child sexual abuse] and reported peer associations with offenders that further increased risk.

This profile underscores how risk may be concealed beneath outwardly stable life circumstances and professional roles.¹³⁴

The study also identified a distinct demographic and behavioural profile of motivated offenders who work with children. They were statistically more likely to:

- be aged 55 years or older
- live in metropolitan areas
- have a high annual household income
- be heterosexual
- be married or cohabitating with a partner
- have at least one child living in their household.

This demographic profile is notable for several reasons. First, it contrasts with the commonly held stereotype of the socially isolated or obviously deviant perpetrator. Instead, these individuals present as socially integrated, economically stable, and domestically situated, features that may actively obscure suspicion or complaints. Their apparent 'normality' and seniority in both professional and community settings can act as powerful camouflage. It enables them to deflect scrutiny and manipulate institutional cultures that are reluctant to suspect or accuse those in positions of trust.

These individuals also demonstrate particular behavioural patterns that enhance their capacity to offend covertly. They are more likely to:

- use social media platforms frequently
- engage in online gaming and online dating
- use anonymity-preserving technologies such as The Onion Router (TOR), virtual private networks (VPNs), and encrypted dark web forums like Hive
- have social networks that include others who engage in some form of child sexual exploitation or abuse
- report poorer mental health outcomes.

The intersections between these factors indicates that many motivated offenders are not isolated or operating independently. They are part of broader digital or social communities in which offending behaviours are normalised, encouraged, or concealed. The use of sophisticated digital technologies allows for both anonymity and connectivity. It creates an environment in which perpetrators can exchange material, reinforce distorted beliefs, and learn tactics to avoid detection.

Poor mental health, while not a cause of offending, may reflect the internal conflict, risk-taking behaviours, or emotional dysregulation associated with such individuals.

The 'typical' indicators of risk such as prior convictions, social deviance, or overt grooming behaviours do not apply to many of the individuals identified in this study. These motivated offenders are older, better resourced, more socially integrated, and more strategic in their offending. They may be senior educators, respected professionals, long-standing volunteers, or community leaders. Their offences are likely to be hidden, opportunistic, and methodically planned to avoid raising concern.

These findings highlight a fundamental weakness in many child safeguarding systems: the tendency to rely on visible warning signs or past criminal behaviour as the primary basis for risk assessment.

In environments where perpetrators are strategically 'normal' in their appearance and behaviour, and where they are embedded in protective institutional cultures, traditional mechanisms of prevention and detection are unlikely to be effective. This underscores the need for more dynamic and context-aware safeguarding frameworks, those that take account of:

- power dynamics
- access to children
- patterns of behaviour within organisations and over time
- the broader environments that facilitate grooming and concealment.

The findings also point to institutional blind spots that can be actively exploited by perpetrators.

Organisations that serve children, particularly large, hierarchical ones—may have cultures that prioritise loyalty, reputation, or procedural compliance over the safety of children. In such environments, perpetrators may thrive, using their seniority and perceived trustworthiness to silence concerns, discredit complainants, and manipulate reporting processes.

Where motivated offenders are embedded within these organisations, they can become 'untouchable', surrounded by structural and cultural safeguards that serve to protect them rather than the children in their care.

Staff may also be reluctant to raise concerns about respected colleagues, and children may not be believed. Even where reports are made, weak investigative responses, poor record-keeping, or inter-agency gaps can result in missed opportunities to intervene.

The implications of these findings are profound. If five per cent of adult men report a motivation to sexually abuse or exploit children, and if those with such motivations are statistically more likely to be working with children, then current child safeguarding systems may be significantly underestimating the scope and proximity of risk.

The findings presented in this study force a critical re-evaluation of how we identify, understand and respond to people with a sexual interest in, or who abuse children. It:

- challenges longstanding assumptions about risk
- reveals the inadequacy of current prevention mechanisms
- highlights the presence of motivated offenders operating undetected in our communities and institutions.

The fact that many of these individuals are older, wealthier, socially embedded and professionally respected makes them particularly difficult to detect and also particularly dangerous. Systems built around the identification of 'problem individuals' through criminal histories or visible red flags are insufficient.

We must build safeguarding environments that anticipate deception, embed protective culture, and actively question assumptions of safety based on social status or familiarity. Only by recognising the full scale and shape of the threat can we design a response that is truly fit for purpose.

This research is also consistent with other representative population samples and surveys. For example:

- A systematic review which critically evaluated 30 studies found the mean prevalence rate of sexual interest in children was between two per cent and 24 per cent. These findings were dependant on the population and there were several inconsistencies across the studies in terms of methodology and the definition of sexual interest in children.¹³⁵
- A 2013 survey conducted on 1978 male third-year high school students in Sweden found 4.2 per cent of the participants had viewed CEM indicating a potential sexual interest in children.¹³⁶
- An online survey of 8718 German men found 4.1 per cent reported sexual fantasies involving prepubescent children, 3.2 per cent reported sexual offending against prepubescent children, and 0.1 per cent reported a paedophilic sexual preference.¹³⁷

Understanding the preconditions for child sexual abuse: a critical analysis of Finkelhor's four-factor model

If identifying the people who may seek to sexually abuse children remains difficult, our focus can instead shift to observing and understanding the behaviours and actions through which abuse occurs. While predicting who will offend is challenging, analysing how abuse is perpetrated provides a more practical and evidence-informed pathway to prevention. To effectively safeguard children, it is essential to examine the behavioural patterns, social contexts, and situational circumstances that facilitate offending.

Understanding the mechanisms of abuse requires looking beyond perpetrator characteristics to consider the ways in which perpetrators interact with children, exploit environments, and leverage opportunities to commit abuse. By focusing on behaviours rather than traits, we can move from acknowledging that abuse occurs to a deeper understanding of the conditions and methods that make offending possible. This perspective naturally leads into the theory of offending circumstances, which examines how personal motivations, opportunity structures, and environmental factors converge to enable abuse. One of the most enduring and influential theoretical frameworks in this field is David Finkelhor's Four Preconditions Model. This model offers a structured psychological explanation of how and why child sexual abuse occurs.

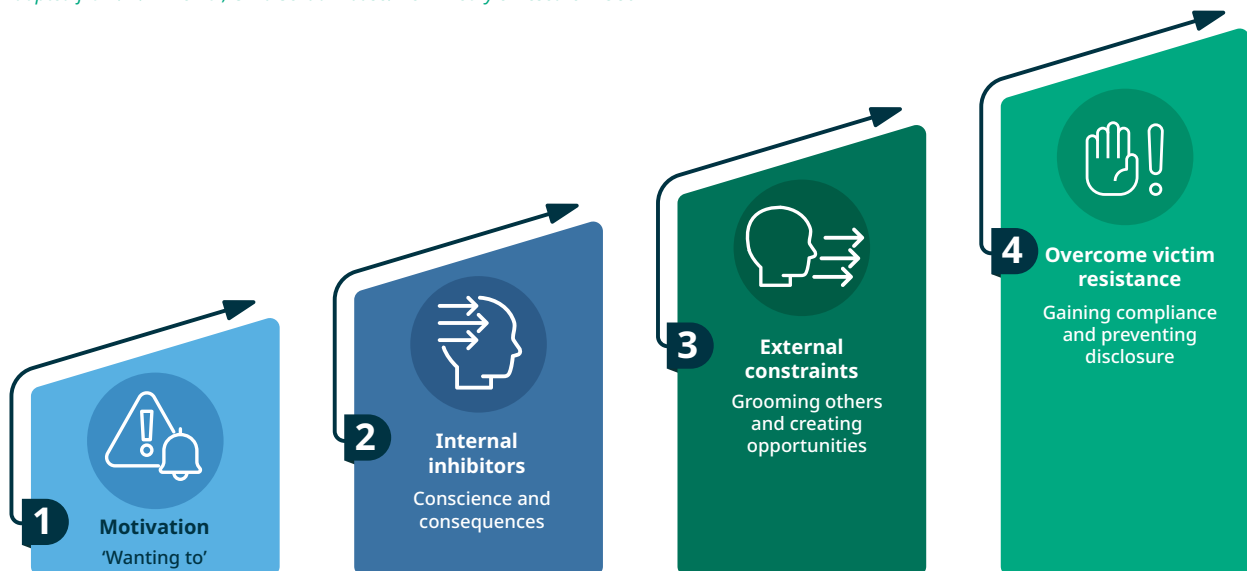
For an incident of child sexual abuse to occur, Finkelhor asserts that four preconditions need to be met.

1. **The offender needs to be motivated to sexually abuse a child.**
2. **The offender would have to overcome internal inhibitions to sexually abuse a child.**
3. **The offender would have to overcome external obstacles to sexually abuse a child.**
4. **The offender would have to overcome victim resistance to the sexual abuse.**

This model moves away from simple notions of 'evil' or criminality. It instead examines the interplay of individual, relational, and environmental factors that enable abuse to occur.

Figure 18: Four Pre-conditions to child sexual abuse

Adapted from: D. Finkelhor, Child Sexual Abuse: New Theory & Research 1986



1. The offender must be motivated to sexually abuse a child

The first precondition in Finkelhor's model is the presence of a motivated offender. This is often founded in three interrelated psychological dynamics:

- emotional congruence
- sexual arousal to children
- blockage of alternative sexual outlets.

Emotional congruence refers to the psychological identification of the perpetrator with the emotional world of the child.

Sometimes perpetrators may feel more comfortable or accepted in 'relationships' with children than with adults due to unresolved childhood trauma, social isolation, or low self-esteem. These perpetrators may seek out children not solely for sexual gratification, but also for emotional connection, validation, or control, blurring lines between emotional and sexual motivation in their own minds.

Sexual arousal to children is another critical factor. While not all people who have a sexual interest in children will offend, those who do are more likely to have persistent and intense patterns of arousal to prepubescent children. This may be compounded by the presence of deviant sexual fantasies, compulsive pornography use (including CEM), or participation in networks that normalise these desires.

Blockage refers to the idea that some perpetrators may lack appropriate or satisfying sexual relationships with adults due to psychological, relational, or situational issues. This 'blockage' of normative outlets may increase the likelihood that motivated offenders turn to children as accessible or less threatening targets.

While this concept has been criticised for implying a level of inevitability, it remains an important lens for examining how certain internal pressures may influence behaviour.

Motivation alone, however, is insufficient. Many people with a sexual interest in children do not offend. What distinguishes those who act is their ability or failure to manage and contain their desires, leading to the second precondition.

2. The offender must overcome internal inhibitions

The second precondition requires the motivated offender to overcome internal inhibitions—psychological and moral barriers that typically prevent individuals from harming others, particularly children. These inhibitions may stem from a person's conscience, empathy, fear or guilt, moral beliefs, or personal values. Perpetrators must neutralise or circumvent these barriers to act on their motivations.

Cognitive distortions are one of the most documented mechanisms by which perpetrators overcome internal inhibitions. They are used by perpetrators to rationalise and justify their harmful sexual behaviours towards children (and sometimes adults).¹³⁸ This includes personal thoughts, beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes which minimise the nature of the abuse and diminish a person's responsibility for the abuse.¹³⁹ The distorted views of victim-survivors, the world and the perpetrator themselves free them from guilt,¹⁴⁰ acting as a self-protective defence mechanism.¹⁴¹

Cognitive distortions could include statements relating to how children are capable of 'seducing' men, or sexual activity between adults and children being seen as 'healthy'.¹⁴² These are self-serving beliefs and rationalisations that allow the perpetrator to reinterpret their actions as non-harmful, justified, or even loving.¹⁴³ Common distortions include beliefs such as 'children are sexual beings,' 'I'm teaching them about sex,' or 'they wanted it.'¹⁴⁴ These distortions reduce moral dissonance and allow a perpetrator to view their behaviour as acceptable or excusable.¹⁴⁵ They can be further reinforced by socialising with others with a sexual interest in children, including in online environments.¹⁴⁶

Substance use can also serve to lower inhibitions. While alcohol and other drug use is not a causative factor, it is commonly associated with the perpetration of incidents of child sexual abuse, particularly those involving opportunistic or situational perpetrators. Alcohol and other drug use may reduce anxiety, impair judgment, and provide a psychological justification for behaviour the individual knows is wrong. In some cases, it may also be used intentionally by a perpetrator to lower their own inhibitions or those of the child.

Lack of impulse control or the presence of personality disorders can further reduce a perpetrator's capacity to resist acting on deviant urges. Perpetrators with antisocial, narcissistic, or psychopathic traits may lack empathy, remorse, or concern for the consequences of their actions. These individuals are more likely to engage in manipulative, coercive, or violent offending, and may reoffend even after detection.

Critically, many internal inhibition-lowering mechanisms are reinforced through repeated offending. The more times an individual offends without consequences, the more entrenched their cognitive distortions become, and the easier it becomes for them to justify ongoing abuse.

3. The offender must overcome external obstacles

The third precondition is the need to overcome external obstacles—physical, relational, or institutional barriers that might otherwise prevent access to a child or reduce opportunities to offend. These can include adult supervision, organisational safeguards, or social and environmental factors that create visibility and accountability.

Finkelhor's model underscores the importance of opportunity in enabling abuse. Even a motivated offender with low inhibitions is less likely to be able to offend if they are never alone with a child, or if they are closely monitored. Conversely, when external barriers are weak, absent, or can be easily bypassed, opportunities for abuse increase dramatically.

Access to children is a central enabling factor. Perpetrators are often in roles that provide both access and authority such as older family members (including uncles, siblings, fathers), neighbours, babysitters, teachers, coaches, youth workers, or clergy. These positions also afford trust, which can be used to manipulate both children and the adults around them. Research consistently finds that most child sexual abuse is perpetrated by someone known to the child who is often trusted by their family or community.

Institutional failings can also create environments in which perpetrators are shielded or enabled. This may include poor recruitment screening, inadequate supervision, fragmented reporting pathways, or cultures of silence and deference to authority. Organisational blind spots and failures to act on suspicions or allegations can contribute to environments which sustain offending. Some perpetrators become adept at identifying and exploiting these system weaknesses. This includes reluctance of institutions to damage their reputations or proactively act on ambiguous concerns.

Technological enablers also play a growing role in lowering external barriers. Perpetrators may groom children online, communicate in private or through encrypted channels, and exchange abuse material without ever being physically present. The internet also allows perpetrators to connect with like-minded individuals, further normalising their behaviour and reducing perceived risks. Preventing child sexual abuse, therefore, requires strengthening external barriers. This includes by:

- ensuring appropriate supervisory safeguards are in place
- embedding safeguarding culture in organisations
- disrupting digital environments where exploitation can thrive.

4. The offender must overcome victim resistance

The fourth and final precondition is the offender's need to overcome resistance from the child. This may be done through physical force, threats, coercion, manipulation, grooming, or abuse of authority. Importantly, Finkelhor acknowledges that many child victim-survivors are not capable of resisting the abuse, due to their age, size, developmental capacity, trust in the adult, or lack of understanding that the behaviour is abusive.

Grooming is one of the most common strategies perpetrators use to reduce resistance.

Grooming involves establishing a relationship of trust with a child, and often their caregivers including parents or other staff, to create opportunities for abuse to occur. This includes by normalising problematic behaviours and desensitising a child to physical contact, secrecy, or inappropriate attention. Perpetrators may provide gifts, affection, or special privileges, while simultaneously isolating the child from others and instilling confusion or guilt.

In some cases, force or threats may be used to ensure compliance and silence. This may include threats to harm the child or their loved ones, to expose them to shame or blame, or that they will not be believed if they were to disclose. The fear induced by such threats can be particularly powerful in keeping children compliant and preventing disclosure, including after the abuse has occurred.

Children may also be targeted when they are asleep, distracted, or otherwise unable to resist.

Vulnerable children—including very young children, those with disabilities, those in care, or those who have experienced previous trauma—are often at greater risk due to their reduced ability to resist or report the abuse, or to be believed when they do tell others.

Understanding how perpetrators manipulate and control children and their caregivers, including parents and staff, to create opportunities for abuse to occur and avoid detection is essential to improving the prevention and identification of, and response to, this type of abuse. It also challenges simplistic community myths and reinforces the need for trauma-informed, child-centred responses to all disclosures or suspicions of abuse.

Implications for prevention and systemic response

Finkelhor's model shows that abuse is rarely the result of a single failing. Rather, it is enabled by a combination of factors, internal and external, individual and systemic.

Primary prevention must target each of these four preconditions. This includes through:

- education to challenge cognitive distortions and promote healthy sexuality
- interventions for people with a sexual interest in children to seek help before offending
- strong cultural and legal norms that reinforce internal inhibitions
- robust safeguarding environments that minimise opportunities for abuse to occur and increase the likelihood of detection.

Secondary and tertiary prevention which focus on early intervention or responding after abuse has occurred, can also benefit from this type of framing. By understanding how grooming, coercion, and manipulation operate, professionals can better detect risk, assess disclosures, and respond sensitively. By recognising the organisational and systemic factors that reduce external obstacles, institutions can implement changes to close gaps and enhance organisational accountability.

Additionally, Finkelhor's model encourages a shared responsibility approach. Preventing child sexual abuse is not just the responsibility of police or child protection agencies. It is the role of schools, sporting clubs, religious institutions, health services, and every adult who interacts with children. Systems must be designed to detect not only clear signs of abuse, but also the situational or environmental conditions that make abuse possible.

Finkelhor's Four Preconditions Model reinforces that abuse is not an isolated or random event, but the result of multiple converging factors that must each be addressed if we are to truly protect children.

The model offers a comprehensive framework for prevention by improving understanding of the motivations of offenders by:

- the way in which they overcome their own inhibitions
- the environmental and institutional vulnerabilities they exploit, and
- the ways they seek to suppress victim resistance.

As systems evolve and perpetrators adapt, this model continues to provide essential insight. It reinforces the need for vigilance, for systemic reform, and for a comprehensive, evidence-informed understanding of how child sexual abuse occurs—and how it can be stopped.

Routine Activity Theory

***Environment is the invisible hand that shapes human behaviour.*¹⁴⁷**

Routine Activity Theory was introduced by Cohen and Felson and relates crime closely to the environment.¹⁴⁸ It is suggested many normal day-to-day activities bring adults and children into contact with each other. These routines can provide the opportunity for harmful offences to occur.¹⁴⁹ Prevention strategies related to environmental factors attempt to alter the opportunity to offend.¹⁵⁰

Routine Activity Theory asserts that for an offence to occur there needs to be the presence of a motivated offender, potential victim and the absence of a capable guardian.¹⁵¹

Figure 19: Routine Activity Theory



(Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson, 1979)

Motivated offenders are persons who have a desire to commit an offence and are capable.¹⁵² They may be driven by various factors such as financial need or social pressure, or for a person with a sexual interest in children potentially to meet a sexual need.¹⁵³

A suitable target/potential victim is a person who the motivated offender perceives to meet their personal preferences and is vulnerable.¹⁵⁴ The opportunity to commit a crime may influence which victim the motivated offender identifies and chooses to engage.¹⁵⁵

A capable guardian means anyone or anything that can effectively deter or prevent an offence.¹⁵⁶ For instance, a capable guardian can be a childcare educator who is going about their routine work and is able to keep both children and other educators in their line of sight (supervision) in order to prevent and/or identify an offence. Further, the choice of architecture of environments can reduce potential for offending by decreasing hiding places.

A likely time to commit harmful offences is when a motivated offender has unsupervised, or minimally supervised, access to children. This includes when no one is watching over them, or people are oblivious to the offending behaviour. It might also include when children are taken behind a closed door or into another area out of sight of other educators and/or CCTV.

If everyone is thinking about guardianship, then all forms of abuse to children committed by both men and women can be better prevented, identified and responded to.

...you need to look very simply at Routine Activity Theory. Particularly if you're dealing with very young, pre-verbal children. The notion of capable guardianship is absolutely critical. [ECEC employees] need to internalise the notion that in order to keep these kids safe, all of us here need to be capable and responsible guardians.¹⁵⁷

Policies and procedures can be implemented to increase guardianship or supervision and decrease opportunities for perpetrators to have unsupervised access to children.¹⁵⁸ Other institutional safeguards, such as contextual prevention and environmental design, can also be established to help further reduce opportunities for abuse to occur. This could include:

- controlling the number of children per educator
- strengthening regulatory controls, such as through the *Child Safe Organisations Act 2024*
- improving physical spaces by creating open spaces to ensure line of sight
- addressing the organisational culture to allow for better identification of offending behaviours and reporting processes.

Navigating online offending

Increased access to the internet and technological advances have created new ways for children to be sexually victimised by diverse motivated offenders.¹⁵⁹ Perpetrators may be known or unknown to a child victim-survivor and can include both young people and adults.¹⁶⁰ The online environment not only provides easy access to unsupervised children but is also an unchecked environment to commit child sexual abuse offences.¹⁶¹

The production, possession and distribution of CEM, either online or in person, presents unique challenges and opportunities for law enforcement and other entities. CEM is defined under the *Criminal Code Act 1899* s207A as follows:

“child exploitation material” means material that, in a way likely to cause offence to a reasonable adult, describes or depicts a person, or a representation of a person, who is, or apparently is, a child under 16 years –

- (a) in a sexual context, including for example, engaging in sexual activity; or*
- (b) in an offensive or demeaning context; or*
- (c) being subjected to abuse, cruelty or torture.*

Responding to the sheer volume of CEM available online is challenging. The volume of online CEM content is impossible for any police agency to remove or investigate efficiently.¹⁶² Police must find ways to triage cases and prioritise the most immediate and serious threats first.¹⁶³

Technology companies have knowledge of their platform's limitations, vulnerabilities and population demographics. Police rely on them to comply with subpoenas and requests to take down information.¹⁶⁴ The technology industry plays an important role in limiting the availability of CEM.

Collaborations and partnerships exist that demonstrate tech companies' strategic efforts to reduce CEM, such as the implementation of scanning tools against websites to proactively identify CEM.¹⁶⁵

Technology platforms and pornography providers should do more to disrupt the availability of illegal and seriously harmful content, including child sexual abuse material, and prevent children's access to pornographic content altogether.

Positively, identifying individuals with CEM can result in victim-survivors, and other perpetrators, being identified.¹⁶⁶ Online perpetrators often engage with communities of like-minded persons which can normalise abusive beliefs and behaviours and give the sense that it is more common than it actually is.¹⁶⁷ These darknet communities are literally on the dark side of our society. They provide anonymity and are challenging for law enforcement to detect and infiltrate.¹⁶⁸

Darknet communities can fill both an emotional and social need for a perpetrator through shared interests.¹⁶⁹ Perpetrators are in an online space to socialise with their like-minded peers. This is something which they often cannot do in real life due to a fear of being caught.¹⁷⁰

The extensive use of CEM indicates a person has a sexual interest in children given people usually choose the kind of pornography that resembles their sexual interests.¹⁷¹ When a perpetrator is caught with CEM it is often thought they will go onto contact offend when it is most likely they already have.¹⁷²

A recent study found 60 per cent of CEM offenders had committed contact sexual offences against children which had not been identified at the time of their arrest.¹⁷³

Recent research published in August 2025 by the Australian Institute of Criminology studied posts from a darknet child sexual abuse forum and found darknet users discussed a range of desistance strategies. Some of these included using CEM to avoid contact offending, reducing access to children, reducing access to the internet, and adjusting their lifestyle. A few darknet users had positive attitudes towards utilising professional psychosocial services however expressed concerns about risk of detection while seeking intervention. The results of the study indicate those with a sexual interest in children do want information and support but would prefer anonymity and online services to decrease the risk of detection.¹⁷⁴

It is clear that prevention strategies must move beyond criminal history checks and reactive reporting systems. A more sophisticated approach is needed. One that incorporates strong intelligence capabilities, behavioural monitoring, environmental risk assessments, and proactive culture-building within child-serving organisations.

Safeguarding cannot be reduced to compliance. It must be embedded in everyday practices, leadership expectations, and staff training, underpinned by a belief that child safeguarding is everyone's responsibility.

There is also a need for greater public and professional awareness of how grooming and offending can be hidden in plain sight. Normality should never be mistaken for safety. Systems must develop tools for identifying subtle patterns of risk and grooming that do not rely on criminal histories.

Technology-based responses must also evolve. The widespread use of encryption, anonymising software, and dark web platforms by perpetrators requires investment in digital forensics, inter-jurisdictional cooperation, and the development of tools to track and prevent online exploitation.

Prevention in the digital age is not only about content moderation or parental controls; it must include law enforcement capability, platform accountability, and education targeted at both children and adults.



Case studies

This section outlines a series of national and international case studies involving child sexual abuse in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings. Each case highlights risk factors, systemic failures, barriers to detection, and post-case measures. Together, these cases provide critical insights into vulnerabilities within systems, and how perpetrators have committed serious abuse and damage.

Case Study One

R.M. (Netherlands, 2010) - At least 87 children, all under the age of four. Most of the victim-survivors were male.

R.M., a 27-year-old daycare worker and babysitter in Amsterdam, was arrested for sexually abusing at least 87 infants and toddlers. He was employed across multiple childcare facilities and provided babysitting services. His partner was also arrested for facilitating and concealing offences. The abuse came to light when investigators reviewing CEM footage identified a distinctive Dutch toy. Dutch authorities broadcast censored images, leading a grandfather to recognise R.M. as his grandchild's babysitter. The case shocked the Netherlands and led to major reforms in staff vetting, oversight, and interagency information sharing.

This case demonstrates how perpetrators exploit weak oversight, fragmented employment systems, and communication barriers. It underscores the value of structural safeguards such as the 'Four Eyes Principle.'

Sources: BBC News (2010); Lindauer et al. (2014); Turrell (2023).

Risk factors

- Deliberately targeted preverbal children; stopped once children began speaking.
- Selected workplaces and homes without CCTV or nanny cams.
- Worked across multiple childcare centres, exploiting lack of coordination.

System failures

- No centralised vetting or staff tracking system.
- Absence of supervision protocols or dual-staffing arrangements.
- Prior concerns (2008) dismissed by both childcare centre and police.
- Previous CEM conviction in Germany (2003) not detected in Dutch checks.

Barriers to detection

- Identified only via international CEM investigation.
- Very young victim-survivors unable to articulate their experiences of abuse.

Post-case measures

- Introduction of the Four Eyes Principle: no childcare worker ever alone with a child.
- Longitudinal study into long-term impacts on victim-survivors and families.
- Heightened scrutiny of childcare safety, especially in institutional/home-based settings.

Case Study Two

S.M. (South Australia, 2014) At least seven victim-survivors, aged between 18 months and 13 years. The victim-survivors were mostly female.

S.M. worked across multiple ECEC services before entering state-run residential care. His crimes were discovered not in childcare settings, but via online investigations into CEM by Taskforce Argos in Queensland. He was a key figure in an international offender network.

This case highlights failures in screening, risk assessment, and staff escalation. Detection occurred only through specialist online investigation, not service-level vigilance.

Sources: Child Protection Systems Royal Commission (2016); Prosser (2016).

Risk factors

- Targeted preverbal/developmentally vulnerable children, including children with disabilities.
- Had only basic training and learned 'on the job.'
- Worked across multiple institutions and countries (including Canada and the United States of America).

System failures

- Employment proceeded despite a psychological assessment rating him 'very unsuitable'.
- Concerns about inappropriate interactions raised as early as 2010 but not escalated.
- Multiple staff complaints ignored across agencies.

Barriers to detection

- Very young victim-survivors unable to articulate their experiences of abuse.
- Workplace cultures discouraged reporting.
- Whistleblowers faced intimidation and discrimination.

Post-case measures

- Establishment of the Child Protection Systems Royal Commission.
- Reforms to recruitment, vetting, staff training, and reporting protocols.
- System-wide push for stronger oversight and escalation pathways.

Case Study Three

D.N. (Sweden, 2014) At least 19 victim-survivors, ranging in age from 12 months to three years. The victim-survivors were all female.

D.N., a 40-year-old childcare worker, was arrested after abusing a 10-year-old girl at an amusement park. Police searches uncovered CEM, including material filmed in ECEC settings. D.N. had worked in over 40 centres via a staffing agency.

Highlights the dangers of rotating agency staff in ECEC. Lack of cross-institutional accountability is a major vulnerability.

Sources: Kjellgren et al. (2022); The Local (2015); Kristianstad District Court (2015).

Risk factors

- Agency employment enabled rotation across many centres.
- Often worked alone or with minimal scrutiny.
- Victim-survivors too young to report.
- Trusted due to calm, professional manner.

System failures

- Staffing agency model lacked consistent vetting.
- No cross-institutional tracking or flagging system.
- Protocols emphasised general care, not abuse detection.
- Diffusion of responsibility between preschools.

Barriers to disclosure

- Very young victim-survivors unable to articulate their experiences of abuse.
- Abuse occurred during routine care (e.g. nappy changes).
- No suspicion raised by staff or parents.

Post-case measures

- Crisis management frameworks reviewed.
- Support mechanisms for preschool staff/managers considered.
- Broader discussions about vigilance in 'trusted' preschool settings.

Case Study Four

J.S. (Sweden, 2014) At least 13 victim-survivors aged between three and four years. The victim-survivors were primarily females.

J.S., a 21-year-old trainee, systematically abused children during a practicum placement. He targeted non-verbal children during nap times and toileting. Evidence was discovered via mobile phone recordings. This case demonstrates the risks of allowing student trainees unsupervised access and suggests value in explicit 'no-lone-worker' provisions.

Sources: Sveriges Radio (2014); Kalmar Tingsrätt (2014).

Risk factors

- Very young, non-verbal victim-survivors.
- Unsupervised access during high-risk caregiving tasks.
- Perceived as caring and competent by staff.
- Preschool included low-visibility areas.

System failures

- Inadequate background checks or screening for trainees.
- No supervision protocols restricting trainee contact.
- Parents not informed about new male trainee.
- Absence of safeguards for intimate care tasks.

Barriers to disclosure

- Very young victim-survivors unable to articulate their experiences of abuse.
- Grooming tactics used to silence victim-survivors.
- Abuse concealed within routine care.

Post-case measures

- No formal institutional reforms implemented.
- Responsibility not extended to the preschool or practicum system.

Case Study Five

V.G. (United Kingdom, 2009) At least 30 children between the ages of two and five years.

V.G., a child care worker in Plymouth, was arrested for producing and distributing CEM involving children in her care. She collaborated online with other perpetrators and shared images taken within the centre. Many images were cropped or anonymised, which prevented identification of some victims. V.G. never disclosed the names of the children she abused, compounding distress for families.

The case exposed the absence of robust internal reporting cultures and highlighted the catastrophic impact when abuse is facilitated by a trusted female worker in ECEC settings. It illustrates the risks of digital devices in childcare, the additional complexity of female offending, and the deep trauma caused when institutions cannot confirm whether a child was a victim.

Sources: BBC News (2009); Serious Case Review (2010).

Risk factors

- Worked in a trusted role with very young children.
- Had unsupervised access to children during care routines.
- Used personal mobile phone on site, enabling production and distribution of CEM.

System failures

- Nursery did not restrict staff use of personal devices.
- Colleagues noted inappropriate comments but did not escalate.
- Safeguarding training focused on external risks, not staff behaviour.
- Lack of clear escalation pathway for parental or staff concerns.

Barriers to detection

- Very young victim-survivors unable to articulate their experiences of abuse.
- Offending came to light only via online intelligence, not nursery reporting.
- Parents left in uncertainty due to V.G.'s refusal to identify victims.

Post-case measures

- National review of nursery safeguarding standards.
- Stronger restrictions on mobile phone use in childcare settings.
- Enhanced staff safeguarding training on peer behaviour.
- Guidance emphasising the role of whistleblowing policies in nurseries.

Case Study Six

B.M. and E.M. (United States, 2015) 10 victim-survivors, aged between one and 14 years.

B.M. and E.M. a married couple operating a home-based childcare service, were convicted of producing CEM using children in their care. They recorded and distributed abusive material, exploiting their position as trusted in-home providers. Discovery came through federal investigation into online CEM distribution.

Highlights risks of abuse in informal or home-based settings, where oversight and accountability mechanisms are weaker. Reinforces the importance of rigorous vetting, monitoring, and restrictions on isolated caregiving contexts.

Sources: U.S. Department of Justice (2015); Associated Press (2016).

Risk factors

- Abuse occurred in a home-based childcare environment with minimal oversight.
- Perpetrators operated as a couple, reinforcing secrecy and normalising offending.
- Very young children targeted due to inability to disclose.

System failures

- Limited regulation and inspection of family-based childcare providers.
- Absence of unannounced visits or external oversight.
- Lack of reporting culture due to isolation of home settings.

Barriers to detection

- Very young victim-survivors unable to articulate their experiences of abuse.
- No suspicions raised by parents due to high trust in couple's 'family' environment.
- Offending detected only through online CEM investigation.

Post-case measures

- Renewed debate on regulation of home-based childcare providers.
- Calls for increased inspection regimes and stricter vetting.
- Strengthened federal-state collaboration on child safety in licensed care.

Case Study Seven

T.D. (New South Wales, 2017–20) 30 child victim-survivors ranging in age from infancy to 16 years.

T.D., a childcare worker, was arrested in 2020 for extensive sexual abuse offences across multiple childcare centres in New South Wales. He produced and distributed CEM, some of it live-streamed. He deliberately sought employment in childcare settings to access victims, exploiting systemic weaknesses in recruitment and monitoring. The case was described as one of Australia's worst child abuse matters. It sparked national debate on background checking systems and the adequacy of Working With Children Checks.

This case illustrates systemic vulnerabilities even in highly regulated contexts. Reliance on background checks without ongoing monitoring created blind spots. This reinforces the importance of proactive supervision, escalation, and inter-centre coordination.

Sources: New South Wales Police (2020); ABC News (2021); Sydney Morning Herald (2022).

Risk factors

- Systematically targeted infants and toddlers in institutional care.
- Moved across multiple centres, avoiding detection.
- Exploited routine childcare tasks (e.g. nappy changing, toileting) for offending.
- Groomed colleagues with charm and apparent professionalism.

System failures

- Working With Children Check cleared T.D. to work with children despite red flags.
- No system to track movement between centres.
- Concerns raised by colleagues dismissed or minimised.
- Lack of supervision during intimate care tasks.

Barriers to detection

- Very young victim-survivors unable to articulate their experiences of abuse.
- Abuse disguised within ordinary care routines.
- Detection relied on digital evidence from online investigations, not childcare vigilance.

Post-case measures

- New South Wales inquiry into Working With Children Checks and childcare regulation.
- Heightened national scrutiny of vetting, reporting, and institutional safeguards.
- Renewed emphasis on information sharing across agencies and states.

Table 5: Summary of case study themes

Theme	Key issues
Child-level risk factors	Very young/preverbal children, children with disabilities, children in out-of-home care
Institutional risk factors	One-on-one access during intimate care; agency/trainee staff, home-based or isolated settings, weak supervision protocols, agency staff
System failures	Inadequate background checks, poor information sharing across employers, weak regulation of family-based care, failure to act on staff concerns, weak/ignored background checks, poor oversight across employers, workplace cultures suppressing reporting
Barriers to detection	Non-verbal victim-survivors, abuse disguised in caregiving routines, reliance on online CEM detection, reluctance of staff to escalate concerns
Post-case responses	Inquiries and reviews, 'Four Eyes Principle', restrictions on mobile phones, strengthened vetting/oversight frameworks

These cases reveal recurring vulnerabilities in ECEC environments: child age and vulnerability, offender manipulation, institutional weaknesses, and systemic blind spots. Together, they highlight the need for multi-layered safeguards, integrated oversight, and mandatory escalation processes.

Endnotes

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