

# **Systematic Review of Child Sexual Abuse Disclosure Pathways:**

A narrative analysis of  
what we know and  
what more we need to  
know



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# Background and Importance

- Up to 1 billion children aged 2–17 years estimated to have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence in 2021 (WHO, 2022)
- Sexual abuse is prevalent for children globally
- **Disclosures** are a key part of the evidence that is needed for substantiation and to carry substantial weight in court proceedings (Rush et al., 2014; Lyon et al., 2012)

# Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA)

- Overall, it is estimated that up to 1 billion children aged 2–17 years, have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence in 2021; 1 in 5 women and 1 in 13 men report having been sexually abused as a child aged 0-17 years; and 120 million girls and young women under 20 years of age have suffered some form of forced sexual contact (WHO, 2022).
- Further estimates suggest that a minimum of 50% of children in Asia, Africa, and North America experienced past-year abuse, with 2–17-year-olds experiencing the most severe forms of abuse in the past year, including at least 64% of children in Asia, 56% in North America, 50% in Africa, 34% in Latin America, and 12% in Europe (Hillis et al. 2016). Sexual abuse is the most common form of reported child abuse globally, followed by physical abuse and then emotional neglect.
- Patterns of abuse are mediated by gender, with girls reported to experience higher rates of sexual abuse, and boys experiencing higher rates of physical abuse (Moody et al., 2018).
- Previous country-level estimates suggest that, however, only about 10% of adolescents report experiences of sexual violence to the authorities (Priebe & Svedin, 2008).
- Yet, for child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) in particular, disclosures are a key part of the evidence that is needed for substantiation and to carry substantial weight in court proceedings (Rush et al., 2014; Lyon et al., 2012)

# Systematic Review Goals

Through our systematic review, we sought to identify:

- In what ways and to whom children under 18 years of age disclose
- How subtypes of CSA are associated with different disclosure pathways
- The prevalence of disclosure pathway elements and legal processes and judicial (court) outcomes

# Key Definitions

- **Disclosure** of CSA: The telling, recounting and/or reporting by survivors of the abuse, in formal and/or ways informal (Paine & Hansen, 2002)
  - **Formal disclosures:** disclosures made to professional service providers (e.g., social workers, police, school personnel, health care providers, etc.)
  - **Informal disclosures:** those made to friends, family, or laypersons

# Narrative Thematic Analysis

We sought to take a unique approach by identifying pathways using a *process* lens to expand our conceptualization of sexual abuse disclosure among children

Our analysis builds upon prior categorical conceptualizations of CSA disclosures by establishing pathways that help to uncover important *processes* and *context* of disclosure

# Categorical Conceptualizations of Disclosure

- Accidental
- Purposeful
- Prompted/elicited' and later expanded conceptualizations included
- Behavioral
- Indirect verbal attempts
- Disclosures intentionally withheld
- Disclosures triggered by recovered memories

However, these are categorical and while helpful establishing possible pathways helps to uncover important processes and context to CSA disclosure often overlooked



# Narrative Analysis Findings

We identified five disclosure '**pathway typologies**' and four disclosure '**influencers**' that impact legal processes and judicial outcomes



# Disclosure Pathways

We define 'disclosure pathway' as a **disclosure and a subsequent action.**

For example:

- From informal disclosure to formal child protection system action
- From formal disclosure to no action
- From informal disclosure to no action
- From informal disclosure to 3rd party disclosure to formal action

# Disclosure Pathway Typologies

1. Non-disclosure
2. Partial, circumstantial, and/or involuntary disclosure
3. Informal disclosure to peers, friends, and/or family
4. Formal disclosure to professional service providers
5. Formal disclosure reported to police in interview (both voluntary and coerced)

# Disclosure Pathway

## Type 1:

### **Non-disclosure**

Non-disclosure is the clear intentional decision by a child to **not disclose** the abuse directly to any persons.

- Non-disclosure may later develop into *delayed disclosure* when information about the abuse is initially withheld and then much later shared by the survivor.
- Type one may also merge with the second type of disclosure pathway, in cases where additional evidence or circumstances prompt external suspicion of the abuse, even when information is not voluntarily disclosed directly by a child to any sources (whether formal or informal).

# Disclosure Pathway

## Type 2: Partial, circumstantial, and/or involuntary disclosure

Type two includes partial disclosures, circumstantial disclosures, and initial involuntary disclosures. Examples include:

- A child initially discloses and then denies the abuse upon later prompting
- A child does not directly disclose the abuse initially, yet situational or circumstantial factors prompt external suspicion that alerts external persons to become somehow involved, potentially prompting, pressuring or coercing an involuntary disclosure

# Disclosure Pathway Type 3: **Informal disclosure to peers, friends, and family**

Type three occurs when a child *voluntarily* discloses to informal sources such as peers, friends, or family members.

- May lead to inaction or sources dealing with the allegation privately/directly, OR
- May facilitate movement toward disclosure types four or five, prompting disclosures to professional service providers (i.e., mandated reporters) or direct reports to law enforcement

# Disclosure Pathway Type 4: **Formal disclosure to professional service providers**

Type four is when a survivor discloses formally to *professional service providers* (commonly those legally designated as mandated reporters).

- Type four could be a first disclosure or a subsequent disclosure
- Because mandated reporters are required by law to report suspicions to local authorities, this fourth type of disclosure typically prompts or precedes the fifth type of disclosure to police

# Disclosure Pathway Type 5: **Formal disclosure reported to police (both voluntary and coerced)**

Type five is a formal disclosure made to police or law enforcement.

- Often in the context of a formal or forensic interview (after an initial complaint has been made to police and a formal investigation is instigated)
- Disclosures commonly made voluntarily; however, some studies identify child survivors as being coerced or forced into these settings and heavily pressured to disclose to police against their wishes (e.g., Chenier et al., 2021; McElvaney et al., 2022)



# **Disclosure Pathway Influencers: Factors impacting judicial processes and outcomes**

We also examined what influencers contributed to disclosure in the form of formal reports made to police.

(1) race/ethnicity

(2) age

(3) severity of abuse

(4) consistent prior disclosures significantly predict the likelihood of formal disclosure to police

# **Disclosure Pathway Influencers: Racial/ethnic identities**

- Indigenous children are less likely to make formal disclosures directly to police when compared to non-Indigenous children (Bailey et al., 2017)
- For the cases that do get reported to police and initiate a legal process, ethnicity has a bearing on charging and conviction rates, non-white child survivors more likely to withdraw from a legal process (Bailey et al., 2017; Chenier et al., 2021)
- Lack of disclosure to a formal source was related to fear of authorities, and colonial oppression over centuries

# Disclosure Pathway Influencers:

## Age

Older children are more likely to make formal disclosures directly to police; these disclosures are more likely to generate legal proceedings that are (a) opened and (b) move further through the judiciary process

The risk for child sexual abuse and severity of the abuse are thought *to rise with age* (Perdahli Fis et al., 2010), so both the age of survivors and severity of abuse may be correlated factors that can prompt investigations which lead to increased cases moving further through judicial processes

# Disclosure Pathway Influencers:

## Severity of abuse

Vaginal penetration (rape), with supporting medical statement conclusions, is correlated with higher convictions when compared to other types of abuse that are considered less severe such as fondling

The objective material of a supporting medical statement alongside a witness and child's disclosure of direct physical contact impact the legal outcome and are also tied in with survivor age

# **Disclosure Pathway Influencers:**

**Multiple, repeated,  
consistent, and  
prior disclosures**

- Cases with repeated, consistent disclosures impact how the disclosure is received by the police
- More likely to be accepted for prosecution and continue in the court process when compared to cases with partial or inconsistent
- Full disclosure is more likely to lead to prosecution, although full disclosures are less likely overall

# Impact of Pathway Influencers on Judicial Processes and Outcomes

Substantiations by child protection of alleged abuse statistically predict a case being accepted for prosecution

Repeated disclosure, eyewitness, and objective material evidence are all elements that strengthen both the grounds for child protection substantiation and a court case in verifying the abuse

# Conclusion: Implications for Practice

## Questions

- The pathway lens gives professionals working with children and youth a clearer interpretation of disclosure *processes* and *context* beyond pre-established categories of disclosure behavior
- Children who are making a first disclosure are likely to benefit from additional support, whether that be a dedicated, consistent individual or advocate who can assist with providing information about what happens once a disclosure is made, or whether that be ensuring that professionals in a position to potentially receive disclosures be taught about trauma-informed approaches, or other support -ensuring that children do feel heard, validated, and that they have a trust-worthy place to go for support, whether or not their disclosure proceeds to a formal justice outcome, would help to move toward a children's rights perspective and overall good practice.
- Professionals engaging sexually abused children could look to epistemic injustice models (i.e. Fricker, 2007)