

# MEDIA RELEASE

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## **Lack of public knowledge could see perpetrators of child sexual abuse escape conviction**

Many perpetrators of child sexual abuse are escaping conviction due to the public's lack of knowledge about this serious crime, according to a Deakin University forensic psychology expert.

Dr Bianca Klettke tested the public's knowledge and perceptions about child sexual abuse (CSA) and, rather than finding many misconceptions, found a high level of uncertainty around many aspects of the crime. Dr Klettke believes that this lack of knowledge may lead to the development of misconceptions and, if not addressed, could impact on the low conviction rate of alleged offenders.

"Child sexual abuse is a serious problem in society, with 5,348 substantiated cases reported in Australia in 2005-2006," Dr Klettke said.

"While it is estimated that this figure represents only 10 per cent of all occurrences, the problem is exacerbated by very few cases making it to court. Moreover, out of those cases that do make it to court, in comparison to all other crimes, child sexual assault has the highest acquittal rate of defendants in higher courts.

"The low rates of conviction are totally unacceptable. CSA is a serious issue and it causes ongoing problems for the victims who can experience an increased chance of depression, substance abuse and suicide, trust and intimacy issues, and greater risk of being a victim of abuse as an adult. Not to mention the financial burden to society as it has been estimated that the annual cost of child abuse and neglect could be as much as \$5 billion. Most importantly, the failure to convict alleged perpetrators often leads to victims feeling re-victimised after the trauma they experienced in the first place."

One reason that has been suggested for the low conviction rate is that jurors may be influenced by their own knowledge and views and fall back on common myths about sexual assaults when assessing cases. Some of the most commonly held misconceptions that have been suggested are that children often make false accusations of abuse, that children can be sexually provocative and that most sexual abuse cases are based on physical evidence.

The study uncovered a number of areas of uncertainty which may ultimately lead to misconceptions about various aspects of CSA and contribute to the low convictions rates.

For example, it was found that 59 per cent of participants were uncertain about the presence of physical evidence (which is often false), 47 per cent were unsure if girls were the main victims (which is true), 46 per cent were uncertain whether children can be easily manipulated into making false accusations (which is false) and 55 per cent were unsure whether Indigenous children were more likely to be abused (which is true).

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“It may be the case that rather than people having misconceptions they may simply not know enough. However, the high levels of uncertainty experienced by those surveyed could easily turn into misconceptions if not addressed and in turn contribute to unsuccessful convictions in child sexual assault cases,” Dr Klettke said.

“This lack of knowledge about the crime needs to be urgently addressed if we are to rectify the low conviction rate of child sex offenders.

“The results of this study provide Australian institutions, particularly legislative bodies and the judiciary, with a valuable insight into the level and areas of potential misconceptions prevalent in the Australian public.

“There is a clear need to develop ways to inform jurors of the realities of CSA. Further research is needed to decide the best source of information such as advice from psychological experts, fact sheets or judges providing the jury with information, but we are getting more insights into what it is that people may not know about this crime.”

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