



**VICTIM
SUPPORT
SERVICE**
INCORPORATED

Submission in response to the draft terms of reference for the Royal Commission into the Safety of At Risk Children

August 2014

Introduction

Victim Support Service broadly welcomes the commitment of the South Australian Government to establish a Royal Commission into the Safety of At Risk Children that will inquire into the existing legislation, policies and structures of the State's child protection system.

Addressing childhood and adolescent trauma

As the specialist victims of crime service in South Australia, and as a DSS funded service to support individuals seeking support for child sexual abuse, Victim Support Service has a well-developed and thorough understanding of the adverse impact of trauma on health and wellbeing.

Improvements should be made to existing laws, policies and structures relevant to protecting children at risk of harm and mitigating the adverse effects of untreated childhood trauma. Research by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) shows that across Australia, "increasing numbers of children are being damaged by the very child protection system that is meant to protect them".ⁱ

Evidence shows that the harm caused by untreated childhood and adolescent trauma should not be underestimated. Research has confirmed that children who experience trauma that is left unresolved and untreated have higher presentations of longer term behaviours destructive to themselves and others. Further, research into the neurobiology of early life trauma shows there are at least four ways that trauma impacts children and adolescents, including:

1. Relational difficulties;
2. Developing maladaptive coping strategies;
3. Developing psychological disorders; and
4. Negatively impacting brain development.

Some traumatic events happen only once, and others, such as childhood sexual abuse and exposure to domestic violence, can happen repeatedly over a long period of time. Research shows that under existing child protection practices and procedures, children can experience "prolonged exposure to neglect and abuse, often with lifelong consequences (including crime, prostitution, drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness, mental illness, gaol, unemployment, and welfare dependence)".ⁱⁱ This tells us that untreated trauma caused by prolonged exposure to neglect and abuse comes at a

*Assisting
Victims of Crime
Since 1979*

Adelaide

11 Halifax Street

PO Box 6610

Halifax Street

Adelaide SA 5000

Tel: (08) 8231 5626

Fax: (08) 8231 5458

1800 182 368

info@victimsa.org

www.victimsa.org

significant cost not only to the child, but also to the government, and the South Australian community.

The lifetime burden of unresolved childhood trauma is estimated to cost Australia \$40 billion as a result of each year of abuse.ⁱⁱⁱ

Estimations of the number of children and adolescents who have witnessed or in some way been exposed to a traumatic criminal event only reflect reported cases of child maltreatment, victimisation, or exposure to crime.

The Victim Support Service strongly believes that all children and adolescents who have experienced crime-related trauma should be afforded access to trauma-informed support services, especially when they are in contact with the child protection system.

Current mental health support services within the child protection system are fragmented and difficult to access, with waiting lists for services exceeding six weeks in metropolitan Adelaide, and longer in some regional areas of the state. As they stand, mental health services for children lack both the capacity and specific expertise to provide the therapeutic and practical support that young people need to address and recover from crime-related trauma.

A Victim Support Service Solution

Victim Support Service delivers trauma-informed support services to adult and older adolescent victims of crime across South Australia. Many of our clients are seeking psychological and practical support to help them recover from the impact of childhood trauma on their adult life. Victim Support Service also delivers professional advice and information sessions to parents and carers of children and adolescents who have experienced trauma associated with grief and loss.

Victim Support Service has been providing help and trauma-informed support to adult victims of crime and their families since 1979. Our experience and expertise on the impact of crime-related trauma means we are uniquely placed to provide a trauma-informed support service to help young people address trauma early, thereby reducing the long-term economic cost of untreated trauma to South Australian communities, and mitigating the adverse effects of childhood trauma on individuals' growth and development.

Children and adolescents who have experienced or witnessed domestic violence, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, or interpersonal violence of any other kind linked with experiences of trauma, should be able to access a trauma-informed support service, whether they are at risk of harm, or have experienced actual harm.

*Assisting
Victims of Crime
Since 1979*

Adelaide

11 Halifax Street

PO Box 6610

Halifax Street

Adelaide SA 5000

Tel: (08) 8231 5626

Fax: (08) 8231 5458

1800 182 368

info@victimsa.org

www.victimsa.org



**VICTIM
SUPPORT
SERVICE**
INCORPORATED

Recommendations

Victim Support Service recommends that the State Government:

1. Establish a trauma-informed support service for children and adolescents who are referred to the child protection system, or are victims/witnesses of crime; and
2. Broaden the scope of the Royal Commission's terms of reference to include not only children who are 'at risk' of harm, but also children who have experienced actual harm and who would benefit from access to a state wide trauma-informed support service to mitigate the adverse impact of untreated childhood and adolescent trauma.

*Assisting
Victims of Crime
Since 1979*

Adelaide

11 Halifax Street

PO Box 6610

Halifax Street

Adelaide SA 5000

Tel: (08) 8231 5626

Fax: (08) 8231 5458

1800 182 368

info@victimsa.org

www.victimsa.org



**VICTIM
SUPPORT
SERVICE**
INCORPORATED

ⁱ J Sammut (2014) "Still Damaging and Disturbing: Australian Child Protection Data and the Need for National Adoption Targets", Issue Analysis, No. 145, p. 3.

<http://www.cis.org.au/images/stories/issue-analysis/ia145.pdf>

ⁱⁱ G McIntosh and J Phillips (2002).

ⁱⁱⁱ Adults Surviving Child Abuse, 2013, 'The Multi-billion dollar cost of unresolved childhood trauma in Australia', http://launchgroup.com.au/wp/the-multi-billion-dollar-cost-of-unresolved-childhood-trauma-in-australia-46/#_edn1

*Assisting
Victims of Crime
Since 1979*

Adelaide

11 Halifax Street

PO Box 6610

Halifax Street

Adelaide SA 5000

Tel: (08) 8231 5626

Fax: (08) 8231 5458

1800 182 368

info@victimsa.org

www.victimsa.org