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## Commentary

# The impact of Australia's Royal Commission on child- and youth-serving organizations

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## ABSTRACT

This commentary considers the impact to date of Australia's Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse on child- and youth-serving organizations, particularly its influence on organizations' efforts to create and maintain 'child safe, child friendly' cultures, policies and practices. Opportunities and challenges for organizational leaders are outlined. The commentary calls for more involvement by researchers in empirical research that is relevant to the causes and prevention of abuse in organizations, and for findings to be disseminated in ways that are useful to organizations.

## 1. Introduction

Australia's Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (the Royal Commission) was established in January 2013, and is due to complete its work in December 2017. Its background, aims, and approach are set out by [Wright, Swain, and McPhillips \(2017, this issue\)](#). The present commentary considers the impact to date of the Royal Commission on Australian child- and youth-serving organizations, particularly its influence on organizations' efforts to create and maintain 'child safe, child friendly' cultures, policies and practices.

This is not an empirical analysis. As I hope befits a commentary of this kind, my observations are anecdotal, subjective, and of the moment. They are based in part on my insights into the workings of the Royal Commission as an independent expert witness in two of its Public Hearings (Case Study 2 into YMCA New South Wales; and Case Study 12 into an independent school in Perth, Western Australia), a participant in several of its roundtable discussions, and an external reviewer for a number of research reports commissioned by the Commission; and on my involvement with some dozens of organizations and associations seeking to improve their approaches to child safe, child friendly policy and practice, largely in response to the Royal Commission.

## 2. What is a child safe, child friendly organization?

The term 'child safe, child friendly' was first promoted in Australia, as far as I am aware, by the New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People in the early-2000s, some ten years before the Royal Commission was established. Many organizations, and the Royal Commission itself, have tended to use the shorter version, 'child safe'. The additional term 'child friendly' reminds us that preventing abuse of children in organizations is not an end in itself, but rather serves the superordinate aim of facilitating the healthy physical, psychological and social development of children. The task for organizations is therefore not simply one of risk detection and risk mitigation, but one of providing protective and *friendly* environments for children.

It is well understood in other areas of crime prevention that interventions intended to make places safer can inadvertently

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introduce new problems, such as an erosion of civil liberties, unwarranted privacy intrusions, or a net reduction in the amenity of the targeted place. Creating safer organizations for children, like other place based crime prevention, thus requires careful consideration of unintended, as well as the intended, outcomes (see e.g. [Tilley & Sidebottom, 2017](#)). Through its case studies, private sessions with victims, research program, and expert consultations, the Royal Commission has sought to identify characteristics of child safe organizations ([Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2016](#)). These have been identified largely by consensus, and have not yet been empirically tested. It remains to be seen how these ideas might influence government regulations, but in any event it will ultimately fall to organizations themselves to strike a sensible balance between risk mitigation and providing a friendly, healthy social environment for the children and adults connected to the organization.

### 3. Prevention is better than cure

The Royal Commission has publicly exposed many individual and systemic failures in organizations' responses to known or suspected incidents of sexual and other abuse. Many organizations have as a result redoubled their efforts to ensure their compliance with expected protocols for responding to incidents if and when they come to light. There seems to be much less clarity among organizational leaders about how they might best prevent abuse from occurring in the first place. In recent decades the most popular approach has been to screen potential employees and volunteers with criminal history and other checks with a view to keeping unsuitable adults away from child- and youth-serving organizations. However, since as many as 80% of adult sexual abusers have no known history of sexual offending ([Smallbone & Wortley, 2001](#)), employment screening can at best target only a proportionally small part of the problem. As [Palmer and Feldman \(2017, this issue\)](#) point out, in many instances the motivation to abuse will first arise *during* a person's involvement with an organization. Furthermore, employment screening does not apply to children and young people themselves, who by some estimates account for the majority of sexual abusers in organizational settings (e.g. [Bromfield, Hirte, Octoman, & Katz, forthcoming](#)). Indeed some organizations (e.g. youth detention facilities; out of home care services) effectively *screen in* those children with the greatest vulnerabilities for offending and victimization.

Clearly the task for organizations is to come to grips with the risks associated with the routine activities of ordinary adults, adolescents and children within their particular organizational setting, to be alert to the vulnerabilities of the particular individuals connected to the organization, and accordingly to develop locally tailored prevention strategies. This seems to be unfamiliar territory for many organizations. [Matthews \(2017, this issue\)](#) points to an emerging consensus that situational prevention offers a suitable framework for analyzing and managing routine risks of sexual and other abuse in organizational settings. The situational prevention approach recognizes that abuse requires the convergence of three necessary elements – a motivated abuser; a vulnerable victim; and a conducive setting. Whereas employment screening for example focuses on who the likely abuser may be, organizations in fact have by far the greatest leverage over the design and operation of the organizational setting itself. Situational prevention essentially involves modifying aspects of a specific organizational setting with the aim of making abuse-related behaviors 1) more likely to be detected and stopped; 2) more difficult and inconvenient to enact; 3) less permissible; and 4) less rewarding; and to 5) identify and remove factors that may precipitate abuse-related motivations. Situational prevention has featured in the Royal Commission's work and seems to have strong intuitive appeal among organizational leaders, albeit that its rationale and methodology are often not well understood.

### 4. Understanding the dynamics of sexual abuse

Effective prevention of sexual abuse in organizational settings begins with a clear and valid conception of the problem – who is involved, and where, when, how and why it occurs. Disseminating knowledge about these fundamental questions to organizational leaders and workers has been limited by two related problems. The first is that the predominant focus of research and practice in sexual offending and victimization – understanding and responding to its outcomes – is of limited relevance for guiding efforts to prevent abuse in the first place. Understanding how things unfold after abuse has been detected and initially responded to is of course necessary to inform the important work of ameliorating potential harms for victims and for preventing re-offending, but in practical terms this is not the business of most child- and youth-serving organizations. For primary and secondary prevention purposes, organizations need to know how abuse starts, not how it ends.

The second problem is that, in the absence of a coherent framework for understanding the dynamics of sexual abuse, organizational personnel seem very susceptible to the simplistic stereotyped construction – promulgated by the media, but also perhaps unwittingly by researchers, professionals and advocates – that reduces the cause of sexual abuse to the mysterious existence of a limited number of disturbed, determined, adept, 'pedophiles'. Indeed the legal defense in a number of the Royal Commission's Public Hearings seemed to be based on this stereotyped conception – essentially that organizations should not be held responsible for the behavior of one or two 'bad apples' who had used devious and sophisticated methods to manipulate organizational systems and avoid suspicion, often over long periods of time. Thankfully this kind of defense gained little traction in an Inquiry whose terms of reference were focused on systemic and situational aspects of the problem.

Away from the spotlight of the Royal Commission's Public Hearings, organizations seem increasingly ready instead to acknowledge what I have referred to elsewhere as the 'disturbing ordinariness' of sexual abuse ([Smallbone, 2016](#)). The Royal Commission's focus on organizational systems and situations seems to have opened the door to a new way of thinking about the problem, namely how organizational settings themselves may enable, facilitate, or precipitate abuse-related motivations and behavior, including among otherwise ordinary adolescents and adults. These insights are important to fully realize the potential of situational prevention to contribute to the design and operation of child safe, child friendly organizational environments.

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