

Response to ACU research findings concerning childhood sexual abuse in religious organisations

5 August 2024

Australian Catholic Safeguarding Ltd (ACSL) has confirmed the data in research published today by Australian Catholic University (ACU) is consistent with the findings of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, of sexual abuse by leaders in religious organisations and is an important contribution to our understanding of the long-lasting impacts of abuse across the lifespan.

“The data is an important reminder of the importance of constant vigilance to ensure the level of child mistreatment and abuse in Australia is addressed. The good news is that the research demonstrates the significant reduction in abuse of younger people by leaders in religious organisations since 2000,” ACSL CEO Dr Ursula Stephens said.

The figures are part of a dataset captured in the Australian Childhood Maltreatment Study (ACMS) which revealed that 1 in 250 Australians have been sexually abused by a leader or other adult in a religious organisation in childhood, with three quarters of that abuse taking place in Catholic organisations, most of which was reported by respondents aged 65 years and older.

“At ACSL we unequivocally acknowledge the lifelong trauma of abuse victims and survivors and their families. While the harm to victims and survivors can never be undone, the Catholic Church in Australia has learnt, and continues to learn from the grievous failures in its past and today is resolutely committed to providing safe environments for children, adults at risk and all people as its utmost priority. Since the Royal Commission, the Catholic Church has taken vital steps to strengthen and streamline its commitment to preventing abuse in all forms.”

“Australian Catholic Safeguarding (ACSL) has been established as the national organisation to lead and champion the Church’s collective safeguarding efforts and we are now seeing progress in key safeguarding initiatives, including the adoption of the National Catholic Safeguarding Standards by all Catholic dioceses and almost 150 religious institutes.”

“We are backing up the Church’s commitment to safeguarding through a robust safeguarding training program, nationwide safeguarding audits and managing the movement of ministry. A new National Code of Conduct is guiding and strengthening a safeguarding culture in the Church.”

“The findings of the Australian Child Maltreatment Study continue to offer vital insights into the rates and long-term impacts of trauma in the Australian community. The findings reinforce our responsibility to not only be focused on preventing further abuse, but also to being trauma-aware throughout our entire organisations. Working through the lens of Catholic Social Teachings, the Church continues to implement best practice across Australia and globally, drawing on professional advice, the voices of all stakeholders, including victims and survivors, and academic studies such as this,” Dr Stephens said.

- ENDS -