



**PARENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON HOW CHILD SEXUAL  
ABUSE MATERIAL IMPACTS THE ENTIRE FAMILY**  
*System Failures, Resilience, and Recommendations for Change*



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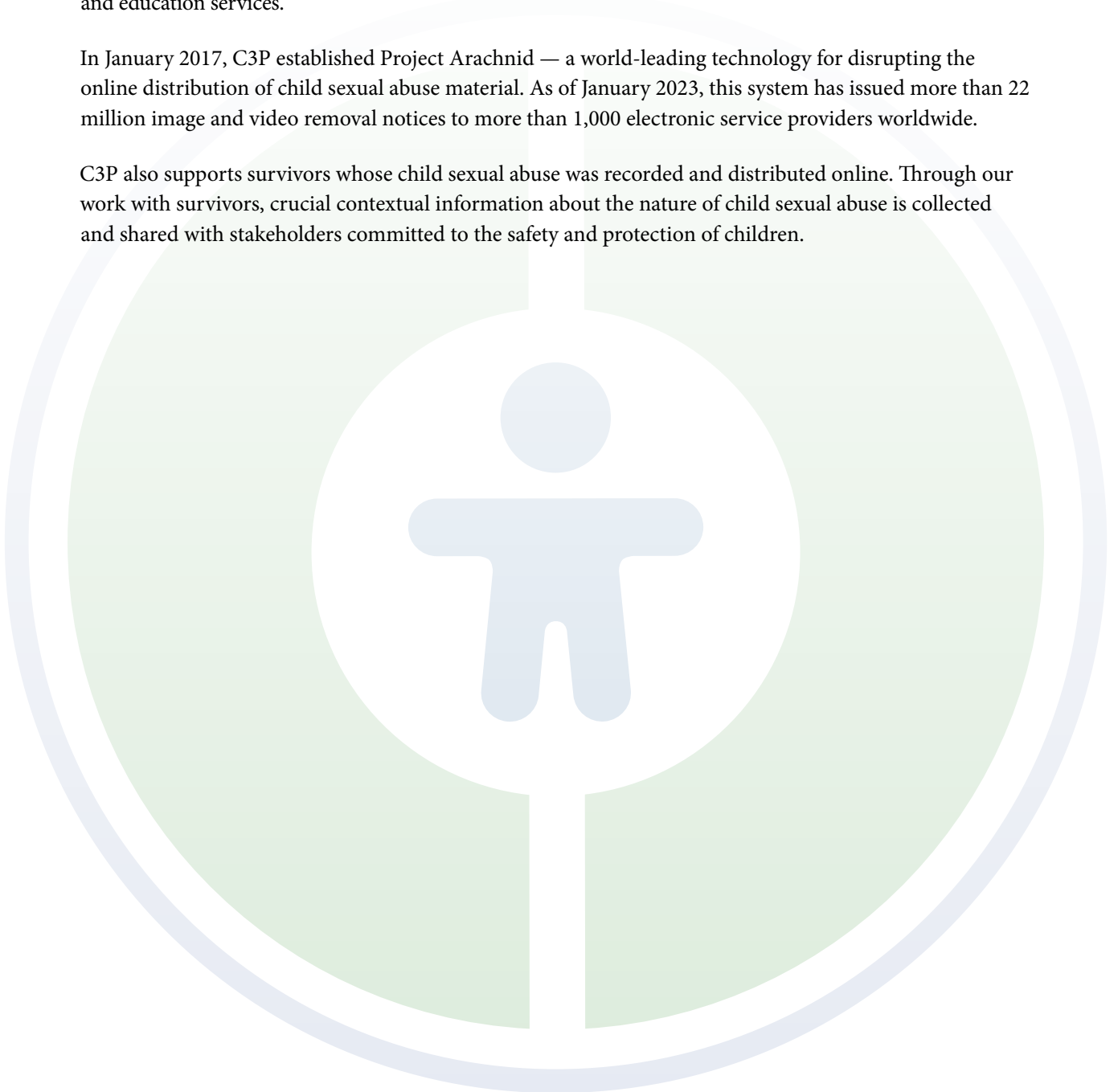
## About the Canadian Centre for Child Protection

The Canadian Centre for Child Protection (C3P) is a national charity dedicated to the personal safety of all children.

C3P operates Cybertip.ca, the national public tipline under the Government of Canada's National Strategy for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation on the Internet. In 2021, Cybertip.ca analysts processed nearly 20,800 reports from the public, providing reporters with crucial intervention, prevention, and education services.

In January 2017, C3P established Project Arachnid — a world-leading technology for disrupting the online distribution of child sexual abuse material. As of January 2023, this system has issued more than 22 million image and video removal notices to more than 1,000 electronic service providers worldwide.

C3P also supports survivors whose child sexual abuse was recorded and distributed online. Through our work with survivors, crucial contextual information about the nature of child sexual abuse is collected and shared with stakeholders committed to the safety and protection of children.



## Work with Survivor Advocacy Groups

### *The Phoenix 11*

For more than five years, C3P and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) have been working with the Phoenix 11, a group of survivors whose child sexual abuse was recorded, and in the majority of cases, distributed online. This group has banded together as a powerful force to challenge the inadequate response to the prevalence of child sexual abuse material.

### *The Chicago Males*

In 2020, C3P brought together a group of male survivors to learn about their experiences and better understand the unique social stigma males face around sexual abuse. This group is working together to advocate for much-needed change in addressing online child sexual abuse and supporting survivors.

### *Mothers of Child Sexual Abuse Material Survivors*

To learn about the hardships families of survivors endure for years after the hands-on abuse has ended, in 2019 C3P convened a group of mothers whose children's sexual abuse was recorded and distributed online. We learned from moms that harms continue long after "the discovery" of the abuse that often includes loss of relationships, financial instability, and a constant worry about their child(ren)'s safety, to name only a few examples. Their insight is crucial to guiding the creation of support resources.

## Support Services for Victims of Online Exploitation

C3P created our Support Services team in response to the influx of individuals contacting C3P through Cybertip.ca, NeedHelpNow.ca, and our Contact Us forms who need help as a result of online sexual victimization. These online incidents include, but are not limited to, luring, sextortion, and non-consensual distribution of intimate images, or having sexual abuse images shared online. This team uses a trauma-informed process to develop tailored response plans for each individual, based on their unique circumstance.



## Executive Summary

The Canadian Centre for Child Protection (C3P) is releasing this report to amplify the voices of protective parents<sup>1</sup> of child sexual abuse material survivors and advocate for systemic changes. The report highlights how offenders' crimes dramatically impact these parents and their families, as well as the ways families are further harmed by the technology industry and government systems. We provide policy recommendations for key stakeholders to better support survivors of child sexual abuse material, their siblings, and parents.

*Child sexual abuse material* refers to any image, video, or other recording of a minor being sexually abused or that is exploitative. This can include recordings that focus on a child's sexual organs, sexualized posing, or sexual acts involving a child.<sup>2,3</sup> Creating and distributing sexual abuse material of a child violates their international rights to be protected from this material<sup>4,5</sup> and to safety<sup>6,7</sup> as outlined by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and associated publications. It's also illegal to create, possess, or share in Canada<sup>8</sup> and many other countries.<sup>9</sup> For survivors, the fact their abuse has been permanently recorded and distributed — or the fear of one day learning it has been distributed — adds additional, ongoing layers of trauma.

In our International Survivors' Survey,<sup>10</sup> survivors shared how they are revictimized every time someone views the abuse imagery. They described living in a constant state of fear that the imagery will be distributed online, and that someone who has viewed the abuse imagery will recognize, stalk, or physically harm them. For some, these fears have materialized.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this report, for brevity, we use “parents” to refer to any protective (i.e., non-offending) adults who had parental authority of child sexual abuse material survivors. This includes, but is not limited to, parents, legal guardians, and foster parents.

<sup>2</sup> Canadian Centre for Child Protection. (2023). Production of child sexual abuse material in Canada: A study of legal decisions from 2001 to 2019 where “make child pornography” was charged and the offending occurred in-person. *Report in preparation*.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, M., Holland, G., & Quayle, E. (2001). Typology of paedophile picture collections. *The Police Journal*, 74(2), 97–107. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032258X0107400202>

<sup>4</sup> Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2000). *Optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography*. United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/optional-protocol-convention-rights-child-sale-children-child>

<sup>5</sup> Child pornography” is the term used in the above-cited protocol as well as the *Criminal Code* of Canada. The term “child sexual abuse material” more clearly describes the assaults taking place against children and is a more accurate term for images and videos depicting this form of abuse.

<sup>6</sup> Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. General Assembly Resolution 44/25. United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>

<sup>7</sup> Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2021). *General comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment*. United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/general-comment-no-25-2021-childrens-rights-relation>

<sup>8</sup> *Criminal Code* (R.S.C., 1985, c. C-46). <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/c-46/section-163.1.html>

<sup>9</sup> International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children. (2018). *Child sexual abuse material: Model legislation & global review*. <https://cdn.icmec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/CSAM-Model-Law-9th-Ed-FINAL-12-3-18-1.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Canadian Centre for Child Protection. (2017). *Survivors' survey: Full report 2017*. [https://protectchildren.ca/pdfs/C3P\\_SurvivorsSurveyFullReport2017.pdf](https://protectchildren.ca/pdfs/C3P_SurvivorsSurveyFullReport2017.pdf)

Another important insight survivors shared in the survey, and complementing what we have learned through operating Cybertip.ca and other initiatives, is that child sexual abuse material does not only impact survivors: it also dramatically alters their parents' lives. Having supported survivors through the aftermath of the abuse, parents have unique insight into impacts of child sexual abuse material on survivors and their families, as well as the systems and challenges they must often navigate. By better understanding their experiences and recommendations, we can advocate for changes to policies and programs to best support families, communities, and societies impacted by child sexual abuse material. Yet there currently exists little research on the experiences of survivors' parents.

To address this gap, in 2021 we launched our International Family Survey. Twenty parents of one or more child sexual abuse material survivors courageously shared their experiences in this survey. We thematically analyzed their responses and found four main themes.



## Main themes:

**1 Offenders' crimes drastically impacted survivors' parents.** Parents experienced negative physical, emotional, and psychological effects including post-traumatic stress disorder, losing trust in others, and living in a constant state of fear for their family's safety. They also experienced disruption in their relationships at a time when they needed social support. Parents lost cherished relationships with partners, friends, family members, and community members who were unsupportive or found the situation too difficult to manage. Parents also distanced themselves from old friends or potential friends because they worried what those people might say or do if they learned about the abuse. And in cases where the parent had known the offender, that relationship was damaged and lost.

**2 The crimes also negatively impacted the whole family.** Parents' parenting approaches and structures changed, with some becoming single parents and many becoming hypervigilant, constantly on high alert for danger to their family. Parents also had new responsibilities, including working to keep their family safe and navigating complex criminal justice and child protective systems. Offenders' crimes resulted in mounting financial costs for families, such as legal and therapy fees, moving costs, and lost wages and jobs. And families lost relationships with other family members, friends, and community members.

**3 Families were continually met with inadequate and retraumatizing responses from government systems and technology companies.** Families of child sexual abuse material survivors were often harmed by the systems that should be helping them. Posing barriers to coping and healing, public health systems failed to provide parents and their families with fully subsidized, ongoing, specialized therapy. Families were caused further harm by child protective services and the criminal justice systems. Common were experiences of victim blaming or not believing the family. Law enforcement showed several parents abuse imagery of their child, giving parents traumatic insight into the abuse that they would not have otherwise had. And in some cases, these systems' failures meant that children continued to be abused after the abuse was discovered; in fact, two parents' children were still being abused at the time of the survey.



When parents asked technology companies to take down the abuse imagery or other harmful content, companies rarely complied. Some simply refused, while others said they would only remove the material if parents provided them with information about the child in the abuse imagery, like names and home addresses, which could further compromise the family's safety. In these ways, technology companies often have few to no barriers for the uploading of child sexual abuse material, while putting up many barriers throughout the system for parents seeking have the imagery removed.

## 4

### **Amidst the pain and upheaval, parents and their families were persistent and resilient.**

Every parent showed remarkable perseverance in fighting for their children's safety. Many were well into their healing journey, sharing encouraging stories of improved health and well-being and restored relationships. Whether through an inspired career change or completing the survey, respondents were using their experiences to advocate for changes to best support those impacted by child sexual abuse material.

What parents of child sexual abuse material survivors shared makes clear these crimes dramatically impact the entire family; families further being harmed by failures of public health, child protective services, criminal justice, and technology companies. So these systems may better support families impacted by child sexual abuse material, C3P has prepared policy recommendations for each group.

## **Summary of Policy Recommendations:**

- Implement public health approaches that provide ongoing, specialized therapy to survivors, their siblings, and parents at no cost to the family.
- Mandate trauma-informed training and practices for child protective services and criminal justice systems.
- End the unnecessary and traumatizing practice of showing survivors and their parents the abuse material.
- Create regulatory frameworks that ensure technology companies do their part to curtail cycles of abuse.

**For our complete policy recommendations, see page 29.**



## Introduction

The experience, recording, and distribution of child sexual abuse material profoundly impacts survivors as well as their family members. To best support those impacted by these crimes, it is crucial to learn from their experiences and accordingly advocate for changes in policies, laws, and systems.

Toward this goal, in 2016 we partnered with experts from around the world to launch the unprecedented International Survivors' Survey. In the first year, 150 survivors completed the survey. Their experiences are detailed in our 2017 report.<sup>11</sup> What they bravely shared continues to advance global understanding about their unique challenges and spark positive changes in policy and practice. Since the report's release in 2017, the survey has remained open and an additional 180 individuals have completed the International Survivors' Survey. We are immensely grateful to all survivors who have participated and deepened our understanding. Adding to our prior knowledge from operating Cybertip.ca, Project Arachnid, and other initiatives, survivors' insights make clear that child sexual abuse material deeply impacts the survivor as well as their parents and siblings. However, there is little research on the experiences of these family members.

To address this gap, in 2021 we launched an International Family Survey for parents of survivors whose child sexual abuse was recorded. By surveying those who were taking care of survivors at the time the abuse was discovered, and throughout the aftermath, we can learn about their unique experiences, which supports and systems are working well, which are failing them, and what is needed but absent.

To date, 20 parents of child sexual abuse material survivors have completed the survey. In this report, we present the results of a thematic analysis of their responses. Four key themes provide insight into how they and their families were impacted by offenders' crimes, how they were further harmed by systems, and how despite this, parents are resilient and persistent. We close with policy recommendations for stakeholders including public health, child protective services, criminal justice systems, and technology companies worldwide.

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<sup>11</sup> Canadian Centre for Child Protection. (2017). *Survivors' survey: Full report 2017*. [https://protectchildren.ca/pdfs/C3P\\_SurvivorsSurveyFullReport2017.pdf](https://protectchildren.ca/pdfs/C3P_SurvivorsSurveyFullReport2017.pdf)

# Method

## Respondents

Between May 2021 and October 2022, the survey was completed by 20 adults who were parents (or parental figures) to children whose sexual abuse was recorded. Their characteristics are presented in the table below. When the abuse was discovered, six respondents were a current partner of the main offender and six were ex-partners of the offender. Two respondents were parents of the offender's partner, one was the offender's daughter-in-law, and one was a family friend of the offender.

The remaining four respondents did not know the offender. In these cases, the offenders primarily abused and exploited the survivor online, whereas all other cases involved in-person abuse. We recognize that online and offline abuses are different forms of victimization and have distinct harms. We have presented findings from these cases together because our analyses found commonalities in parents' experiences navigating and supporting their family through the aftermath. All themes and subthemes in this report reflect experiences of respondents who did and did not know the offender, with one exception: As respondents who did not know the offender did not interact with child protective services, they are not represented in the subtheme "child protective services responses."

<b>RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS (N = 20)</b>	
	<i>n</i>
<b>GENDER</b>	
Female	19
Male	1
<b>COUNTRY</b>	
Canada	14
United States	3
Mexico	1
Netherlands	1
Australia	1
<b>NUMBER OF THEIR CHILDREN WHOSE SEXUAL ABUSE WAS RECORDED</b>	
One	15
Two	2
Three	1
Not stated	2

## Survey Design

C3P developed the International Family Survey in consultation with experts worldwide in child protection and development, law, criminology, and perhaps most importantly, six mothers of child sexual abuse material survivors. The survey was available in English, French, German, Dutch, and Spanish, and consisted of 126 questions about the abuse and its aftermath. Most questions were open-ended, meaning participants could write their responses in their own words and give insight into their unique experience.

We took several steps to facilitate respondent safety during the survey. For instance, at the start of each section, we presented respondents with an explanation of its purpose and how many questions it included, followed by calming images. Participants could decide whether they would like to skip the section, or take a break and resume the survey at a later time.

We advertised the survey through our social media channels, website, and emails to stakeholders and partners. Interested respondents accessed the survey online. They began by giving informed consent and answering eligibility questions; those who did not match the criteria were screened out of the survey. At the end of the survey, we offered respondents opportunities to join a network of families impacted by child sexual abuse material and learn about possible advocacy participation.

## Analytic Approach

Data analysis involved an *exploratory inductive thematic analysis*,<sup>12</sup> meaning we analyzed the data without hypotheses or a theoretical framework. Through several rounds of reading, coding, and discussing the data, we arrived at four main themes: impacts on parents; impacts on the family; inadequate and retraumatizing responses to families; and family resilience and persistence.

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<sup>12</sup> Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

## Findings

### Impacts on Parents

One cannot overstate the devastation that offenders' actions cause parents, fully upending and forever changing their lives. Discovering that an offender sexually abused one's child or children is a traumatic event in and of itself; that trauma intensifies upon learning that the offender memorialized the abuse by recording it, and have (or may have) distributed it to other offenders who victimize their child by viewing the recording. Respondents described the ways in which they were impacted by these traumas, including suffering adverse physical, emotional, and psychological effects and losing out on cherished and potential relationships — from the moment they discovered the abuse through to the current day. Despite this, some respondents and their families have begun to pick up the pieces of their lives; we discuss those in the later section, “family resilience and persistence.”

#### *Adverse Physical, Emotional, and Psychological Effects*

Every respondent detailed ways in which the crimes severely impacted their health and well-being, with mentions of posttraumatic stress disorder and its symptoms being especially common.

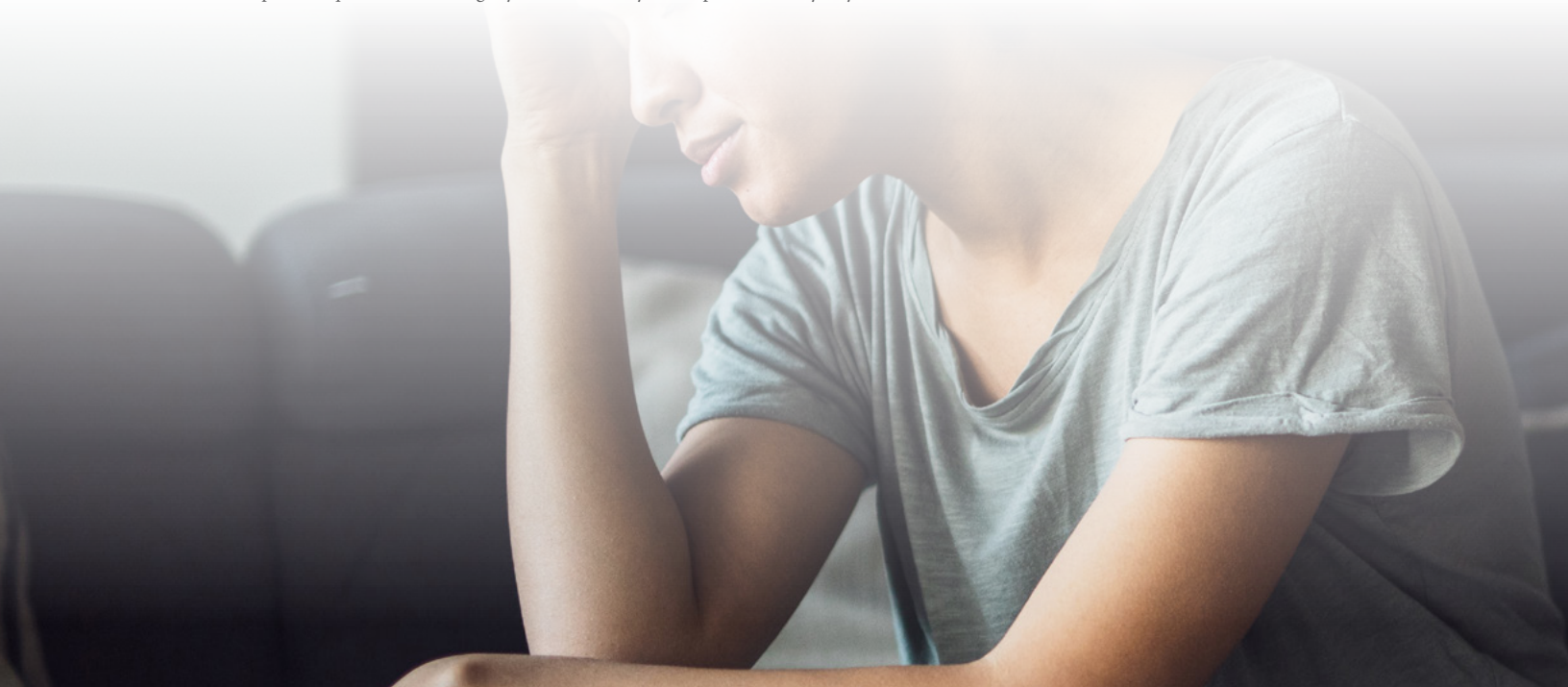
**“It has caused lifelong health problems – high blood pressure... depression, anxiety. It ruined our lives.”<sup>13</sup>**

**“Emotionally I am shot, depressed, overwhelmed. I just want a normal life. I feel like we are living a series of crime shows.”**

**“It has changed me to my core. I feel sad that my youngest daughter (different dad) will never know me as I was before. I'm anxious, hypervigilant and went from an expressive person to guarded. I have wondered if I will ever truly feel anything again because the guilt, pain and anger can only be contained sometimes by turning off all feelings. I want to feel free happiness with my kids again even if for one day.”**

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<sup>13</sup> Respondent quotes have been lightly edited for clarity and to preserve anonymity.



A sense of guilt weighed heavily on many parents. For some, the guilt stemmed from feeling they failed their fundamental, sacred duty as a parent in that they had not protected their child(ren) from the abuse; this was typically tied to the parent completely questioning their parenting abilities. One respondent who expressed guilt about the abuse described the discovery as “a complete 180” in that she suddenly felt like she did “not [know] anything about how to parent. Like I literally forgot it all over night. It really was a matter of losing all trust in my judgment to the point of paralysis.” Others echoed these sentiments:

**“I already was super protective: I homeschooled, limited online time, used family search safety utilities, DNS blockers, and buddy system with my kids. I feel like a failure and I regret getting married and having a family.”**

**“I know deep down we are really good parents. This makes you completely feel like the worst type of negligent, ill-informed and incompetent parent.”**

These and other respondents mentioned that since discovering the abuse and its recording, they had become more hypervigilant in their parenting, which seemed to be both driven by and fueling chronic stress; we further discuss impacts on parenting in later sections. Stress also stemmed from the impacts the abuse already had on their children, such as self-harm and depression, as well as anticipating the abuse’s potential future impacts, such as fearing for the family’s safety after the offender’s eventual release from prison:

**“We are continually worried about our family and fear for their safety when [the offender] gets out. We have had other life events occur since this (deaths) and it has become less easy to bounce back to what would be the norm in those situations... We are emotionally exhausted and have great trepidation about the future for [our family].”**

**“[I have ongoing fears or concerns related to] what happens when [the offender] is finally released and has no supervision... laws in our state allow sexual offenders to use computers even if their crime involved the use of one. What’s to stop him from stalking us online or looking up where we are, or worse yet, looking up more children?”**



On top of the stressors of learning that their children were sexually abused, the fact that the abuse was recorded and potentially distributed created extra stressors for respondents. As the abuse imagery circulates, others in the public might identify and locate the survivor, which can result in bullying, harassment, stalking, and stigmatization;<sup>14</sup> later in life, being recognized might also mean they lose out on employment opportunities. For some respondents, these scenarios were hypothetical for now, however, even the mere thought of these issues materializing was stressful, even consuming; as one said, “[I] wonder where [the abuse imagery] could be, if it’s out there, [and] worry about future recognition and distribution. I’m so stressed and disgusted thinking of it.” For others, these nightmare scenarios had already become incredibly stressful realities. In addition to thinking about how the abuse imagery might impact her family, one respondent also feared how it might impact other children:

**“We worry it will be shared, used for people to extort more images, used for bullying, accessible if she applies for a job, education or gets into a relationship, even a healthy relationship with someone. We worry it will be shown to other kids to make it seem normal and further child sexual abuse.”**

Traumatic experiences, such as learning that one’s child was sexually abused, can shatter feelings of safety and security, often breeding distrust in other people.<sup>15</sup> Consistent with this research, respondents mentioned how they have lost trust in others — in not only the offender or strangers, but also in other people who they had long trusted, like friends and family members. As trust is also fundamental to starting relationships,<sup>16</sup> respondents cited difficulties in forming or keeping new relationships.

**“Turned my world upside down. Made me untrust people.”**

**“Makes me a bit distrusting generally. I have my own trauma history and this doesn’t help. Also have to make effort to not think all men are like this even though the great majority of offenders of this type are men.”**

**“I have the desire to be in a relationship but... the man I dated [for] years before marrying and was married to for [several] years could abuse my daughter at 7 days old, like he created her just to abuse her. You just don’t wake up one day and say I am going to abuse my brand new baby.”**

<sup>14</sup> Canadian Centre for Child Protection. (2017). *Survivors’ survey: Full report 2017*. [https://protectchildren.ca/pdfs/C3P\\_SurvivorsSurveyFullReport2017.pdf](https://protectchildren.ca/pdfs/C3P_SurvivorsSurveyFullReport2017.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Anders, S. L., Shallcross, S. L., & Frazier, P. A. (2012) Beyond Criterion A1: The effects of relational and non-relational traumatic events. *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 13(2), 134–151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15299732.2012.642744>

<sup>16</sup> Rempel, J. K., Holmes, J. G., & Zanna, M. P. (1985). Trust in close relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 49(1), 95–112. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.49.1.95>



## *Loss of Relationships*

Because of the impacts of the offenders' crimes, many respondents lost out on important relationships — new and old — often rendering them isolated at a time when social support is so crucial. In some cases, the offender and respondent had been romantic partners until the abuse's discovery, and then the relationship ended when the respondent learned of this traumatic betrayal. Although these respondents didn't discuss the impacts of the lost relationship, others have likened these losses to a death: even though the offender is physically alive, it feels as if the partner they thought they knew — who would not sexually offend against children — has died.<sup>17</sup> These respondents also lost relationships with the offender's family members who stood by the offender.

Regardless of whether their partner had been the offender, respondents also lost cherished relationships with other family members or friends. Respondents explained that these relationships dissolved for reasons including others being unsupportive or judgmental, like victim blaming or stigmatizing the parent, or because they had to relocate. In some cases, respondents relocated *because* of these unsupportive responses.


**"[My community] blamed the parent: me."**

**"I have no friends. I alienated myself from people so I don't have to give explanations. Friends that I had before the issue came to light treated us like we had the plague after because the abuse was all over the news."**

**"We have parted ways with those who cannot understand or be supportive. Some friends seem to not know how to talk to us now. Some family feel we should be able to just get up and carry on. Given some folks don't get it and don't care to understand... We gradually have grown apart. On the other hand, we have some great solid friends... We will always stand up for [the survivor] so if that bothers someone... We are better off without them."**

**"New [friends] I rarely tell anything about my past. When I do, people are so shocked it seemed to hurt them too much so I typically never tell."**

<sup>17</sup> Duncan, K., Wakeham, A., Winder, B., Blagden, N., & Armitage, R. (2022). "Grieving someone who's still alive, that's hard": The experiences of non-offending partners of individuals who have sexually offended – an IPA study. *Journal of Sexual Aggression*, 28(3), 281-295. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552600.2021.2024611>



Respondents' romantic lives were also impacted. Their disrupted sense of trust complicated dating, making some "very careful who [they] dated" and leaving others with a "non-existent" romantic life.

**"I have no romantic life. I have severe trust issues, plus find it hard to answer questions about divorce and if anyone asks questions about my children, I immediately turn into dragon mode and will not answer and breathe fire if they ask too many personal questions about them."**

Most of those who remained in a relationship with a non-offending partner reported that the crimes immensely strained the relationship, with one respondent saying that "the idea of sex was sullied to me that first year." Others described the impacts on their relationships in these ways:

**"[The crimes] destroyed it. My husband has all but abandoned me. I've changed too much and am not the person he married. I'm incredibly lonely."**

**"I have a great husband, but this did drive him to drink for a while. While he was not violent and wouldn't be drunk in front of me or the children, I was left basically alone to navigate everything, make appointments, have the heart to hearts, take her to counselling. Which is why I got counselling. Just to be able to talk to someone."**

Just as these respondents did, many linked these relational impacts of the offenders' actions — of lost or strained past relationships with friends, family members, and partners, coupled with losing out on new relationships — to social isolation.

## Impacts on the Family

Something we often hear from those impacted by child sexual abuse and its recording is that these crimes impact the entire family. Undoubtedly, the impacts on parents in turn impact their (non-offending) partners, survivors, and other children in their household. In particular, respondents described how the crimes led to changes in their parenting, new responsibilities, financial hardship, and strained relationships.

### *Changes in Parenting*

The fact that offenders had sexually abused and recorded their children had consequences for respondents' parenting approach and structure. In a couple of especially egregious cases, the offending parent won full custody of the children, meaning these respondents were cut off from parenting their children day-to-day while the offender was able to continue abusing the children.<sup>18</sup> As for respondents who maintained custody of their children, they adopted more restrictive parenting styles, often self-describing it as “overprotective” or “hypervigilant” parenting that stemmed from a newfound general distrust and a way to keep their children from further harm. Many increasingly limited the online and offline activities and relationships for all their children, including those who are not child sexual abuse material survivors.

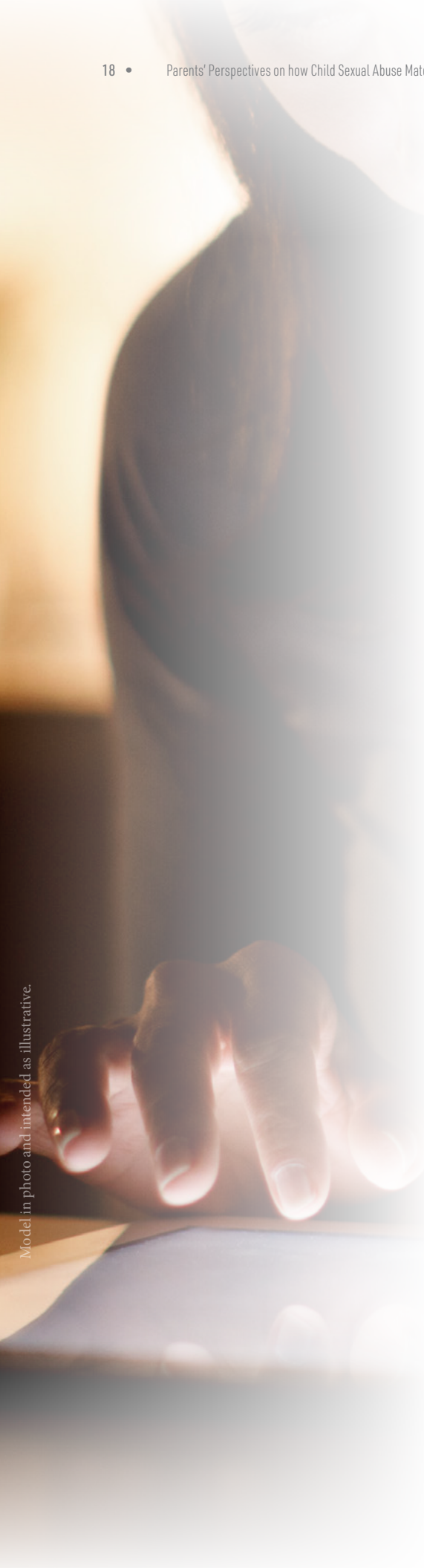
**“I over-protected to the point my kids felt I had a stranglehold on them. I did not trust anyone new who came into our lives. I was afraid to let them go to sleepovers and then when I did, I became an amateur ‘private eye,’ including paying for background checks on anyone they were around.”**

**“I became so overprotective that my kids couldn’t have access to age-appropriate online activities (even any activities).”**

<sup>18</sup> An allegation of child sexual abuse that arises in the family law context is often viewed with suspicion, particularly if the allegation arises in the context of custody or access disputes; however, rates of intentionally false allegations in these contexts are low. For further discussion of this phenomena, see:

Bala, N., Paetsch, J. J., Trocmé, N., Schumann, J., Tanchak, S. L., & Hornick, J. P. (2001). Allegations of child abuse in the context of parental separation: A discussion paper. *Department of Justice Canada*. [https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/fl-lf/divorce/2001\\_4/pdf/2001\\_4.pdf](https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/fl-lf/divorce/2001_4/pdf/2001_4.pdf)

Trocmé, N., & Bala, N. (2005). False allegations of abuse and neglect when parents separate. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 29, 1333-1345. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2004.06.016>



Some felt that their more restrictive parenting had a trade-off, in that although they felt they were protecting their children, doing so cost them their independence or they “had to grow up faster, losing or missing out on a normal childhood.”

A few of the respondents who had other children (who were not child sexual abuse material survivors) noted the crimes had another impact on their parenting style: Because their survivor children needed extra support and care, respondents came to devote more of their attention and energy to the survivors at the expense of their other children. For example, one respondent felt that because of the relatively little attention she was able to give her other children, one of them dropped out of school.

### ***Additional Responsibilities***

The discovery of the abuse, its recording, and in some cases distribution, triggered a cascade of new responsibilities for respondents, especially working to shelter their family from further harm. To prevent their children from further victimization, some respondents took on the difficult task of searching online for the abuse imagery or other harmful content — content that is legal but nonetheless poses risks to the survivor. For example, the offending parent may have family photos posted on social media that include the survivor, increasing the survivor’s risk of other offenders identifying and locating them. Once respondents found harmful or abusive content online, they would request that the electronic hosting service remove it. As we detail later, this grueling work often did not pay off. To shield their family from media spotlight, public stigma, and stalking, respondents also monitored news coverage and court records of the crimes to check whether their family’s identity was protected. Unfortunately, this was not always the case — even when case details were supposed to be protected by publication bans — and respondents then had to advocate to have the details removed, often unsuccessfully.

Offenders’ crimes also resulted in the additional responsibilities of navigating systems and services. Respondents and their children were now involved in investigations by child protective services and law enforcement and endured trying criminal court and family law proceedings. They also had to find supportive, knowledgeable therapists for themselves or their children, and then make the time to attend appointments. Many of these additional responsibilities contributed to financial hardship.

## ***Financial Hardship***

Offenders' crimes had substantial negative financial consequences for respondents and their families. In the crimes' aftermath, parents found themselves facing many new expenses. As we detail later, the therapy that survivors, respondents, and other family members needed was generally not cost free or fully subsidized, which resulted in mounting expenses; one respondent explained how she "went broke funding my kids' therapies." Respondents who endured legal battles were burdened with tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal costs. Some families incurred relocation costs because they had to move, either due to safety concerns (e.g., the offender had shared the survivor's name and address, and the parent feared the survivor would be stalked or harassed), wanting a "fresh start" in a community where no one knew about the abuse and recording, or because the other financial impacts of the crime lead to the loss of their home.

As expenses associated with the crimes mounted, many respondents' household incomes decreased. A few lost their household's main income stream when the offender had been their income-earning partner and was arrested. Respondents themselves lost wages, increased earning potential, and career opportunities due to missing work for court, therapy, and childcare, or the psychological toll of the crimes:

**"I had to miss a lot of work for appointments with therapy for my children and court."**

**"I had to make choices with my career that would be best for my children. I couldn't take on a job that required too much of my time because they needed me, which left the opportunity for advancement in a position unrealistic which also limited my income potential."**

Several respondents lost income as they had to leave the workforce early because of the psychological toll of the abuse, its recording, and the aftermath:

**"Missed work, lost jobs... Social Assistance now."**

**"I have [complex post-traumatic stress disorder]; can't work now."**

**"I had to retire early due to stress... [Post-traumatic stress disorder], flashbacks..."**

Another respondent's career and financial stability were delayed due to the offender's actions:

**"I was completing a PhD at the time. [The crime and its impacts] delayed my research for about three years, stopped me from attending international conferences to further my career, and forced me to accept insecure employment so I could support my daughter. Has put me back at least five years from where I should be."**

Some respondents mentioned how the financial constraints resulted in dramatic lifestyle changes for their family, such as not being able to enroll the children in extracurricular activities or take vacations, losing their vehicle, or having to declare bankruptcy.

### ***Loss of or Damaged Relationships***

Earlier we discussed how respondents lost relationships with their partners, friends, and extended family members because of offenders' crimes. Sadly, respondents weren't the only ones to lose these relationships. Respondents' children — survivors and their siblings — also lost many of these and other relationships. Extended family members, friends, and community members often excluded respondents and their children instead of providing social support in their time of need:

**"My parents and sisters sometimes left us out of activities because they felt bad being around us, or later when kids acted out, [they] didn't know how to handle it."**

**"Many parents of friends wouldn't let their kids be friends with my kids anymore despite their dad [the offender] being in prison."**

**"They treat us like lepers and are afraid the offender will return."**

**"Judgmental. Shunned, gossiped and pointed when they saw us in public. We had to move."**

**"Due to the failure of the publication ban, the child is identified. He and our family are shunned. We are outcasts."**



## Inadequate and Retraumatizing Responses to Families

As if parents and their families have not already endured enough because of offenders' actions, they are often further harmed by systems they reach out to for help. While some respondents described positive and helpful experiences with child protective services, the criminal justice system, and technology companies, most respondents recounted inadequate and retraumatizing experiences. In several cases, **these system failures meant that children continued to be victimized after the abuse was discovered.** Respondents and their family members were also prevented from receiving the therapy they wanted and needed because of a public health failure: they were not provided fully subsidized, ongoing, specialized therapy.<sup>19</sup>

### *Public Health Response: Lack of Fully Subsidized, Ongoing, Specialized Therapy*

Therapy can help families navigate and heal from the ongoing trauma of child sexual abuse, its recording, and distribution, as well as inadequate and retraumatizing experiences with technology companies, child protective services, and the criminal justice system, described later. Indeed, several respondents reported exactly that. In attending therapy, they and their family members felt heard, had their reactions to trauma normalized, and were supported in their healing. As one respondent put it, “the mental health sector literally saved my daughter and was the only place we could turn when the police refused to get involved.” But more often than not, respondents and their families were unable to access the therapy they wanted and needed because it was not provided to them at no cost, or it ended too early. In addition, it was difficult to find therapists who were well-versed in the unique harms associated with child sexual abuse material — the abuse, its recording, the fears of it being distributed, and both the psychological and personal safety impacts of it being distributed.

Sometimes survivors and their family members receive therapy at no cost to them: the cost might be covered by the judicial system as a part of victim services, by employee benefits, by government insurance or health care, or by community organizations. This was not the reality for most respondents. The fact that therapy was not fully subsidized meant that in some families, no one was able to access therapy at all. One mother shared how the lack of fully subsidized therapy meant she could only afford sessions for one of her two survivor children. This systemic failure put her in the impossible position of having to choose which child would go to therapy and which would not. In other cases, some therapy was fully subsidized for survivors but not for other family members, even though they are also severely impacted by the abuse and its discovery. As one father described:

**“They gave [my son whose imagery was recorded] counseling and nothing for me or my older boy who saw the video and he needed help to deal with that and I needed help or counseling to me get through the emotional and mental stress. We are still pretty messed up and unstable. We are doing the best we can with what we have all been put through.”**

<sup>19</sup> Though child protective services, criminal justice systems, and private health care insurers are often the ones who might provide survivors and their families with some form of therapy, we argue that it is a public health responsibility.

Even when respondents or their family members had received fully or partially subsidized therapy, the number of these sessions was limited, which again meant families could not access as much therapy as they needed. These traumas can be ongoing and their impacts may intensify in response to other events, such as a survivor reaching puberty.<sup>20</sup> The father above explained how his survivor son “only received 10 sessions and he needed a lot more.” Another respondent, whose ex-husband had recorded his sexual abuse of their three children, said that the children “had an excellent therapist, she did all she could, I paid for two years longer on top of what was offered. I could afford no more.”

Regardless of whether the therapy was fully subsidized and ongoing, another difficulty was finding specialized care. A few parents described how the fully subsidized therapy they and their family members received was not trauma-informed and, consistent with past research,<sup>21,22,23,24</sup> therapists did not understand what child sexual abuse material is or its impacts. As a result, some parents switched to a therapist they had to pay for, furthering the crimes' financial and psychological toll on the family.

**“[The free] therapy wasn’t helpful and so we sought further help privately. It seemed to us that the ‘system’ is not set up to really help a victim’s journey towards healing. The therapy was very ‘surface’, and although [the survivor] also attended, there has been no progress with her, to the point that now at 10 years of age she still has no real understanding of anything.”**

**“The child sexual abuse material and distribution part was never properly addressed or understood [in therapy] and we saw more therapists than I can count.”**

Respondents also mentioned difficulties in finding therapists who work with children and teens.

<sup>20</sup> For an example from case law, please see paras. 49-54 of *R. v. D. B. and T. S.*, 2019 MBQB 159 (CanLII). <https://canlii.ca/t/j34zs>

<sup>21</sup> Martin, J. (2014). “It’s just an image, right?”: Practitioners’ understanding of child sexual abuse images online and effects on victims. *Child & Youth Services*, 35(2), 96–115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0145935X.2014.924334>

<sup>22</sup> Gewirtz-Meydan, A., Lahav, Y., Walsh, W., & Finkelhor, D. (2019). Psychopathology among adult survivors of child pornography. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 98, 238–248. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.104189>

<sup>23</sup> Slane, A., Martin, J., & Rimer, R. J. (2021). Views and attitudes about youth self-produced sexual images among professionals with expertise in child sexual abuse. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 30(2), 207–229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10538712.2021.1875095>

<sup>24</sup> Gewirtz-Meydan, A., Walsh, W., Wolak, J., & Finkelhor, D. (2018). The complex experience of child pornography survivors. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 80, 238–248. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.03.031>



Models in photo and intended as illustrative



### *Child Protective Services Responses*

Child protective services failed to protect many children from continued abuse. One mother shared how she had called child protective services for help upon suspecting her children were being abused by their father, but doing so did not end the abuse; instead, the children continued to be sexually abused by their father at the time of the survey. In other cases, the abuse *had* ended, but child protective services failures had delayed its end, for example, by failing to unearth potential evidence during an investigation:

**“[I called child protective services] to the home... because I saw a picture I thought was inappropriate of my daughter on the diaper changing table and never knew my husband had a camera to take a picture and put it on the computer. They dropped the ball by never checking the computer. That could have spared my daughter three years of unknown abuse.”**

Respondents also described how child protective service workers failed to provide them and their families with supports, including treating them with suspicion, not following up after the investigation, and not providing resources or advice to help better equip them to navigate the difficult emotions and legal processes.

### *Criminal Justice Responses*

In recounting their experiences with the criminal justice system, respondents explained how people within it, such as law enforcement officers and lawyers, caused their family further harm. In some cases, this included insensitive responses — ones that were not trauma-informed or developmentally appropriate. For example, one family went to police for help because a boy had shared their daughter’s intimate images online and she was now being stalked. But instead of providing a compassionate response in their time of need, police threatened to criminally charge their daughter for creating child sexual abuse material. Similarly, another respondent described how her survivor children were “treated like adults without support while making police reports. They reported feeling alone, frightened, like they were doing something wrong by telling, like they were telling lies, afraid of what their father (abuser) would do when he found out.” Other respondents described harm done by defence lawyers in the courtroom. A father wrote that “the defendant’s lawyer said stuff to my kid that should never been allowed to be said to my child while he was on the stand”, including accusing the son of both fabricating and “asking for” the abuse.

As in the prior example, criminal justice system members’ insensitivity also manifested as questioning the family’s credibility and allegations. Sometimes, this extended into victim blaming, either explicitly like above, or subtly, like when police “seemed to highlight the idea of a consensual relationship (because my daughter was 17), even though she was clearly being sexually exploited.” For other respondents, police or the offenders’ lawyers fully discredited their allegations and evidence of abuse, and in turn, the offenders were able to continue abusing children.

## SHOWING ABUSE IMAGERY TO PARENTS

We asked respondents about a practice sometimes used by criminal justice system members: showing parents their child(ren)'s sexual abuse imagery. This practice, typically done during investigative or legal processes, is clearly traumatizing for families. By showing parents the abuse imagery, parents see and potentially hear their child's abuse, giving them a traumatic memory they would not have otherwise had. The impacts may be intensified if the offender recorded the imagery from their perspective: Seeing the "abuse through the eyes of the offender" gives parents "horrendous knowledge."<sup>25</sup>

Some respondents had lived this experience, and echoing the Phoenix 11<sup>26</sup> and other survivors shown their imagery by members of the criminal justice system,<sup>27</sup> the experience was a traumatic one. Respondents detailed reactions of shock and horror and how the practice contributed to enduring harm. One respondent described it in these terms:

**"It was a horrific experience and made me feel – I can't even describe... The first image they showed me is inscribed in my brain and I will never forget it. Most of the others are locked away in my head as I try to block what I saw for my sanity."**

**"Seeing the abusive images of my daughter took away the enjoyment or pleasure of being intimate with someone because I cannot relate to it that way anymore. It's been 20 years..."**

Another respondent illustrated the inappropriate context in which the survivor's mother was shown abuse imagery, as well as its serious, enduring impacts:

**"[The mother] was put through hell at the police station where she was held for questioning (six hours) and was shown imagery and told to go in and confront the pedophile in an attempt to make him [her partner] talk. She had no knowledge of the crimes... And so psychologically this ruined her and she continues to have serious mental health problems as a result of this situation. She has had three episodes of suicidal ideation... three trips to the Crisis Center and one admittance to the psych unit."**

<sup>25</sup> Cooper, S. (2017). Forensic interview and CSA images. [Video]. *Canadian Centre for Child Protection*.

<sup>26</sup> Phoenix 11. (2019). Insights from The Phoenix 11 for law enforcement working with survivors of child sexual abuse material. Reproduced in its entirety in National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, *Be the Solution: Helping Victims of Child Sexual Abuse Material: A Guide for Law Enforcement*. <https://go.missingkids.org/1/808593/2020-11-24/21bhf2>

<sup>27</sup> Canadian Centre for Child Protection. (2017). *Survivors' survey: Full report 2017*. [https://protectchildren.ca/pdfs/C3P\\_SurvivorsSurveyFullReport2017.pdf](https://protectchildren.ca/pdfs/C3P_SurvivorsSurveyFullReport2017.pdf)

When we asked respondents who didn't have this experience to share their thoughts on the practice, their comments largely aligned with the above. In general, they opposed the practice, with some additionally expecting it would have negative impacts on the respondent:

**"I wouldn't want to see. It kills me that [the abuse] happened. I feel I failed to protect my kids."**

**"I cannot imagine how horrifying that would be."**

**"[Showing a parent the imagery would be] unforgivable – devastating."**

One respondent spoke from related experience. Though police did not show her and her husband the abuse imagery involving their daughter, the couple did see it when searching their daughter's device.

**"I think [police showing family members the abuse imagery] is not necessary and very disturbing for a parent. My husband said he will never be able to get that one image out of his head and it affected him deeply."**

To sum up, when asked about the practice of showing abuse material to parents during investigative or legal processes, respondents had either personally endured and been harmed by this, or had anticipated the experience to be a negative one.



In addition to describing criminal justice system members' harmful *actions*, respondents recounted how criminal justice system members' *inactions* had caused families harm. In one instance, further burdening a respondent during an already trying time, a law enforcement officer "did not seize the devices at the time of reporting and we had to follow up with him the next day to get that done." Another respondent was "not impressed" that law enforcement hadn't told her that her son had been raped, even when she specifically asked whether he needed medical attention. She didn't learn this information until two years later in court; consequently, her son wasn't tested for sexually transmitted infections until two years after the abuse. And some respondents voiced how the criminal justice system hadn't provided desired or necessary supports, such as help in writing victim impact statements and navigating other legal processes.

### ***Technology Company Responses***

After offenders created and distributed the abuse material, respondents described how platforms operated by technology companies facilitated further harm to their families. A common experience was that these companies, which had enabled offenders to upload, share, and redistribute sexual abuse imagery of children, made the removal of the material incredibly difficult, and at times impossible. Several respondents went through the time consuming and retraumatizing work of finding the abuse imagery online, then alerting companies about the illegal material on their platform, and requesting its removal; unfortunately, their experiences with the companies were uniformly negative.

#### **TECHNOLOGY COMPANIES DIDN'T COOPERATE WITH TAKE DOWN REQUESTS**

Instead of companies immediately taking down the imagery without question, and thereby limiting the potential for the abuse imagery to proliferate and revictimize survivors, respondents described how companies either refused or introduced unnecessary hurdles to the process, making it far more difficult to have abuse imagery removed from their platform than to be uploaded to or shared on their platform.

**"In order to get something removed, [companies] want to know more information, such as name, address, phone number, email, etc. Why would someone have to give out personal information for something you are trying to remove that is obviously endangering the welfare of the person and illegal?"**

In asking for personal information, technology companies present parents with a difficult decision. If the parent gives the company their or their child's personal information, that company now holds both the abuse imagery and identifying information about the survivor, which could heighten privacy and safety risks and concerns for the child and family. There is also no guarantee that once given this information, the company will remove the imagery from their platform or service.

Fortunately, some respondents had success in requesting that technology companies remove the abuse imagery once they connected with skilled, trusted third parties. One characterized her takedown requests as “useless... until the Cybercrime Commissioner (bless her) got Interpol involved.”



Technology companies also further harmed families through refusing to remove content that was not abusive but was harmful. Consider the following respondent’s take down efforts that were met with partial success:

**“We asked Twitter to remove the convicted pedophile’s account... Although he has no abuse pics there... he does have pics of our family. They have still done nothing. We asked the Canadian Centre for Child Protection to help get his Instagram and Facebook accounts shut down and they did. We have pursued having our identity changed on Facebook so as to be hidden and even more secure from the pedophile and his family – they have refused.”**

This respondent’s experience is all too familiar to us at C3P. First, many, but not all, major social media platforms have policies that prohibit convicted sex offenders from having accounts on their platforms.<sup>28,29,30,31</sup> Despite these policies, we have often found that offenders’ accounts are not automatically removed following conviction; rather, their accounts might only be removed once we or survivors and their families file a report to the platform. Second, it is unduly challenging to get companies to remove content that, while not illegal, is nonetheless harmful to families who are already experiencing trauma. For example, during 2019 meetings C3P convened, the mothers of survivors shared that when the offender is a family member, even seemingly benign family photos that include the offender can be incredibly triggering because they serve as a reminder of the abuse and betrayal. In these cases, decisions by technology companies to not remove family photos from a convicted offender’s social media accounts is also a physical safety issue: it increases the chances that other offenders can identify and find the survivor, thereby violating the child’s rights to privacy, safety, and protection from child sexual abuse material.<sup>32,33,34</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Meta. (2022a, July 26). *Terms of service*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20230307151222/https://www.facebook.com/terms.php>

<sup>29</sup> Meta. (2022b, July 26). *Terms and imprint*. [https://web.archive.org/web/20221024192736/https://help.instagram.com/581066165581870/?locale=en\\_US](https://web.archive.org/web/20221024192736/https://help.instagram.com/581066165581870/?locale=en_US)

<sup>30</sup> Snap. (2021, November 15). *Snap Inc. terms of service*. <https://snap.com/en-US/terms>

<sup>31</sup> TikTok. (2022, October). *Community guidelines*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20230307152834/https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines?lang=en>

<sup>32</sup> Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2000). *Optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography*. United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/optional-protocol-convention-rights-child-sale-children-child>

<sup>33</sup> Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child. General Assembly Resolution 44/25*. United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>

<sup>34</sup> Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2021). *General comment No. 25 (2021) on children’s rights in relation to the digital environment*. United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/general-comment-no-25-2021-childrens-rights-relation>

## Family Resilience and Persistence

Parents and their families endured incredible pain and upheaval at the hands of the offenders, and the systems to which they reached out for help harmed them further; nonetheless, each respondent showed remarkable resilience and persistence. These parents repeatedly made sacrifices to protect their children and help them thrive, persevered through court battles and investigations, and continually petitioned technology companies to take down harmful and illegal content. Encouragingly, many respondents shared stories of their healing journeys, such as improved mental health and well-being: one respondent explained she is “no longer depressed because I’ve worked it out” and another said she is now “stable, majority of the time I cope okay with it, still comes up, often indirectly.” Respondents also experienced healing within their family relationships:

**“We have healed a lot and come a long way. Our relationship with our daughter is much better. It had suffered greatly (trust and closeness). I can say that we are almost as close now as before this happened, but it has taken time and work. The offender really messed with this. I am so grateful we did not lose this relationship with our daughter, as this could have easily happened.”**

**“The other kids found it stressful and we had to work hard to make life ‘normal’ for them while we were dealing with this crisis. Now I feel we are closer. We communicate about difficult issues and make sure we spend time doing things together (this was part of our therapy). We as parents are more watchful (and maybe less trusting), but we try and balance it so that we are not giving a message of fear.”**

Central to several respondents’ healing journeys was the act of sharing their story. For one mother, this happened when she gave her victim impact statement in court: “This was a huge step for me, in being able to personally speak my mind and feel this was the first step at healing.” Others shared their stories in advocacy contexts outside the courtroom. They explained how they harnessed this horrific experience to advocate for changes that better support child sexual abuse material survivors and their families, including by “helping medical professionals address the unique needs of these victims” and going back to school to become a “victim advocate for children who’ve been abused and exploited.” By taking the time and energy to complete our survey — to share their experiences to improve policies and practices — every respondent engaged in advocacy.

## Policy Recommendations

When offenders sexually abuse a child, record, and share the abuse, their actions trigger a series of harms that deeply impact the survivor, their siblings, and parents that continue long after the abuse is over. Tragically, the parents who seek support for their families from technology companies and government systems are often met with inadequate and retraumatizing responses. The following policy recommendations will help governments ensure that public health, child protective services and criminal justice systems, and technology companies will provide those impacted by child sexual abuse material the support and care they deserve.

### Public Health

**“[Therapy] should be offered to parents, the benefits explained (short and long term) and access navigated or facilitated by police/children’s advocacy centres, etc. Children need timely access to therapists that have the knowledge, skills and abilities to provide appropriate services on this specific type of therapy.”**

To help survivors and their families heal and build resilience, it’s important they have the choice to access free, ongoing, specialized therapy. Though child protective services, criminal justice systems, and private health care insurers are often the ones who might provide survivors and their families with some form of therapy, we argue that it is a public health responsibility. Public health policymakers must ensure that relevant policies and programs in their jurisdiction:

- Adopt a whole family approach. In recognition that child sexual abuse material impacts the entire family, victim services and other relevant bodies should define “victims of child sexual abuse material” in a way that includes survivors as well as their protective parents and siblings.
- Provide therapy at no cost to victims and their families. To remove financial barriers to therapy, it should be fully subsidized upfront, in that survivors of child sexual abuse material should never have to pay out of pocket or be reimbursed. The therapy should be provided regardless of whether they go through the justice system or victim services programs.
- Provide ongoing therapy. Because child sexual abuse material has ongoing impacts for survivors and their family members, there should not be a maximum number of free sessions. Rather, survivors and their family members should be able to access therapy as desired.
- Increase the availability of specialized therapists. These crimes have unique impacts and are not always understood, even by well-intending therapists. To avoid causing further harm, governments should invest in trauma-informed training programs or continuing education/professional development offerings in the mental health sector, such as social work, clinical psychology, and counselling psychology.

## Child Protective Services and Criminal Justice

**"I would never ever trust the police again never. My son is now in the hands of the man that did this and is no different than a kidnap victim."**

**"A prosecutor insisted that my children have forensic exams to help build the case even though they had not seen their father, the offender, for over two weeks. This traumatized my children and I had no idea I could say no and even if I did, I would have been too afraid to say no because even the 'advocate'/ lawyer assigned to protect the rights of my children, doubted me when I said I didn't know the abuse was happening."**

Criminal justice systems and child protective services may better support families impacted by child sexual abuse and its recording, policymakers should ensure that these institutions:

- Implement trauma-informed practices for handling cases of child sexual abuse and child sexual abuse material.
- Ensure courts have clarity around what details should and should not be publicly available through court documents. There should be more consideration of confidentiality, such as by redacting identifying information or sealing sensitive records.
- Provide clear and unambiguous direction that survivors and their parents should not be shown the unaltered abuse imagery during investigative or legal processes, alongside a list of concrete, viable alternatives. For example, the Phoenix 11 suggest instead showing the imagery to a "neutral third-party, such as a specially trained pediatrician."<sup>35</sup>
- Connect families to a support service that: assists with safety planning; provides psychoeducation on trauma, assistance in preparing victim impact statements, and legal support for restitution; reduces the online availability of abuse imagery; helps them navigate systems; and connects them to therapeutic supports and financial assistance.

<sup>35</sup> Phoenix 11. (2019). Insights from The Phoenix 11 for law enforcement working with survivors of child sexual abuse material. Reproduced in its entirety in National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, *Be the Solution: Helping Victims of Child Sexual Abuse Material: A Guide for Law Enforcement*. <https://go.missingkids.org/l/808593/2020-11-24/21bhf2>



## Technology Companies

**“The internet companies need to take responsibility to remove images immediately upon notice. They should be held legally accountable when they do not act on this or they should be shut down. Laws need to be updated with the times... They are antiquated and not written to deal with the advancement in technology and how it is used in abuse.”**

**“It is up to the tech companies and the government to do something about the sharing of these images and to fully understand how it makes a victim feel when they have to go out in public, fearing they could be recognized. It is easy to think positively and believe that online exploitation won’t affect kids who’ve been abused and it’s even easier to ignore this problem.”**

From providing adult offenders with direct access to children to failing to block and remove online child sexual abuse material and other harmful material, technology played a role in the continued abuse of survivors and their families; in many cases, this was made possible through online platforms and services. Those at the helm of these companies must fulfill their legal and moral obligations to help end cycles of abuse. We therefore echo our recommendations to policymakers from our Project Arachnid report,<sup>36</sup> which are critical components in creating regulatory frameworks for electronic service providers:

- Enact and impose a duty of care, along with financial penalties for non-compliance or failure to fulfill a required duty of care.
- Impose certain legal duties on upstream electronic service providers and their downstream customers.
- Require automated, proactive content detection for platforms with user-generated content.
- Set standards for content that may not be criminal, but remains harmful-abusive to minors.
- Mandate human content moderation standards.
- Set requirements for proof of subject or participate consent and uploader verification.
- Establish platform design standards that reduce risk and promote safety (i.e., “safety-by-design”).
- Establish standards for user-reporting mechanisms and content removal obligations.

<sup>36</sup> Canadian Centre for Child Protection. (2021). *Project Arachnid: Online availability of child sexual abuse material*. [https://protectchildren.ca/pdfs/C3P\\_ProjectArachnidReport\\_en.pdf](https://protectchildren.ca/pdfs/C3P_ProjectArachnidReport_en.pdf)

## Conclusion

In this report, we summarize parents' descriptions of how child sexual abuse, its recording, and distribution are traumatic events for survivors, their siblings, and parents. Unfortunately, survivors and their families are often further traumatized and failed by the systems they reach out to for help, including public health, child protective services, the criminal justice system, and technology companies. Despite these system failures and the crimes' aftermath, many parents and their families are resilient. These findings point to policy changes needed to better support the countless people impacted by child sexual abuse material.

We are grateful to the 20 parents who shared their experiences and expertise in our survey. Your voices build on the International Survivor Survey findings,<sup>37</sup> further underscoring that child sexual abuse material impacts the entire family and necessitates trauma-informed, family-oriented responses from governments and technology companies around the world.

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<sup>37</sup> Canadian Centre for Child Protection. (2017). *Survivors' survey: Full report 2017*. [https://protectchildren.ca/pdfs/C3P\\_SurvivorsSurveyFullReport2017.pdf](https://protectchildren.ca/pdfs/C3P_SurvivorsSurveyFullReport2017.pdf)





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