

Tackling public misunderstandings of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA): A qualitative study involving people who have experienced CSA in the creation of a performance-based short film series

Project report

Principal Academics: Alison McKinlay

Principal Artist: Viv Gordon

Project background

This project was funded by the UKRI Violence, Abuse and Mental Health Network as part of its workstream on artistic and public engagement around violence, abuse and mental health.

The project ran for a total of 9 months



Project team:

- Dr Alison McKinlay, University College London
- Viv Gordon, Viv Gordon Company

Project partners:

- Viv Gordon Company
- Riverside Studios

Viv Gordon
COMPANY

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Project summary

Background

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is extremely common but not often talked about. Millions of people around the world are affected by CSA and prevalence rates are likely to be significantly underestimated. One of the reasons for this is that most crimes go undetected or unreported (1,2) and conviction rates are low at around 4%. (3) Trauma survivors have long faced discrimination, inappropriate labels for their distress, and victim-blaming when they have come forward about their experiences. (4) In this research, we wanted to use the arts challenge some of these narratives that many people carry around with them about survivors. Evidence also suggests that survivors might find it valuable to use the arts and in particular, creative writing, to support their wellbeing. (5)

Methods

With the help of experts with lived experience, the Plain Sight research team (AM, VG) developed an anonymous online survey, that invited adult survivors of CSA from around the UK to share their views, perspectives and creative writing to help inspire the creation of the Plain Sight film series.

We heard from people from all walks of life, different ages, genders, sexualities, ethnicities, and professions. After being checked for anonymity by the lead researcher (AM) and the survey passages were sent to VG for inspiration during the film script writing phase of the project. The film scripts were then developed from the culmination of responses sent in anonymously from 25 survey participants. None of the films are based on any one account but rather the combined themes and messages shared. AM then held follow-up interviews with 8 participants to seek feedback on the project and their responses to the survey.

Results

Most participants said they had never participated in anything like this before, but that it was “interesting” or “helpful” or “valuable” to talk about their feelings. For some, the questions in the survey helped them think about their experiences in a different way than what they had before. While others said that although they enjoyed taking part and projects like this are important, it must be part of a multifaceted set of efforts to produce meaningful change in the lives of all survivors. If this project were to run again, some of the feedback that participants shared were that they wanted to know “success stories” from other survivors and know more about how other survivors are coping. One participant suggested that artistic research projects like this could be done in groups and tailored according to the specific interests and priorities of that individual group.

Conclusions

There is incredible diversity within the community of adult CSA survivors, and the Plain Sight films and research findings are likely to provide only a snapshot into some of the views and perspectives that people have. Results highlight a need for platforms where adult survivors of CSA can connect with each other. While so much important work is being done, more efforts are greatly needed to comprehensively support wellbeing of survivors and produce meaningful change in the way survivors are perceived and treated by the public.

References

1. Gill AK, Harrison K. 'I Am Talking About It Because I Want to Stop It': Child Sexual Abuse and Sexual Violence Against Women in British South Asian Communities. *Br J Criminol*. 2019 Apr 9;59(3):511–29.
2. Priebe G, Svedin CG. Child sexual abuse is largely hidden from the adult society. *Child Abuse Negl*. 2008 Dec;32(12):1095–108.
3. Office for National Statistics. Child abuse extent and nature, England and Wales: year ending March 2019 [Internet]. 2020. Available [here](#).
4. Borelli JL, Cohen C, Pettit C, Normandin L, Target M, Fonagy P, et al. Maternal and Child Sexual Abuse History: An Intergenerational Exploration of Children's Adjustment and Maternal Trauma-Reflective Functioning. *Front Psychol*. 2019 May 14;10:1062.
5. Malchiodi C. Trauma and expressive arts therapy: Brain, body and imagination in the healing process. London, UK: The Guildford Press; 2020.

Public impact

Plain Sight was a creative research project designed to challenge the misconceptions that exist in society about adult survivors of child sexual abuse (CSA). Viv Gordon Company worked with University College London, VAMHN and Fluxx Films to develop 4 short films inspired by responses to a creative research survey from 25 CSA survivors, and the films were premiered at a launch event in London, hosted by Riverside Studios, on March 21st 2023. The titles of the films are:

1. Alive kicks back against toxic positivity
2. Mirror calls out pathologising systems and cultures
3. The Story reflects the pain, isolation, and embodied experience of CSA survival
4. We sings with hope for a different future

The event was ticketed and open to any member of the public. Previous survey participants were also invited to attend. The event included a networking session, live screening of the films accompanied by commentary from the research team, and a panel Q&A with guest speakers' Sophie Olson from the Flying Child and Roz Etwaria from Little Ro Rights. Wellbeing support was available at the event and provided by a strengths-based counsellor with expertise in supporting adult survivors of CSA.



Photo of the film launch event at Riverside Studios

In order to evaluate impact of the event, we encouraged audience members to give us their feedback using Mentimeter, to help evaluate the event. Based on the Mentimeter responses, the films were described as “empowering” and “encouraging”, emphasising “the need to talk openly and freely.” Some described feeling validated: “That it’s ok to be... angry!” and reminded about “power of community” for survivors of CSA.

The films “Mirror” followed by “We” received the most positive feedback quantitatively from audience members (i.e., based on the number of “heart” ratings). However, qualitatively, the film “Alive” seemed to resonate most with people with lived experience of CSA, being described as “amazing”, “striking” and “badass.” One audience member commented that the film should be shown to all frontline police officers in the country, and another suggested they would be suitable for university students learning about the long-term impact of trauma.

Public impact

When asked if the films had changed their perceptions about what it means to be a survivor, 50% of the audience said “yes” with qualitative feedback suggesting the films gave “more of an education,” “about how society turns a blind eye,” and “how things continue to stay the same while it affects so many people.”

Participants who said “no,” that the films had not changed their perceptions explained that: “the short films portray how I feel [on a] daily basis,” “the words resonated with emotions and experiences I’d not been previously aware of,” and “it’s too early to answer in words but I know I feel moved, my body responded differently to each story, and I have lots of sensation around my heart, shoulders and the back of my ears. My breathing is soft but strong. I feel open and defiant.”



Photo of the film launch event at Riverside Studios

Survivor involvement

Plain Sight survey development: The lead researcher and lead artist worked together to develop an online survey for the Plain Sight project. During this stage, the perspectives of two lived experience experts were sought to help pilot the survey questions. Their feedback received was positive and minor revisions were made to improve readability and sensitivity of the question wording. From this experience, we learned that some demographic questions can be challenging to answer and therefore, we kept most of these questions open-ended, leaving space for participants to self-describe some of their characteristics that they felt were important.

Film script inspiration: The film scripts were written by the lead artist, inspired based on participant contributions (alongside creative interpretation) that survivors submitted via the Plain Sight survey platform and gave permission to be included. Key learnings from the survey included (a) the role of helping professions in inadvertently perpetuating stigma with narratives around “us” and “them”, (b) the frequency of long-term health concerns that many survivors live with and manage on

a daily basis, (c) the limited mental health support available tailored to the needs of survivors, (d) the pain but also hope that many survivors have for a different future.

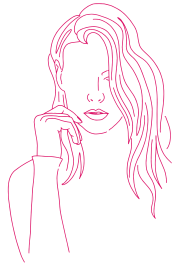
Project idea: The Plain Sight project is survivor-led and was created following discussion between the lead artist and lead researcher based on mutual interest in promoting visibility of survivors and research expertise. By working together, we learned how to combine our knowledge and skills to produce a series of films that reflect what survivors want the public to know about their lives and what change they want to see.

Project name: Whilst setting up the project, we knew we wanted to produce a piece of considered and meaningful work that creates awareness and challenges harmful public attitudes about survivors, so the project name needed to reflect this. We sent a post out on twitter, asking survivors, what should we call ourselves? Of all the suggestions we received from the community of CSA survivors on Twitter, Plain Sight resonated the most, because survivors are everywhere, whether the public knows it or not. Through this, we learned that many survivors do not want to feel the need to be hidden but to unite, rise up, and “speak the unspeakable”. These points raised by survivors led to us choosing the name of the project, Plain Sight.

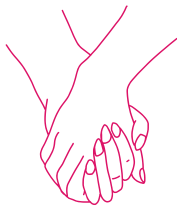
Follow-up interviews: The lead researcher has been carrying out follow-up interviews with Plain Sight survey respondents to learn more about how they found the survey and whether being involved with the work impacted their wellbeing in any way. All interview participants were invited to become co-authors of the manuscript that will arise from this work. During this phase, we learned that (a) while many participants found their involvement with Plain Sight valuable, there needs to be much more widespread systemic changes to make meaningful differences in the lives of all survivors, (b) some participants felt more comprehensive mental health and wellbeing support options for survivors are greatly needed.

Key messages

Top 3 key messages from the project



It is essential that lived experience significantly informs the development of research proposals involving the mental health and wellbeing of survivors of CSA.



Results from the Plain Sight project highlight the value of platforms where adult survivors of CSA can connect and build feelings of community and solidarity.



While much important work is currently taking place, more efforts are greatly needed to comprehensively support wellbeing of survivors and produce meaningful change in the way survivors are perceived by “the public.”



PLAIN SIGHT

Tackling Public Misperceptions
About Adult Survivors of CSA

Final Outputs

Plain sight film

Below are a series of stills from the Plain Sight films that were produced as part of this creative research project. Each of the films depicts a different set of key messages that were inspired by participants' responses to our anonymous online survey about what survivors want the public to know and what they want to see changed. The actual films are not available to be publicly viewed yet.



The Violence, Abuse and Mental Health Network

We will be sure to keep our members updated on any outputs linked to this project in the future. To keep updated you can sign up to our mailing list and receive our monthly newsletter. You can also follow us on our socials . All links can be found at the bottom of this page.

About the VAMHN

We are a network of individuals and organisations aiming to reduce the prevalence of mental health problems by addressing associated violence and abuse, particularly domestic and sexual violence. We bring together and support research by experts from a range of disciplines, sectors, and backgrounds - some with personal experience, others with expertise from the work that they do, and survivor researchers with both.

The activities of the network are organised into 3 themes:

Measurement	Measuring the extent and impact of domestic and sexual violence in relation to mental health. Our first year activities focused on the theme of measurement
Understanding	Understanding the pathways that lead to domestic and sexual violence and their relationship to mental health problems
Intervention	Planning interventions and services to prevent, reduce and address domestic and sexual violence in people with mental health problems or at risk of developing mental health problems

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