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**Fly a White Balloon and Child sexual abuse:
A study of community perceptions in regional Australia**

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Executive Summary

Child sexual abuse has become an issue of great social concern over the past thirty years, with increasingly heavy media coverage that usually emphasizes the criminal components of the issue. Particularly noticeable has been the growing awareness of the widespread and pervasive nature of such abuse, along with knowledge that assaults are usually perpetrated by someone the child knows. However, despite widespread concern, the situation is made even more complicated by a lack of underpinning knowledge, varying understandings, and legislative definitions of child sexual abuse.

Within this context, 'Fly a White Balloon' (FWB) is a regional community development project, which uses a symbolic white balloon as a way of bringing the community together at a local level around the statement, 'Breaking the Silence on Child Sexual Abuse – Keeping Kids Safe in Our Community'. How and where balloons are used/flown, and the nature of community based activities in schools, churches, parks shopping centres etc, is determined by each community involved in the event.

The initiative evolved from 800 balloons flown in 1999 in one community, to an event that is widely supported throughout the Hume Region (VIC) and Southern Riverina (NSW), with many communities participating regularly and 15,000 balloons flown in 2006-2007. FWB is now a regional event that is community owned and that brings communities together. The stakeholders involved in the event include councils, businesses, school children, students, child protection agencies, churches, aboriginal groups, police, jails, health workers, hospitals, the Victoria Department of Human Services, Centrelink, housing networks, domestic violence networks, youth agencies and others. This growth is driven by volunteers in each community, with their work sometimes facilitated by agency support. The event remains largely self-funded via donations.

Although FWB is implemented worldwide, there is very little in the way of formal documentation and articulated objectives against which this project could be evaluated. The Hume region version of FWB is to our knowledge the first formally organised event in the world for which a regional multi-sector steering committee has been formed, with a strategic plan, regularly engaging communities in implementation, and taking an on-the-ground participatory and community development approach to these issues. As a community development project FWB has been a constantly evolving initiative that by 2007 needed strong evaluation, and to this end a research partnership was formed by the Steering Committee, Upper Hume Community Health Service and Charles Sturt University.

This exploratory research engaged participants and organisers, to evaluate FWB and to assess formally whether the initiative was achieving its purpose and what opportunities existed for the future.

Given the unique opportunity offered, a secondary aim of exploring regional community perceptions to child sexual abuse incidence and treatment, was also developed. The research included 25

communities throughout the Hume Region (VIC) and Southern Riverina (NSW), and focused in-depth on six communities, representative of the evolution of FWB from 1999 until 2007. A mixed-methods exploratory research design was used, that included a community survey (distributed in six communities in September 2007, with 479 responses collected) and focus groups with local coordinators in the months immediately following FWB Day.

Community perceptions of “Fly a White Balloon”

The community survey showed almost unanimous support for FWB with 99% responding positively to the question 'Do you think FWB is a good idea?' The event has primarily been focused on awareness raising, and this focus was supported by respondents who stated that FWB was about awareness raising (68%) and education (12%).

From local coordinators' perspectives, high levels of participation from many sectors are seen as strong indicators of community support with the logistics and organisation of the day. Many coordinators approached their first year of involvement with trepidation and highlighted their surprise in discovering such ready support and availability of community members and businesses to help them. Coordinators were adamant that within all the communities involved in the event, help and support was relatively easy to find. This help included time, finance and/or in-kind donations. Commitments often roll over from one year to another. Schools are increasingly using FWB as an opportunity to integrate awareness of child protection issues into their teaching activities.

This support has important implications for our understanding of community attitudes towards child sexual abuse given that the academic, media and policy literature displays an underlying and prevalent assumption that communities do not want to talk about these issues. However, despite the 'taboo', sensitive nature, and 'silence' surrounding this topic, the overwhelming community response received by FWB and this research, indicates that given a 'safe' and 'proper' forum, communities are willing, indeed eager, to debate, discuss and talk about these issues at a local level. Whilst this seems surprising considering the taboo nature of these issues, it could also be seen as representative of a closely knit social fabric, more often found in regional areas.

The community survey identified the two main positive strengths of FWB as raising awareness and high visibility. The majority of respondents thought that the event had a positive impact on the community and that it would greatly raise awareness. However, some respondents were more cautious, stating that the one-off nature of the event would mean that its impact might remain marginal. Local coordinators confirmed the important strength of FWB as the power and un-deniability of the message in the initiative. The message is clear, simple, and triggers various (sometimes unexpectedly positive) reactions. Another major strength, seen as vital by coordinators,

was the community development dimension and the ability of FWB to reflect, respond to and meet local community needs.

The clear and positive community perception of FWB as an awareness raiser is a good indicator of how well FWB achieves its first goal. This is potentially good news for those engaged in promoting community participation in problem-solving, and these findings support arguments about the value of empowering communities and creating participatory systems in addressing problem crime and/or important societal issues.

A clear majority of survey respondents indicated that FWB should remain an annual event: that is how it stands out and doing otherwise might 'dilute' its strength and impact. However, there is a potential underlying issue of passivity in that FWB opens a conversation that at the moment remains one-way. This is confirmed by the majority of respondents indicating a need for more and varied activities throughout the year and for converting knowledge into action. Along these lines, local coordinators and the community survey identified two major weaknesses of FWB as being insufficient pre-advertising and a lack of variety in the event itself. In addition, it was felt that the event could have a greater impact through the use of appropriate merchandise, and follow-up activities after the event.

The building of awareness and its time span were re-emphasised when respondents were asked about the impact of FWB on communities. Even though the event is regional and here to stay, without strong pre-advertising and noticeable follow-on activity, FWB risks being seen as subject to a quick 'fade in-fade out' effect. However, we need to remember that progress on complex issues is slow and takes time. This was highlighted by one local school, that while reticent to display anything but plain white balloons during the first FWB year, slowly built up its activities and went from hanging plain white balloons (without logo or slogan) to slowly integrating the language and encouraging students to participate in the event.

FWB has remained largely a self-funded event over the years. However, there is a need for funds to support the event itself, assist local coordinators, facilitate community support, and organise additional initiatives (training, forums, prevention campaigns, etc). A point made frequently by local coordinators is the need for clarity about FWB being a community-based, largely unfunded event that needs to pay its own way – and that all funds raised go into making the event happen that year and in future years.

Identification of the goals and purpose of FWB seem to be quite clear cut. However, respondents proposed other possible outcomes for the event. Despite FWB's primary goal being one of awareness raising, public opinion shows that it might also provide further community service. FWB is seen as an open/safe place to talk or for services to be provided to victims/survivors, families, friends

and community. This suggests that FWB, in the mind of respondents, could be an opportunity to launch a more holistic and active approach to child sexual abuse in regional communities.

Considering the core role of FWB, it may be that feedback on FWB frequency, organisation and potential is more a reflection about community perceptions of cooperation amongst agencies addressing these issues. If the core business of FWB is one of awareness raising, then activities desired by respondents indicate that specialised agencies could leverage the event, using FWB as a means of publicising available support services, responsibilities, specialties, areas of interest, and ongoing activities. In this scenario the role of FWB is one of a conduit, a medium, rather than an actual service provider.

However, one also needs to emphasize here that given the current levels of service availability and funding, there may be discrepancies between what communities think should happen in terms of support and services and what services and agencies know can happen. These discrepancies need to be recognized, otherwise any agency limited in resources and manpower, and mandated to focus on recent events, will be potentially overwhelmed by levels of community demand for services that they cannot deliver.

Community perceptions of Child Sexual Abuse

The respondents were confident in their knowledge of child sexual abuse, with a large majority of them (82%) stating they thought their knowledge was average to very high. However, most respondents showed limited understanding when asked to define child sexual abuse, with only five giving an exact definition and four others providing an answer that closely matched a legal definition. Definitions tended to be limited to physical contact (including sexual penetration), with the inclusion of verbal abuse on occasion. Abuse through pictures, pornography via the Internet or phones was rarely mentioned.

Some myths around child sexual abuse are being deconstructed, with almost all respondents aware that child sexual abuse occurs at home, in close proximity to the home or with people in a position of trust and in a place that is familiar; that child sexual abuse is a general community issue; and not something that just happens in specific ethnic or socio-economic minorities. Given current media coverage, it is encouraging that the community finds the stereotypes to be wrong. Another myth – that this 'does not happen in my community' is also , with over 70% of respondents indicating they thought the level of child sexual abuse in their communities was average to high, compared to other communities.

There was general support and acknowledgement of the need for service provision to victims/survivors, with the majority of respondents suggesting that counselling should be provided. However, this came with a high lack of knowledge about supports available in their communities with

just under a quarter of respondents saying they knew little about services and just over a quarter admitting they knew nothing.

When asked what type of services should be provided for offenders, the majority wanted to see counselling, rehabilitation programs, education, information, community support and in the end 'whatever is necessary'. Criminalisation and harsher punishment only constituted one-third of respondents' answers. This answer may be linked to perceptions that offenders are part of the community, inside our families and communities, in which case wishes for rehabilitation make sense, although careful consideration of traditional justice processes was still deemed important for the most virulent offenders.

Community members were aware of the scope of issues leading and impacting on the commission of child sexual abuse. The issues seen as leading to and impacting on child sexual abuse and impacting on the problem were seen as preventable or treatable conditions, with respondents identifying the 4 leading causes as mental illness, anger and violence management problems, past abuse and lack of education. Individual and personality characteristics such as issues of power, frustration, depravity, upbringing, self-esteem, etc., still featured, but by far fewer respondents. This awareness of the 'circumstances behind the act' may explain the position on what should be done with offenders. The identification of offenders as family and community members, but maybe suffering from a mental illness, being previous victims themselves, etc. allows for a wider understanding of the needs and efforts to be made in the (early) prevention and treatment of the abuse.

Worrying data was found when we asked about identification of child sexual abuse by children and perceptions of children's reporting with an overwhelming majority (85%) of respondents believing that children did not fully understand what constitutes child sexual abuse. Particularly worrying was the response to the question 'Who do you think the majority of sexually abused children are most likely to turn to first?'; to which the key response was 'nobody'. Not only are these points concerning, but they have implications on our understanding of notification rates, and of the complexities facing family and friends in regional areas.

These findings show that some progress has been made in raising community awareness about the issues around child sexual abuse. However, they also show that a limited understanding still exists of what actually constitutes child sexual abuse with significant gaps in understanding. The implications of this need to be taken into account when considering what is and what is not reported as sexual abuse to the authorities: it is likely that some incidences are not reported because they were not initially identified as an assault or a form of abuse.

Emotional literacy was an issue raised by respondents, and therefore discussed by the research team during the analysis of the survey results, although issues of how and when to raise awareness among children are complex and fraught. However, respondents insisted on the necessity to engage in early intervention and in getting the message through education at the earliest age possible. Suggestions made by respondents included extensive holistic multi-agencies approaches and the need for national education campaigns.

Further considerations of research results

It is important to remember that this study took place in regional Australia, in locations where anonymity is unusual and close relationships between neighbours and community members are sometimes more important and obvious than in urban areas. In that sense, then, anonymity and close relationships contradict each other. Therefore, considering the communities in which we conducted our research are closely intertwined, it is likely that reporting rates are also impacted by a wish to 'not let the neighbours know', or 'not to upset the family/community' for the sake of preserving cohesion and harmony. This may also mean that personal knowledge of an offender's past history (which may of course include abuse, mental health issues and trauma) could have influenced some respondents' answers.

Access to services, and lack of knowledge about services, leads us to wonder whether those exposed in regional Australia would actually seek support, and if so whether this would be from generic rather than specialised services. If this is so, then there is a need to ensure that staff at generic services are aware of the issues involved in child sexual abuse disclosure, and know the best approaches to take and the available pathways of referrals to specialised services. In this regard, should victims be reluctant to seek specialised counselling for various reasons (such as fear of stigmatisation reaching out to a particular agency, shame, unfamiliarity of the place) and if counselling is the response that needs to be provided to victims (therapeutic follow-up being identified as a priority by respondents as well), then additional specialised training for generic services is something that should be considered.

What happens immediately after the disclosure seems to greatly influence the incidence of reporting to authorities. Reluctance to report may be connected to fears of the secondary victimisation and additional trauma triggered by the investigation processes, and a wish to not being 'labelled' negatively by close acquaintances and friends. The slightest reaction may have a tremendous negative impact on victims' self-awareness and well-being.

This research uncovered that the 'not in my backyard' myth is slowly being deconstructed, despite some caution as to the resilience of paedophilia. These results also show that the majority of community members want to see the rehabilitation and re-humanisation of some offenders rather

than the demonisation of all perpetrators, and yet, with caution expressed as to how to deal with the most virulent offenders. The events currently happening in Queensland (the Dennis Ferguson case) illustrate such dual approaches in a regional area. This is not to say that traditional criminal justice pathways are discarded; rather that additional parallel options/alternatives for victims and offenders need to be looked at.

It is important to note that, during informal conversations where this research was discussed, some teachers and representatives of non-government and government agencies admitted that, despite their duty of care and mandatory reporting protocols, they would still avoid reporting some incidents of abuse. This decision was usually influenced by issues of stigmatisation and further victimisation of those going through the investigation and consequential criminal justice process. Facing the offender during a traditional justice process was also considered problematic. But justice per se is not out of the question – and all research participants, when asked about their position on the issue, found positive aspects in engaging in restorative justice practice to address the issue and ‘bring some level of closure’, especially in regional settings.

Where to from here

Community perceptions of FWB

In relation to evaluation of the event, FWB is clearly successful in achieving its first aim of raising community awareness about issues of child sexual abuse. However, in spite of the respondents’ debunking persistent myths about child sexual abuse, clear gaps in understanding and knowledge of the full definition of child sexual abuse have been identified. These will impact in areas such as responses to disclosures of inappropriate sexual activity and reporting which will in turn, prevent us from having a complete picture of the problem and a full understanding of its scope. Furthermore, ignorance about response possibilities and support options might deter victims/survivors from seeking help, especially in regional areas where the lack of anonymity and confidentiality, and a culture of silence, still remain.

As a result this report makes several recommendations in relation to the future of FWB.

Structural changes

Recommendation 1 - Integrate fund raising initiatives into the FWB event. Financial sustainability is an important issue and FWB remains largely self-funded. However, local coordinators and survey respondents do not seem to see this as a problem and fundraising activities would be popular and welcomed by the community.

Recommendation 2 - Create a permanent coordinator position. Although FWB happens only once per year, engagement has now reached a point where many communities want organisational and logistical activity to be sustained year round. An ongoing position is needed to help ensure the success of the initiative, maintain the smooth coordination of core activities and support ongoing breadth and depth of FWB.

Recommendation 3 - Implement pre-event advertising. It is essential to create awareness of FWB event prior to the day to increase the communities' understanding and responses to the event. Eventually this will boost momentum and lead to further development of the event and its impact in the years to come.

Recommendation 4 - A move towards different types of intervention. A move from primary to secondary prevention is something that will be enabled by some of the suggestions made above. Particularly, the work with schools is a welcomed addition to FWB activities, as is the potential for FWB to identify ideas, problems or gaps and refer these to appropriate agencies. Both would lift FWB to a new more pro-active and dynamic role which would be augmented by post-event debriefings, including action planning sessions.

Improvement of impact

Recommendation 5 – Developing appropriate merchandise and other activities for the event. This needs to be thoroughly revisited, as FWB could be at risk of stagnating. There is a need for coordinated effort in organising new material (for example myth-postcards or wrist bands) and local ingenuity in organising FWB day events (concerts, fundraising initiatives, awareness meetings, etc.).

Recommendation 6 – Encouraging other agencies to leverage off FWB. As a recognised and established community event, FWB offers a channel for more visible involvement and participation of specialist agencies in the events at a local level, encouraging victims/survivors to seek support.

Community perceptions of Child Sexual Abuse

In relation to community perceptions of Child Sexual Abuse, this research shows that considerable progress has been made in raising community awareness about the issues around child sexual abuse, but that there is still a limited understanding of what actually constitutes child sexual abuse. Of concern is the belief that children would tell no one, if exposed to such abuse, which may be affected by their lack of awareness and a general lack of knowledge of available support services. Some of the major myths are losing their power, and communities are keen to engage with early intervention, getting the message out at an early age. With offenders seen as part of the community, rehabilitation becomes an option, not as a discarding of traditional criminal justice, but as a crystallisation of a wish for more options for victims and offenders.

In this research, the option of direct reporting to the authorities was rated as very low. As a result, one has to wonder how many incidences are not reported. This is congruent with other research,

which has also found that there is a reluctance to report to authorities and police in general. This research provided a unique insight into community perceptions of child sexual abuse in regional Australia, and it is important to build on the opportunity that this gives FWB to create real community change on these issues. Therefore we make six recommendations.

Community Education

Recommendation 1 – Clear and (age) appropriate information defining child sexual abuse.

Recommendation 2 – A campaign encouraging young people to tell someone and seek help, to counteract the finding that a child would turn to ‘nobody’ if exposed to child sexual abuse, which is particularly difficult in regional and rural areas.

Recommendation 3 – Praise and confirmation that some of the key myths have been broken. The fact that some major myths have been shown to be deconstructed is significant and worth celebrating.

Recommendation 4 – Education about specialist services and survivors’ needs.

Community – Service Discussions

Recommendation 5 – Community and service discussion around rehabilitation and treatment programs. The desire to see the rehabilitation of some offenders highlights the paucity of programs available in this region.

Recommendation 6 – Alternative responses to child sexual abuse based on restorative justice. Building on the community preference to see restorative justice processes used to address the issue and ‘bring some level of closure’, it is recommended to build on the already strong use of restorative justice in health and education services in this region.

In relation to further research

Considering the results of academic multi-disciplinary research on the issue of disclosure, one might wonder whether the figures re-released in Australia in February 2008, already labelled conservative, are even more under-representative of the facts than originally suggested. From this perspective, under-reporting of child sexual abuse is an ongoing endemic issue. In this research, the option of direct reporting to authorities was rated very low. Disclosure, if it occurs, may also be ‘buffered’ by the reactions and subsequent advice of those to whom it is made.

As a result, new research needs to address the reasons and responses to non disclosure and under-reporting. The primary focus of new research will be to sharpen the picture of disclosure and responses to child sexual abuse, in order to draw a ‘map’ of practice in cases of child sexual abuse. Further research is required to examine what authorities can do to help counteract a multi-faceted culture of silence that still prevails.

The core question becomes, ‘Do we need to increase reporting rates to help identify better ways to address the problem?’ The answer to this core question is both, ‘Yes and no’. Indeed we do, or otherwise we will, yet again, fall into the trap of not being able to clearly identify it. However, we know that we are stuck in our current reporting situation. What we need is to shift the ‘need for reporting’ to the ‘need for disclosure’. Further research should not only aim at increasing reporting rates for reporting sakes. We need to know what is happening, in order to help design better answers. We acknowledge that our key concern and objectives are to find the most effective means of protecting and supporting the physical and emotional wellbeing of abused victims and ultimately reduce abuse incidence rates by developing new processes in addressing the problem. To that effect, the restorative justice paradigm may be of help. Through this approach, perpetrator punishment is not precluded, but harm and reparation do become the ‘all consuming’ foci of the restoration process. Further research will look at how these might be embedded in judicial and policing practices. It will look at various international programs that aim at addressing problems of sexual abuse within communities in parallel to or within traditional justice mechanisms, getting a better picture of effective solutions to what is considered one of the most problematic criminal issues of our time.

Chapter 1 - Background and Context

Fly a White Balloon in North-East Victoria and Southern New South Wales

'Fly a White Balloon' (FWB) is a community development project which uses white balloons as a way of uniting the community around the statements 'Breaking the Silence on Child Sexual Abuse – Keeping Kids Safe in Our Community'. Every year, balloons are displayed throughout the community on the Tuesday of Child Protection Week, and left flying for the rest of the week. How and where balloons are used/flown, and the nature of supporting activities in schools, town centres etc, is determined by communities themselves.

FWB is about communities demonstrating their desire for children to be safe through;

- raising awareness that child sexual abuse is an important issue, breaking down myths such as 'this doesn't happen to people like us';
- increasing understanding of the issues surrounding child sexual abuse and knowledge about what communities can do to help;
- sending support to those subjected to abuse, letting them know where they can find help, and encouraging survivors to 'break the silence'.

This widely supported event brings communities together to clearly state that:

1. Children have a right to feel safe at all times in their community;
2. It is never OK to sexually abuse children; and
3. Children who are / have been, subjected to sexual abuse need support and protection (Young, 2006).

Since 1999 FWB has grown from three friends and 800 balloons in one small North-East Victorian town to 15,000 balloons flying in over 25 communities across North-East Victoria and Southern NSW. FWB has evolved into a community owned event that brings together a variety of stakeholders, around an issue recognised as concerning the community as a whole. The stakeholders involved include local government, businesses, school children, students, child protection agencies, churches, aboriginal groups, police, jails, health workers, hospitals, the Victoria Department of Human Services, Centrelink, housing networks, domestic violence networks, youth agencies and others.

The growth of FWB has been driven by volunteers in each community, with their work sometimes facilitated by agency support. Major participation has regularly occurred in the communities of Beechworth, Myrtleford, Rutherglen, Yackandandah, Wangaratta, Tallangatta, Wodonga, Shepparton, Benalla, Howlong, Albury and many other smaller rural communities in North-East

Victoria. In 2004 the event won the Victorian Department of Justice Gold Award for Excellence & Innovation in Community Safety – Crime Prevention.

FWB is a project that enables individuals and communities to start working together at a local level and engage in a conversation about complex and difficult issues. The idea behind FWB is that although these issues are hard to talk about and address, a majority of community members want to tackle them, want their world to be safe for children, but don't know how and where to start. FWB aims to re-establish a balance and contributes to reminding people that although there are a few people who chose to abuse, there are many more who care and want to solve the problem.

A self-funded community based project, FWB uses a regional facilitator (currently based in Wodonga) to support individuals and communities working at a local level. Communities are sent information that explains what FWB is; describes what FWB involves; talks about what different groups and communities have done in the past; and gives tips to help communities work out what they want to do and how to get started. Once each community has decided what it wants to do, they let the facilitator know what is going on and order any balloons, posters and information they need.

The role of the regional facilitator is to support local people, helping them decide what they want to do, and organising balloons, posters and some of the supporting information that will be made available for use on the day. The regional facilitator also works with a steering committee, develops publicity at a regional level, and works with communities after the day on debriefing and action planning.

Child sexual abuse and Communities

Definition and early research history

There are diverse definitions of child sexual abuse, which vary with regard to factors such as age limits for victim and offender, categories of act and so on. Generally speaking child sexual assault or abuse is defined as any sexual activity between a child and an adult or older person. This can include fondling genitals or breasts; masturbation; oral sex; vaginal or anal penetration by a penis, finger or any other object; voyeurism; exhibition; and pornography involving, or being shown to, children (Heenan, 2005). In Australia, Federal and State legislation allow for a large margin in terms of defining the abuse, but there are still major differences to account for in between local (State) official designations of the issue (see Appendix A). Whilst such legislation differs on the ages to include, as a general rule abuse by peers is also covered.

Child sexual abuse is a complex and difficult issue that has become an issue of great social concern over the past thirty years, and has been interpreted from a number of different perspectives. Heavy media coverage of events in the 1980s emphasized the criminal component of the issue. Since then,

political discourse has opted for the idea that child sexual abuse is independent of social circumstances and family background, and suggests that it is a product of non-harnessed sexuality (Glaser, 1993). Since the 1970's child sexual abuse has also been approached from a mental health perspective, seen as a causal factor in teenage and adulthood disorders (Read et al, 2007) and possibly leading to similar or other types of abuse at a later age.

Issues of child sexual abuse need to be considered within the context of child abuse in general, which is now seen as widespread and pervasive (Brown & Endekov, 2004). We know that such assault is often perpetrated by someone the child knows (Weiser-Easteal, 1993). A report commissioned by the Alannah and Madeline Foundation (Australia) showed that, between 2002 and 2004, there were 198355 child abuse *notifications* to authorities (2003) and 219384 in 2004, with research findings indicating a very low 10% notification rate (Brown and Endekov, *op.cit*). Child abuse *reports* constituted 40416 of these¹. Ten percent of these reports considered child abuse of a sexual nature. The largest survey regarding child sexual abuse to date, in Australia, was conducted in 2002-2003 on 6677 women aged 18 to 69. More recently, figures from the Australian Institute of Health Welfare showed 309517 reports of abuse made to authorities, resulting in 58563 substantiations, a raise in both categories not so much due to an actual increase of abuse incidences, but rather than an increase in reporting rates (National Child Protection Clearinghouse, 2008). As of today, there has been no large-scale survey focused on child sexual abuse against males (Heenan, *op.cit*).

After a withdrawal of the biogenetic paradigm (Read et al, *op.cit*), research focused on the long-term mental health impacts of child sexual abuse, since observations were available, not through the testimonies of children themselves, but through the disclosures of adults who came forward to break the 'cycle of silence' (Dominguez et al, 2001; Mullen & Fleming, 1998). These early self-revealed victims were exclusively women (which may explain the feminist orientation taken by early research), and were often victims of incestuous abuse. The issues of boys being victims, or of children and females being perpetrators themselves, only came to the fore late in the 1990s.

Research into therapeutic responses and social consequences

Most of the research that followed was clinical in nature and focused more on the long term psychological consequences of the experience rather than on the immediate consequences for the child (Dominguez et al, *op.cit*). This tendency was reinforced by the forensic psychiatric discourse about child sexual abuse (Read et al, *op.cit*). Most of the research was done with regard to various models of psychological implications, such as the post-traumatic stress model which focuses on trauma-induced symptoms, dissociative disorders, fugues, etc. and the traumatogenic model which focuses on the psychological effects that may lead to behavioural changes (Mullen & Fleming,

¹ *Notifications* were followed up by investigations which led to *reports* when the abuse was substantiated.

op.cit). However, there are still many gaps in the understanding of the experiences of child sexual abuse survivors (Heenan, *op.cit*).

Recent research focusing on identifying proximate causes and risk factors, has attempted to develop prevention strategies and reactive/therapeutic response for both children and adult survivors (*ibid.*; Weiser-Easteal, *op.cit*). The major findings of research into identifying causes and risk factors, suggests that child sexual abuse cuts across all social levels, but is not randomly spread, and some populations may be more vulnerable than others (Mullen & Fleming, *op.cit*). Observations and surveys showed that the major risk factors include social deprivation, marital dysfunction, parental separation, domestic violence and disrupted family background. Children suffering other sorts of abuse (emotional, physical, mental, bullying, etc.) are more at risk of becoming sexually abused. Individual physical, mental and educational characteristics are also taking place among risk factors. Research has also investigated the socio-economic status of families, sexuality and sexual adjustment of victims, relationships and intimacy, self-esteem, long-term impact on mental health, alcohol abuse, etc. However, caution was expressed as to how these social factors could also be linked to the particular issue of child sexual abuse.

Many studies have investigated long-term consequences of child sexual abuse and shown the correlation between child sexual abuse and negative psychological and social outcomes such as depression, anxiety, suicidal and/or anti-social behaviours, eating disorders, risks of re-victimisation, etc (Heenan, *op.cit*; Mullen & Fleming, *op.cit*). Many counselling agencies and services have been involved in addressing the immediate consequences of such abuse, including specialised agencies such as Centres Against Sexual Assault, but also more generalist agencies such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. However, their number is still limited and long-term survivors, may sometimes be refused help or see this help delayed, due to agencies being overloaded with emergency cases (where the abuse has been detected early). Health costs related to both immediate and long-term victims remain largely unknown which is exacerbated by a situation in which the needs of the victims are still under investigation, and the coordination of agencies dealing with child sexual abuse is often on a case-by-case or localised nature. Limited research has also taken place into understanding what drives sexual offenders. Table 1 shows factors contributing to sexual offending and that some of these factors are preventable (Glaser, *op.cit*).

Table 1: Factors Contributing to Sexual Offending that are Potential Targets for Intervention	
Motivators	Sexual desire, deviant sexual desire, cerebral basis for sexual pleasure, emotional needs and conflicts, for example: dominance, hatred, acceptance, aggression, nurturance and so on
Blocks to legal sexual outlets	Low IQ, unattractive, unassertive, low social skills, restrictive views on sexuality, low sex knowledge, sexual dysfunction, unavailability of appropriate sex partners, marital discord
Disinhibitors	Alcohol/drug use, pornography use, models (childhood victimisation), cognitive distortions, deviant sexual attitudes (rape myths, victim blaming) attitudes supportive of violence, antisocial lifestyle, psychopathy, psychosis, brain injury/pathology
Inhibitors	Moral values, empathy for victims, aversion to violence, fear of consequences, legal penalties, incarceration, unavailability of potential victims, resistance of victims

Prevention and the role of communities

The main research related to prevention and response, other than clinical and psychological interventions, insists on the importance of community participation in addressing the issue (Aldunate, 1993; Tucci et al, 2006) and focuses mostly on the importance of awareness raising. State government agencies throughout Australia have developed extensive resources that are now available for welfare and health workers, including published materials on practice implications, dominant social discourses, creation of support sub-groups (institutional, ritual, siblings, male, indigenous, elderly, disabled, etc.), perpetrators, mental health disorders, resilience and so on. However, despite these resources, there are still many gaps in community and service knowledge of how to respond to survivors of child sexual abuse and how to respond to a disclosure, which may happen in any context (whether clinical or everyday life).

Active community engagement in addressing child sexual abuse is particularly important, as disclosure may happen in different contexts. Should the disclosure happen in a community context (i.e.: a non-specialist environment), the recipient of the disclosure often does not have the skills or knowledge to react properly to the situation, and may cause more damage than intended, by either over-reacting or dismissing the statement (Read et al, *op.cit.*). To avoid the risks, research strongly indicates that enhancing community awareness and knowledge is essential to preventing and reacting to child sexual abuse.

However, society doesn't like to be reminded that its children are sometimes vulnerable to such predatory acts, as they implicitly involve consideration of facts, such as:

- if perpetrators are known to the child - they are likely to be part of the immediate community;
- abuse means there are breaches in the protective barriers society has built for its children;
- communication about abuse might raise an awareness that could lead to contagion.

Since the 1990s, it has been accepted that the fundamental damage induced by child sexual abuse is on the child's capacities to normally develop trust, intimacy, sexuality and relationships with others, but also on the child's brain development (see, for example, the work of Bruce Perry in this area). As a result, there is a need for the development of secondary interventions, aimed at enhancing the support provided to the victim as a way to help them develop different coping and defence mechanisms.

Providing enhanced community based peer support, teacher sympathy, sporting opportunities and other management systems, may heavily influence coping mechanisms and act as 'protective factors', thus buffering the negative impacts of victimisation and possibly overcoming after-effects. However, it is important to recognise there is a thin line between support and overemphasis (which could lead to secondary victimisation and have stigmatising effects). Community awareness and

participation in preventing child sexual abuse, or in accompanying the child on the path to recovery, is one of the major foci of research today (Wood et al, 2008; Tucci et al, *op.cit*).

The Fly a White Balloon research project

FWB in North-East Victoria and Southern New South Wales is a community based and evolutionary initiative that in 2007 was in need of an evaluation to assess progress and plan a way forward. This research project was designed to gather community feedback about the event to provide input for the FWB steering committee about how to improve the provision and articulation of services delivered through FWB. It also analysed the development of the various partnerships within the project (community partnerships, business partnerships, coordination of agency services, etc.). As the evaluation was undertaken through community consultation, it also created an opportunity to gather information about community perspectives on child sexual abuse from a holistic viewpoint.

Although FWB is implemented worldwide (Bartkowiak-Théron, 2008; Bartkowiak-Théron et al, forthcoming), there is little in the form of documentation and general objectives against which the project can be evaluated. This regional version of the event (limited, in our case, to North-East Victoria and Southern NSW regions) is, to our knowledge, the first 'formally organised' event in the world for which a strategic plan has been drafted, for which a broad agency based steering committee has been formed, and for which a formal evaluation has taken place. This regional event is also unique in taking a community development approach.

This project was co-hosted by Charles Sturt University (CSU) and Upper Hume Community Health Service, with two CSU schools running the project: the School of Policing Studies (Faculty of Arts) and the School of Community Health (Faculty of Sciences). As a cross-sector evaluation, the project was to bring a dual law enforcement/health perspective into research regarding child sexual abuse. Many research projects are multi-disciplinary today, especially in the area of criminological research (for example, current research on drugs often looks at policing and health perspectives). This research project therefore complements and adds to new research initiatives in these areas.

This research project offered the potential to contribute to the policing, response and community awareness of child sexual abuse in regional Australia. The research was mostly exploratory, although it also engaged participants and organisers in an evaluation of the FWB initiative including identification of further improvements. The aim was to foster opportunities for pro-active reflection on 'where things are', and identify opportunities for effective, strategic development. Through a series of focus groups, the many agencies and government services who were part of the FWB initiative were given an opportunity as stakeholders to share their experience and best practices to further the project. As such, this research project is the first one, to our knowledge, to look at child sexual abuse from communities' perspectives, and not from victims' and offenders' points of view only.

Chapter 2 - Methodology

Rationale

This research was commissioned by Upper Hume Community Health Services and the organisers of FWB to assess the initiative and provide insight as to its impact and effectiveness.

Therefore, the primary aim of this research was to evaluate FWB and to formally assess, for the first time since inception in the Hume region, whether it is achieving its purpose and what opportunities exist for the future. This report lays out community perceptions of the event, its strengths and weaknesses, along with suggested ways forward and concerns about the initiative. We also took this as an opportunity, as a secondary aim to the evaluation, to investigate regional community perceptions of child sexual abuse incidence and response, in areas impacted by an awareness raiser such as FWB. This report, therefore, focuses mainly on the FWB as an event but *also* includes a snapshot of this secondary research.

To sum up, the specific aims of the evaluation were to:

1. Evaluate Fly A White Balloon as an awareness raising project, including the provision of information for community members and service agencies;
2. Evaluate Fly A White Balloon as a community development project, including the creation of partnerships with community agencies and community members;
3. Assess and measure the effectiveness of the project against identified objectives;
4. Suggest ways to enhance awareness of community members and to improve partnerships with community agencies; and
5. Identify community perceptions of child sexual abuse and its response.

This evaluation encompassed 25 communities spread throughout Hume Shire, Indigo Shire, Alpine Shire, Corowa Shire, Towong Shire, City of Wangaratta, City of Wodonga and City of Albury, but focused on the in-depth case studies of six communities representative of the evolution of the project from 1999 until 2007.

The Research Process

The evaluation adopted a mixed methods exploratory research design, reporting regularly to the FWB steering committee. The design included several steps in the assessment of the FWB initiative, a mapping of social representations of child sexual abuse and response, and a proactive assessment of processes as per the project's aims and objectives.

This evaluation process consisted of three stages.

Stage 1 – Community Survey – survey of community members (random sampling) focusing on their appreciation of 'FWB day' activities and on their knowledge and awareness of child sexual abuse and response (September 4th 2007).

Stage 2 – Stakeholder Focus Groups – a series of focus groups with all available FWB local coordinators that focused on the logistics, processes and achievements of FWB, run in the three months following FWB day.

Stage 3 – Analysis – in which the principal investigators reflected on a comprehensive analysis of all data obtained, concluding in the draft of this report and recommendations to the steering committee for future FWB events (early to mid 2008).

Stage 1 – Community Survey

Data gathering tool

A two page survey was designed to gather community perceptions and social representations of the FWB project, in order to provide feedback that would enhance the provision of services within communities, identify gaps and raise any community concerns. The survey questions and their phrasing were thoroughly discussed within the research team. They remained as open and broad as possible, allowing research respondents to express their views, and were subjected to feedback from an ethicist and a grief counsellor. Two separate sections were built into the survey: the first page looked at FWB, and a second page addressed the perception of child sexual abuse within the community.

The survey was as short and complete as possible. A disclaimer, at the end of the front page, informed respondents of potential distress the second part of the survey might cause and allowed for respondents to hand back the survey without completing the second page. Questions remained general and respondents were not asked to relate or comment on specific events. Should

respondents start revealing personal information related to a particular event, the survey facilitators were asked to follow specific disclosure protocols developed to that effect.

An optional question, at the end of page 2, asked about respondents' experiences of child sexual abuse. Although potentially confronting, this question was included to allow for the researchers to cross-reference responses where a victim/offender/related third party might have responded in a particular way to a question². This question was formatted inconspicuously (lower cases, smaller fonts and shaded) for three reasons:

1. A victim attending the event might be willing to talk about the issue of child sexual abuse without disclosing his/her past or might not wish to be identified as such during the event while filling in the survey;
2. A former offender might also want to avoid identification and stigmatisation; and
3. A family member or a friend might be willing to talk about the issue of child sexual abuse without disclosing his/her knowledge or might not wish to be identified during the event while filling in the survey.

The survey was printed on bright coloured paper so that they could be easily monitored in the crowd. This was to ensure that any surveys that fell to the ground or that were carelessly disposed of, could be spotted and retrieved promptly by a survey facilitator. This was to reduce the risk of the survey being picked up by minors.

Data gathering procedure

To recruit survey facilitators, a presentation was made to fourth year occupational therapy students at Charles Sturt University. These students were suggested by Michael Curtin as their course co-ordinator who taught the research subjects within the course. It was felt that involvement in this project would provide students with the opportunity to participate in real research, and that this would complement their theoretical knowledge. The investigators hoped for 12 students to volunteer to allow for two per research site. However, after the presentation, 29 (of the 44) occupational therapy students volunteered, indicating that the students valued the opportunity to be involved in research and supported the aims of this particular project. The students who volunteered participated in a briefing session about the research and the expectations of their involvement. Students were given the task of engaging with the general public, explaining and handing out surveys and collecting completed documents.

All survey facilitators wore a coloured T-shirt (the same colour as the paper the survey was printed on) so that they were clearly identifiable throughout in the crowd and at the entrance of a local event.

² Victims of sexual abuse, for example, could have ticked 'very high' to the question 'How do you evaluate your knowledge of child sexual abuse?', due to their personal experience.

They were also advised, in the briefing session, of the risk protocols, if a member of the public disclosed being a victim or perpetrator of child sexual abuse. In addition, mental health professionals were available on the day to support the survey facilitators if required. However, there was no incident in which any of the risk protocols had to be enacted.

Surveys were handed out to adult community members who voluntarily agreed to complete the survey after being informed of the research project, both verbally and with an information sheet. No surveys were handed to a minor. Adults who completed a survey were given the option of returning it in a sealed envelope to a survey facilitator or a return box conveniently placed at the event location.

Data analysis of survey

The research team hoped to collect a total of 250 surveys. On September 4th 2007, 479 surveys were actually collected in six communities running the event in this region: Beechworth, Myrtleford, Albury, Wodonga, Wangaratta and Corowa. These communities were chosen to provide various insights into the initiative, according to a range of size (large to small rural communities) and longevity of involvement (nine years to first year). Data from the survey was input into Excel and was analysed using descriptive statistics. Its analysis was completed prior to focus groups being held.

Most of the survey respondents³ were female (73.5%). Half of those surveyed were of working age (25-60) and a very small portion of the respondents were above 70. Several factors influenced these demographics: the day of the week and time of day the survey was run (from 10am to 4pm on a Tuesday). A majority of the respondents were employed. It is worth noting the self-identification of 4 victims at the end of the survey, plus 4 acquaintances of a child sexual abuse victim and a former police prosecutor. Responses provided by these 9 respondents were not exemplars of extreme views in any of the areas approached in the survey.

Stage 2 – Stakeholder Focus Groups

Data gathering tool

Focus groups usually involve a maximum of 7 to 9 research participants, according to usual ethnographic methodological guidelines, and run for a maximum of 1.5 hours. FWB focus group sessions were designed as a forum for regional coordinators to not only reflect on the various existing processes unfolding prior and during FWB day, but also on some of the generic trends shown in the preliminary results of the survey. Fostering the reflective process was seen as important to not only collect first hand information regarding processes and internal logistics of the event, but also for

³ NB: '**Respondents**' refers exclusively, throughout this report, to respondents who filled in the survey generally and/or who took the time to answer a particular question. It has to be noted that not all questions were answered by all respondents, this being due to time constraints, knowledge, individual wish not to address the question, etc. Details of responses are either mentioned in actual occurrences or in percentages (%). '**Research participants**' refers exclusively to focus group participants.

regional coordinators to proactively reflect on how to further the project, better handle issues (if needed), develop partnerships, etc. The groups were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Questions for these focus groups were semi-directed but left open ended – although generic guidelines for facilitation were drafted. They included questions such as: What works? What doesn't work? Who's engaged? How have things evolved since the start of the initiative in your area? How do you organise things in your area? What needs to be done? What should be done? Are there major highlights that you would like to share with us? Where would you like this research to go? How and why? Considering these focus groups were semi-directed, these questions were used as an open framework from which the facilitator could work.

Data gathering procedure

Two focus groups were organised with local FWB coordinators. The first focus group was organised in Wangaratta and the second one happened in Wodonga. A total of 14 participated in these two sessions (respectively 8 and 6). Some of the participants came in as representatives of several communities. Indeed, some had worked on FWB in the past in a specific city (let's say Wangaratta) and when they relocated to another one, they decided to maintain their participation to FWB in their new location (let's say Myrtleford).

All participants were informed of the procedure for the focus group before commencement of the conversation and of the recording. They had been sent information sheets prior to the session and were allowed to ask some questions about the process before the recorder was turned on.

Both sessions ran for 90 minutes and were digitally recorded. They were then typed up confidentially by an external transcription company and the consequential verbatim document was doubled checked by one of the principal researchers prior to analysis. All data was sanitised and all identification of participants was removed prior to analysis.

Data analysis of focus groups

Both focus groups produced a total of 88 transcript pages. These were proofread and analysed using NVivo, a qualitative text analysis software. For the purpose of building on the various issues raised by survey respondents and in order to highlight the mechanics of FWB from the perspectives of local coordinators, text items were regrouped according to specific semantic clusters, which included, for example, the themes of: merchandising, advertisement, coordination, networking, etc.

All clusters were then either linked to issues relating to FWB specifically or child sexual abuse more generally, and then highlighted as comments that confirmed, developed or contradicted topics raised

by survey respondents or as other important issues to be raised as such in the report. All relevant quotes were added to the report and embedded in the appropriate discussion of topical clusters.

Ethical issues

Although the main focus of this research was the evaluation of FWB, the research team approached the project with careful precautions due to the sensitivity of the research topics and issues raised. Ethics approval was sought and granted by the Ethics in Human Research Committee at Charles Sturt University, and this formal approval was then acknowledged by Upper Hume Community Health Service.

Although this evaluation presented many potential benefits for communities and stakeholders, the high risk nature of the research topic needed to be taken into account, in particular the risks to:

1. focus group participants and surveyed community members during the FWB Day (distress, disclosure, etc.)
2. the research team, including the survey facilitators (distress, disclosure, etc.)

Several things were done to address these concerns and risks as discussed below.

A list of all available support services or specialised agencies attending the FWB Day was made available for respondents, research participants and research team during the FWB Day.

Neither the survey nor the focus groups were designed to influence the knowledge, thinking, attitudes, feelings or other aspects of behaviour of research respondents and participants. The survey and focus group process were designed to map out existing patterns or mechanisms, foster a safe reflective opportunity, and to help people think about child sexual abuse and the FWB event.

To address any distress or disclosure risks that the focus groups and community survey might entail, the research team designed two sets of protocols (one for distress caused by the research process; another for cases of disclosure) to unfold throughout the research process. As these protocols had been established, survey facilitators, as part of the research team, were thoroughly briefed as to how and when they should be activated (again, there eventually was no need to do so). In the case of distress or disclosure, one survey facilitator would accompany the person to one of the principal researchers (the authors of the report or FWB local coordinators), who would seek help according to the needs arising.

Also considered were the risks involved for the research team and other research participants (coordinators, students). Although the research team exclusively consisted of volunteers, which might, to a certain extent, lower the risks and the vulnerabilities of team members, the same distress, disclosure protocols and support services were made available to the research team. Participating

students were made aware that they could have the possibility to be involved in all stages of the research (survey facilitation and data collection) but could withdraw at any time, should they think that the data gathering process (or anything else) might cause distress, due to the sensitivity of the research issue. Therefore the distress/disclosure protocols also applied to the research team.

No identifying data was collected throughout the research. This helped ensure anonymity and confidentiality throughout the whole process. All data from focus group transcriptions was de-identified by the research team and close scrutiny was given to all information collected, so that everything was sanitised before analysis. Research documents were kept in a secured facility.

Reflections on the research process

It was noticeable on the day that the research process in itself triggered additional interest in the event, which itself facilitated additional willingness from community members to be part of the consultation process, as shown in this comment.

There was a very old lady. Must have been in her late eighties, early nineties and she so wanted to do that survey and it was at the end of the day and nobody had a spare one we could find. It took us half an hour to find one... she sat there waiting, she wanted to fill it out and do it. I thought I am not... I refuse to say there is none left. I have to find one. She was so adamant and absolutely gorgeous. We never had one negative response. I was told that you can get negative responses and we had none and that was a really, really pleasant surprise.

(Comment from a FWB coordinator during a focus group)

The research was also perceived as a practical way forward for FWB local coordinators to identify new ideas to implement in their communities and try and develop various elements of early intervention.

What it can achieve for us? ... Well, just some of the reactions from your research, so we can take from that because I think ... I think we can follow up from that, you know what I mean. Look at some of the findings that you got, and then, you know, if there is a way of getting the message out that, you know, that we need to be educating our children, you know, going into primary schools and doing that sort of stuff, you know.

(Comment from a FWB coordinator during a focus group)

Chapter 3 - Fly A White Balloon Research Results

The following describes and analyses the results obtained throughout the evaluation process and in the conclusion of this report, we consider these results against the vision, mission and aims of FWB. This research will therefore indicate whether FWB is indeed achieving its objectives, in full or in part.

The vision, mission and aims of FWB, at the time of the research, were as follows⁴:

Vision: A community united in keeping children safe from child sexual abuse

Mission: A community that is aware of, knows about and understands child sexual abuse, and that is actively working together to resolve it and prevent it within the community

Aims: 1 - To raise community awareness of child sexual abuse

2 - To increase community knowledge and understanding of child sexual abuse

3 - To strengthen community engagement with resolving / preventing child sexual abuse.

The results that follow are discussed in order of the major topic areas unveiled by the evaluation which were:

- community perceptions of FWB purpose and levels of support,
- strengths and weaknesses and,
- logistics.

These results are systematically presented as data gathered via the survey, then results from focus groups, before analysing these further in a consecutive subsection.

Community Perceptions of Purpose and Levels of Support

Survey Results

The results of the first part of the survey show that communities strongly support the FWB initiative. When asked 'Do you think FWB is a good idea?' almost all respondents answered positively (439 - 99% yes and 3⁵ - 1% no⁶). The main reason given by respondents (234 - 53%) was a perception of FWB as an awareness raiser, which was clearly and mostly recognised as the main goal of the project. Other reasons, less often quoted, were that (in order of importance) FWB: provided a way to break the silence; mobilised communities against the issue of child sexual abuse; was a start in the

⁴ The third aim has since changed. We will address this point later.

⁵ The three negative answers focused on pollution generated by the balloon, or on the fact that child sexual abuse is a taboo subject. The other insisted on the fact that the white balloons were a bad idea, as they were puzzling younger children and explaining what these were about was difficult for a certain age bracket. The respondent suggested finding another visual medium than the balloons (*sic*).

⁶ This question was not answered by all respondents.

fight against child sexual abuse; was a helpful step in fighting ignorance; was a peaceful and visual way to spread the message; and anything along these lines was welcomed.

A clear majority stood out when it came to identifying the purpose of FWB. When asked what they thought FWB was supposed to achieve, a widely held community perception of the function of FWB was one of awareness raising (68%) and education (12%). Other, less often mentioned roles of FWB were (in order of importance): breaking the silence on the issue of child sexual abuse; encouraging discussion and speaking out; providing help, prevention and protection; informing people they are not alone; promoting safety and wellbeing, and support and support services.

Focus group results

The strong participation of agencies was considered, from local coordinators' perspective, to be a strong indicator of community support. The active involvement of schools, in particular, also highlights a tacit acknowledgement of the need for early intervention. School participation has slowly built up since the inception of the project in the area, and school staff sometimes takes the opportunity to embed awareness raising and child protection items in their teaching activities.

The school very much supported that they had balloons out in the front of the school and a big banner and, um, the principal includes stuff about White Balloon Day in the school's newsletter for that week. The teachers discuss with their students by age appropriate topics, but always around child protection (...) so they talk about that kind of stuff.

(Comment from a FWB coordinator during a focus group)

The school has been really involved and in all different levels, both the primary school and the high school want to become more involved. They want to make it more... a more positive learning experience. They want to make it theirs. So, there is still that aspect of having a package that helps so much or that you can just pack to give to the schools. The secondary college might be involved much earlier in the year but the other schools might just want to hang up balloons on the day or wear their white t-shirt or eat white food or whatever.

(Comment from a FWB coordinator during a focus group)

Another indication of the strong support from community members and community businesses was their involvement in the logistical processes and organisation of the event. FWB local coordinators were quite adamant that whatever the community, help and support of various kinds were relatively easy to find. This could be surprising considering the taboo nature of the issue at stake. However, it could also be seen as representative of a closely knit social fabric, more often found in regional and rural settings. Many coordinators approach their first year of involvement with trepidation at engaging with such a difficult issue; but focus group participants highlighted their surprise in discovering such 'easy' and immediate availability of community members and businesses in helping them in the logistics of the event.

It was just terrific. The coordination of the volunteers went really well, I was... I had no idea where I was going to find volunteers so I just ran around and asked people and I got some TAFE students and the youth councils, some of the general public that I know that people would like to be involved. They knew people, friends, you know I called on anybody and everyone. It was an absolutely fantastic day. It was a lot of fun and some of the business houses may not have given us money but they certainly helped it. Like there are party shops down below who actually blew up all the balloons for free. They blew them all up.

(Comment from a FWB coordinator during a focus group)

What I did for the businesses? I will let you know that I put a little package together for them. Like they had their balloons, they had a thank you letter that I had written, they had all this information, posters, whatever... all this stuff went in the pack. Women's Health gave me the bags. We did it all at Women's Health, I had... I got volunteers at Women's Health to put them all together for me. I coordinated volunteers for the breast clinic at Women's Health and they gladly you know came along and said what do you want us to do? Here you go. They are well over rehearsed in doing this. It took a couple of hours in the morning.

(Comment from a FWB coordinator during a focus group)

In kind donations are also considered a strong indication of support, according to participants, especially considering that these donations in kind and in time roll over from one year to another.

I used XXX photocopying a few years ago. Now, I was conscious of the fact that they were not getting anything back for it but he photocopied everything that I gave him which was great. I just did two pages, do you know what I mean, back and front.

(Comment from a FWB coordinator during a focus group)

For some of the businesses, as I said... like the printing shop, they printed up big posters for us for nothing. I don't know it is all in my report anyway. There was other shops that did things. Card and lotto shop gave us an information stamp, like for our brochures at the kiosk. We have a kiosk open with a whole array of information.

(Comment from a FWB coordinator during a focus group)

One women said she couldn't but she donated about five rolls of the white tape. We will be using it for years won't we for the balloons. I wrote letters this year, I decided to write to two local butchers and the two supermarkets asking for donations of the sausages and the bread blah, blah to have a bar-b-que. I wrote to the Apex boys and I said will they come and cook the bar-b-que for me which they did. I also wrote letters to the four schools and the pre-school centre and the kindergarten... the child care place telling them that it was all on and there would be packages available for the schools for the kids to do things. (...) So, they were very involved. We got some calico didn't we for them to do banners if they wanted to do that and we got some bamboo stakes and bird netting ... the kids made a hot air balloon in front of the old police station.

(Comment from a FWB coordinator during a focus group)

One butcher instead of sausages gave me steakettes and XXX wanted to give me a few hundred sausages but I already had the other butcher giving me a couple of hundred sausages as well and I don't need all these sausages and then Kerry said about lollypops for the students. So I rang him and he said oh, I will help you out anyway you like. I rang him and I said can you do this and he

said, you are just going to get a voucher, a gift card so he sent me a gift card worth \$50.

(Comment from a FWB coordinator during a focus group)

Discussion and Further Analysis of Community Perceptions of Purpose and Levels of Support

In the research and policy literature there is an underlying and prevalent assumption that communities do not want to talk about issues of child sexual abuse. This has been discussed at length in both academic and media literatures. However, despite the 'taboo', sensitive nature, and 'silence' surrounding this topic, the overwhelming community response received by FWB and this research project indicates that given a 'safe' and 'proper' forum, communities are willing, indeed eager, to debate, discuss and talk about these issues.

This is potentially good news for those engaged in criminological research which currently aims to promote community participation in problem-solving community issues (Wood et al, *op.cit*). These findings also support research that argues for the value of empowering communities and of participatory systems in addressing problem crime or important societal issues (Aldunate, *op.cit.*). We will address this further in our next chapter.

The clear and positive community perception of FWB as an awareness raiser is a good indicator of how well FWB achieves its first aim: 'raising community awareness'. FWB not only raises awareness about and around its own event, but through this also raises awareness about the issues of child sexual abuse. We will see, in the following chapter, that public awareness in communities 'touched' by FWB has considerably been improved and that considerable impact has been made in the recession of dangerous myths surrounding child sexual abuse. This is to be taken into account in regards to further deliberations surrounding the formulation of appropriate prevention and response initiatives.

However an underlying issue of passivity needs also to be raised here. Although it is reassuring to know that the message about child sexual abuse is reaching the community, and that FWB is seen as opening a window of opportunity for conversation, as yet the conversation rather remains one way and the day is currently indeed increasing knowledge and awareness but is not necessarily about doing anything. Opportunities therefore exist for the FWB to convert knowledge and awareness into action.

Finally, the question 'do you think FWB is a good idea' could be described as 'loaded', given that the survey was conducted on FWB Day, and the nature of the topic presented, the question was unlikely to see many negative answers. However, the researchers believe that the growth of FWB over 10 years, and the overwhelming number of positive answers, are signs of genuine community support.

Community Perceptions of Strengths and Weaknesses

Survey Results

The community survey identified the two main positive aspects and strengths of FWB as raising awareness (89) and high visibility (55)⁷.

These two very strong and (sustainable) points are intrinsically linked to the nature and aims of the event and its choice of medium, but they also remain important to consider for further developments. Other strengths of FWB included (in order of occurrence): community involvement; the fact that it is a fun and joyous event; silence breaking; support from schools and agencies; community gathering tool; unique concept; support to victims; span throughout all people of all ages; its annual frequency its non-threatening message; and finally 'everything FWB is about'.

The survey identified the main weakness of FWB as insufficient efforts in advertising and lack of variety in the event itself. Merchandising, in particular, was something seen as worth looking at. Some respondents (8) mentioned that the lack of follow up after the event was a problem or disappointing; 4 indicated that there should be more events to maintain the built up awareness throughout the year. This was discussed in a steering committee meeting by one agency representative, who felt that this could be compared to a disclosure without follow up (the 'so what' effect). The steering committee is currently looking at a structured approach to address this, in partnership with interested agencies.

Focus group results

The most important strength of FWB was confirmed in focus groups as the power and un-deniability of the message embedded in the initiative. The message is clear, simple, and triggers various (sometimes unexpected) reactions amongst people.

the highlight was (...) the reaction of some people and the willingness to take a balloon and then to hear someone, a family, say 'we still got ours at home from last year.

(Comment from a FWB coordinator during a focus group)

Last year the highlight was for me, there was a lady who came up and, and disclosed what had happened to her and she was, [looking at the facilitator] like your age, she was thirty so, that was good, the fact that it generates those kinds of discussions.

(Comment from a FWB coordinator during a focus group)

Can I share a story - this wasn't this year, last year when I was at QEII Square I had some year ten girls and the young boys were on their bikes. The boys were

⁷ This question was an open one and several participants decided to not answer it. 220 answers to this question of strength/weaknesses were collected.

not involved but they were coming to harass the girls. The girls were painting a banner. I said, guys can you please let us do what we have got to do and they were not listening. One of them... the ring leader come up and goes 'well what is this about anyway?' I showed him a balloon. He goes: 'okay I get it'. They backed right off, they left us alone for the rest of the day. I think they took a couple of balloons and that really, really made... I will never forget that. Because he wasn't going to stop or they weren't going to stop because there were some pretty girls painting you know, they wanted to annoy them. I didn't say a word, I showed him the balloon. They backed right off and he goes I get it. Very powerful

(Comment from a FWB coordinator during a focus group)

Another strong point was raised as the community development dimension of the initiative. The importance of the local adaptability of FWB to suit community needs was stressed as an important point by local coordinators, who shared ideas and examples of best practices in various areas (advertising, time management, etc.) during the focus groups.

I think you know from our perspective I am very happy with the White Balloon day. I tend to... do it my way. That is that I go in on Sunday on my day off and I blow up the majority of the balloons, with a compressor, just leave them in the community centre. Then on the Monday I grab the student representative council out of the college and that is the young boys in the primary school and the girls and the same in the secondary school, so then they have got some form of ownership of it and then we got and tie all the balloons together or whatever. This year we only put balloons in bunches of two or three maximum and then we put them up around the school on Tuesday morning and you know right around the fence and whatever. I will tell you a funny story in a minute about that. Through the school and the community. You know we get the community bus on Tuesday morning, put them all on the bus and we put them right through the town.

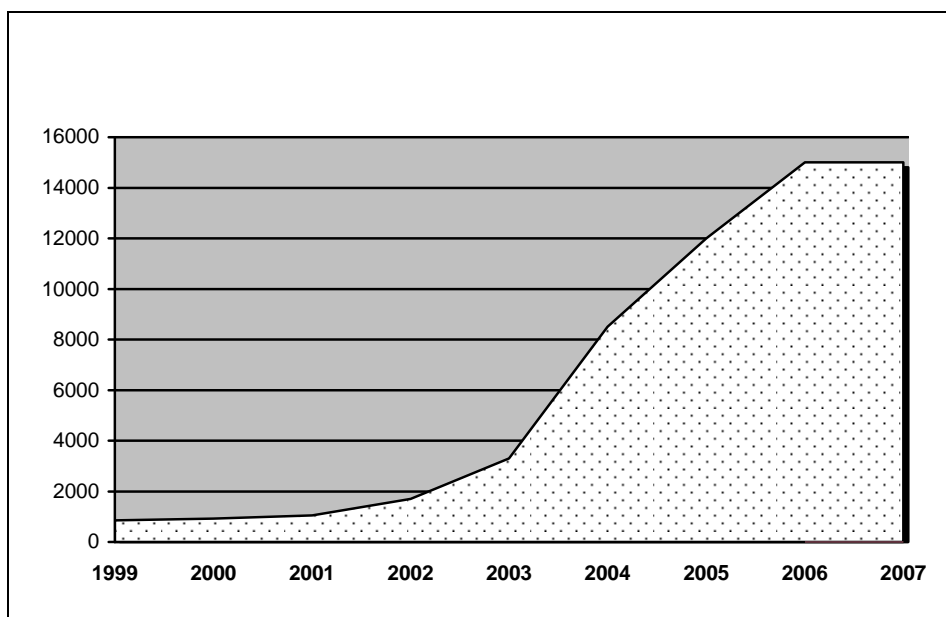
(Comment from a FWB coordinator during a focus group)

I say to the kids at the end of the day 'you can take the balloons home, when you go down through the street you can take them off the trees, you can take them off the sign posts, you take them wherever you feel that you want to take them to'. Probably deep in the back of my mind I would like to give each child a balloon not blown up so they could take it to their place and I did actually have some kids who would not have got balloons but as they come out of the school gate of a night, not the bus travellers but the others, could get a balloon off one of those young people that helped me in the morning that wasn't blown up.

(Comment from a FWB coordinator during a focus group)

Despite these positive aspects and features of FWB, participants also stressed issues in the pre-advertising, and merchandising aspects previously mention by survey respondents. This was strongly emphasized during focus groups, as shown in the quotes below. Diversity in activities during the day and diversity in merchandising are issues that need to be addressed in the years to come. The event, in some communities, seems to stall on 'things of the past' and even if there are some sporadic new elements on the ground, they are still deemed insufficient to add some youth and momentum to the initiative. Therefore, efforts still remain to be made in the area of merchandising, where both coordinators and public opinion express a need and desire to see something more happen. This may also be reflected in the stagnation of balloons numbers flown over the past 2 years (Fig.1)

Figure 1 - Balloons flown from 1999 to 2007



Local coordinators were happy to share ideas in that regards during the focus groups.

I'd like to have a bit more entertainment and activities running during the course of the day...

(Comment from a FWB coordinator during a focus group)

We had the kiosk full of information one of the things that we would have liked is to have dispel the myth surround child sexual abuse and they came up... like they had these... I will just give you one each, just an example [showing a colourful postcard displaying a myth about rape on the front and the reality on the back]. (...) Do it in the shape of a bunch of white balloons and have a um, have a myth and have a truth... (...) You know how on the literature there is how to help and what to do, (...) a similar concept: instead of having it on the literature like that you had it on the card. (...) You know, you have got your balloons at the front, a myth, and then at the back there will be some information, contact numbers.

(Comment from a FWB coordinator during a focus group)

Much earlier in the year to get [young people] involved in producing some sort of information and then they go out to the community and they talk to community members and sell it and give out the information and ask if they want to be involved in doing all the work. That is so much more a thing, it is so much more powerful in terms of it coming from kids and so much yeah more beneficial for the kids learning.

(Comment from a FWB coordinator during a focus group)

Even though the event is regional and here to stay, given the amount of community support it receives, FWB is subject to a quick 'fade in-fade out' effect. This building of awareness and its time span were re-emphasised when respondents were asked about the impact FWB has on communities. There are therefore additional efforts to make in the weeks leading to the event, in order to build momentum and generate additional community interest, partnership and participation.

The steering committee is currently working on a plan of action to cover this, and a clear timeline has been established in order to accentuate media coverage and community activities in the months immediately prior to the event.

And it takes [time] to build up FWB... but then it just builds up and then people become more aware that it's happening (...). You get people approach you and ask 'what's all those balloons about?' and then you can say and they say, 'oh, that's good, you know, it raises awareness' and, and it shows that your community is united against child abuse cause you look down the street, there's these balloons everywhere, you know.

(Comment from a FWB coordinator during a focus group)

Discussion and Further Analysis of Community Perceptions of Strengths and Weaknesses

There is a clear consensus about the strengths and weaknesses of the project in the eyes of both community members and event coordinators. Such consensus means that the steering committee needs to seriously consider the pillars of the event (its nature and medium) and revisit the advertisement and merchandising mechanics behind FWB.

Whilst steps have already been taken in building up pre-event communication, with additional interest (partly triggered by this research) expressed by the local media, there could also be, as of 2008, a longer-term, latent and baby- steps communication process throughout the year. This could then lead the way for a dynamic surge in advertising in the months/weeks leading up to the event, that is followed by further community based activities after FWB Day. The steering committee is currently looking how this might be done, in an effort to counteract the 'stalling effect' the initiative seems to have met in the past two years.

The majority of respondents (83%) thought that the event had a lot of positive impact on the community (24%) and that it would greatly raise awareness (59%). However, others (17%) were more cautious, stating that the one-off nature of the event and its fade-in and out effect, would mean that its impact might remain marginal. However, a comment from FWB coordinators and an anecdote from FWB local history tends to contradict this. A local school, while reticent to display anything but plain white balloon during the first FWB year, slowly built up its activities and went from hanging plain white balloons (without the logo or slogan) on its fence to slowly integrating the language and encouraging staff and students to participate in the event.

when [the school principal] first started doing it, um, she'd handout white balloons, just the plain ones, but now because the town is so used to it and accepts it, she hands out balloons with all the words written on it.

(Comment from a FWB coordinator during a focus group)

Community Perceptions of the Logistics of Fly a White Balloon

Survey Results

A clear majority of respondents (210 - 48%) indicated that FWB should remain a yearly event: that's how it stands out and doing otherwise might 'dilute' both strength and impact of the initiative, according to some. A marginal number of respondents suggested the event could become bi-annual, others suggested quarterly or such events to run 'more often'. Ongoing frequency such as everyday, monthly or every school holidays were not popular.

However, when asked whether FWB should run other events (a point to link with the issue of diversity raised above) and if so what, the majority of respondents (65%) still indicated that they thought that there was a need for more and more varied activities throughout the year. Suggestions included picnic fun/market/family days, concerts to raise money, expanding the issue to not only children but adults as well, education sessions or forums, information nights, programs in schools, joint agencies campaigns and corporate dinners.

Focus group results

With regard to FWB logistics, the issue of fund raising was approached in two ways, and both of these were emphasized in the focus groups with FWB coordinators:

1. Fundraising to support the event itself and facilitate the role of local coordinators (financing incidentals, such as mailing costs, petrol, etc)
2. Fundraising to help facilitate community support and organise additional initiatives (training, forums, prevention campaigns, etc. – see reference note 3).

There is a couple of things that... what I feel I could improve on at the same time. It would be that what I would like to do is to... because [some of us] are keen for people to pay and our business houses get hit with everything because we are a tourist town and if anyone wants anything they go to the business house and say can you give us this, can you give us that. I personally probably don't have a problem with it but when it is something that we want to do and we want to put out there and whatever, what I thought would be a good idea would be to have... and I did this a few times without charging them. Just have a plastic bank bag with three or four or five or six balloons in it and the string and just seal it up and then with a little flyer and give it to the bank or give it to the shops and whatever and then just ask them to put them out the next day. I am not saying whether it is right, wrong or indifferent but I would really like to give the information. You know if next year is already done, you know, like change the date on the computer for the date. Because it is obviously going to be the same information and do those packages all ready, you know with the balloons and put them in the bank bags and whatever and then go around the community you know a month before and say when we put up the white balloons you think you could put these up or whatever. If you would like to make a donation we are selling six for \$5 or whatever. So, you know, give them something. The bank

bag isn't going to cost us anything, the little plastic bank bag. I think that could be something that could be recycled for those conscious of recycling and whatever.

(Comment from a FWB coordinator during a focus group)

A further point made frequently by the FWB coordinators is the need to make clear in all of the promotional material that this is a community based and largely unfunded event that needs to pay its own way – and that all funds raised go into making the event happen that year and in future years. This is something that has been taken on board by the steering committee and is being incorporated into future information materials.

Discussion and Further Analysis of Community Perceptions of Logistics of FWB

Although identification of the goals and purpose of FWB seem to be quite clear cut, respondents' wishes as to what it could achieve are numerous. Despite FWB's primary goal being one of awareness raising, public opinion shows that it might also aim at providing more services, counselling, networking, referrals, etc⁸.

FWB is seen as an open/safe place for all necessary things to happen or be provided to victims/survivors, families, friends and community at large. This suggests that FWB, in the mind of respondents, could be an opportunity to launch a more holistic and active approach to child sexual abuse in regional communities.

Considering these responses together, one could ask whether the feedback on frequency and organisation of FWB-related events is actually more a reflexion on cooperation amongst agencies addressing issues of child sexual abuse. If the clear core business of FWB is one of awareness raising, then additional activities emphasised by the respondents might indicate that specialised agencies could 'cash in' on the event and use the event as a means of publicising their services, responsibilities, specialties and areas of interest in these communities on the FWB day, accompanied by coordinated follow up activities during the year.

The role of FWB here needs to be emphasized as a conduit, a medium, rather than an actual service provider. Considering that FWB currently does not have the funding to organise anything but FWB, it is wise to consider the scheme as a facilitating body that can play a role in identifying community issues and concerns, opening up issues with service delivery or community wishes, helping agencies organise training and prevention or support initiatives.

⁸ Answers provided were (several answers allowed): raise awareness and provide information about child sexual abuse (380), run prevention campaigns (278), provide information about response and support of victims (287), liaise with community agencies offering response (241), help with emergency and education programs (232), offer education for community members about child sexual abuse and available response (256), liaise with agencies offering response for offenders (212), provide counselling services during Fly a White Balloon day (229), provide informal advice during Fly a White Balloon Day (234), were also mentioned: provide contact information, provide ongoing advice throughout the year, counselling diffusion after the event, 'in your face' promotions, posters, flyers, contract involvement and funding from the community, etc.

FWB can therefore grow into a role as an 'issue or idea referring body', with referrals made to appropriate agencies (through its steering committee) as a means to start enhancing processes that can lead to stronger, more active community initiatives. FWB could therefore become a central community activity in relation to child sexual abuse, monitoring community perceptions and awareness and feeding results back (via this research and informal on the ground feedback) to related agencies – opening up and supporting ongoing conversations between communities and the services that they could work with.

However, one also needs to emphasize here that given the current levels of service availability and funding, there may be discrepancies between what communities think should happen in terms of support and services and what services and agencies know can happen. These discrepancies need to be recognized, otherwise any agency limited in resources and manpower, and mandated to focus on recent events, will be potentially overwhelmed by levels of community demand for services that they cannot deliver.

Chapter 4 - Child sexual abuse research results

The second page of the survey was optional and addressed communities' knowledge and perceptions of child sexual abuse. Thirty-three respondents self-identified as not wanting to fill in the second page. This part of the report summarises the main findings relating to community perceptions of child sexual abuse. As no discussion occurred in the focus groups on these issues (conversations revolved around FWB logistics and technicalities) this part of the report refers only to the community survey results.

Community Awareness and Knowledge

Respondents seemed to be confident in their knowledge of child sexual abuse, with 82% stating they thought their knowledge was average to very high (average= 38%, high= 19%, very high= 25%).

It should be noted that several influences might have affected these responses (ranging from having experienced an assault, to people actually attending the event on purpose and therefore being familiar with the issue, to media coverage and exploitation of the theme of child sexual abuse on TV shows or in several recently released movies). However, a very low proportion of respondents stated that they had barely any knowledge of the issue (low= 13%, very low= 3%).

However, it was of some concern that despite this self-assessment of a strong knowledge and awareness, most respondents actually showed limited understanding when asked to define child sexual abuse, with only 5 giving an exact definition and 4 other respondents providing an answer that closely matched the legal definition (see Chapter 1 and Appendix A).

The definitions of child sexual abuse most often given were limited to physical contact of some sort (including sexual penetration), with the inclusion of verbal abuse on occasion. Of most concern, given current internet and technology trends, was the fact that sexual abuse through showing pictures, pornography and/or use of the Internet to display pornographic images was barely ever mentioned.

Deconstruction of lingering myths

The research clearly showed that the myths surrounding child sexual abuse are being deconstructed. This community survey indicated that a very large majority of respondents (94.7% of respondents) were aware that:

- Child sexual abuse occurs at home, in close proximity to the home or in a place that is familiar to the child (at home, in families or with people close, everywhere, anywhere);

- This is a general community issue;
- This is not something that just happens in specific ethnic minorities or within specific disadvantaged socio-economic minorities.

Given recent media coverage of child sexual abuse events, it is encouraging that this community survey found these stereotypes to be erroneous.

Another myth – that this 'does not happen in my community' was also shown to be erroneous. More than 70% of respondents indicated that they thought the level of child sexual abuse in their communities was average to high, compared to other communities.

Knowledge of available services and support

As stated above, community awareness of the specifics of child sexual abuse can be vague. It is therefore not surprising that respondents also showed a lack of knowledge about support systems available in their communities. 22% of respondents said that they knew little about available services and 26% admitted they knew nothing about them.

Despite this limited knowledge of services, there was support and general acknowledgement of the need for service provision to victims/survivors, with the majority of respondents suggesting that counselling should be provided. However, only 32% of the respondents did identify a support agency by name (such as NECAMHS, CASA and DHS or DOCS for NSW), and 17% mentioned general counselling.

When asked about what type of services should be provided to help offenders, it is interesting to see that criminalisation and harsher punishment only constitute 35% of respondents' answers. A majority (more than 60%) of the community wanted to provide counselling, rehabilitation programs, education and information, community support and in the end 'whatever is necessary'.

This answer may be linked to the destruction of the myth that child sexual abuse is done by strangers outside the family and/or community network. The myth 'it does not happen in my community' seems to not be a common perception for respondents, as more than 70% of respondents indicated that they thought the level of child sexual abuse in their communities was average to high, compared to other communities. Also, if offenders are being seen as part of the community, inside the family and community network, then rehabilitation rather than punishment makes sense, although careful consideration is still given to the incarceration of the most virulent offenders.

Community perceptions of issues leading to / impacting on child sexual abuse

Community members affected by FWB are aware of the large scope of issues leading and impacting on the commission of child sexual abuse. It is important to note that issues seen as leading to child sexual abuse and impacting on the problem are either preventable problems or treatable conditions, such as mental illnesses, anger and violence management, trauma from past abuse, lack of education, etc., which can be addressed via education or therapy and/or medication support.

These factors listed above were identified by respondents as the 4 leading causes of child sexual abuse. In detail: mental illness constituted 19% of the responses collected, followed by anger and violence management problems (17.3%), past abuse (10.7%), lack of education (9.2%). Other less often mentioned causes included drugs and alcohol (5.9%), disability, lack of control, influence of the media and pornography, self esteem, over-sexualisation of children, etc.

Individual and personality characteristics such as issues of power, frustration, depravity, upbringing, self-esteem, etc., still feature amongst the first answers of the respondents, but they are still far behind in terms of response occurrences. This is, however, congruent with earlier research about community perceptions of child sexual abuse (Tucci et al, *op.cit*; Scheffer, 1993).

The additional awareness of the 'circumstances behind the act' also partly explains communities' positions on what should be done with and offered to offenders. The identification of some offenders as not only possible close relations but also persons who maybe suffering from a mental illness, previous victims themselves, etc. allows for a wider understanding of the needs and efforts to be made in the (early) prevention and treatment of child sexual abuse.

Community Perceptions of Identification and Reporting

Worrying data was found when respondents were asked about the identification of child sexual abuse by children and their perceptions of children's reporting. These responses showed that 86% thought that children did not fully understand what constitutes child sexual abuse; 8% others said they thought that young people did not always know what it was.

This indicates a perceived limited understanding of these issues by those who are most vulnerable to the commission of these offences (the victims/survivors). This may be influenced by a general hesitation in terms of education and a desire to protect the innocence of children at a young age and is complicated by various other complex and hotly disputed questions such as who should we educate, what should we educate about, and what would be the proper vocabulary to use.

Also of interest are responses to the question 'Who do you think the majority of sexually abused children are most likely to turn to first?'; to which the key response was 'nobody' (148). Other

responses were (in order of priority): 'friends', 'siblings or family', teachers, parents and Police. These figures are concerning if we think of the implications of such silence on the understanding of reporting and notification rates, and of the complex situation facing family and friends in rural and regional areas. We discuss this in more depth further on in this report.

Discussion and Further Analysis

These findings show that some progress has been made in raising community awareness about the issues around child sexual abuse. However, they also show that a limited understanding still exists of what *actually* constitutes child sexual abuse. Significant gaps have been shown to exist in the understanding and knowledge about such abuse. The implications of this need to be taken into account when considering what is and what is not reported as sexual abuse to the authorities: some incidences are simply not reported because they were not identified as an assault or a form of abuse.

It is important to remember that this study took place in regional Australia, in locations where anonymity is unusual and close relationships between neighbours and community members are important and more obvious than in urban areas. In that sense, then, anonymity and close relationships contradict each other. Therefore, considering close relationships are 'a given' in regional locations and considering the communities in which we conducted our research are closely intertwined, it is likely that reporting rates are also impacted by a wish to 'not let the neighbours know', for the sake of preserving community coherence, cohesion and harmony. This also may mean that personal knowledge of an offender's past history (which may of course include abuse, mental health issues and trauma) could have influenced some respondents' answers to our questions.

Approximate or generalist knowledge about services available in the community leads us to wonder whether victims/survivors would actually seek support, and if so whether this would be from generic rather than specialised services due to a lack of access to and/or knowledge of relevant services. If this is so, then there is a need to ensure that staff at generic services (e.g. community health, counsellors, General Practitioners), are aware of the issues involved in child sexual abuse, and know the best approaches to take, and possible/available pathways of referrals to specialised services. In this regard, should victims be reluctant to seek specialised counselling for various reasons (such as fear of stigmatisation reaching out to a particular agency, shame, unfamiliarity of the place) and if counselling is the response that needs to be provided to victims (therapeutic follow-up being identified as a priority by respondents as well), then additional specialised training for generic services might be something that should be considered.

This research has uncovered some important findings, namely that the 'not in my backyard' myth is slowly being deconstructed, despite some caution as to the resilience of paedophilia. These results also show that the majority of community members want to see rehabilitation and re-humanisation of

the offender rather than wanting to demonise perpetrators, and yet, with caution expressed as to how to deal with the most virulent offenders. The events currently happening in Queensland (the Dennis Ferguson case) illustrate such dual approaches. This is not to say that traditional criminal justice pathways are discarded; rather that additional parallel options/alternatives for victims and offenders need to be looked at, also.

Emotional literacy was an issue raised by respondents, and therefore discussed by the research team during the analysis of the survey results, although issues of how and when to raise awareness among children are complex and fraught. However, respondents insisted on the necessity to engage in early intervention and in getting the message through education at the earliest age possible. Suggestions made by respondents included extensive holistic multi-agencies approaches and the need for national education campaigns.

Considering the results of academic multi-disciplinary research on the issue of disclosure, one might wonder whether the figures re-released in Australia in February 2008⁹, already labelled very conservative, are actually even more under-representative of the facts than originally suggested. From this perspective, under-reporting of child sexual abuse is an ongoing endemic issue. In this research, the option of direct reporting to authorities was rated very low. Then, disclosure, if it occurs, may also be 'buffered' by the reactions and subsequent advice of those to whom it is made. As a result, one has to wonder how much is not reported at all. This is congruent with other pieces of research, which also demonstrate a reluctance to report to authorities and police in general.

What happens immediately after the disclosure seems to greatly influence the incidence of reporting to authorities. The reasons for the reluctance to report appears to be connected to fears of the secondary victimisation and additional trauma triggered by the investigation processes (see, for example, Weiser-Easteal, *op.cit*; Read et al, *op.cit*; Dominguez et al, *op.cit*, etc.), and a wish to not being 'labelled' negatively by close acquaintances and friends. The slightest reaction may have tremendous impact on victims' self-awareness and well-being, as pictured in a victim's quote:

If I knew they would react in such a way, I wouldn't have said anything. They did deeply care, but they had this slight, almost not perceptible movement of taking a step back, to move away from me. That deeply, deeply, hurt me. I was the victim, but somehow, I was disgusting. Or at least, that's how it made me feel.

(Abstract from a conversation with a child sexual abuse survivor)

It is also important to note that during informal conversations where this research was discussed, some teachers and representatives of non-government and government agencies also admitted that, despite their duty of care and mandatory reporting protocols, they would still avoid reporting some

⁹ The figures released by Child Wise (2008) would indicate that 1/4 young girls and 1/7 young boys are sexually abused in Australia.

incidents of abuse to Police. For these professionals, a decision not to report such incidences was usually influenced by the same issues of stigmatisation and further victimisation of those victims going through the investigation and consequential criminal justice process. Facing the offender during a traditional justice process was also considered problematic from the perspective of the victim. But justice per se is not out of the question – and all research participants, when asked about their position on the issue, found positive aspects in engaging in restorative justice practice to address the issue and ‘bring some level of closure’, especially in regional settings.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion and Recommendations

“Fly a White Balloon” – Evaluation conclusions

At the time of the research, the vision, mission and aims of FWB were as follows:

Vision: A community united in keeping children safe from child sexual abuse

Mission: A community that is aware of, knows about and understands child sexual abuse, and that is actively working together to resolve it and prevent it within the community

Aims: 1 - To raise community awareness of child sexual abuse

2 - To increase community knowledge and understanding of child sexual abuse

3 - To strengthen community engagement with resolving / preventing child sexual abuse.

This study of FWB in the regional context of North-East Victoria and Southern New South Wales has been an important step in the investigation of child sexual abuse and the impact of FWB. It has unveiled important community perspectives on the issue of child sexual abuse, and also helped identify what to consider in the conceptualisation of further prevention and response initiatives.

With regard to the first goals of this research – evaluating how well FWB is meeting its objectives, this evaluation has identified that FWB is clearly meeting its first aim, but that more work is required to realise the second and third aims.

With regard to the first aim, there is a clear indication that FWB contributes greatly to raising awareness on the issue of child sexual abuse. The results show that respondents felt more confident, given a proper forum, to talk about these issues. In addition, respondents could more or less define what child sexual abuse consists of and could identify where child sexual abuse occurs, although there is still room for progress in both these areas.

Results of the research show that aims 2 and 3 are only partially met. Although knowledge of child sexual abuse has been shown to have overcome some of the strongest myths, clear gaps in understanding and knowledge of the full definition of child sexual abuse have been identified. These will impact in areas such as responses to disclosures of inappropriate sexual activity and reporting which will in turn, prevent us from having a complete picture of the problem and a full understanding of its scope. Furthermore, ignorance about response possibilities and support options might deter victims/survivors from seeking help, especially in regional areas where the barriers of anonymity, confidentiality and a culture of silence still remain.

However, our research indicates that, in an area where FWB has been operating and steadily growing for 10 years, there is a recession of damaging myths surrounding child sexual abuse. Mainly,

we observed a withdrawal of preconceptions such as ‘this can not happen to us’, ‘this is only done by strangers’, etc. accompanied by awareness and understanding that this does happen in all communities and it is done by people sometimes known as family and friends. This is important to take into account, as it means that topical ‘Stranger-Danger’ campaigns are not meeting public needs and understandings but may actually fuel misconceptions that child sexual abuse never happens in the close proximity of the child.

These findings lead us to a consideration about what steps should be taken from here in regard to early intervention and prevention. FWB is currently situated in what is commonly referred to as ‘primary prevention’ (Dominguez et al, *op.cit*): that is, a service that targets the general population via awareness raising campaigns. Any other look at early intervention would imply a move towards ‘secondary prevention’, which services target groups, via the delivery of specially packaged prevention programs delivered in occasional settings, such as schools¹⁰. Such a move has been decided upon by the steering committee, and this has also been accompanied by a change in the third aim of FWB – which now stands as ‘to support community pathways to action’.

However the reality is that significant structural changes will need to happen for FWB to achieve this aim and bring the community actively into sexual abuse prevention efforts. Current policy and campaigns around domestic and family violence still focus largely on raising community awareness – with little discussion of how to engage the community in prevention other than through reporting.

For FWB to move actively into secondary prevention, extensive negotiation is required with school staff, health and social workers, before any formalised prevention workshop package is implemented and delivered in school settings. As observed by one of us in another research project, issues such as self-harm are very rarely talked about at school, as agencies often label them ‘contagious’ and not talking about them is sometimes a preferred option to raising awareness and taking the risk of young people to ‘experiment’ what they were just taught about. Child sexual abuse is an issue that might face the same hurdle. Again, emotional literacy needs to be taken into account here, and it has to be mentioned that other criminological issues face the same resistance (for example: should we talk about drugs and sexual health issues with young people, and risk their experimenting with them?). The question of preserving the innocence of the child versus making them able to recognise danger signs is an on-going debate and not ours to answer here.

¹⁰ ‘Tertiary prevention’ aims at specifically providing victims with means to minimize negative impact of the offence and avoiding reoccurrence (*ibid.*)

“Fly a White Balloon” - Recommendations

In order to build on the momentum that this research has created, and indicate possible ways forward, we would like to make six recommendations to the FWB steering committee and FWB coordinators in relation to the FWB campaign.

These can be broken into two categories: structural changes and improvement of impact.

Structural changes

Recommendation 1 - Fund raising

Financial sustainability is an important issue and FWB systematically struggles, every year, with finding the necessary means to pay its way. However, local coordinators and survey respondents do not seem to see this as a problem and this research has shown that fundraising activities would be popular and welcomed by the community. We therefore suggest FWB to add to its core business the collection of donations on the day from community members and throughout the year (particularly in the months leading to the event) from businesses and agencies. This will enable greater community participation and contribution in the event, and expand the range of activities that can be incorporated into event.

Recommendation 2 - A permanent coordination position

Although FWB day happens only once per year, the activity has now reached a point where many communities want the initiative to be sustained year round, at least from an organisational and logistical point of view. An ongoing position needs to be created, possibly funded via the activities suggested above. This will help ensure the success of the initiative, will maintain the smooth coordination of core activities (media communication, purchase of balloons, update of material and coordination of merchandising), and support the ongoing strength of FWB as a community development project.

Recommendation 3 - Additional advertisement

Prior to the day, it is essential to boost momentum and further develop the event and its impact. Although some additional efforts have been made to this effect for 2008, and more may be triggered by this research, there is still an identifiable gap here to manage in the years to come. The steering committee is currently looking at mechanisms for media involvement to that effect.

Recommendation 4 - A move towards different types of intervention

The move from primary to secondary prevention is something that will be enabled by some of the suggestions made above. Particularly, the work with schools will be a welcomed addition to FWB activities. Also, the identification of prevention ideas or of gaps in service delivery could be properly referred to appropriate agencies. Both of these will help lift FWB to a new more pro-active and dynamic role. One way in which this could be done is to extend the regular post-event debriefing sessions in each community, to include a forward planning session building on past year activities and setting a future agenda.

Improvement of impact

Recommendation 5 - Merchandising

The issue of merchandising needs to be thoroughly revisited, as FWB, while not losing momentum, could be seen to be risking stagnating in terms of impact. Although local coordinators have provided us with ideas, there is a need for a coordinated effort in organising new material (for example myth-postcards or wrist bands) and local ingenuity in organising FWB day events (concerts, fundraising initiatives, awareness meetings, etc.). This will feed into some of the recommendations raised above (advertisement and fund raising).

Recommendation 6 – Encouraging other agencies to leverage off FWB

As a recognised and established community event in this region, FWB has now become an important part of raising awareness, not only around child sexual abuse issues, but also around available services and supports to people who are or have been exposed to child sexual abuse. Our research shows that community members are aware of general support mechanisms but that more visibility of specialist agencies and services is needed. A more visible involvement and participation of specialist agencies in the events at a local level is therefore recommended, in order for victims/survivors to seek appropriate support when needed.

Community Perception and Attitudes to Child sexual abuse – Conclusions

This research shows that considerable progress has been made in raising community awareness about the issues around child sexual abuse, but that there is still a limited understanding of what actually constitutes child sexual abuse. Although many in the community feel confident in their knowledge of child sexual abuse, it is of concern that community awareness of the specifics can be vague with definitions limited to physical contact of some sort. Of serious concern is the lack of community awareness that exposures to pictures, pornography and/or use of the Internet to display pornographic images can also constitute forms of sexual abuse.

It is reassuring to see that some of the major myths surrounding child sexual abuse are losing their power, with communities largely aware that child sexual abuse is a general community issue; that this abuse occurs at home, or with people in a position of trust and in a place that is familiar; and that this is not something that just happens in specific minority groups. Another myth – that this 'does not happen in my community' was also shown to be erroneous with many indicating a perception that levels of child sexual abuse in their community was average to high, compared to other communities

This research showed a lack of community knowledge about specific support systems and services although there was support and general acknowledgement of the need for service provision particularly counselling services. This generalist knowledge leads us to wonder whether victims/survivors would then seek help from generic rather than specialised services due to a lack of access to, desire to engage with, and/or knowledge of specialised services. If this is so, then there is a need to train staff at generic services in the issues involved in child sexual abuse, the best approaches, and possible/available pathways of referrals to specialised services.

These results also show that the majority of community members want to see rehabilitation and re-humanisation of the offender rather than wanting to demonise perpetrators at all cost, although incarceration remains an option for the most violent and repeat offenders. There is an express community wish for more counselling, rehabilitation programs, education and information, community support and in the end 'whatever is necessary' for offenders. If offenders are seen as part of the community, inside family and community networks, then rehabilitation is a coherent option, according to community members. Again, this is not a discarding of traditional criminal justice processes, but rather the crystallisation of a wish for more options for victims and offenders.

In this research the community insisted on the need to engage in early intervention, getting the message out through community education at an early age. A great majority perceive that children do not fully understand what constitutes child sexual abuse, which means that those most at risk are possibly those with the least knowledge.

Of great concern is the fact that when asked who a child would turn to – the key response was ‘nobody’. These figures are disturbing if we think of the implications of such silence on understanding of reporting and notification rates, and of the complex situation facing family and friends in rural and regional areas.

In this research, the option of direct reporting to the authorities was rated as very low. As a result, one has to wonder how much is not reported at all. This is congruent with other pieces of research, which also demonstrate a reluctance to report to authorities and police in general. What happens immediately after the disclosure seems to greatly influence the incidence of reporting to authorities, with other risks of ‘buffering’ reporting remaining high. But although traditional justice mechanisms seem to be loaded with concerns for further trauma and secondary victimisation, many indicated a preference to see restorative justice processes used to address the issue and ‘bring some level of closure’ for all parties.

Community Attitudes to Child sexual abuse - Recommendations

This research has provided a unique insight into community perceptions of child sexual abuse in regional Australia, and as such it is important to build on the opportunity that this gives FWB to create real community change on these issues. Therefore we would like to make six recommendations as to how this information might be used in the future.

These can be broken into community education and community-service discussions.

Community Education

Recommendation 1 – Clear information outlining what child sexual abuse is and involves

It is particularly important to educate the community further about what child sexual abuse actually is and what it involves – of particular concern given current Internet and technology trends is the need to raise awareness that child sexual abuse also includes exposure to exposure to pictures, pornography and/or use of the Internet to display pornographic images. This could be done through FWB.

Recommendation 2 – A campaign encouraging young people to tell someone and seek help

It is of serious concern that a deeply held view in the community is that a child would turn to ‘nobody’ if exposed to child sexual abuse. With what we now know about exposure to trauma and the ongoing implications of being sexually abused as a child, this has considerable implications for the design of follow up options for victims. There are also the implications of such silence on the understanding of

reporting and notification rates, and of the complex situation facing family and friends in rural areas. A campaign on such problems could be organised through FWB.

Recommendation 3 – Praise and confirmation that some of the key myths have been broken

Child sexual abuse is a confronting, complex and difficult issue, in which it is often hard to find positive stories and which often seems too huge to overcome. The fact that some major myths have been shown to be deconstructed is significant and worth celebrating in news releases and information campaigns. This could be organised through FWB.

Recommendation 4 – Education about specialist services and the needs of survivors

It is important that issues of service knowledge be approached from a community perspective. Communities need to know where the specialist services are, and how and where to access them, and generalist services need also to understand the specific needs of child sexual abuse survivors, and be aware of what they are trained and equipped to deal with and what they need to pass on. Educating the community could be done through FWB; however, working with services would need to be done through partnerships building on work currently done by the steering committee.

Community – Service Discussions

Recommendation 5 – Community and service discussion around rehabilitation programs

Community members' desire to see the rehabilitation of some offenders highlights the paucity of programs available in this region that can cater for these needs. Whilst this is something that is slowly being addressed, it is important to have an ongoing discussion about such programs and how communities can deal with family and community members who have offended. This could be done through service agency partnerships building on the steering committee.

Recommendation 6 – Alternative responses to child sexual abuse based on restorative justice

Given that many indicated a preference to see restorative justice processes used to address the issue and 'bring some level of closure', it is recommended to build on communities' current strong use of restorative justice in health and education services. This could be done through service agency partnerships, building on the relationships with education and police. Such initiatives have been developed overseas and the Canadian *Four Circles of Hollow Water*, which address sexual abuse in particular, have been proven as a best-practice example of communities addressing sexual abuse together.

A final word: new research perspectives

This research has unveiled new research perspectives for the team who ran the FWB evaluation. At this stage, reasons for non disclosure and under-reporting to authorities are clear and consistent amongst our research participants. What is unclear, however, is what should be done to better address this problem. One difficulty which had prevented world-wide research from progressing is that we still do not really have an entirely accurate description or mapping of the issue of child sexual abuse. As a consequence, any attempt to solve this partially defined problem will be equivalent to dealing with the apparent symptoms of a chronic unknown disease.

The research team is now therefore looking at solutions to unblock the problem. The primary focus of a new research that will be launched in 2009 by Charles Sturt University will be to find ways to sharpen the picture of child sexual abuse. Evidence suggests that awareness raising is an effective method of addressing this, when appropriate emotional literacy is applied. However, as discussed previously with the limitation of better identification and definition of abuse, enhanced awareness alone might not trigger sufficient reporting for us to have a better understanding of the scope of child sexual abuse, for all the reasons described above. From the Policing and Health perspectives, issues of investigation, questioning and care of victim are therefore to be taken into account.

We intend to examine investigative and interviewing practices amongst various key stakeholders dealing with these victims and their immediate family: Domestic Violence Officers, School Liaison Police, Youth Liaison Officers, etc. We will attempt, in partnership with various justice and community agencies, to draw a 'map' of police and judicial practice in the case of child sexual abuse. Under the principle that best practice and additional training, after a while, may counteract victims' resentment towards judicial 'processing', while minimising secondary victimisation, then it is hoped that we will get a clearer picture of the problem scope.

Our research intends to examine what authorities can do to help counteract a multi-faceted culture of silence that still prevails. For example, a major point of the research will be to look at how, when a victim does not want to file a complaint against a family member or other, agencies and authorities can work together to provide sufficient and appropriate care so as to support and bring healing to the victim, when this one wants the offender to receive treatment as well (not be incarcerated), and makes this a non-negotiable condition for disclosure and discussion with authorities. Basically, the question is, 'Do we need to increase reporting rates to help identify better ways to address the problem?' The answer to this question is both 'Yes and no'. Indeed we do, or other wise we will, yet again, fall into the trap of not being able to clearly identify it. However, we know that we are currently stuck in our current reporting situation. What we need then, is to shift the 'need for reporting' to the 'need for disclosure'. Our research will not aim at increasing current reporting rates for reporting

sakes. We 'simply' need to know what is happening, in order to help design better answers. We acknowledge that our key concern and objectives are to find the most effective means of protecting and supporting the physical and emotional wellbeing of abused victims and ultimately reduce abuse incidence rates by developing new processes in addressing the problem; but we also realise that for some victims, current ways of reporting may be harmful and actually counter-productive to our intentions. In stating this, in any case of abuse, we do not deny that a crime has been committed and we realise our responsibilities as researchers, under the Australian Government National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, but rather focus attention of the fact that individual harm has been inflicted. This way of thinking clearly defines the restorative justice paradigm. Through this approach, perpetrator punishment is not precluded, but harm and reparation do become the 'all consuming' foci of the restoration process instead.

To that effect, and considering respondents' positive opinion about restorative practices, we will look at how these might be embedded in NSW judicial and policing practices, according to, for example, the model of the Four Circles Hollow Water circles (Buller, 2001). This Canadian initiative is considered a model of best practice in addressing sexual abuse in regional and indigenous communities, where the social fabric is closely knit and somehow resembles Australian regional communities. It is said to appropriately address issues of shame and to recreate a feeling of belonging amongst traumatised parties. We will therefore look at various international programs that aim at addressing problems of sexual abuse within communities and in parallel to or within traditional justice mechanisms. Although this is a research program that will, undoubtedly, be time consuming and strenuous in the area of addressing police practice and government policy, we hope it will be of tremendous help in not only helping victims recover from the abuse and the consequential trauma, but also in getting a better picture of what is considered one of the most problematic criminal issues of our time.

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APPENDIX A – Some Definitions of Child sexual abuse in Australia

New South Wales

- There are a number of definitions of child sexual abuse. The NSW Child Protection Council broadly defines it as: 'Contact or interaction between a child and an older person in which the child is used as an object of gratification for the older person's sexual needs or desires and is unable to give consent, due to the unequal power in the relationship' (Kennedy, 'Reporting Suspected Child Abuse' 1995 p.10). The NSW 2000 Draft Interagency guidelines for child protection intervention includes 'sexual threat' imposed on a child or young person in its definition and adds that coercion, either physical or psychological is intrinsic to child sexual abuse and is what differentiates it from consensual peer sexual activity (Commission for Children and Young People 2000 p.34).

Coorey, 2001

Victoria

What is sexual assault?

Sexual assault is an abuse of your rights. Women and children are most often the victims of sexual assault and men are almost always responsible (the 'perpetrators').

Sexual assault is any unwanted sexual behaviour that causes humiliation, pain, fear or intimidation. It includes rape, incest, child abuse, and unwanted kissing and touching. It includes behaviour that does not involve actual touching. For example, forcing someone to watch pornography or masturbation is also sexual assault.

Some behaviours may not be criminal, such as unwanted sexual comments and staring.

Victoria Legal Aid, 2007

Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault

What is childhood sexual assault?

The different state and territory governments use their own legal definitions, but child sexual assault is commonly considered to be any sexual activity between a child and an adult, or older person. This can include fondling genitals, masturbation, oral sex, vaginal or anal penetration by a penis, finger or any other object, fondling of breasts, voyeurism, exhibitionism and exposing or involving the child in pornography.

Many definitions of child sexual assault specify the age difference between the perpetrator and the child or young adult, as it is considered that young people are not able to make a free and informed decision (that is, consent) to engage in such sexual activities because of their lack of relative knowledge and power. However, concerns have been raised that definitions that specify age difference between the perpetrator and child or young person fail to take into account non-consensual sexual activity between peers (such as sibling sexual assault, and sexual assault and date-rape perpetrated by adolescents).

Heenan, 2005