Executive Summary

'Lots of adults don't care enough about kids and this stuff is going to keep happening. Until they see us as having good ideas and believe us [when things go wrong] nothing will change.' (MX-2)

History tells us that children and young people are at risk of sexual abuse within institutional contexts. This is partly due to their relative powerlessness and inherent vulnerability, but equally to a lack of, or inadequate, systems and structures to protect children from unsafe people and respond when safety concerns are raised. Although studies have identified better practice approaches to protecting children in institutions, many have failed to consider children and young people's views on what they need to be safe and how they would like institutions and the wider community to respond when safety concerns emerge.

In 2014, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse commissioned the Institute of Child Protection Studies (ICPS) at the Australian Catholic University, with colleagues from the Queensland University of Technology and Griffith University, to develop an understanding of how children perceive safety and consider it within institutional contexts. Specifically, this study explores:

a) how children and young people conceptualise and perceive safety;
b) children and young people's views on what gives rise to these perceptions;
c) children and young people's perceptions of safety within institutions;
d) what children and young people consider is already being done to respond to safety issues and risks in institutions;
e) what children and young people consider should be done to respond to safety issues in institutions.

This study is being conducted in three stages:

1. Planning;
2. Conceptualising safety;
3. Considering children's experiences of safety and institutional responses.

This report provides an overview of the major themes emerging from Stage 2 of the project, which conducted 10 focus groups with pre-schoolers, children and young people in the ACT, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. One hundred and twenty-one children and young people, ranging in age from 4 to 18 years, participated in focus group discussions in a variety of institutional and jurisdictional contexts. Participants interacted with early learning centres, schools, sporting groups, holiday camps, church groups, out-of-home care agencies and hospitals. Three reference groups provided advice on the methodology and methods, and trialled proposed tools.

Findings from these focus groups will help inform the development of an online survey that will gauge children and young people's experiences of safety in a variety of institutional contexts, and determine how well they believe institutions are responding to their needs.

Talking to children and young people about safety and responses to their safety needs

This study is premised on the view that children and young people understand and experience safety in different ways to adults and that without an appreciation of what children and young people need to be and feel safe, responses may fail to adequately respond to their concerns.

To enable the study to be carried out in an ethical and appropriate way, ICPS spent some time considering the sensitivities related to issues such as safety and child sexual abuse and, in partnership with the Royal Commission and Adults' Advisory Group, developed a methodology that afforded participants a high degree of choice and control, physical and emotional safety, and checks to ensure they did not experience any distress through their participation. The development of the methodology benefited greatly from the active participation of three reference groups of children and young people who were involved in every stage of the project from the clarification of its scope through to its analysis and dissemination. The Australian Catholic University's Human Research Ethics Committee granted the study ethical approval.

How do children conceptualise safety and a lack of it?

Participants differentiated between feeling safe and being safe, and defined safety in relation to how they felt and how they behaved, as well as the things that surrounded them. For example, they described safety as the absence of unsafe people, behaviours, activities, things, dangerous items and other threats. They often used synonyms such as 'protection', 'security' and 'looked after'; feelings such as 'comfortable' and 'relaxed'; and personal characteristics such as 'confident' and 'resilient'. As such, they defined safety in relation to how they felt and how they behaved in response to a person, place or experience, as well as the things that surrounded them.

Participants defined 'unsafe' in relation to danger, risks and a lack of safe people and strategies to keep them safe. Like safety, they often talked about being unsafe in relation to feelings: of being frightened, worried, anxious and angry about their circumstances.

Children and young people identified risks such as being hurt, being abducted, being bullied, being lost, being forced to do unsafe things that they didn't want to do, encountering creepy adults or experiencing racism.

Children and young people generally saw the world outside of the spaces, people and activities that they were familiar with and trusted as being unsafe or, at least, as being potentially unsafe. They had some faith in caring professionals (teachers, doctors, the police and others) but did not automatically assume that any adult was safe until they got to know them. Adults who didn't take responsibility for children and young people's safety, particularly when they assumed a supervisory or support role, were seen as unsafe.

Participants often characterised safety in relation to others: they felt most safe when they had adults and peers around them whom they trusted and who would protect them from danger; that they had faith in these people because they knew that they cared about children; that they knew them well enough to identify when they were unsafe; that they took time to be with children and took their worries and concerns seriously, acting on them when appropriate.

Adults, on the other hand, who were unpredictable or who did not demonstrate adult-like behaviours were also seen as unsafe. This included those who were under the influence of alcohol or other drugs, people with mental health issues, people who were angry, people like magicians and clowns, adults with poor boundaries (who got too close or acted inappropriately) and people who acted erratically. Adults who were different to adults that children knew were also seen as potentially dangerous – people from foreign countries, homeless people, people with different religions and people who were doing things which adults wouldn't usually do.

Adults were also unsafe when they used their power or influence against children and young people. This included adults who bullied children, those who displayed favouritism, those who threatened children and made them feel powerless.

Participants, particularly in the older groups, increasingly felt that it was their own responsibility to keep safe and to deal with their safety concerns. Most identified strategies for 'blocking out' their concerns (by hiding in their rooms, playing loud music and distracting themselves), for escaping unsafe situations and for managing unsafe people.

Familiarity and predictability were key characteristics of safe people, places, activities, times and things. Children and young people felt most safe when they knew what was happening, why it was happening and how to navigate any emerging safety issues. Choice and control were also seen as enabling children to feel safe or less unsafe in unsafe circumstances and environments.

Power was an issue highlighted in most groups. Often it was adults (such as teachers but also coaches, older young people and police) who were identified as people who use their physical presence and their power as adults to intimidate children and young people, particularly those who were challenging their authority. Children and young people felt that to be safe they needed to feel a level of power and control. They felt that when children were being hurt they would feel powerless and that as well as responding to a situation, adults needed to give children some power so that they wouldn't remain in a powerless position.

Children and young people were quick to identify things that were unsafe: be they things that could hurt them (weapons, wild animals, fire and explosives, broken things, cars); things that scared them (scary movies, news reports, violent games); things that could lure them to unsafe places or people (white vans, lollies); and media through which unsafe people could contact them (the internet, mobile phones).

Spaces and places that were mainly for adults (such as pubs, businesses, nightclubs and shops) were seen as unsafe for kids in that children and young people were often unwanted there, because adults acted differently there than in more child-friendly spaces, because children's needs and wishes weren't a priority and because (in the case of pubs and nightclubs etc.) adults would act unpredictably. Public spaces were often seen by children and young people (particularly those who were younger) as not being child-friendly – particularly bus interchanges, near government housing, at large sporting matches and when there were big groups of adults.

Young people talked about the fact that sometimes they sought out unsafe situations, environments or activities due to the thrill, challenge or affirmation they received from others. They did highlight the fact that it was reasonable for young people to place themselves at risk but that it was unreasonable for adults (or their peers) to do this when there were potentially negative outcomes.

Children and young people reported that they thought they often understood safety in similar ways to adults. However, they felt that there were also differences. Children and young people stressed the fact that although being safe and feeling safe were related and interlinked; they needed to be understood differently. They believed that adults were often more focused on the observable threats surrounding children, rather than how children feel and what they need to feel safe. They believed that adults sometimes did not recognise or value children's concerns and that this was problematic. Without an appreciation of children's perceived safety needs, participants believed that institutions' responses were limited.

Participants reported that there were times when they were safe but felt unsafe, because:

- they held fears that were under-appreciated by adults and left unresolved;
- they were aware of risks but not of the ways that adults were managing those risks and protecting them from harm;
- they felt as though there was no one around them to protect them;
- people, places and things around them were strange or unfamiliar.

Similarly, there were times when they realised that they were unsafe but did not experience it this way. This occurred when:

- they were ill-informed about risks;
- adults informed them of safety issues but not how they were managing them;
- they misjudged people and places;
- they successfully used strategies to 'switch off' their feelings;
- they failed to see the consequences of their risky behaviours.

Without allowing children to better understand what real risks exist, and to allow children to raise their concerns, participants felt that adults enabled children to be in vulnerable positions, and ultimately, to be and feel unsafe.

They also believed that sometimes adults failed to appreciate children's feelings of safety, and in not appreciating them, tried to quell rather than explore children's fears and the ways they would like them to be managed. Participants felt that adults based their assessments on their own past experiences, or their judgments of people, places and activities, and were not as good at picking up on their own feelings or children's reactions.

What gives rise to perceptions of safety?

Participants were asked to consider how they and children and young people of different ages assessed safety and how this differed to adults. Children and young people suggested that they often based their assessment on: their gut feelings (towards a person, a place or an interaction); previous experience; the way that others seemed to be behaving in a space; things they'd heard from other children and young people, their parents and trusted adults; what they'd seen in the media (be it on TV or in the movies); and things that they had been taught at school.

Older participants believed that younger children generally assessed risk based on what was immediately in front of them, whereas they placed the risk in context and related it to past experience. They were concerned that adults didn't appreciate the extent to which kids worried and believed that adults failed to acknowledge children's worries and fears. Older children felt that teenagers were more likely to put themselves at risk because they enjoyed the thrill while children their age were more cautious.

Children and young people believed that adults primarily assessed risk based on their experiences as a child. This, they believed, meant that adults would minimise children's concerns rather than recognise that what children experience now is different to what it was in the past. Some participants thought that adults were more anxious (and over-protective) of children because they were more aware of the risks than in previous generations. They felt that this led to children and young people having less freedom than before.

Perceptions of safety in institutions

Children and young people were mostly engaged with schools and sporting groups. However, some had involvement with school holiday programs, church and youth groups, hospitals, residential care and after school care.

In these environments, children and young people most often raised concerns related to bullying (by peers or by adults), of coming across 'creepy adults' who could hurt them or make them uncomfortable, being pressured into doing things they didn't want to do (that had negative consequences), of being hurt because adults weren't doing their job, or of the institution failing to protect them from external threats (such as kidnapping, road accidents or violent strangers).

Most participants reported feeling safe in their schools but talked about experiences in previous or other schools that were unsafe. Children and young people generally believed that institutions were not effective in dealing with issues such as bullying or harassment but could identify things that were in place to support them.

A small number of participants voiced a general lack of faith in institutions, and felt that they prioritised the needs of the institution before children and young people. Children and young people generally believed that the institution should side with children and young people in the first instance, take their concerns more seriously, and act on children and young people's wishes until the investigation process was complete.

Characteristics of a safe institution

Participants generally agreed that institutions were safe when a number of conditions were met. Being able to see how these institutions were demonstrating these conditions was seen as crucial, in helping children not only be safe but also feel safe.

- **The institution has a focus on helping children and young people**: This is demonstrated by the way that adults interact with children. There are things that children and young people can do there. There are signs that children are welcome (such as child-friendly posters, pictures, and play areas) and other children and young people feel safe in that environment. (This is demonstrated by other children's behaviour.) Children in these institutions feel valued and respected.

- **The institution values children and young people and their participation:** This is demonstrated in the way that adults and children and young people interact; in the value the institution places on understanding children's fears and concerns, their needs and wishes; in the mechanisms they have in place for children and young people to complain, to shape strategies and to provide feedback. The institution makes demonstrable changes on children and young people's advice.

- **The institution provides a safe environment for children and young people**: Children and young people felt most safe in ordered and child-friendly environments where things like broken glass or equipment and mess were absent. Physical signs such as fences, security cameras and locks (when they are about locking unsafe people out rather than monitoring or controlling children) were seen as valuable. Participants felt that the best way of determining whether an environment is safe is to observe how children behave there.

- **The institution proactively protects children and young people from unsafe people and experiences by:** identifying issues early, being informed of potential threats and hazards (including things that scare or make children and young people feel unsafe), actively communicating with children and young people and their safety concerns, employing safe and trusted adults, and being open to monitoring by an external agency.

- **The institution employs safe and trusted adults who:** care about children and young people, act in appropriate ways, are available when children and young people need them, are able to talk about sensitive issues, prioritise children's needs and concerns over the needs of other adults and institutions, and who do what they say they will do. These adults aren't 'creepy', they don't play favourites but instead treat children equally, they don't bully children or use their power to intimidate or belittle children, they monitor their peers and have been assessed as being appropriate people to work with children and young people.

Effort is taken for children and young people to participate in deciding who is safe and unsafe and reviewing their assessment.

- **The institution is open to monitoring by an external agency:** that reviews the policies and practices that are in place, which engages children and young people about how things are going and monitors the institution to ensure that issues for children and young people are being addressed.

Advice to adults on how to best support children and young people

Participants gave examples of times when adults helped them to manage their safety concerns and when they stepped in to protect them from harm. They reflected, however, that there were a number of things that adults did not always do well and believed that even when an adult's natural reaction was to intervene and to take control of a situation it is important for them to:

- actively listen – to ensure that they fully appreciate children and young people's thoughts, feelings, needs and ideas on how things might be dealt with;
- help the child or young person to determine the nature and seriousness of the situation, so they can build their skills and respond in future situations when adults aren't around;
- help the child or young person to develop their skills to manage unsafe situations;
- offer solutions that are realistic and respond to the child or young person's concerns.

Participants recognised that there were a number of things that kept children and young people from seeking and receiving support for their problems. These included feelings of shame and embarrassment, a lack of confidence in adults and their ability to help, fears of retribution, fears of things getting worse due to an adult's intervention or negative past experiences.

They felt that unhelpful adults were those who aren't accessible to children or young people, don't have the knowledge to assess a situation, aren't comfortable in dealing with painful experiences, don't believe it is their job to help kids or believe that someone else is responding to the situation. Participants felt that these adults made seeking support a significant challenge for children and young people.

Key messages from children and young people for the Royal Commission

Children and young people were asked to think about all the things they had discussed within the focus groups and summarise them into a set of key messages for the Royal Commission. Key messages included:

- Most adults are doing well. Children and young people appreciated adults' efforts to keep them safe.
- Things aren't as bad as many adults believe. Children and young people are safer than many imagine and have developed skills and strategies to manage unsafe people, places and situations.
- It is important for the media to promote the ways that children and young people are being kept safe rather than just focusing on dangers and problems. Children and young people need to know about safety issues, but without an appreciation of how likely and how dangerous something is, and how it's being managed, children experience unnecessary stress and anxiety.
- Some adults need to develop their skills and institutions need to better deal with some safety concerns.

- Children and young people's safety needs and wishes need to be seen as a priority. They should be prioritised over those of adults and institutions to ensure that children and young people are protected from harm.
- Children and young people want to be involved in identifying and dealing with safety issues and believe that, in partnership with adults and institutions, issues such as child sexual abuse can be better dealt with.
- Children and young people would like to have more engagement with the Royal Commission.

Full report available at:
https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/file-list/research_report_-_taking_us_seriously_children_and_young_people_talk_about_safety_and_institutional_responses_to_their_safety_concerns_-_causes.pdf