

TEN YEARS OF SURVEYING THE PUBLIC ABOUT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE:

RESULTS OF ANALYSIS

**Executive Summary**

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**Report Prepared by**

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Terry Amick, M.P.H.

P.O. Box 2781

Amherst, MA 01004-2781

**Report Prepared for**

.....  
Stop It Now!

351 Pleasant St., #B- 319

Northampton MA 01060

[www.StopItNow.org](http://www.StopItNow.org)

## **Executive Summary**

Through its affiliated partners in six states, Stop It Now! participated in ten random digit dialed (RDD) telephone surveys conducted by professional market research firms between 1997 and 2007 with a total sample population of 5,241 adults. This report summarizes and compares the data from these surveys.

Local Stop It Now! programs (“sites) had some autonomy in which questions to ask but were encouraged to use the same core questions so that a national database could be established to compare to other research results and to further the field of knowledge. However, not all sites asked all of the core questions, which resulted in different sample sizes for many questions.

Weighting of the data was explored but disregarded since the sample is fairly comparable to the most recent U.S. Census data and because most variables showed strong statistical relationships regardless of weighting.

### **Description of the Sample Population**

About six out of ten survey respondents are women. Most respondents are in the 35-44 (21%) or 45-54 (21%) age categories. Racial proportions of the survey sample (Whites, 75%; African Americans, 17%, other races, 8%) are fairly similar to the U.S. Census. About one quarter of respondents have achieved a high school diploma, one quarter have attended at least some college, and one quarter have a bachelor’s degree. About half of respondents are married and a quarter of them are single.

### **Results**

#### Respondents’ Knowledge of the Term “Child Sexual Abuse”

Nearly all respondents had heard of the term “child sexual abuse.” Primarily due to the “ceiling effect” (nearly 100% agreement), there are no differences in how different demographic or survivorship groups answered this question.

#### Perception of Child Sexual Abuse as a Major Problem

Slightly fewer than half (44%) of respondents feel child sexual abuse is a major problem in their state or city. Those who are more likely agree that this is a major problem include women, non-Whites, those less educated, those living without a partner, younger respondents, and survivors of child sexual abuse.

## Information and Communication

Nearly 90% of respondents had heard on the radio or television, or had read about child sexual abuse in the past year. There are no demographic differences based on whether or not they had heard reports concerning child sexual abuse. When compared to the question regarding whether or not child sexual abuse is a major problem, 26% of those who reported that they had heard or read in the past year about child sexual abuse said child sexual abuse is a major problem. Only 6% of those who had not heard or read about child sexual abuse felt that it is a major problem.

Respondents were asked if they had talked to a friend, relative, or neighbor about child sexual abuse in the past year. Fifty-three percent of women had talked to someone, while 40% of men had. Overall, about 48% of respondents had talked to someone about child sexual abuse.

## Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse among Respondents

Survey respondents were asked if they, themselves, had been sexually abused as children. Women (29%) and non-Whites (30%) are more likely to have been sexually abused as children than have men (14%) and Whites (20%). In addition, people who describe themselves as living alone (single, not married, widowed, and not living with a partner) are more likely to have been abused as a child than those who are living with a partner (married or living with a partner; 25% to 21%, respectively).

## Respondents' Awareness of Adults Who Sexually Abuse Children and Action to Intervene

About 8% of the 3,421 respondents knew during the previous year of another adult who was probably (or may have been) sexually abusing a child. Survivors, more than those with no childhood abuse experience, parents or guardians with children living at home, and younger adults are most likely to know about or suspect an adult who has sexually abused a child. Of those who had the experience of knowing an adult they thought was sexually abusing a child, the majority of people (65%) say that they intervened in a suspected child sexual abuse situation in some way. Twenty-two percent stated that they did nothing.

## Respondents' Perceived Intention to Intervene in Various Child Sexual Abuse Situations

Almost all respondents say they would intervene in situations of child sexual abuse. In fact, most people interviewed said they would do something (91 to 99%). Depending upon the situation, they are most likely to call the police or other authority, or confront or talk to the offending adult.

There are a small number of people who say they would do nothing ranging from 0.2 to 1.4%. This compares to 22% who said they did nothing in a real life event (see above). Social desirability may be a factor here. There is social pressure for the respondent to say that they would intervene in some way if they encountered a child sexual abuse situation.

It is clear that when abuse is considered definite, or when it is from outside the respondents' family, the course of action is to call authorities and report it. If the abuse is within the family

and or only suspected, respondents are most likely to say they would talk to or confront the suspected offender.

#### Attitudes Related to Child Sexual Abuse

Program sites asked respondents to react (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree) to eleven attitude statements. Some sites did not ask some of the questions; therefore, the questions have different sample totals.

Most respondents overall agree with the statement, “Most sexually abused children are abused by someone they know.” In fact, 95% of respondents either strongly or somewhat agree. However, statistical tests do show some variation in responses based on demographic variables. For example, those who agree with the statement include men more than women, Whites more than non-Whites, more highly educated more than less educated, and sexual abuse survivors more than non-abused.

Almost two-thirds (64%) of respondents agree with the statement, “Many sexually abused children are abused by other children or adolescents.” Women are more likely than men, non-Whites more than Whites, higher educated more likely than less educated, and survivors more likely than non-abused, to agree with this statement.

Nearly three-quarters of respondents agree that “It is likely that adults who sexually abuse children live in your community.” Women, younger respondents, Whites, more highly educated, and abuse survivors are more likely to agree with this statement.

The majority of respondents say that “A community should have the right to say whether or not someone who has been convicted of child sexual abuse is able to live in their community.” Laws vary state-by-state and even city-by-city regarding this issue. Clearly people want to have some control over who lives in their community when it comes to sex offenders. Three of the demographic variables showed significant results based on how respondents answered this question. Women, Whites, and less educated are more likely to agree, and agree more strongly, with this statement.

About two-thirds (68%) of respondents agree with the statement, “Some people who sexually abuse children would like to get help to stop abusing children.” For this statement, respondents under 56 years of age, Whites more than non-Whites, and higher educated more than less educated, tend to agree with this statement.

Depending on the demographic cohort being considered, between 18% and 28% of all respondents feel that, “Adults who sexually abuse children can stop if they want to.” Proportionately more men, younger respondents, non-Whites, and less educated respondents agree with this statement. Survivorship status has no effect on responses.

About half of all survey respondents agree that, “Child sexual abusers can stop abusing if they get treatment.” Results show that men, younger respondents, and non-Whites are more likely to agree with the statement. There are mixed results for the level of education variable (lower

education more likely to strongly agree, higher education more likely to somewhat agree) and no significant outcomes based on survivorship.

More than two-thirds (69%) of respondents agree with the statement, “Treatment programs can help abusers stop their sexual abuse of children.” Education level is the only demographic variable for which statistical tests showed a difference in how this question was answered, with those with a high school diploma or less more likely to strongly disagree.

When asked to respond to the statement, “Sexual abusers can be rehabilitated and should be able to get a second chance.” only 10% strongly agreed with this statement while 37% somewhat agreed. This question was only asked by one site and for only one survey (N=600). A substantial proportion (18%) said that they don’t know how they feel. It is interesting that respondents who have survived sexual abuse from their childhood answer this question almost identically with those who have had no childhood sexual abuse experience.

An overwhelming majority (96%) of respondents agree that, “Child sexual abusers who are in prison for the sexual abuse of a child should get treatment while they are there.” This response was not unexpected since there is little threat posed. Even respondents who feel that treatment is not helpful say that treatment should be given in prison. Of those who do not think that treatment programs can help abusers stop their abuse, 90% still feel that people in prison for child sexual abuse should get treatment while they are in prison.

Slightly over half (54%) of respondents agree that “Sexual abusers who are caught should be dealt with more strictly than sexual abusers who turn themselves in voluntarily.” Male, older, and more highly educated respondents are more likely to agree with this statement.

### Sex Offender Registry

Respondents were asked if they had ever used the sex offender registry and how effective they think the registry is in preventing child sexual abuse. The 2007 Georgia survey (N = 600) was the only site that asked these questions.

There are several demographic differences based on who has used the sex offender registry. For example, women are more likely than men (39% to 28%) and Whites more likely than African-Americans (38% to 27%) to have used the registry. Respondents with children at home are more than three times more likely to have used the sex offender registry than those with no children at home (58% to 18%).

There are relationships between respondents’ attitudes and their use of the sex offender registry. For example, 42% of respondents who feel there are adults in their community who abuse children have used the sex offender registry compared to 17% who disagree that there are child sexual abusers nearby.

Most respondents feel that sex offender registration policy is either very effective (16%) or somewhat effective (52%) in preventing child sexual abuse, together representing about two-

thirds of the sample. There is no difference between those who have used the registry and those who have not in how effective they feel the registry is in preventing child sexual abuse.

#### Familiarity with Stop It Now!

As a social marketing organization Stop It Now! is continuously interested in knowing if their name and message is recognized among the general public. The name varied based on location (for example, the Georgia site goes by the name Prevent Child Abuse Georgia, the Philadelphia site, Stop It Now! Philadelphia, etc.). Respondents were asked how familiar they were with the organization named. Of the 3,440 people who answered this question, most (92%) are not familiar with Stop It Now! This question was answered by respondents in four states across seven surveys. Since evaluators used the entire state (except in the case of Philadelphia) as the survey pool, it is not surprising that so few people were familiar with Stop It Now!.