

PartnerSPEAK Research Report



PartnerSPEAK.org.au
stop pornographic exploitation against kids

Women's experiences of learning about the involvement of a partner possessing child abuse material in Australia

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2015

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The researchers would like to extend a huge thank you to the women who participated in this research. Without their willingness to share their stories this research would not have been possible. We have been humbled by their stories and generosity in sharing often traumatic experiences in the hope that this research might improve the paths for other women whose partners accessed, possessed, used and sometimes produced child abuse material.

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PartnerSPEAK Research Report: Women's experiences of learning about the involvement of a partner possessing child abuse material in Australia

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FOREWORD

Natalie Walker

Founder of PartnerSPEAK

This important report is a call for action. To our knowledge this published research is the first of its kind worldwide, exploring the experiences of and impact on the non-offending partners of people involved with child exploitation material. In this pilot project, the voices are few but they are consistent. Partners, and their families, are experiencing significant trauma with a distinct lack of support often coupled with ostracism and isolation.

PartnerSPEAK is deeply grateful to the research team, Dr. Marg Liddell and Professor S. Caroline Taylor AM and RMIT University (Melbourne), for undertaking this research. Hours of pro bono contribution and deep personal commitment made this research possible. Nine partners were interviewed in this pilot research report. Within this small group of participants from diverse backgrounds, we learn that some parts of their experiences as affected partners have been consistently and strikingly similar. Clearly this pilot study exposes only the tip of the iceberg.

The research participants, who volunteered to be involved in this study, shared difficult, sensitive experiences with the research team to raise awareness and better understanding of this hidden issue, so that other affected partners and children can be better supported by various agencies and their own community during this extremely difficult time. My deepest thanks go to the research participants for their courage in sharing their personal and traumatic experiences for the future benefit of other families in the community who may suddenly find themselves in similar situations. These participants have broken the silence on this growing issue and shared their most personal experiences. We must value their brave and important contribution and build on this initial research by funding and supporting further research with a broader cross-section of affected partners.

The findings of this report provide insight into the specific needs of affected partners, and allow us to pursue the most appropriate and beneficial response. Support groups such as PartnerSPEAK, law enforcement agencies, government departments and the community sector all have critical roles in supporting affected partners. By listening to partners and learning from their experiences, we become much better informed when planning and implementing best practice. Let us seriously consider and respond to the recommendations made within this report.

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Executive Summary

We are grateful to all of the women who agreed to be interviewed in this research for their willingness to tell their stories to researchers whom they did not know. They openly stated that they wanted to tell their stories so that the paths for other women learning about the involvement of a partner possessing child abuse material would be less traumatic.

Their stories are very different; with some finding their partner's child abuse material themselves, others experiencing a police raid, or their partner being apprehended at work. Some left their partners; some continued to live with their partners or continued to support a long-time partner. Some reported relatively good experiences with authorities whilst others reported a negative experience. Every woman reported irrevocable impacts as a consequence of their partner's illegal activities upon their lives and those of other family members. Some women had the experience of family members and friends minimising the activities of their partner and reported feeling 'judged' by others for adopting the stance they did with regard to their partner's possession and use of child abuse material.

The stories of these women, as told to us in interviews, make clear the distress and turmoil inflicted upon them and their extended families as a consequence of their partner's conduct. They also reveal strength and courage in dealing with and coming through such traumatic events. Most participants reported mental health issues, with many seeming to experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). There is no doubt that for many, these are long-term issues.

The loss of memories, such as photographs on computers, often compounded most women's views that they had "lost their life." This research will, we hope, pave the way for better responses to people who experience a partner's use of child abuse material. We also have a responsibility to ensure that the community has more understanding and awareness of the experiences of people whose partners use child abuse material, both at the time of the detection or investigation, or in the future as they attempt to come to terms with this offending.

The experiences of the women in our sample have much to teach and guide criminal investigators and those who provide treatment programs to offenders. From our interviews with these women we gained insight into the behaviours of their partners as well as critical insights into the behaviours and activities that aroused suspicion among those women who went on to discover the child abuse material. In addition, this study revealed the extent of secondary victimisation experienced by the participants to varying degrees. This is an important consideration both for counsellors and also for police to take into consideration.

The first section of the research report includes an introduction to the research, a brief scan of the literature particularly related to definitions and key issues related to child abuse material, and the methodology used including ethics approvals. We hoped to conduct 12 interviews and received queries from 10 women expressing interest to be interviewed. One participant was not suitable for interview given that her partner's use child abuse material was undergoing a criminal investigation. Nine women were interviewed, two of whom lived interstate.

Profile of the participants in the research

The ages of the participants ranged from late 20s to mid-60s. One of the women was in her late 20s when interviewed for the research and four of the women were in their early or mid-30s; one was in her early 40s; two were in their 50s and one was in her 60s. For the young women in the sample, the discovery of the child abuse material occurred when one of the young women was in her early-20s and three were in their mid to late-20s. Eight of the women were married.

All of their partners were male. Four had divorced their partners post discovery of the child abuse material and three participants were still living with their partners. Two of these indicated they planned to leave in the future.

Six of the women had children when their partners were arrested or investigated for the use of child abuse material. Two participants were the subject of a child protection investigation. One of these participants and her children were forced to leave the family home following the detection of her partner's use of child abuse material. Eight of the participants were employed at the time of the detection of the child abuse material.

The detection of the partner's use of child abuse material

This was different across the women we talked to. What was the same though, was the shock they experienced in either finding the material themselves; or having the police investigate or raid the house for the child abuse material. The reactions of the participants' partners when the child abuse material was investigated were very different. Three said that their offending partners expressed relief at being found out. Most initially denied their use of child abuse material, some expressed remorse, and all but one of the participants referred to the offending partners blaming either them or others for their use of child abuse material.

Participants' reaction to their partner's use of child abuse material

Most participants were emotional when discussing their partner's use of child abuse material during the interviews. Some cried constantly, some struggled for composure and regularly stopped what they were saying to regain control of their emotions. Two were very controlled throughout the interview but it was clear that they were still struggling to come to terms with the detection of their partner's use of child abuse material.

The range of responses at the detection of child abuse material were shock, hurt, anger, disbelief, extreme trauma, depression and feelings of responsibility for their partner's use of child abuse material. Five of the participants talked about their feelings of a link between their partner's use of child abuse material and their partner's childhood abuse. There was a considerable amount of guilt and/or feelings of responsibility expressed by all participants about their partner's use of child abuse material. Two participants initially thought the detection of the child abuse material could not be true.

What was also noticeable was that the long-term impact of the traumatic experience of participants sometimes resulted in contradictory feelings and comments that suggested that they continued to be affected by the experience.

Police response to the participants' partner's use of child abuse material

This was very varied. For two of our participants, the police took no immediate action when they reported their discovery. In both situations there was either very limited or no investigation. Both participants were appalled by the lack of police response. One participant felt that she was regarded as a vengeful wife because her report to police was made once she had left her partner and felt safe enough to do so. Upon making her report she was asked questions relating to her now being estranged from her partner and she felt that police viewed her complaint as one stemming from an ulterior motive. Her report to police was not investigated at all. The other participant referred to the police interviewing her partner but not examining his phone or computer.

In contrast three participants thought the initial police response was very good, but for two this was marred by the lack of support and follow up after the investigation commenced. Two participants felt the police response was very disappointing. This was related to no information being provided to them about their partner's use of child abuse material or about the investigation. Four of the participants did not receive any ongoing information from the police about the investigation, court adjournments and hearings.

The majority of the participants felt that the police lacked knowledge about what they were experiencing or where to refer them for help. Participants talked about the length of time the police kept their computers as well as the traumatic impact they experienced by the removal of all personal details including family photographs.

Sentences that the offending partners received for accessing child abuse material

Some of the participants were unclear about the sentences their offending partners received. This may have had something to do with the ongoing reaction and trauma to the raid or the investigation of their partners accessing child abuse material; the lengthy time that some investigations took; then the numerous adjournments that often followed.

One of the participants' partners was placed on a community services order and five were given custodial sentences. The longest sentence known of an offending partner was 18 months. Some participants felt that the sentence their offending partner received was too harsh and other participants felt it was too lenient. All participants felt that their partners or ex-partners being on the Sex Offenders Register was important as it meant that they were being monitored over an extended period of time.

Family tension, disruption and loss of friendships

There was considerable tension between many of the participants and their families. One felt that family and friends closed ranks against her to protect her ex-partner, despite one of these friends also discovering child abuse material on her ex-partner's computer. Some referred to family and friends not treating the issue as serious, while others felt that family sometimes blamed them for their partner's use of child abuse material.

Some participants referred to losing friendships or not being able to make friends because of fear that if they discussed the issue they would be further alienated. One participant summed this up saying she had "...lost her family... lost everything... I am ostracised, stigmatised, marginalised... Not a lot of people want to talk to me about this or be friends." Some lost contact with family and there was reference to family tensions when children needed to live with two different families after the family breakdown.

Minimisation related to their partner's use of child abuse material

Comments from family and friends were often dismissive of the use of child abuse material with comments such as "He was only looking" or "They are only pictures, so what is the harm". Of concern is that people watching videos or looking at pictures do not connect that in order for this material to be available, they have been responsible for commissioning serious abuse of children.

All of the women interviewed were cognisant that the 'pictures' were the lives of children being abused. Many felt that the relatives of their partners ignored the fact the images were of children being raped, abused and tortured. Many participants were concerned that their friends continued to allow the offender to have access to their children.

All were troubled by their partner or ex-partner's potential to continue to use child abuse material. Some spoke of their anxiety when their partners formed relationships and then remarried, but when the participant warned the new partner of the ex-partner's use of child abuse material, this warning was disregarded.

The child abuse material being used and produced

For women who discovered the child abuse material on their partner's computer/s, the material ranged from images of babies and infants to young pre-pubescent and adolescent children. Some of the material involved pictures and videos depicting violence and torture.

Two participants experienced overwhelming distress and shock when they discovered that their partners had images of other children known to them. For one participant, the images were of neighbouring children and for another her own younger family member who had stayed at their home. In these latter examples, the partners of these women were not only purchasing and hoarding child abuse material but were also producing child abuse material themselves and were accessing children known and/or related to them to do so.

Lack of support

Many of the participants in this research reported that they felt alone, abandoned and unsupported. This compounded the impact of the detection and investigation of their partner's use of child abuse material. Two participants commented that the stigma of divorce could have been viewed by others as worse than the stigma of abusing children.

One participant felt that there was little support for partners of people who accessed child abuse material. She undertook a large search and said that while "there's a lot of information for the victims and lots of stories and books... there's nothing for [affected] partners." Other participants talked about the lack of knowledge about child abuse material specifically and that this compounded their isolation and trauma.

Many craved for someone to talk to who understood what they were experiencing and could provide practical non-judgmental help. The latter comment is critical as the majority of participants in our study spoke to us of others' explicit or implied blame and negative judgments towards themselves upon learning of their partner's actions.

Some women felt they were judged as either being the *cause* or as someone who must have *known* of such activity. In either case the women felt they were being judged and tainted by association rather than being understood as a collateral victim to their partner's criminal conduct.

Contact with PartnerSPEAK¹

All of the participants talked of the help that they received from PartnerSPEAK. Comments were made about feeling validated, supported by people who understood their circumstances and about not being judged. Of concern however is that most participants stumbled upon the PartnerSPEAK website after making statements online that they were "going crazy" or words to that effect. It could be assumed that many people who are dealing with a partner's use of child abuse material might not access this site.

Future strategies have been organised into **Recommendations** see next page.

¹ PartnerSPEAK is an online peer-to-peer support forum for people ('affected partners') concerned about child exploitation material viewed by their partners, spouses or family members. Following this research's completion, PartnerSPEAK rebranded and changed its URL from PartnerSPEAK.org to **PartnerSPEAK.org.au**.

Recommendations

The research provides the following recommendations for further research, policy and practice. Although the research sample was small, the researchers are confident that the following recommendations are justified.

Research

1. Research should be extended to **include both women's and men's experiences** of their partner's use of child abuse material. This should include both heterosexual and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Questioning (LGBTIQ) experiences.
2. Further research needs to be undertaken to **determine the link between adult pornography and child abuse material**. This possibility was raised by participants, who felt that their partners became desensitised as a consequence of their consumption of legal adult pornography, and their later use of child abuse material. This, they felt, led to their partner increasingly accessing violent images of adult pornography as well as images of very young children.
3. The child abuse material research needs to be published to **raise awareness of the impact of the offender's use of child abuse material on their partners**. Journal articles should examine such impact related to
 - a. the minimisation of the seriousness of the participants' partners' use of child abuse material by family and/or friends (as discussed above);
 - b. the significant psychological trauma and emotional distress experienced by the participants and their families when they discovered their partner's involvement in possessing child abuse material.
4. In addition, child abuse material research needs to publish and **raise awareness of the factors that lead a person to suspect the presence and use of child abuse material by their spouse or partner**. Such information will be of direct benefit to criminal justice personnel and therapeutic professionals as it provides insights into the subtle and nuanced characteristics and behaviours of an offender, gained within an intimate relationship. Such information can assist with intelligence gathering, prevention, early detection and exposure of offenders accessing or distributing child abuse material.

Policy and practice issues

5. Raising awareness

- a. **All universities and professional training programs** should provide information in their **health, welfare and justice-related programs** to raise awareness of the use of child abuse material; responses to child abuse material; impact on the child abuse victim and impact on the secondary victims, especially the children and the affected partner of the person who has used the child abuse material.
- b. There needs to be more awareness in the **media** of the impact of the offender's use of child abuse material on the affected partners and their families. This can be achieved by more media coverage on the topic of this research, plus publications.
- c. There needs to be an increased awareness of child abuse material at a range of levels. These include **police, child protection and counsellors**:
 - i. **Police** require more awareness of the need to support the affected partner of the person who has accessed child abuse material. Police need to be cognizant of secondary victimisation and its impact for partners; and take this into account when interacting with partners of alleged offenders to ensure that appropriate supports and referrals are provided from the outset.
 - Better communication and understanding from police is required about the impact of the offender's use of child abuse material on their affected partners and families.
 - Police need to provide information to affected partners of the offender at the time of the report, raid or investigation. Further there was concern that participants were told not to discuss the case. They were not provided with an avenue either from the police or a counsellor at the time or shortly after the detection or investigation of child abuse material, to discuss what was going to happen. Failure to provide information left the participant concerned about making sure they did not breach anything to do with her partner's case and this impacted on them receiving formal help and support.
 - Police need to provide ongoing information and support to affected partners prior to and throughout the judiciary process.
 - Police need more experience in the detection of child abuse material – this includes police officers in the child abuse units. Failure to check computers and phones in two participants' situations seems to have been a serious oversight.

- It is suggested more consideration needs to be given about the removal of photos and other personal information by police from the affected partners' computers. It seems surprising that police felt that all photos had to be wiped from computers. Further, there did not seem to be any recognition of the impact this action would have on already very traumatised lives.
- ii. **Child protection** Three participants thought child protection could have been more supportive and helpful. It is unclear from these accounts how much child protection workers knew about child abuse material. It is clear however that more awareness of the need to support the affected partner of the person who has accessed child abuse material, is required. This research demonstrated that child protection workers in one participant's situation had little understanding or awareness of the trauma associated with a spouse's or partner's use of child abuse material. It is also hard to understand why child protection did not consider a range of strategies rather than just insisting the mother and the three children find alternative accommodation. In other cases police strategies uncovered problems such as hidden cameras which, when dealt with, obviated the need for the family to leave the home and at least spared them that extra trauma.
- iii. **Counselling** It is clear from this research that counsellors need to have more awareness of the issues surrounding use and detection of child abuse material plus the resultant traumatic response and secondary victimisation that affected partners or other family members might experience. Examples given by research participants suggested that counsellors sometimes gave advice which did not take relevant factors into account.

6. Referral and support services

There needs to be somewhere for people to go who may be suspicious of their partner and think that they might be using child abuse material. Those agencies that are best situated to support affected partners are the National Child Abuse Prevention Hotline and PartnerSPEAK. At the time this research was conducted there was no known standalone specialised services for affected partners and their families. Funding should be available to establish such a service. PartnerSPEAK is considered the knowledge leader in this particular field and therefore should be consulted in extending training programs for existing services.

7. Mentoring

All participants talked about the need to have a mentor, someone who understood what was going on. This need not necessarily be a 'counsellor' but rather someone who understands the impact and experience of affected partners and families in this situation. While PartnerSPEAK provides online peer-to-peer support, the research demonstrated that the participants would like additional support such as the funding and development of a face-to-face mentoring program. This would provide a contact point and a support person for affected partners.

8. Development of a brochure

All participants felt that a brochure should be developed for key agencies, including police, to distribute at the time of the reporting of the child abuse material to police; the raid or the investigation. This needs to include:

- Where they can go for immediate online help, such as PartnerSPEAK.org.au
- What will happen from then on in terms of the investigation, the court processes including adjournments and the sentencing process
- Information about their legal rights
- Information related to appropriate counselling support services
- Centrelink details
- Legal aid details

Introduction

In recent years there has been an exponential criminal focus and social debate on what has been termed '*child pornography*' largely as a consequence of the ubiquity of the internet and social media where the digitalised abuse of children is captured and trafficked globally. The authors of this report and members of PartnerSPEAK recognize that the term '*pornography*' is inappropriate to describe images of child sexual abuse and child exploitation. The term is misleading and sanitises the rape, sexual abuse and exploitation of children, which is a serious criminal offence and a human rights violation. Instead we use the term '*child abuse material*' that has been coined and adopted by advocates and other researchers (Marsh, 2011; Quale & Jones, 2011) to more ethically and appropriately describe the crime. In doing so it reflects the reality of the crime against children and gives dignity and recognition to child victims through a proper linguistic framing of their experiences as innocent victims of sexual violence that are produced and disseminated on the internet.

From the extensive professional experience of Professor Caroline Taylor AM with Interpol and other police around the world, the term '*child abuse material*' and '*child exploitation material*' is the accepted descriptor used by police and others who work in this field. In this report the term '*child pornography*' will only be used where the term is used verbatim or will be denoted in inverted commas and italics to signify our disagreement with the term. At all other times in this report the term '*child abuse material*' will be used.

This project developed out of contact and discussions between Professor S. Caroline Taylor AM (Chair of Social Justice and Director of the Social Justice Research Centre, Edith Cowan University and Adjunct Professor, RMIT) and the founder of PartnerSPEAK, Natalie Walker, regarding the impact on women who discovered their partner was downloading, using or producing child abuse material. The aim of this project has been to capture the voices and experiences of those who variously discovered that their spouse or partner was in any way using child abuse material, and the reactions and actions that followed this discovery. There is an absence of research on the experiences of women who discover their partner or spouse has been or is accessing or producing child abuse material. There are important insights and learnings to be gained about the in-situ life of the offender, especially as the offences most often occur within a private domestic setting. As well, any indicators that triggered the concern or suspicion of their partner or other contextual factors that led to exposure of the partner offending, provide additional insights. Following a discussion between Professor Taylor and the founder of PartnerSPEAK regarding the need for this research, committee of management members of PartnerSPEAK ratified an agreement for researchers to undertake this study.

This exploratory study draws from experiences of nine women who became aware of their then partner's involvement in child abuse material. In-depth, individual interviews with these women have elucidated the lived experiences of their knowledge, awareness and response to the discovery of their partners' activities. Additionally, understanding of the participants' responses, regardless of whether such activity was reported to police or not, will raise awareness and suggest improvements required to assist affected partners in these situations.

This project has generated new knowledge about the nature of women's experiences and responses to them, when they have become aware of a spouse's or partner's involvement in child abuse material. This is a significantly under-researched area of crime and response to crime. To the researchers' knowledge, no research to date has explored the experiences of non-offending women, their knowledge or insight into their partner's involvement in child abuse material, or their experiences of informal and formal responses.

The aims of this project were therefore to:

- 1. Explore the experiences and perspectives of women who have become aware of their partner's involvement in child abuse material***
- 2. Identify areas for improvement in informal responses (such as by friends and family), and formal responses (such as by police and community agencies) to these women***
- 3. Provide recommendations to improve formal responses.***

This project involved only female participants who were members of PartnerSPEAK². This project set out to interview only female affected partners who self-selected to be involved in the study, as per the advertisement on the PartnerSPEAK website. They were women who had discovered or become aware of a spouse/partner possessing illegal child abuse material. This is not unusual given that the overwhelming majority of perpetrators who possess child abuse material are males. The sample may not be representative of the wider population as it is small and participants self-selected to be interviewed. Nevertheless the stories of the participants, while different, raise some consistent themes and it would be surprising if the findings did not apply to other women who have experiences of learning about their partners' involvement in possessing child abuse material.

This report commences with the definitional issues around the terms child abuse material and '*child pornography*', and brief literature that discusses this complexity. We then describe the methodology and the ethics approval process for the research. From there we provide details about the research project, including a profile of participants; a profile of the participants' partners, and actions taken related to the participants' partners' possession of child abuse material. This includes the circumstances regarding their partner's use of child abuse material; the police response, the participant's response to the sentencing process; family disruption and tension, minimisation of the issue and the pain this caused; lack of support; and lastly their contact with PartnerSPEAK. We conclude the paper with strategies that participants suggested.

² *'Affected partners' become members of PartnerSPEAK by participating in online forums. It was thought that women in this study needed to be members of PartnerSPEAK so they would have shared their story or been able to obtain mentoring to deal with the problems associated their partners' possession of child abuse material.*

Definitional issues related to child abuse material

The sexual abuse of children is both a major crime and a human rights violation of the most serious kind. So too is *'child pornography'* though it is only in recent times that critics and the legal system have shifted from seeing *'child pornography'* as a victimless crime to be catalogued alongside adult pornography. Applying the term 'pornography' to discuss photographic and/or digitalized images involving children has been debated and contested by researchers and advocates who argue the term child abuse material and/or child exploitation material better reflects the criminal sexual violation of children (Marsh, 2011; Quale & Jones, 2011).

Accessing and downloading child abuse material is a criminal offence, and one difficult to monitor given the relative ease with which offenders operate out of private spaces on home computers. The widespread notion that those who view *'child pornography'* are merely looking at images and that they are not partaking in a contact offence, is a widespread view promulgated in scholarly literature (Long, Laurence & McManus, 2012; Norma, 2011; Pringle, 2011; Taylor, 2011).

What does the literature say about child abuse material?

Arguments have been mounted that those who download and view *'child pornography'* that is child abuse material, are 'harmless' and that their activity substitutes for 'contact offending', that is, they are merely *looking* as opposed to actually sexually abusing children. Notwithstanding the flawed foundation of this rationale – to produce the images children who are sexually abused – there is ample empirical evidence linking online offenders (those downloading and viewing child abuse material) who are also committing contact offences (the actual sexual abuse of children) (see Long et al., 2012). Moreover, child abuse material may serve as a precursor to contact offending and/or facilitate various forms of child sexual abuse (Bailey, 2007; Long, et al., 2012). In addition, the internet facilitates a private, anonymous and globalised digital marketplace for online offenders who not only download, swap, share and trade child abuse images but enables the sharing of information of current and potential child victims (Durkin, 1997; Holt, Blevins & Burkert, 2010; Jenkins, 2001; Quayle & Taylor, 2002).

Law enforcement agencies operate with finite resources on a global criminal problem that operates within layers of secrecy and privacy and is facilitated through the complex web of internet technology. *'Child pornography'* is a multi-billion dollar industry operating along a spectrum of those who procure, produce, disseminate, trade, swap, share and download material. Sitting alongside this are the millions of child victims – most of whom have never been identified both in terms of identification of the crime itself and identification of their images – when they come to the attention of law enforcement agencies.

A non-finite violation is created as a consequence of child abuse material being captured on film and disseminated globally to be viewed, downloaded, traded, and used as a sex aid by offenders around the world. Such material further aids in the procurement and abuse of other children and the making of further material. As a 2009 United Nations (UN) report on *'child pornography'* makes clear, children are aware that images of their sexual abuse will be viewed indefinitely by users as a consequence of the internet creating a digitalised image

that can never ever be erased. Law enforcement personnel working in this field also know this terrible reality and many realise its impact on the child abuse victim. As the UN report states: “This is a never-ending violation of these children’s rights to privacy which causes additional humiliation. Victims grow up knowing that photographs or videos of them will be on the internet for the rest of their lives” (UN, 2009, p. 11). More than that, the captured images of sexually abused children doubles the horror in terms of victimisation that is recorded and uploaded into a public technology that can never be erased.

In recent years studies have begun to focus specifically on the crime of child abuse material to draw out a deeper understanding not just of offenders but the machinations involved in this technology-assisted crime against children. Studies on sex offenders tend to focus on self-report which is limiting because of the propensity and inclination of sex offenders to lie about their criminal behaviour and conceal the extent of their crimes (Hall & Hall, 2007). It is therefore important to obtain evidence from other sources such as victims or non-victims who are/were intimately connected with the offender.

Closer attention to the experiences and impacts of child abuse material on child victims yields insights not only into offenders but makes explicit the depth of trauma and its ubiquitous presence and impact connected to the virtual immortality of their violation on the internet (see Marsh, 2007; Pringle, 2011; Tankard Reist & Bray, 2011). The voices of victims denounce arguments that those who view their images are somehow partaking in a victimless crime.

Only recently a prominent, long serving judge from the Victorian County Court, Justice Michael McInerney used sentencing remarks in a criminal case involving child abuse material to question the lack of serious investment by the Commonwealth government to address ‘*child pornography*’. Justice McInerney said there had been an “abject failure” by the Commonwealth to advise the community both of the seriousness of the crime and its dire consequences for child victims. Moreover Justice McInerney used the opportunity to request that the Crown Prosecutor in the case ‘advise the Attorney General’ of these concerns (Butcher, 2015).

On the global stage, in March 2015 the European Parliament voted in a resolution to further advance efforts by all criminal justice agencies and governments to eradicate online child sexual abuse, ensure the prosecution of offenders, and focus greater effort on the protection of child victims. These calls are underpinned by a growing awareness of the online child abuse ‘industry,’ and the breadth of its impact and destruction upon the lives of children. The challenges posed for the detection and successful prosecution of those who produce, procure and download these images were also highlighted (European Parliament News, 2015).

In conclusion detecting offenders is not only important in addressing the crime but helps expose and potentially track those who produce and disseminate millions of child abuse images downloaded around the globe. It also can aid in the identification of child victims and in some cases, rescue children still being abused. Early detection of offenders is critical. Partners of offenders are an important source of information not only for their capacity to provide context to the characteristics and dynamics of offenders but to learn from those who discovered their partner or spouse was engaged in online child abuse material. This is

an understudied area in terms of capturing the experiences of how such affected partners became aware of this knowledge and their capacity and decision-making in response to this knowledge including the responses they received from others.

Methodology

The project employed qualitative methods involving ethnographic interviews that involve narrative conversation. The flexible, open narrative interview structure uses open-ended introductory questions with verbal prompts around specific themes to guide the interviewees or to seek clarification of issues that arise (Agar, 1980; Oakley, 1981; Robson, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Further questions around specific themes were used as prompts to help direct the conversation for the purpose of eliciting information about the key research areas. This open narrative form of interview is very relevant for grounded theory approaches where the emphasis is on obtaining information about a phenomenon that is not well understood or researched.

This ethnographic approach enables the interviewee to tell of experiences that are marked by complexity and strong emotions while also allowing the interviewee to recall events more deeply as they reflect upon them (Harding, 1986; Reinhartz, 1992; Robson, 2002). The objective of the interviews for this research was to gain insight into the participants' perceptions of the issues and their effects (see **Attachment 1** on pages 53-54 for an outline of questions/themes). The aim was to achieve an understanding of the nature of the participants' experience as they perceived it. Analysis of the interview data involved a critical ethnographical discourse analysis of participant narratives about specific lived experiences.

As well as asking about these women's experiences, the researchers wanted to tap into their views about current and future informal and formal responses to issues that women experience in this area. Studies have shown that sensitively designed studies that make central the experiences of victim/survivors of sexual violence in order to inform education, law and policy reform can be empowering for the women who take part in such studies (Campbell, 2002; Heenan & McKelvie, 1997; Lievore, 2003 & 2005).

This project included women in the following situations:

- Women who had some experience of their partner's involvement with child abuse material
- Women who are members of PartnerSPEAK (see **Footnote 2** on page 15 for rationale).

The project excluded women in the following situations:

- Women who were not members of PartnerSPEAK
- Women for whom court proceedings relating to their partner's possession of child abuse materials are pending or ongoing.

Prior to commencing the research the following tasks were completed:

- Development of a confidential communication site for possible interviewees. A discrete email address was created at RMIT University and this was monitored each day so that researchers would respond to queries of prospective interviewees quickly.
- Funding of \$5,000.00 for transcription and gifts for participants was obtained from the Justice and Legal Studies program at RMIT. It was hoped that 12 interviews could be undertaken.
- Ethics approval.

Ethics approval

Ethics Approval was obtained from RMIT University and Professor Taylor informed Edith Cowan University of this approval. The latter was necessary as Professor Taylor was employed by that university at the time. Both researchers³ have significant experience conducting highly sensitive research involving face-to-face interviews with participants on equally sensitive and potentially distressing topics.

Following ethics approvals, a brief explanation of the project, its aims and potential outcomes were posted on the PartnerSPEAK web page in August 2013 (see **Attachment 2** on page 55). The founder of PartnerSPEAK organised a media release about the project. All participants came from those women who self-selected to be interviewed. These women contacted the researchers after reading the PartnerSPEAK advertisement. We hoped this interview would be an empowering process and we envisaged that other women would approach us and self-refer after online conversations with other participants, via the PartnerSPEAK online forum (this process is referred to as a snowballing approach).

Of interest was that this rarely occurred and the researchers were not able to obtain 12 participants for interview. We feel that part of the reason had to do with the extreme sensitivity and need for privacy among the women and this prevented the kind of open sharing that is often prevalent in snowball approaches.

In the event of unforeseen adverse events the researchers sought to minimise the risk to participants by suggesting if appropriate, they contact one of the following organisations for counselling and support:

- PartnerSPEAK
- Relationships Australia
- CASA (Centres Against Sexual Assault)
- WIRE Women's Information (Women's Information and Referral Exchange Inc.)
- Lifeline

³ The research commenced with the involvement of Dr Anastasia Powell. Dr Powell withdrew from the research due to other priorities after completing two interviews. She has had no further involvement in the research.

The Research Project

Researchers received a number of email inquiries seeking further information about the project. A total of ten women contacted the researchers expressing interest to be interviewed. One participant was not suitable for interview given that her partner's use of child abuse material was in the process of a criminal investigation.

Two interviews were organised almost immediately and within the next month three other interviews were completed. In October 2013 the founder of PartnerSPEAK and Professor Taylor undertook further media interviews to recruit interviewees and three more women came forward. The last person contacted the researchers early in 2014. A total of nine women were interviewed. All those who made email contact were forwarded a Participant Information and Consent Form (PICF) to peruse prior to the interview (see **Attachment 3** on page 56).

The researchers asked the participants to nominate a place for the interview in which they felt comfortable. Such places could include Community Centres, Neighbourhood Houses, offices of Relationships Australia, or other suitable places designated by the participants. We envisaged interviews would be conducted at a neutral location. Of interest was that three interviews were conducted in the researcher's offices and three in hotels/ coffee shops. While we originally did not envisage meeting in participants' homes, this occurred in three situations. Two of these interviews were due to the participants' need to care for infants or small children.

Interviews were organised with participants as quickly as possible after they made email contact, with the exception of the two participants who lived interstate. Prior to interviews being conducted the researchers outlined the research, including discussion of the PICF and questions. The researchers ensured that the participants were aware that they could withdraw from the research at any time, prior to the commencement or during the interview, even if the researcher had travelled interstate. Participants were also assured of their anonymity. If the participant agreed to proceed they were asked to sign the consent form. We also sought permission to audio-record the interview.

While the researchers had anticipated that the interview would take 60 to 90 minutes, in six instances the interview took approximately three hours. One interview took over four hours. At the completion of the interview the participants were given a hamper of 'Fair Trade' chocolates as a thank you for participating in the research. Interviews were digitally recorded and each researcher also documented field notes after the interview to record general themes and the tone of the interview so they could be shared with the other researcher. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim after being uploaded onto a confidential transcription link via the RMIT University confidential email address for this research.

Profile of the interview participants

The following table provides information on the profile of the nine participants in this research. After some consideration, a decision was made to ascribe codes to the participants rather than use pseudonyms. PS plus a number have been used to indicate a PartnerSPEAK interviewee. The numbers are reflective of the sequence of the interviews. All of the participants' partners were male.

While the title of the research refers to women's experiences of their partners' use of child abuse material, all women who were married at the time of the detection or raid or police investigation referred often to their partners as their husbands. We have been true to their views so where the term 'husband' was used in the interview, this term rather than 'partner' appears in the quotations. In all other discussion areas we use the term 'partner', not 'husband'.

Table 1: Demographics of participants in the research

Code	Place of interview	Age at interview	No. of children (at time of partners' use of child abuse material)	Length of relationship/ marriage	Remained with partner/ or not	Employment (at time of partners' use of child abuse material)
PS 01	Victoria	35-40	None	Married under 5 years	No – divorced partner	Education sector
PS 02	Victoria	65-70	2 adult children	Married under 10 years	No – divorced partner	Administrative work
PS 03	Victoria	50-55	3 adult children	Married 20 years plus	Yes – but communicates only in writing	Community sector
PS 04	Victoria	30-35	None	Married under 10 years	No – divorced partner	Retail sector
PS 05	Victoria	30-35	3 young children	Relationship/ marriage under 20 years	No – unknown if divorced	Financial sector
PS 06	Victoria	30-35	1 young child	Married under 5 years	No – divorced partner	Community sector
PS 07	Northern Territory	50-55	2 children under 20 years	Married 20 years plus	Yes	Retail sector
PS 08	Western Australia	25-30	None	Married under 5 years	Yes but will separate	Retail sector
PS 09	Victoria	40-45	2 children under 15 years	Relationship under 10 years	Still in contact	Welfare sector

For the young women in the sample, the discovery of the child abuse material occurred when one was in her early 20s, and three were in their mid- to late 20s. Six of the women had children when their partners were arrested or investigated for the use of child abuse material. Eight of the women were married. The length of time they were married at the time of the discovery or police investigation of the child abuse material is listed in **Table 1** above. The participants' contact and relationship with their partners following the discovery of child abuse material was varied. Some remained with their partners for a short time,

some divorced their partners, some continue to live with their partners, or in the case of PSO9 has continued contact.

PSO1, PSO5 and PSO6 separated fairly quickly after they confronted their partners with his use of child abuse material. PSO4 confronted her partner by phone about his use of child abuse material and told him not to return home. All four divorced their partners. PSO2 remained with her partner for a short time after the police charged him with use of child abuse material. This seemed to be related to the shock and disbelief of the discovery that he was using child abuse material. She subsequently divorced her partner.

PSO3 has remained with her partner but the relationship has deteriorated to such a degree that they only communicate in writing. She spoke of separating from her partner, and her reluctance to do this seemed to be financial as she was not in paid employment. PSO7 has remained with her partner and supported him throughout his court case and subsequent imprisonment. She said when people knew of his use of child abuse material they were very critical of her for remaining with him. PSO8 has remained with her partner. PSO9 has never lived with her partner but continues to support him.

Religious faith was mentioned by four of the participants. For PSO1, PSO3 and PSO4 religion was a significant part of daily life for both the affected participant and her partner. Both PSO1 and PSO4 talked of the stigma of separation and divorce given their religious connections. PSO4 felt there was extra stigma as she could not tell other church members the reason for separation and she would have been judged as someone who did not try hard enough to save their marriage. This information was volunteered in the interview but was not part of the questions asked of participants.

Child protection issues

Two of the families were investigated by child protection services as a consequence of the partner's criminal conduct. PSO7 stated that it was six months after her partner was charged, before child protection completed an investigation to determine whether her partner had involved the children in child abuse material. She said that while the children had indicated to her and the police that they had not been photographed by their father, she was very keen to have this confirmed by child protection, which it ultimately was.

For PSO5 the experience was very different. The Children's Court hearing occurred straight after her partner was apprehended by the Australian Federal Police (AFP). She stated

... overnight I was confronted with the choice of losing the kids over the weekend or moving away from my partner, and it seemed pretty touch and go, like, quite likely that I was going to have the kids taken away from me right there and then. So that was pretty traumatic...

She was informed by child protection that she had to leave the house. She suggested that her partner go to live at her parents' house as they were away but child protection were concerned that her partner had surveillance cameras set up in the house. They informed her that she and the children had to find alternative accommodation. This resulted in PSO5

living in temporary accommodation, which she felt was very destabilising for both she and her children.

So it took a while just to get my head around looking after myself and the kids and all that, and meant balancing work, I would have been a bit of a mess... it was horrendous...

In addition she was very critical of child protection and did not feel that they provided enough help. Further, she felt they lacked understanding of how difficult the situation was for her. PSO5 felt that child protection put obstacles in her way, especially regarding the children having supervised access with their father.

Like they organised this contact – so the court ordered that it would be three times a week, two hours each time. But then they'd cancel visits at the last minute or they'd chop and change it. So you'd try and tell the kids what's coming up and then it would change on you. And then they'd organise it in the middle of kinder[garten] sort of thing... We had a few weeks off... then I tried to get the kids back into normal routines. And they were just completely inconsiderate of what other stuff the kids had going on and all they had to do was make sure that there were the visits. Yeah, so it was pretty unpleasant.

While PSO5 thought that supervised access three times a week sounded a lot at that time, the daily questions she faced from her children asking “Where’s Daddy?”, “I miss Daddy”, “Why can’t he live with us?” due to their father being the primary carer of the children, made frequent contact necessary. In addition PSO5 said that child protection requests put pressure on her to undertake tasks that were completely unreasonable. The following is an example:

... later on one of the people from Child Protection rang me up – like I was pretty messy and had all sorts of things going on, and she asked me to organise for a security company to do a swoop on the house and remove the cameras (it is not clear if cameras were present in the house)... It [the house] was about to be sold in five weeks, so she said that she had a duty of care to the people moving into the house to make sure that that it was safe... I rang back and spoke to someone else and said, “She’s got to get off my case, I can’t deal with her any more.” I said, “I have no idea where to start making that kind of call, and I’ve just lost my entire life and you want me to do that?”

Questions arise about the pressure that child protection placed on PSO5 and the lack of child protection understanding or awareness of the trauma associated with her partner’s use of child abuse material. As well, it is unclear why child protection did not organise a “sweep” of the couple’s house (or request this from the police – see the police response related to PSO6 on pages 29 and 30) to determine if there were hidden cameras rather than insisting on PSO5 and the three children find alternative accommodation. Temporary accommodation further traumatised PSO5 and the children, given the instability of accommodation plus family issues and problems that ensued.

Circumstances surrounding the participants' partner's use of child abuse material.

The following information provides a profile of the participants' partners who had used child abuse material – see **Table 2** below for a summary.

Table 2: Profile of the partners who had used child abuse material

Code	Professional employment of partner who had used child abuse material	Denied use of child abuse material	Blamed wife or someone else for use of child abuse material	Used adult porn
PS 01	Health sector	Yes	No	Yes
PS 02	Arts sector	No	Yes – blamed wife	Yes
PS 03	IT sector	Yes	Not known	Yes
PS 04	Financial sector	Yes	Yes – blamed wife	Yes
PS 05	Carer of own children	No	Yes – blamed someone else	Not known
PS 06	Retail sector	No	Yes – blamed others	Yes
PS 07	Retail sector	No	Yes – blamed others	Yes
PS 08	Mining sector	Yes	Yes – blamed wife	Not known
PS 09	Factory sector	No	Not known	Yes

A number of the participants referred to their partners blaming either them or others for their use of child abuse material. PSO2, PSO4, PSO8 referred to their partners blaming them for their use of child abuse material. PSO2 also blamed herself for not realising there was a link between adult and '*child pornography*'. PSO3 blamed herself also and said that others blamed her – the affected partner – just as much as the offender: "...because why didn't I know, why didn't I do something about it."

PSO4 said that her partner gave the impression in court that she had framed him and or that she was responsible for the child abuse material being on the computer. She was concerned that she may have to give evidence at court. This was not however necessary. PSO5 said that her partner blamed someone else saying, "Someone else had logged into our computer network and downloaded this stuff and put it on the computer, so did it all remotely, sort of thing."

Five of the participants talked about the link between their partner's use of child abuse material and their partner's childhood abuse, most of this related to sexual abuse with one instance of neglect. For some, this was a clear connection, but for others it was a possibility. PSO2 felt that her partner had suffered abuse at some time but she did not get to the bottom of this. PSO4's partner admitted that he had accessed child abuse material for many years, which would have meant that he started using when he was in his mid-teens. PSO7 referred to her partner telling her that he had been sexually groomed when he was in his pre-teens and had been given lavish gifts. She questioned why his parents did not enquire at the time, about where he had obtained these items.

PSO8 referred to her partner accessing child abuse material from when he was in his pre-teens. PSO9 said that her partner told her he had been abandoned and neglected from a very young age. She believed that this might have led to him accessing child abuse material. He told her that looking at pictures of nude women was comforting to him. However as

PSO9 explained her partner then started to load more and more pictures, then started to download pictures of children.

There was a considerable amount of guilt and/or feelings of responsibility expressed by all participants about their partners' use of child abuse material. This is discussed below under the section titled *Participants' reaction to their partners' use of child abuse material* on page 33.

Table 3: Action taken by the participants regarding their partner's possession of child abuse material

Code	Found child abuse material	Action taken	Police action	Court action	Current Contact
PS 01	Yes	Informed police	No charges	NIL	No
PS 02	No	N/A	Arrested at work – charges laid	Prison sentence	No
PS 03	Yes	Discussed situation with church	Relative reported him to police – charges laid	Prison sentence	Yes
PS 04	Yes	Confronted partner – took computer to police	Charges laid	Community service order	No
PS 05	No	N/A	Police raid – charges laid	Prison sentence	Yes but only for supervised access of children
PS 06	Yes	Confronted partner then reported him to police	Charges laid	Prison sentence	No
PS 07	No	N/A	Police raid – charges laid	Prison sentence	Yes
PS 08	Yes	Took computer to police	No charges	NIL	Yes
PS 09	No	N/A	Police apprehension and charged	Prison sentence	Yes

The detection of their partner's use of child abuse material was different across the women we talked to. What was the same though was the shock they experienced in either finding the material themselves or having the police investigate, or raid the house for the child abuse material. PSO1 was told by a mutual friend who had serviced her partner's computer that her partner had "underage pornography" on his computer. PSO1 said that her response to this knowledge was shock but she was not surprised, as her partner's use of adult pornography had gone through significant change through their marriage. PSO1 confronted her partner and eventually decided to leave him. It was two years later when she reported him to police (see next section *Police response to the participants' partner's use of child abuse material* on page 27).

For PSO2 and PSO7, their reaction to finding out that their partners had accessed child abuse material was initially one of denial. This may have had something to do with the way

the police investigation or raid occurred (see next section ***Police response to the participants' partner's use of child abuse material*** from page 27). As mentioned before, PSO2 said that she felt guilty – her partner was a regular user of adult pornography – she felt she should have known that this was a precursor to the use of '*child pornography*'.

PSO3 said that she discussed her partner's use of child abuse material with her church in the first instance because he was involved with children's activities. They were concerned and referred her partner to a psychologist. PSO3's sister then contacted the police some six months later about PSO3's partner taking pictures of her daughter. He was interviewed by the police and charged on summons. PSO3 had no concrete knowledge that her partner had taken pictures of her niece but said she had suspicions.

PSO4 found the child abuse material images of "8- to 12-year-old girls" on her partner's computer after she became suspicious that her partner was having an affair. She rang his mobile and confronted him with what she found. She told him not to return home. She took the computers to the police some days later. PSO4 went on to say that she had confronted her partner previously about a picture she had found on his computer and he had counselling for some years after this.

PSO5 and PSO7 were shocked firstly about the police raid and could not believe that the men they had been married to for such a long time could be involved in using child abuse material. Initially PSO5 thought to support her partner as they had been together for over 10 years but this changed quickly when child protection intervened (see pages 22 and 23) and she was required to leave the family home. She referred to her life falling apart. As discussed below PSO7 has remained with her partner.

When asked about how she came to have suspicious that her partner might be accessing child abuse material, PSO6 identified two incidents that stood out for her, which "raised red flags" about what was going on for her partner. Both incidents happened at home. PSO6 says in hindsight her partner was a loner with few friends as he was not very sociable and she feels she should have picked this up as a "flag" at the time. PSO6 said that they had both watched legal "adult porn" as a couple and she became increasingly concerned about his behaviour. While he was at work she searched their garage where she found a hidden box with flash drives and DVDs etc. She also found an "extra" computer she had no knowledge about. When she opened the flash drives/USBs and DVDs, she was distressed and disgusted to find child abuse material and to her greater horror, pictures and a video of the teenage girl living next door (taken through the window of her bedroom). She also found girls' underwear in the box (it would eventuate that her partner had stolen it from the clothesline of the family next door – the underwear belonged to the teenage girl). PSO6 said she felt ill and could feel herself going numb with shock and then a sense of rage. She subsequently rang her partner and demanded he come home where she confronted him. Soon after she reported him to the police.

The situations of PSO2, PSO4, PSO5, PSO7 and PSO8 are discussed further in the next section ***Police response to the participants' partner's use of child abuse material*** on page 27. Just as the police responses were varied so was the sentencing of the offender. PSO2's partner was given a 40-month prison sentence. He was later deported to his country of origin. PSO3's partner received a nine-month sentence, with six months suspended – he

served three months in prison. PSO4's partner was sentenced to a Community Service Order for two years. PSO5's partner was sentenced to a six-month prison sentence. PSO6's partner received a two-year prison sentence with a non-parole period of 18 months. PSO7's partner was sentenced to 12 months in prison and PSO9's partner was sentenced to four months in prison.

Police response to the participants' partner's use of child abuse material

For two of our participants PSO1 and PSO8, the police took no action. It was Operation Auxin in 2004 – a police response to reporting online child abuse material, which motivated PSO1 to report her partner's use of child abuse material. Up until then she had been dealing with her marriage breakdown, economic and social changes in her circumstances and the loss of friendship networks with little support from family. PSO1 made a report to police in Melbourne and was upset by their response. Even though PSO1 advised police that a computer technician could verify the presence of child abuse material on the computer and she provided them with the details of the technician, the police officer was more interested in the fact that she had left her partner. PSO1 believed the police felt she was a vengeful wife seeking retribution on her partner. She also advised them about her partner's penchant for taking photos of people without their knowledge or consent who were either in his care or undergoing medical treatment. She received little response from the police.

PSO1 continued to follow up with police for two years but each time was rebuffed. She felt that she was not believed. PSO1 then sought access to her police report under Freedom of Information (FOI). While a lot of material was blacked out, PSO1 was able to ascertain that the police did not follow up on any of the information she provided. They did not contact the computer technician or act on the information about the photos being taken of vulnerable adults and children who were patients in the care of her partner. These were specialist sexual offence police. The police report noted her separation and divorce, and the way it was written confirmed PSO1's initial suspicions that the police felt she was motivated to harm her partner through frivolous allegations. While she acknowledged other women have had positive experiences with police, she felt that police continue to lack any real depth of knowledge about this area and continue to view reports by affected partners as suspicious and possibly motivated by revenge. PSO1 stated:

So that on initial disclosure the assumption is that the person is telling the truth, unless proved otherwise. Whereas I think the assumption was that someone is making it up, unless proved. So I felt I had to prove I wasn't lying. Obviously at that point of time in my life that was the most difficult thing I had ever done. This was the person that I probably still loved at that time, being able to hold that complex thing of still caring about the person and finding what they do abhorrent...

Even if it had gone swimmingly, it was already going to be a very difficult situation and I was not prepared to be discounted or not believed. From what I saw in the media it was a big deal and I thought it would have been responded to as if it was a big deal.

Similarly PSO8 was appalled that the specialist child abuse unit took no action related to the 'child pornography' picture that was on her computer, left there by her partner. She said, "The police child abuse unit interviewed... [name of partner] but didn't charge him. Further they didn't check his computer or his phone". She stated that the police response was very disappointing and did nothing to stop or interrupt her partner's use of child abuse material. PSO8 said that she wanted the police to be more proactive – she wanted them "to really get into that spot where [partner's name] is hiding". This comment related to his failure to initially admit to downloading child abuse material, then minimising his use. She felt that the police did not treat the issues seriously and did not validate her feelings.

In contrast to this PSO3, PSO4 and PSO6 thought the initial police response was very good. PSO4 spoke highly of the policewoman to whom she notified her partner's use of child abuse material. This policewoman warned her that once the police investigation of his use of child abuse material commenced it could not be stopped. PSO4 said this policewoman informed her of all the proceedings against her partner, from when they intended to lay charges to court appearances, adjournments and when he was sentenced. She also provided PSO4 with names of appropriate counsellors but not until all of the proceedings against her partner had been completed.

PSO3 felt that the police response was quite good. She said that the police did not have enough evidence to take her partner's computer but, "she could have offered it to them." She said initially it was "really hard to know what to do and what to say because I didn't want to be a witness against him." It seemed like PSO3 felt conflicted by her desire to support her partner, by her feelings of guilt due to her niece being the victim of her partner's use of child abuse material, and by her desire for her partner to confess to the offending. She said:

As soon as they knew he was going to be charged, his lawyers already recommended that he wipe the computer, which he did... I figured they [the police] were not going to find evidence on it so I didn't bother handing it in.

PSO3 felt that following up with the police after her partner had been charged was problematic, as it was hard to get in contact with the police. She was advised they were either out of the office or away on leave, and did not follow up contact – sometimes "because they were out, away or something". She did give a statement to the police and commented that a policewoman was very supportive.

While PSO6 felt the initial response from the police was good, after that the detective in charge of the case failed to keep her informed about the court adjournments. She was informed of these by her ex-partner's sister. Further the police did not inform her of her ex-partner's release on parole. Again she was informed of this by her former sister-in-law. The lack of follow-up contact by police was seen as disappointing by women in this study and caused them to feel a lack of confidence in the capacity of police to respond appropriately. A recent Victorian study on policing sexual violence in Victoria highlighted the problem of police not maintaining regular contact with victims post reporting, despite police protocols and guidelines requesting that police maintain regular contact (see Taylor, Muldoon, Norma & Bradley, 2012).

For PSO2 the police response was very disappointing. The police brought her partner home from work to collect all of the home computers. They had confiscated the computers at his work. When she asked the police to explain what they were doing at her house, the police officer said, "We will let your partner explain it to you". Her partner said something along the lines of "They're investigating my underage pornographic activities". She was stunned as was her partner's daughter (who was staying with them at the time). When her partner told her that he was charged with the use of child abuse material, she said she could not believe this and thought that there must have been a mistake. Given PSO2 received no information from the police, and had no one to talk to, she felt almost as if she did not exist. PSO2 said she did not even know which police station her partner had been taken to and contacted a friend who worked for Victoria Police to find this out for her.

I couldn't go to people in my street and I had close friends who had young children that used to come to our house. It was a huge dilemma. Because I was told that I cannot talk to anyone about it, even though I had talked to my neighbour and my other friend that worked in the police department, on the night that... [partner's name] was arrested to see where he was.

PSO2 talked about the number of images that her partner had accessed and that he was passing these images on to other people. She was shocked when she heard this information from the court process and the media, not from the police. She felt let down by the entire criminal justice system. PSO2 had no further dealings with the police until she requested the return of her computer, as she needed access to the personal information that was on the computer. At the request of her son, she also needed to find out if her partner had taken images of her son's children. The investigators informed her that there were no pictures of them on the computers.

When PSO2's computer was eventually returned everything had been wiped. There was considerable disappointment and distress from other participants about the seizure of computers by police when the computer belonged to the participant – personal data, including photographs was irretrievably lost. Further the sense of loss was compounded when all material had been removed from the computers especially family photographs. PSO6 spoke of this distress: "We'd had computers taken away and we lost our entire family albums, and still haven't got the whole stack with them back." Reference was often made that "I have lost my life".

PSO5 said that seven AFP officers conducted a raid at 7.30am one day. All the family were still asleep and they told her and her partner that

...our house had been flagged for downloading a particular file from a particular internet site, that had been, yeah, questionable. So they set about saying that, searching the house at that point in time, and like I just thought, oh this is weird, like I'm not quite sure what's going on... I think they'll just clear us, like they've got their wires crossed... I went off to get ready for work and I went to work and the police didn't want the kids around so we made arrangements for one child to go off to childcare and the other went to kindergarten].

PSO5 went to work then got a call from her partner at midday to say she needed to come home. When she got home she was questioned by police about what she knew of her partner's use of a particular file that had been downloaded. He had denied downloading it saying, "it must have been someone who stayed with us who must have done it... but it still didn't connect that it could have possibly been my partner." PSO5 stated that the police were pleasant to her when she was interviewed. At a later stage when PSO5 got in touch with one of the police officers he said, "We don't like to get involved with families and rip them apart and just leave them." It was clear that PSO5 felt they had done just that when she made the comment:

I'm sure they could have been more helpful, but yeah I just felt like I'd been completely left high and dry, and really hadn't had any support.

After PSO6 notified the police, they found that her partner had purchased and downloaded thousands of images that included the sexual abuse, rape and torture of very young children, including infants. PSO6's partner then moved from possession to producing child abuse material after installing hidden cameras to capture images of the neighbour's children through bathroom and toilet windows. In addition he hid cameras inside their own home and similarly secretly filmed his wife's younger sibling who was staying with them.

PSO7 said the family were all having a quiet drink on a Friday night when the police came to charge her partner. Her sister-in-law and her partner were staying and the front door was blocked so the police attempted to break it down. PSO7 said that 10 to 20 police conducted the raid and wanted everyone to stay where they were except for her partner whom they took into another room. She said that they were all very stressed and anxious. The police then searched the house. She said that they all suffered from shock and disbelief, except for her son who had seen his father looking at 'child porn'. Her partner was taken to be charged and all computers were seized. The police informed PSO7 that her partner had been...

... accessing 'child pornography' and downloading, along those lines... images and all that. They said he was under arrest or whatever and would be taking him to the Watch House... they told my daughter and she said, "Please don't put handcuffs on him" and they didn't. So that was sort of, I suppose, because she was upset. Then they took him away and we just sat there like stunned mullets.

PSO7 said that the police were not helpful. She said that one policewoman "hassled" her about making a statement related to her partner's use of child abuse material. She felt alone and unsupported having no one to talk to. PSO9 said her partner cooperated with the police and gave them everything related to his access of child abuse material.

Participants' partner's reaction when challenged about his use of child abuse material

The reactions of the participants' partners were different. When PSO1 challenged her partner, his response was one of remorse but he said he "couldn't help himself". PSO1 felt her partner abhorred what he was doing but he could not stop nor did he want intervention to help him stop. Additionally she and her partner had been childhood sweethearts, he

valued their relationship so there was some remorse as his “whole world was coming out from under him and he didn’t know to what effect”.

She felt he was also worried that if it became known that he looked at child abuse material he would lose his job. PSO1 referred to the deceit that she felt is common when people are accused of using child abuse material.

When I confronted him about any content, at this point I realised his responses were typically all lies. So when I found the teenage content I asked him, "Has there been younger than teenage, does this translate into offline life and things like that?" He said no about [viewing] younger than teenage [child abuse material]. So obviously that wasn't true.

PSO2, PSO7 and PSO9 said that their partners expressed relief at being found out. PSO2 said that her partner referred to the police’s understanding about his use of child abuse material. They made a comment along the lines of “This now is stopped for you”. Her partner told her he had said, "Yes, thank goodness". He also asked to be placed in custody after his case had been adjourned a number of times. He later went on to blame PSO2 for his use of child abuse material. PSO5 and PSO8 said their partners blamed them for their use of child abuse material. The blaming of these women by their partners post-detection suggests that their ‘relief’ was not aligned with remorse or responsibility.

PSO3 referred to her partner’s need for her to support him and sympathise with him. She commented, “He still wants to share his journey with me and he's always the victim”. PSO3 felt that she was the victim, saying:

I feel like the victim, I feel like I'm being picked on all the time. I think, "Yeah, you are, you were the one responsible" ... I doubt whether he would tell me when he started pornography, but his experience in prison even, he kept notes and everything. I thought, "No, you're not acknowledging my feelings". All along he would just ignore it.

When PSO4 told her partner that she was going to report him to the police, he admitted to her on the phone that he had struggled with his use of child abuse material for 20 years. She said he said he had been accessing material since he was 15 years of age.

I said, "Don't you want to get well, you are sick, you need to get better" and he said, "I do". He admitted on the phone that "I do want to get better", but because he couldn't face his problem or admit that he had it, he was still so much swept up in the secrecy of it all and the denial of it all. So that's why at the end of the day I said to him, "I care about you and I care about you getting better, and I'm making choices that are going to force you to get help."

PSO4’s partner later blamed her for his use of child abuse material. He also went on to deny use of child abuse material.

As indicated above PSO5’s partner said that someone must have downloaded the material, even when the police indicated he had been downloading and saving child abuse material onto his computer. He was not prepared to take any responsibility for his use of child abuse

material. Further he tried to minimise the pictures that he took of his teenage daughter in the bathroom.

... he said that he was doing it for her own safety and he thought that she was suicidal and he had to check if she was cutting herself or something, which now, it's just like, no that's ridiculous... Then he'll still hold that excuse to this day that that's what he was doing, which is just a bit nasty.

PSO6 told her partner to come home where she challenged him about his accessing of child abuse material. She "laid it out all on the bed", asking him "What is this?" She said her partner...

... broke down, buckled over, tears streaming down his face. He was like, "I've got a problem". I'm like "No fucking shit you've got a problem, what is this?" He said, "I need to get rid of it". I said, "Don't you touch that, you don't make the rules anymore. Don't you even dare." I said to him, "Is there 'child pornography' on that?" He said, "Yes". I said, "How young, 5?" He said "No, not that young". So he admitted to me that that's what it was, amongst everything else. He said, "I feel sick, I'm going to vomit". Then he ran into the ensuite.

I said, "You can't stay here. Either [daughter's name] and I go, or you go. I don't think it's fair that I uproot [daughter's name] and you've got no friends". Because he didn't, he wasn't a very social person, probably one red flag. I said, "I'm ringing your mum". He panicked. He said, "Don't do that". I said, "You've got nowhere else to go, I'm calling your mum. I'm not having you at a loose end, you need somewhere to go, so I'm calling your mum".

PSO6 called her partner's mother and he went to stay with her.

PSO7's partner was helpful to police and gave them passwords and codes to help catch other people accessing child abuse material. She said that when she questioned him later about the use of child abuse material he said he was waiting to be caught and seemed to be relieved. After being charged and released her partner slept constantly – he later had a nervous breakdown. He also attempted suicide.

PSO8's partner did not deny accessing child abuse material:

After about a week of him sleeping pretty much constantly he finally was like "Okay, well, I guess I'd better talk to you". One day we went for a walk and just sat in the bush and had a bottle of wine and he told me everything.

PSO8 told her partner that she had found the picture and that he needed to get help. This seemed to be a recurring comment in the interview – she wanted her partner to acknowledge the child abuse material and get some assistance so he did not access it again. It seemed that he was initially contrite and scared about the discovery of the child abuse material but over time minimised the seriousness of its use. He then blamed PSO8 for ruining his life and became violent towards her. She seemed to understand his reaction rather than be critical of it; she also seemed to blame herself somehow, as she said she felt

she did not give him enough time to explain the issue. PSO8 also found a therapist who was experienced in child abuse material for her partner but he attended only one session.

PSO8 said at a later time her partner was critical of her telling a few people about his use of child abuse material and while he initially blamed her, she wasn't sure if he still blames her:

... for doing what I had to do... Maybe he does [blame PSO8] and he's just saying that just to make me feel better. I don't know. He honestly doesn't talk about it at all. The first couple of weeks he did and then he just shut down.

PSO9's partner told her that his accessing child abuse material was mainly teenage girls, "like schoolgirl kind of stuff" because he has long term chronic depression and had quite a troubled childhood.

He said he started looking at arty nude type photography of adults and found it comforting, then he was looking at more 'porn' orientated... and then he moved down to the younger girls and then that moved down to children, but he glossed over the child/pre-teen sort of age group and he gave me the impression that it was very minimal part of his collection, that it was mainly teenage girls.

PSO9 said that they had just resumed their relationship when her partner was charged with accessing child abuse material and she continued to support him as she said he was depressed and suicidal.

Participants' reaction to their partner's use of child abuse material

All participants were emotional when discussing their partner's use of child abuse material in the interviews. Some cried constantly, some struggled for composure and regularly stopped what they were saying to regain control of their emotions. Two were very controlled throughout the interview but it was clear that they were still struggling to come to terms with the detection of their partner's use of child abuse material. The range of responses at the detection of child abuse material was shock, hurt, anger, disbelief, extreme trauma, depression and responsibility for their partner's use of child abuse material.

PSO1 had feelings of disbelief:

... this is the person I know better and love and have chosen to spend my life with etc. Is he capable of this? What does this say about my judgment in other things? ... and can I trust anybody? This is the person I wanted to have children with. I hear those things repeated a lot by other women. If I can't trust him, who can I trust? ... After that, for 10 years, it was "That's it, I'm never having children, I'm never having a relationship". This is a one-bedroom house for a woman that is going to be single and independent.

PSO1 said that her response to her partner accessing child abuse material was shock but she said she was not surprised. This was because his use of adult pornography had gone through significant change over time with his access to more violent material in magazines and then she found "some barely legal teen type stuff". PSO1 referred to computer technology not being very advanced at that time (10 years ago) so she did not know how to go "digging

around” in the hard drive. She said she saw the headings related to child abuse material and confronted him and then he would promise not to do it again. When PSO1 confronted her partner after their friend told her he was looking at children, he cried so loudly that PSO1 went out into the garden where she could still hear him. PSO1 talked of not being told the truth or the whole story about her partner’s use of child abuse material.

I suspect I probably found out about the child abuse images relatively early, that it hadn’t been going on for a long time, because I was on high alert and I was checking the computer. If police had listened at that point they could have got that information quite early. If he has continued to offend in this way... and if he is ever caught and charged, it would have escalated and the impact would be far greater.

PSO1 made a very interesting analogy between family violence and a partner’s detection of child abuse material:

I recognised that cycle similar to domestic violence... I am not comparing just the theoretical cycle of the being caught, the being confronted, the promising never to do it again, and then me walking on eggshells waiting for it to happen again. Then it happens again... I said I was not going to become that person in that kind of cycle and if this doesn’t stop, our relationship is going to stop.

PSO1 went online to read stories of children who had been the victims of child abuse material and when she read these she became very upset. PSO1 later told her story online and to the media. She contacted her ex-partner to inform him of this. She went on to say:

I didn’t want to ruin his life for the sake of ruining his life. I wanted him to be held to account and for other people to be safe. There was no benefit to me for him not knowing what I had been up to.

All other participants went online to read stories about child abuse material as a way to try to find out some answers about this level of abuse; to try to understand why it had happened; to get some assistance and support – see section **Contact with PartnerSPEAK** on page 45.

The response from PSO2 was one of trauma and disbelief. PSO2 she said she was in a trance for about five weeks due to shock. She had short-term memory loss and slept a lot, all related to the stress and trauma. She also felt cut off from others – at one point she offered her resignation at her place of employment – this was not accepted by the manager. PSO2 said she had the feeling that she was tainted in some way and that her partner’s use of child abuse material was in part her fault. For example, she felt guilty about not knowing and felt in some way to blame for his use of child abuse material.

She talked also about her relationship with her partner and their sexual relationship and that she should have realised something was wrong with their relationship much earlier on. She subsequently felt there were “flags”, which related to his interest in watching violence against children – something she could not do herself; and also his increasing interest in adult pornography. She and her partner went to counselling about this but she later found out that he had been accessing child abuse material.

PSO2 struggled from the time the charges were laid against her partner to the time he went to prison and beyond, even though she had felt that their marriage was over prior to him being charged with using child abuse material. She thought that some of this was related to not knowing what was happening, being severely traumatised and feeling abandoned. She talked about the secrecy and the stigma associated with the charges. PSO2 also stated that she probably could not have coped with talking about the issue in the early stages.

All women interviewed had ongoing concerns about whether their partners had taken photographs of neighbours', relatives' or friends' children and of their partners continuing to use child abuse material. PSO1 and PSO3 referred to constantly being on alert. PSO3 said:

It was about a year ago I think, we were at my daughter's place, and their friends were there with two little girls. He asked the father, "Can I take a photo of the daughter?" She was about 18 months at the time. The father, he knew he had been charged for this, but he doesn't understand. He said yes. He took the photo of the child and then he took another one of her sitting on his knee. I can feel it; I know this is wrong. When I got home I went to bed.

The next morning I checked my camera and that photo was gone. I am going, "He's downloaded that photo". Just that one photo was missing. So I thought has he got a conscience and he's deleted it because he knows it will be a risk. I thought no I bet he's downloaded to the laptop when I went to bed. So I asked him and he said, "Oh, I don't know where it went". I thought, "My goodness" so I told the police that too, so I don't know whether they checked it. So he's using familiar kids now – danger. My head's going "Danger".

PSO3 said she had remained with her partner because of her loyalty to him and felt responsibility to support him. They are likely to separate, as he will not confess to accessing child abuse material. Her comment was, "If you want a marriage you've got to be totally honest with me, and he's not. They just want to hide it."

PSO4's reaction was one of anger and hurt. She drove to her mother's house a few doors down:

I was shaking, screaming and crying and basically trying to explain to her what I had found. I just remember at the time she went to console me and I was so angry I pushed her away and was screaming, and then I just collapsed on the floor and was just screaming and crying and didn't even know what to think...

PSO4 also felt betrayed by her partner. She was concerned about his deceitfulness and the fact that she needed to warn others about what he had done. She contacted his sister interstate as she felt his sister needed to know about her brother's use of child abuse material. His sister was very dismissive of PSO4's concerns. PSO4 spoke to a small cluster of close friends who she trusted and spent time weighing up what to do. PSO4 said she gave her partner three chances to be honest and say...

"I've got a problem, I've got an addiction, I need help". After those three chances and nothing had happened, people were saying to me, "If you don't take this

further, imagine what could happen, and you've got to live with that for the rest of your life. What if he acted it out on a person", so I was weighing all that up.

PSO4 said she suffered from depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts and said at one stage she almost ran into a pole whilst driving her car – she stopped herself just in time. She did not eat properly and her sleep patterns were affected. The support she obtained from her family and church helped her through a very difficult journey.

PSO5 spoke of feeling unsafe and not able to trust anyone. In addition she could not reconcile that the man she thought she knew, loved and married accessed child abuse material – such comments were made by other participants PSO1 and PSO6. PSO5 said she was worried about the motives of others towards children and is now very aware of the issue of child sexual abuse. She said she felt duped and conned and was worried for a while that others would also blame her for her partner's conduct, but strong support from family and the police have helped her let go of those feelings. PSO5 spoke of the importance of the support from her boss. He was the only one in her circle of family and friends who asked her what she was thinking or feeling or what she wanted to do when she was debating "Should I stay? Should I go? ... It wasn't like a black and white thing for him."

PSO6 said she felt confident to confront her partner and was very angry with what she had found. After he left the family home she confided in women from her mother's group and they said she should contact police. PSO6 spoke of feeling unsafe and not being able to trust others. Further she could not reconcile that man she thought she knew, loved and married was like this. She feels worried about the motives of others towards children and is now very aware of the issue of child sexual abuse and child abuse material.

PSO6 referred to feeling duped and conned and was initially concerned that others would also blame her for her partner's conduct. Strong support of family and of police has helped her let go of those feelings. She needed ongoing counselling to help her deal with the issues and fears she held about the impact on her own daughter's psychological health when she becomes aware of her father's use of child abuse material.

PSO7 said that she was in a state of shock a lot of the time after her partner was charged for using child abuse material. She referred to herself as "a mess." She said her daughter provided her with support until she got "jack of it", telling PSO7 that she was supposed to be the mother. PSO7 talked a lot about her decision to stay with her partner. As indicated previously, many people criticised her for the decision to stay. Ultimately it became a decision about PSO7's children:

I can get another husband I know because I have been married before, but the kids can't get another father. He will always be their father, good, bad or whatever, he is their father.

PSO7 felt that some odd sexual practices that occurred when her partner was in the defense forces might have had some effect on her partner's use of 'child pornography'. He spent some time in Asia and they [defense force personnel] got 14-year-old boys, to dress up as girls and they then had sex with them.

PSO8 said her reaction was one of shock. She said she...

... went totally nuts trying to figure it out. I couldn't handle it. I didn't sleep for four days, I didn't eat, I forgot to feed my dog. And she just lay beside me and I just cried for four days. And one of [partner's name] friends came over and he was just like "Holy shit. What is wrong with you?" And I was just like, "Oh nothing. Just don't worry." And he wouldn't leave me alone and eventually I was like, "Okay. Well, I found this picture" and totally freaking out. And he was the kind of guy that's not going to let that go...

And I didn't want to do anything about it because I was just in denial or something. I was totally freaking out. I was just like "I don't believe he's a bad person" and everything like that. And his friend was like, "I don't care. You don't have a choice." And he just pretty much forced me to go to the police, so I did. They took my computer.

PSO8 had a very severe reaction following her discovery of the child abuse material. She had time off work, could not sleep, then slept all of the time and put on a lot of weight. She eventually got some antidepressants and anxiety medication as she had panic attacks. PSO9 said her initial reaction to hearing about the charges related to her partner accessing child abuse material was one of shock, surprise, especially given the police found over 100,000 images, plus some weapons in his possession.

The emotional impact for these women was clearly one of trauma and layers of shock and grief which they largely endured in isolation, some of the participants just wanted to sleep all of the time, others had trouble sleeping; some of the participants did not eat properly and others overate due to shock.

It was clear that there frequently was a lack of awareness about the trauma that ensued for participants when they found the child abuse material or when the police apprehended their partners. They were not regarded as victims, and some were explicitly blamed by their partners or others, or had this implied.

Moreover they received comments indicating a total lack of insight and understanding about their dilemma and the fact they were secondary victims of their partner's criminal behaviour. Some comments included "Why aren't you doing anything for the children [child abuse material victims]?" and "Why are you involved in PartnerSPEAK? It's not about you, it's [issue is] about the children [child abuse material victims]."

PSO1 said she had been stigmatised for supporting partners of offenders who use child abuse material, because they are not the primary victims. There is a general perception that either the affected partners are not harmed, or worse, that they are complicit through guilt by association.

Participants' reactions to the sentencing process

Brief details above provide some information on the sentences that the participants' partners received following the court process. Some of the participants were unclear about the sentences that their partners received. This may have something to do with the ongoing reaction and trauma to the raid or the investigation of their partners accessing child abuse material; the lengthy time that some investigations took; then the numerous adjournments that often followed. For some the sentence was too harsh and for others too lenient.

PSO2 felt that the whole sentencing exercise was a PR exercise:

... let's give him a big sentence so it looks to the community that we are onto this and we are not going to tolerate these crimes, so we are going to sentence this man, even though he hasn't hurt anyone physically, but we are going to do this and sentence him to 40 months. That's a pretty hefty crime for something like that.

She went on to say that she felt he was able to get on with his life in a way that she could not and that everyone in the prison loved him and he was in his element. Further PSO2 said that her partner was able to realise one of his long life ambitions and that was to make musical instruments.

He left jail with this whole lot of art and craft that he had made there to prepare him for his new life in [overseas country]... that were shipped over there. That was a bit of a kick in the bum for me, because I am still suffering. I am not saying he's not suffering, or hasn't suffered, I am not saying that at all. But I'm saying, look what we women... look how we suffer and where is the support, the real justice in this? Where is it? He didn't go to any program in jail because the talk around the jail was that it's really of no use to anyone.

PSO3 felt her partner's prison sentence was light saying, "He only served three months in prison. But at least that got him on the Sex Offenders Register". She later said that he will be on the register for 10 years.

PSO4 felt shocked that her partner received a light sentence (after pleading guilty he received a community service order) but stated that at least her partner would "be monitored and [she] didn't need to feel responsible anymore". She felt that the number of images should have resulted in a prison sentence. She also felt that this would have been more of a deterrent to his future use of child abuse material.

PSO5's partner was sentenced to imprisonment but it is not known if he was on parole after release. PSO5 said she felt like a victim of the court and criminal justice system. This however was not elaborated upon.

PSO6's partner was sentenced to imprisonment – 18 months was non-parole. He is now on parole with conditions that stipulate that he is not allowed to have contact with PSO6 or their daughter. He will be on the Sex Offenders Register for 15 years and this will seriously compromise the type of contact he can have with his daughter. For example he will not be able to see her at any event where other children are present.

PSO7 said that the court process was very difficult as she was not familiar with the criminal justice system. She seemed a bit confused about the length of sentence overall but was pleased that it wasn't as long as she thought it might be. Her partner will be on the Sex Offenders Register for 10 years.

PSO9 supported her partner whilst he was in prison and remained in contact with him when he was released on parole. He was placed on the Sex Offenders Register for eight years.

All participants felt that their partners or ex-partners being on the Sex Offenders Register was positive as it meant that they were being monitored.

Family tension, disruption and loss of friendships

There was considerable tension between many of our interview participants and their families. PSO1 did eventually tell her ex-partner's family and friends about his use of child abuse material. This was when she decided to tell her story to the media. She felt that they closed ranks against her to protect her ex-partner.

PSO2 felt that she had...

*... lost her family... lost everything... I am ostracised, stigmatised, marginalised...
Not a lot of people want to talk to me about this or be friends.*

PSO2's daughter was supportive of her but her son had some ongoing issues firstly because she stayed a short time with her partner then would not go to stay interstate with her son. Her son felt that her loyalties and obligations were at odds with the realities of what her partner had done, yet she chose at times to put his needs above those of her adult children. He and PSO2's brother did not want to discuss her partner's use of child abuse material or for her to discuss the issue with others. It was clear that her adult children were impacted by the criminal actions of her partner and were likely confused by her ongoing support of him. Her son was very upset when PSO2 decided to tell her story to the media.

There was considerable tension between PSO3 and her sister due to PSO3's partner taking pictures of PSO3's niece and the circumstances under which the child abuse material was reported to police (see page 28).

She was really angry. My brother-in-law was ready to kill him if he came near or whatever. He wasn't allowed anywhere near them when the proceedings started. So that's the only time I've spoken to her on the phone and there was a bit of controversy as to how the police got him to the police station. My sister said that they picked him up or something and he refused to go so he walked there or something. But I heard that he was called up and told to go there on the way to work. I don't know what was the truth and what was not. She was terribly angry. She had always been suspicious, but she saw stuff.

PSO3 has lost contact with her sister:

I haven't spoken to her in two years now, two and half years. My crazy mother, she got it, she got the truth but then she's backstabbed and now she supports him. This

is her granddaughter, two of her granddaughters have been abused and she supports him: "Poor [partner's name]", and I think how can you.

PSO4 told her sister-in-law about her partner's use of child abuse material but this was disregarded by her. PSO4 was bothered about this as she feared for the safety of her sister-in-law's children.

PSO5 spoke of the tension between her sister, her partner and her mother. This seemed to be the result of PSO5 needing to live with both families. She lived with her sister after leaving the family home (where her partner remained). She spoke of trying to adjust to other people's parenting styles at a time when the children were adjusting to a different situation and the tension that this created. When she went to live with her mother, there were similar problems. She also spoke of the tension related to her mother going to her partner's court appearances. PSO5 said she was:

Just trying to respect his space and appreciate he was going through a hard time, without trying to make it worse for him in any particular way. So I didn't really appreciate her going to the court appearances, I just thought it was sort of making it into a bit of a public debacle, like a bit of a spectacle to be watched, and I just didn't understand why – how she thought that was helping in any way.

PSO5 also talked of the lack of understanding from her mother if she failed to discuss a particular issue with her. She said it was exhausting trying to keep everyone up to date with what was happening:

... if I had a court appearance coming up, I probably would have spoken to his ex (wife), I probably would have spoken to his mum, I probably would have spoken to my counsellor and probably work as well. So that's like, if you've got a half hour or 45-minute conversation after being at full-time work for the four nights in a row, you're just not necessarily thinking about their feelings first. Like I kind of had to just think about what I needed at any particular point in time, that was all. It was all a bit much to manage her. I thought she was a bit fragile so I didn't necessarily want her to know everything going on either. So she was a bit resentful.

PSO5 also talked about the problems that ensued when her partner was released from prison. She said he just turned up without warning. She said she had already told him that any contact with the children would be supervised and it would be limited. He then became nasty, was late for access visits and was "quite antagonistic." She said he was angry about the restriction of the contact and tried to convince her that "legally I didn't have a leg to stand on."

In contrast to most of the participants, PSO6 had strong support from her family and friends. For PSO6 this was vital in helping her to make the decisions to both report her partner and divorce him. PSO6 described tension with her in-laws due to PSO6 reporting her partner and then divorcing him. A decision recently to have contact with in-laws for the sake of her small daughter has been difficult and has caused tensions in her relationship with her sister who was a victim of PSO6 partner's use of child abuse material. PSO6 talked of how she felt she was betraying her partner on some level and also betraying her sister by having

contact with her ex-partner's family, but did so only in order that her daughter had contact with cousins.

PSO7 and her partner are still together and she made a comment early on about this and that many people judge her negatively because of it. A particular issue was that she and her sister-in-law are no longer close because she is still with her partner. PSO7 said that making this kind of decision is harder than others might realise. PSO7 talked at some length about the decision to support her partner while he was in prison and remain with him upon his release and the toll this has taken on her and her two children. Both children suffer from health issues as a result of their father's conviction and imprisonment. Further there has been some stress related to keeping her partner's use of child abuse material and his sentence, a secret from his elderly mother. She talked about the difficulty in doing this.

PSO8 said that she was still in contact with her partner's mother but she has decided not to talk to her mother-in-law about her son's use of child abuse material. She said her mother-in-law...

... would feel completely responsible and she would feel terrible and I don't want to do that to her because she's such a sweet lady... And she's in her 60s and doesn't need to feel like she's totally ruined her son's life.

PSO8 discussed her partner's use of child abuse material with her mother but it seemed that this was not much help and to some degree she was and still is very isolated. It seems like she has not been able to make friends easily either. Similar to PSO2, PSO8 also stated that she lost all of her friends in Australia and on occasions that she talked about her partner's use of child abuse material, the friends distanced themselves from her. She said, "I've got maybe two friends that are sort of close so I'm not ready to lose them too", meaning that she could not afford to discuss issues related to her partner's use of child abuse material with them.

The saddest response PSO8 had was when a friend told her she must report her partner to the police for his use of child abuse material saying he would be there for her, and then decided that he did not want to have anything further to do with her. This was extremely hurtful to PSO8.

Minimisation related to the participants' partner's use of child abuse material

Many participants were concerned that their friends continued to allow the offender to have access to their children. PSO1 felt that most of her friends closed ranks around her partner to protect him from her, with comments like, "It's just pornography", "Why are you making such a big deal about this?" and "Don't you know you could ruin his career?" When PSO1 was believed by family and friends, the common response was "He was only looking" or "They are only pictures so what is the harm?"

The 'friend' who serviced the computer and found the images and subsequently told PSO1, finished up continuing to support her partner over PSO1. One of her partner's friends who had children said that PSO1's partner was never going to be allowed to babysit the children

or be left alone with the children. She went on to say, "That gradually fell away over the next years. All his friends stood by him. All his groomsmen that we had in our wedding, were groomsmen in his next wedding". She commented, "Not only did they push me out they closed ranks around him". PSO1 also commented that when people did not minimise the situation, they were hysterical and even viewed the affected partner of the person who uses child abuse material, as a paedophile:

So it's minimisation or hysteria, and nothing in between.

PSO3 had an issue in convincing friends about the seriousness of her partner's use of child abuse material. She stated,

They don't get it. They've seen the behaviour. I think how do they not get it. They want to support him because he's so nice. He's helpful, he's nice. That's what he uses to get to them.

PSO4 said that she had one friend contact her a few days after she had found the child abuse material and ask her if she was "just revengeful because you know that he's had this relationship with this woman at his work. Are you just going to take it to the police to get back at him, what's your motive?" Another friend told her,

"... think long and hard about the decision you are about to make because you could ruin his life. He won't be able to work with children, he will have to report where he's living and he won't be able to live near schools and kindergartens and it will dramatically affect his life, so think about what you're about to do and make sure that you understand the seriousness of what you're about to do".

PSO4 went on to say

... no one really acknowledges, "Oh my gosh you must feel..." No one actually talks about your own feeling and emotion; they are talking about "What are your actions going to be?" and I felt like I was in a lose-lose situation. Either way I was going to get judged and I was damned if I do, damned if I don't. I felt somewhat attacked by people...

In contrast PSO5 was told that she could have received victims of crime compensation but she did not pursue this as "I didn't feel like I was a victim of a crime". She felt that she was...

... some sort of a victim of the court process and the legal system, but I didn't feel like he [her partner] had personally done anything to me so I didn't feel like I should be saying that my partner had committed a massive crime. Like, it wasn't him that caused the grief, in some ways. He did, he is the reason why it all happened, but I didn't necessarily feel like I should be treated any differently to any other separated couple who obviously have a whole lot of issues to deal with. So maybe I could have pursued victims of crime, and even just to get the counselling covered, because I would have been out of pocket about \$80 potentially every counselling session.

Again this demonstrates some contradictions and minimisation of the crime of downloading child abuse material, by PSO5. This may be due to confusion about her feelings, the traumatic experiences and upheaval that she and her children had following apprehension of her partner for his use of child abuse material. She also had little support – see details under *Future strategies* on page 46.

When PSO6's mother-in-law and sister-in-law were told about her partner's use of child abuse material, they both minimised the seriousness saying that it was "only pictures" and therefore there was no "hands-on" abuse, so it was less harmful. Both refused to acknowledge the damage even though PSO6's partner was filming other children and PSO6's sister, and thus making his own child abuse material.

PSO6's doctor also minimised the abuse referring to it as a "teenage crush" on young girls and suggested there was no harm in her partner's behaviour. While the GP referred her on for counselling, PSO6 was very angry because the GP made it sound like she was overreacting.

Many of the participants were concerned and in some cases distressed about their partner's or ex-partner's potential to continue to use child abuse material. PSO1 and PSO4 spoke of their anxiety when their partners formed relationships and then remarried. PSO1 emailed then spoke to her ex-partner's new partner to warn her about his use of child abuse material. This warning was disregarded by the new partner.

PSO9 was concerned that some of their friends continued to allow access of their children to her offending partner who had been imprisoned for use of child abuse material. She also stated that the psychiatrist that her partner saw, seemed to have little understanding of the seriousness of someone accessing child abuse material or the responsibility of a psychiatrist to report it. The issues that PSO9 mentioned here were similar to the lack of knowledge discussed by other interviewees regarding specialist services not being able to understand the issues related to child abuse material and respond appropriately.

Of concern here is that people watching videos or looking at pictures don't connect that in order for this to be available, they have been responsible for commissioning serious abuse of children. The majority of the women interviewed were cognisant that the 'pictures' were the lives of children being abused. It is surprising that many relatives of partners ignored the fact the images were of children being raped, abused and tortured.

If such denial or ignorance of the seriousness of possessing child abuse material is a common issue and we suspect it is, it is cause for serious concern. It has taken decades for the public to understand the prevalence and seriousness of child sexual abuse. Further, there does appear to be a disjuncture in this research between public awareness and understanding of what constitutes child abuse material and child exploitation material, especially given some of the comments participants encountered such as those suggesting that their partners were only "looking" or that the child abuse material was "only pictures". Hence increased public awareness of this issue is critical.

Lack of support after participants' partner was investigated/charged

PSO1 felt unsupported as no one in her world said, "Yes, you are doing the right thing; you need to leave this person." Because of the circles she mixed in, the stigma of divorce was worse than the stigma of abusing children. What she needed to hear was a validation about leaving her partner.

PSO2 felt let down by the entire criminal justice system. She referred to her sense of abandonment:

The abandonment issue is that you are of little consequence, you are of no consequence to anyone or anything... My trust is gone. I felt abused, like I was the cover, the foil, because I was a very nice person too and upstanding in the community... so it was like every level of my understanding and my treatment of myself just went out the door and I felt bare of everything. I felt raw and absolutely bare.

There was nothing around me that I could support myself with in terms of feelings about myself or knowingness about anything, and I thought I was a fairly intuitive and fairly, how shall I say, solid in who I was and who I was with [partner's name] in terms of our marriage, and how supportive and respectful we were of one another.

PSO3 felt that there was little support for partners of people who accessed child abuse material. She undertook a large search and said that while "There's a lot of information for the victims and lots of stories and books... there's nothing for [affected] partners." PSO3 said that she thought that this was related to partners being too "scared to come out," hence there was nothing written about them. Her example was how petrified she was once her partner was charged then convicted. She was worried that people would react negatively to her and her children, especially her son who was still at school, as information about her partner's conviction was in the newspapers.

PSO3 felt that she would be blamed for his use of child abuse material, as indicated earlier. She is still fearful about what people in her local neighbourhood know or do not know. She also talked about her partner's family supporting him but "not one of his family approached me to see how I was coping with the charges against him".

While PSO4 received support from her close family, some friends and her church, she talked a lot about the lack of understanding and support received from others in her social circle, especially those connected to her partner. She also felt the lack of knowledge about child abuse material was a problem. Of concern was that she was told after she submitted the computers to the police that she must not talk about the criminal investigation to anyone. This put considerable pressure on her and prevented her from getting counselling support.

As indicated earlier PSO5 felt she had no support, nor was she offered any, but also did not think support would have been possible either. She said she had more recently worked out

that CASA could have offered counselling after someone she knew told her about the organisation. They said:

“They do have support groups for people like you”. But I haven’t quite worked out how “people like me” is framed as a group to actually access services.

Further PSO5 did not hear about PartnerSPEAK until six months after the police raid. She has since found it valuable to view online other people’s stories.

PSO7 felt alone and unsupported. This was compounded by living in a large country town. She did say that her partner’s parole officer had been helpful at least until this same parole officer breached her offending partners order for a non-criminal condition of his parole. PSO7 indicated that the founder of PartnerSPEAK had been an enormous help to her but this was some years ago. As she’s not that computer savvy, she did not do much posting but did say she put her story on the PartnerSPEAK website.

PSO7 said that until the interview for this research, she had never had the opportunity to talk non-stop about her partner’s use of child abuse material and the impact of this on her and their children, including her decision to stay in the marriage. This was because any counselling session was for 50 minutes and it was hard to really talk openly in a limited time frame. She talked about the cost of these sessions and indicated that most of the time she talked about the issues with her son, rather than herself. He is using drugs. She did have one person – her son’s friend’s mother who supported her throughout her partner’s court case.

PSO8 felt alone and unsupported. The most support she obtained early on seemed to be from PartnerSPEAK (see next section below **Contact with PartnerSPEAK**). Early counselling services she accessed were not useful, as the counsellors had limited awareness of the use of child abuse material.

When PSO9 found out about her partner’s use of child abuse material, she did not think she needed any support as she was getting a lot of support from friends, two of whom she talked to about the issues. Her problem about talking to others was:

I didn’t really want to talk about it because people would go, “What the hell are you doing supporting a child sex offender? Like you are a counsellor, how can you support this person?” I suppose I was a bit worried about people knowing.

PSO9 indicated towards the end of the interview that she had decided to seek help for her depression and would contact a psychologist.

Contact with PartnerSPEAK

PSO1 talked about the lack of understanding of the important role played by PartnerSPEAK. She referred to the importance of service providers strongly supporting the victim and wanting to protect the children but there was also a need to support secondary victims such as the affected partner of those who use child abuse material. Participants valued their contact with PartnerSPEAK.

All of the participants talked of the help that they received from PartnerSPEAK. Comments related to feeling validated, supported by people who understood their circumstances and about not being judged. Of concern however is that most participants stumbled upon the PartnerSPEAK website after, as PSO8 said, “going crazy” online. It could be assumed that many people who are dealing with a partner’s use of child abuse material might not access this site.

PSO2 talked about the impact PartnerSPEAK had on her life and the positive role model that the founder of this online forum had on her. She was a mentor and an example of a strong woman who had recovered from her experience. This had assisted PSO2 to feel that she could recover too.

PSO4 has contributed to the PartnerSPEAK forum and this has been very helpful as she has felt that she could share her story and help others. She said that she needed to move out of that space however, and is now involved in a movement against the sexualisation of girls.

PSO5 said it was “definitely helpful to read about other people’s stories on the website and realise that there are other people thinking and feeling the same kinds of things” as she was. As indicated above, she also felt that people in her situation needed to know about PartnerSPEAK at the time of the initial investigation of their partner’s use of child abuse material.

PSO7 felt the greatest support she received came from PartnerSPEAK especially the founder who was “really good and very helpful.” As she is not that computer savvy, she did not do much posting but did say she put her story on the website.

PSO8 said she had no idea how she came across PartnerSPEAK. She found out about her partner’s use of child abuse material and within a couple of days she contacted PartnerSPEAK after undertaking a large search on the internet. She found the online discussions very helpful. With the help of the founder of PartnerSPEAK, she was able to locate a therapist who has some knowledge of child abuse material. PSO8 said she has found her sessions with this person very valuable.

Future strategies

The following represents the strategies participants thought important. PSO1 suggested that a unit or subject should be incorporated into every counselling, psychology, social work and justice related program so that every single practitioner in Australia has at least thought of or has some awareness about child abuse material and what happens to all involved, including children and the affected partners of the offenders. Every single community organisation should at least offer counselling or some sort of therapeutic intervention for affected partners of those who use child abuse material.

PSO1 felt that the media needed to be aware of the impact that the offender’s use of child abuse material has on affected non-offending partners; the media should not name affected partners, or regard them as part of the offence or problem. Instead they should write articles from an affected partner’s perspective to improve awareness that these people are secondary victims, rather than someone who has contributed to the offending.

Much more awareness and understanding are required for affected partners of those who are involved in accessing child abuse material. PSO2 felt that PartnerSPEAK had faced some criticism by others who believed that the non-offending partners are not people in need of any special assistance; instead they should be focusing on child victims of such abuse. She felt there was little knowledge about the traumatic impact and associated long-term problems for affected partners of people who use child abuse material.

PSO1 felt that as the police had a primary criminal focus, there needs to be somewhere for people to go who may be suspicious of their partner and think that they might be using child abuse material. She felt that the National Child Abuse Prevention Hotline could fill that role.

PSO2 felt that there needed to be better communication and understanding from police about the impact of the offender's use of child abuse material on that person's partner.

If a policewoman came to see me several days later and said, "Now [PSO2's name] how are you feeling?", or "I can see, you know dazed eyes", or "Have you been to the GP? Are you sleeping, or cooking? What is it that you need?"

PSO2 felt that a mentor was required to help the affected partner of the offender talk through information and issues. This would also ensure that this person's needs were met.

PSO1 said that child protection would need to change if they were to be of any use to the family of the person who had used child abuse material. She stated,

How can the mother get support from child protection when she's going to be worried about intervention from child protection? And also not everybody leaves. Not everybody leaves immediately for a whole host of social and financial reasons. In that situation the [affected] partner is not going to want child protection involved because she will be fearful that her children will be taken away from her and that she'll get a record.

PSO1 felt that this research was important in counteracting the minimisation of people's use of child abuse material, as there is little or no information of the experiences and the patterns of behaviour of the offending partner. She also criticised the pro-porn movement, saying it is a lucrative area and it does not want bad press from research or from organisations such as PartnerSPEAK.

PSO2 and PSO4 believed that there needed be more awareness in society about the sexualisation of children.

PSO2 believed that additional research is needed to highlight the link between adult and child pornography. She also felt that there needed to be some understanding about whether there is a link between use of child abuse material and some earlier experience/abuse in life. She talked about the need to research/interview offenders to find out this information.

Like other participants, PSO3 was crying out for knowledge about her partner's use of child abuse material. She had limited knowledge and thought that it would be good to know "What is 'child pornography' and what isn't?" Like other participants she also wanted to

know about the link between ‘adult pornography’ and ‘child pornography’. PS03 talked about access to legal aid and the need to be able to get Centrelink, as well as knowing whom to report suspicions about a partner’s use of child abuse material.

PS04 thought there needed to be more information for affected partners about what to do when they either find child abuse material or their partners are apprehended for accessing child abuse material. While the policewoman in PS04’s situation was extremely supportive and provided a lot of information, PS04 was told not to discuss the case with anyone. She was constantly concerned about making sure she did not breach anything to do with her offending partner’s case and this impacted on her receiving formal help/support. It was not until 12 to 18 months later (after her partner’s conviction) that the police referred PS04 to a psychiatrist, then for counselling at a Victims of Crime service.

PS04 indicated that if the police had referred her to PartnerSPEAK early on, that would have been extremely helpful. Like others she thought that a brochure from police would have been helpful but given the shock she was experiencing it might have been hard to absorb the information. In summary she thought people needed to know:

- Who to ring
- Where to go for help/support
- Who are the best support services

PS05 felt that child protection services could have been more helpful. She said that they thought she had not protected her children and there was always that threat over her head that they might remove the children. This was even after the police were very happy that she did not have any knowledge of her partner’s use of child abuse material. She also felt that child protection might be able to recruit better staff if they paid more money that is, “twice as much” as workers currently receive.

PS05 said she would have liked to have had contact with other people to know “that I wasn’t the only person in the world that it had happened to, because it’s just, it’s really embarrassing, like you just don’t want anyone to find out about it”. She said being told about the CASA group counselling could have been good. She felt that knowing about the PartnerSPEAK website straight away would have been beneficial – she did not find out about this service until six months after the police raid.

Because all I had to go off was what was appearing in the press every day really... It might have been helpful to know what the core processes might be, what could be around the corner from Child Protection, although I’m not sure if that would make it worse, if you’re worrying about it and it doesn’t actually happen. But, just not being briefed at any point about what was going on, in terms of the children’s court process and what it meant.

Additionally PS05 felt that some kind of financial help should be provided. She has to pay for her legal bills and is still paying these. In addition while she was able to access 10 visits a year on the mental health plan with counsellors, additional funding would have been beneficial. She also thought that group counselling would have been good.

PSO6 had to Google and ferret out information about her rights and what things she needed to do to protect herself and her child. She had to find out about financial support; family law and custody issues; counselling and child care support services she could access; and what the court process meant and her legal rights. She believed that material, brochures and information were needed specifically to assist women who suddenly find almost overnight that their life is turned upside down; it is hard enough to find out all this information and much harder when an affected partner is scared and traumatised.

PSO7 and PSO8 said that counselling services needed to be more aware of issues surrounding the use of child abuse material. PSO8 said that her experience was that many had little knowledge and understanding of the issue. She was referred to a relationship counsellor who was no help whatsoever and was even shocked to hear her talk about her partner's use of child abuse material. Services did not even know where to refer her. In the end she contacted the founder of PartnerSPEAK and felt that "even she had a hard time finding someone to help."

PSO8 said, "The whole thing about child abuse material is just too underground. It's taboo and it is just not something people want to deal with." PSO8 also felt that more knowledge about child abuse material and how to receive help is important. She wanted affected partners and their families to be referred to some kind of helpline.

Similar to other participants, PSO9 thought more information needed to be available to affected partners at the time of the apprehension and following this. She felt isolated given that she did not live with her partner, so documentation would have been helpful.

All participants talked about the importance of having access to both online and paper information about the use and access of child abuse material. PSO3 talked about looking for a brochure on a support service to help her understand what was happening to her. Others wanted similar information but wanted to know what would happen after their partners had been charged.

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Attachment One: Interview Themes/ Indicative Questions

Research title: Women's experiences of learning about the involvement of a partner possessing child abuse material

Introductory questions

Can you tell me a bit about yourself? Age, where you're from, work/study, children, etc (if applicable)?

How did you first hear about PartnerSPEAK? What was your reason for becoming involved in the support network/visiting the site? How much involvement/contact have you had with the network?

Recognising the problem

How did you come to learn or form a view that your partner at the time had involvement in child abuse material on the internet?

(Consider the responses here and ask if they were aware if the partner was using/viewing adult pornography and why, type etc. if this were the case and/or any other kind of pornographic material)

What was your initial reaction/response when you had suspicions or became aware of this information?

What fears or concerns did you have at the time and did they impact on your decision/s about what actions you felt you could or would take?

Did you confront your partner with your knowledge/awareness or suspicions?

If yes – what were their reactions and how did you respond/handle them?

If no – did you feel unable to confront your partner or were you fearful to do so or concerned for the safety of yourself and others (perhaps children or other family members)?

What actions did you take?

Can you tell me a bit about how you felt, taking those actions?

Did you feel at any time that your personal safety was compromised due to taking this action?

Responses from your partner

Can you tell me about the reaction from your partner when you confronted him or he heard that you had reported that he had involvement in child abuse material on the internet?

Can you tell me about how you felt about his reactions?

What was the reaction from others such as family, friends and others when you disclosed this information or tried to discuss your concerns?

Responses from agencies

Did police become involved at any stage and were there any criminal proceedings as a consequence?

When you reported your concerns or knowledge to police or other agencies what responses did you receive?

How helpful or unhelpful was the response?

Can you tell me about how you felt about that response?

What was the impact of reporting for you personally and also for your children (if applicable) and/or other family members?

Improving the response

What kind of help/support would you have liked to receive?

How could police and other agencies or services better respond to these issues?

Do you have a view about how increased awareness and help for partners could be provided?

And can you tell me who would be the best organisations to provide that help/support?

Is there anything else that you would like to add that you think would benefit the research

Demographic details

Age, rurality, parental status, socioeconomic indicators

Attachment Two: Information for PartnerSPEAK.org⁴ website

RMIT University is seeking to interview members from PartnerSPEAK.org who have had some experience of partner's past involvement in the use child abuse material.

The research is titled: 'Women's experiences of learning about the involvement of a partner possessing child abuse material'

If you wish to participate, we would like to arrange an in-person interview at a time and a safe location that suits you, to discuss your experience and views. In the interview, we would ask you to share your experiences, including:

- How you came to learn of a partner involvement in child abuse material?
- What reactions you experienced from others, including the partner?
- What response you experienced from police or other agencies?
- How do you think responses by police and other agencies could improve?
- What do you feel are the support needs for women who become aware of this activity, and how could this support be provided?

We expect that the interview will take between 60 to 90 minutes.

Please contact Caroline Taylor, Marg Liddell or Anastasia Powell on 9925 2506 or 9925 3566 if you wish to participate in this research. If you are currently involved in court proceedings related to your partner's possession of child abuse material, which are pending or ongoing, it would be best to wait until these are completed prior to talking to us.

⁴ Following this research's completion, PartnerSPEAK rebranded and changed its URL to PartnerSPEAK.org.au

Attachment Three: Participant Information and Consent Form (PICF)

Project Title: Women's experiences of learning about the involvement of a partner possessing child abuse material

Investigators: Professor Caroline Taylor AM, Dr Marg Liddell and Dr Anastasia Powell (RMIT University).

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by RMIT University. Please read this letter carefully and be confident that you understand its contents before deciding whether to participate. If you have any questions about the project, please ask one of the investigators.

What is the project about? Why is it being conducted?

This study explores the experiences of women who have become aware of a partner's involvement in child abuse material (also referred to as child pornography). This area of crime is often hidden and the experiences and support needs of partners is not well understood by police and other professionals and the public. By listening to women's knowledge and experiences, it is our hope that this research will provide much needed information that can be used to improve the responses of support services and police, as well as contribute to further knowledge about these crimes.

Why have you been invited to participate?

You have been invited to participate as someone with personal experience of having reported or become aware of a partner's involvement in child abuse material. We believe your experiences have much to teach us about these crimes, about the current responses by police and other professionals, as well as how these responses and supports can be improved.

If you agree to participate, what will you be asked to do?

Should you agree to participate, we would ask to arrange an in-person interview at a time and a safe location that suits you, to discuss your experience and views. In the interview, we would ask you to share your experiences, including:

How you came to learn of a partner's involvement in child abuse material?

What reactions you experienced from others, including the partner?

What response you experienced from police or other agencies?

How do you think responses by police and other agencies could improve?

What do you feel are the support needs for women who become aware of this activity, and how could this support be provided?

We expect that the interview will take between 60 to 90 minutes. With your permission, we will audio-record the interview and transcribe it for analysis.

What will happen to the information you provide?

All interviews are confidential and the transcripts will be non-identifiable so as to ensure that you, the participant, cannot be identified by a third party. Once transcribed the digital recording is destroyed. Transcriptions will be retained in line with RMIT policy for 5 years. Interview transcripts will not contain names or any identifying material and will be stored securely by the researchers on password protected computers and cannot be accessed by anyone other than the researcher/s.

We anticipate that the findings of this research will be published in academic journals, books and presented at conferences. In any such publications, you would be referred to by a false name (pseudonym). A summary of the study findings will also be made available to you on request and on the *PartnerSPEAK.org*⁵ website.

What are the possible risks and benefits associated with your participation?

We acknowledge the courage and integrity required by women to report this crime, as well as the impact that its discovery can have on women and their families. As such, we understand that sharing this experience with us may be emotionally distressing. Each of the researchers has experience conducting interviews with women who have experienced abuse either directly or indirectly, and your well-being is our first concern and priority.

During the interview you may choose to skip any questions that the researcher might ask should you not want to talk about a particular aspect of your experience. In addition, if you feel uncomfortable at any time during the interview and wish to take a break, stop the recording, or stop the interview entirely, your choice will be fully listened to and respected. In addition if you feel any distress related to areas discussed in the interview a number of organisations that provide counselling and support such as PartnerSPEAK.org; Relationships Australia; CASA (Centre for Sexual Assault) WIRE (Women's Information Referral Exchange) are available to assist you. We have contact details which we can provide upon your request.

The benefit of participating is that sharing your experience and views may contribute to the investigators' development of recommendations to improve responses and support for others who discover a partner is involved in child abuse material.

⁵ Following this research's completion, PartnerSPEAK rebranded and changed its URL to PartnerSPEAK.org.au

What are your rights as a participant?

Your involvement in this project is your own personal decision and is completely voluntary. You have the right to have any questions about the research answered at any time. Should you agree to take part, you reserve the right to withdraw your participation at any time without explanation. You also have the right to request that audio recording of the interview cease. After the interview, should you change your mind about your participation, you have the right to have all traces of your participation removed and any unprocessed data withdrawn and destroyed.

Whom should you contact if you have any questions?

If you have any further questions about the study or if anything is unclear, please feel free to contact the researchers via the confidential email address details below. This email address will only be viewed by the three named researchers.

If you agree to participate, please read and sign the consent form. The researchers will collect this form at the time of the interview.

Yours sincerely,



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If you have any complaints about your participation in this project please see the complaints procedure on the [Complaints with respect to participation in research at RMIT](http://www.rmit.edu.au/) web page:
<http://www.rmit.edu.au/>

CONSENT FORM

Women's experiences of learning about the involvement of a partner possessing child abuse material

Investigators: Professor Caroline Taylor AM, Dr Marg Liddell and Dr Anastasia Powell (RMIT University).

I (the participant) have had the project explained to me. I have read the participant information sheet and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to participate in the research project as described.

1. I agree:

- to be interviewed
- that my voice will be audio recorded
- that the data I provide during the interview may be included in a research report, conference papers, journal articles and/or books
- that these publications will refer to me by a pseudonym and not my real name

2. I acknowledge that:

- a) I understand that my decision to participate is completely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time and to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied.
- b) The project is for the purpose of research. It may not be of direct benefit to me.
- c) The privacy of the personal information I provide will be safeguarded and only disclosed where I have consented to the disclosure or as required by law.
- d) The security of the research data will be protected during and after completion of the study. The data collected during the study may be published, and a summary report of the project outcomes will be made available to me upon request. Any information which will identify me will not be used.

Participant's Consent

Participant:

Date:

(Signature)