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*Reflections from the Phoenix 11 and Chicago Males
on their experiences as public advocates for survivors
of child sexual abuse material*

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This research report was written by Dr. Michael Salter and Dr. Delanie Woodlock from the University of New South Wales (UNSW Sydney) on behalf of the Canadian Centre for Child Protection Inc.

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INTRODUCTION

This report draws on interviews with members of the Phoenix 11 and the Chicago Males regarding their experiences as public advocates for the global community of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) survivors. CSAM refers to any media that sexually exploits a child, whether image, video, text or other. The two groups formed at separate retreats organised by the Canadian Centre for Child Protection (C3P) and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). The Phoenix 11 formed following a weekend retreat in 2018, where a group of women whose sexual abuse as children had been recorded gathered to discuss how they might work together to address the urgent needs of survivors such as themselves. The Chicago Males formed shortly afterwards in 2020 following a similar retreat for male survivors.

Some, although not all, members of the Phoenix 11 and Chicago Males have legal representation, and their lawyers informed them of the opportunity to attend the retreats and supported their involvement. Other members were informed about the retreats through other means, including the recommendations of law enforcement and therapists. Following the two retreats, both groups have worked with C3P and NCMEC to develop and implement an advocacy agenda, although the COVID-19 pandemic has necessarily curtailed advocacy opportunities, particularly for the more recently formed Chicago Males. Between the two groups, advocacy activities have included speaking at major policy forums, attending meetings with politicians and representatives of technology companies, providing training and developing educational resources for law enforcement, therapists and lawyers, participating in the co-design of social marketing and public awareness campaigns, and making policy submissions on major law reform initiatives.



Movements of people with lived experience of child sexual abuse have played a vital role in driving positive change for child victims and adult survivors, including promoting awareness of child sexual abuse and advocating for legal and policy reform (Whittier, 2009). However, as public and government concern about the problem of online CSAM has escalated over the last two decades, the voices of CSAM survivors have not been heard in discussions on how best to respond. These debates have been dominated by the economic might of the technology sector and shaped by privacy extremists within civil society and academia who have denounced online child protection initiatives as a breach of consumer rights. The Phoenix 11 and the Chicago Males offer a much-needed perspective and public contribution as adults whose sexual abuse as children was recorded and, for most members, shared online. The impact of the advocacy of the Phoenix 11 and the Chicago Males has been global and significant. For the first time, politicians and technology companies are accountable to the people who are most directly affected by their decisions on CSAM.

This report draws on interviews with nine members of these two unique groups about their experiences as public advocates for a community of survivors that has long been silenced. The report explores the effects of CSAM victimisation, how they felt about meeting other survivors and forming an advocacy group, their activist journeys and lessons, and how advocacy has shaped and transformed their lives. A key finding of the report is the interlinked nature of personal and social change. As each survivor found their voice and place in advocacy work, the changes they affected in public awareness, policy, and decision-making were mirrored in the personal changes they observed in themselves and each other. While interviewees recognised the challenges and difficulties of their advocacy roles, they were largely optimistic about the future. The report closes by gathering their thoughts on future areas for activist attention and the importance of providing all CSAM survivors with the experience of being recognised as people of serious intent with important contributions to make to debates over internet regulation, online safety, and recovery from exploitation.



LITERATURE REVIEW

This brief literature review draws together current research evidence on the impact of CSAM on victims and survivors. It considers the role of political advocacy in restoring health, safety, and dignity for survivors at the individual and collective level.

Since the commercialisation of the internet in the mid-1990s, internet governance has been conceptualised within a “multi-stakeholder” model that includes governments, the technology sector and non-government organisations. This approach recognises the distributed nature of internet infrastructure and services, which requires global collaboration to function. However, this model has not included the voices of victims and survivors of CSAM or other forms of online child sexual exploitation. While all internet stakeholders routinely expressed concern about victimised children, key issues for CSAM survivors (for instance, blocking CSAM at the point of upload, and the proactive and swift removal of CSAM once it is online) have been deprioritised within national and international arrangements (Salter & Hanson, 2021). A *laissez-faire* approach to online harms has led to the massive online accumulation of CSAM that is “exceeding the capabilities of independent clearinghouses and law enforcement to take action” (Bursztein et al., 2019, p. 1).

The impacts of CSAM victimisation

For victims and survivors, online CSAM is a digital artefact of the worst moments of their lives. Not all victims are aware of the creation of CSAM as it may be recorded surreptitiously or while they are asleep or sedated, which introduces significant ethical questions about whether and how they should be informed when this material is found to have been recorded and distributed (Ost & Gillespie, 2019). However, for those victims who are aware of the production of CSAM and suspect or know that it has been distributed, online circulation constitutes distinctive and additional harms to them (Rothman, 2010). These harms include the significant ongoing trauma and humiliation caused by CSAM offenders sharing and viewing recordings of their sexual abuse. CSAM distribution and consumption is also a risk to the physical safety of the child victim and adult survivor. Offenders use online CSAM to blackmail, threaten, and extort child victims and adult survivors (Salter & Woodlock, 2022). Some adult survivors describe being forced to move houses to protect themselves and their families from stalking and harassment by online CSAM offenders (Salter & Woodlock, 2022). In order to minimise these risks, victims and survivors can spend considerable time online seeking out and reporting their own CSAM to maintain their safety (Salter & Hanson, 2021).

The most extensive study to date on the impacts of CSAM was C3P's (2017) survey of the experiences of 150 adult survivors whose abuse was recorded and may have been distributed online. The majority of respondents were female (85%). Most participants were abused before they were 12 years old (87%), and over half were abused before they were five (56%). The abuse continued into adulthood for one-third of the participants (36%). Most respondents stated that CSAM production had a different impact from hands-on abuse. The permanence of the images, the trauma of their distribution, and ongoing anxiety that they may be recognised in their daily life by a CSAM consumer were concerns for two-thirds of participants. Respondents reported a range of impacts on their lives due to CSAM: 95% reported anxiety, 92% reported sleeping difficulties, and 58% reported that their schooling and education were disrupted. The abuse also affected survivors' intimate relationships and sexuality, with 64% stating that they had issues with intimacy and 58% unable to engage in and/or experienced difficulties in sex acts.

Other research finds that CSAM victimisation increases and compounds the harms of child sexual abuse. An online survey by Gewirtz-Meydan et al. (2019) with 107 survivors of CSAM found that the guilt and shame associated with the ongoing circulation of abuse images correlate with higher levels of trauma and distress. An increased risk of mental health problems from the filming of sexual abuse was also found in a survey from Sweden of 5,839 students aged 19-20 years (Jonsson & Svedin, 2017). Participants were asked about their experiences of online sexual abuse, and those who had photographs or videos taken of their sexual abuse had higher levels of mental health problems. The researchers concluded that survivors of CSAM should be considered polytraumatized with complex traumatic presentations. In her clinical experience working with children victimised in CSAM, Leonard (2010) observed that the continuous circulation of images and videos of the abuse could prevent children from putting their abuse in the past since their victimisation is ongoing at the hands of CSAM consumers.

While there is broad recognition that CSAM has life-long impacts on victims, the recovery of damages for victims has proved difficult, if not impossible, in most cases due to the cross-border nature of this crime (Binford, 2015). Even without these jurisdictional complications, CSAM victims face difficulties in determining the harm of these crimes, as well as causation and liability, particularly where there is more than one offender involved (Binford, 2015). In the United States, lawyers have drawn on the legal statements of survivors to establish that ongoing CSAM distribution and consumption is an additional harm distinct from other experiences of sexual abuse (Cassell & Marsh, 2019; Rothman, 2010; Sheldon-Sherman, 2013). In the United States, the Amy, Vicky, and Andy Child Pornography Victim Assistance Act became law in 2018, creating a systematic process of restitution that is specifically designed for the crime of CSAM. The United States also has a victim notification scheme in which identified victims (or their representatives, such as a caregiver or an attorney) can nominate to be notified each time their CSAM is seized as part of an investigation, which enables them to sue the CSAM offender for damages. However, no other jurisdiction has such a CSAM-specific notification scheme.

Lack of accessible and specialist supports for CSAM survivors

Specific and targeted responses to CSAM victimisation can be complicated for survivors to find. C3P’s (2017) report documented the struggles of CSAM survivors to access affordable and effective therapy across a range of jurisdictions. Von Weiler et al.’s (2010) study of the care and treatment of minor CSAM victims in Germany emphasised the specialist nature of the work, and recommended CSAM-specific training for therapists and counsellors. In a survey of practitioners who work with CSAM survivors, the majority agreed that these cases were more complex compared to other child abuse cases and that CSAM victims had different clinical presentations compared to other traumatised children (Von Weiler et al., 2010).

A recent study by Dimitropoulos et al. (2022) on the perceived ability of Canadian mental healthcare workers to recognise and respond to online sexual exploitation of children found a significant lack of training for professionals in this area. The majority (83%) of the 209 surveyed mental health care professionals reported working with a client impacted by grooming, luring, online sexual abuse, or sexual image distribution in the last year. However, these professionals indicated that they were less confident, experienced more barriers, and had less training to work with these clients compared to other forms of sexual abuse. Similar challenges have been identified in research with educators and school staff. A survey developed by Lindenbach et al. (2021) in collaboration with C3P examined the experience, capacity, and confidence of school staff to recognise and respond to concerns about disclosures of child abuse, including online sexual exploitation of their students. Staff reported low levels of training and confidence in identifying online sexual exploitation.

Advocacy by adult survivors of child sexual abuse

Since at least the 1970s, social, legal and policy changes to prevent child abuse and support victims and survivors have been driven forward by the political mobilisation of adult survivors of child sexual abuse (Whittier, 2009). In her history of child abuse survivor movements in the United States, Whittier (2009) explored how activist groups “broke the silence” around child sexual abuse and promoted systematic improvements to child protection, mental health, and legal responses. Public activism by survivors of child sexual abuse can be personally healing and highly informative for the public and policy-makers, and contributes to more effective responses to child sexual abuse (Salter, 2020). By sharing their stories and advocating for their rights, survivors also assist other survivors in identifying common experiences across different experiences of abuse, which helps to overcome stigma and shame, and provides a shared vocabulary to talk openly about abuse and trauma.

Despite the benefits and contributions of survivor activism, adult survivors of CSAM face many barriers to participation in public advocacy. The first is the severity of the impacts of child sexual exploitation and the absence of sufficient care and support services for adult survivors, as discussed above. The second barrier is the significant safety concerns of CSAM survivors. The targeting of CSAM survivors by CSAM offenders is a problem that typically is not addressed by law enforcement and other agencies, leaving survivors exposed to the risk of re-victimisation if their identities are known (Salter & Woodlock, 2022). The third barrier is ignorance and disbelief. Claims of child sexual exploitation can attract significant scepticism from the media and the public (Salter, 2017). Indeed, the failure of internet governance structures to accommodate survivor voices can be attributed, at least in part, to widespread ignorance about the seriousness of child sexual exploitation. With the formation of the Phoenix 11 and the Chicago Males, adult survivors of CSAM now have their own specific advocacy groups to raise public awareness and political will and to promote reform in their interests. This report aims to document and explore the experiences of these two unique advocacy groups.

METHODOLOGY

The guiding question of the study is “How do CSAM survivors experience their participation in political and policy advocacy work, and what are the impacts of this work on them?” The study employed an arms-length recruitment approach in which C3P shared information about the study with the Phoenix 11 and Chicago Males, who had the opportunity to raise any questions about the study with C3P. Group members could contact the first author to indicate their interest in participating in an interview. Interviews were held in person in May 2022 for some participants and online for other participants from June to September 2022. Interview questions focused on:

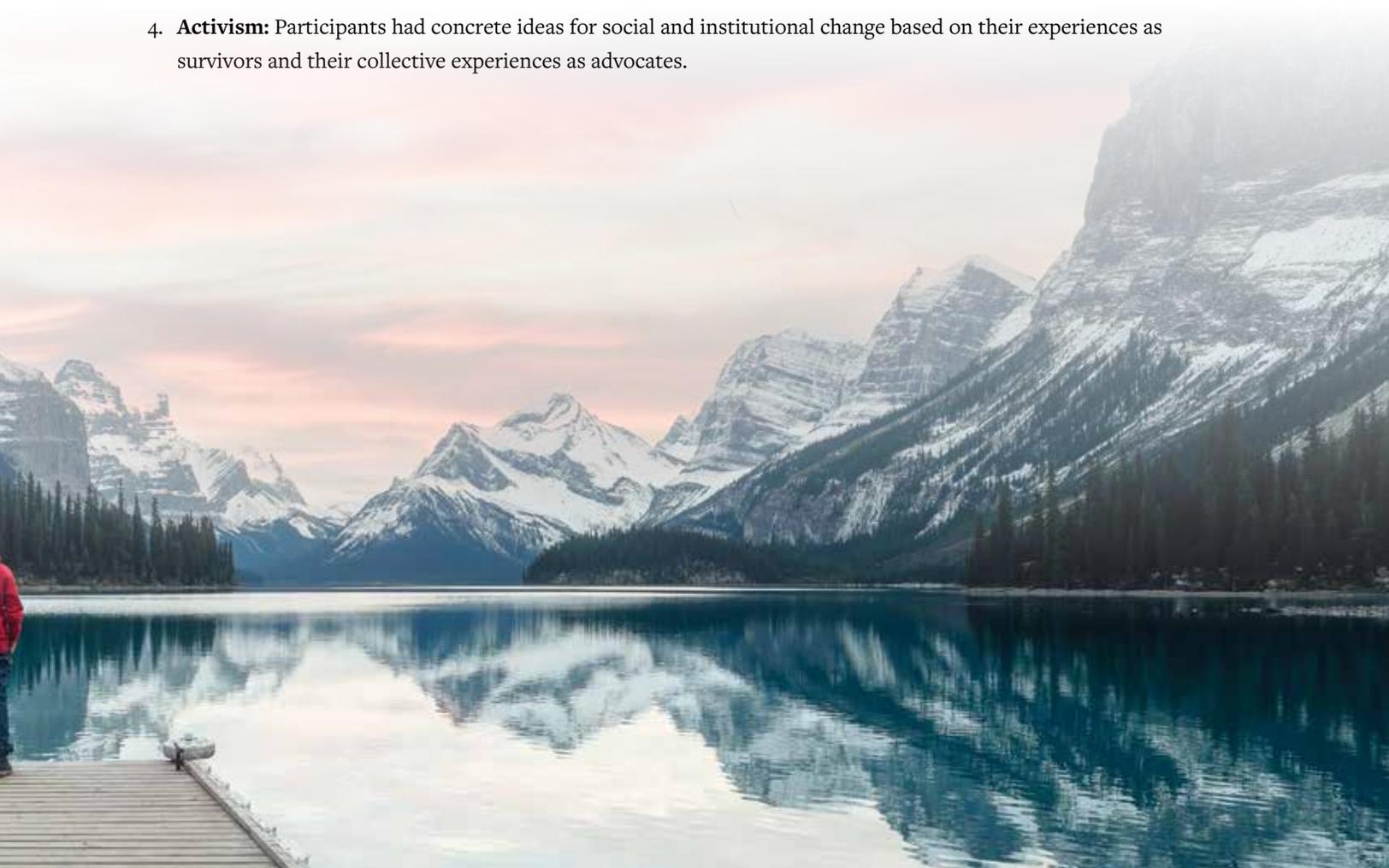
- when participants first heard about the Phoenix 11 or Chicago Males,
- their initial thoughts and experiences about meeting other survivors,
- their experiences of public advocacy, and
- their hopes and aspirations for the future.

Interviews were semi-structured and conversational, lasting for between 30 to 90 minutes, with an average time of approximately one hour. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, after which they were anonymised with the removal of all identifying names and details. Pseudonyms are used throughout this report.



We coded the transcripts using the thematic analysis process outlined by King, Horrocks, and Brooks (2019). The first stage of coding was descriptive. In this step, we read through the transcripts to familiarise ourselves with the participant's experiences. The transcript was then imported into the software program NVivo, allowing the user to highlight and assign themes to relevant text passages. Interviews were initially assigned descriptive codes that describe the content of the interviews. The second step was interpretive coding, where descriptive codes that share a common meaning were linked together from across the transcripts to develop a more conceptual and theoretically-informed coding matrix. The third step was to define overarching themes in order to answer the research question. These four major overarching themes are:

1. **Healing:** Interviewees found the process of forming a collective for the purposes of advocacy to be healing, in and of itself. They valued feeling less alone and sharing their experiences with others who understood, which they linked to emotional well-being and personal growth.
2. **Empowerment:** Through their bond with each other, advocates could work together to create change. They found their voices together and increasingly felt more confident in their political and social roles as advocates.
3. **Hope:** The personal and political changes that occurred due to their participation in advocacy created a sense of hope. They felt future-orientated and developed goals for their advocacy, which was undergirded by a feeling that things could be different and better.
4. **Activism:** Participants had concrete ideas for social and institutional change based on their experiences as survivors and their collective experiences as advocates.



1. HEALING

All of the survivors whom we spoke to found the experience of being part of the Phoenix 11 or the Chicago Males to be personally healing. This healing was linked to finding other people who understood their experience, forming friendships, and learning to trust others. Survivors also spoke about the personal growth that occurred due to being part of the groups, which was often life-changing. We begin this section by acknowledging the long-term impacts of CSAM and abuse, which provided the backdrop to the decision of the survivors to undertake public advocacy as a collective.

The legacies of childhood trauma and CSAM

The impact of child sexual abuse and its recording was felt across all domains of survivors’ lives. Their perpetrators were parent/s, family members, and authority figures, and their exploitation was a catastrophic breach of their trust. CSAM was part of a pattern of abuse and betrayal that Iris said had left her “destroyed essentially completely to the soul”, forcing her to try and “rebuild yourself in some shape or form to survive.” She said:

Even the sense of having dreams gets crushed when you’re a kid and this is happening to you. Everyone goes “Hey, what do you want to be when you grow up?” But when this happens to you, you don’t have dreams, you just have nightmares. And it’s hard to push past those nightmares and say, “Hey, I can have an actual life and dreams, and I can do this and I can do that.”

Disruptions to study and education were shared amongst the advocates, impacting their job prospects and financial security. Some survivors had close connections with caring and non-abusive family members, but others could not rely on parents or family networks for emotional or financial support. Max grew up with unprotective parents who left him alone with a relative whom they knew had prior convictions for sexual abuse, who subsequently exploited him. He remarked, “I don’t have a big connection with them (my family), and that’s kind of intentional and it’s been for the better.”

All survivors discussed the long-term mental and physical health impacts of CSAM victimisation. Erica explained that, prior to joining the Phoenix 11, “I had a very severe eating disorder. Severe self-injury. I got a lot of diagnoses.” Physical health was an enduring concern. Survivors described their bodily systems under constant stress because of past abuse and the ongoing circulation of their CSAM. Ethan experienced the impact of abuse and trauma on his body in terms of chronic overwhelm:

You’re constantly in hyper-arousal, and your nervous system is constantly going. I’m telling you, the physical effects, you will feel them in your body. I’m literally a freaking case study. I have acid reflux, I have a bad back and hypertension. You name it, I’ve dealt with all of it. My nervous system is an absolute wreck.

Claire felt that the public “need to understand that it affects every area of your life, down to normal functioning, eating, dressing, sleeping, building relationships, school, work, health – especially health.” The knowledge of the ongoing circulation of CSAM was central to survivors’ mental and physical health burden. Survivors were prevented from putting their abuse behind them because that abuse had been recorded and distributed. The circulation of their CSAM forced them to reckon with memories of past abuse and the anticipation that the recordings of this abuse would continue to be shared into the future. Claire said:

So it’s almost like there’s always a bit that’s stuck there, because it’s ongoing and people are still using it for sexual satisfaction. So they’re still using you and it feels like there’s a part of you that’s not completely free. There’s a part of you that’s always grieving. There’s a part of you that doesn’t feel like it gets to live the normal life. And you’re always fighting that, it’s always in the back of your mind.

Meeting other survivors

Survivors talked about growing up feeling isolated from their peers. Cassie said, simply, “I never really was social.” This was a shared experience amongst interviewees, who had often struggled to relate to other children and young people due to their abuse. Lucy was left deeply hurt when her abuse became public knowledge amongst her peers at high school. The subsequent harassment forced her to leave school and end her education prematurely:

When I was in middle school I had to drop out, because when kids found out about what I went through, I was literally surrounded by a group of six boys who were like, “You’re used, you’re disgusting.” They compounded it. So the second you share something you really have to worry about how it’s going to be received.

Loneliness and a fear of connecting with others could persist into adulthood. Three survivors used the word “alien” to describe how their experiences of abuse left them feeling dislocated and separated from others.

It’s the kind of thing that you can’t talk to even your closest friends about because it’s such an inherently alien experience to normal life, I guess. *Max*

It makes you feel alone, it makes you feel like you’re an alien. *Ethan*

Missing out on some of the normal childhood stuff, it was a bit hard to meet peers growing up, so I always felt a little bit like an alien. *Claire*

When they were asked in interviews how they had felt about the prospect of meeting other survivors, participants expressed a mixture of emotions, from “anxious” to “ready” and “excited.” This anxiety included the fact that some had been groomed by being shown CSAM of other children and were worried that their CSAM may have been shown to other survivors. Brianna encapsulated this mix of anticipation and concern. She said:

I was really excited. I was one of the ones who was just really looking forward to meeting others who had similar stories. I did have a little concern, just because in my case I was groomed a lot with CSAM, so I had concerns about, in regards to, well, I reckon, there’s someone [I saw in those images], like, how does that feel? But for the most part, I was really excited.

This fear did not eventuate, and no survivor disclosed recognising another member of the Phoenix 11 or Chicago Males from CSAM. An important rule that emerged informally in both groups was that, by and large, members did not share the details of their abuse. Erica explained:

I don’t know any of the other girls’ trauma. Maybe little bits and pieces, but I have not looked them up, and I won’t. If they want to tell me they can tell me, but we’ve all kind of agreed not to do that. I think that’s very important, because it can quickly become a triggering retraumatizing atmosphere, rather than a strength-building empowering atmosphere.

Max’s introduction to the male survivors occurred under challenging circumstances. He was in his late teens when his primary abuser was arrested, and he lost his job around the same time. Shortly afterwards, while in a “massive downward spiral”, he was offered the opportunity to travel to meet other male survivors. This meeting was, he said, “a real turning point in my life” and “the closest thing I’ve ever had to a properly spiritual experience. It was like a complete turnaround in myself.”

Trusting each other

While some survivors were excited to meet others, all of them were concerned about building trust with each other. “Awkward” was a common term that arose throughout the interviews when survivors described first meeting each other. However, many were surprised at how easily they could bond and connect with other CSAM survivors. By connecting with other survivors, Max discovered that his responses to his abuse were entirely normal and expected. He said:

It turns out there are other people here that experienced the same things, do the same things, and have the same odd little habits that are actually mechanisms from trauma. It was really validating more than anything else. It’s like “Hey, I’m not alone in this.”

For Claire, this validation prompted other feelings, including grief:

Having that in common is really validating and comforting. But at the same time, knowing they’ve been through what you went through, and you know how horrible what you went through is, is really heavy and hard and sad. And it’s definitely a shared grief ... You always carry that knowledge that there’s just a lot of darkness in the world ... knowing the other Phoenix 11 ladies, and how inspiring and good-hearted they all are has really helped.

Alongside this shared grief is a deep bond and a love for each other that they can draw on when they feel alone. Claire continued:

...it’s been amazing. And I really do think it’s happened for all of us, it’s happened for me too, that we have found a strength that we didn’t have before. Just in the safety of our community, knowing that we have it, even if we’re not talking every day, just knowing that it’s there. It’s something we can carry with us in difficult situations in life and we can love ourselves better because we know how loved we are. We have a strength to draw from that we didn’t have before.

Several survivors talked about the informal communication channels that developed within their groups. When they were having a bad day, they could reach out to the group or another member to discuss it. Jade said:

We created a way to keep in contact, so when we have things come up that bugged us we can relate to other people, posting online and talking to the girls. They’re always really understanding.

Cassie felt that the trust she had developed within the Phoenix 11 positively impacted all her relationships. She observed:

I’m definitely more open with the people I’m around, and with like relationships and stuff I’m more comfortable with everything. I still always hold back, there’s always a part of me that I keep to myself. But it’s definitely helped me through life recently.

2. EMPOWERMENT

The personal connections that the advocates made with each other provided them with the impetus to turn their solidarity into a political force. The interviewees did not just want to share their experiences to inform others; they wanted to create social and political change. Brianna remembered:

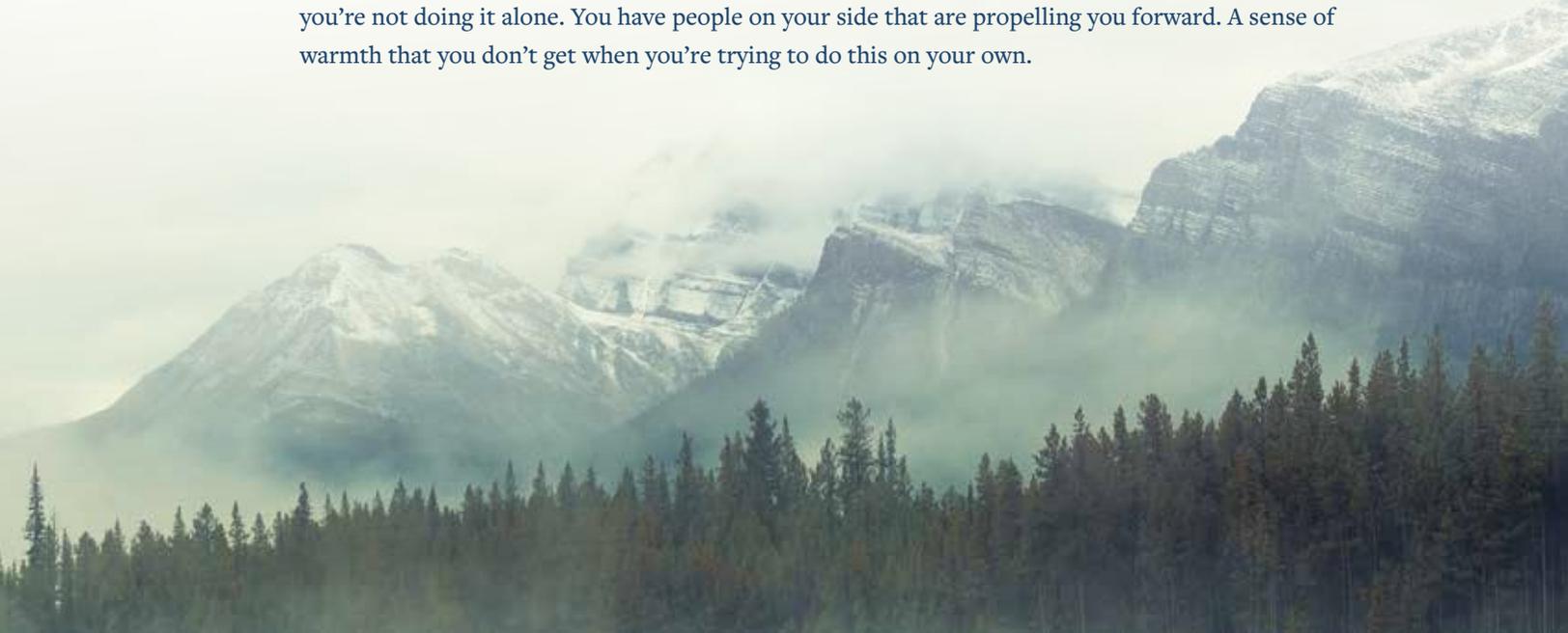
We all just seemed to gel super well, and the more we talked about our experiences, the more it confirmed within the group that there was so much that needed to be done in this area We just felt so empowered by meeting each other and having conversations.

Ethan argued that advocacy is essential to transforming CSAM survivors’ lives. While he acknowledged that survivors could work with professionals to gain catharsis (a release of emotion), explanation (an account of their abuse), and education (understanding their trauma symptoms), advocacy was the stage where they put these lessons into practice, and in doing so, transformed themselves:

I think advocacy is extremely important ... you’ve got your catharsis, and you’ve got your explanation, you’ve got your education. Then you’ve got transformation. I think a lot of times in a professional environment you can get the first three pretty easily, right? All that’s extremely important. But a lot of times with the transformation aspect, being able to use that and transform yourself into who it is you want to become, and whatever way that is. I think that’s where advocacy will play a big role.

All the participants felt the transformative aspect of advocacy. They described a shift from viewing their lived experience of CSAM victimisation as primarily a source of fear and shame to realising that they could use their story to advocate for themselves and for others. This shift was made possible through the connection they had with one another. Iris said:

It’s scary [to talk about] but I know it’s a better life when it’s scarier and you’re trying to do something better. It’s better to live big than small... There’s a sense of hope that it won’t be easy but you’re not doing it alone. You have people on your side that are propelling you forward. A sense of warmth that you don’t get when you’re trying to do this on your own.



Their initial motivations for advocacy were often altruistic: they were speaking up on behalf of victimised children and adult survivors. However, with this mission came the realisation that they, too, were worth fighting for. Brianna identified the transformation that advocacy has created in her life. While she initially spoke up because she cared about other survivors and wanted to protect children, she has now come full circle and realised that she could advocate for herself also. She detailed this change:

When I originally started, I was super excited to fight for other kids, future victims and survivors. But it's more so in the past couple of years... where I kind of evolved to a point where I'm actually fighting for myself and that little girl in me that was so badly disrespected, and who has been silent for so long. The biggest part for me is just being able to say that I'm here fighting for myself, too.

Shame is one of the most common and powerful emotions associated with the trauma of child sexual abuse. Children routinely blame themselves for being abused. This traumatic shame often persists into adulthood and can be difficult to alleviate. Such shame is compounded in CSAM victimisation in myriad ways, including through the ongoing circulation of abusive images and videos. However, advocacy had a powerful de-stigmatising effect. Jade explained:

Meeting the other girls and whatnot, it was easier to relieve that stigma personally, because you judge yourself a lot ... Sometimes I can tell people about my past and not be as worried about how they judge me, and that's a good thing because I've grown more confident within myself and that shame has disappeared a little bit. Phoenix 11 has really helped that.



Advocacy also demonstrated to survivors what they are capable of. Cassie found strength within herself by trying to help others, and she grew through the process:

We did a lot of things I never thought I’d be doing, like meeting all these extraordinary people that are advocates really trying to help the kids that really need the help when no one else can be there for them ... It definitely made me stronger about it because ... I can pursue so much more than I thought I ever could.

The opportunity to speak and have an impact on governmental policies and practices felt to Claire like it was a “corrective experience”, and that it somewhat restored the voice that their abusers had tried to silence. For Jade, her membership of the Phoenix 11 came shortly after the prosecution of some of her abusers, and she felt that advocacy gave her a powerful “voice” that was absent in the criminal justice system.

I was going through all the court and stuff and it (Phoenix 11) gave me that voice. And because in the court system, my voice is all I had and I felt really powerless, because the court takes forever – a date to reschedule another date, “we need more information, let’s schedule another date.” So with this (Phoenix 11) I felt I could make real change and talk to people who were actually in power.



Sisterhood and brotherhood

Many of the survivors referred to the bond between them as a sisterhood or a brotherhood. Joining together made them feel powerful and capable of taking on challenges because they could depend on the strength of the group. Lucy had been hesitant to join the Phoenix 11 due to her previous experiences of bullying and harassment at school. But, she reflected:

Now that it's five years in, we're getting really comfortable with the sisterhood. We'll be like "I don't like that, let's not do that." Or can we debate this or edit it and do something different. I got bullied by a group of girls back in the day, so I was really hesitant about working with women. I'm, like, girls can be mean, and very cliquey almost. But that's the thing, it's nice that there hasn't been certain ones of us that have cliqued up or anything.

The men in the Chicago Males group found camaraderie in their shared experiences as male CSAM survivors. Ethan was pleasantly surprised by the ease with which the men came together:

It blows my mind that you can even get males together because the stigma on males is no weakness, only strength. ... I knew how I felt – you just don't want to come forward because you feel like less of a man ... So I was very happy to see that there was male participation. It gave me a lot of hope. It makes you not feel alone, it really does. I can't explain how important that is.

This burgeoning sense of connection and mission sat within a broader context of support, which included C3P and NCMEC as well as, for some members, legal representation. Max commented that, before contacting C3P, "I haven't really had a solid group of people around me to say 'Hey, we're in your corner.'" He fondly remembered the encouraging text messages that he received from C3P staff during the prosecution of his abuser. Ethan agreed, noting that the services offered by C3P provided a backdrop of comfort and security to his decision to join the Chicago Males. He said:

[T]he biggest thing that drew me in there was the fact that C3P is trying to get this stuff taken down from the internet with Arachnid trying to get it hashtagged and all that¹ ... It helped me so much to see that people actually were attempting to do something about it, after living with the knowledge for years that nobody cares, nobody knows, there are no laws around it, you didn't hear nothing about it.

¹ Project Arachnid is a set of victim-centred tools designed to prevent the proliferation of online CSAM run by C3P. For more information, see: www.projectarachnid.ca/.

Life changes

Survivors felt that their trust and bond with each other had catalysed profound shifts in their personal lives. Some of these changes included radical transformations in how they viewed and understood themselves. One of the most vivid illustrations of such changes was given by Erica, who explained that, by joining the Phoenix 11, she “became a human.” She expanded:

I said to [my therapist] while I was out there working with her, “I feel like I’m a head.” And that’s all I am. Just a head. Realising I was an actual human being – it sounds kind of strange – was actually a revelation to me. I’m a person. I exist. That was a big deal. I know how weird that sounds, but I didn’t connect to myself as a person. At all. I became a human, you know? I have had four years ... of being a real person. And Phoenix 11 did that for me.

Other advocates identified how joining the group had led to significant changes in their lives, including decisions to deal with alcohol and drugs, mental health, or complex relationships. Claire noted that her membership with the Phoenix 11 coincided with a reduction in entrenched anxiety and insomnia and increased self-esteem. She felt more confident and assertive and explained, “I’ve been able to leave a bad marriage, advocate for myself much better, and feel more confident in public spaces.” Lucy linked her membership of the Phoenix 11 to the cessation of her eating disorder:

If you were to look at the first group photo [of the Phoenix 11] ... I was going through eating disorders, I was literally 100 pounds and for my height that was deadly, a little bit ... [But] I’ve gained that confidence ... I see it and my family and my husband especially. Me and one of the other survivors were talking about it this morning, she said to me “you look healthier.” That doesn’t mean bigger, it means healthier.





Some women spoke of deciding to have children after seeing that other women in the Phoenix 11 were mothers too. Like many survivors, they had been worried about passing on the trauma of their abuse to their children. Jade described how her fellow Phoenix 11 sisters came to realise that they could be parents after watching other members raise their children:

Connecting with the other girls has helped the other girls too because some of them were afraid to have children. Then they learned I had a child and others had children too ... Some of them were afraid and had been given the courage to have children.

Survivors also identified significant improvements in the areas of study and employment. Cassie explained that she had recently completed her training and was now undertaking volunteer work in a medical setting. She was proud of herself for “saving lives” through her volunteer work and her work with the Phoenix 11. She was actively engaging with others rather than being so withdrawn or “to myself”:

I started being a volunteer. I never thought I’d get there, and I probably wouldn’t have if I wasn’t with these girls. So it’s like two ways I’m saving lives. It’s definitely something I would have never thought about doing, because I’m so ‘to myself’ and you cannot be to yourself, you have to talk to people.

Iris has written several book-length manuscripts that she has never shown to anyone. After joining the Phoenix 11, she was beginning to contemplate publishing her work. She remarked, “To actually be able to conceive the fact of me being a writer is monumental prior to the Phoenix 11.” Max explained how the confidence gained through his advocacy work translated into new employment opportunities. He said: “I went from an aimless loser to a person who is ... I told you what my work schedule is like, I’m a very career-driven guy right now.”

3. HOPE

Through the healing and empowerment that resulted from being part of the Phoenix 11 and the Chicago Males, the survivors spoke of feeling hopeful that they could make a difference and draw on their experiences to ensure that others do not have to suffer as they have. This hope had a personal and a social dimension. Lucy reflected on how her membership of the Phoenix 11 challenged her to care for herself in the same way she was caring for others and being cared for:

You get that reassurance that you’re not alone and you don’t have to be hating yourself for the things you went through, because you wouldn’t hate someone else for going through it. So the love you get for them is returned because you start loving yourself, because you can’t give them that grace and not give yourself a little bit of it.

For Max, his personal connection with other survivors gave him the impetus to create change. He said: “I was like, yes, I am totally ready to go and get some shit done and make the world a better place.” Brianna explained that the Phoenix 11 had come to believe that, despite the “darkness” and hopelessness of their childhoods, change was possible:

... we can believe that we can leave the world a better place, it is just incredible and a real testament to the journey we’ve been on as well. Because there was a real darkness in the beginning before this all came together, just [a feeling that] this is the way it is and nothing’s going to change. Now we’re in a place where we do believe that we can actually leave the world a better place.

Survivors were impressed by the many professionals and policy-makers that they had met in their activism work. This network shared their commitment to supporting CSAM victims and survivors and preventing abuse in the future. Such encounters were important to the development of a more future-orientated and hopeful outlook, as they realised that more people shared their advocacy mission than they had initially realised. Cassie observed:

We did a lot of things I never thought I’d be doing, like meeting all these extraordinary people that are advocates really trying to help the kids that really need the help when no-one else can be there for them. It was definitely a great experience. There were other people, and higher up people that can help, that want to help.

Brianna found that meeting committed professionals helped restore the trust that had been broken by her abuse and by the failure of the “system” to prevent her abuse images and videos from being circulated. In this process, she realised that she was not alone and that a network of others all around the world supported her. She said:

[I]t’s really helpful to see all these different adults, and people who are fighting, because that’s something that kind of gets lost in this type of abuse, the trust for adults and the system ... There are lots of people in this world who are fighting, and it’s probably been one of the best parts of being with this group.

This movement from an internal focus on survival to an external focus on connection and change could provide a healthy release for the anger and frustration over their ongoing victimisation in CSAM distribution. Advocacy gave Lucy a way of channelling her anger in healing ways: rather than asking “help me, please,” she could demand action and change from others. She remarked:

You don’t really get to be, like, a social justice warrior a lot of the time. You don’t get to go out and be pissed off and people listen to you. But this is a space where you can. We still try and be as respectful as possible, because you don’t want to come across as abrasive and emotional reacting. You’ve thought about it and you have a right to be pissed. You’re getting to the point where you’re like, “Do your job!” versus “Help me, please.”

Iris made a similar point, explaining that, when the Phoenix 11 began, “we were essentially pleading for help,” but, “now, we’re just kind of pissed.” Becoming more confident in their activism and the belief that change is possible came with an increasingly vocal position and insistence on change. Each step forward through this advocacy process built up reservoirs of strength and hope. Ethan’s advice to other CSAM survivors was that, through advocacy, they will not only see their own strengths, but they will inspire strength in others. He said:

They’re (CSAM survivors) stronger than they realise. It’s not that they’re weak or that there’s anything wrong with them – you’ve faced challenges that most will never understand, and you’re still standing. That, in and of itself, makes them one of the strongest people in the world. And if they can see other people, other groups, doing it – like seeing it in their face – you’ll be surprised that it’s mirrored back to them and they’ll want to do it as well. You’d be surprised at what that will do for you, what that will open up in you. And you’ll be surprised how receptive people are, and how people actually want to help. You’ll see a lot more of it than maybe you ever anticipated. So, step forward, take a chance. You’re not alone.

4. ACTIVISM

This section draws on the reflections and thoughts of survivors about their current and future advocacy plans. They acknowledged that their activism was powerful but also personally demanding. Survivors felt the pressure of speaking on behalf of a group of survivors who have not, as Lucy put it, been “at the table” in terms of public policy and decision-making. However, they felt a strong responsibility to represent CSAM survivors in these discussions. Max argued that significant errors are being made by decision-makers who are failing to understand and engage with the human impacts of child sexual abuse. He said:

They were getting caught up in the legal words of the law and not thinking about how it affects real people. I think, in general, across the board, no matter what specific aspect of the fight against child sexual abuse you look at, the biggest thing is forgetting the actual human impact.

As survivor advocates, the Phoenix 11 and Chicago Males exemplified the human cost not only of sexual offending against children, but also of government and technology industry inaction and community misunderstanding. Talking publicly about their experiences was often very emotional. For Brianna, this was the most challenging part of being an advocate:

I think [the hard part was] probably in the beginning having to sit there and tell the story. In a way it was very good for me, there’s not ever been a place where I can sit and just tell my story. But it’s really difficult because it’s really hard, there’s a lot of really vulnerable parts in play, and it was very emotional and draining in the beginning.

Several survivors felt that the period of being asked to tell their personal stories regularly had come to an end and was only something they would do if they felt it was strategic and worthwhile. Brianna argued that the Phoenix 11 is a recognised advocacy group and should not have to be “throwing a bunch of emotion out and retraumatising ourselves” to be heard and respected as activists. Erica warned about the potential for “exploitation” as a survivor advocate. She said, “If you’re finding yourself having to retell your story in detail over and over and over again to find yourself a legitimate survivor and prove why your voice should be heard, you might be being exploited.” In short, survivors felt that they had established their credibility on the world stage and were not obliged to present their lived experience credentials to be taken seriously.

A recurring theme throughout the interviews was the frustration that survivors felt as they came to terms with the slow pace of social, political, and legal change. Advocacy takes great courage and energy, but the change it catalyses is often not immediate. Claire said:

I think the hardest part is not seeing change happen as fast as I would like it to. Because we have all of this motivation and collective voice, and we come up with these solutions, and then it takes so long for things to change. You make progress in one place and then progress goes away in another place. Like you’re fighting the hydra. That’s hard and discouraging for all of us sometimes.

Lucy reflected on a recent conversation with a policy-maker who had told her how long he had been fighting for change, and the importance of persistence. This was not a dispiriting conversation, but it reminded her that “we have to get the fire under us” in the long term. She said:

I talked with a [policy-maker] last night. We were talking about how everybody [concerned about CSAM] has been in it for literally decades, 10 or 15 years, and we're (the Phoenix 11) five years in ... But you've got to be in it for the long run because that's where we're kind of getting our anger out. You can't just sit around keeping sad about how it's not getting done, we have to get the fire under us the way everybody here has it.

Reflecting on his activism, Max recognised the systemic nature of the failings that he was confronting and the need to educate and bring stakeholders along on a difficult journey:

It's not any one person's fault. That's why I've never been a big fan of “aggressive activism” where it's like “fuck you, you're evil”! They just don't get it, either because they haven't lived it or maybe they were raised or educated in a way that was wrong by someone else ... You've just got to educate and do it in a way that will get the message through.

Survivors discussed the contrast between their work as advocates and their everyday lives. Iris commented, “For a couple of days you're all superheroes and then you go back to doing everyday life. It's like, mmm ... what just happened?” Erica also found the transition between advocacy and “going home” jarring. She said:

The hardest part is coming to these retreats, events, and being surrounded by safe, caring people who care about these issues and want to do something. That's why they're here. Then going home and realising that not a lot of people do. It's a bit of a let-down and it's one that I've had to adjust to.

Importantly, activism is not paid work, for the most part. Survivors had other commitments, including employment and parenting, that put limits on their ability to participate in activism. Max aired his frustrations about how the demands of his job sometimes prevented him from undertaking advocacy opportunities:

The hardest part, especially because I lead a very busy life, is obviously not being able to do more. Not having the time of day sometimes to go and contribute as much as I can ... One of my biggest regrets is being too busy to do more.

However, a key source of strength for survivors was that they were part of a group rather than being solo advocates. As a result, the burden and responsibility of advocacy could be shared - if one individual needed to rest or had other commitments, then other members could push forward. Claire reflected on the benefits of being part of a “collective voice”:

In the past, I’ve felt like, if I want to take this on, it’s all on me and I’m fighting this dragon that’s so big and it’s really scary. But when you have people doing it with you, they can do some parts and you can do some parts, and you can take a break when you need to, and it’s not like the fight is stopping just because you need to take a break. That’s really freeing.

Future advocacy plans

Much of the activism efforts of the two groups has been focused on debates around online regulation and the impacts of CSAM circulation on their lives. These issues were deeply personal and important to all advocates. The interviews also surfaced a number of issues of concern to both groups that could inform a future advocacy agenda. This report has not had the space to canvas in detail all the issues raised by survivors in interviews, but they include a number of concerns discussed briefly below.

The conduct of police investigations into CSAM: The advocates had diverse experiences of criminal investigations into their abuse: some good, some bad. A consistent theme was that they didn’t feel that their specific vulnerabilities and needs as CSAM survivors were taken into account through the process of investigation and prosecution. For example, Lucy explained that the pattern of criminal charges in her case delivered painful messages to her about the ways in which some aspects of her abuse were considered more serious than others. One of her abusers was charged with producing CSAM but he wasn’t prosecuted for the contact offending that occurred as part of CSAM production. She felt the state “used” her abuse images for their own purposes without addressing the totality of the harms committed against her and other victims:

[T]he person in my case, he got life on production, he wasn’t charged with abusing us. So even in that sense the government used the imagery to their benefit, without acknowledging [us] ... Like, in murder trials, you get charged with everything you do, it’s not just the fact that you killed someone. It should be like that, it should be like the full sense that you’re going to be held accountable for everything you did ... They don’t really take into account everything that happens outside of the camera, which is rough. Because we feel like, okay, so we are just the image basically.

In Erica's case, her abuse was reported to the authorities by a mental health professional when Erica was an adult. Her therapist felt obliged to make the report under mandatory reporting legislation, however a lengthy police investigation resulted in the decision not to lay charges. Erica was told by police that her mental health was a key reason that a criminal prosecution would be difficult to secure. In her interview, she emphasised the irrationality of expecting survivors not to evince the psychological impacts of the offences committed against them:

Once, law enforcement told me that I wasn't a "good victim" ... Like, what's a good victim? One who doesn't have a mental health history? One who doesn't struggle? Like, that's not reality. So, when somebody comes to you and they're a mess, and they've had a million hospitalisations, and they're not the perfect victim, that should be your cue that there's actually a lot going on here.

A consistent message from the survivor advocates was that sentencing for CSAM offences should be proportionate to the harms of CSAM offending, particularly the long-term impacts on victims and survivors. Many advocates were incensed that CSAM victims continue to struggle with the trauma of their abuse long after their abusers have left prison, if indeed they receive a custodial sentence at all in cases of CSAM possession.

Managing criminal justice processes as a CSAM survivor: For those survivors whose offenders were prosecuted, they generally did not have access to specialised support to manage court processes and outcomes. They were often left to their own devices to navigate the implications where offenders were convicted or not convicted, where there were simultaneous court matters or multiple prosecutions spread over time, and the consequences for their health and safety once their abusers were released from prison. Max's matter was still before the court at the time of interview, and he described being kept "in the dark" by the court and then "blindsided" by the expectation that "you need to be at the courthouse in eight days to go and do the guilty plea." He was working hard to build a life and career, and put his abuse behind him, and "then someone would just come and hit you in the back of the head with another court appearance or court date." Other survivors also described the difficulties of juggling the practicalities of life, the traumatic impacts of their abuse, and the bureaucratic demands of the justice system.

Media coverage of CSAM investigations and prosecutions: The advocates had strong feelings about the ways in which journalists should be covering CSAM matters. They commented on the tendency of the media to report on the quantity of CSAM found on the devices of perpetrators rather than on the number of children victimised within that content. They felt that the media focus on the number of images or videos, rather than the children depicted within them, reflected a broader pattern of journalistic disinterest in the lives of CSAM victims, to the point where journalists were routinely misreporting important details about their cases. Claire observed that, for almost all members of the Phoenix 11, journalists made significant errors in the coverage of their cases. She said:

There are so many times – I think in every single one of our cases – they (journalists) got the facts a bit wrong. Maybe someone’s father was the perpetrator and they said the step-father had done it. Then everyone’s upset about the step-father, and they’re actually the safe parental figure. So much more care needs to be given to reporting on these stories because of the ways they can impact the survivors.

In Jade’s case, she was alarmed by the lack of media interest in the prosecution of her perpetrators. She felt that publicity was a key aspect of accountability and ensuring that the community was aware of the threat that her offenders posed to children. She took an active role in contacting journalists and encouraging them to attend her court matters:

When it went to the pretrial there were no court reporters or nothing, so that upset me ... So I ended up tipping off reporters myself, for all my trials to make sure that it was publicised, because if people don’t know what’s happening then how are they supposed to make change?

The experience of receiving CSAM notifications: As previously explained, the United States has established a process whereby known CSAM survivors, or their nominated caregivers or legal representatives, can be notified when a criminal investigation identifies their CSAM in the possession of a suspected offender. Some of the survivors were receiving such notifications, but others lived in jurisdictions without such a system. Survivors had complex reactions to notifications. On one hand, the notifications were evidence of the ongoing distribution of their CSAM, which was very upsetting. On the other hand, the notifications provided some validation for their worries and anxieties, and assured them that the authorities were acting to protect them. In Ethan’s case, the initial receipt of notifications triggered a major crisis in his life that, while “devastating”, he credits with forcing him to acknowledge abuse that he had been trying to avoid with alcohol and drugs. He said:

[T]he notifications are a double-edged sword. With me, it was brutal to know how bad it was, how far it had spread. Devastating ... But it also made me understand that they’re aware of it and they’re trying to do something about it, so there was that. Then it kind of forced me to opening up ... And I’m glad it did, because the amount of drugs I was taking, and alcoholism, I would have died.

Civil redress and restitution: Emerging from the interviews was a disparity of access to redress and restitution between those survivors in the American CSAM notification system and those survivors outside that system. Survivors who were receiving notifications had lawyers who would initiate civil proceedings on their behalf against CSAM offenders who had accessed their material. One survivor explained that she “gets a lot of notices” and that the subsequent compensation payments were at a level that had enabled her to secure and pay for bank loans. However, Brianna explained that “in my case, there was absolutely no option for restitution” which puts her in a position where she has to “compartmentalise” her trauma so that she can “put my head down and work.” In the absence of the financial buffer of compensation and restitution, she identified that she and other CSAM survivors are in a precarious position in relation to work, study, and life opportunities while they tried to cope with the trauma of their abuse:

[T]here’s days where you just can’t work, and if you’re at a job where it’s not understanding, then you don’t have a job suddenly. And there are those of us who want to go to school and they can’t, and they have student loans. I feel there’s a lot more that can be done in that space, definitely.

Difficulties in finding CSAM-informed therapists: Many survivors faced shared challenges in finding a mental health practitioner who understood the specifics and complexities of CSAM victimisation. Although she very much wanted counselling, Lucy described cycling through a number of therapists, including one who did not understand why she needed to receive CSAM notifications and another who tried to use child therapy techniques on her as an adult. Lucy felt that her therapists to date had been unable to comprehend the totality of her situation and the various difficulties she was forced to confront as a CSAM survivor. Brianna summarised the view of many survivors when she said that therapists “are not quite prepared to hear what we have to say” and lack the necessary training and background to work with CSAM survivors.

A lack of medical attention to their physical health needs: As previously discussed, some interviewees identified that their long-term physical health had been impacted by childhood abuse and chronic stress. Chronic pain, inflammatory, immunological, metabolic, and reproductive health problems intersected in complex ways with the psychological impacts of childhood trauma, and interviewees expressed a desire for comprehensive and holistic care that addressed their physical and mental health needs. Claire articulated the need for research and medical attention to the “strange chronic illnesses” that she shared with many in the Phoenix 11 sisterhood:

[W]ith that kind of chronic stress, everything flares up, the systems in your body. I think a lot of us in Phoenix 11, and other survivors that I’ve met outside of that, have had a lot of strange chronic illnesses that aren’t very well understood by doctors, nor have the medical community we’ve interacted with been very understanding. Sometimes they haven’t responded in very compassionate ways to that. So it would be more helpful to have some research done in that area so when it does come up the survivor is able to take that to their physician and be like I’ve been through this experience and here’s things that are common with that experience that you need to look into.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

All CSAM survivors interviewed for this report identified that participating in public, collective advocacy had life-changing effects on them. This finding is even more remarkable given the traumatic circumstances of their childhoods and the ongoing impacts of abuse. All survivors commented on the increased self-esteem, confidence and quality of life linked to their participation in collective advocacy. These changes included improvements to mental and physical health and the decision to leave bad relationships, find positive relationships, study and work, and even start their own families. Alongside and related to these personal changes, the Phoenix 11 and Chicago Males members witnessed the impacts of their contributions to public deliberation and the seriousness with which they were being taken on the global stage. In this section, we identify several factors which we feel have played a role in the personal and political changes catalysed by the two groups.

1 Firstly, while the two groups made independent decisions to constitute an advocacy collective, they did so within a scaffold of support that included C3P, NCMEC and, for some survivors, legal representation. This structure of support and trust provided a relatively safe environment for CSAM survivors to consider engaging in public advocacy because it included professionals who were dedicated to managing the civil and criminal aspects of CSAM, monitoring their safety situation, advocating for their best interests, and actively screening for and removing their CSAM. Knowing that their privacy, safety and legal rights were backstopped by a team of professionals at least partially alleviated the justified anxieties that force many CSAM survivors into hiding and silence. Furthermore, these professionals could provide advice, experience, resources, and advocacy opportunities that the two groups of survivors, on their own, did not have access to. Agencies such as C3P and NCMEC were a supportive launching pad for the two groups and are an ongoing source of information, upskilling, and support.

2 Secondly, the collective and shared nature of their advocacy experience had many emotional and practical benefits. Through the Phoenix 11 and Chicago Males, interviewees met a group of other survivors for the first time and realised that their trauma impacts and experiences were not unique to them. They bonded through a shared process of mutual normalisation, no longer feeling strange and “alien.” The diminution of shame and stigma created the space for other feelings, including grief, determination, and anger. Their shared bond gave them the confidence to apply themselves to public advocacy. Within a supportive group, the responsibility to represent the survivor experience did not fall to a single person. They felt strong in their ability to speak as a collective. When one member could not attend an event or needed to rest, they were assured that other members could step forward.

Third, collective advocacy created lasting and deeply felt experiences of understanding, trust, and dignity. Survivors found themselves surrounded by other survivors and professionals who understood what they had been through. They were able to develop trust amongst themselves as a group and with non-survivor professionals, advocates, and decision-makers. This was a non-judgemental environment in which survivors did not need to hide their vulnerabilities and pain, while, at the same time, being valued for their contributions and what they were able to offer both personally and as activists.

Fourth, through taking up strategic opportunities and the efficacy of their shared contributions, the two groups could externalise the lessons they learnt amongst each other to significant public benefit. Ethan made an important observation when he said that activism is the public *application* of what survivors can learn in private. To a certain extent, he felt that much of what survivors could learn from each other and professionals was the “theory,” and advocacy was the “practice” — it was the art of transforming oneself and the world according to new insights. This dual personal-political transformation brought with it a sense of hope and optimism in contrast to previous feelings of hopelessness and despair.

Fifth, participation in advocacy brought about new personal insights and skills. Their reasons for advocacy were often multiple, but typically focused on others, at least initially. At first, they were motivated to fight to protect children, adult survivors, and each other. Over time, their advocacy stance also came to encompass themselves, to the point where, as Brianna said, “I’m actually fighting for myself and that little girl in me that was so badly disrespected.” Advocacy prompted survivors to develop new skills such as public speaking and learning about strategy, advocacy, law reform, policy-making, and when and how to intervene to make a change. In this sense, survivors were not only giving of themselves in their advocacy efforts, but also being enriched by them.

Sixth, while both groups were formed around a shared experience of CSAM victimisation, the Phoenix 11 and Chicago Males provided a space in which survivors were not defined by those experiences, but were recognised and celebrated as individuals and as people. The advocates described their enjoyment as they discovered each other’s personalities, interests, and aptitudes. For the Phoenix 11, the more established of the advocacy groups, members took great pride in their sisters’ personal and professional accomplishments, including starting families, beginning study or completing training, overcoming illness, and demonstrating more confidence and self-esteem. Men in the Chicago Males found a surprisingly easy camaraderie amongst themselves and were keen to build on those connections. Importantly, both groups fostered recognition of the uniqueness of each member above and beyond the traumatic experiences that had brought them together.

In the interviews, survivors identified several challenges associated with activism. There was the grief of realising that other survivors had gone through similar experiences, as Claire identified. Advocacy included speaking publicly about traumatic experiences and, sometimes, repeating the same points to different audiences, which could come at a high emotional cost. Some members of the Phoenix 11 clearly said they would only talk about their circumstances at times and places of their choosing, when they were confident that the benefits outweighed the personal cost. Some survivors also reflected on the contrast between the time they spent as activists — as Iris said, “for a couple of days you’re all superheroes” — and then returning to their daily lives, which were often more mundane. A key challenge was to keep the “fire” going over time, mainly since social and political change can be slow.

It is not the responsibility of CSAM victims and survivors to take up the burden of advocacy to secure their rights to safety, health, privacy, and dignity. The fact that such advocacy is necessary is testament to decades of institutional failure and betrayal. The current configuration of the technology sector and its agreements with governments and other agencies has facilitated the proliferation of CSAM to an astronomical degree. This is the status quo that the Phoenix 11 and Chicago Males formed to change. Despite the scale of this challenge, and the extent of their own victimisation, the survivors interviewed for this report had a very positive experience acting as advocates for the CSAM survivor community, and identified a range of beneficial impacts on their lives.

This finding raises an important question: How might such beneficial experiences and effects be more widely accessible to survivors of CSAM? The answer is not necessarily to promote the establishment of more CSAM survivor advocacy groups per se. The conditions under which these two groups formed and developed a coherent and shared identity included significant relationships with and support from CSAM-focused agencies such as C3P and NCMEC, legal representation for some survivors, as well as the unique strengths and bonds amongst group members. However, the experience of meeting with other survivors in a safe environment, having the chance to normalise and de-stigmatise traumatic experiences and reactions, and participating in a meaningful way in public discussion on matters that directly concern them have long been denied to CSAM survivors. The findings of this report should prompt reflection from a range of stakeholders in national and international responses to CSAM as to the harms that have accrued to CSAM survivors under governance frameworks that have not meaningfully included their voices and contribution, and how this might be rectified in safe, respectful and dignified manner.





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