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A SURVEY OF KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEFS ON CHILD MALTREATMENT

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of
Montclair State University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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Upper Montclair, NJ

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MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY
THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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A Survey of Knowledge and Beliefs on Child Maltreatment

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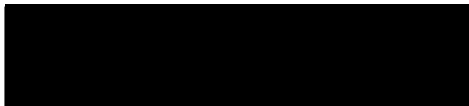
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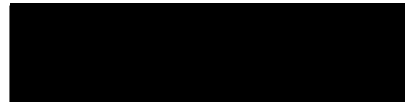
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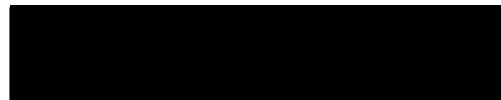
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Abstract

Child sexual abuse (CSA) remains a wide-spread problem and challenging to prosecute in a court of law for many reasons, among these being the manner in which children disclose abuse. A recent Supreme Court ruling decided upon the admissibility of expert testimony in cases of CSA, which raise important questions about how lay individuals think about different disclosure behaviors. As such, the current study investigated knowledge and beliefs about two common CSA disclosure behaviors—delayed disclosure and recantation—in a sample of jury eligible lay persons. The primary aims associated with this study were to characterize individuals’ knowledge and beliefs regarding the nuances of and reasonings for a delay disclosure or recantation. A sample of 320 jury-eligible lay persons were recruited through an online panel provider to complete a survey that consisted of a combination of open-ended and close-ended questions about delayed disclosure and recantation. Participants demonstrated varied knowledge and beliefs about familiarity with delay and recantation, beliefs regarding their frequency of occurrence, conceptualizations of delay (onset/duration), and rationale for why children delay or recant, as well as the credibility of these behaviors. In addition, results provide information regarding areas in which beliefs align with what is known in the scientific literature, such as in typical disclosure patterns and the influence of relationship to perpetrator on delay. Study results contribute to the extant literature on lay persons’ knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors for understanding how jurors make sense of CSA cases. Limitations of online panel providers and caveats to conclusions that can be drawn from survey research are discussed. Findings from this study highlight the need for future research to determine if and how certain knowledge and beliefs impact fact finders’ legal decision-making.

Keywords: Child sexual abuse, delayed disclosure, recantation, knowledge, jury-eligible

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Chapter One: Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) remains a widespread issue in the United States. Indeed, data from the US Department of Health and Human Services (2022) indicate that the overall rate of CSA reports has steadily risen over the past several years. Consequently, cases of CSA continue to filter through the legal system at high rates (Block & Williams, 2019). However, these cases are notoriously difficult to prosecute, largely due to a general lack of trace evidence available in most cases (see e.g., London et al., 2005). A child's statement may become the primary source of evidence when corroborative findings are sparse or non-existent. However, understanding a CSA allegation can be complicated by the process in which some children come forward about abuse, such as delaying a disclosure of abuse, recanting an allegation, and/or denying abuse when directly asked (London et al., 2008; Lyon et al., 2020). These disclosure behaviors may raise questions about a victim's credibility when a trial jury is employed as fact finder in cases involving CSA. Given the impact that witness credibility perceptions can have on case outcomes (Goodman-Delahunty et al., 2021), it is important to understand how lay individuals perceive CSA victim behaviors. To that end, the current study investigates what the jury-eligible general population knows, and how they think about, two relevant disclosure behaviors—delayed disclosure and recantation—in the context of CSA.

Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome

In a court of law, expert testimony will often be admitted to assist the jury panel in understanding complicated issues, such as on victim behaviors. Courts across the US have long grappled with what quality of testimony is appropriate to introduce regarding CSA victim behaviors, if admissible at all.

Historically, many courts have relied on testimony about a phenomenon coined the *Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome* (CSAAS; Summit, 1983) to explain CSA victim characteristics and behaviors; CSAAS was introduced by Ronald Summit in the 1980s, which presumed to describe what was believed to be the most common pre-existing vulnerabilities and subsequent behavioral soliloquies of CSA victims. Within this framework, “secrecy” and “helplessness” defined preconditions that put children at risk for experiencing abuse, while “entrapment and accommodation,” “delayed, conflicting, and unconvincing disclosure,” and “retraction” (also known as recantation) characterized sequentially resultant CSA victim behaviors (Summit, 1983). Although Summit did not develop the CSAAS framework as a scientific instrument, it was nonetheless quickly popularized in the legal area and misused as a diagnostic tool for evidence to argue a child’s sexual abuse status (Summit, 1993).

As CSAAS was a clinical framework born from anecdotal observations, primarily of adult CSA victims who had been abused by a family member, it lacked empirical evidence to support its validity. Although many researchers as well as empirical evidence derived since CSAAS’s inception support that several of these components do exist, it is now understood that no one process or framework fits to fully explain all CSA victims, undermining the syndrome’s reliability. Given these concerns, there has been significant controversy about the admittance of CSAAS testimony in the courtroom, and several states have rendered its testimony inadmissible on these grounds (e.g., *Blount v. Commonwealth*, 2013; *Hadden v. State*, 1997; *State v. Ballard*, 1993). This issue surfaced in the state of New Jersey in 2017 when testimony on CSAAS was challenged under this same pretense.

State v. J.L.G., 2017

In order to satisfy admissibility standards (N.J.R.E 702; Rule 702), expert testimony evidence must be of probative value, meaning it is relevant to the case at hand as well as beyond knowledge held by the average lay juror. In addition, the evidence must be reliable, meaning the subject of the expert's testimony must be generally accepted in the relevant scientific community. The issue facing the New Jersey Supreme Court in 2017 was that of whether CSAAS met this reliability standard. To aid in this determination, a "Frye test" was conducted to determine general acceptance. Under Frye, courts can admit expert testimony that is deduced from commonly recognized scientific principles; however, the scientific principles that expert testimony evidence is founded on must be adequately established to gain general acceptance in the relevant scientific community (*Frye v. United States*, 1993).

The Court decided that there was not general acceptance of CSAAS within the scientific community, rendering CSAAS testimony inadmissible under N.J.R.E 702 (*State v. J.L.G.*, 2017). Consensus was found for only one component of CSAAS—delayed disclosure; thus, the ruling of the New Jersey Supreme Court was that "...expert testimony about CSAAS in general, and its component behaviors other than delayed disclosure, may no longer be admitted at criminal trials" (*State v. J.L.G.*, 2017). Instead, testimony on delayed disclosure would be admissible if the State can demonstrate that the evidence is beyond the understanding of the average juror *and* if "...a child cannot offer a *rational* explanation [as to why they delayed disclosing], expert testimony may help the jury understand the witness's behavior" (*State v. J.L.G.*, 2017).

Although the repudiation of CSAAS by the New Jersey Supreme Court was warranted, this new admissibility standard raises other questions; for instance, what constitutes a "rational" explanation for a delayed disclosure of abuse? Also, the Court's ruling effectively eliminates all

testimony on recantation. This decision was based on Summit's (1983) overrepresentation of recantation in CSA cases. However, disallowing expert testimony on recantation may be shortsighted given this behavior does occur in a significant minority of cases (for a review, see London et al., 2005). Even more, there are inherent challenges to evaluating the validity of a recantation; for instance, some children falsely take back an allegation when they have experienced abused, while others correctively take back a false allegation when they have *not* been abused. This is an important nuance that may not be well understood, yet is relevant for conceptualizing cases of CSA involving recantations.

Despite potential limitations in the resulting decision, *State v. J.L.G.* (2017) nevertheless raised important questions about how laypersons view the dynamics behind delayed disclosure and recantation, as it is possible these issues will again be argued before the New Jersey Supreme Court. Therefore, it could be helpful to characterize lay persons' knowledge and beliefs about delayed disclosure and recantation in order to determine whether expert testimony on these behaviors would be of probative value.

Empirical Evidence

Delayed Disclosure

As was the finding in *State v. J.L.G.* (2017), delayed disclosure in cases of CSA is well-supported by empirical evidence. Although methodological limitations within the existing literature make it difficult to reliably quantify disclosure rates (Townsend & Rheingold, 2016), research has shown that children often delay disclosing or altogether fail to disclose experiences of sexual abuse (for a review, see London et al., 2005). According to a largescale review, approximately 31%–45% of adults with a self-identified history of CSA reported that they disclosed to anyone during childhood (London et al., 2008); more recent studies have found

similar patterns in childhood delayed disclosure rates (23%–50%; Collin-Vézina et al., 2015; Easton, 2013; Hunter, 2011; McGuire & London, 2020; Winters et al., 2020). Data indicate that the distribution of length in delay during childhood is positively skewed, with many children disclosing within one month of the abuse, and others waiting a year or longer to disclose (e.g., Hershkowitz et al., 2007; London et al., 2008; McGuire & London, 2020). However, quantifying length of delay in disclosures is difficult due to study differences in the operational definition and measurement of delay (e.g., beginning from onset versus from termination of abuse; Alaggia et al., 2019; London et al., 2008), which potentially indicates that these findings may not be as consistent as suggested.

In order to contextualize delayed and non-disclosure, a host of research has investigated various correlates and predictors of these behaviors. Consistently, victim age and gender have been identified as predictors of both disclosure and delay; rates of disclosure generally increase as a function of age, with younger children at time of abuse more likely to delay, and as a function of gender, with male victims less likely to disclose abuse, or likely to delay longer, than females (for a review, see London et al., 2008; see also, Alaggia et al., 2019; Cashmore et al., 2017; Grandgenett et al., 2019; McElvaney et al., 2020; Wallis & Woodworth, 2020; Yurteri et al., 2022). In addition, evidence suggests that a victim's relationship to the perpetrator also moderates disclosure behaviors; findings from several studies indicate that closer relationships, such as being victimized by a parent, a family member, or someone in a family-like role, is associated with longer delays and lower disclosure rates (Alaggia et al., 2019; Gewehr et al., 2021; Wallis & Woodworth, 2020; Yurteri, et al., 2022) and that children are more likely to disclose when they have been abused by a stranger (e.g., Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Ullman 2007) or someone outside of the family (Grandgenett et al., 2019; Loinaz Calvo et al., 2019).

A sizeable portion of the CSA disclosure literature is dedicated to investigating factors that promote, or hinder, a child's disclosure of abuse; research to date has yielded a consistent collection of internal and external barriers to CSA disclosure (Winters et al., 2020). For instance, internal factors such as self-blame or guilt, shame and embarrassment, and a variety of reasons motivated by fear (e.g., for their own safety, of upsetting others, of not being believed, for repercussions to the perpetrator), as well as developmental immaturity (i.e., inability to comprehend the event as abusive) or confusion about the abuse or who to tell about the abuse are among the most commonly noted barriers to disclose (Alaggia et al., 2019; Lemaigre et al., 2017; McGuire & London, 2020; Winters et al., 2020). In addition, research has shown that children are less likely to disclose abuse at closer victim-perpetrator relationships, such as when the perpetrator is a member of the family (Gewehr et al., 2021; Winters et al., 2020). Familial factors such as dependency needs, dysfunctional communication, experiencing or witnessing other forms of abuse (i.e., domestic violence), and unsupportive non-offending caregiver relationships have also been identified as barriers to CSA disclosure (Alaggia et al., 2019; Grandgenett et al., 2019; Lemaigre et al., 2017; Wallis & Woodworth, 2021).

In sum, while variability across study findings exist, several trends in delayed and non-disclosure of CSA have been identified. Undoubtedly, however, the disclosure of sexual abuse can be a complicated, iterative, and life-long process for many victims, which is unlikely to be influenced by any one factor in isolation (Collin-Vezina et al., 2015; Hunter, 2011). Despite questionable validity to CSAAS overall, delayed disclosure of sexual abuse remains widely recognized in the literature (Alaggia et al., 2019).

When conceptualizing delayed disclosure, it is necessary to understand that the disclosure of sexual abuse is a process by which children come forward over time; important in this process

is how a child responds when they are questioned about the abuse. Related to delay, *denial* occurs when a child denies the experience of abuse when directly asked. Data indicate that a minority of CSA victims will deny that abuse has occurred when questioned by authorities (Azzopardi et al., 2019), particularly in high-substantiated cases and when the child has provided a disclosure prior to the investigation (London et al., 2008; except see Lyon et al., 2020 for a dissenting opinion). However, other experts argue that CSA denials are currently under-identified in extant empirical investigations (Lyon et al., 2020); as such, controversy exists in the field about the frequency of occurrence of this CSA disclosure behavior. While denial of abuse is not a focus in this project, it is nonetheless important to note its occurrence and relevancy in the disclosure process.

Recantation

Recantation refers to when a child discloses an instance of abuse and then *takes back* their initial allegation to claim that the abuse never occurred. Of note, there is current disagreement in the field regarding what constitutes a “recantation;” some argue it is a child taking back the allegation before a formal disclosure, others believe this extends to include a child making a disclosure prior to an investigation and then *failing* to disclose when formally interviewed, while still others support different definitions.

Summit's (1983) original framework indicated that recantation was inevitable in the behavioral outcome of CSA victimization, particularly when abuse was perpetrated by a family member; however, existing data do not support this frequency of occurrence. In a review of studies involving children who came to the attention of authorities, London and colleagues (2008) found prevalence rates ranging from 4% to 27%. Researchers noted that higher recantation rates were discovered in studies that reviewed cases determined to have used

suggestive or questionable methods to elicit initial allegations, while lower rates were discovered in substantiated or high-probability cases (London et al., 2008). This brings to front an important consideration about recantations of CSA; some recantations are “true” in that abuse never occurred and the child is correcting their previous statement, while others are “false” in that abuse *did* occur and the child is falsely denying the experience. London et al., (2008) suggest that the highest rates of recantation have been obtained from studies that include cases of CSA that are least certain about actual abuse status (e.g., no corroborative evidence) and use the most suggestive interviewing methods to elicit initial allegations (London et al., 2008).

While it is true that poorly conducted interviews in cases with no corroborative evidence may result in a number of false allegations, research indicates that recantation is not solely influenced by abuse status certainty. One study investigated the prevalence of recantations among children involved in substantiated cases of CSA, with sufficient evidence to result in a dependency court filing; in total, 23% recanted, with 19% of the sample making a formal recantation (Malloy et al., 2007). When examining predictors of recantations, results indicated that children who were more vulnerable to familial influences, such as being younger in age, abused by a parental figure, and not having support from the non-offending caregiver, were more likely to recant (Malloy et al., 2007).

An extension of this research led by the same principal author matched the sample of those who recanted with a sample of those who did not recant on the previously identified predictive variables (Malloy et al., 2016). Results showed that children were more likely to recant when they remained in the home post-disclosure and when they had other family members (besides the non-offending caregiver) explicitly express disbelief, whereas children were less likely to recant when they were initially separated from their siblings post-disclosure and when

they had at least one other family member (besides the non-offending caregiver) express belief (Malloy et al., 2016). These findings again illustrate how family pressures might be influential in a child's decision to recant a prior allegation of CSA. Similar results have been found in other matched-sample research, demonstrating that children were more likely to recant their allegation when 1) the perpetrator was intrafamilial, 2) there were recurrent episodes of abuse, 3) their family had a repressive approach to the abuse, and 4) they received a non-supportive reaction from their family (Celik et al., 2018).

Despite methodological limitations, findings from the extant research on recantation provide evidence that, even in substantiated cases (which are purportedly more indicative of high-certainty abuse status), a child may recant an allegation of abuse. Even more, evidence suggests that additional factors beyond abuse certainty, particularly familial influences such as non-offending caregiver support, as well as disclosure latency, may be highly influential in a child's likelihood to recant (see also, Baía et al., 2021). Despite difficulty differentiating between true and false recantations, it is a clear finding in the literature that recantation does occur in a minority of CSA cases. This highlights the importance of considering recantations within context, such as of case features and familial/socio-environment influences, when conceptualizing cases of CSA that involve a recantation.

As illustrated above, there is evidence to support general trends and correlates of delayed disclosure and recantation. Although research does not support the assumption that either of these stages are inevitable CSA outcomes, the evidence does show that delayed disclosure and/or recantation does occur in a sizeable portion of CSA cases (McElvaney, 2015). As such, there is a reasonable probability that lay persons will encounter either or both of these case features when empaneled to decide upon a case involving CSA. However, the question remains whether lay

persons adequately understand delayed disclosure and recantation to a degree that they are able to make informed decisions in such cases when presented these complex victim behaviors; understanding what knowledge and beliefs lay persons come into the courtroom with is relevant in determining the usefulness of expert testimony on these issues. As noted, in order for expert testimony to be probative, the information presented by the expert must be beyond the knowledge possessed by the average lay person; as such, it is important to take into consideration lay persons' prior beliefs and understanding in order to determine if the information provided will indeed assist the tier of fact.

Lay Person Knowledge and Beliefs Studies

To date, there have been several studies examining public knowledge and perceptions of CSA, including pertaining to delayed disclosure and recantation. These questions have primarily been investigated through the development of questionnaires and survey studies.

Morison and Greene (1992) developed one of the first CSA knowledge questionnaires, the Child Sexual Abuse Questionnaire, intended for lay persons; this questionnaire contained 40 items derived from a review of the CSA literature to reflect information that had general empirical support at the time. Item content in this questionnaire was related to definitions of CSA, prevalence rates, typical symptoms or reactions to abuse, demographics, and victim, offender, and offense characteristics; only one item each directly addressed either delayed disclosure, "*Individuals should be suspicious about the allegations made by a child following a lengthy delay in reporting,*" or recantation, "*Children who retract their stories about having been abused were probably lying in the first place*" (Morison & Greene, 1992, p. 603). This study's aim was to compare lay persons' CSA knowledge to CSA experts' consensus ratings. Results demonstrated that, overall, jurors were generally not well informed about many CSA

issues for which there was consensus among experts. Specific to delayed disclosure and recantation, results showed that, while lay persons were “less knowledgeable” than experts, participants still provided responses indicating they generally believe that a true CSA victim might delay reporting or that a child who takes back an allegation was not necessarily lying about the abuse (Morison & Greene, 1992).

Other CSA knowledge surveys have since been developed; however, several of these questionnaires recycle numerous questions included in the original Child Sexual Abuse Questionnaire (Morison & Greene, 1992). For instance, Peters (2001) used a 28-item version of this questionnaire in their study, including both original delay and recantation items. Several other studies also use this same recantation question as well as variations of the question on delay (e.g., “*When a child delays in reporting sexual abuse, this is evidence of lying;*” Cossins et al., 2009, p. 441; Goodman-Delahunty et al., 2010; Goodman-Delahunty et al., 2011; Kovera & Borgida, 1997; Quas et al., 2005).

Studies that report on findings for individual questionnaire items (Cossins et al., 2009; Kovera & Borgida, 1997; Quas et al., 2005) discovered that a majority of their samples “correctly” answered both the delay and recantation items, albeit “less” correctly for recantation. An important finding from the Cossins and colleagues (2009) study demonstrates that 14% and 25% of participants explicitly expressed uncertainty about the delay and recantation questions, respectively. Similarly, Quas and colleagues (2005) indicated that 16% and upwards of one third of their sample either incorrectly endorsed or explicitly expressed uncertainty about delayed disclosure and recantation questions, respectively. While these studies conclude that a majority of individuals (>50%) refute common CSA misconceptions, as shows, a sizable minority are either misinformed or unsure about these disclosure behaviors, particularly recantation.

Based on the general findings from these studies, researchers posited that the public is generally well-informed about CSA, including recognizing both delayed disclosure and recantation as possible victim behaviors; however, given the complexity of the dynamics involved in delayed disclosure and recantation, as well as the findings that a significant minority of individuals either express uncertainty and/or endorse misconceptions, it is unclear whether individuals adequately understand the nuances of these disclosure behaviors.

Towards the aim of further characterizing lay person's knowledge about CSA disclosure, Pelisolo and colleagues (2015) developed a new CSA questionnaire with items more closely mapped to empirical data on these issues. Two disclosure items included "*At least 30% of all children who are sexually abused never disclose their abuse during childhood*" and "*At least 25% of sexually abused children who disclose abuse do so at least six months after the abuse occurred,*" and one recantation item included "*At least 25% of all children who disclose sexual abuse will at some point take back (recant) their initial disclosure*" (Pelisoli et al., 2015, p. 39). Findings from this study demonstrate that, while participants generally provided "correct" responses about delay, a majority were "incorrect" about recantation (74% incorrect). Importantly, as questions about delayed disclosure became more nuanced, understanding decreased (94% correct versus 70% correct for the former and latter disclosure items, respectively). This demonstrates a need to ask lay persons specific questions about these phenomena, as variability in how participants think about different aspects of these behaviors clearly exists.

More recently, McGuire and London (2017) developed another questionnaire which included more nuanced items aimed to examine how lay persons think about CSA, including delayed disclosure and recantation. Researchers constructed items based on information for

which there exists well-established scientific evidence as well as for exploratory purposes in areas less examined in the literature. Five questions in total were related to disclosure, denial, and recantation, with fixed response options. Results showed that nearly half of participants believe a child will *never* disclose an experience of sexual abuse; of those indicating they believe a victim *will* disclose, over half (~ 55%) reported they believe the child will not disclose until after they are an adult. In addition, a majority of participants indicated that children will deny abuse when asked (86.1%) as well as recant their allegation (64.6%), even when asked by a formal authority (65.9%). Finally, participants indicated that they believed children most often delay disclosing because they are afraid of being physically harmed by the abuser (36.2%) or they are embarrassed (25.0%).

Mock Juror and Expert Testimony Studies

Understanding how lay individuals think about the dynamics of delayed disclosure and recantation is important for the larger aim of clarifying whether the average juror possesses adequate knowledge and empirically-consistent beliefs to make informed decisions in cases involving these CSA disclosure behaviors and, importantly, whether this translates to actual jury decision-making. Research has been accumulating on this very question in cases involving these victim behaviors. While the aim of the current study is to first characterize *how* individuals are thinking about these behaviors, a likely basis for resultant decision-making and informative for what type of testimony may be needed, studies investigating mock jury decision-making in cases of CSA involving delay and/or recantation are nonetheless briefly noted here.

To date, several studies have experimentally examined the effects of various CSA case features, including delay and recantation, on mock jury outcomes. For instance, two studies reported on above (Goodman-Delahunty et al., 2010, 2011) found that the overall endorsement

of CSA misconceptions (including about delay and recantation) were related to participants' assessment of complainant credibility, determinations of guilt, and verdict outcomes in mock CSA cases that included a delayed disclosure and a recanted allegation. Findings demonstrated that the more misconceptions participants endorsed, the less credible they rated the victim, as well as indicated less determinations of guilt and guilty verdicts rendered. However, without information about specific items endorsed, it is unclear whether misconceptions related to delay and recantation were influential in these results.

Recently, Miller and colleagues (2022) investigated the influence of delay (1 day, 1 month, 10 months) and victim-perpetrator relationship (next-door neighbor versus stepfather) on mock-juror perceptions of victim credibility (likelihood of abuse, trustworthiness, believability, memory strength/accuracy) and case judgements (verdict). Overall, results demonstrated that participants rendered fewer guilty verdicts at longer lengths of delay, as well as endorsed higher credibility ratings (apart from likelihood of abuse) at shorter lengths of delay. However, only likelihood of abuse (and victim memory strength) significantly varied by perpetrator relationship. Likelihood of abuse was rated higher at shorter lengths of delay, but only when the perpetrator was a next-door neighbor; participants rated likelihood of abuse equally across length of delay for the stepfather perpetrator. Despite this finding, results demonstrated that length of delay was the sole predictor of verdict, with no significant effect of relationship to perpetrator. As such, these results demonstrate that, when the perpetrator is the victim's stepfather, participants are rendering fewer guilty verdicts at longer lengths of delay despite no differences in beliefs about actual likelihood of abuse; in fact, although non-significant, results demonstrated a trend *up*, such that longer lengths of delay were rated as *higher* likelihood of abuse for the stepfather perpetrator.

This finding is important for several reasons. As is generally concluded in the literature, closer victim-perpetrator relationships, particularly intra-familial relationships, are consistently related to disclosure delays (e.g., Gewehr et al., 2021; Wallis & Woodworth, 2020; Winters et al., 2020); while results from this study suggest that “mock jurors do appear sensitive to the notion that delayed disclosure is more likely in cases of CSA involving family member versus non-family member perpetrators” (Miller et al., 2022), this understanding does not appear to translate to decision making in trial outcome decisions (i.e., verdict). Perhaps, questions raised surrounding other victim credibility factors (i.e., trustworthiness, believability, memory) at longer lengths of delay may preclude individuals from rendering guilty verdicts, despite no differences in beliefs about actual abuse status (i.e., likelihood of abuse).

Summary

Research to date generated from knowledge and perception studies, as well as mock jury investigations, has provided a solid foundation for exploring lay persons’ understanding of these issues. Although it is likely that the general public’s perceptions of CSA victim behaviors, and by proxy those selected to a jury, have shifted over time in line with heightened awareness and media attention on these issues (e.g., Alaggia & Wang, 2020), findings from existing studies indicate that lay persons may vary greatly in their understanding of the dynamics of CSA disclosure, holding a combination of beliefs that are both consistent and inconsistent with the CSA literature, as well as evidencing general uncertainty (Denne et al., 2023). Indeed, delayed disclosure and recantation represent dynamic and complex disclosure behaviors, influenced by both context and individual characteristics. While evidence to date points to the general finding that lay persons may recognize that these behaviors *do* exist, there is more to explore regarding *how* lay persons are thinking about these dynamics, relevant for understanding 1) whether this

thinking is in line with empirically-informed conceptualizations of CSA disclosure behaviors, and 2) what information may influence decision-making when deciding on cases that include these CSA case features.

Current Study

The potential limitations of the recent New Jersey court decision restricting testimony on delayed disclosure and disallowing testimony on recantation raise important questions about how the public views the dynamics behind these two CSA behaviors. Although several studies have investigated the question of what knowledge and beliefs the general public holds about CSA, including aspects of delay and recantation, no such study has catalogued lay persons' understanding and perceptions of the various nuances of these behaviors, important for contributing to the understanding of whether expert testimony would be helpful to the average lay juror. As such, the current study aimed to examine lay persons' knowledge and beliefs about delayed disclosure and recantation in a comprehensive manner.

Primary Study Aims

This study is primarily exploratory in nature; consequently, specific predictions about outcomes were not made. The aim of the current study is to characterize what lay individuals know and believe about child sexual abuse disclosure behaviors, namely, delayed disclosure and recantation. The following lists the primary research questions associated with this study.

Research Question 1. Are lay individuals familiar with the term **a)** delayed disclosure and **b)** recantation, and how do they understand/define these terms?

Research Question 2. How prevalent do lay persons believe **a)** delayed disclosures and **b)** recantations are in cases of CSA?

Research Question 3. What do lay individuals believe about CSA disclosure patterns. Specifically, how long after abuse do lay individuals believe children disclose, if at all?

Research Question 4. How do lay individuals conceptualize a “delay;” specifically, what duration of time between abuse and disclosure of that abuse do individuals consider a disclosure to be “delayed?”

Research Question 5. At what instance do lay persons believe delay onset begins, for both single instance and recurrent abuse (i.e., at first instance of abuse or last instance of abuse)?

Research Question 6. What do lay persons believe are common reasons why a child would **a)** delay disclosing abuse or **b)** recant an allegation, and do they believe these reasons differ by the age of the child?

Research Question 7. Under what case conditions do lay persons believe children are most likely to delay a disclosure of abuse (i.e., relationships to perpetrators).

Research Question 8. How do lay persons view the credibility of a child (an allegation) if that child **a)** delays a disclosure or **b)** recants an allegation?

Research Question 9. How do lay persons view the credibility of a disclosure of abuse at various lengths of disclosure delay?

Although the primary aim of this study is to investigate what lay persons know and believe about delayed disclosure and recantation, we also investigated questions about general CSA case features (e.g., prevalence rates, perpetrator/victim characteristics, presence of corroborative evidence, etc.), important for understanding the context of how individuals think about child sexual abuse¹.

¹ General knowledge questions were included in the survey for purposes of generating information that can be compared to findings from other general knowledge studies as well as to what is known in the CSA literature; while questions on delayed disclosure and recantation represent the focus of this study, findings for general knowledge questions from the current sample are depicted in Appendix B for reference.

Chapter Two: Method

Data Collection

Data Collection Source

A survey sampling and administrative company, Qualtrics, was contracted to recruit participants and to manage data collection and participant compensation. Qualtrics sources respondents from existing research panel pools. These panel pools consist of respondents who have signed up to complete online surveys in exchange for monetary compensation or other incentives; recruitment is targeted towards panelists who are likely to qualify for the study based on demographic information contained in their user profiles (Boas et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2020). Recruitment and compensation are exclusively managed by Qualtrics and their contracted vendors; as such, researchers have no direct control over participant compensation or who is recruited beyond specifying a target audience and defining quotas (Boas et al., 2020). We elected to use Qualtrics due to their reported timeliness of data collection and to gain access to our target population. Cost of Qualtrics services is determined by 1) the target population, 2) sample size, and 3) demand of participation (e.g., length of survey). The total cost of this project was \$3,000. This study was funded by Montclair State University's Psychology Department and Social Work and Child Advocacy department.

Data Cleaning Process

Qualtrics' contracts include data cleaning services in order to ensure researchers are receiving quality responses from participants. Qualtrics includes various safeguards in their data collection process (e.g., flags for rapid responding, ID address tracking to prevent repeat responses). In addition, Qualtrics sends data for scrubbing procedures, where individual responses are evaluated for quality. This process returns a report with recommendations for

responses to be removed due to poor quality such as open-ended question infractions (e.g., supplying irrelevant, repeated, or gibberish/nonsensical responses). Qualtrics replaces removed participants at no additional cost to researchers. We used Qualtrics' recommendations for determining data integrity. Approximately 17% of respondents were removed for overt violations of data integrity in the current sample. We identified and requested to remove an additional three respondents not included in the removal recommendations who evidenced similar flagrant data quality violations (i.e., gibberish/nonsensical responses) resulting in 320 valid responses.

Participants

Target Audience

The purpose of this study is to generate information and draw conclusions with real world legal applications. As such, it is important that the sample be reflective of those who are likely to find themselves in the courtroom as a juror. Therefore, our target audience were nationally representative jury-eligible individuals in order to maximize the ecological validity of this study. We used quotas for age, gender, race/ethnicity, and region in order to maximize the national representativeness of the sample.

Exclusionary Criteria

Screening questions were included, and participants were not eligible to complete the study if they indicated they were ineligible to serve on a trial jury. In addition, participants were excluded from this study if they failed to commit to providing quality responses. This screening question was included at the advisement of Qualtrics for enhancing data integrity. Similarly, participants' data were excluded if they indicated they did not complete the study to the best of their ability.

Sample

The current sample consists of 320 self-identified jury-eligible individuals. Participants were mostly female (58%), mostly white (54%) non-Hispanic or Latino (77%) and had a mean age of 47 years old ($SD = 18.42$). Half of all participants indicated their highest level of education was high school or equivalent (49%). 48 states and the District of Columbia were represented in this sample, with the South region forming the largest proportion (43%). All participants noted they were jury-eligible and 20% indicated that had previously served as a juror; of those, 10% indicated they served on a case involving sexual assault. Furthermore, 32% and 58% of participants indicated they were themselves a victim or knew someone who was a victim of sexual assault, respectively. Of those reporting they experienced sexual assault, a minority (23%) indicated that the assault was reported. Of those who endorsed knowing a victim of sexual assault, most often was this person a family member (39%) and a majority were not reported to authorities (62%).

Survey Instrument

Survey Development

We developed, pretested, and piloted a survey for the purposes of this study. Questions include information on delay and recantation, as well as general CSA information (e.g., prevalence rates).

Pretest. The first version of the survey was pretested with 10 participant-eligible individuals who completed the survey in the presence of one of the researchers. Cognitive interviewing strategies for pretesting surveys (Collins, 2003) were implemented, including think-aloud interviewing (e.g., “*What are you thinking about right now as you answer this question?*”), paraphrasing (e.g., “*Please tell me in your own words what this question is asking.*”), and

retrieval probes (e.g., “*What else were you thinking about that lead you to this answer?*”).

Information generated from each participant-eligible individual was thoroughly documented; we made adjustments to the survey where deemed appropriate.

Pilot Study. We conducted a pilot study with the second version of the survey with 67 pilot participants recruited through the Montclair State University Psychology Department undergraduate research participant pool. This version consisted of 56 multiple choice and free response questions. Additional refinements were made to the survey based on pilot study results. Several questions were modified, added, or deleted based on their utility in generating relevant information.

Current Survey

The full survey can be found in Appendix A. It opened with informed consent and the stated purpose of the survey was to “know what people believe about child abuse. The results will be published and shared with judges and others who make legal decisions involving children.” After providing consent, participants answered two screening questions on commitment to providing quality responses and their jury-eligibility status. Next participants completed a subset of the demographic questions (age, gender, race/ethnicity, state) that were used to fill quotas. Participants completed the remaining demographic questions (education, political affiliation, jury experience, experience with CSA) at the end of the survey.

General Knowledge Questions. This portion of the survey opened with a prompt requesting that participants do not look up any information while completing the survey. In addition, they were instructed that all questions reflect US populations and were provided a short definition of child sexual abuse. Participants then answered questions about prevalence rates,

victim and perpetrator characteristics, timing of reports to authorities (childhood versus adulthood), proportion of reports that are false, and prevalence of corroborative evidence.

Delayed Disclosure Questions. We then asked participants if they were familiar with the term “delayed disclosure” in regard to child sexual abuse; if indicated that they were, participants were prompted to briefly define delay in an open-ended response. All participants were then provided a brief definition of delay. Participants then answered questions about proportion of disclosures at various time lengths, as well as indicated what time frame they consider a disclosure to be delayed. Participants also provided information on their beliefs regarding the prevalence of delay in cases reported to authorities, as well as perpetrator characteristics that contribute to delay (relationship to victim). They were then presented three short scenarios and asked whether the situation constituted a delay. Participants were also asked a variety of questions about their beliefs on the credibility (believability) of a child whose allegation involved a delayed disclosure with a combination of open-ended² and close-ended prompts. They also provided information about what they believe to be common reasons children delay disclosing abuse, as well as indicated whether they believe these reasons differ by the age of the child and provided rationale as to why².

Recantation Questions. We then asked participants if they were familiar with the term “recantation” in regard to child sexual abuse; if indicated that they were, participants were asked an open-ended question to briefly define recantation. All participants were then provided a brief definition of recantation. Participants then answered questions on the prevalence of recantation in cases reported to authorities as well as answered several questions about the credibility

² Three additional short response questions were not analyzed at this time, as they asked participants to describe their perceptions of factors beyond what they consider a “rational” explanation for children to delay disclosure or recant an initial allegation.

(believability) of a child whose allegation involved a recantation. They also provided information about what they believe to be common reasons children recant an allegation of abuse, as well as indicated whether they believe these reasons differ by the age of the child and provided rationale as to why².

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data

Quantitative data were analyzed mostly with descriptive statistics and univariate analyses using the SPSS (Version 29) statistical software program and Microsoft Excel. Frequency counts and measures of central tendency, dispersion, and position were used for quantitative questions.

Qualitative Data

We conducted an exploratory analysis of qualitative responses to open-ended prompts. We developed preliminary coding schemes with categories relevant for different open-ended question prompts. We formed a preliminary coding scheme modeled after schemes developed for previous research (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Schaeffer et al., 2011) and supplemented them with additional categories based on a preliminary review of responses for certain question types. Depending on the open-ended prompt, we analyzed between one-third and 100% of the data. For the next stage of the project, Qualitative data will be fully analyzed; each response to every open-ended question will be independently coded by researchers blind to the participants' other responses. 100% of the data will be double coded by a researcher blind to the purposes of this study. Interrater reliability will be calculated, and discrepancies will be reconciled by a consensus rating between researchers.

Chapter Three: Results

Delayed Disclosure

Familiarity with Delayed Disclosure

Two thirds of participants ($n = 212$) reported that they were *not* familiar with the term delayed disclosure. Of those answering yes ($n = 108$), definitions of delayed disclosure varied considerably. Upon review, approximately 34.2% of definitions were either largely irrelevant to the intent of the question, ($n = 17$), unclear ($n = 17$), or were explicitly pulled from an internet source ($n = 3$). Additionally, approximately 9% ($n = 10$) of responses contained rationale as to why a child would not tell, without providing a definition. As such, these responses were pulled from the exploratory analysis and are summarized separately in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes and Examples of Definitions of Delay Excluded from Analysis of Definitions ($n = 47$)

Themes and Examples
Irrelevant to the intent of the question
“It is not okay to abuse an innocent child”
“Any molesting, touching or hotting”
Unclear
“Where people can’t wait years or even the kids are really what happened when they were a kid”
“It’s a more time and gather more evidence for the case to be in more of a understanding”
Provides potential rationale
“The child suffers severe emotional mental problems”
From internet source
“The phenomenon common to survivors of child sex abuse where individuals wait for years, often decades, before disclosing to others that they have been victims”

Of the remaining responses ($n = 61$), a majority (50.8%) included some mention of waiting a *substantial* period of time before telling, or until adulthood. Additionally, 30% of definitions included an element of waiting for *some* period of time, or until they were older to

tell, while approximately 15% mentioned not telling immediately or as soon after abuse occurred. A minority of definitions included a statement about the abuse not being reported (6.6%) or not being disclosed due to age or not recognizing abuse had occurred (4.9%). A further minority included mention of statute of limitations (3.3%) or waiting to disclose abuse until a trial (3.3%). Finally, approximately 6% of definitions included a rationale for the delay. See Table 2 for a summary of these themes and example definitions.

Table 2. Frequency of Themes Within Open-Ended Responses for Definitions of Delayed Disclosure (n = 61)

Themes and Examples	<i>f</i>
Mentions waiting until older/for a period of time to tell “When the victim does not disclose or report what happened until some time passed” “When a sexual abuse occurred, & NOT disclosed till later.”	30.1%
Indicates a substantial length of time has passed/adulthood before disclosure “People waiting until they are an adult to disclose sexual abuse “ “Child sex abuse victims wait until adulthood, or several decades later to disclose that they have been a victim of abuse.”	50.8%
Mentions not disclosed immediately ““The child sexual abuse was not immediately disclosed.” “Delayed disclosure in words is when a victim of sexual abuse doesn’t disclose the event of abuse right after, but rather waits and hides it.”	14.8%
Mentions not being reported ““The victim doesn’t report the abuse immediately.” “Were the abuse is not reported at the actual time it happened”	6.6%
Provides rationale within definition ““Delayed disclosure would be an extended period of time before the victim tells anyone what had happened to them out of fear of repercussions.” “Not disclosing abuse until after it's been processed, taking weeks or months or years.”	6.0%
Mentions not being able to disclose due to age/not recognizing abuse ““People do not realize they have been sexually abused until they become adults” ““When kids can't say what happened until they are older”	4.9%
Mentions statute of limitations	3.3%

“Saying it past the statue of limitations”	
Mentions waiting until trial	3.3%
“Waiting until trial to disclose evidence”	

Note. Total percentage exceeds 100% as definitions could include more than one theme (e.g., indicates substantial period of time *and* provides rationale).

Timing of CSA Disclosure

Participants varied in when they believe CSA victims disclose abuse (see Table 3). On average, participants indicated that a sizeable minority ($M = 36.2\%$, $SD = 23.6$) will *never* disclose an instance of child sexual abuse. Participants also consistently indicated a low prevalence of disclosures for victims who *do* disclose across various timeframes during childhood, including immediately disclosing ($M = 13.2\%$, $SD = 17.7$), disclosing within one month ($M = 11\%$, $SD = 9.0$), one month to six months ($M = 12.8\%$, $SD = 10.6$), six months to one year ($M = 13.1\%$, $SD = 10.5$), and after one year but before adulthood ($M = 16.2\%$, $SD = 12.7$). Alternatively, on average participants indicated a sizeable minority ($M = 33.8\%$, $SD = 24.6$) do not tell until they are an adult.

Table 3. Estimated Prevalence of Disclosures at Various Timeframes

Prevalence at timeframes	Mean (SD)	Median	<i>f</i> respondents
Never Tell	36.2% (23.6)	30%	
0%–10%			15.6%
11%–25%			30.3%
26%–50%			31.9%
More than 50%			22.2%
Tell during childhood	25.5% (16.5)	25%	
0%–10%			26.9%
11%–25%			34.7%
26%–50%			33.1%
More than 50%			5.3%
Tell during adulthood	38.4% (20.2)	40%	
0%–10%			9.7%
11%–25%			20.6%
26%–50%			49.7%
More than 50%			30.0%

Tell immediately	13.2% (17.7)	9.5%	
0%–5%			48.4%
6%–10%			20.7%
11%–20%			16.8%
More than 20%			14.1%
Tell between 24 hours and one month	11% (9.0)	10%	
0%–5%			38.1%
6%–10%			27.8%
11%–20%			24.1%
More than 20%			10.0%
Tell between one and six months	12.8% (10.6)	10%	
0%–5%			31.6%
6%–10%			30.3%
11%–20%			23.7%
More than 20%			14.4%
Tell between six months and one year	13.1% (10.5)	10%	
0%–5%			27.8%
6%–10%			31.3%
11%–20%			26.5%
More than 20%			14.4%
Tell after one year but before adulthood	16.2% (12.7)	15%	
0%–5%			21.6%
6%–10%			28.1%
11%–20%			26.6%
More than 20%			23.7%
Tell after then have become an adult	33.8% (24.6)	30%	
0%–10%			26.3%
11%–25%			18.1%
25%–50%			33.7%
More than 50%			21.9%

Prevalence of Delay in Reported Cases

Participants indicated that approximately 64% ($SD = 21.4\%$) of CSA reports to authorities include a delayed disclosure, with a third indicating they believe more than 75% include a delay (see Table 4).

Table 4. *Estimated Prevalence of Delayed Disclosures in CSA Cases Reported to Authorities.*

	Mean (SD)	Median	<i>f</i> respondents
Cases reported including a delay	63.9.2% (21.4)	66.5%	
0%–25%			6.6%
25%–50%			20.8%
51%–75%			40.2%
More than 75%			32.4%

Timeframe for a Disclosure to be Delayed

Participants differed considerably about the timing in which they consider a disclosure to be delayed; a predominant minority (25.8%) indicated that the minimum time that must pass between the abuse and disclosure for the disclosure to be considered delayed was more than one year. The remaining participants were roughly split in their beliefs about what period of time constitutes a delay; 15% indicated 0 to 24 hours, 18% indicated one day to one week, 11% indicated two weeks to one month 13.7% indicated one month to six months, 15.8% indicated six months to one year. As such, a third of participants (33%) believe delay begins within one week, while approximately 40% of participants do not believe delay begins until at least six months after the abuse.

Perpetrator Influences on Delay

A majority of participants (59%) indicated that a child abused by a family member would be most likely to delay disclosing abuse compared to a child abused by other individuals (family friend, acquaintance, institutional figure, peer; see Table 5).

Table 5. *Victims Most Likely to Delay Based on Relationship to Perpetrator*

A child abused by a:	<i>f</i>
Family member (e.g., biological or step-family member)	59.7%
Family friend	12.5%
Stranger	10.9%
Institutional figure (e.g., teacher, counselor)	6.4%
Acquaintance (e.g., neighbor)	5.4%
Peer	5.1%

Delay Onset

70% of the sample indicated that a disclosure was delayed in a scenario depicting recurrent abuse that occurred over the course of one year, and a disclosure that was made one day after the abuse stopped; of those who indicated this was a delayed disclosure, an overwhelming majority (88%) indicated that the delay was one year long. Similarly, 79% of participants indicated that a disclosure was delayed in a scenario depicting recurrent abuse that occurred over the course of one year, and a disclosure that was made 6 months following when the abuse stopped; however, of those who indicated this was a delayed disclosure, participants were more split in what duration they believed the delay to be, with 42% indicating the child delayed for 18 months and 38% indicating the child delayed for six months. For this scenario, 17% of participants also indicated that the delay was one year in length. Finally, 87% of the sample indicated that a disclosure was *not* delayed in a scenario depicting a single instance of abuse and a next day disclosure. Most participants (85%) reported that the delay was one day long, while 10% continued to report one year in length. See Table 6 for scenarios, responses regarding delay, and length of delay provided in open-ended responses.

Table 6. *Delay and Duration of Delay for Scenarios*

Scenario 1

“Sara was sexually abused when she was 8 years old. The abuse started on 06/15/2020 and stopped exactly 1 year later on 06/15/2021. The day after the abuse stopped, she told her mom about it. Is this a delayed disclosure of abuse?”	<i>f</i>
No	30.9%

Yes (n = 219)	69.1%
What was the duration of the delay?	
One year	87.7%
One year and one day	6.4%
One day	1.8%
Other duration (e.g., “one month”)	2.7%
Did not provide a duration (e.g., “She was scared”)	1.4%

Scenario 2

“Lucy was sexually abused when she was 8 years old. The abuse started on 06/15/2020 and stopped exactly 1 year later on 06/15/2021. Six months after the abuse stopped, she told her mom. Is this a delayed disclosure of abuse?”

No	20.9%
Yes (n = 252)	79.1%
What was the duration of the delay?	
One year and six months	42.1%
Six months	38.1%
One year	16.7%
Other duration (e.g., “500 days”)	1.6%
Did not provide a duration (e.g., “after it stopped she didn’t tell her mom”)	1.6%

Scenario 3

“Cate was sexually abused when she was 8 years old. She was abused on 06/15/2020. She told her mom about the abuse the next day. Is this a delayed disclosure of abuse?”

No	87.2%
Yes (n = 41)	12.8%
What was the duration of the delay?	
1 day	85.4%
Other duration (e.g., “one year”)	9.7%
Did not provide a duration (e.g., “When she spoke out about it”)	4.9%

Credibility of a Child Who Delayed

88% of participants indicated that they would believe a child’s eventual disclosure if they had delayed disclosing an experience of sexual abuse; alternatively, 10% of the sample indicated they would doubt the child’s disclosure. Finally, approximately 2% ($n = 4$) of the sample endorsed that they would “*not believe*” a child’s disclosure if they had delayed, without additional context. In addition, two questions were counterbalanced across participants, with the

same meaning phrased in opposite manners (“The shorter the delay, the more credible the allegation;” “the longer the delay, the less credible the allegation”). Of those answering the former question, slightly over one-third (36.1%) indicated that they agreed, or strongly agreed with the statement; alternatively, of those answering the latter question, slightly under half (44.8%) indicated they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

Table 7. “In general, to what extent do you agree with the following statement:”

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
The shorter the delay, the more credible the allegation	12.9%	11.6%	3.2%	20.6%	15.5%	14.8%	21.3%
The longer the delay, the less credible the allegation	22.4%	22.4%	12.1%	18.8%	10.9%	7.9%	5.5%

Table 8 shows the frequency of credibility ratings at various lengths of delay. 58% of the sample viewed an immediate disclosure as “Extremely Credible,” while, alternatively, 36% viewed a delay of over one year as only “Credible.” Consistently, however, a small minority of individuals rated a disclosure as “Not at all credible” at any length of delay. Finally, on a scale of 0–10, participants had a mean credibility rating of 7.2 ($SD = 2.2$) for a child who delayed disclosing abuse but could not provide a rational explanation as to why they delayed.

Table 8. Frequency of Credibility Ratings at Various Lengths of Delay

	<i>Immediately</i>	<i>2 days to 1 month</i>	<i>One month to six months</i>	<i>6 months to 1 year</i>	<i>More than 1 year</i>
Not at all credible	0.3%	0.9%	1.3%	2.2%	7.5%
A little credible	4.4%	5.3%	9.4%	15.7%	19.1%
Credible	18.1%	22.8%	30.6%	34.5%	36.7%
Very credible	19.4%	37.5%	33.8%	27.0%	14.7%
Extremely credible	58.0%	33.4%	24.7%	20.7%	21.9%

Note. Participants selected one credibility rating for each disclosure interval.

Reasons for Delay

Exploratory Analysis of Reasons for Delay. A majority of participants (79.8%) indicated they believe age-related differences exist in the reasons why children delay disclosing abuse. We conducted an exploratory analysis for the open-ended question on the reasons why participants believe all children delay disclosing abuse. A random subsample (112 cases; 35%) of respondents' data was coded for these purposes.

Overall, participants provided 693 total responses. However, approximately 10% of responses provided were either nonsensical (e.g., “N”) or explicitly uninformative (e.g., “I don’t know”) and were therefore removed from the final preliminary analysis. On average, participants provided 5.5 reasons and ranged from 0–10 responses each. Participants varied considerably in reasons they provided as to why children delay disclosing abuse, in both content and thoroughness of responses. Of note, almost half (46%) of responses provided were single word responses (e.g., “love,” “trust,” “family”); as such, many responses were largely uninterpretable. We included several categories to capture many single answer responses reflecting general, emotion-related factors (e.g., “scared,” “sad,” “traumatized”), however, 25% of the remaining responses were determined to have too little information within context and too great of interpretation required to infer meaning (e.g., “family,” “alone,” “financial”) to capture in meaningful categories. The final sample for this exploratory analysis consisted of 467 responses, including a portion of single-word responses (e.g., “ashamed,” “guilt,” “confusion,” “age”).

Table 9. provides a breakdown of response categories and most frequently endorsed sub-themes.

Table 9. Percentage of Most Frequently Endorsed Themes in Open-Ended Responses About Common Reasons a Child Delays Disclosing Abuse (n = 467 responses)

Category and Sub-theme	Response examples	<i>f</i>
Lack of understanding		17%

Did not understand/categorize the experience as abusive	“Do not know they were abused” “They thought it was a game”	11.2%
Unsure what to do/how to tell/who to tell	“They don’t know what to do”	2.8%
Refers to age/maturity level	“Maturity of the child”	1.7%
Fears of the child (specific)		15%
Fear of not being believed	“Scared nobody will believe them”	6.0%
Fear of repercussions/retaliation	“Fear of retaliation”	2.5%
Fear of the perpetrator getting into trouble	“Doesn’t want anything to happen to them”	1.5%
Fear of the child getting into trouble	“Afraid they would get in trouble”	1.5%
Perceived responsibility		12%
Feelings of shame/guilt	“Being ashamed”	8.3%
Feelings of fault/blame	“Blaming themselves”	2.6%
Relationship with the perpetrator		10%
Mentions who the perpetrator was in relation to the child	“Abuser is a close relative”	3.5%
Inferred mention of who the perpetrator was	“Authority figure” “A teacher”	3.1%
Refers to grooming behavior	“They have been groomed”	1.8%
Threats		9%
Threats in general	“The abuser may have threatened them” “Threatened”	6.9%
Threats of harm to self or loved one	“Because offender said would hurt family if they do tell”	1.4%
Lack of opportunity		4%
Not having anyone to tell (perceived & actual)	“Doesn’t have a trusted adult to tell”	2.8%
Emotional factors (general)		33%
Fear-related	“Scared,” “Fear,” “They might be scared,” “Terrified”	19.4%
Embarrassment	“Embarrassed”	4.0%
Trauma-related	“Emotional trauma”	2.0%
Other	“Anxiety,” “Mad,” “Emotional Stress”	6.6%

Note. Percentages within categories do not total the overall category percentage, as only the most frequently endorsed sub-themes are displayed.

Recantation

Familiarity with Recantation

52.8% of participants indicated they were *not* familiar with the term recantation. Of those answering yes ($n = 151$), definitions of recantation provided varied considerably. Table 10 outlines a summary of themes included in definitions and examples. Upon review, approximately 17% of definitions were either irrelevant, unclear, or were explicitly pulled from an internet source. Approximately half (47.7%) of definitions provided included some mention of “taking back” what was said or expressing that what was stated did not happen. In addition, approximately 18% of definitions included a statement indicating that the original story was changed in some way, while 12% of definitions included an element that indicated the child had initially lied and was correcting their statement. Finally, a minority of definitions included a statement about denial of abuse (7%) or taking back a report or testimony (5%), and 6% of definitions were more broadly related to the term in general.

Table 10. *Frequency of Themes Within Open-Ended Responses for Definitions of Recantation*

Theme and Examples	<i>f</i>
Mentions “taking back” or saying something did not happen “When a child takes back their allegation of abuse.” “They claim that the abuse did not happen at some later point”	47.7%
Mentions changing the story/statement in some way “Changing story about what happened” “They tell one story and then they come back with another story.”	17.9%
Indicates a child was lying and now correcting their statement "Victim" recants their story of being abused. Happens a lot when parents are getting divorced and one or the other parent "coaches" the kids into hating the other parent and convincing them they've been abused.”	11.9%

“The child says they were abused then they come clean and say it never happen”	
Mentions denial	7.3%
“Recantation or retraction is when a victim makes a claim of abuse and later denies the claim for any number of reasons.”	
“Would when the child denys the charges that were made.”	
Mentions taking back a report or testimony	5.3%
“Retraction in sexual abuse is withdrawal of a reported assault.”	
“The behavior of children and adolescents who after having reported any form of abuse or mistreatment later change their account when providing formal testimony”	
General definition of recant/retract	6.0%
“Taking back statements”	
"Retraction is action of drawing something back or back in"	
Unclear (differences between recant & retract)/irrelevant/copied from internet	17%
“Recantation is telling the story over and seeing if the timeline, items fit. Retraction is changing or taking away allegations or actions taken.”	
“Child can become anti social, less friendly”	
“Victim Recantation is a retraction or withdrawal of a reported sexual assault. Recantations ar. routinely used by victims to disengage the criminal justice sy.. by themselves, indicative of a false report.”	

Note. Percentage exceeds 100% as definitions could include more than one theme.

Prevalence of Recantations in Reported Cases

Participants indicated that approximately 38% ($SD = 23.0\%$) of CSA reports to authorities include a recantation (see Table 11).

Table 11. *Estimated Prevalence of Recantations in CSA Cases Reported to Authorities.*

	Mean (SD)	Median	<i>f</i> respondents
Cases reported including a recantation	37.9% (23.0)	35%	
0–15%			19.4%
16–30%			25.9%
31–45%			17.5%
46–65%			25.6%
More than 65%			11.6%

Credibility of a Child Who Recanted

Finally, a majority (58%) of individuals indicated they would still believe a child's allegation if they recanted their initial allegation of abuse, while 41% indicated they would *doubt* the initial allegation; similarly, participants had a mean credibility rating of 6.1 ($SD = 2.5$) for a child who recanted an allegation of abuse but could not provide a rational explanation as to why they recanted.

Reasons for Recantation

Exploratory Analysis of Reasons for Recantation. A majority of participants (62.5%) indicated they believe age-related differences exist in the reasons why children recant an allegation of abuse. We conducted an exploratory analysis for open-ended questions on the reasons why participants believe all children recant an allegation of abuse. A random subsample (112 cases; 35%) of respondents' data was coded for these purposes.

Overall, participants provided 553 total responses. However, approximately 12% of responses provided were either nonsensical/irrelevant (e.g., "Jeff") or explicitly uninformative (e.g., "I don't know") and were therefore removed from the preliminary analysis. On average, participants provided 4.4 reasons and ranged from 0–10 responses each (13 participants in this subsample provided 0 reasons). Participants varied considerably in their reasons as to why children recant an allegation of abuse, in both content and thoroughness of responses. Of note, almost half (48.2%) of responses provided were single word responses (e.g., "Financial," "Information," "Bad"); as such, many responses were largely uninterpretable and were therefore analyzed separately. The final sample for this exploratory analysis consisted of 239 single-word responses and 253 additional responses for a total of 492 responses; Tables 12 and 13 provide breakdowns of response categories and most frequently endorsed sub-themes, respectively.

Table 12. Common Themes and Examples of Single-Word Responses to an Open-Ended Question About Common Reasons Children Recant Allegations of Abuse (n = 239 responses)

Category	<i>f</i>
Fear-related	31.0%
“Scared,” “Afraid,” “Fear,” “Terrified”	
Self-evaluative emotion-related	15.1%
“Shame,” “Guilt,” “Embarrassed,” “(Self-) Doubt”	
External influence/entity	20.5%
“Threat,” “Intimidation,” “Blackmail,” “Bribe,” “Forced”	
“Manipulated,” “Coerced,” “Groomed,” “Pressured”	
“Police,” “Parent,” “Neighbor”	
Incorrect/error/unsure	
“Lying,” “Mistake,” “Confusion,” “Faked”	7.1%
Idiosyncratic responses	
“Financial,” “Investigation,” “Wrong,” “Love,” “Incarceration,”	27%
“Pride,” “Dread,” “Trust”	

Table 13. Percentage of Most Frequently Endorsed Themes in Open-Ended Responses About Common Reasons Children Recant Allegations of Abuse (n = 253 responses)

Category	Response examples	<i>f</i>
External Influence		19.0%
Pressure/threats from perpetrator	“Because they were threatened by abuser”	5.1%
Pressure from family	“A family member pressures the child to recant and keep secret”	4.7%
Pressure from others (e.g., peers, authorities)	“Pressure from friends,” “Outside pressure”	4.4%
Threat/pressure in general	“Feeling pressured, “Feeling threatened”	3.6%
Fears of the child		11.9%
Of retaliation/repercussions	“Fear of retribution,” “Fear of retaliation”	4.7%
(Of harm) for self	“Fear of retaliation”	1.6%
(Of harm) for others/protecting others	“Fear for their family or pet,” “Fear of siblings being hurt”	1.6%

Of upsetting/hurting others	“Doesn't want to hurt a family member,” “Scared of causing pain to others”	1.6%
Of the perpetrator	“Fear of the abuser”	0.8%
Of punishment/getting into trouble	“Fear they will get in trouble”	0.8%
Toll/Consequences of the disclosure		10.3%
Desire to move past experience/end the situation	“Wants ordeal to end,” “Just want to put it behind them”	4.4%
Stress/difficulty of the process following disclosure	“The experience is too difficult for them”	2.4%
Avoid further attention/conflict	“Doesnt want the conflict,” “Want the attention to end”	2.4%
Non-Supporting Factors		9.9%
Not being believed/no action taken	“Parent's don't believe/support the child”	7.5%
Perpetrator denial/lack of supporting evidence	“Perpetrator denial,” Lack of evidence”	2.4%
Result of False Allegation		6.3%
False memory/misremembered event	“False Memory,” “Incorrect memory of event”	4.3%
Child lied about the abuse	“The abuse was a lie from the beginning”	2.0%
Home/Familial Effects		5.1%
Family disruption/discord	“Afraid that the consequence of the accusation could cause major family upheaval in their lives”	2.4%
(Fear of) being removed from the home	“Being placed in foster care”	1.2%
(Fear of) losing parents/siblings removed	“Fear of losing a parent,” “Fear of siblings being displaced”	0.8%
Response from Others		5.1%
(Fear of) being shamed/judge	“Shaming by peers,” “Fear of ridicule”	2.8%
Gossip/being talked about	“People begin to talk about them”	1.9%
Lack of Understanding	“Doesn't understand”	5.1%
Positive Regard for Perpetrator	“Genuinely care about the abuser”	3.6%

Other Emotion-Related	“Child felt afraid”	3.6%
Other	“Be mad at the person,” “Lack of fear,” “Loss focus,” “Abuser living better life than they were before”	18.6%

Note. Percentages within categories do not total the overall category percentage, as only the most frequently endorsed sub-themes are displayed.

General Knowledge Questions

Please refer to Appendix B for a summary of findings for general CSA knowledge questions. As these questions are not a central aim to the current study, results are not reported here. However, one important result from the general knowledge questions relevant to understanding the context in which individuals are evaluating delay and recantation was that participants reported prevalence rates of CSA of upwards of 50%.

Chapter 4: Discussion

Decades of research have been dedicated to understanding the process by which children disclose abuse; following this has been a host of attention towards investigating how others think about this process, yet much is still unknown about how the general public understands the dynamics of child sexual abuse – including disclosure behaviors. The present study sought to characterize lay persons’ knowledge of and beliefs about child maltreatment and contribute to the understanding thus far about how the general public thinks about delayed disclosure and recantation in cases of alleged child sexual abuse.

Delayed Disclosure

Although past research has generally concluded that the lay population is familiar with and understands delayed disclosure as a CSA phenomenon (e.g., Pelisoli et al., 2015), results from the current study, including findings for more nuanced elements of delayed disclosure, indicate that this generalization may not be so conclusive. Despite studies demonstrating that lay

persons generally recognize the concept of delayed disclosure, our results suggest that many are unfamiliar with the term itself. It may be that individuals intuitively understand that a child may wait a period time before coming forward about abuse, without explicitly recognizing the term used to describe this behavior; however, even so, results from this study indicate that this intuition is not fully cross-cutting. The variability in which individuals define this concept was great, evidencing beliefs both consistent and inconsistent with how the phenomenon is generally characterized in the literature. As such, an important finding (as is consistent with the notion of confidence versus accuracy; e.g., Roediger & DeSoto, 2014) beliefs about ones' own familiarity does not necessarily translate to an informed understanding.

While one singular definition of "delayed disclosure" does not exist, these results indicate that people may present with a variety of different beliefs about what a delay is, even among those whose beliefs are generally in line with what is known from the literature, as well as varying degrees of depth at which these concepts are considered or thought about.

Individuals' beliefs regarding the prevalence of delayed disclosure in cases of CSA is in line with the hypothesis that, despite not recognizing the term, many individuals understand that delays in disclosing CSA can and do occur. However, the rate at which individuals believe this CSA behavior occurs is largely split across a wide range, with many respondents (28%) believing this occurs in less than half of cases while almost an equal number of respondents (32%) believe this occurs a vast majority of the time (>75%). Again, this evidences that individuals vary greatly in their beliefs about this topic. This is important to consider relevant to decision making about a case of CSA, as those who believe delay occurs at a much smaller frequency may potentially place greater weight on this factor as evidence against likelihood of abuse or other credibility perceptions.

Research to date has characterized several correlates and predictors of delayed disclosure. One such finding is that, generally, children are more likely to delay disclosing an experience of abuse the closer the victim-perpetrator relationship (e.g., Alaggia et al., 2019). Our results showed that most individuals understand that closer relationships contribute to a delay; indeed, a majority (59%) of individuals indicated that a child abused by a family member would be most likely to delay disclosing abuse. Alternatively, a significant minority (11%) of individuals think children are most likely to delay disclosing when they have been abused by a stranger, which does not align with findings from empirical evidence (e.g., Hershkowitz et al., 2007). Of interest would be to further investigate individuals' thought processes behind why they believe certain individuals are more likely to disclose based on various abuse features such as relationship to the abuser (e.g., family member vs. a stranger).

Overall, findings on disclosure patterns were generally in line with evidence in the scientific literature. Broadly, individuals recognized that a minority of CSA victims (25%) disclose during childhood, and that a sizable proportion never disclose abuse (36%); these results are consistent with evidence on child disclosure patterns in the literature (see London et al., 2008). Regarding CSA victims who disclose abuse during childhood, participants indicated virtually equal likelihood of disclosures across timeframes (e.g., within 24 hours, within 1 months, one month to six months, etc.), with a slight increase in estimated prevalence after one year following abuse. These results are generally in line with what the literature suggests about CSA disclosure timeframes (see again London et al., 2008 for a review), which indicates that many CSA victims either disclose within one month, or wait over one year to disclose.

In order to further understand how individuals conceptualize delayed disclosure, it is important to determine how delay is being quantified. Individuals varied in their beliefs as to

what period of time between abuse and disclosure constitutes a delay, with a third of participants reporting that delay begins after one week of failing to disclose, while a greater proportion (40%) believe delay does not begin until much further in the future—after six months following the abuse. This is an important finding when talking about delay, as two individuals could hold wildly different opinions or beliefs about whether the same child delayed disclosing; if it is believed that a delayed disclosure is influential in decision-making, then whether the individual does in fact perceive the period of time between abuse and disclosure as delayed is highly relevant. Our results demonstrate that individuals are quite inconsistent in this belief.

Similarly to what is outlined above, understanding when individuals believe delay onset begins is important for knowing how delay is being quantified, and also for how they think about potential influential factors in the process of disclosing abuse—for instance, considering a delay after first instance of abuse or after a failed disclosure at the first safe opportunity to disclose (e.g., abuse has ceased). According to our results, it appears a sizable proportion of individuals may be sensitive to the added complexity of the disclosure process when abuse is ongoing, with almost a third of individuals indicating a disclosure was not delayed following a year of recurrent abuse and immediate disclosure at abuse cessation. However, alternatively, only one-third of the number of individuals shifted towards believing a disclosure was delayed after six months post-abuse cessation. This is an interesting finding considering the results that many individuals believe delay does not begin until at least six months following abuse. In this case, it is possible that those who do not believe that a disclosure following repeated abuse and a 6-month time period between cessation of abuse and disclosure constitutes a delay because 1) they do not believe delay begins until last instance of abuse and 2) they do not believe delay begins until 6 months following (last instance of) abuse.

Additionally, another interesting finding is that almost 13% of individuals believe any period of time (e.g., one day) between abuse and disclosure constitutes a delay, which is marginally in line with findings from the question regarding timing between abuse and disclosure that constitutes a delay, where 15% of the current sample stated that 0–24 hours after abuse constitutes a delay. This finding further highlights the difference between considering opportunity versus motivation to disclose when determining if a disclosure is delayed, given this belief that delay occurs essentially at the instance the abusive experience ends.

Understanding what individuals believe are common reasons why a child would delay disclosing abuse is essential to determining what lay persons believe constitutes a “rational explanation of delay.” However, results from this research question are heavily mixed. While general themes (e.g., lack of understanding, threats, relationship to perpetrator, etc.) emerged that are in line with both reasons that have been identified as barriers to disclosure/contributory to delay in the literature as well as to what has been included in other lay person studies (e.g., McGuire & London, 2017), the variability in responses provided in terms of both content and depth in this preliminary analysis was vast, precluding larger, more sweeping conclusions to be drawn related to this question at the present time.

The finding that a third of “reasons” provided included one-word concepts was particularly interesting; given contextual information that naturally accompanies cases involving CSA, it may be unlikely that one-word concepts/ideas would be sufficient to continue to hold up as rational explanations, and nuances involved would require greater elaboration and consideration as to what reasons these overarching ideas may be indicative of. At present, it is unclear whether this response style is indicative of a disinterest in engaging in effortful thought, or instead an inability or lack of capacity to think about these concepts to this degree of depth.

In addition, a large majority of individuals believe reasons as to why children delay disclosing abuse differ by age, indicating sensitivity to age-related contributing factors; however, the alternative of this is that a sizeable minority (20%) of individuals *do not* believe that reasons differ by age; understanding what reasons these individuals consider to be rational explanations may shed light on this dis-belief in age-related differences, as perhaps these individuals do not view factors that have relevance for different ages as rational explanations for a delay.

Understanding the impact of a delay on lay persons' credibility perceptions of a witness is important for determining what influence (or mediating influence) this factor may have in juror decision-making. A vast majority of individuals (88%), without context, endorsed that they would believe a disclosure if it had been delayed while, alternatively, a small minority would either doubt or not believe the disclosure. This is important, as mentioned above, given no additional context was provided. For those who would not believe a disclosure, if truly indicative of one's beliefs, this effectively eliminates the influence of any additional factors or contextual information.

Similarly, although participants were more inclined towards viewing a child as credible (when the child could not provide a rational explanation for the delay), variability existed, indicative of doubt or disbelief in a portion of participants. In addition, although a very small minority of individuals would view a delayed disclosure as not at all credible, even after a year following abuse, in general and as expected, credibility perceptions trended down at longer lengths of delay.

It is also possible that the direction in which the prompt is phrased may have an influence on how individuals think about and respond to the question of credibility. Indeed, individuals provided quite different responses to the same question phrased in an opposite manner across

participants. Over half of participants indicated that they agreed to some extent that shorter delays result in more credible allegations; alternatively, however, with respect to this questions' complement, less than a quarter of participants agreed to some extent that longer delays result in less credible allegations. As such, this indicates a potential bias towards endorsing a reduction in believability/credibility; stated otherwise, individuals may be reluctant or else recognize that they do not believe they would view a disclosure as that much less credible at longer lengths of delay, whereas this same message sentiment might be less obvious when stated in the opposite way, despite meaning being the same from the response provided. This is an interesting avenue for future research in determining what factors make a child "more" or "less" credible/believable

Recantation

As was with delayed disclosure, researchers have concluded that lay persons recognize recantation as a CSA phenomenon (e.g., Cossins et al., 2009), although in general, less so than delayed disclosure. Again, our results suggest that many participants (53%) are unfamiliar with the term itself; interestingly, a larger proportion of participants indicated they were familiar with recantation than were familiar with delayed disclosure, which was an unexpected finding. It is possible that, since questions surrounding recantation appeared in the latter portion of the survey, participants were able to use context clues to infer the meaning of recantation. Despite this, there was again variability in the way individuals define this concept, evidencing beliefs both consistent and inconsistent with how the phenomenon is generally characterized in the literature.

Furthermore, additional nuances between those definitions considered more closely aligned to the scientific literature exist as well, for instance, voluntarily taking a statement back, denying that abuse occurred after already previously disclosing, formal versus information recantations, etc. Given there is no one definition or single agreement of recantation in the field

(and experts continue to contest about several of these mentioned nuances), it is expected that variability in lay persons understanding/beliefs would vary as well, and naturally, more so.

Regardless however, these findings indicate that people may present with a variety of different beliefs about what a recantation is, even among those whose beliefs are generally in line with what is known from the literature, as well as evidence varying degrees of depth at which these concepts are considered or thought about.

Individuals' beliefs regarding the prevalence of recantation in cases of CSA is also in line with the hypothesis about delay. Many respondents report that recantation can occur in CSA cases, despite a majority (53%) of individuals indicating they are unfamiliar with the term. However, the rate at which individuals believe recantation is a case feature is largely split across a wide range, with a roughly even split between those believing recantation occurs in less than 30% of cases (45%), while a similar amount (38%) believe this occurs in almost 50% and more of CSA cases. In general, however, it does appear that individuals recognize that recantation occurs at a lower rate than does delay, which is in line with the empirical evidence (London et al., 2008). Additionally, these differences may have important implications for decision-making about a case of CSA, for instance, if individuals believe recantations occur at such high proportions, they may be more inclined to disregard a recantation given their belief in its frequency and regularity of occurrence in cases. However, what is known from the empirical evidence is that recantations occur in a sizeable minority of cases (e.g., Malloy et al., 2007), as opposed to a majority, overall.

Identifying what individuals believe are common reasons why a child would recant an allegation of abuse helps to illuminate what individuals know about recantation, providing evidence towards whether this understanding is empirically-aligned or if misconceptions or

misunderstandings exist. However, results from this research question are heavily mixed, largely mirroring the results found for delayed disclosure including a wide range in variability of responses provided, both in terms of content and depth of response. While general themes (e.g., pressures to recant, subsequent family disruption, not being believed/having support) emerged that are generally in line with reasons that have been identified as contributory to a recantation in the literature, the variability in responses preclude more generalized conclusions about this question at the present time. Again, a large proportion of responses provided included single-word answers, which suggests more surface-level considerations of this topic, possibly indicating an inability, difficulty or disinterest in thinking about these concepts to this degree of depth.

Interestingly, only a small minority of explanations (6.3%) provided included some indication that the recantation is a result of a false initial allegation; as such it does not appear that many individuals are sensitive to this fact, which is highly important given that evidence for the highest prevalence of recantations are found in studies that investigated cases with questionable investigative procedures (e.g., London et al., 2008). Given this and given that recantation already occurs in a sizeable minority of CSA cases, sensitivity to the fact that recantations can be “true” recantations is important for thoughtfully evaluating a recantation.

In addition, a majority of respondents (63%) believe that reasons as to why a child recants an allegation of abuse differs by age, indicating sensitivity to age-related contributing factors; however, the alternative of this is that a large minority (~40%) of individuals do not believe that reasons differ by age. As was the consideration with delay, understanding what reasons these individuals consider to be rational may shed light on this dis-belief in age-related differences.

Finally, regardless of reason, a majority (58%) of individuals indicate they would still believe an allegation of abuse if a child recanted, without additional context provided, while the remaining individuals indicated they would doubt the allegation. Similarly, individuals rated a child who could not provide an explanation for their recantation as mostly credible (but less so than delay), also without additional context provided. This is a relevant finding given, as mentioned previously, recantations do occur, but in a sizeable minority of cases; as such, a tendency towards more often believing in the credibility of the child/initial allegation may be related to an earlier point about disregarding a child's recantation of their allegation due to perceived frequency of occurrence, as well as potentially due to a lack of consideration that recantations can be "true" (as discussed previously).

To summarize, the combination of findings from the current study evidence that there may be considerable variability in what jury-eligible lay persons know and believe about CSA disclosure behaviors. This study isolates specific elements about these topics to provide a more comprehensive scope of the different ways in which individuals are thinking about these behaviors; these nuances, while further highlighting discrepancies, are illuminating in advancing the understanding of what variability exists in these topics within this population.

Limitations

While a strength of the current study is its comprehensive approach to examine understanding of CSA disclosure behaviors, as is with all research, this study is not without limitations. Consideration of the following caveats is important for interpreting results, evaluating implications, and for generating insights for research practices.

The first limitation concerns using online panel providers for data collection. Panel providers offer wide-reaching channels for research with participants outside those more easily

and readily available to researchers (e.g., college samples), which more closely reflect the diversity of the US population. As such, one strength of research with panel providers are their ability to generate nationally representative samples. However, there may be important trade-offs for research with these data sources.

We encountered issues in data collection with the panel provider used for this study, Qualtrics; specifically, related to quality of data. A sizeable amount of participant data gathered was subsequently discarded due to violations of data integrity. We primarily used responses to open-ended questions as a measure of effort and indicators of validity. While this was done at the recommendation of Qualtrics as standard practice, it is nonetheless important to consider the potential effects of excluding a sizable portion of participants on overall findings, particularly given the study aim to capture a nationally representative sample. Specifically, over an accumulation of many cases in larger studies, these practices may result in an overrepresentation of individuals who tend to think more deeply or attend to topics in a more thoughtful manner than is representative of the general population. However, despite this, the remaining participants and current sample in this study still evidenced a wide range in terms of data quality and thoroughness (informativeness), and likely is a broad representation of real differences that exist between individuals in how they think about or respond to complex topics.

Relatedly, a large component of this study was to supplement quantitative data with qualitative information (i.e., responses to open-ended prompts) in order to more fully characterize thoughts and beliefs individuals hold when they are afforded the opportunity to freely and spontaneously respond. However, a sizeable proportion of the current sample provided limited information (or no information at all) in response to several of these prompts, which precluded more thorough conclusions to be drawn, as the limited nature of these types of

responses require a certain degree of interpretation to infer meaning; this is the antithetical purpose of including such question types, as we sought to eliminate or reduce the need for interpretation in order to more fully capture true thoughts and beliefs. A related concern is whether these tendencies extended to closed-ended/quantitative question types, where poor effort or quality of responding is more difficult to determine, which may impact the overall validity of findings.

However, despite this and its impacts on generating information regarding *content* that was originally sought from these questions, these findings may indicate important information regarding the *process* by which individuals think about such topics. It may be likely that, when presented with complex issues that require more in-depth thought, individuals defer back to short-cuts in thinking, schemas, and biases to generate conclusions. While this may be evidenced on a much smaller-scale in the current survey, it is possible that these tendencies in thinking generalize out and surface in situations or circumstances that also require more in-depth thinking about complicated issues, such as those encountered as a trial juror.

A second limitation of the current study is an inherent caveat to survey research, which informs the implications and future directions associated with this study (described in the following section). While the current survey study methodology affords to comprehensively capture thoughts and beliefs, how lay persons make decisions based on their knowledge and beliefs is still not well understood nor was addressed in the current study. Although this study was designed to catalogue factors (i.e., knowledge and beliefs) related to delay and recantation that are *likely* to influence decision-making, no claims can be made regarding actual decision-making behaviors or *how* these thoughts and beliefs influence those decisions.

Implications and Future Directions

The overarching aim of the current study was to contribute towards the field's understanding about what jurors know and how they think about different factors in cases of CSA, particularly those where CSA disclosure behaviors (delayed disclosure and recantation) are relevant. Research on juror knowledge and behaviors, including studies such as the current project, must be considered alongside what is known regarding child sexual abuse disclosure, as well as considered within the context of legal processes and policies. The combination of these three core components overlap to form the context in which conclusions can be drawn, and greater understanding forged, about practical implications of these legally-relevant issues.

Understanding the process by which jurors make sense of CSA case features and behaviors provides information regarding the potential basis upon which lay persons' conclusions are drawn, including as relevant for trial decision-making. However, as noted above, no conclusions can yet be made regarding the relationship between knowledge and beliefs and subsequent decision-making in cases of CSA. Stated another way, simply knowing what lay persons believe and know, or alternatively, do *not* believe or know, regarding certain CSA information is not inherently indicative of whether or how decision-making may be affected. This gap in the scientific literature is rich with avenues for future research, with important practical and policy implications. As such, an important future direction in this line of research is to pair the understanding of what jurors know and believe with decision-making in order to generate conclusions about how this knowledge and these beliefs are applied in context. Furthermore, an important additional future undertaking is not only capturing knowledge and beliefs in relation to decision-making, but including specific case features that map onto different abuse scenarios to investigate differential impacts on legal decision-making that mirror what is

currently being asked of fact finders to do. With respects to delay and recantation specifically, adjusting case details and context to reflect the nuances of these CSA disclosure dynamics will provide useful information about whether and how jurors utilize their knowledge and beliefs about these factors in their decision-making. In addition, this would allow for an investigation into complex decision-making when various case features overlap (e.g., decision-making in the presence of a delay and a recantation).

Results of these future research directions surrounding knowledge and decision-making in various cases of CSA would highlight potential biases at play in jurors' decision-making process, with important implications for understanding ways to mitigate such biases to promote more accurate legal outcomes. Taken together, this poses larger implications for determining whether expert testimony is warranted, and on what topics, in light of the landmark decision in *State v. JLG*. The current study is one additional step towards building upon the research foundation for generating these conclusions.

Conclusion

This survey study represents a comprehensive investigation into the general public's knowledge and beliefs regarding CSA behaviors, specifically on delayed disclosure and recantation. Results from this study demonstrate clear variability in both what individuals think, and how they think about, these disclosure behaviors, indicating that these are not areas lay persons understand with great consistency. In addition, another consideration that is raised by the current study is the importance of taking into account the varying ways in which individuals approach these complex topics, and the depth at which the average lay individual is able to or *presumed* to be able to conceptualize complicated issues on sensitive topics. Furthermore, much is still unknown about how potential jurors' knowledge and beliefs translate to decision-making

at a criminal trial, or how this decision-making varies based on case features (e.g., presence of a delay or a recantation). Understanding ways in which knowledge and beliefs influence, or do not influence, decision-making is important for determining the probative value of expert testimony on these topics.

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Appendix A Full Survey

Consent Form:

Please read this form carefully. If you have any questions, you can contact the research team at stettlerb1@montclair.edu.

Title: A Survey of Knowledge and Beliefs Related to Child Maltreatment

Study Number: IRB-FY 21-22-2613

Why is this study being done? We want to know what people believe about child abuse. The results will be published and shared with judges and others who make legal decisions involving children. None of the results will identify you as a participant. Qualtrics will know you were in this study to compensate you, but your individual responses will be anonymous; at no time will your responses be linked to your identity.

What will happen while you are in the study? If you choose to be in this study, you will answer questions about your knowledge and beliefs about childhood sexual abuse.

Time: This study will take about 25 minutes to finish.

Risks: The risks involved in this study are low. You may feel uneasy or upset when answering some questions. If you continue to be upset, you can stop at any time. If you want to speak with someone about these feelings, you can contact the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) at 1-800-662-HELP (4357).

Privacy: This survey is anonymous. We are taking steps to protect your privacy. We will collect the data using Qualtrics. The only data we will collect that may be linked to you will be your IP address to make sure you are in the United States at the time of the study. Once this is known, we will delete the IP addresses from our data file. After deleting the IP addresses, we will store data on a password-protected account. Once we have looked over the data (no later than two years after we have finished collecting data), we will upload the final data files to the Open Science Framework (OSF) website. The OSF is a data storage website to promote honest science practices. We will delete the files from other accounts once we have uploaded them to the OSF.

Benefits: This study is low risk. There are no direct benefits to you.

Compensation: You will receive the compensation amount that you were told by your panel provider for being in this study. Payment depends on finishing the survey as stated in the panel's provider participation agreement.

Who will know that you are in this study? The only identifying information we will collect are IP addresses to make sure you are in the United States when you take the survey. Once this is verified, IP

addresses will be deleted. IP addresses will never be used to link your answers to your identity. No other identifying information will be collected. As stated, Qualtrics will know that you participated in this study so panel providers can compensate you; Qualtrics will not know your individual responses.

New Jersey requires that any person with reasonable suspicion that a child has been subjected to harm shall report that concern to DCP&P. Other states have their own mandated reporting rules; we encourage you to become familiar with those rules if you live in another state.

Do you have to be in the study? You do not have to be in this study. You are a volunteer! It is okay if you want to stop at any time and not be included in the study. Please know that your compensation may be affected by discontinuing study.

Do you have any questions about this study? If you have any questions about this study, email Brooke Stettler at stettlerb1@montclair.edu

Do you have any questions about your rights as a research participant? Any questions about your rights may be sent to Dr. Dana Levitt, Chair of the Institutional Review Board at Montclair State University at reviewboard@montclair.edu or 973-655-2097.

It is okay to use my data in other studies:

Yes

No

By clicking "I agree to participate" below, I confirm that I have read this form and will participate in the project described. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement, and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can discontinue participation at any time. My consent also indicates that I am 18 years of age or older.

(Feel free to print a copy of this page for your records)

I agree to participate

I decline to participate

Note. Participants were immediately terminated and screened out if they responded "I decline to participate"

We care about the quality of our survey data. For us to get the most accurate measures of your opinions, it is important that you provide thoughtful answers to each question in this survey.

Do you commit to providing thoughtful answers to the questions in this survey?

I can't promise either way

Yes, I will

No, I will not

Note. Participants were immediately terminated and screened out if they responded “No”

In order to participate in this study, you must be eligible to serve on a trial jury.

To be legally qualified for jury service, an individual must:

- be a United States citizen;
- be at least 18 years of age;
- reside primarily in the judicial district for one year;
- be adequately proficient in English to satisfactorily complete the juror qualification form;
- have no disqualifying mental or physical condition;
- not currently be subject to felony charges punishable by imprisonment for more than one year;
- never have been convicted of a felony (unless civil rights have been legally restored)

Given the criteria outlined above, to the best of your knowledge, are you currently eligible to serve on a trial jury?

Yes

No

Note. Participants were immediately terminated and screened out if they responded “No”

In which state do you currently reside?

▼ Alabama ... I do not reside in the United States

Note. All 50 States and US territories included in drop-down choice format.

Which of the following terms best describes your current gender identity?

- Woman
 - Man
 - Non-binary/genderfluid or genderqueer
 - I am not sure or questioning
 - Not listed _____
 - Prefer not to answer
-

Do you identify as transgender and/or nonbinary?

- No, I am not transgender and/or nonbinary
 - Yes, I am transgender and/or nonbinary
 - I am not sure yet or questioning if I am transgender and/or nonbinary
 - I don't know what this question is asking
 - Decline to answer
-

Which of the following best describes your ethnicity?

- Hispanic or Latino
 - Not Hispanic or Latino
-

Which of the following best describes your race?

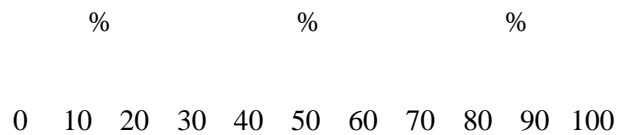
- White
- Black or African American
- American Indian/Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- Some other race (describe) _____
- Two or more races (describe) _____

What is your age in years?

▼ Under 18 ... 99

Note: All of the following questions pertain to US populations. For all the following questions, "child" or "childhood" refers to someone under the age of 18.

Child sexual abuse is defined as sexual contact with a person under the age of consent by an adult (16 - 18 years old, depending on where you live). Using the sliding scale below, estimate the percent of **children** in the US population who have been sexually abused.



What is the most common age (in years) of a victim of child sexual abuse:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17



What percent of children who are sexually abused fall into the following gender categories? (Answers must total 100%)

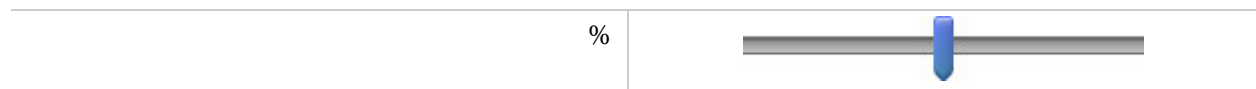
_____ % Male
 _____ % Female
 _____ % Non-binary

What percent of the perpetrators of child sexual abuse fall into the following gender categories? (Answers must total 100%)

_____ % Male
 _____ % Female
 _____ % Non-binary

What percent of child sexual abuse victims wait until adulthood to disclose their abuse to authorities for the first time?

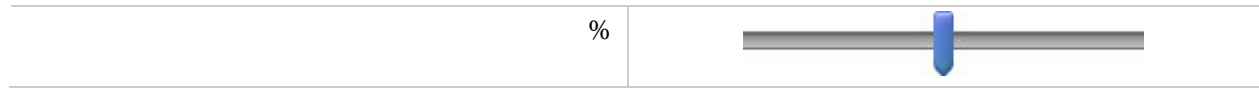
0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100



Some cases of child sexual abuse come to the attention of authorities when the victim is still a child, and some come to attention once the victim has become an adult.

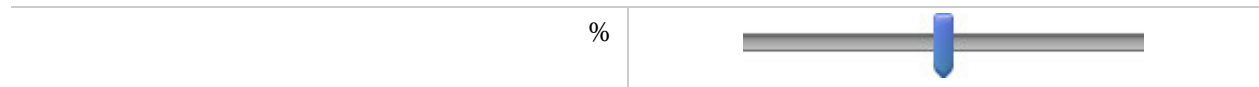
What percent of cases come to the attention of authorities while the victim is still a child?

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100



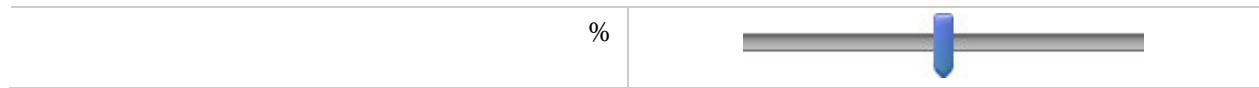
What percent of cases come to the attention of authorities after the victim has become an adult?

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100



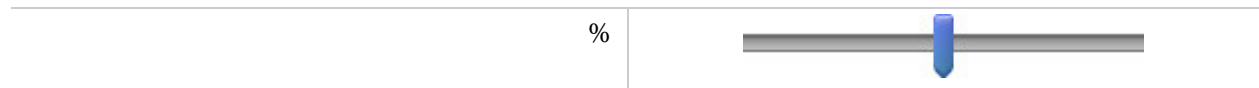
What proportion of child sexual abuse allegations made in **childhood** are not true?

0 25 50 75 100



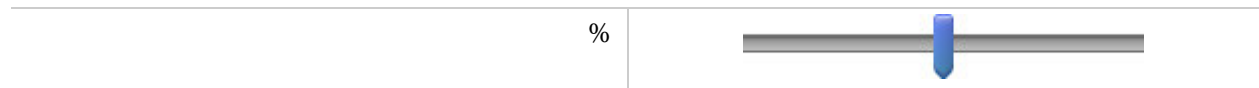
What proportion of child sexual abuse allegations made in **adulthood** are not true?

0 25 50 75 100



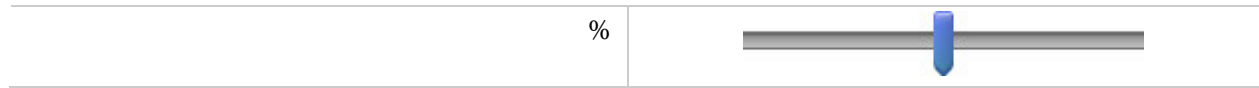
Medical evidence (e.g., pregnancy, STD, bleeding) is found in ____ percent of child sexual abuse cases (under 18 years)?

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100



Physical evidence (e.g., semen, pornography, condoms) is found in _____ percent of child sexual abuse cases (under 18 years)?

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100



Are you familiar with the term delayed disclosure in cases of child sexual abuse?

Yes

No

In your own words, define delayed disclosure in cases of child sexual abuse:

Note. This question uses display logic and will only be presented based on responses provided to previous questions.

What percent of child sexual abuse victims _____ (answers must total 100%):

Never tell anyone in their lifetime: _____
 Tell someone at some point during childhood: _____
 Tell someone at some point during adulthood: _____
 Total: _____

When victims disclose abuse, what percent tell within the following time-frames (answers must total 100%):

*Note that the first 5 options refer to those who disclose during childhood; the last option refers to those who disclose during adulthood only (after 18 years old).

Immediately (within 24 hours) after the abuse: _____

Within one month of the abuse: _____

Between one month and six months of the abuse: _____

Between six months and one year of the abuse: _____

After one year of the abuse, but before adulthood: _____

Discloses during adulthood only: _____

Total: _____

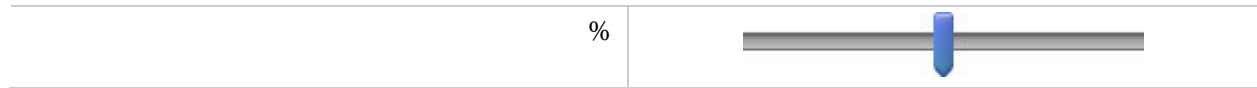
For the remainder of the survey questions, delayed disclosure means that there is a significant period of time between abuse and when the child discloses (i.e., tells someone about the abuse).

In your opinion, what is the minimum amount of time that must pass between abuse and the child's disclosure for it to be considered a "delayed disclosure."

- 0 to 24 hours
 - 1 day to 1 week
 - 2 weeks to 1 month
 - 1 month to 6 months
 - 6 months to 1 year
 - More than 1 year
-

What percent of child sexual abuse allegations that are reported to the authorities involve a delayed disclosure?

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100



Please rank the following in the order of whom you believe would be most likely to least likely to delay disclosing (1st placement = mostly likely, 6th placement = least likely; drag to reorder)

- _____ A child abused by a family member (biological or step-family member)
- _____ A child abused by a family friend
- _____ A child abused by a peer
- _____ A child abused by an acquaintance (e.g., a neighbor)
- _____ A child abused by an institutional figure (e.g., a teacher, counselor)
- _____ A child abused by a stranger

Note. Answer choices are randomized.

Sara was sexually abused when she was 8 years old. The abuse started on her 8th birthday and stopped on her 9th birthday. The next day, she told her mom about the abuse.

Is this a delayed disclosure of abuse?

Yes

No

What was the duration of the delay?

Note. This question uses display logic and will only be presented based on responses provided to previous questions.

Lucy was sexually abused when she was 8 years old. The abuse started on her 8th birthday and ended on her 9th birthday. Six months after the abuse stopped, she told her mom.

Is this a delayed disclosure of abuse?

Yes

No

What was the duration of the delay?

Note. This question uses display logic and will only be presented based on responses provided to previous questions.

Cate was sexually abused when she was 8 years old. She was abused two weeks after her 8th birthday. She told her mom about the abuse the next day

Is this a delayed disclosure of abuse?

Yes

No

What was the duration of the delay?

Note. This question uses display logic and will only be presented based on responses provided to previous questions.

If a child **delayed disclosing** that they were sexually abused, I would _____ their eventual disclosure.

- Believe
- Not believe

For each delayed disclosure interval, rate how credible (believable) that disclosure is:

	Not at all credible	A little credible	Credible	Very credible	Extremely credible
Immediately (within 24 hours)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2 days to 1 month	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
One month to 6 months	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6 months to 1 year	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
More than 1 year	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

What other factors would help you determine the credibility (believability) of a delayed disclosure?

In general, to what extent do you agree with the following statement:

"The shorter the delay, the more credible (believable) the allegation."

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Note. This question is counterbalanced with the following question; participants are randomly assigned one or the other.

In general, to what extent do you agree with the following statement:

"The longer the delay, the less credible (believable) the allegation."

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Note. This question is counterbalanced with the previous question; participants are randomly assigned one or the other.

Do you believe there are age differences that explain why children delay disclosing abuse?

- Yes
 - No
-

Please explain why you believe there are age-related differences in why children delay disclosing. In other words, why might you see differences in delayed disclosures between older and younger children

Note. This question uses display logic and will only be presented based on responses provided to previous questions.

Please list the top reasons why a child would delay their disclosure.

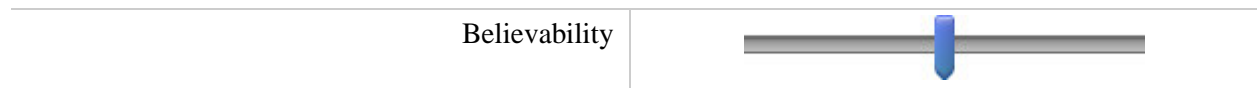
- Reason 1 _____
- Reason 2 _____
- Reason 3 _____
- Reason 4 _____
- Reason 5 _____
- Reason 6 _____
- Reason 7 _____
- Reason 8 _____
- Reason 9 _____
- Reason 10 _____

In a case involving delayed disclosure, on a scale of 1 – 10, how believable is a child’s allegation of abuse if the child does not provide a rational explanation for the delay?

Not at all
believable

Always
believable

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



Are you familiar with the term recantation or retraction in cases of child sexual abuse?

Yes

No

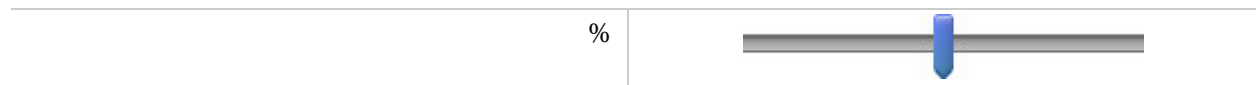
In your own words, please briefly define recantation or retraction in cases of child sexual abuse:

Note. This question uses display logic and will only be presented based on responses provided to previous questions.

For the remainder of the survey questions, the term recantation will be defined as making an allegation of abuse and then later, retracting (taking back) those statements to say that the abuse never happened. Throughout the survey we will use recantation and retraction synonymously.

What percent of child sexual abuse allegations that are reported to the authorities involve a recantation?

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100



If a child recanted their allegation of abuse, I would _____ their initial statement.

Still believe

Not believe

Do you believe there are age differences that explain why children recant an allegation of abuse?

Yes

No

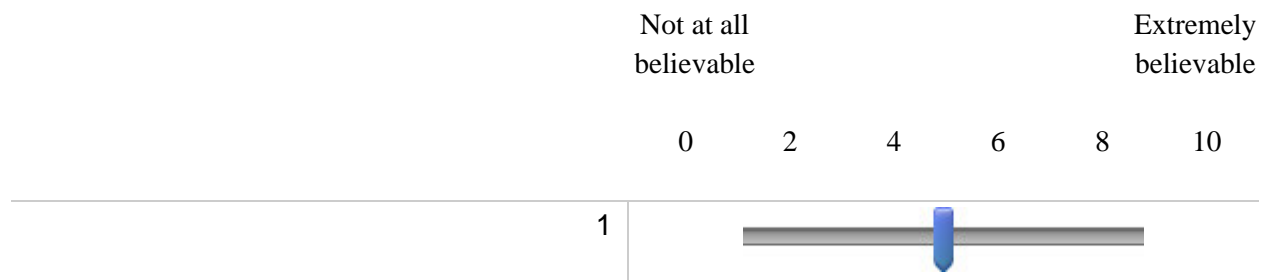
Please explain why you believe there are age-related differences in why children recant an allegation of abuse. In other words, why might you see differences in recantations between older and younger children?

Note. This question uses display logic and will only be presented based on responses provided to previous questions.

Please list the reasons why a child would recant their allegation of abuse:

- Reason 1 _____
- Reason 2 _____
- Reason 3 _____
- Reason 4 _____
- Reason 5 _____
- Reason 6 _____
- Reason 7 _____
- Reason 8 _____
- Reason 9 _____
- Reason 10 _____

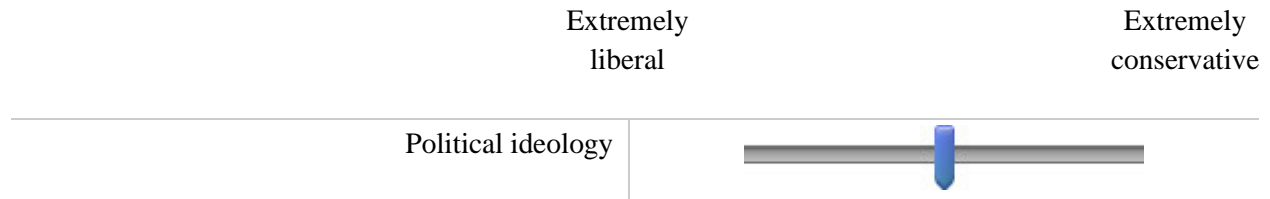
In a case involving recantation, on a scale of 1 – 10, how believable is a child’s allegation of abuse if the child does not provide a rational explanation for the recantation?



What is your highest level of education completed?

- Some High School
- High school or equivalent
- Associates Degree
- Bachelor's Degree
- Master's Degree
- Doctorate Degree
-

Please rate where you fall in your political ideology, from extremely liberal on the left to extremely conservative on the right.



Have you ever served as a juror in a criminal trial?

- Yes
- No
-

Have you ever served as a juror in a criminal trial involving sexual abuse or sexual assault?

- Yes
- No

Note. This question uses display logic and will only be presented based on responses provided to previous questions.

Have you ever been the victim of sexual abuse or sexual assault?

Yes

No

Was the abuse reported to authorities?

Yes

No

Note. This question uses display logic and will only be presented based on responses provided to previous questions.

Do you personally know someone who has been the victim of sexual abuse or sexual assault?

Yes

No

Was that person a family member, close friend, or acquaintance?

Family member

Close friend

Acquaintance

More than one of the above

Note. This question uses display logic and will only be presented based on responses provided to previous questions.

Was the abuse reported to authorities?

- Yes
- No

Note. This question uses display logic and is only displayed based on answers to previous questions

Should you feel uncomfortable answering any of these questions and would like to speak with someone, please contact the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) at 1-800-662-HELP (4357). SAMHSA's National Helpline (also known as the Treatment Referral Routing Service) or TTY: 1-800-487-4889 is a confidential, free, 24-hour-a-day, 365-day-a-year, information service, in English and Spanish. This service provides referrals to local treatment facilities, support groups, and community-based organizations.

We thank you for your time spent completing this survey. Your responses could have a significant impact on how child abuse cases are handled within the legal system.

Did you complete these questions to the best of your ability?

- Yes, I completed these questions to the best of my ability
- No, I did not complete these questions to the best of my ability

Note. Participants were immediately terminated and screened out if they responded "No"

Appendix B

General Knowledge Questions Data Table

Prevalence	Mean (SD)	Median	<i>f</i>
Prevalence of CSA	48.9% (25.3)	50%	
1 – 10%			5.3%
11 – 25%			20.0%
26 – 50%			30.0%
51 – 75%			26.0%
More than 75%			18.7%
Victim gender			
Male	34.7% (15.9)	33%	
Female	56.9% (16.9)	57%	
Non-Binary	8.5% (12.8)	1.5%	
Victim age	8.9 (3.4)	9	
0 – 5 years			16.3%
6 – 9 years			39.3%
10 – 12 years			28.5%
13 – 17 years			15.9%
Wait until adulthood to disclose to authorities	68.1% (19.4)	73%	
0 – 25%			5.3%
26 – 50%			10.7%
51% - 75%			42.0%
More than 75%			42%
Come to the attention of authorities during childhood	38.5% (20.7)	32%	
0 – 25%			36.6%
26 – 50%			40.0%
51 – 75%			17.2%
More than 75%			6.1%
Come to the attention of authorities during adulthood	59.7% (21.4)	63%	
0 – 25%			8.8%
26 – 50%			25.9%
51 – 75%			41.2%
More than 75%			24.1%

Allegations made in childhood that are not true	25.1% (22.5)	18%	
0 – 10%			32.2%
11 – 20%			24.4%
21 – 30%			16.2%
31 – 50%			13.5%
More than 50%			13.7%
Allegations made in adulthood that are not true	32.3% (23.7)	26%	
0 – 10%			18.4%
11 – 20%			19.4%
21 – 30%			18.8%
31 – 50%			23.7%
More than 50%			19.7%
Medical evidence	46.9% (24.1)	49%	
0 – 25%			26.0%
26 – 50%			32.0%
51 – 75%			27.0%
More than 75%			15.0%
Physical evidence	51.4% (25.1)	50%	
0 – 25%			22.3%
26 – 50%			28.8%
51 – 75%			29.2%
More than 75%			19.7%
Perpetrator gender			
Male	64.3% (21.1)	70%	
Female	29.9% (18.4)	25.5%	
Non-binary	5.8% (9.8)	0.0%	

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