
Between Participation and Justice: Best Practices for Trauma-Informed Research and the Experiences of Child Victims of Sexual Offenses in the Criminal Justice Process

An International Literature Review

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Abstract

Background

In 2001, Israel's Crime Victims' Rights Law came into force, establishing specific rights for minors who are victims of sexual offenses, including the right to protection, information, rehabilitation, and participation in the criminal justice process. Over the years, additional measures have been taken to strengthen the implementation of these rights, including the publication of the Chief Justice of the Israeli Supreme Court's directive on child testimony in 2017 and the expansion of the activities of the Minors' Representation Unit within the Legal Aid Department of the Ministry of Justice to represent minors who are victims of severe sexual offenses in criminal and related proceedings.

Despite these efforts, research and public authorities have pointed to difficulties in the actual realization of minors' rights in practice, due in part to the complexity of the criminal justice process, lack of information, and the complex relationships between victims and offenders. Against this background, the Ministry of Justice asked the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute to conduct a study examining the perceptions of minors and adults who are victims of severe sexual offenses and who are represented by the Minors' Representation Unit, regarding the criminal justice process, their experiences within it, their attitudes toward it, as well as the perceptions of their parents. The first stage of the study is an international literature review, presented in this report. It aims to establish a theoretical foundation for conducting trauma-informed research and to understand the experiences of minor victims of crime as participants in the criminal justice process.

Objective

The purpose of this literature review is to lay the groundwork for the broader study. Its objectives are: (a) to review best practices for the design and implementation of trauma-informed qualitative research, including research conducted with children and young adults who experienced sexual abuse in childhood and with their parents; and (b) to provide professional knowledge and information to policymakers and

practitioners in the “A Lawyer of My Own” program¹ regarding the experiences of minors who are victims of sexual offenses in the criminal justice process – before trial, throughout all stages of the proceedings, and at sentencing.

Method

A review of academic articles addressing best practices in trauma-informed, child-friendly qualitative research was conducted, alongside a review of academic literature examining the subjective experiences of minors in the criminal justice process, including the experiences of testimony and participation in the criminal justice process of child victims of sexual offenses. Data collection took place between June and November 2025.

Key Findings

Best practices for trauma-informed qualitative research adapted for child and young adult victims of sexual offenses and their parents. Qualitative research with children and young adults who are victims of sexual offenses, as well as with their parents, requires the adoption of two complementary approaches: trauma-informed research and child-friendly research. A trauma-informed approach is essential to balance attentive listening to participants’ experiences with minimizing the risk of re-traumatization, and to apply principles of safety, transparency, partnership, empowerment, and cultural and gender sensitivity throughout all stages of the research process – from planning to dissemination.

The review also highlights that children’s participation in research, beyond being a right enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, is a vital tool for generating authentic knowledge about children’s lives. Despite professional concerns, participation of children in research – including those from vulnerable groups – is generally perceived by children themselves as a beneficial and empowering experience, when accompanied by methodological adaptations appropriate to their age and developmental stage.

¹ The Lawyer of My Own program is a service provided by the Minors’ Representation Unit of the Legal Aid Department of the Ministry of Justice for legal representation of minors in civil proceedings.

Experiences and attitudes of minor and young adult victims of sexual offenses toward the criminal justice process. Participation of minors and adults who are victims of sexual offenses in the criminal justice process may be a difficult and prolonged experience, causing significant psychological stress and harming mental well-being. Victims expressed a need for clear information, preparation for the testimony stage, and a sense of being believed and heard. However, in practice, many experienced skepticism, aggressive cross-examination, and distress due to encounters with the offender. At the same time, the opportunity to tell their story of victimization may be perceived as providing relief and empowerment.

Professional literature emphasizes the importance of continuous professional accompaniment and support throughout all stages of the process – from reporting the event to sentencing – as this reduces distress, mitigates psychological harm, and strengthens the victim's sense of control over the process.

Recommendations for Research and Policy

Recommendations for conducting research with minor and young adult victims of sexual offenses and their parents. Qualitative research with children and young adults who have experienced sexual trauma should be grounded at all stages in a trauma-informed and child-friendly approach. A safe and nonjudgmental environment should be ensured, along with transparency and ongoing informed consent, confidentiality with a clear explanation of its limits, and the provision of a sense of choice and control to participants. Investment in training research teams is recommended, as well as ensuring access to professional support for researchers to safeguard their well-being. In research involving minors, particular care should be taken to obtain informed consent from both parents and children, to use diverse and experiential age and developmentally appropriate tools, and to ensure faithful representation of participants' voices in the final research report.

Recommendations for policy and the conduct of the criminal justice process. It is recommended to shorten the duration of criminal proceedings and reduce hearing postponements, alongside establishing an accessible information mechanism for victims and their families to reduce feelings of stress, uncertainty, and lack of control. Continuous professional accompaniment for minors who are victims of sexual offenses should be ensured throughout all stages of the process, and binding guidelines should be developed to limit harmful cross-examination.