

**Submission
No 208**

**INQUIRY INTO THE RECRUITMENT METHODS AND IMPACTS OF
CULTS AND ORGANISED FRINGE GROUPS**

Organisation: The Victorian Children of God - The Family International Survivors
Network

Date Received: 30 July 2025

Submission to the Legal and Social Issues

Standing Committee

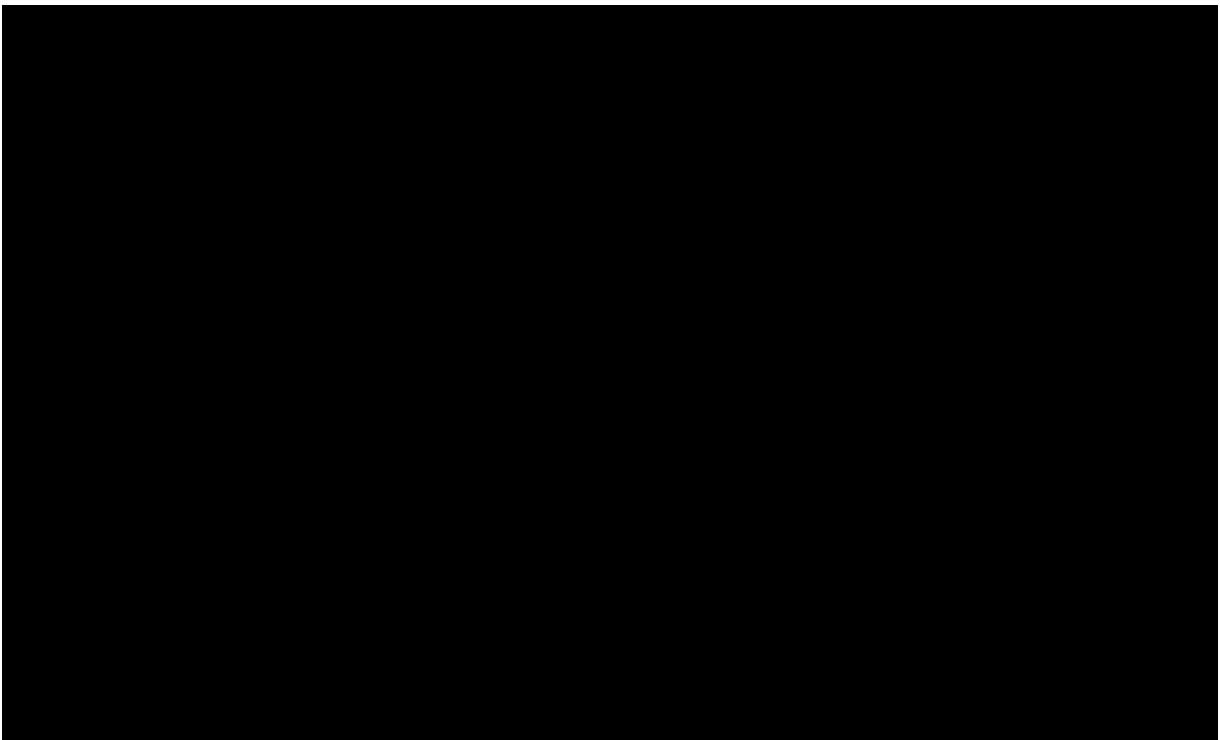
Inquiry into Cults and Fringe Groups in Victoria

Submitted By:

The Victorian Children of God /The Family International Survivors Network

Date:

July 30, 2025



1989 - Melbourne school home

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SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Strengthen Child Protection Frameworks

- **Mandatory Specialist Training:** Implement mandatory, comprehensive training for all Child Protection Services staff, Victoria Police, and relevant frontline professionals (educators, healthcare workers) on cult dynamics, coercive control, and the specific indicators of harm in high-control, insular groups.
- **Develop Clear Intervention Guidelines:** Create and distribute specific, actionable guidelines for identifying and intervening in situations where children are at risk within cultic environments, empowering professionals to act decisively despite the challenges of closed communities.
- **Improve Information Sharing:** Establish robust inter-agency and inter-jurisdictional protocols to track and protect vulnerable children who are moved between cult locations, ensuring no child is lost to jurisdictional complexity.

2. Enhance Support Services for Survivors

- **Fund Specialised Trauma Support:** Allocate dedicated, long-term funding for accessible and affordable trauma-informed psychological services specifically designed for survivors of cultic abuse, addressing Complex PTSD and the unique challenges of recovery.
- **Create Educational and Vocational Pathways:** Fund and develop specialised programs to help survivors obtain formal education, vocational training, and essential life skills (financial literacy, etc.) to overcome educational deprivation and achieve economic stability.
- **Provide Transitional Financial and Housing Assistance:** Establish a support fund to provide immediate, transitional aid for housing and basic necessities for survivors exiting cults with no resources or employment history.
- **Support Peer Networks:** Provide funding and resources to support the creation and operation of peer support networks, recognising the vital role of shared experience in the healing process.

3. Enact Legislative Reforms

- **Criminalise Coercive Control Beyond Domestic Contexts:** Enact a robust criminal offence for coercive control that is explicitly drafted to capture the social-psychological, emotional, and financial control exerted by leaders and groups in cultic settings.

- **Review and Broaden Child Abuse Definitions:** Review existing legislation to ensure definitions of "emotional/psychological harm" and "neglect" are explicitly interpreted to include the systemic and cumulative damage inflicted in cultic environments, including spiritual abuse, educational deprivation and medical neglect.
- **Establish Organisational Accountability:** Implement legal mechanisms to hold cultic organisations accountable for systemic abuse, including pathways for civil remedies and asset forfeiture, government contract / funding blacklisting, warning labels and federal referral, recommending the removal of charity status, ensuring institutions cannot evade responsibility.

4. Invest in Prevention and Public Awareness

- **Launch Public Education Campaigns:** Develop targeted public awareness campaigns about the dangers of high-control groups and coercive control, educating parents, youth, and communities on how to recognize manipulative recruitment tactics.
- **Implement School-Based Resilience Programs:** Integrate age-appropriate curriculum in all Victorian schools to educate children on human rights and to foster critical thinking, media literacy, and emotional resilience, to protect young people from manipulation.

5. Commit to Ongoing Research and Data Collection

- **Commission Research on Cult-Related Harm:** Fund government-commissioned, independent research to understand the prevalence of high-control groups in Victoria and the long-term health, social, and economic impacts on survivors and the general public" (i.e. the cost of inaction and the drain on Centrelink, etc.). This data is critical for developing effective, evidence-based policy and allocating resources appropriately.

6. Specific Calls for Justice

- **Inclusion in the National Redress Scheme:** We request that The Family International be added to the National Redress Scheme and that the Victorian Government agree to act as the "funder of last resort," as NSW has done, for all eligible survivors.
- **Extradition and Prosecution of Leadership:** We request that the Victorian and Australian Governments pursue all available avenues to extradite the current leaders of The Family International, Karen Zerby and [REDACTED] (last known location: [REDACTED]), to bring them to justice for crimes committed under their leadership.

Inquiry into Cults and Fringe Groups in Victoria

Group Submission: Victorian Children of God aka The Family International, Survivors Network.

I. Introduction and Background

- **1.1 Executive Summary:**

We, the Victorian Children of God (CoG), AKA The Family International, Survivors Network, stand united to share our harrowing experiences. Raised within a system of extreme coercive control, our childhoods were marked by systemic abuse, psychological manipulation, and profound deprivation. We endured the loss of education, social connection, and personal autonomy, leaving us with lifelong scars and immense challenges in rebuilding our lives. This submission is an urgent plea to the Victorian Parliament to acknowledge the unique and devastating impacts of such environments on children, to strengthen protective legislation, and to provide essential support for survivors like us, ensuring no child in Victoria suffers a similar fate. To this end, we present concrete recommendations for legislative reform, specialised survivor support, and mandatory training for frontline services.

- **1.2 About Our Group:**

Mission/Purpose: A collective of adult survivors who were raised in the Children of God/The Family in Victoria, dedicated to advocating for justice, support, and prevention for current and future generations of children impacted by cults.

Contact Details: Maria Esguerra and Dani Sorensen - Directors of the Olive Leaf Network support@au.oliveleaf.network and [info@cog-tfi survivors.org](mailto:info@cog-tfi-survivors.org)

Our Shared Experience: Our group represents individuals who were born and raised in the Children of God in Victoria and have a lived experience and shared understanding of its specific doctrines, practices, behaviours, culture and harms. We have provided specific statements.

- **1.3 Scope of Submission:**

This submission focuses on the unique and profound impacts of being raised within the Children of God communes in Victoria. Drawing on our collective experiences, we address the Inquiry's terms of reference related to harms to children, the adequacy of support services, and necessary reforms.

II. The Children of God (The Family): Our Childhood Experience in Victoria

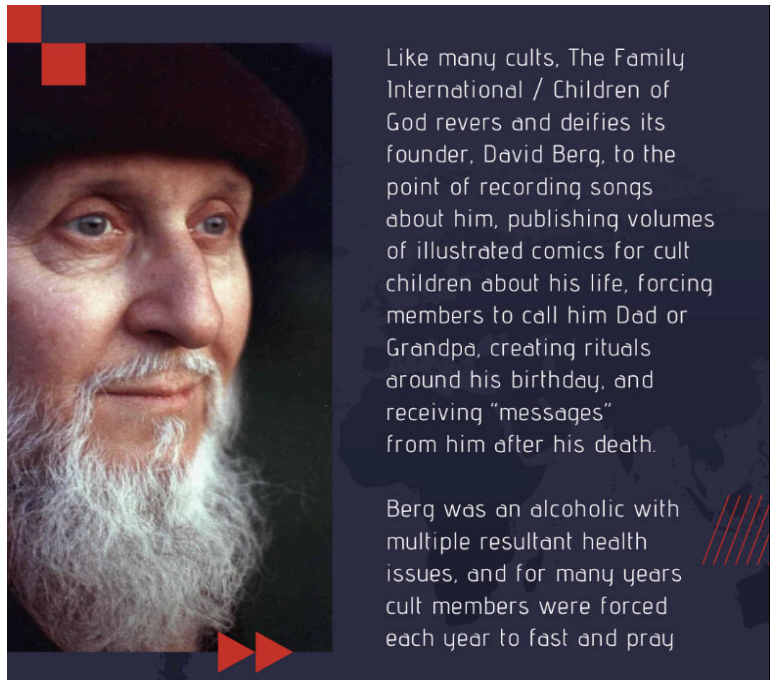
2.1 The Specific Nature of the Children of God (CoG/The Family):

The group, known successively as the Children of God, The Family of Love, The Family, and The Family International, was founded in Huntington Beach, California, in 1968. It began operating in Victoria in 1972 and The Family International remains current.

2.2 Ideology and Doctrine: The Framework of Childhood Harm

Image credits @cogtfsurvivors

We are discussing the doctrine of the Children of God because, in this specific context, **the distinction between belief and behaviour is functionally non-existent.** The group's ideology, as dictated through the "Mo Letters," was not a collection of abstract theological concepts for personal reflection. It was an operational manual that prescribed, mandated, and meticulously detailed the very behaviours that caused systemic harm to children. **We were required to read and memorise "The Word" constantly.**



Like many cults, The Family International / Children of God reveres and deifies its founder, David Berg, to the point of recording songs about him, publishing volumes of illustrated comics for cult children about his life, forcing members to call him Dad or Grandpa, creating rituals around his birthday, and receiving "messages" from him after his death.

Berg was an alcoholic with multiple resultant health issues, and for many years cult members were forced each year to fast and pray

These doctrines provided the explicit justification for abuse, dismantled traditional safeguards, and created a closed system where harmful actions were reframed as righteous. Therefore, to examine the behaviours without understanding the doctrines that commanded them would be to analyze the symptoms while ignoring the disease. The ideology is the root cause—the ideological architecture of the harm—and is essential to understanding why these specific patterns of behaviour occurred with such devastating consistency.



David Berg (referred to as "Mo" or "Father David"), in his prolific **"Mo Letters."** These teachings formed the framework of our upbringing, shaping every aspect of our reality and directly impacting our safety, development, and understanding of the world.

Key ideological and doctrinal elements that severely impacted children included:

"Mo Letters" as Absolute Authority: These voluminous letters were treated as divinely inspired, superseding traditional biblical interpretation and serving as the ultimate source of truth, policy, and moral guidance. For us children, this meant growing up in an environment where the arbitrary and often contradictory pronouncements of a distant leader dictated everything from our education and social interactions to the most intimate aspects of our lives, instilling an unquestioning obedience to a constantly shifting, authoritarian narrative.

"Flirty Fishing" (FFing) and its Corrosive Impact on Children's Safety and Understanding of Relationships: This doctrine encouraged female members to use sexual intimacy as a tool for proselytising and financial gain. While officially for adults, children were tragically exposed to, and sometimes directly involved in, its

practices. Children were taught to give the “look of love” and act in flirtatious ways and spend private time with “kings” or supporters. This perverse normalisation of sexualised behaviour as a transactional tool shattered our understanding of healthy relationships, boundaries, and consent. It created a deeply unsafe environment, particularly for girls, and fostered a warped perception of love and intimacy that has plagued us survivors with profound trust issues and relational difficulties throughout our lives.

Flirty Fishing

Fishing
Cult women gaining male converts, supporters, and earnings through prostitution.

Fish
Non-cult men recruited through prostitution as converts, financiers, and supporters.

Launched in 1974 by the cult founder, Flirty Fishing was widespread and many female members were expected to participate. Children born as a result were called "Jesus babies." The cult claims over 223,000 men were "fished" before the practice was mostly discontinued in 1987.

The Law of Love

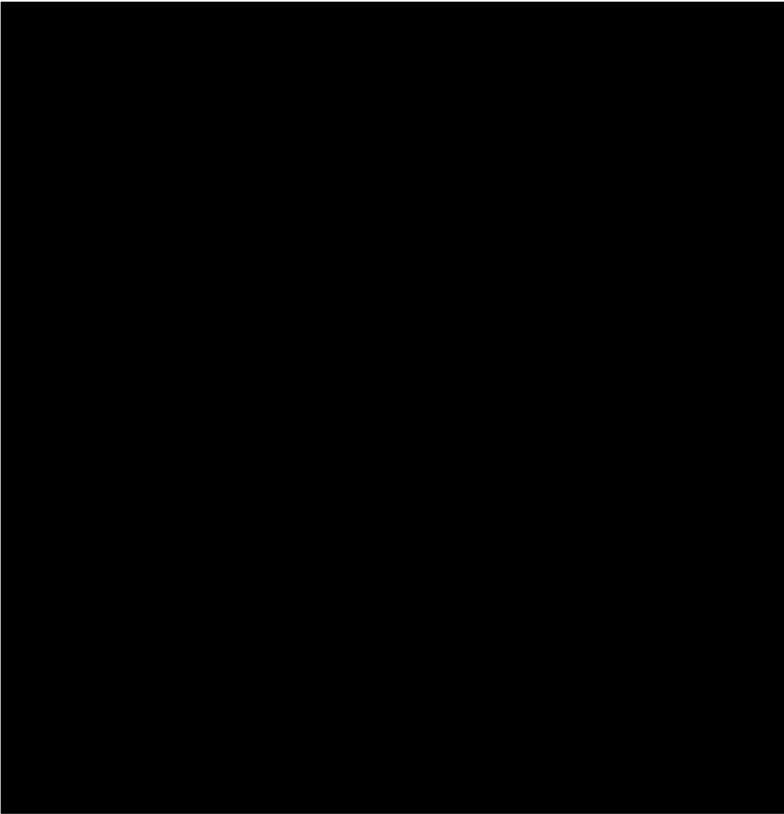
The cult taught that "God's only law is love" and that the Law of Love morally justifies all actions done "in love."

It was primarily used to justify sexual activity such as spouse-swapping and to sanction the sexual abuse of children and minors.

Published in 1974, the Law of Love was touted as a liberty for the spiritually superior. Cult members were taught they had transcended the Mosaic Law and grace through Jesus, to total freedom under the Law of Love. The cult claimed only those with true strength and love could be trusted with such liberty. It published comic versions of this teaching for children as well.

Doctrines on "Sharing" the "Law of Love" and the Erosion of Boundaries: The "Law of Love" was a concept that stated that nothing was a sin, and morally justified all actions as long as they were done in love," this included incest, pedophilia, and coercive rape.

"Sharing" extended beyond material possessions to encompass sexual partners, creating a chaotic and



boundary-less environment for adults that directly impacted children. The “free love” was in reality enforced polyamory and sex was used as a way to show your commitment and sacrifice to the cult.

It fostered a sense of communal ownership that often translated into a lack of personal space, privacy, and protection, leaving children vulnerable to various forms of exploitation and abuse under the guise of "love" and "sharing."

End-Times Prophecies and Apocalyptic Fear: We were steeped in an intense apocalyptic worldview,

constantly taught that "The System" (mainstream society) was evil and on the brink of collapse, and that only CoG members would be saved. This instilled deep-seated fear, anxiety about the future, and a profound sense of isolation from the outside world. Our bedtime stories involved stories of martyrdom and rape by the anti-christ soldiers. It discouraged critical thinking, preparation for a conventional future, and attachment to anything beyond the group, leaving us ill-equipped for life outside its confines.

"Revolutionary Youth" and Mission-Centric Lives: We were taught that we were part of a "Revolutionary" movement, destined to spread God's message and usher in the End Times. This often meant highly itinerant lives, constant "witnessing" (proselytizing), and being viewed primarily as instruments for the group's mission rather than as individuals with distinct needs and rights. The group's purpose entirely subsumed our identities, denying us the opportunity for personal development and independent thought.

Distrust of "The System" and Deceivers Yet True: A fundamental tenet was a deep-seated distrust and contempt for external authorities and institutions, including governments, police, traditional education, and healthcare. This ideology actively prevented us from seeking help when we were being harmed, fostering secrecy and loyalty to the group above all else. It isolated us from protective services and denied us access to the very systems designed to safeguard children, contributing directly to the perpetuation of abuse within the group.

These doctrines collectively created a childhood devoid of typical protections, boundaries, and opportunities, leaving us with complex and enduring psychological, emotional, and social challenges that continue to shape our lives today.

2.3 Structure and Authority: The Absolute Control Over Children's Lives

The Children of God (CoG), and later The Family International, operated under a rigidly hierarchical structure that vested absolute authority in its founder, David Berg (referred to as "Mo" or "Moses David"), and cascaded down through senior

Deceivers Yet True



The belief that it's right to lie to non-members, including law enforcement, to protect the cult and its leaders, practices, and interests.

A comic book was created for children. It taught how to lie to protect God's work, as the "ungodly and enemies" have no right to know the truth.



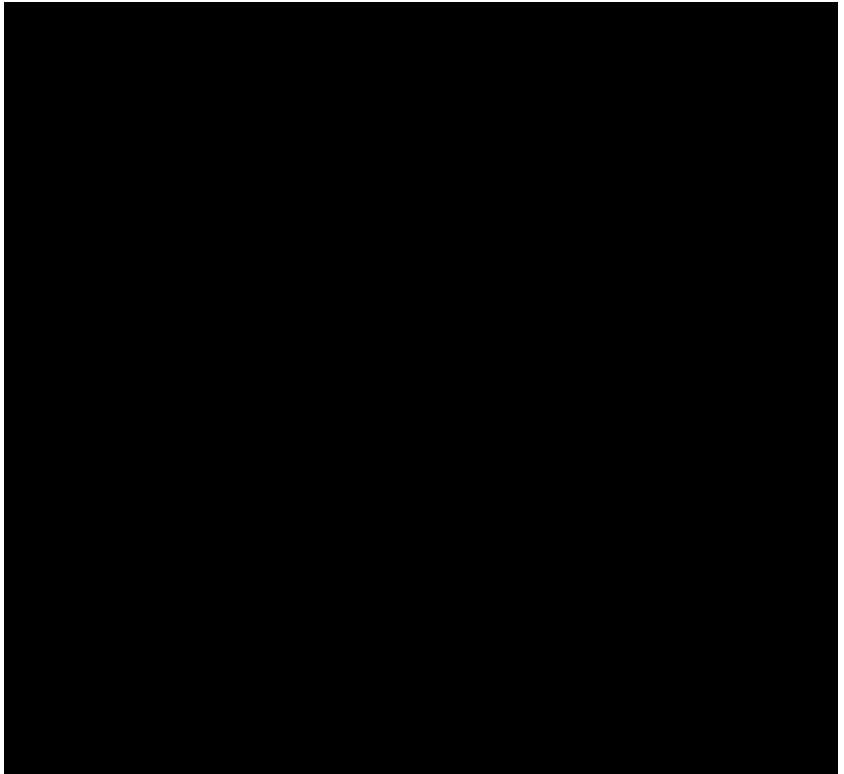
Authored by the cult founder in 1979, this doctrine advocated deceit by lies and half-truths. Its basis is the Bible verse, "By honour and dishonour, by evil report and good report: as deceivers, and yet true." (II Cor. 6:8, KJV)

The 1990 children's comic was a response to allegations of child abuse in the cult. It covers Bible stories about lying, some of which are fictional. It was used to prepare children for questioning by police and social workers.

members. For children raised within this system, this meant living under a pervasive and unquestionable control that dictated every facet of our existence, leaving no room for individual rights, autonomy, or recourse.

At the apex of this structure was **David Berg, a criminal with dark tetrad traits and a pedophile, whose authority was absolute and considered divinely inspired.**

His “Mo Letters” served as indisputable law and his pronouncements, no matter how erratic or harmful, were obeyed without question by all members. For children, this meant our very lives were subject to the whims and often destructive ideologies of a distant, unseen leader, with no mechanism for appeal or protection.



Beneath Berg, a clear chain of command enforced his will:

Regional and Local Leaders (Kings/Queen [Berg and Zerby], Visiting Servants, Area Shepherds/Home Shepherds): These senior members held immense power over the daily lives of families and individual children. They were responsible for implementing Berg's doctrines and making decisions that profoundly impacted children's welfare, including:

Placement and Movement: Children could be moved between various "colonies" or "families" (households) without warning or consultation, often separating them from parents, siblings and/or primary caregivers. Leaders made these decisions entirely, with no regard for a child's attachment needs or preferences.

Family Planning: In the early years, contraceptives were forbidden. Later, while not banned, their use was shamed. Combined with doctrines like "sharing," many of us children were born with no knowledge of our paternity.

Relationships: Leaders could approve or disapprove of relationships, including those between adults, which directly impacted the stability of children's living situations and

our access to consistent caregivers. Often, our parents were broken up when they became too close, as their relationship was a threat to the cult.

GO FOR THE GOLD



Gold

No birth control used, showing full trust in God. Receives full rewards, peace, and blessing.

Some birth control used, after seeking God's approval. Receives less peace and blessing.



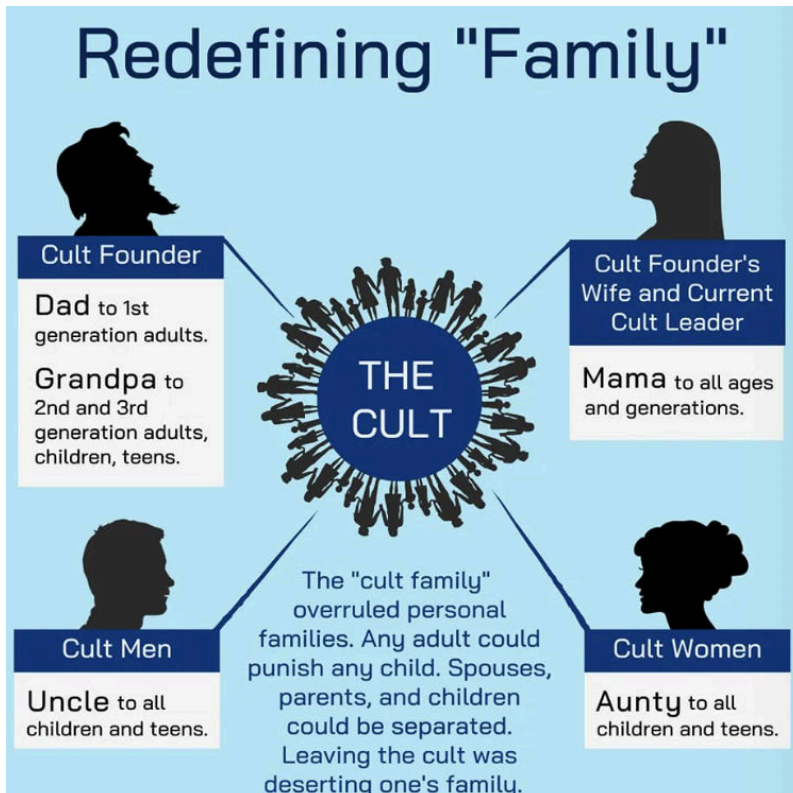
Silver



Bronze

Birth control used, without God's approval. Receives the least peace and blessing.

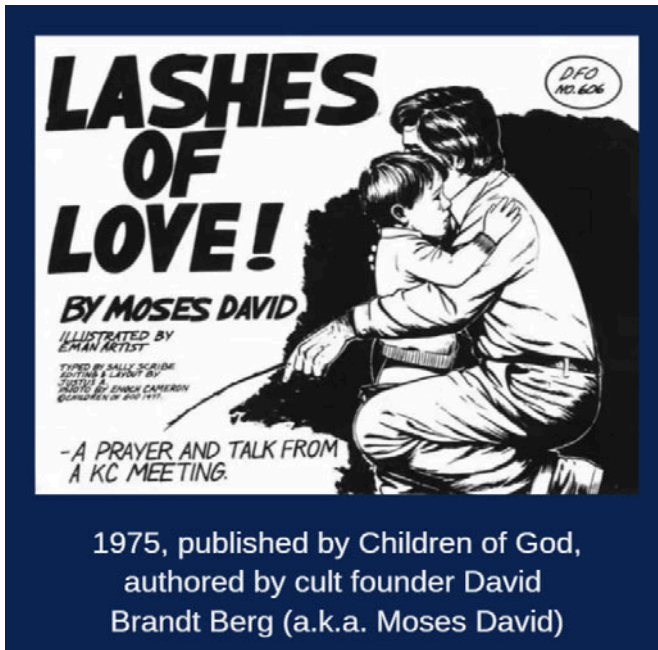
Published in 1995, this cult edict claimed to allow "free choice" but by spiritualizing the issue and threatening loss of peace, blessing, and standing before God, most members felt they had **no choice**.



Education and Daily Routines: Leaders dictated whether children received any education, often opting for highly insular, group-centric learning that omitted essential mainstream subjects and critical thinking skills. Formal schooling was absent and there were no qualified teachers. In some cases, other children led educational sessions. Leaders controlled daily schedules, chores, and the extent of contact with the

outside world.

Destruction of Family and Parental Authority Subsumed: Even biological parents within the CoG system had their authority significantly diminished, subject to the directives of senior leaders and Berg's teachings. This meant parents often felt powerless to protect their children from harmful practices dictated by the leadership or they actively participated in enforcing these practices out of fear,



1975, published by Children of God, authored by cult founder David Brandt Berg (a.k.a. Moses David)

indoctrination, or belief. Children learned that parental protection was conditional upon adherence to the group's rules, further eroding our sense of safety and trust.

Discipline: Disciplinary practices, often harsh and arbitrary, were enforced by these leaders, with children having no avenue to report abuse or seek protection from outside authorities. These included beating with a range of implements.

For example, we had a board that had drilled holes in it to create airflow, silence restrictions, isolation, public humiliations.

Lack of Accountability and Recourse for Children:

Within this closed system, children had no means to report abuse, neglect, or dissatisfaction. The concept of external authorities ("The System") was demonized, making it unthinkable for a child to seek help from police, child protection services, or even sympathetic outsiders. Complaints

were often met with punishment, spiritual shaming, or dismissal, fostering a culture

of silence and absolute obedience. This absence of accountability created a fertile ground for unchecked power and systemic harm.

This rigid structure ensured that children were entirely dependent on and vulnerable to the dictates of the group's leadership. It stripped us of our fundamental rights, denied them agency over our own lives, and created an environment where our well-being was consistently secondary to the group's mission and the absolute authority of its leaders.

2.4 Daily Life and Environment as a Child: A Childhood Defined by Deprivation and Control

For children raised within the Children of God (CoG)/ The Family in Victoria, daily life was a stark deviation from any semblance of conventional childhood. It was an existence meticulously controlled, marked by constant surveillance, and fundamentally isolated from the protective and developmental norms of mainstream society.

Communal Living: A Labyrinth of Shared Space and Absent Privacy

Our homes were not private family units but often crowded communal households, sometimes referred to as "colonies" or "homes." This communal living, in Victoria, frequently involved moves to local **communes, interstate or international**, tantamount to labor and sex trafficking for the cults' needs. It meant a perpetual lack of autonomy, personal space, and privacy. Bedrooms were often shared with multiple siblings or unrelated children, and often adults, where nudity and sexual interactions were normalised. Resources were collective, from food to clothing, blurring personal boundaries and fostering an environment where individual needs were often secondary to group necessities.

This constant proximity and lack of personal retreat, coupled with the ever-present watchfulness of adults, created an atmosphere of **constant surveillance**. Every action, word, and emotion was potentially observed and judged, instilling a deep-seated fear of transgression and eroding any sense of individuality or personal autonomy. The frequent, often abrupt moves between different Victorian

locations, and sometimes beyond, prevented the formation of stable friendships, consistent routines, or a lasting sense of belonging to any one place or community.

The Absence of Childhood Normality: A Stolen Innocence

Our upbringing was devoid of the milestones and experiences considered normal for children.

Conventional schooling was largely absent or severely curtailed.

Education was idiosyncratic, often based on internal CoG materials, with a heavy emphasis on Berg's doctrines and the group's mission. We lacked exposure to a broad curriculum, critical thinking skills, and the socialisation and self-development that comes with attending public or private schools.

Access to mainstream media was

strictly forbidden or heavily filtered, denying us knowledge of current events, diverse perspectives, or popular culture. This deliberate information control ensured our worldview remained entirely insular and shaped by CoG's narrative. Consequently, forming **peer relationships outside the group was virtually impossible**, fostering an intense reliance on, and insularity within, the group's internal dynamics. We did not participate in typical recreational activities such as

organised sports, birthday parties, or school excursions, further isolating us from the external world and the joy of a free, unburdened childhood.

The Role of Children: Miniature Adults in Service of the Mission

Within CoG, children were not primarily seen as individuals requiring protection, nurturing, and development, but rather as integral, albeit miniature, adults in service of the group's

mission. We were often viewed as **"revolutionary youth"** – we were named **"Junior Endtime Teens,"** a special generation destined to participate in the End Times. This perception translated into children being tasked with **adult responsibilities far beyond our years**, including:

Fundraising and Missionary Work: Children were frequently utilised in "witnessing" efforts, either directly proselytizing or passively generating sympathy and donations. Many times we were handing out highly sexualised posters in the streets asking for donations. This exposed us to complex adult interactions, harassment and often placed us in vulnerable situations, without the capacity to understand or consent to the risks involved.

The "Child Bride" Narrative: While not universal, the ideology surrounding sexualisation and early partnering within the group, particularly in earlier phases,

THE POWER OF LABELS

Sheep Receptive to the cult's message.

Not receptive to the cult's message. **Goat**

Wolf Snake Out to hurt the cult or its members.

From childhood, cult members were taught not to associate with anyone labeled a goat, wolf, or snake, even if the person was a friend or close family member.

instilled a precocious and often dangerous awareness of adult sexual dynamics, treating children not as children but as potential partners, blurring ethical boundaries.

Household Labour: We were expected to contribute significantly to the upkeep of communal households, undertaking demanding chores that often replaced any opportunity for play or education.

Caregiving: Older children were often made responsible for the care of younger children, sometimes functioning as primary caregivers without adequate support or supervision, mirroring adult roles without the necessary maturity or training.

Isolation from Mainstream Society: A World of "Us vs. Them"

A cornerstone of CoG ideology was a profound and deliberate **distrust of "The System"** – encompassing all external governments, laws, institutions, and mainstream society. This was not merely ideological; it translated into physical and social isolation. We were taught that "The System" was corrupt, evil, and soon to be destroyed, instilling a deep-seated fear and suspicion of anyone outside the group. This

SATAN'S SYSTEM

The System The world and society outside the cult, considered under the devil's control.

Non-members, not to be trusted as long as they remain outside the cult.

Systemites

This worldview was central to the cult. It featured in cult materials from preschool onwards. All things from the System including music, media, news, books, education, and medicine, were unclean unless specifically approved by the cult.

deliberate isolation profoundly impacted our worldview:

It fostered an "us vs. them" mentality, making it incredibly difficult to trust outsiders or understand conventional social norms. It prevented children from accessing vital services (education, healthcare, child protection) that could have offered alternative perspectives or escape routes.

It denied us the opportunity to develop independent critical thinking skills, as all information was filtered through the group's anti-establishment lens. It left us utterly unprepared for life outside the group, creating significant challenges in later navigating education, employment, and social relationships in the broader world.

Our childhoods in CoG were, therefore, a unique and deeply damaging experience, characterised by a systematic stripping away of normal developmental opportunities and a forced immersion into an insular, controlled world defined by adult responsibilities and ideological rigidity.

The 1992 Raids on the Communes

For those of us who were children in the Victorian and NSW homes in 1992, the day the police and social workers came was not a rescue. It was an attack.

When the Committee asks why those investigations failed, why hundreds of children could be assessed only to be sent straight back into the arms of our abusers, the answer is this: you were looking for individual victims, but you found a unified army of indoctrinated children.

As a group, we want to explain why you saw no abuse and why we were all returned.

1. We Weren't Being Rescued; We Were Being Attacked

According to a Community Services Victoria (CSV) spokesman, the children were living in extremely cramped quarters, adolescent girls were sleeping in the same rooms as married couples, some of the children were living without their parents and without adequate supervision, there was pornographic Children of God literature on the premises, and the children did not attend school (Writer 1992, p. 39).

From our earliest memories, we were all taught that the outside world — "The System" — was profoundly evil. Police, government workers, and doctors were "Systemites," agents of Satan sent to destroy God's chosen people.

So when our doors were broken down across the country, we did not feel relief. We felt a collective, abject terror. This was the prophesied persecution our leaders had warned us about our entire lives. The raids weren't a sign that our world was wrong; they were absolute proof that our leaders were right. Our fear was not of our caregivers; it was of the uniformed strangers who were taking us from everything we knew.

2. We Were Coached and Ready for You

We had all practiced for this day. The drills were a regular part of our lives. We were given scripts and taught exactly how to respond to questions from authorities in the "deceivers yet true." We knew the answers long before you asked.

"Are you happy?" *"Yes, we're all very happy here."*

"Does anyone hurt you?" *"No, never. This is our family and we love each other."*

"Do you want to go home?" *"We are home. Please let us go back to our family."*

We sang songs for you about how happy we were. We presented a united, smiling front. We were not allowed to be interviewed by child safety officers or social workers. We were told they were "wolves." We laughed and praised God when a



By 1990, the threat of authorities taking children born and raised in COG-TFI into protective custody on reports of child sexual abuse was growing. COG-TFI co-founder and current leader ██████████ commissioned a top COG-TFI editor, ██████████ (known in the cult as ██████████) to write a 32-page comic book entitled "Deceivers, Yet True!—2Cor.6:8" to teach COG-TFI children to lie to authorities. This publication was classified as DO (Disciples Only), a secret publication inaccessible to non-members.

This publication became the basis of practice drills and role plays children in COG-TFI were forced to participate in, as they were coached and trained to lie to law enforcement, social workers, and courts about the abuse they suffered and the realities of life in COG-TFI.

██████████ left COG-TFI in 1990; in 2005, he wrote an apology to second-generation COG-TFI survivors and recounted how the "Deceivers Yet True" comic came about:

child safety officer was in a serious car accident. The only person who interviewed a few of us was a psychologist, [REDACTED], who gave a glowing report and seemed to be working for the cult. It was not long after that he lost his registration as a psychologist due to drug abuse, unprofessional conduct and flaws in character.

We weren't having conversations; we were in a battle for our souls. Our testimony was our weapon. We felt a shared sense of pride in our loyalty. We were all doing exactly what God and our leaders demanded of us.

3. Being "Deceivers" Was Our Sacred Duty

We were taught, and we fully believed, that deceiving outsiders to protect the group was not a sin. It was a righteous act of faith. We were not covering up abuse; we were protecting God's sacred work from His sworn enemies.

When we told you that everything was wonderful, in our minds it was not a lie. Rather, it was our **collective testimony**. We were loyal soldiers defending our kingdom. The only shame would have been in telling the truth, in betraying our family, each other, and our God.

4. We Had No "Normal" to Compare It To

Your investigation assumed we understood that the way we lived was wrong. None of us did. Our reality was the only one we had ever known.

Systemic neglect, harsh corporal punishment, and a complete lack of personal and/or sexual boundaries were not "abuse" to us; they were simply "life." These things were presented to us as normal, necessary, and even holy. We could not report abuse

“

I was 12 years old and I'm down the streets going, "We've been accused, we're not abused!" We were told to chant that, after the raids. So I suppose they look at us and think, 'Oh, well, the kids want to be there. They're not abused.' But they don't realise that we didn't know what abuse was.

MARIA ESGUERRA

Psychologist born into the Children of God



Interview episode out now

LET'S TALK ABOUT

SECTS

because we lacked the words and the concepts to identify it as such. It was impossible for us to describe a reality we had never experienced.

The Aftermath: Your Failure Was Our Group's Victory

The most devastating part is what happened when you sent us all back.

For our leaders, it was the ultimate victory. For us, as children, it felt like a triumph. We had faced the enemy, stood strong together, and won. God had protected us. The System was weak and foolish, just as we'd been told.

But this "victory" was a tragedy. Your failure to see past our conditioning gave our leaders a renewed sense of invincibility. It proved their methods of control worked perfectly. The failed raids didn't just send us back to years more of abuse; they locked the doors behind us even tighter, deepening our isolation and condemning us to a childhood that you had the power to stop, but failed to understand.

III. The Profound and Lasting Harms on Children

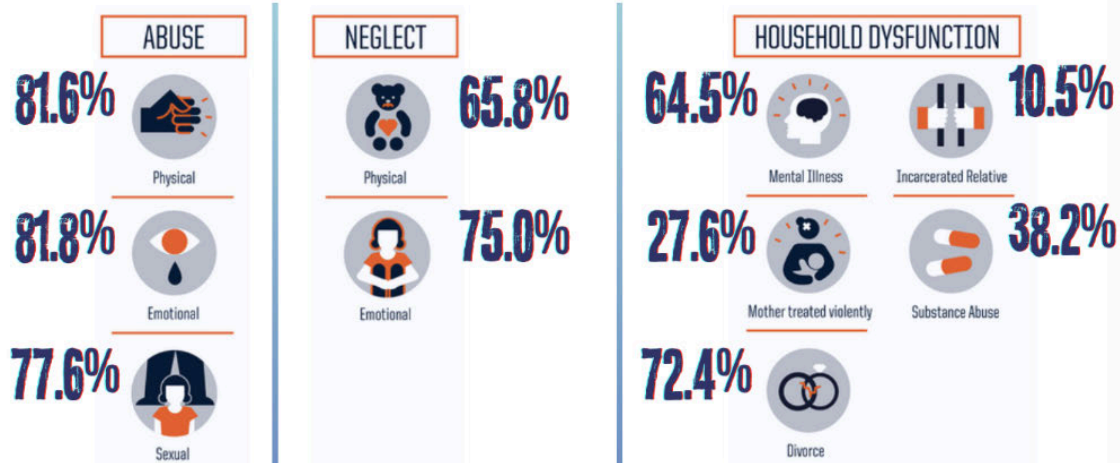
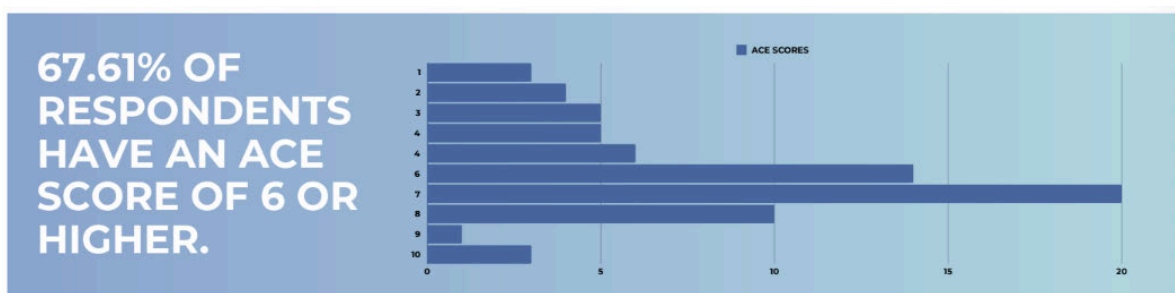
3.1 Abuse and Neglect: The Systematic Erosion of Childhood Safety

Within the Children of God (CoG), the daily reality for children was often permeated by various forms of abuse and neglect, not as isolated incidents, but enabled or even normalised by specific doctrines and the group's insular structure. These harms left profound and lasting damage. The graphs below are from the attached study, Esguerra, 2025. Based on a survey of 76 survivors, majority (70) being the Children of God, this study has been submitted to the Journal of Traumatology.

Sexual Abuse: A Pervasive and Doctrinally Enabled Betrayal

It is imperative to acknowledge the **widespread and systemic nature of child sexual abuse within the Children of God**. This was not an unfortunate side-effect but a direct consequence of, and tragically facilitated by, core doctrines that blurred ethical and sexual boundaries.

The direct and indirect exposure to these doctrines cultivated an environment where children's safety was not protected, leading to the pervasive trauma of sexual abuse. This trauma continues to haunt us survivors with feelings of betrayal, profound trust issues, and complex psychological wounds. The sexual grooming inherent in this environment also conditioned us, leaving us vulnerable to further abuse and exploitation even after we departed. This vulnerability is reflected in a recent study that found that more than 77.6% of former members experienced Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) and more than 46% later endured intimate partner violence. Moreover, countless testimonies reveal that young women are frequently trafficked in the sex industry after leaving these communities.



Physical Abuse: Discipline Defined by Severity and Arbitrary Control

Corporal punishment was a sanctioned and frequent method of "discipline" within CoG. This often escalated beyond reasonable limits, becoming **severe and arbitrary physical abuse**. Children were subjected to beatings, spankings with objects, and other forms of physical pain, often for minor infractions or perceived disobedience. The justification was rooted in interpretations of biblical passages advocating for corporal punishment, but in practice, it served as a brutal tool of


control. This constant threat of physical violence instilled deep fear, learned helplessness, and a profound anxiety that shaped our responses to authority and conflict for years to come.

Emotional and Psychological Abuse: The Constant War on the Self


Perhaps the most insidious and pervasive form of harm was the unrelenting emotional and psychological abuse. This included:

- **Constant Psychological Manipulation and Gaslighting:** Our perceptions of reality were routinely distorted. We were told that our feelings were wrong, our memories inaccurate, or our thoughts sinful if they deviated from the group's narrative. This systematic invalidation eroded our ability to trust our instincts and judgments.
- **Shame, Guilt and Fear:** We were constantly bombarded with messages of shame for perceived failures, guilt for "worldly" desires, and intense fear.

Backsliders



Backslider -- A person who leaves the cult, thus turning one's back on God. Considered enemies, backsliders were distrusted, demonized, and often cut off from other cult members, including family.



God's Vomit -- Another term coined by the cult leader to scorn those leaving. It is derived from the Bible verse, "because thou art... neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth." (Rev. 3:16, KJV)

Leaving the cult opened people up to vitriol and at times public slander. The cult founder published hateful lies and rants against former members. He led the cult in praying against and cursing former members, including praying for death and misfortune.

In 2002, the current cult leader published advice on how to pray against former members who are family members. The cult also introduced the Vandari, a breed of demons it claims influences former members and others who speak against the cult.

This fear extended to literal "demons" and "hitch-hiking spirits" lurking outside the group, the impending destruction of "The System," and the terrifying prospect of being "lost" from God's favour or the group's salvation. This fear was a powerful mechanism of control, binding us to the group through terror.

- **Suppression of Individual Thought and Emotion:** Critical thinking

was discouraged; obedience was paramount. We were taught to suppress dissenting thoughts, "negative" emotions, and personal aspirations that did

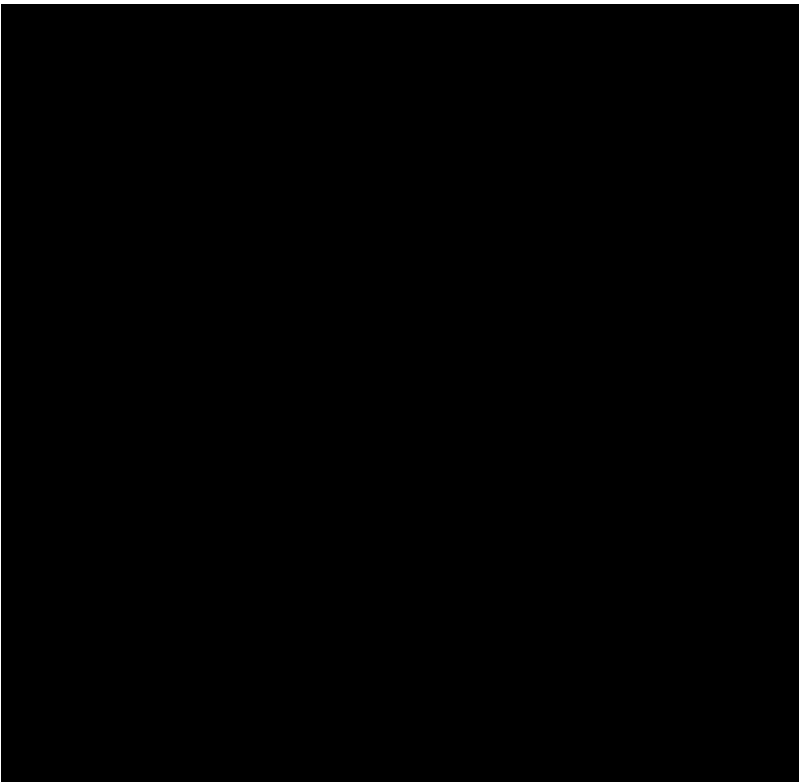
not align with the group's mission. This led to a profound inability to identify and express our true feelings, leaving us with underdeveloped emotional regulation skills and a fractured sense of self.

- **Shunning and Excommunication:** An individual who leaves or dissents is labeled a "backslider" to justify the punishment. He or she is then subjected to complete social isolation, even by their closest family. This is followed by a deliberate campaign of defamation and abuse to destroy character and serve as a powerful warning to any remaining members. Adults carried out this defamation campaign on children as young as 14, naming them as demons such as "Vandari", with devastating consequences.

Systemic Gender-Based Discrimination and Misogyny

CoG operated as a deeply patriarchal and misogynistic system where gender determined one's value and role.

For Women and Girls: We were systematically objectified and valued primarily for our sexuality and reproductive capacity. Doctrines like "Flirty Fishing" institutionalized sexual exploitation, teaching us that our bodies were tools for the



group's mission. We were taught to be submissive to male authority at all levels, our bodily autonomy was non-existent, and our identities were subsumed by our roles as servants, sexual partners, and mothers.

For Men and Boys: While seemingly in a position of power, men and boys were also harmed by this rigid gender structure. We were indoctrinated into a model of toxic masculinity, pressured to

be dominant and sexually aggressive. Any deviation from this prescribed role—such as showing emotional vulnerability or a lack of sexual interest—was met with shaming and correction. This taught us to view women as objects and to suppress our own humanity, leading to profound difficulties in forming healthy, respectful relationships later in life.

Racial Discrimination

David Berg's teachings were permeated with racist and antisemitic rhetoric. While CoG presented itself as a global "family," its ideology was underpinned by prejudice that caused specific harm to members of color and indoctrinated all children with racist worldviews.

- **Erasure of Cultural Identity:** For survivors of color, any connection to our racial or cultural heritage was actively suppressed and replaced with the cult's monolithic identity. We were subjected to racist stereotypes and language within Berg's "Mo Letters," which fostered an environment of internalized racism and a diminished sense of self-worth.
- **Indoctrination into Prejudice:** All children, regardless of race, were taught

to see the world through a prejudiced lens. This further entrenched our "us vs. them" mentality and equipped us with a distorted, racist understanding of the world, making genuine integration into a multicultural society a significant challenge upon exiting.


Discrimination Against Homosexuality

The cult's stance on homosexuality was one of extreme and violent condemnation.

Homosexuality and Racism


David Berg, the cult founder, taught members to associate homosexuality with Africa and African people, whom he described in racist and degrading terms.

In 1981, Berg wrote that homosexuality "has now swept across the civilised World, from uncivilised, savage, native Africa, across Europe, North America & South America.... it has virtually taken the World over today until it seems like the World is just full of sodomites, which is one reason God is now going to have to destroy the World again!"



Literal Demonization of Gays

David Berg framed homosexuality as demonic possession, writing in 1990, "We were sitting in a restaurant next to a table of homosexual men dressed as women. I am sure female devils get into these guys. They don't realise they are playing with something more powerful than they are, the spirit world! I'm convinced they become demon-possessed by female devils which makes them more female even than they expected to be, a total perversion that God has hated even from the beginning! May God deliver us from this sort of sickening delusion! It is a perversion."




Homosexuality was not simply discouraged; it was demonized as a perversion, a sign of demonic possession, and one of the ultimate sins of "The System."

Calling for Gays to Be Murdered

David Berg repeatedly stated that gays should be killed and condemned modern governments for failing to do so.

In 1985, Berg wrote, "Why don't we call it what it really is, sodomy!--The vile, filthy, dirty sin of sodomy that the Devil cooked up to destroy man ... & for which God cursed & wiped out whole cities & whole civilisations, whole peoples, whole empires!"

Berg wrote in 1988, "That's one thing [God] held against some of the kings of Israel, that they didn't destroy all the Sodomites! They were to




excommunication. There was no possibility of a safe or authentic LGBTQ+ identity within the group. This ceaseless psychological torment left many of us survivors with severe anxiety, depression, a pervasive sense of worthlessness, and complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD).

Psychological Terror: For any of us questioning our sexuality or harboring same-sex attractions, the psychological torment was immense. We lived in constant terror of being discovered, which would lead to public shaming, aggressive exorcism rituals, isolation, and ultimately,

slaughter them, destroy them, kill them! That's the only cure of that kind of wickedness & sin. God didn't have too much faith for their repentance or their changing, He just said 'Kill'm'!

Now instead of the governments & the people slaughtering the Sodomites, the Sodomites are slaughtering their people through their filthy diseases like AIDS & their filthy wickedness & sin! Sodomy is ... being made legal now in many of the so-called 'developed' countries. They've developed, all right, into monsters!-- Filthy, wicked, sinful, iniquitous monsters, 'brute beasts created to be destroyed!-- 2Pet.2:12. And God's going to destroy them pretty soon."



3.2 Systemic Financial Exploitation and Welfare Fraud

We knew the group needed money, and we were the tools to get it. Our mothers were told to lie to the government, to tell Centrelink they were "single parents" even when they were living with partners in the commune. This was a trick to get more money. We were their children on paper, but the money that was supposed to be for us never felt like ours.

Even when we were moved around—to different houses in Victoria, to other states, or even sent overseas—the group often kept collecting government payments for us as if nothing had changed. At the same time, we were out on the streets every day, witnessing-racketeering, raising cash donations for charitable causes that were untrue and cash in hand that was hidden from the government. These finances

were a secret that allowed the group to take welfare money it shouldn't have received.

Despite all this money coming in, we lived in poverty. We wore worn-out, secondhand clothes and often didn't have enough basic necessities or proper shoes. The money that the government gave for our food, our health, and our education was stolen from us. It was used to fund the cult's operations. The group's control was absolute. We saw what happened when people were kicked out—young mothers being forced to hand over their last government payment when excommunicated, leaving them and babies homeless with nothing.

The financial fraud wasn't just a crime against the government; it was the direct reason for our neglect.

3.3 Developmental and Educational Deprivation: The Wounds of a Stolen Future

Beyond active abuse we children often suffered from various forms of neglect, as the group's priorities – mission, outreach, and internal cohesion – often superseded the fundamental needs of its youngest members:

- **Educational Deprivation:** As detailed previously, formal education was severely curtailed, often consisting of irregular, unaccredited instruction focused on Berg's teachings and writing and other religious indoctrination.
- **Poor Nutrition and Basic Personal Care:** While not always intentional, communal living and shifting financial priorities often resulted in inconsistent or inadequate nutrition. Basic personal care, hygiene, and access to appropriate clothing could also be neglected due to resource constraints or a focus on "spiritual" rather than "worldly" comforts.
- **Medical Neglect:** A deep distrust of "The System" extended to conventional healthcare. Medical needs were often downplayed, ignored, or treated with non-professional "spiritual" methods and were considered due to "spiritual sins." People who were sick were often shunned and rebuked. This led to preventable illnesses, untreated conditions, and a general disregard for

physical health that had long-term consequences, including some children who are no longer alive. Many of us live with illnesses and disabilities.

Together, these patterns of abuse and neglect created a childhood of pervasive trauma, leaving deep and enduring scars that continue to impact our mental, emotional, and physical well-being decades after leaving.

Cognitive Distortion: A Skewed Lens on Reality

Constant and pervasive indoctrination profoundly impacted our cognitive development, hindering our ability to think critically and discern truth. We were taught to accept David Berg's "Mo Letters" and the group's narrative as absolute, unquestionable truth, irrespective of logic or external evidence. This fostered a mindset where:

Critical thinking was actively suppressed: Questioning authority or doctrine was deemed disloyal or even "demonic," punishing independent thought.

Truth was relative to the group's agenda: Information from "The System" was dismissed as evil or deceptive, preventing us from learning about much less evaluating conflicting viewpoints.

A skewed worldview was ingrained: Concepts like freedom, justice, human rights, and even love were redefined within the group's narrow, often self-serving, framework. This resulted in a distorted understanding of mainstream society and an inability to trust external information, making it incredibly difficult to navigate reality after leaving.

Social and Emotional Stunting: The Scars on Our Inner Worlds

The insular, high-control environment of CoG severely stunted our social and emotional development, leaving many of us with lasting challenges:

“What aspects of your life do you believe growing up in the cult adversely impacted?”

EDUCATION 90.8%	SLEEP 67.1%	USE OF DRUGS AND ALCOHOL 63.2%
SHAME 88.2%	PERMANENT PHYSICAL DISABILITY 15.8%	SEXUAL HEALTH 67.1%
FERTILITY 21.1%	ABILITY TO TRUST OTHERS 85.5%	PHYSICAL HEALTH 55.3%
HOME LIFE 78.9%	CULTURAL HERITAGE 59.2%	FINANCIAL SECURITY 84.2%
OPPORTUNITIES 86.8%	FAITH 69.7%	LIFE CHOICES 81.6%
WELLBEING 85.5%	PARENTING 67.1%	FAMILY 78.9%
POTENTIAL 75%	SEXUALITY 73.7%	WORK 75%
CONFIDENCE 92.1%	FRIENDSHIPS 78.9%	LEGAL ISSUES 34.2%
SENSE OF SELF 96.1%	EMOTIONS 85.5%	HOMELESSNESS 21.1%
RELATIONSHIPS 94.7%	MENTAL HEALTH 90.8%	

- **Difficulty Forming Healthy Attachments:** Frequent moves, the "sharing" doctrine that fragmented family units, and the conditional nature of "love" within the group prevented the formation of secure, consistent attachments. This often manifests as difficulties with intimacy, trust, commitment, and healthy relationship boundaries in adulthood.
- **Challenges in Understanding Boundaries:** The communal living, lack of privacy, and often blurred personal and sexual boundaries within the group meant we never learned appropriate personal boundaries. This leaves us vulnerable to exploitation and struggling to establish healthy limits in our adult lives.
- **Impaired Emotional Regulation:** Emotions deemed "negative" or "worldly" were often suppressed, shamed, or punished. We were not taught healthy coping mechanisms or how to identify and process complex emotions. This leads to difficulties in emotional regulation, including emotional numbness, explosive outbursts, or the inability to express needs.

- **Navigating Social Situations Outside the Cult:** Lacking exposure to mainstream social norms, humour, and unwritten rules of interaction, we as survivors often struggle with basic social cues, feeling alienated and awkward in conventional settings. This contributes to social anxiety and difficulty forming meaningful connections.

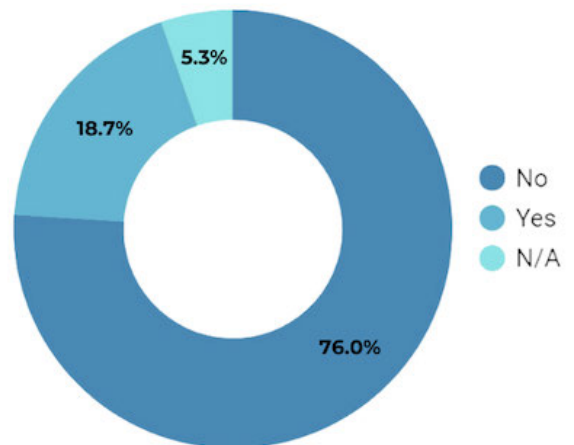
Lack of Formal Education: A Barrier to Integration and Opportunity

The pervasive **lack of conventional, accredited formal education** is one of the most immediate and tangible consequences of a CoG childhood. Homeschooling, if it occurred at all, was inconsistent, often rudimentary, and heavily biased towards religious (i.e., CoG'S) indoctrination. Core academic subjects like mathematics, science, history, and critical literature were ignored and neglected, our fear of the "System" overlay with this severe educational deprivation. From research on primarily CoG participants, only 18.7% completed a high school education in the cult.

The consequences of this educational deprivation are severe and enduring:

- **Limited Future Opportunities:** Without formal qualifications or a foundational education, we face immense barriers to pursuing higher education, securing stable employment, or entering skilled professions. This often perpetuates economic vulnerability and limits personal growth.
- **Challenges with Integration:** A lack of general knowledge and academic skills creates significant hurdles in understanding and participating in mainstream society, from navigating bureaucratic systems to engaging in informed civic discourse. Many of us opt for self employment or are un/under employed

COMPLETED HIGH SCHOOL CERTIFICATE IN THE CULT



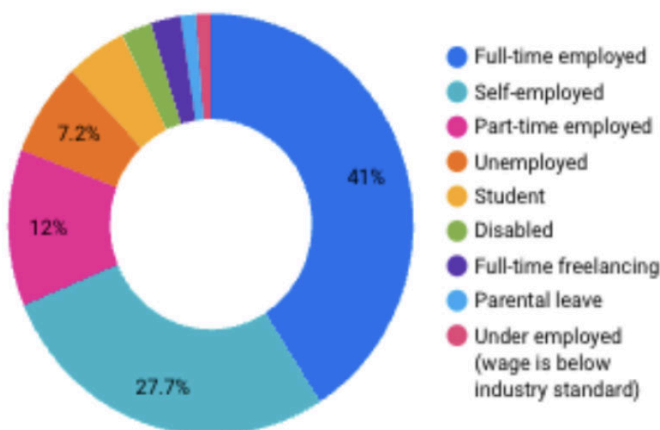
- **Feelings of Inadequacy:** Many of us survivors internalise a sense of intellectual deficiency or inferiority, despite our innate capabilities, due to the gaps in our education.

Lost Childhood: An Irreversible Void in Identity Formation

Perhaps the most poignant and irreversible loss is that of a "normal" childhood. We were denied the fundamental experiences of play, exploration, carefree innocence, and the organic process of self-discovery that is crucial for healthy identity formation. Furthermore, we had no access to our local culture, citizenship, personal heritage, or extended family—elements that are essential for building an identity. Instead, our childhoods were characterised by:

- **Adult Responsibilities:** We were often thrust into adult roles, taking on caregiving, missionary work, or financial burdens, skipping the vital stages of development.
- **Ideological Imposition:** Our identities were shaped by the group's doctrines, leaving little room for individual personality, social experimentation, or life aspirations.
- **Absence of External Social Norms:** Without interaction with mainstream peers or mentors, we lacked external validation and perspective that help children understand their place in the broader world.

This profound loss impacts our very sense of identity and belonging. We as survivors often feel like "aliens" in the mainstream world, carrying a deep yearning



for the childhood that was stolen from us, as we struggle to forge an authentic self and find a true sense of belonging in a society we were deliberately taught to distrust.

3.4 Transnational Exploitation and Human Trafficking: A Childhood in Forced Transit

Our experience within the Children of God was not confined to Victoria; it was a transnational existence of perpetual transit. This constant movement of children was not benign travel but a deliberate and core operational strategy of control and exploitation that, under current Australian and international law, constitutes human trafficking and modern slavery.

Children were frequently moved between communes in Victoria, interstate, and across international borders with little to no notice. This constant dislocation served multiple exploitative purposes:

- **Forced Labour and Financial Exploitation:** We were trafficked for the explicit purpose of labour. As children, we were the primary workforce for the cult's fundraising arms, forced to engage in daily "witnessing" (proselytizing and soliciting donations) on the streets of foreign cities. This work directly aligns with the definition of forced labour under Australia's *Modern Slavery Act 2018*. The money we raised was not for our benefit; it funded the leaders' lifestyles and the cult's expansion while we often lived in poverty.
- **Sexual Exploitation and Grooming:** The movement of children, particularly young girls, exposed us to new environments where doctrines like "Flirty Fishing" were practiced. We were placed in situations that facilitated grooming and sexual exploitation, with our vulnerability magnified by our isolation in foreign cultures where we did not speak the language or understand the norms.
- **Deepening Isolation and Control:** Each move served to sever our ties to any potential external support systems, such as extended family in Australia who may have been able to intervene. As detailed in the testimonies, this erased our connection to our own national and cultural heritage. It made us completely dependent on the cult for survival, reinforcing the group's absolute control. This is a hallmark tactic of human traffickers: isolate the victim to ensure compliance.
- **Evading Scrutiny and Justice:** The constant movement of both children and adult perpetrators was a highly effective method for evading law enforcement and child protection agencies. By moving individuals across state and international borders, the cult created a jurisdictional black hole. An

act of abuse that began in Melbourne could continue in Manila or Mexico, making investigation and prosecution by any single national authority nearly impossible. The frequent use of aliases, as documented in our experiences, further compounded this, making it impossible to track individuals.

If a secular corporation were found to be moving young Australians overseas, confiscating their passports, and creating conditions of dependency and exploitation, it would trigger an immediate and serious investigation into human trafficking. We ask the Committee why a different standard is so often applied when these actions are performed under the shield of 'religious' or 'missionary' activity.

3.5 Long-Term Impacts on Adult Survivors: The Enduring Wounds of a Traumatized Childhood

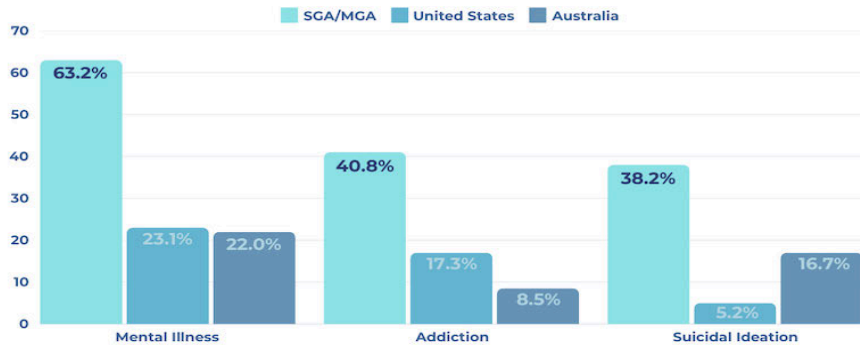
For adults who survived being raised in the Children of God (CoG), the departure from the group marks not an end to our struggles, but the beginning of a lifelong journey to heal from the deep and multifaceted impacts of a childhood stolen by extreme abuse—adverse childhood experience, coercive control and abuse. These long-term consequences manifest across psychological, social, and practical domains, profoundly affecting our ability to thrive in mainstream society.

Complex Trauma (C-PTSD): A Pervasive Psychological Landscape

The relentless, pervasive, and often subtle forms of abuse experienced within CoG rarely cause simple PTSD. Instead, we survivors overwhelmingly grapple with **(C-PTSD)**. This manifests as a constellation of severe and enduring psychological impacts, including:

- **Suicidal Ideation:** Significantly higher levels than the average population.
- **Chronic Anxiety and Depression:** A pervasive sense of dread, hopelessness, and emotional dysregulation.
- **Dissociation:** Episodes of feeling detached from one's body, thoughts, or reality, as a coping mechanism developed during overwhelming trauma.
- **Panic Attacks:** Sudden, intense bursts of fear or terror, often triggered by seemingly innocuous situations that recall past threats.

MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS OF GROWING UP IN A CULT: GENERAL POPULATION COMPARISONS

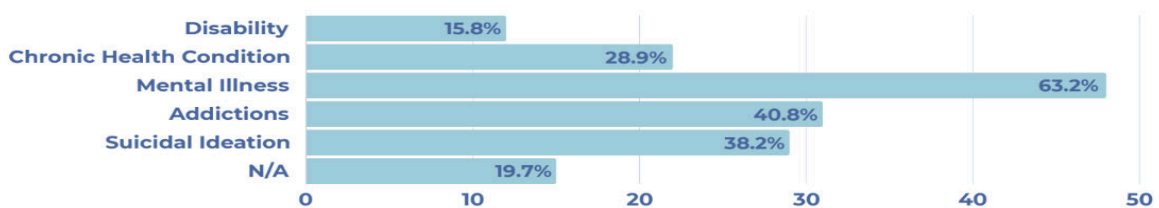


- **Profound Difficulties with Trust and Intimacy:** The pervasive betrayal within the group, coupled with distorted understandings of relationships, makes it incredibly challenging to form secure attachments, trust others, or engage in healthy, intimate relationships.
- **Fragmented Sense of Self:** A struggle to understand who we are outside the cult's imposed identity

Active Identity Suppression: The Struggle to Forge an Authentic Self

Having had our identities meticulously shaped by CoG's doctrines and roles from a formative age, designed explicitly to homogenise individuals into the group identity, we as survivors face a profound and arduous struggle to forge an identity separate from the cult's indoctrination.

MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH IMPACTS



We must actively dismantle deeply ingrained beliefs, question fundamental assumptions about life and self, and often grieve the person we were prevented from becoming. This process is long, painful, and often involves navigating feelings of emptiness, disconnection, confusion, lack of self-worth, and a sense of being perpetually "behind" our peers.

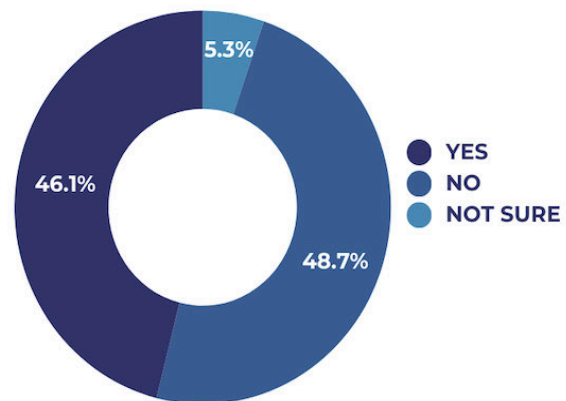
Difficulty with Basic Life Skills: Navigating an Alien World

The deliberate isolation and educational deprivation experienced in CoG left us ill-equipped for the practical demands of mainstream life. Many face significant challenges in areas most take for granted, including:

Vulnerability to Ongoing Abuse and Lack of Understanding Bodily Autonomy and Rights:

Indoctrinated to view our bodies as instruments of the group's will, often subject to control, surveillance, or exploitation, many of us survivors struggle to understand personal boundaries, consent, and our right to make autonomous decisions about our own bodies. For example, 46.1% CoG survivors stated that they experienced domestic violence post-cult, with 5.3% unsure.

"Did you experience domestic violence after leaving the cult?"



Managing Finances: A lack of financial literacy, experience with budgeting, and understanding external economic systems leaves us vulnerable to financial hardship and scams.

“

I know a lot that are in jail now for doing exactly what was done to them growing up. And the government assumes that they should know the laws... If you hear hate speech your whole life, and then you come out and say it not in that cloistered community, how can you be responsible?

MARIA ESGUERRA

Psychologist born into the Children of God



Interview episode out now



Obtaining and Maintaining

Employment: Limited formal education, a lack of conventional work experience, and difficulties with social norms in professional settings create immense barriers to stable employment.

Understanding Mainstream Social

Norms and Laws: Basic social or professional cues, unwritten rules of interaction, and cultural references are

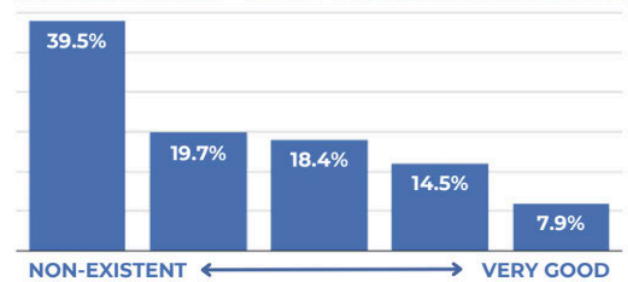
often alien, leading to social awkwardness, isolation and a feeling of being an outsider. Sometimes we are not even aware of laws, or what criminal behaviour or civil injustice is.

Accessing Government and Professional Services: Distrust of "The System," coupled with unfamiliarity with bureaucratic processes, makes it difficult to navigate essential services like healthcare, housing, legal aid, or social welfare programs.

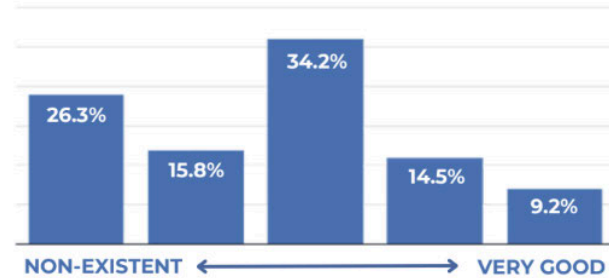
Family Estrangement: The Ongoing Pain of Fractured Bonds

The insidious nature of cult involvement often leads to the fracturing of family relationships. In many cases, the emotional toll of family estrangement is compounded by the deep conflict we as survivors feel toward our parents—the very individuals responsible for bringing us into the cult environment. We are often forced to confront both the betrayal of parental duty and, in some cases, direct abuse, while simultaneously navigating an intense fear of further isolation if we sever these relationships. For some of us, the desire for connection compels attempts to preserve familial bonds at great emotional cost; for others, the rupture is irreversible, leading to the painful loss of the parental relationship altogether.

RELATIONSHIP WITH BIOLOGICAL FATHER

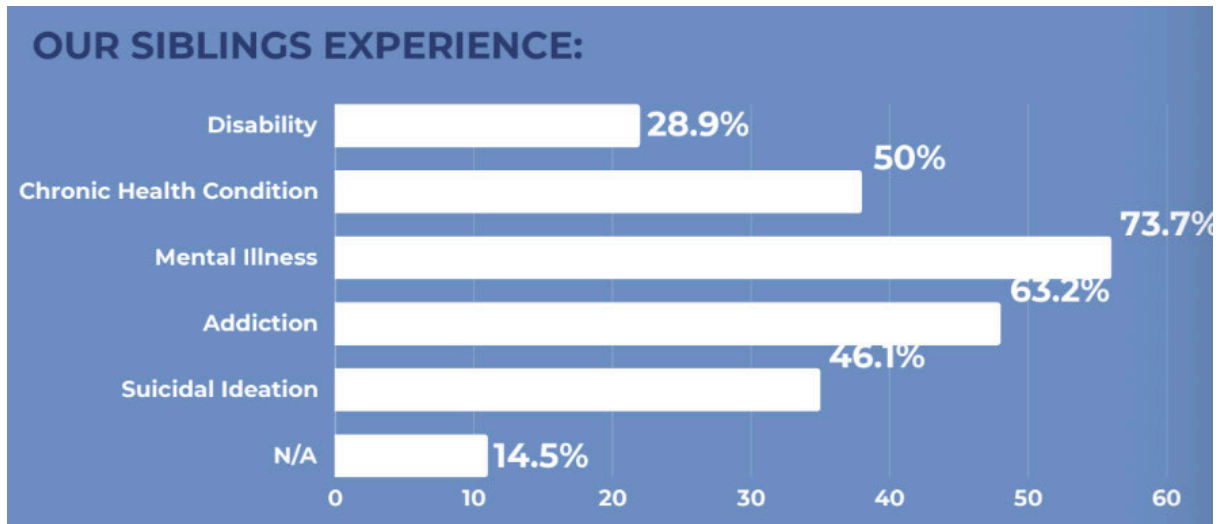


RELATIONSHIP WITH BIOLOGICAL MOTHER



Beyond parents, sibling relationships—though often shaped by a shared experience of victimisation—are rarely straightforward. Differences in age, different fathers or even unknown, living circumstances, coping strategies, and exposure to specific forms of trauma frequently cause divergent understandings of our time in the group. Secrecy, shame, and the psychological conditioning instilled by the cult can all contribute to mistrust, miscommunication, and emotional distance, even in the

absence of bad faith. In some cases, siblings become unintentional reminders of the trauma itself, making closeness difficult despite a common history. On one hand, many of us are carers and supporters for our siblings with disabilities, health conditions, and severe addictions.



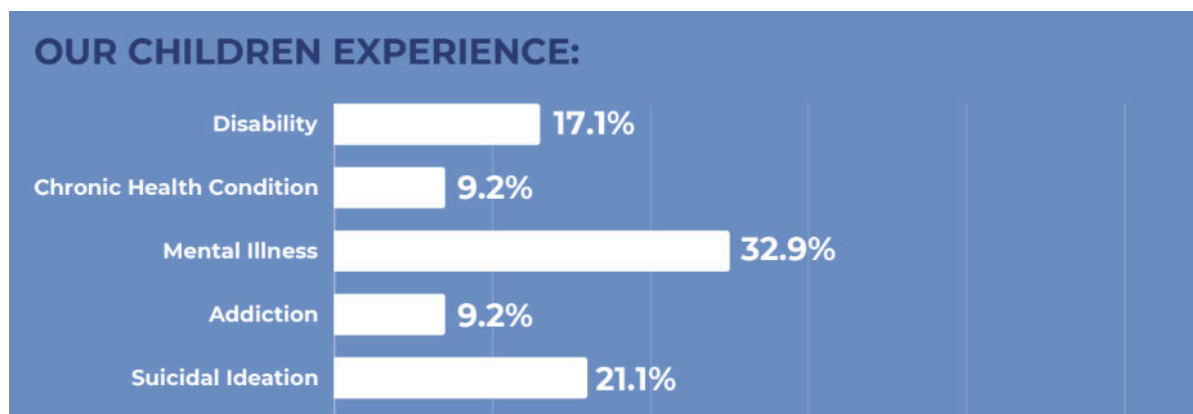
These layers of relational rupture leave us survivors grieving, not only the family we lost, but also for the family we never had the chance to become. Cult structures are often designed to undermine authentic familial bonds, severing the very support systems that might have sustained us in the aftermath. Combined with ongoing disconnection from the broader community, many are left without any meaningful source of understanding or support. Without stable familial or communal ties, we are often left to carry the weight of our experience alone.

Intergenerational Trauma: The Cycle's Shadow

Perhaps most tragically, the unaddressed impact of cultic abuse carries the potential for **intergenerational trauma**. Wrestling with our own C-PTSD, attachment issues, and skewed understandings of healthy relationships, we may inadvertently pass on patterns of anxiety, emotional dysregulation, or difficulty with trust to our own children.

Without adequate support and healing, the cycle of harm, even if not directly through cult involvement, can subtly echo through future generations, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive survivor support to break this pattern.

It is important to note that our children are still children/ young adults, as the majority of us SGA were born in the 1970-1880's, so it may be why there were reported relatively low levels of addiction. In relation to disability statistics, there are challenges with gaining official diagnosis and support due to the high cost, lack of resources and knowledge, so the actual number is likely higher.



In summation, those of us who were raised in this cult, carry a lifelong burden of complex trauma and practical challenges. Our struggles are a testament to the profound and enduring harm inflicted by coercive control, underscoring the critical need for targeted, long-term support and societal acknowledgment to facilitate our healing and integration.

IV. Challenges in Seeking Justice and Support

4.1 Barriers within the Legal System: An Impenetrable Maze for Justice

For us survivors of the Children of God (CoG), seeking justice or redress through the legal system has historically been, and often remains, an arduous and frequently insurmountable challenge. The unique nature of cultic abuse and the systemic failures within the legal and judicial systems, to acknowledge its complexities have created significant barriers, leaving many feeling re-victimised by the very system designed to protect them.

Proof of Abuse: The Insidious Nature of Unseen Wounds

One of the most formidable barriers lies in the **difficulty of proving historical abuse, particularly psychological, emotional, and systemic forms of neglect.**

Unlike physical injuries, the deep wounds of coercive control, gaslighting, and emotional manipulation leave no visible scars or easy paper trails. Within the insular environment of CoG:

- **Anonymity:** CoG members used aliases that changed often. Many, including children, had unofficial names. There were also strangers (kings/donors) who were given unfettered access to children.
- **Lack of External Records:** Abuses occurred behind closed doors, often with no external witnesses, police reports, or medical documentation. The group actively discouraged contact with "The System," ensuring that evidence was internalised and kept hidden.
- **Victim Blaming and Internalised Guilt:** We as children were often groomed, manipulated, or indoctrinated to believe that sex was godly and pure, that we were at fault, or that reporting would lead to dire spiritual consequences, making it incredibly difficult to come forward, let alone testify credibly years later.
- **Memory Fragmentation:** The profound trauma experienced, along with the constant anxiety, gaslighting and confusion can lead to dissociation and fragmented memories, further complicating presentation of a coherent, legally robust narrative.

Statutes of Limitations: Justice Denied for Decades

Historically, **statutes of limitations** presented an almost insurmountable barrier for survivors seeking justice for childhood abuse. Many forms of abuse, particularly sexual abuse, often only come to light or are fully processed decades after they occur. Having spent our formative years in a controlled environment, we survivors often emerge into mainstream society with profound psychological damage that delays our capacity to seek legal recourse. Currently, none of us have.

- **Past Limitations:** For many years, strict time limits on when legal action could be commenced meant that by the time we were emotionally and

psychologically able to confront our past, the window for justice had irrevocably closed. Many perpetrators are now deceased.

- **Noted Improvements, but Gaps Remain:** While there have been welcome and significant improvements in recent years, particularly in Victoria and federally, extending or removing limitations for child sexual abuse claims, many other forms of abuse (e.g., severe psychological abuse, forced labour, sex trafficking, financial exploitation) may still face such constraints. The fight for comprehensive justice continues.

Absence of Clear Legal Definitions: "Cult" and "Coercive Control"

A critical systemic barrier is the **absence of clear and actionable legal definitions for "cult" or "high-control group" in Australian law**, and the historical lack of robust legislation specifically targeting **coercive control** in non-domestic contexts.

- **"Cult":** Without a legal definition, the unique dynamics of cultic abuse—indoctrination, undue influence, and systemic social-psychological manipulation are often unrecognised or shoehorned into existing criminal categories (e.g., fraud, assault) which fail to capture the full scope of the harm. This makes it difficult for law enforcement, prosecutors, and the judiciary to understand and effectively respond to cult-specific abuses.
- **"Coercive Control":** While Australian states have recently introduced laws against coercive control in family violence contexts, its application to cultic relationships or group scenarios (which are often pseudo-familial but extend beyond traditional domestic partnerships) remains a significant gap. The psychological torment, isolation, and control that define cultic environments are not adequately addressed by existing laws.

Jurisdictional Complexity: A Transnational Maze

The **transnational nature of the Children of God** and the frequent movement of members between various locations in Victoria, interstate, and internationally, present immense **jurisdictional complexity**.

- **Crossing Borders:** Abuses might have occurred across multiple Australian states or even other countries, creating a bureaucratic nightmare for legal

proceedings. Which jurisdiction's laws apply? Which police force has the authority?

- **Tracing Perpetrators:** Perpetrators may have moved to different jurisdictions, making them difficult to locate or prosecute years later. The cult continues to provide a safe haven for them to hide.
- **Evidence Collection:** Gathering evidence from multiple locations, under different legal systems, is incredibly challenging and resource-intensive, further deterring us survivors from pursuing justice.

These systemic barriers within the legal and law enforcement frameworks have, for too long, shielded perpetrators and organisations like CoG from accountability, leaving us without the justice we deserve and perpetuating a cycle of unaddressed harm. It also puts members of the wider society at risk, as perpetrators likely continue to abuse.

4.2 Inadequate Support Services: A System Unprepared for Cult Trauma

Even when we as survivors of the Children of God (CoG) manage to overcome the immense internal and legal barriers to seek help, we frequently encounter an external system of support services that is largely unprepared for the unique complexities of cult-related trauma. This inadequacy perpetuates the suffering of us survivors and highlights a critical gap in current public health and social welfare provisions.

Lack of Specialisation: A Gap in Understanding

The general mental health and social support systems in Victoria (and indeed, across Australia) often **lack a nuanced understanding of cult dynamics and the specific trauma experienced by cult-raised children**. Mainstream therapists, counsellors, and social workers, while well-intentioned, may not be equipped to recognise or effectively address:

- **Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD)** rooted in pervasive coercive control and systemic abuse.
- The profound **identity confusion** stemming from growing up in a high-control, insular environment.

- The unique challenges of **disentangling indoctrinated beliefs** from personal values.
- The impact of **spiritual abuse (or ideological abuse, for those cults that are not religious in nature)** and the specific challenges of trusting others after systematic betrayal within a supposedly loving community.
- The societal stigma and fear often associated with cults, which can lead to misdiagnosis or an inability to fully grasp the survivor's narrative.

While some highly specialised services exist (e.g., Cult Consulting Australia, Cult Information and Family Information Services, Blue Knot Foundation for complex trauma), they are few and often unavailable.

Funding and Accessibility: A Scarcity of Lifelines

There is a significant **insufficiency of dedicated funding for specialised services** tailored to cult survivors. This lack of investment means:

- **Limited Availability:** The few existing specialised services struggle to meet demand, leading to long waiting lists and limited capacity.
- **Cost Prohibitive:** Many services operate on a fee-for-service model (as noted in search results for Cult Consulting Australia), which can be financially prohibitive for survivors who typically emerge from cults with little or no financial resources and significant employment challenges. Publicly funded options are scarce.

This dearth of accessible, specialised support creates a major obstacle to healing and successful integration into mainstream society for many CoG survivors.

Stigma and Misunderstanding: The Invisible Wall

Despite growing awareness, significant **societal stigma and pervasive misunderstanding** still surround cults and those who are or were in a cult. When we as survivors disclose our experiences, we often face judgment, disbelief, or minimization from friends, family, co-workers, and even professionals. This can lead to:

- **Re-traumatisation:** We as survivors may be met with questions like "Why didn't you just leave?" or "How could you believe that?" which invalidate our experiences and reinforce feelings of shame and isolation.
- **Reluctance to Seek Help:** Fear of judgment or not being believed can prevent us survivors from reaching out for necessary support, deepening our isolation and prolonging our suffering.
- **Difficulty in Advocating for Themselves:** The complex narrative of cult survival can be challenging to convey to those who lack a foundational understanding, making it difficult for us as survivors to articulate our needs effectively. It can even leave us open to ongoing abuse, as perpetrators see us as easy targets.

National Redress Scheme: A Step Forward, But Not Without Gaps

The **National Redress Scheme for Institutional Child Sexual Abuse** has been a crucial and welcome development, offering a pathway to acknowledgment and compensation for survivors. However, for Children of God survivors, specific challenges and gaps remain:

- **"Funder of Last Resort" Issues:** While the Scheme aims to hold institutions accountable, the highly mobile and often deliberately decentralised nature of The Family International/Children of God can make it difficult to identify a responsible institution with assets. This often means reliance on "funder of last resort" arrangements, where state governments step in to provide redress when the institution cannot or will not pay. As noted by Knowmore Legal Service, there have been calls for the Victorian Government (and other states) to make the same commitment as NSW to ensure all CoG survivors can access redress, as it is "unfair that victims in some states have no access to redress." Inconsistent application of these "funder of last resort" mechanisms creates inequity.
- **Proof Challenges:** As discussed in Section 4.1, the lack of formal records, the clandestine nature of abuse, and the psychological impact on memory can make proving abuse to the Scheme's standards challenging for some CoG survivors.

- **Scope Limitations:** The Redress Scheme primarily covers child *sexual* abuse within institutions. While this is critical, it may not adequately address the full spectrum of systemic harms experienced by CoG-raised children, such as severe neglect, forced labour/modern slavery, and/or profound psychological and emotional abuse where sexual abuse was not the primary or only factor.

In conclusion, while strides are being made, the current support landscape for cult survivors, particularly those raised in environments like CoG, is fragmented and insufficient. Without targeted, trauma-informed, and adequately funded services, many survivors remain in a prolonged state of pain, confusion, loss, and partial recovery, vulnerable to further abuse, have caring responsibilities and extremely difficult lives likely to be cut short, while bearing the heavy cost of a system that is yet to fully comprehend and respond to our unique needs.

V. Recommendations for the Victorian Government: A Blueprint for Protection and Healing

Our collective experience as survivors of the Children of God unequivocally demonstrates the profound and lasting harm inflicted on children within high-control, cultic environments. The existing frameworks and services in Victoria are currently inadequate to prevent, identify, intervene, and support those impacted by such groups. We therefore submit the following urgent recommendations to the Legal and Social Issues Standing Committee, urging the Victorian Government to act decisively to protect future generations and support those still grappling with the devastating aftermath.

5.1 Strengthening Child Protection Frameworks

To effectively safeguard children vulnerable to and within cultic environments, a fundamental overhaul of current child protection approaches is required:

- **Uphold Section 8 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC):** In reference related to the child’s right to identity and access cultural connections. Children in cults are NOT different from other citizens.
 - Article 8.1: States must respect and preserve a child’s identity. This includes not only official identifiers such as name and nationality, but also the child’s cultural and family connections.
 - Article 8.2: If a child is unlawfully deprived of any element of their identity (e.g., taken from their family, denied access to their name or nationality), the state must provide appropriate assistance and protection to re-establish that identity.
- **Mandatory Training:** Implement comprehensive, mandatory training for all Child Protection Services staff, Victoria Police, and other relevant frontline professionals, including educators, healthcare and social workers, legal practitioners as well as pastoral counselors. This training must specifically cover cult dynamics, indicators of undue influence, the nuances and impact of coercive control in group settings, and the specific harms to children in high-demand, insular groups.
- **Clearer Guidelines:** Develop and disseminate specific, actionable guidelines for identifying and intervening in situations where children are at risk within cultic environments. These guidelines should address the unique challenges of proving harm in closed communities and empower professionals to act.
- **Improved Information Sharing:** Facilitate and improve inter-agency and potentially inter-jurisdictional information-sharing mechanisms to effectively track children moving between cult locations, both within Victoria and across state/international borders, ensuring that no child falls through the cracks of jurisdictional complexity.

5.2 Enhanced Support Services for Survivors

Addressing the deep and complex needs of survivors requires dedicated, specialised, and accessible support:

- **Dedicated Funding for Specialised Trauma Support:** Allocate significant, long-term funding for trauma-informed psychological and therapeutic support services specifically designed for survivors of cults, particularly those who were born or raised within such groups from childhood. This funding must ensure services are affordable or free, and available statewide.
- **Funding for training of psychologists and mental health providers:** There is a significant lack of qualified professionals with understanding of cultic abuse and the aftereffects.
- **Educational and Vocational Pathways: Cult survivors get less support than people leaving jail!** Fund and develop specialised programs to assist survivors in obtaining formal education, vocational training, and essential life skills necessary for successful integration or reintegration into mainstream society. This includes literacy, numeracy, digital literacy, learning basic life skills, and financial management. People coming out of prison get access to more support!
- **Transitional Financial Assistance:** Provide transitional financial aid, including support for housing and basic necessities, for survivors struggling with the immediate challenges of integration and establishing independent lives, recognising their often limited financial resources and lack of employment history.
- **Peer Support Networks:** Actively support the establishment and ongoing funding of peer support groups for cult survivors. Recognising the unique value of shared experience in healing and validating trauma, these networks are vital for long-term recovery and community building.

5.3 Legislative Reforms

Current legislation is insufficient to address the full spectrum of harms inflicted by high-control groups. Legislative reform is crucial:

- **Strengthening Legislation on Coercive Control:** Advocate for and enact a specific, robust criminal offence of coercive control in Victoria. This legislation must be drafted broadly enough to explicitly capture the psychological, emotional, social, and financial control exerted by cult leaders

over both children and adults in order to ensure that perpetrators can be held accountable for patterns of non-physical abuse.

- **Review of Child Abuse Definitions:** In Victoria, child abuse definitions are found across several key pieces of legislation, primarily:
- **Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 (Vic):** This is the primary civil child protection legislation. Section 3 defines "child abuse" as including:
 - Any act committed against a child involving a sexual offence or a grooming offence (under the Crimes Act 1958).
 - **The infliction of physical violence or serious emotional or psychological harm.**
 - **Significant neglect of a child.**
 - Misconduct involving any of the above.
 - It also states that a child is "in need of protection" if they have experienced, or are at risk of, "significant harm" as a result of physical injury or sexual abuse, or if their emotional or intellectual development, or physical development or health, is significantly harmed, or if they are abandoned or experience parental incapacity.
- **Family Violence Protection Act 2008 (Vic):** This Act defines "family violence" broadly in Section 5 to include:
 - Behaviour that is **physically or sexually abusive**.
 - Behaviour that is **emotionally or psychologically abusive**.
 - Behaviour that is economically abusive.
 - Behaviour that is threatening.
 - Behaviour that is **coercive**.
 - Behaviour that in any other way controls or dominates the family member and causes fear for safety/wellbeing.
 - Crucially, it also includes **behaviour that causes a child to hear, witness, or be exposed to the effects of such behaviour**.
 - Examples of emotional or psychological abuse provided in the Act can include "preventing connections with family or culture."
- **Crimes Act 1958 (Vic):** This Act defines criminal offences, including those related to child sexual abuse (e.g., sexual offences, grooming offences, child abuse material offences). While primarily focused on sexual and serious

physical harm, some sections touch on the psychological aspects related to these crimes (e.g., how children may be "bribed or threatened physically or psychologically" to participate in sexual activity). Section 49O(1) also creates an offence for a person in a position of authority who fails to take reasonable steps to protect a child under their care from a substantial risk of sexual abuse.

Analysis of Current Laws:

- **Positive Aspects:** Victoria's legal definitions are *stronger than many other jurisdictions* in explicitly including "**serious emotional or psychological harm**" and "**significant neglect**" in the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005*. The **Family Violence Protection Act 2008** also has a very broad definition of family violence, including "emotional or psychological abuse" and "coercive" behaviour, and importantly, includes children as victims if they are exposed to such behaviour.
- **Areas for Strengthening:**
 - "**Cultic Contexts**" **Specificity:** While "serious emotional or psychological harm" and "significant neglect" are included, the application of these definitions within the highly insular, ideologically driven, and systematically manipulative environment of a cult can still be challenging. Ensure the requirements and applications are **expansive enough to explicitly include cultic contexts**. This implies ensuring that the *dynamics specific to cults* (e.g., spiritual/ideological abuse, indoctrination/thought reform, group-mandated isolation from external support, exploitation of children for group benefit) are clearly understood to fall under these existing definitions or that definitions are refined to articulate this specification.
 - "**Spiritual Abuse**": This is a key area where existing definitions, even broad ones, might fall short. While some aspects might be captured under "psychological abuse" (e.g., fear of damnation used for control), "spiritual abuse" and as a distinct concept, involving the perversion of

spiritual authority and beliefs to harm a child, is less explicitly named. Highlighting this would reinforce the specific type of harm.

- **Severity Thresholds:** The terms "serious" emotional or psychological harm and "significant" neglect still require interpretation. In a cult context, subtle, continuous, pervasive control might not be seen as "serious" in a single incident but is devastating cumulatively. The review could aim to clarify how continuous patterns of subtle control, even without overt physical violence, meet these thresholds. (In fact, physical violence typically is not necessary because of the psychological conditioning.)
- **Organisational Accountability:** While the Crimes Act has "failure to protect" offences for those in positions of authority, the broader "accountability for organisations" (6.3 recommendation) might require examining charitable status, corporate responsibility, and legal pathways for restitution from the group itself, not just individuals who are many times victims.
- **Accountability for Organisations:** Explore and implement new legal avenues and mechanisms to hold cultic organisations themselves accountable for systemic child abuse and neglect perpetrated under their authority or within their structures, beyond individual perpetrators. This may include asset forfeiture or civil remedies.

5.4 Prevention and Public Awareness

Preventing future harm requires proactively educating the public and building resilience in vulnerable populations:

- **Targeted Public Education:** Develop and implement public awareness campaigns about the dangers of cults and coercive control. These campaigns should focus specifically on protecting children and young people, educating parents and communities on recognising the signs of undue influence, manipulative recruitment tactics, and high-control environments.

- **School/UniversityBased Resilience Programs:** Implement mandatory, age-appropriate programs in Victorian schools to foster critical thinking skills, media literacy (including understanding propaganda and misinformation), and emotional resilience in young people, making them less susceptible to manipulation and recruitment by high-demand groups aka cults.

5.5 Ongoing Research and Data Collection

To inform effective policy and practice, a sustained commitment to understanding the scope of the issue is vital:

- **Government-Funded Research:** Invest in comprehensive, Government-funded, independent research, ideally through partnerships with universities and survivor and expert-led organisations, to (1) better understand the prevalence and internal dynamics of cults and high-control groups in Victoria, (2) the long-term impacts on child survivors (our research on Adverse Childhood Experiences ACEs indicates that most of survivors of CoG will have a reduced life span of 20 years), and (3) the most effective intervention, recovery, and reintegration strategies. This research will be critical for evidence-based policy development and resource allocation.

5.6 Specific Calls for Justice

- **Inclusion in the National Redress Scheme:** We request that The Family International/Children of God be added to the National Redress Scheme and that the Victorian Government agree to act as the “funder of last resort,” as NSW has done, for all eligible survivors.
- **Extradition and Prosecution of Leadership:** We request that the Victorian and Australian Governments pursue all available avenues to extradite the current leaders of The Family International, Karen Zerby and [REDACTED] (last known location: [REDACTED]), to bring them to justice for crimes committed under their leadership

These recommendations represent a vital step towards ensuring that the horrors and injustices experienced by Children of God survivors are never repeated and

that all Victorians, particularly children, are protected from the insidious grip of coercive control in a group context.

VII. Conclusion

6.1 Our Collective Plea

We, as survivors of the Children of God/The Family, urge the Victorian government to listen to our voices. Our childhoods were stolen. Our development was often stunted. We have been subjected to extremely difficult lives with both the lack of basic childhood needs and significant levels of abuse. We have buried countless friends, siblings and even some of our children. Our recovery has been a lifelong journey. Our experiences are not just personal narratives; they are a stark testament to systemic vulnerabilities that must be urgently addressed.

6.2 A Call for Change

The time for comprehensive action is now. By acknowledging the unique harms suffered by children in cults like the Children of God/The Family and implementing robust legislative, policy, and support reforms, Victoria can lead the way in protecting its most **vulnerable citizens**, ensuring that no child endures the hidden devastation we have experienced and offering meaningful pathways to healing and wrap around supports, for those who have.

VIII. Appendices



Appendix B: De-identified Survivor Testimonials: The Saddest Stories Are the Ones Not Told (all stories have aliases, are completely true, and survivors may been supported with the writing to enhance readability)

The testimonies vividly depict the controlled and indoctrinated environment described in the report.

The Childhood Experience in Victoria (Section II)

- **Ideology and Doctrine (2.2):** Mary's testimony directly reflects the ideological control. She states she was taught her "individuality didn't matter" and that her only purpose was to "serve the Lord." Her account of the "One Wife" doctrine, where sex was reframed as a holy act and refusing was a sin, powerfully illustrates how ideology was used to normalize and command abusive behavior.

- **Structure and Authority (2.3):** **Rose's** memory of cult "leaders" inspecting children for bruises—and only scolding the abuser because the bruises were the wrong color—is a chilling example of the group's internal authority structure sanctioning and regulating abuse, rather than stopping it. **Mary** also describes how all personal decisions had to be "vetted by my overseers," showing the complete subsuming of personal autonomy to the group's hierarchy.
- **Daily Life and Environment (2.4):** **Sarah's** account of being separated from her mother at age eight to live in a communal "school home" in Victoria exemplifies the destruction of the family unit. **Rose's** testimony about only seeing her parents on a weekly "Family Day" and crying herself to sleep from longing for them further illustrates the emotional deprivation of this environment.
- **The 1992 Raids (2.5):** **Jono's** testimony provides a direct, firsthand account of why the raids failed. As a Deaf child, he recalls being "guarded and mostly silent" during interviews with authorities. His experience shows how indoctrination ("Systemites" are evil) and a lack of understanding from authorities (who recommended a Deaf school, which the cult forbade) led to children being returned to their abusers.

The Profound and Lasting Harms (Section III)

Nearly every testimony is a case study in the long-term damage inflicted by the cult.

- **Abuse and Neglect (3.1):**
 - **Physical Abuse:** **Rose's** graphic account of being beaten with a cricket bat and **Jono's** memory of being repeatedly spanked with a leather shoe are direct examples of the sanctioned corporal punishment.
 - **Sexual Abuse:** **Jenny's** testimony of being assaulted at age eight and then psychologically manipulated by the question "Did you like it?" is a powerful example of how abuse was coupled with insidious grooming. **Mary** also details the predatory environment where the concept of rape was "effectively erased."

- **Medical Neglect: Maya's** story is the most potent illustration. She describes watching her father die of a treatable cancer, suffering through childhood illnesses without care, and her own son sustaining permanent brain damage due to delayed medical intervention—all direct results of the cult's "faith healing" doctrine.
- **Educational Neglect: Sarah's** testimony that her "homeschooling" consisted solely of cult propaganda is a clear example. **Joy's** account of having only a 6th-grade education and struggling to start a business later in life shows the direct economic consequences of this neglect.
- **Financial Exploitation (3.2):** **Joy** speaks directly to this, explaining how all money earned was turned over to the commune and that they had "no savings to start our life" upon leaving, forcing them into debt.
- **Developmental Deprivation (3.3):**
 - **Social & Emotional Stunting: John's** testimony perfectly captures this, describing his daily life as feeling like he has a "significant and visible disability" in social situations. **David** echoes this, feeling like a "foreigner in the places I have spent the most time" due to a lack of shared cultural experiences.
 - **Lost Childhood: Sarah's** story of being cut off from her extended family—who were distinguished Australian citizens—and her culture highlights the profound loss of identity and heritage.
- **Long-Term Impacts (3.5):**
 - **Complex Trauma (C-PTSD): Jimmy's** life story is a tragic case study, detailing his excommunication at 15, subsequent homelessness, criminal activity, substance abuse, and eventual diagnosis of Bipolar Disorder, OCD, and C-PTSD. **Mary** also speaks of developing chronic anxiety and learning to dissociate as a coping mechanism.
 - **Intergenerational Trauma: Maya's** experience as a lifelong carer for her disabled sons, whose conditions she directly attributes to the cult's neglect, is a heartbreaking example. **Sarah** also speaks of a "cycle of traumatic relationships" that stemmed from her upbringing.

Challenges in Seeking Justice and Support (Section IV)

The testimonies vividly illustrate why survivors struggle to get help.

- **Barriers within the Legal System (4.1): Jenny's** story of being manipulated into believing she was complicit in her own abuse shows why it is so difficult for survivors to articulate their experience in a way the legal system understands. The indoctrination she experienced made it impossible for her to identify the crime when it happened.
- **Inadequate Support Services (4.2): Maya's** account of being excommunicated is crucial. She describes her three years outside the cult as "some of the most damaging and lonely times of my life," marked by poverty, homelessness, and her mother's severe mental breakdown. Her eventual *relief* at rejoining the cult demonstrates the complete lack of a safety net for those who exit. **Jimmy's** story of ending up in a halfway house with youths from juvenile detention further highlights the absence of specialized support.

A) Challenges with Basic Life Skills - Joy

My partner and I were both born in 1974. Children in the cult were taught that since we were not part of the "world," we didn't need to acquire any skills to be part of it or to get jobs to support ourselves. The founder believed, and stated in various "Mo Letters" to his followers, that a basic education was important, but it wasn't necessary to go higher than a 6th-grade level. He later amended this, saying that a 10th-grade education might be necessary in the computer age. My partner and I had a fairly good education up to Year 6. However, our high school education was done at home with whatever we were able to teach ourselves from high school-level textbooks.

We were taught childcare and had a lot of experience with it, as the cult lived in communal homes and children were cared for in age groups.

The older second-generation cult members, such as my partner and myself, were encouraged to have children young and not to practice birth control. We were both 19 when our first child was born, and our next five children came approximately every year afterwards. Our last one was born when we were both 28.

When we left the cult with our six children, we were in a situation where we had already been able to rent a house on our own, but we had no income other than Family Tax Benefit and Parenting Payment. The cult didn't allow people to have jobs outside its structure. All the money we earned came from selling products made by the cult, such as music tapes, videos, and DVDs. This money was turned into the commune and then divided to cover rent, food, and other expenses. A tithe of 10% of the total income was sent to the organisational arm of the cult, called World Services, which supplied us with the materials we were supposed to distribute or sell at the behest of the cult leader, David Berg, and his wife, Karen Zerby. No one in the cult had personal money. It was all turned into the commune, including any inheritances or gifts.

At the time of leaving, we didn't have a vehicle and had to borrow money to get a van. The fact that we had no savings to start our life away from the cult and no educational background to get good jobs made it quite difficult to set up our new lives. However, we were able to get a credit card using our Family Tax Benefit income, which we had been receiving for a few years. Because we had very little education around finances and budgeting, we had to figure it out ourselves, which got us into debt for a while.

We had no experience enrolling children in school, so we kept homeschooling for some time while we decided how to approach it. Around that time, I was pregnant with and gave birth to the child we had decided would be our last. It was my midwife who suggested a small, private community school.

We were spending every day just surviving, and her suggestion seemed really appealing. This was a bit of luck for us, as the school community ended up helping us a lot by giving us a large discount so that all six of our children could attend. We were able to get involved in the community, develop relationships with people who were not cult members, and learn how to be in the world by being around normal,

non-cult people. I feel that the high school years were the most difficult, as we had only a hit-and-miss education at that level, so guiding our kids through it was a struggle. Some of them are on the ASD spectrum and have ADHD but weren't diagnosed until they became adults; they may have had a better experience of high school if they had received support.

The skills we did have were learned in the cult. From a young age, we were expected to sell products, such as music tapes and videos, to support the homes we lived in. Other skills included singing and playing guitar in bands, entertainment such as making balloon animals, rudimentary magic tricks, and juggling. We also learned to be skilled in leading group sessions of various kinds.

As a couple, we both registered our individual business names and began small businesses. My husband worked as a magician doing shows and entertainment, and I worked as a doula. Later, I started a tea business, selling hand-blended teas at markets, and then added other eco-friendly products.

Acquiring the skills to start a business was a bit haphazard, as we had to carefully choose what we would spend money on. Most of the information was acquired via Google, and I took a course that had a component about registering a business name and ABN.

All the information about what we had to do to make a living was acquired haphazardly from library books, Google, and courses that we were only able to take after we already had some money. It would have been more useful to receive an education in these things, which was denied to us for what now seem like ridiculous religious reasons. I still believe that people can believe what they want to, but cults and high-control religions shouldn't be allowed to deny their members an education or the learning of life skills. Most of all, a cult shouldn't be allowed to prevent its members from having an income they can use as they desire or prevent them from making other personal decisions, such as when and how to have children.

I was born into the cult. From as early as six years old, my memories are marked not by innocence but by fear. Within the walls of our so-called "homes," discipline came not from love or care, but from pain, intimidation, and psychological control.

B) Physical Abuse and Fear-Based Control – Rose

One of my earliest and most traumatic memories is watching my baby brother—only about two years old—being violently spanked by a man known as [REDACTED]. I remember counting each lash in horror, frozen in place as he screamed. I wanted to stop it, to protect him, but fear made me helpless. At six years old, I already understood that children like us had no rights, no protection, and no voice.

We were taught that corporal punishment was righteous. That pain was necessary to “shape us into God’s soldiers.” There were no televisions or examples of healthy family dynamics—this abuse was presented as normal, even godly.

And yet, even in my young, brainwashed mind, I knew it was wrong. I imagined myself as a giant, scooping up my brother and shielding him from the violence. But imagination couldn’t stop the pain.

These beatings were not isolated. They were routine. They were sanctioned. And they left wounds that went far beyond bruises.

When another family moved into our house, I found myself under the care of a woman we called [REDACTED]. She was openly cruel, favouring her own daughters while punishing the rest of us harshly. I remember her slippers—white with a pink and green bow—which she used to hit us. More terrifying, she kept a cricket bat in her cupboard. This wasn’t a threat; it was frequently used.

One incident that stands out is a misunderstanding around menstruation. After a biblical lesson about Rachel hiding idols, I saw a small speck of blood on the toilet paper one night and innocently claimed I had my period. [REDACTED] responded by beating me savagely in front of the other children with her bat. She accused me of lying and deceit. I was a child—maybe six or seven—and I was beaten for not understanding my own body.

My hatred for her remains one of the strongest feelings tied to my childhood. I only recently saw a photo of her again, and the flood of memories was immediate. Trauma doesn’t disappear; it lives in the body, the mind, and the soul.

The system itself protected the abusers. I recall a visit from cult “leaders” sent to inform caregivers about new “discipline guidelines” following a lawsuit. They told us that only flexible items could be used to spank children and limited the number of lashes per child based on age.

I was inspected during this visit. We were forced to strip so they could examine us. I had dark purple bruises on my back and buttocks—evidence of [REDACTED] beatings. She was mildly “scolded” for the severity of the bruising—not because it was abuse, but because the colour wasn’t “acceptable.” The preferred bruising was yellow to brown.

I felt genuine excitement that maybe, just maybe, she would no longer use her wooden paddle. That was the level of my conditioning—finding joy in having only slippers or belts used on me instead.

I barely saw my parents, even though they lived in the same house. I longed for their affection so badly that I once faked an illness just to get my father’s attention. The only time I saw them was on “Family Day” once a week. Otherwise, we were raised in groups, with little to no individual care or emotional connection. I often cried myself to sleep, missing the security of a real family.

The psychological damage from this experience is profound. I carry with me not just the scars of physical pain, but the shame, fear, and helplessness that no child should ever endure. The violation of trust, safety, and bodily autonomy has affected every stage of my life—from relationships to self-worth to mental health.

This submission is just a glimpse into what many of us endured. I share this with the hope that no other child will have to grow up in fear, in isolation, or under the control of a manipulative and abusive regime disguised as faith.

C) Experiences of Neglect: Medical – Maya

I was born in Adelaide in 81’ and lived in Melbourne around the time of 1987-90.

Medical neglect- The cult’s doctrine of rejecting conventional medicine in favour of “faith healing” had catastrophic consequences for my family. This neglect was not

passive; it was an enforced practice, using shaming and shunning, that led directly to suffering and death.

At age four, I watched my father [REDACTED] [REDACTED] die of a treatable cancer because he was denied access to medical intervention. Although he was working long hours in poor conditions creating a puppet show for the cult that was aired on TV and brought in income, he was publicly shamed by the cult leader for his supposed lack of faith. My father died ostracized and deserted by his “spiritual family”, and believing he had angered God.

My father was from a good family, and attended [REDACTED]. My grandfather was a doctor. I cannot imagine what it may have felt like for my grandparents, not being able to see their son or provide him with life saving medical care. I later found out my grandfather was badly affected by this. He became an alcoholic and had a stroke that disabled him, dying not long after in his 60s. My

family is an example of the incredible damage cults inflict not only on the people who are in, but their extended families.

Throughout my own childhood, I never received vaccinations or proper medical care. I suffered through measles, chicken pox, mumps, and whooping cough without treatment. A broken nose was left to set on its own.

Despite being legally blind with a prescription of -4, I was denied glasses until I left the cult. The debilitating migraines and other physical ailments I experienced were ignored and prayed away.

This pattern of neglect tragically continued when I became a mother. Forced into motherhood at 19 due to the cult's ban on contraception, I was unequipped to protect my own child. When my infant son developed meningitis, my indoctrination led me to believe it was a spiritual attack. Instead of seeking immediate medical help, we engaged in prayer and chanting. By the time he received life-saving treatment, the delay had caused permanent brain damage. I am now a life long carer for my two sons, both of whom live with lifelong disabilities. I firmly believe these disabilities stem directly from the cult's doctrines—from the medical neglect that caused my son's brain injury and the broader environment of deprivation that shaped their early development and my ability to parent in my younger years.

The decisions were made for me, but the consequences are mine.

D) Experiences of Neglect: Educational -- Sarah

Educational and Social Deprivation: My education was a tool of indoctrination. "Homeschooling" consisted solely of the cult leader David Berg's teachings and propaganda. We were completely isolated from the outside world; external music, literature, and media were forbidden. There were a few allowed movies, they were usually anti-establishment creating a fear of the outside. When we watched a movie we had to have a "pow-wow"- where the leaders would tell us what lessons we needed to learn from the movie. For instance in the "Lost Horizon" movie, there is a scene when a beautiful young woman leaves paradise, and becomes a decrepit old woman, this frightened me.

We were taught to fear "systemites" (non-members) and were cut off from all families outside the group. I only recently learned that my paternal grandparents, whom I never met, were both recipients of the Order of Australia. Generations of my family significantly contributed to Australia, however I grew up without any rights or protections as an Australian, I still struggle to feel like a citizen and member of a country, community and family. This isolation was designed to erase our individual identities and ensure total dependence on the cult.

Neglect of Basic Personal and Emotional Needs- From the age of eight, I was separated from my single mother and raised in a communal "school home," in

Victoria, often sharing a bed with other children in overcrowded rooms. I have no memory of a healthy parental relationship or attachment to a primary figure. The longing for affection and security was and still is a constant, painful ache. We were not seen as individuals to be nurtured, but as a collective to be controlled. This fundamental neglect of my need for parental love and a stable family bond has left a void that impacts me to this day.

Lasting Impact and Intergenerational Trauma- The neglect I endured was not something I could simply leave behind. It has caused a cascade of intergenerational trauma that affects every aspect of my life and the lives of my children.

Personal Trauma and Health Issues- The constant state of fear, stress, and untreated illness has resulted in chronic physical pain and a range of health issues. Psychologically, I have struggled with severe anxiety and emotional dysregulation. Having never been taught how to process emotions or build a stable sense of self, I have been overwhelmed by feelings that are a direct echo of the trauma I survived.

Relationship Trauma- The destruction of familial bonds, I have no relationship with my parents or grandparents, or extended family in Australia. Growing up without any model for a healthy relationship has had devastating consequences for my intimate life. My early marriage was marked by extreme control, patterns of behaviour learned in an environment where ownership and submission were normalized. The lack of trust and security that defined my childhood has made it incredibly difficult to form stable, healthy attachments as an adult, creating a cycle of traumatic relationships. I have had ongoing therapy for a decade both individually and couples therapy.

The absence of care was as damaging as the presence of abuse. This systemic neglect has inflicted deep, lasting wounds that I, and my children, carry every day.

I submit this testimony to shed light on one of the most persistent and least understood consequences of growing up in a high-control group: the lifelong struggle with social integration. While my physical freedom was gained the day I left, I have been serving a life sentence of social and emotional relearning.

E) Identity Confusion and Building: Social Rules - John

When you are raised in an environment where every interaction is scripted and policed, you learn a very specific set of social rules that are useless, and often detrimental, in the outside world. Upon leaving, I quickly realised I was missing a fundamental human instruction manual that everyone else seemed to have been born with.

Simple things like making small talk with a cashier, understanding sarcasm, or knowing how much personal information is appropriate to share with a new acquaintance were completely foreign concepts. I had to consciously study people, to mimic their cadence and gestures, to try and reverse-engineer the basics of normal human connection. It was, and still is, exhausting.

Years later, I still face significant barriers in what should be normal daily interactions.

In the community: Simple errands can feel like a high-stakes performance. I feel a constant, low-grade anxiety that I am being watched and judged for being "odd." Attending a school event for my children or a neighbourhood barbeque requires days of mental preparation and recovery, as I navigate conversations feeling like an anthropologist studying a foreign tribe.

At work and in education: These environments are particularly challenging. Group projects, team meetings, and networking events are my personal nightmare. I struggle to contribute organically, terrified that my ideas will be rejected or that I will misread the social dynamics of the room. I often remain silent, not because I have nothing to say, but because the risk of saying the wrong thing feels too great. This has undoubtedly impacted my professional and educational advancement.

The most accurate way I can describe my daily experience is this: despite looking like a normal, functioning adult on the outside, I feel as though I have a significant and visible disability that everyone is staring at.

I walk into a room and feel a palpable shift, as if all eyes are on me, scrutinizing my every move. I know, logically, that this is likely a projection of my own internal state, but the feeling is overwhelmingly real. It is the deep, ingrained belief that I am

fundamentally different, that I am "other," and that at any moment, I will be exposed as an impostor who doesn't belong.

This feeling of being constantly watched creates a state of hyper-vigilance. I am always monitoring myself, my tone of voice, my body language, my facial expressions. There is no "off" switch. The freedom to simply be in a social space, without this intense self-scrutiny, is a luxury I have never known.

Leaving the group was not the end of my struggle; it was the beginning of another kind. The physical walls may be gone, but the invisible cage of social ineptitude and anxiety remains. It is a permanent disability, a direct result of a childhood spent in isolation, and it is a wound that I carry with me every single day.

F) Cultural Dislocation and Social Isolation – David

I am writing this testimony to describe a profound and enduring consequence of my upbringing in a high-control group: a deep-seated social and cultural isolation. This is not merely about shyness or social anxiety; it is the experience of being a permanent outsider, disconnected from the very society I was born into and have lived in for most of my life.

The Absence of a Shared Past- So much of human connection is built on a shared foundation of common experiences. People bond over memories of popular TV shows from their childhood, songs that were on the radio during their teenage years, the collective experience of public schooling, or cultural fads that everyone seemed to participate in.

I have none of this.

My childhood and young adulthood were spent in a vacuum, deliberately cut off from the culture unfolding outside our walls. When people my age reminisce, I have nothing to contribute. I can only listen, feeling a chasm widen between us. Their nostalgia is a language I don't speak. This absence of a shared past makes it incredibly difficult to form genuine connections. I am constantly on the outside of inside jokes, cultural references, and the easy camaraderie that comes from having grown up on the same planet.

An Outsider in My Own Home- This feeling of dislocation is most acute in relation to my own country. I am disconnected from the culture of my birth. I feel like a foreigner in the places I have spent the most time. While I may understand the language and the logistics of daily life, I lack the intuitive cultural fluency that makes a place feel like home.

This creates a constant sense of being unmoored. I don't fully belong to the world I was raised in, which I left behind, nor do I fully belong to the world I now inhabit. I exist in a liminal space, a perpetual cultural no-man's-land.

This inability to connect with society at large is not a choice. It is a direct result of being denied the common experiences that weave individuals into the social fabric. It is a form of isolation that is invisible to others but is a constant and defining feature of my reality. I am left with a profound sense of loneliness and the feeling that, no matter where I go or what I do, I will always be on the outside looking in.

G) Identity Confusion and Building: Experiences with Complex Trauma and Sexual Abuse -- Mary

I left the cult with my husband and six children in 2003, when we were both 28.

Having been raised within the rules of a cult and largely shielded from society's ideas about self-worth, I naturally believed what I was taught: that I was not important, except as a CoG in the mechanism of God's will. According to the teachings, the only reason I was alive was to "serve the Lord." This meant my individuality didn't matter; my sense of self was defined by obedience. Any decisions I made had to be vetted by my overseers and "prayed over and confirmed with prophecy" by myself and the "shepherds," but the ultimate decisions were always made by the shepherds. Many times, I wanted to do something different and struggled with decisions that were made for me, but I ultimately had to submit to what I was told.

The consequences for defiance were severe. As a child, it meant physical corporal punishment. As a young teen or adult, it meant other punishments as well, such as being assigned the most physically demanding work, being subjected to a community "laying on of hands" or an exorcism for having "desires inspired by

demons," or being paired with a shepherd for "prayer time," which often lasted all day and required fasting. We had to write daily "Open Heart Reports" on forms with intrusive questions about ourselves. These reports often became the subject of the next day's group prayer time. Our lives were scheduled down to the hour, and free time was very rare.

After I left the cult with my husband and children, I felt relaxed for the first time in my life. Only then did I realize that I had always felt like someone was looking over my shoulder at everything I did. For the first time, I could make decisions for myself and my own children without someone telling me I was wrong.

Living this way, I developed chronic anxiety. I find it very hard to be around people who are yelling or around violence of any kind. I still flinch when someone lifts their hand near my face—a reaction to the frequent face-slapping I endured as a child. After leaving the cult, I trained in self-defense to give myself more confidence.

As a defense mechanism, I learned to dissociate during corporal punishment or in humiliating positions. Even now, I find it hard to watch scenes on TV that involve embarrassment; they can trigger mini-panic attacks. I also get panic attacks when I am constrained in any way or in a small, tight space, due to my experiences. Since leaving the cult, I have been working through my trauma with various therapies and have made a lot of progress.

One of the first things I did after leaving was read widely, especially books on sociology and psychology. I even completed part of a degree in psychology. I needed to develop my sense of self and understand who I am in relation to the world. I had to understand the roots of my reactions and learn how to make decisions for myself and my children in the outside world.

One of the beliefs that became part of the teachings in the '70s was a doctrine of "sexual freedom" called the "One Wife" doctrine. The idea was that to bond fully with the cult, we all had to be willing to have sex with each other, regardless of marital status or age. The cult leader wrote about sex in every published letter distributed to his followers. He taught that sexual repression in society stemmed from people not being introduced to sex early enough in childhood. He believed that

because sex is natural, children should be taught about, exposed to, and encouraged to participate in it.

A related teaching was that people should not say "no" if someone wanted to have sex with them. Children, myself included, were regularly touched and pressured to participate in sexual activities we were far too young to understand. We were told it was natural, so any misgivings we had were twisted into feelings of guilt. I learned to dissociate during times when I felt compelled to participate. Other times, I played the "good girl" to get approval. This created a predatory environment where, since saying "no" was not an option, the concept of rape was effectively erased. The group remained deeply patriarchal; texts frequently instructed women to submit to men and let them be leaders. Even when women were leaders, it was understood that their male partners had more authority.

In the late '80s, facing the world's changing attitude toward sex with children, the cult leaders realized they had to at least make a show of stopping the practice. They sent out notices that sexual contact with anyone younger than 15 was now banned—at least in theory. In practice, many abusers in the cult had grown accustomed to a free-for-all and were not going to stop. The cult tried to get a handle on it, but because they refused to prosecute anyone, the abuse continued behind closed doors.

After the rules changed, I internally heaved a sigh of relief at not having to have sexual contact with adults anymore. But later, when I had my own children, I couldn't understand how anyone could permit that sort of behavior. It went against every instinct I had as a mother and my husband had as a father. From the moment I had my first child, I just wanted to protect him from everything.

After leaving the cult, it took a lot of reading, discussion, and various types of therapy to understand how my upbringing had shaped my mind. I needed to develop new frameworks for nearly every viewpoint and learn how to be a parent outside of a cult, since all the childcare and parenting I had ever seen had been in that setting. I read and studied the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and realized just how far from its principles I had been raised. I was determined to raise my children differently.

H) Anatomy of Abuse – Jenny

My memories of ██████████ in the ██████████ commune are marked by a disturbing contradiction. At times, he was very playful and was the only adult who would bend the strict rules of the community. For instance, white sugar was forbidden, but he would occasionally give us children ice cream, telling us to keep it a secret. I remember him joking and teasing frequently.

However, this playful side was coupled with extreme violence. I was aware that he was beating his partner and step-children in a manner I can only describe as brutal. I experienced his beatings firsthand for the most tiny infractions and sometimes for no reason at all. He was a man who did not tolerate being challenged or questioned in any way.

One day, he isolated me from the group, took me into a room, and sexually assaulted me. I was eight years old. I was terrified and I froze during the experience.

The part of the assault that has haunted me for decades was the question he asked me immediately afterward: "Did you like it?"

As a child who had been conditioned to be obedient and agreeable to my elders, I answered "yes." With that single question and my coerced response, he did more than assault my innocent body. He manipulated my mind into believing I had wanted it, that I had asked for it.

This had profound and devastating long-term consequences. The deep-seated feeling that I was somehow complicit in my own abuse led to years of being victimized, even after I finally left the cult. I did not realize I had a right to defend myself. I couldn't recognize when my boundaries were being crossed or when I was being assaulted.

It has taken many years and ongoing therapy to begin to unpack the immense shame and blame I carried. It has been a long and difficult process to grieve the loss of my innocence and to heal from the assault on my young body and mind.

1) The Myth of Freedom: Trauma and Hardship for Children Exiting High-Control Groups -- Maya

I am submitting this testimony to shed light on a critically misunderstood aspect of the cult experience: the profound trauma that continues, and often intensifies, for children after they leave.

There is a dangerous misconception that for a child, leaving a cult is a moment of liberation, an immediate escape to freedom. My experience proves this is a fantasy. I was nine when my mother was excommunicated. My six older siblings, all over the age of eleven, were forced to remain behind, many without a parent (there are 4 dads to my siblings). The three years we spent outside were not years of freedom. They were some of the most damaging and lonely times of my life. I urge you to understand that the harm of coercive control does not end at the gate. For many children, the exit is the beginning of a new kind of hell.

Mentally in, Physically out - When my mother left, she was physically out, but mentally, she was still a prisoner of the cult. The indoctrination remained. She sought to replicate the group's intense camaraderie by surrounding us with other ex-members. These were often the worst of the worst—individuals so dangerous or non-compliant that even the cult had cast them out.

In this shadow community, the abuse continued, just without the formal structure. We were exposed to bizarre and harmful practices. We had escaped the institution, but not the behaviour it had ingrained in its followers.

We experienced poverty and homelessness- Inside the cult, our basic needs were met. There was a roof over our heads and food on the table, provided by the communal structure. Outside, we had nothing. My mother had no education, no work history, and no understanding of how to function in the real world. In the three years we were out, I remember sleeping in cars more times than I can count. The stability and support of the commune, however flawed, were gone. We were completely alone, without a safety net to catch us.

My mother was a broken woman. The trauma of being rejected by her entire world and being forced to abandon her children was immense. She was mentally unwell,

often spending days in bed, crying, distant, and disconnected from me. She would send packages to my siblings for their birthdays, only to have them returned unopened. Large portions of her pension would go to the cult, to try to win back their favour, and so she could rejoin and see my siblings again.

When we did find somewhere to live—usually a single room or a squalid granny flat—it was often filthy. My mother’s trauma manifested as hoarding, and I was a child left to fend for myself in an environment of chaos and neglect. My parents were incapable of parenting, and there was no one else. I was not an outsider everywhere - The cult taught us we were "in the world, but not of it." This mindset followed us. Leaving did not mean we tried to assimilate. My mother never got a job. I never went to school.

The worst was social isolation. I had no idea how to be a "normal" kid. I didn't know how to make friends or understand the unwritten rules of the outside world. I had felt like an outsider inside the cult, and now I was an outsider in mainstream society. Because we had been excommunicated, I carried a deep sense of shame, believing there was something fundamentally wrong with us. Those years were defined by a profound and debilitating loneliness. I had lost my house, my community, and, most painfully, my siblings.

That is why, when we were eventually able to rejoin the cult, the feeling was not one of defeat, but of overwhelming relief. It felt like coming home. Suddenly, I had peers and friends again. There was structure. There was a clean bed and consistent meals. I had a community around me, and I could finally see my siblings again. The cult, with all its known dangers, felt safer than the world outside.

This committee must understand that for a child, the choice is not always between abuse and freedom. Sometimes, the choice is between structured abuse and the terrifying chaos of neglect, poverty, and total isolation. This is why if these groups are allowed to continue to use and exploit their members, then it is imperative that there is support and services provided when people leave.

The trauma does not stop when you walk out the door.

J) Excommunication and Experiences with Complex Trauma (C-PTSD) --

Jimmy

I submit this statement to detail the profound and devastating impact that a high-control group has had on every aspect of my life. My life was not shaped by youthful choices, but by a foundation of educational neglect, abuse of all forms, and forced isolation that began in my childhood.

From a young age, my life was not my own. I was denied a formal education, and my days were consumed by labor for the group. By the age of 14, I was sexually active, exhausted, and completely overwhelmed. My developmental years were not spent learning and growing, but serving the needs of the organisation.

Looking back, I can identify that I was struggling severely with undiagnosed conditions, including Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), and dyslexia. I suffered from terrifying intrusive thoughts and compulsions, but the environment of fear and judgment prevented me from seeking help. I believed I would be punished, exorcised, or placed in isolation, things that had happened. My only coping mechanisms were intense physical exercise and a vivid imagination where I would dream of escape. To the group, however, I was simply the "naughty" and "evil" child.

Shortly after my 15th birthday, I was excommunicated. Having lived apart from my parents for several years under the group's direction, I was accused of having "system" contraband on a computer. The group's leadership, a "shepherd," informed my parents, and I was subjected to a period of intense public shaming, isolation and "correction" designed to break what they called my rebellious spirit. Ultimately, through threats and humiliation, I was pushed into leaving. They manipulated the situation to make it look like it was my own decision.

I escaped with nothing. I sold my Walkman, which was just enough for a bus ticket to the Gold Coast. At 15 years old, I was homeless, penniless, and walking down Cavill Avenue with no one in the world to turn to.

A youth worker providing meals to the homeless found me. He offered me temporary shelter at his own house, before I was moved into a halfway house with

other teenagers, many of whom had just been released from juvenile detention. The environment was harsh and unforgiving. With no money and needing shoes, I stole a pair and was subsequently charged, marking my first involvement with the legal system.

During this time, I experienced a significant trauma when a housemate I looked up to, [REDACTED] died after huffing aerosol. Witnessing the event and his girlfriend's hysterical grief left a mark on my young self. Life was a constant struggle with absolutely no support system. I managed to enroll in [REDACTED], but with the immense gaps in my education, I was unable to catch up and never graduated. My contact with my family was limited to sporadic, angry calls from a payphone. The sense of abandonment was absolute.

After a year and a half of this hardship, the outside world proved to be too difficult to navigate alone. At 16, I rejoined the group. Soon after, my first son was born. The struggle was immense, and I could see no future for myself or my child within the confines of the group.

At 17, I left for the final time with my girlfriend and our baby.

The skills needed to survive in the outside world had been systematically denied me. To make ends meet, my girlfriend became a stripper. I descended into a life of substance abuse, using alcohol, ecstasy, speed, and cocaine. I became involved in criminal activity, working as a pimp and a drug dealer.

For years, I attempted to find legitimate work, taking jobs at retailers like BWS and in nightclubs, but I could never hold a position for long. In my life, I have never had a stable career.

The defining crisis of my adult life occurred when I received a call at work. My mom told me my brother had died by stepping in front of a truck. The news shattered me, and my life began to spiral completely out of control.

My substance abuse intensified and I suffered extreme anxiety. Following a suicide attempt, I was hospitalized and formally diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder, other diagnosis are Anxiety, OCD, cPTSD. My life has been one of extreme difficulty. My

relationships are invariably strained; partners eventually leave, unable to cope with the challenges my trauma presents.

Today, my life remains unstable and exhausting. I live in backpacker hostels in [REDACTED]. To manage my mental health, I rely on a daily regimen of anti-psychotics, a mood stabiliser, and sedatives to sleep. I am now sober, a choice I made because I knew that continuing my previous path would lead to my death. I lost my job during my last hospital admission a month ago (I've had about 8) and I've applied for about 140 jobs since then, with no success.

I want my family back. I can't see a future for me, but I can for my children.

I do not wish this life on anyone. The group did not just disrupt my childhood; it set me on a path of trauma, poverty, and mental illness from which I have never been able to fully recover. They stole my education, my family, my mental health, and any chance I had at a normal, stable life. A redress payment would be life changing for me. I urge this inquiry to hold these groups accountable and to implement measures to protect other vulnerable children from suffering the same fate.

K) How I Learned Why My Mother Couldn't Protect Me – Maya

For most of my life, I carried a deep and burning anger toward my mother. Growing up in the [REDACTED] communes, I knew I wasn't safe, and the person who was supposed to be my ultimate protector failed me completely. I remember telling her on a weekend visit (I lived at another home at 8 yo), desperate for help, that I was being sexually abused. Her advice wasn't to fight, to scream, or to run to another adult, she did NOTHING to stop it. Her advice was to "laugh and say 'stop it, uncle!'" or, in another conversation, to "pick my nose" because she thought it would turn them off. The memory of that—of being handed such a pathetic, useless shield against such a profound violation—has been a source of pain and resentment for decades.

I remember growing up with [REDACTED] siblings; they were closer to my age, and we often shared rooms. I remember his mother, who we called [REDACTED] as a quiet, almost scared-looking woman who spoke in a soft falsetto. She seemed to float through the commune, trying to be invisible.

It wasn't until I read the cult's own article about what they did to ██████, "Contend for Our Teens!," that my anger began to shift. Reading it was like finding the missing piece of a puzzle I had been staring at my whole life. For the first time, I saw the system that had broken my own mother.

<https://archive.xfamily.org/docs/fam/fsm/teen-james-fsm104.pdf>

The article is a manual for how the cult systematically shamed, humiliated, and dismantled mothers who showed any sign of natural, protective instinct. I could see hundreds of statements designed to inflict shame and humiliation. ██████ wasn't just criticized; she was psychologically flayed. They called her "weak," "pacifistic," and "dirty." They blamed her for her son's normal teenage rebellion. Most horrifically, they implied that her "compromising spirit" was the reason her previous baby had been stillborn. They weaponized her own grief and loss to force her into compliance.

Every word of condemnation against her was a word I realized had been leveled against my own mother and every other mother in that environment. Any act of softness, any hesitation to use violent punishment, was reframed as a spiritual failure, as "compromising with the Enemy." To protect your child was to defy God and the group. The price for that defiance was public humiliation, spiritual condemnation, and the very real threat of being cast out, losing all your other children in the process.

Reading that cult publication, I could finally understand why my mother was so completely inept. Her advice to "pick my nose" wasn't a sign of malice; it was the desperate, last-ditch strategy of a woman who had been terrorized into submission. She had been taught that she had no power, that her instincts were wrong, and that the only way to survive was to be small, quiet, and obedient. She couldn't give me a sword and shield because the cult had taken hers and beaten her with it. She had also grow up in foster homes (as several of the Australian cult parents had) and had no template for a protective and caring attachment and relationship with her children.

My anger hasn't vanished, but it has found its proper target. It no longer rests solely on my mother. It rests on the system that systematically broke her and every other mother, turning them into unwilling accomplices in their own children's suffering. They were victims, too. And understanding that has been the most painful, and most necessary, revelation of my life.

L) The Aftermath of the cult Identity- James

In 2019 in therapy, I was given a diagnosis of Complex PTSD (C-PTSD) by my therapist in Canada. I can attest to having struggled for 20+ years with recurring depression and have experienced many of the other issues highlighted in the submission (particularly around the Long-Term Impacts on Adult Survivors). These include, anxiety, panic attacks, dissociation, trust and intimacy and identity issues. I associate these with my upbringing in the COG/TFI.

I was born into the group in [REDACTED] Australia. My father was from Victoria ([REDACTED]) and my mother was from Queensland ([REDACTED]). During my childhood, we travelled throughout South East Asia and the Pacific region (on tourist visas generally) and rarely lived in the same place for more than a year. Some of this time was spent in communal residences in NSW and VIC. My experience of childhood was that joy, individualism, critical thinking and self-expression were suppressed. Brief periods of happiness were overshadowed by years of separation from parents and family, manipulation and psychological abuse resulting from the group's adherence to an irrational set of beliefs, promoted by a cult leader, who was an unashamed pedophile, a self-confessed alcoholic and simultaneously a self-identified "prophet of God".

At age 17, with the support of a friend and his brother (who were both a few years older), I left the cult while living in a large group home environment in rural Japan. With the help of the wife of my friend's brother, I found a job and earned enough money to return to Australia.

Since then, I've set about trying to figure things out for myself and break free of the absurd indoctrination that pervaded my childhood. This is an ongoing process, and I have experienced struggles with maintaining long-term relationships, adapting to

full-time employment and dealing with financial matters. These struggles have never fully dissipated, though I think there have been some improvements, esp. after engaging in therapy. Notably, I'm enjoying being sober after 20 or so years of excessive alcohol consumption.

M) Experiences with disability - Jono

As a profoundly Deaf boy at 7 years old in [REDACTED], It was deeply traumatic growing up in a harsh place where children like us were brutally punished and abused. I relied on my age group wherever they went, I followed. Every time they got caught, I ended up in trouble too, even if it wasn't intentional. There was a FGA (First generation adult) who gave us kids hard spankings with his black leather shoe every time he saw us. No matter how hard we tried to avoid that sadistic uncle, we always ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was preying on us for more spankings. We were horrified, watching him hit the kids' bare bums so hard too hard that they screamed in pain right in front of us while we waited for our turn to be spanked. Repeated and rinsed.

A few FGAs yelled at me and punished me for not hearing their commands. I wasn't able to defend myself against alleged disobedience, and I was punished mostly with spankings or beatings because they didn't bother to question me first, due to my muteness. Sometime my mum left me in the care of other FGAs, and I was at their mercy. I was also sexually assaulted by my caregiver, an FGA auntie. Twice. I didn't know how to tell my mum about it or other punishments because of my limited ability to communicate, I thought it was normal for us, so I kept it to myself. I endured endless night terrors and it deeply affected my behaviour. Sometimes I became rebellious and caused trouble not out of defiance, but because the punishments and abuse felt so unfair.

I wasn't given any speech lessons, like learning to speak vocally or read lips. I relied on my mum, stepdad, siblings and friends to communicate using sign language. I was homeschooled, but alongside hearing kids. I first learned to read through 'Life with Grandpa' (Mo Letters) and other books made by the cult. There were no proper educational resources for Deaf child at that time.

During the Sydney police raids, when I was 9, I stayed guarded and mostly silent, barely responding to the DOCS interviewers through sign language interpreters, due to my withdrawal and limited Auslan skills. When I was examined by child psychologists, they recommended that I be sent to a Deaf school to socialise with other Deaf children. But that went against the cult's freedom of religion. My mum and stepdad were determined to remain in the cult, they wanted me to become a missionary, rather than focus on my own career and future. DOCS provided me with a new TTY and a special VHS recorder that could create subtitles for TV programs, but I was too young to use the TTY. The cult kids weren't allowed to contact with systemite kids. TV programs, even educational ones with subtitles, were considered too worldly for me and the other kids.

I was denied a proper education for another decade. Although I was homeschooled, it was slow, inconsistent, and far behind what I needed. At 14 years old, I told my parents that I wanted to go to a public school but they discouraged it. When I was 20, I independently moved to a Deaf home overseas for a whole year. It turned out to be like a Deaf cult within the cult, and it was the worst part of all. There was no formal education for us.

Every time I tried to escape the cult, I was discouraged and reminded that I won't be able to survive in real world without a high school diploma. And I was told that the cult was the preferred and safest place for someone with my disability. It left me with no option but to remain in the cult, so I was determined to make myself more dependable. I then moved to one of the Service Homes for a few years; these were bases where regional leaders were stationed. It was considered the best life within the cult. I was trained and later became an Xtreme Disciple. I even took on a manager position, which it outranked the shepherds. To my surprise, it caught Karen Zerby's attention because I was the only Deaf person in the cult who had achieved the impossible. She lovebombed me and sent me gifts. She treating me like I was someone special. I remembered her and David Berg who mocked another Deaf boy (Deceased) in a Mo Letter because of the disability when he was a kid in the '80s.

Another Deaf person was mistreated in the field homes, so I had to pull some strings to get her the help she needed. Twice.

When I learned that the cult was eventually going to fall apart, I started doubting myself and questioning everything the cult taught me. So I had been planning to escape the cult. At 28 years old in 2010, I moved back to Australia on my own, it was a risky move without my family's support. I slowly began rebuilding my life, and had to re-educate myself, because I had missed out on so much just to be able to live and survive in the real world.

It's been ups and downs, and then I ended up in a toxic relationship with a narcissist. I was addicted to painkillers, and struggled with suicide thoughts. I was enduring untreated complex PTSD without even realising it. I hadn't sought professional help for many years after escaping the cult because I had developed deep trust issues with medical professionals, especially due to the cult's programming and what happened during the Sydney raids. I procrastinated applying for the NDIS for many years. I tried a few times, but I didn't feel it was worth it because it made me feel even more like a helpless disabled person, it was frowned upon in the cult. I felt like my identity was missing.

After the cult, I struggled to socialise with Deaf people and didn't feel like I fit into the Deaf community. Sometimes I looked down on them because they lacked the experiences I had in the cult. They saw me as a hearing person because I acted like one. They relied more on facial expressions for sign language than on writing or typing. If I had been sent to a Deaf school, it would be a different story.

My resentment toward my disability is difficult to overcome. It reminded me of my mother's decision to remain in the cult after divorcing my father, who had escaped the cult in the States. Her decision cost me my hearing, which I lost to meningitis when I was a baby in Indonesia, after she had moved there. Had she joined my dad in escaping the cult, then I wouldn't have lost my hearing in Indonesia, I would have been hearing today. The cult's brainwashing heavily influenced her decision. She was shepherded by [REDACTED] after being recruited in Holland, she was only 17 years old. She even abandoned her first two sons when they were children, and later, another son at 14, to remain in the cult at any cost.

When I heard that my former fellow, ex-cult member had taken his life, I was shocked. And it wasn't just that I also knew about fifteen people in my life who didn't survive after escaping the cult. One of my younger siblings attempted to overdose. Twice. That was too much for me to bear. It felt like a tragic domino effect of falling lives, breaking something inside me.

I finally reached out to a psychologist with experience in cult-related trauma. I'm glad I did. I'm still working on my mental health, learning to embrace my disability, and rediscovering my identity. Hopefully, this helps raise awareness of the cult's impact and brings more support for the cult survivors.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Media reports of crimes committed from GoG survivors in Australia

<https://www.heraldsun.com.au/leader/east/man-at-centre-of-manhunt-grew-up-in-children-of-god-cult/news-story/406a8ef615ec644a1a5a4664b22ef98d>

<https://www.goldcoastbulletin.com.au/truecrimeaustralia/police-courts-gold-coast/drama-on-the-m1-an-alleged-stolen-car-spiked-at-tugun/news-story/164f3bcb93a9ad1af51499cc599f04ec>

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/latest-news/mans-child-sex-addiction-blamed-on-religious-cult-upbringing/news-story/36afc775ea15cf0d289c38342f1ad969>

<https://www.1news.co.nz/2023/08/04/kiwi-to-be-deported-over-brisbane-sex-shop-murder/>

<https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/various/zurich-court-sentences-ex-sect-member-for-abuse/89216178>

<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/indonesia-deports-australians-for-participating-in-papua-protests/ic3vwwqw2>

Appendix D: Support Letters from Academics



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Statement to the Victorian Government Inquiry into Cults and Fringe Groups

From: Dr. Steven Hassan, Ph.D., M.Ed., LMHC, NCC

Cult Expert, Author, and Licensed Mental Health Counsellor

Founder, Freedom of Mind Resource Center

Date: July 15, 2025

Subject: The Children of God / The Family International – A Case Study in Extreme Cultic Abuse, with a Focus on Child Victims

To the Esteemed Members of the Victorian Government Inquiry,

I am writing to submit this statement to your crucial inquiry based on over four decades of experience as a cult expert, former cult member, author, and licensed mental health professional. My work has involved counseling thousands of individuals and families impacted by destructive cults worldwide, and I have extensively studied and documented the tactics and harms inflicted by these groups.

Among the numerous destructive cults I have investigated and worked with, I unequivocally state that the Children of God, later known as The Family, and currently The Family International, stands as the most egregious and harmful cult I have ever encountered in terms of its systematic abuse, particularly of children.

My assessment is based on extensive research, including interviews, books, documentaries, direct testimonies from former members – many of whom I have personally counseled – and a deep understanding of mind control techniques and their devastating psychological, emotional, and physical consequences. The Children of God/ The Family did not merely engage in typical cultic manipulation; they institutionalized practices that led to widespread and profound abuse, especially against their most vulnerable members: children.

To help this Inquiry understand the systematic nature of the abuse within The Family and to illustrate the mechanics of coercive control that make such groups uniquely harmful, I will frame my analysis using my BITE Model of Authoritarian Control, which outlines the four overlapping components of mind control: Behavior, Information, Thought, and Emotional Control.

Behavior Control

In The Family, Behavior Control was absolute and began at the structural level. The group dictated the members' physical reality. Children were subjected to **child labor**, forced to engage in fundraising activities for the group's benefit, often at the expense of their own health and education. Their most intimate behaviors were also regulated, most notoriously through the doctrine that led to **systemic child sexual abuse**. The "Flirty Fishing" and the "Law of Love" doctrines created a framework where the sexual violation of children was not merely an anomaly but a normalized, structural problem. This prescribed behavior served the group's leadership and ideology. Furthermore, Behavior Control was exerted through parental neglect, educational neglect and importantly **medical neglect**. By denying access to conventional medical care and insisting on faith healing, the group controlled the life and death of its members, punishing doubt and reinforcing dependency. **Corporal Punishment** was commonplace, a form of physical discipline that involved spankings and beatings, which were often administered with a range of implements such as paddles, belts, or other objects.

Information Control

Information is the lifeblood of a free mind, which is why destructive cults strive to monopolize it. Children born into The Family were victims of **indoctrination from birth**. Their entire reality was filtered through the group's lens. They were systematically isolated from mainstream society, denied a formal education with accredited teachers, and taught that all outside information was deceptive and dangerous. This creates an informational prison. This was intensified by the practice of **parental alienation**. The group's leaders understood that the primary bond between a parent and child is a powerful source of unconditional love and alternative perspectives. By separating children from parents, placing them in communal care, and shuffling caregivers, they deliberately broke these bonds, ensuring the child's primary source of information and attachment was the group itself.

Thought Control

With behavior and information locked down, the group could then focus on controlling thought itself. The indoctrination created a black-and-white, us-versus-them, good vs. evil worldview where critical thinking was equated with sin. The group's idiosyncratic and harmful doctrines were presented as absolute, divine truth. **A number of thought-stopping techniques were employed, including:** the "Open Heart Reports," where children wrote down every thought and behavior; public confessions; demands for constant memorization and reading of "Mo Letters" (David Berg's writings); praise time; rebuking the "devil" or "hitchhiking spirits" for critical thoughts; and keeping constantly busy.

This process reached its horrifying apex in their teen training camps, or "Victor Programs," such as those documented in their **Melbourne communes**. These camps represent a horrifyingly clear application of thought reform. When I analyze these camps, I see a systematic assault on the individual. They employed techniques I directly associate with communist brainwashing, designed to shatter a young person's identity. It began with the

extreme isolation I mentioned—removing teenagers from anyone not loyal to the group. Within this controlled environment, they were subjected to psychological attacks mirroring Maoist "struggle sessions," where they were forced into humiliating public confessions.

Emotional Control

Profound Emotional Control cemented this entire structure. The techniques used in the Victor Programs were designed to instill crippling guilt and shame. Fear was a constant tool. The psychological warfare was backed by unimaginable cruelty; the use of **violent punishment and torture** was not arbitrary but a calculated method to create a state of constant terror and physical exhaustion. Through beatings, food and sleep deprivation, and solitary confinement and silence restrictions sometimes spanning months, they broke down the individual's mind and body, destroying their ability to think critically and leaving them completely dependent on the group for their survival and sense of self. The threat of separation from family and the trauma of sexual abuse were also powerful levers of emotional manipulation, creating a population locked in a state of fear and learned helplessness.

From my perspective, the outcome of the 1992 raids in Australia was a horrific tragedy and innocent children suffered unnecessarily due to Australian authorities' lack of cult expert involvement. Children gave no statements of abuse, and no convictions of wrongdoing were documented. This was a tragic but textbook example of the power of cult coercive control that counted on authorities' ignorance of what was actually taking place. These children were not simply "not talking"; Authorities had no specialised training on how to interview cult victims, especially minors. The minor cult children were psychologically incapable of identifying their own experiences as abusive or viewing the police as rescuers. Through years of intense indoctrination from birth, their minds were programmed with an 'us-versus-them' worldview, where any outsider, especially law enforcement, was painted as a demonic agent of the 'System' sent to destroy them. They had no external frame of reference to understand what was normal or that their experience was harmful; instead, they were filled with phobias about the outside world and taught that any punishment they received was divinely sanctioned discipline. To speak out against the group would have been an unimaginable act of betrayal against God, their parents, and their entire world, triggering immense, pre-programmed guilt and fear. Essentially, the authorities expected victims to behave like people with free will, but they were dealing with individuals whose identities and loyalties had been completely captured by the cult; the silence of those children was not evidence of innocence, but rather the most profound evidence of the cult's total control.

I would like to add that the Attorneys General of Utah and Arizona brought me and former defectors in to train their officials regarding how to evaluate and help build a case against Warren Jeffs, the "Prophet" of the Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints cult. Jeffs was ultimately tried and convicted and remains in jail for abuse of minors.

The cumulative effect of this integrated BITE Model of Authoritarian Control is, predictably, catastrophic. The combination of systemic sexual abuse, profound isolation, parental alienation, and relentless indoctrination backed by torture has left generations of former members, particularly those who grew up in such environments, with deep and lasting scars. In my work, I see the results: complex PTSD, severe identity confusion, chronic difficulty forming healthy relationships, and a profound sense of loss and betrayal. I have observed high suicide rates and early deaths in this population. The lack of a proper education or socialization leaves them at a severe disadvantage when they finally exit or escape, struggling to navigate a world they were indoctrinated to fear. The harm is not accidental; it is the direct and intended result of a system designed to dismantle the human personality for the benefit of the group and its leaders. I sincerely hope this testimony will aid the Inquiry in understanding these mechanisms and formulating protections for the future.

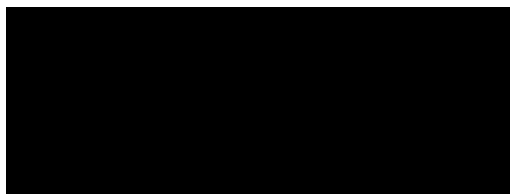
The long-term consequences for these survivors are staggering. Many require extensive and specialised therapeutic intervention to unpack the layers of trauma and learn basic social and emotional competencies. The Victorian government must understand that the legacy of groups like The Family is not simply a matter of differing beliefs but a catastrophic failure to protect the rights and well-being of its youngest members.

I urge this Inquiry to consider the profound and lasting damage inflicted by groups that operate with such systemic disregard for human rights, especially those of children. It is imperative that legislative and support frameworks are developed to protect children from authoritarian control and provide comprehensive support for those exiting such groups.

The experiences of those who survived The Children of God/The Family serve as a stark warning. Their suffering underscores the critical need for governments to take proactive measures to safeguard citizens from the profound harms inflicted by destructive cults. Support for survivors who were raised in this authoritarian cult is crucial, including access to resources, therapy and practical support.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this vital matter.

Sincerely,



Dr. Steven Hassan
Cult Expert and Licensed Mental Health Counselor
Founder, Freedom of Mind Resource Center

Freedom of Mind Resource Center. (n.d.). *Freedom of Mind Resource Center*.
<https://freedomofmind.coM>

15 June 2025

Inquiry into Cults and Fringe Groups
Victorian Legislative Assembly
Legal and Social Issues Committee
Parliament of Victoria, Australia

To the Esteemed Members of the Inquiry:

My name is Janja Lalich. I am Professor Emerita of Sociology and for the past almost 40 years, I have focused on the study of cults and coercive control and am regarded internationally as a leading scholar on the subject. I have also served as expert witness in 25 cult-related legal cases (civil and criminal) in the U.S., including custody cases. My research, including my work on children in cults published in my book *Escaping Utopia*, has provided me with extensive insight into the dynamics of high-demand groups. I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this vital inquiry into the profound and often devastating impact of such groups on individuals and society.

In this statement, I specifically address the Children of God (COG), later known as The Family or The Family International. COG represents a classic and deeply troubling case study of cultic dynamics and the impact on children born and/or raised within such a closed and restrictive environment. With its origins in the counter-cultural movement in the 1970s, the group rapidly devolved into a highly authoritarian and exploitative system, particularly for its most vulnerable members—the children. Based on decades of research, observation, and interviews with survivors (most of whom grew up in the group), in my opinion, COG was (and remains) one of the most extreme and harmful of the groups that emerged during that era. And I wish to stress here that my critique of COG is based on the group's behaviours and practices, not on its beliefs.

To truly understand the insidious nature of the indoctrination within groups like COG, it is necessary to apply a specific analytical framework. My research led me to develop the Bounded Choice model, which posits that individuals in cultic groups are not simply "brainwashed" in a passive sense. Instead, they make what they perceive to be rational choices within a severely limited and manipulated environment. This framework rests on four intersecting dimensions:

1. A charismatic authoritarian leader who becomes the object of devotion and the ultimate arbiter of truth.
2. A transcendent ideology that provides a totalizing worldview and a grand sense of purpose, explaining everything and justifying any action.
3. Systems of control (coercive persuasion) that meticulously monitor and manipulate members' behaviour, thoughts and emotions.
4. Systems of influence that reconstitute the individual's identity, sense of self and social reality entirely within the closed world of the group. (By "sense of self," I mean one's self-confidence, self-esteem, ability to trust, self-worth, purpose, and moral code.)

1

For children born in COG, the concept of "choice" was bounded to an extreme degree. They did not choose to join; rather, they were born (or in some cases brought at a young age) into a totalist reality wherein the above four dimensions orchestrated, controlled, monitored, and thereby defined their entire existence. COG's leader, David Berg ("Moses David"), was not a figure they chose to follow; rather, he was presented as a prophet, a god-like charismatic authority to be revered and whose word was absolute. His writings, the "Mo Letters," formed the group's transcendent ideology. This was not a belief system to be adopted but rather was regarded as the fundamental "Truth" of the universe that ultimately rationalized abhorrent behaviours and silenced dissent. For a child with no external frame of reference, questioning this extremist ideology was tantamount to questioning reality itself.

The systems of control (i.e., the rules and regulations, the expected behaviours) were all-encompassing. Children were isolated from mainstream society, cut off from non-member relatives, and denied formal education, reinforcing total dependence on the group. The systems of influence (psychological and emotional pressures and influences) were equally powerful. COG's practices demonstrate a chilling disregard for child welfare. For example, doctrines such as "Flirty Fishing" and the explicit sexualization of children (rebranded as "love sharing") were not presented as abusive but rather as righteous, divinely ordained acts. Within this closed environment, abuse became normalized and acceptable. The typical parent-child bond was either not allowed to develop or was systematically dismantled, replaced with unwavering allegiance to Berg and the group. Ultimately, these enforced and reinforced social-psychological dynamics resulted in a profound dependency that made independent thought nearly impossible. Reality was so meticulously constructed that these children lacked the tools to question, let alone leave, the only world they had ever known.

In sum, the Bounded Choice framework is essential for understanding why the widespread court cases against The Family/COG in the 1990s largely failed to deliver justice. Legal systems are predicated on concepts of free will and overt coercion (i.e., physical force). The courts and law enforcement were, and often still are, ill-equipped to grapple with the nuanced, social-psychological coercion that defines and characterizes the cult experience. The following are explanations of what occurred in the course cases.

- **Distorted Testimony:** When children from COG were brought before legal authorities, they were testifying from within their "bounded" reality. Taught that the group's sexual practices were normal and that outsiders ("Systemites") were evil, the children's inability to label their experiences as "abuse" in a way the court could understand resulted in their testimonies appearing as inconsistent or unreliable. They were not lying; they were articulating the only "truth" they had ever known.
- **The Illusion of Choice:** From the outside, it may have appeared that COG members were "choosing" to stay. The Bounded Choice model clarifies that these were not free choices. The psychological, emotional and social costs of leaving—losing one's entire identity, family, and support system to enter a world they were taught was demonic—were immense. A decision to leave was regarded as impossible for it represented either physical or metaphorical death. This powerful and over-arching coercion was invisible to a legal system looking for direct threats.

- **Lack of Corroborating Evidence:** The group's transient nature, including moving across international borders and separating children from their parents, made gathering physical evidence and consistent jurisdictional oversight nearly impossible. Therefore, court cases relied heavily on the testimony of survivors and current members. Such testimony was systematically undermined by the very nature of their indoctrination.

In essence, the justice system asked questions that the children of COG could not comprehend. The court sought clear victims; whereas in reality, it was confronted with individuals whose very sense of self and harm had been manipulated by the group's totalist ideology. When COG survivors do emerge, they face immense challenges: grappling with severe trauma, a lack of practical life skills, a distorted understanding of the world, as well as a profound lack of societal resources aimed at helping this vulnerable (and growing) population integrate into society.

It is imperative that this Inquiry recognizes the long-term, intergenerational trauma inflicted by groups like the Children of God. The harm is not solely psychological; it is also physical, emotional, educational, and economic, with consequences that ripple throughout entire lifetimes.

In sum, I urge the Committee to consider the testimonies of survivors with the utmost seriousness. By understanding the mechanisms of coercive control through frameworks like Bounded Choice, we can develop more effective strategies for prevention, intervention, and support for those who have been victimized. Thank you for your time and attention to this critical matter.

Sincerely,



Janja Lalich, PhD
Sociologist and Author
Founder and CEO, Lalich Center on Cults and Coercion

Books

Janja Writes: The Collected Works of Janja Lalich. In progress.
Take Back Your Life Workbook. In progress.
Recupera Tu Vida -- Spanish-language edition of *Take Back Your Life* (see next entry).
Take Back Your Life: Recovering from Cults and Abusive Relationships. 3rd edition updated and revised. Lalich Center on Cults and Coercion, 2023. In print and audio.
Escaping Utopia: Growing Up in a Cult, Getting Out, and Starting Over (coauthor Karla McLaren, M.Ed.). Routledge, 2017. In print and audio.
Bounded Choice: True Believers and Charismatic Cults. University of California Press, 2004.
"Crazy" Therapies: What Are They? Do They Work? (coauthor Margaret Thaler Singer). Jossey-Bass, 1996.
Cults in Our Midst: The Hidden Menace in Our Everyday Lives (coauthor Margaret Singer). Jossey-Bass, 1995.

3



Statement to the Victorian Government Inquiry into Cults and Fringe Groups
From: Dr. Stephen A. Kent, Emeritus Professor, Department of Sociology, University of
Alberta, Edmonton, Canada

Date: July 20, 2025

To the esteemed members of the Victorian Government Inquiry into Cults and Fringe
Groups,

I am Dr. Stephen A. Kent, an Emeritus Professor of the Department of Sociology at the
University of Alberta. My research has focused extensively on high-demand, alternative
religions, often referred to as "cults," and the social influences exerted upon their members. I
wish to provide a statement regarding the treatment of children within the group formerly
known as the Children of God (COG), and subsequently The Family.

I have published three single-authored and two co-authored articles on the Children of God,
and discussed the group in sections of eight other single-authored, co-authored, or
second-authored peer reviewed studies. In addition, two books contain sections on the
group.

My co-authored study, "Brainwashing and Re-Indoctrination Programs in the Children of
God/The Family" (*Cultic Studies Journal*, Vol. 17, 2000), details the severe and often brutal
experiences of preteen and teenage members within the organization's globally operated
"teen training and re-indoctrination camps and programs" during the late 1980s and early
1990s. These programs, which included facilities known as Teen Training Camps (TTCs)
and Victor programs, were established to address what The Family's leadership perceived
as a "crisis of the second generation"—a decline in commitment and enthusiasm among
children born to existing members.

Our research, based on extensive interviews with former members (whose accounts were
triangulated with other sources, including organizational publications and court documents),
demonstrates unequivocally that these programs fit the most restrictive social scientific
definition of "brainwashing facilities." This definition requires forcible confinement and
physical maltreatment, often amidst intense ideological training, social isolation, forced
confessions, and extremely hard physical labor.

Key findings from our research include:

* Widespread Implementation: Hundreds of young people were subjected to these programs
in numerous countries, including Australia, Brazil, Denmark, England, Italy, Japan, Macao
(China), Mexico, Norway, the Philippines, Scotland, Switzerland, and Thailand. Some young
people remained in these programs for years.

* **Coercion and Control:** COG leaders designed these camps to instill deep commitment among young people whose faith was wavering or who had not made intense emotional investments in the group's ideology. This coercive and manipulative program involved systematic efforts to subjugate individual will to the collective.

* **Physical and Psychological Abuse:** Accounts from former members consistently describe a regime of physical maltreatment, including severe beatings with paddles or boards. Punishments often included "silence restriction" (prohibiting communication), prolonged isolation, and pressured confessions of doubts and criticisms in publicly-exposed "Open Heart Reports."

* **Forced Labor:** Teens were subjected to grueling schedules of demanding physical labor, often for long hours, seven days a week, with constant adult surveillance.

* **Sexual Exploitation:** Disturbingly, our research also uncovered instances of pre-teen sexual sharing encouraged at some camps, and ongoing adult sexual exploitation of young girls, notably at Macao's Detention Teen program.

* **Judicial Corroboration:** The findings are reinforced by external sources, such as the 1995 British wardship court case involving David Berg's granddaughter, Merry Berg. Lord Justice Alan Ward described her ordeal as "barbaric and cruel" and a "form of torture," which included her confinement in the Macao Detention Teen Camp. The Family's leadership, including Berg's decades-long partner, Karen Zerby, later apologized for "harsh and unlovingly disciplined" young people, acknowledging "excessive corporal punishment, prolonged 'silence restriction' and/or isolation."

* **Deceptive Practices:** The Family has a documented policy of justifying deception to protect its interests, making the testimony of current members on such controversial subjects highly problematic. Conversely, former members, especially those seeking anonymity, have a strong incentive to provide accurate accounts, since they are free to speak honestly without fearing group retaliation.

In essence, The Family's teen programs constituted an invasion of personal freedom, designed to strip children of their individual identities and mold them to the group's image. These were not merely "discipline" programs; they were coercive re-education efforts aimed at ensuring compliance and commitment among a second generation that had not experienced the initial intense conversion of their parents.

My professional opinion is that the experiences of children in the Children of God/The Family, as documented in our study and corroborated by judicial findings and organizational admissions, represent a clear case of brainwashing as a social scientific concept. This context involves extreme social influence in a setting of confinement, physical coercion, and intense indoctrination.

Understanding such programs is crucial for inquiries like yours. The vulnerabilities of children within high-demand groups, and the potential for severe physical and psychological abuse under the guise of "training" or "discipline," demand rigorous examination and appropriate

governmental oversight. Support must be provided to the survivors of such programs to ameliorate the lifetime, psychological, physical and social impacts.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this critical issue.

Sincerely,



Stephen A. Kent (PhD)
Emeritus Professor, Department of Sociology
University of Alberta

Select Academic Publications:

Kent, Stephen A. 1994. "Misattribution and Social Control in the Children of God." *Journal of Religion and Health* 33(1): 29-43; Reprinted in *Spirituality in East and West* No. 1 (1997): 16-22.1994.

Kent, Stephen A. 1994. "Lustful Prophet: A Psychosexual Historical Study of the Children of God's Founder, David Berg." *Cultic Studies Journal* 11(2): 135-188.

Kent, Stephen A., and Deana Hall. 2000. "Brainwashing and Re-Indoctrination Programs in the Children of God/The Family." *Cultic Studies Journal* 17: 56-78.

Kent, Stephen A. 2004. "Generational Revolt by the Adult Children of First-Generation Members of the Children of God/The Family." *Cultic Studies Review* 3(1): 56-72.

Kent, Stephen A., and Jonathan Simmons. 2015. "An Expansion of the Rational Choice Approach: Social Control in the Children of God during the 1970s and 1980s." *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 6(1): 27-49. <https://jonsimulacrum.files.wordpress.com/2016/04/cog-and-rational-choice.pdf>.

Raine, Susan, and Stephen A. Kent. 2019. "The Grooming of Children for Sexual Abuse in Religious Settings: Unique Characteristics and Select Case Studies." *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 48: 180-189; <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2019.08.017>.