

NY must give child sex abuse victims more time

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As the legislature debates the Child Victims Act, astonishingly little has been said about the prevalence, effects, or economic and social costs of childhood sexual abuse. These demonstrate the urgent need for an extended statute of limitations so victims can achieve justice and heal.

The CDC reports that about one in five American children is sexually abused. So, in a classroom of twenty-five children, *five* will be abused before adulthood.

Abusers prey on the most susceptible, often choosing children already at risk: isolated, weaker, smaller, non-athletic, disabled, or from a disadvantaged minority. Victims may have troubled, addicted, or physically abusive families, or be separated from their parents. They look to other adults for solace, healing, advice, and emotional support. Abusers exploit these needs, professing to offer understanding and comfort while laying groundwork for victimization.

Common aftereffects of childhood sexual trauma include anxiety, depression, drug and alcohol addiction, prostitution, truancy, poor grades, and even suicide. These carry a huge social and financial cost to the State; a recent study in Australia (with approximately the same population as New York) found the real cost of child abuse in 2007 was between US\$7.7 and \$21.5 *billion*.

Since predators commonly hurt numerous victims, stopping even one offender may protect many children from abuse. But this is impossible when the time clock on access to justice runs out.

Victims are often criticized and derided for not coming forward sooner. This is because they usually know their victimizers, most of whom are either

family members or caretakers in positions of power and trust -- teachers, scout leaders, babysitters, coaches, clergy, camp counselors, health care professionals, and others. Abusing their positions, they betray children's trust to satisfy their own needs without regard for their victims. This betrayal creates shaky foundations for the children's future relationships. Frightened of closeness, they often stay isolated and distant.

Shame also silences victims, who typically minimize their trauma for decades as a means of warding off painful humiliation. They also fear disclosing abuse because they have no faith they'll be believed. And for good reason. Stories abound of children being told they're inventing dirty lies about pillars of the community, or, worse, being blamed for "seducing" these adults.

Abusers also keep their victims quiet with threats of harm against the children or their families. They may even be told they'll be taken from their homes and put in foster care or prison if they tell.

So, they desperately try to forget what happened. Research has long confirmed the capacity of the human brain to stop conscious recall of traumatic information. When memories pierce victims' consciousness, they rarely connect long ago abuse to currently enduring symptoms until well into adulthood. In war veterans, holocaust survivors, and even crime victims, the brains' ability to protect itself by blocking unwanted memories is well documented.

Valid claims of recalled memories have also been widely noted; Brown University's Ross Cheit has identified numerous such cases at his website. False claims of childhood sexual abuse are exceedingly rare and are often detectable. But, while any law providing a pathway to justice can be violated by frauds, it simply isn't responsible public policy to prevent access to justice for all victims in order to avoid the atypical false case.

When victims come forward, institutions perpetuate the silencing of victims by stonewalling, disavowing culpability, and denying child sexual abuse exists under their auspices. Schools, athletic organizations, religious institutions, scouting and camping groups, and others unjustly try to insulate themselves from responsibility for the harmful behavior of people who work for them. So, victims are retraumatized, betrayed again by institutions that tolerated abuse.

This brings us to the larger institution, the State. The current statute of limitations for sexual abuse, five years after age 18, is woefully inadequate for victims' legitimate needs. It encourages abusers to increase their silencing efforts, ensuring the child stays quiet long enough for the clock to run out. It also gives institutions incentive to provide only temporary remedies and support for victims -- just long enough for the statute to expire.

A short limitation period punishes victims for their blameless role in becoming silenced while rewarding offenders for choosing children as their victims. It therefore makes sense to create a one-year window in which victims can charge predators and any organizations that demonstrably shielded them. People disenfranchised by the current statute should be permitted to get redress for wrongs done to them.

Newsday's online poll indicates that 85% of responders agree the statute of limitations must be lengthened until victims are more clearly old enough to face their abusers and the institutions shielding them. These men and women were abused as children by sexual predators, and then again by institutions that countenanced crimes. New York State must not revictimize them by continuing to protect predators and institutions.