

Sentencing trends in
the higher courts of
Victoria
2009–10 to 2013–14

June 2015
No. 179

Persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16

Introduction

This Sentencing Snapshot describes sentencing outcomes¹ for the offence of persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 in the County Court of Victoria between 2009–10 and 2013–14.² Adjustments made by the Court of Appeal to sentence or conviction as at June 2014 have been incorporated into the data in this Snapshot.

Detailed data on [persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16](#) and other offences are available on [SACStat – Higher Courts](#).

A person who is involved in at least three relevant sexual offences with a child under the age of 16 over a specific period is guilty of the offence of persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16. It is not necessary to prove any of the acts with the same degree of specificity as to the date, time, place, circumstances, or occasion as would be required if each act were charged as a separate offence.

Persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 is an indictable offence and carries a maximum penalty of 25 years' imprisonment³ and/or a fine of 3,000 penalty units.⁴ Indictable offences are more serious offences triable before a judge and jury in the County or Supreme Court.

Persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 was the principal offence⁵ in 0.4% of cases sentenced in the higher courts between 2009–10 and 2013–14.

People sentenced

From 2009–10 to 2013–14, 43 people were sentenced in the higher courts for a principal offence of persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16.

Figure 1 shows the number of people sentenced for the principal offence of persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 by financial year. There were 9 people sentenced for this offence in 2013–14, down by 2 people from the previous year. The number of people sentenced was highest in 2009–10 (14 people).

Sentence types and trends

Figure 2 shows the total number of people sentenced for persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 and the number that received an immediate custodial sentence. An immediate custodial sentence is one that involves at least some element of immediate (as opposed to wholly suspended) imprisonment or detention.⁶

Figure 1: The number of people sentenced for persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 by financial year, 2009–10 to 2013–14

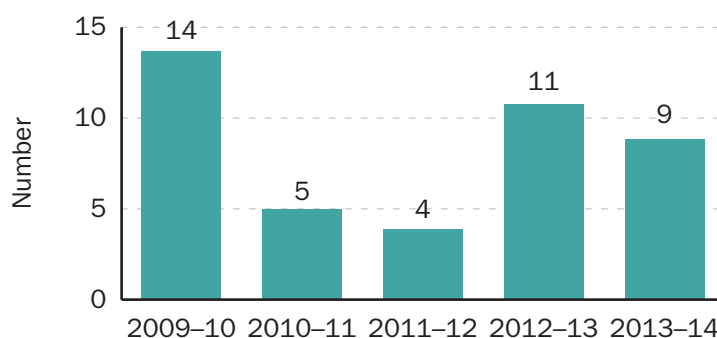
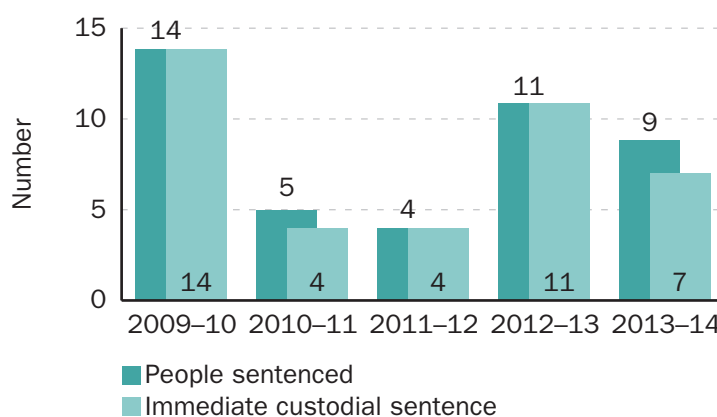


Figure 2: The number of people sentenced for persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 and the number that received an immediate custodial sentence, 2009–10 to 2013–14



Over the five-year period, 93% of people were given an immediate custodial sentence. This peaked at 100% in 2009–10, 2011–12, and 2012–13 before decreasing to 78% (7 of 9) in 2013–14.

Table 1 shows the number of people sentenced for persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 from 2009–10 to 2013–14 by the types of sentences imposed.

Over the five-year period, the majority of the people sentenced for persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 received a period of imprisonment (93% or 40 of 43 people).

The number of people receiving imprisonment for persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 was lowest during 2010–11 and 2011–12 (4 people) and highest during 2009–10 (14 people). The percentage of people receiving imprisonment was lowest during 2013–14 (78%) and highest during 2009–10, 2011–12, and 2012–13 (100%).

Table 1: The number and percentage of people sentenced for persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 by sentence type, 2009–10 to 2013–14

Sentence type	2009–10	2010–11	2011–12	2012–13	2013–14	Total
Imprisonment	14 (100%)	4 (80%)	4 (100%)	11 (100%)	7 (78%)	40 (93%)
Wholly suspended sentence	0 (–)	0 (–)	0 (–)	0 (–)	1 (11%)	1 (2%)
Mix (fine and adjourned undertaking)	0 (–)	1 (20%)	0 (–)	0 (–)	0 (–)	1 (2%)
Community correction order	0 (–)	0 (–)	0 (–)	0 (–)	1 (11%)	1 (2%)
People sentenced	14	5	4	11	9	43

Age and gender of people sentenced

Data on the age and gender of people sentenced for persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 are available on SACStat – Higher Courts.

Principal and total effective sentences

Two methods for describing sentence types and lengths are examined in this section. One relates to the principal sentence and examines sentences for the offence at a charge level. The other relates to the total effective sentence and examines sentences for the offence at a case level.

The principal sentence is the individual sentence imposed for the charge that is the principal offence.⁷

The total effective sentence in a case with a single charge is the principal sentence. The total effective sentence in a case with multiple charges is the sentence that results from the court ordering the individual sentences for each charge to be served concurrently (at the same time) or wholly or partially cumulatively (one after the other).

In many cases, the total effective sentence imposed on a person will be longer than the principal sentence. Principal sentences for persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 must be considered in this broader context. The following sections analyse the use of imprisonment for the offence of persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 from 2009–10 to 2013–14.

Principal sentence of imprisonment

A total of 40 people received a principal sentence of imprisonment for persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 between 2009–10 and 2013–14.

Figure 3 shows these people by the length of their imprisonment term. Imprisonment terms ranged from 1 year and 6 months to 12 years, while the median length of imprisonment was 6 years (meaning that half of the imprisonment terms were shorter than 6 years and half were longer).

The most common ranges of imprisonment length imposed were 5 to less than 6 years and 6 to less than 7 years (8 people each).

As shown in Figure 4, the average length of imprisonment term imposed on people sentenced for persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 ranged from 5 years and 5 months in 2013–14 to 8 years and 6 months in 2011–12.

Other offences finalised at the same hearing

Often people prosecuted for persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 face multiple charges, which are finalised at the same hearing. This section looks at the range of offences for which offenders have been sentenced at the same time as being sentenced for the principal offence of persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16.

Figure 5 shows the number of people sentenced for the principal offence of persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 by the total number of offences for which sentences were set. The number of sentenced offences per person ranged from 1 to 20, while the median was 1 offence. There were 22 people (51.2%) sentenced for the single offence of persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16. The average number of offences per person sentenced for persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 was 3.33.

Figure 3: The number of people sentenced to imprisonment for persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 by length of imprisonment term, 2009–10 to 2013–14

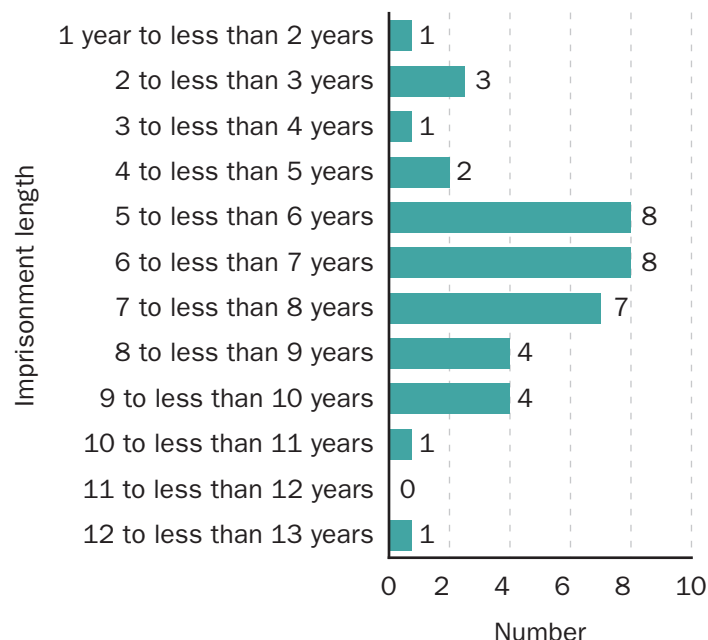


Figure 4: The average length of imprisonment term imposed on people sentenced for persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16, 2009–10 to 2013–14

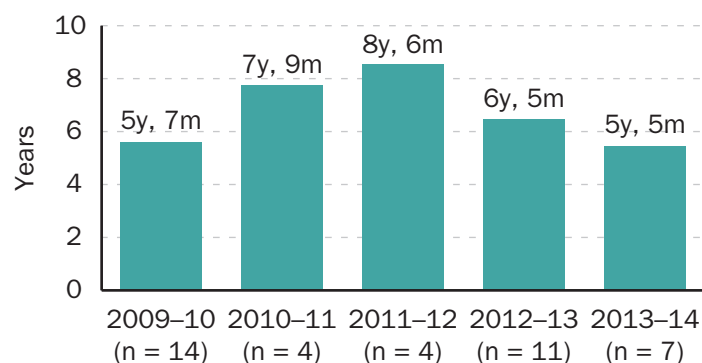
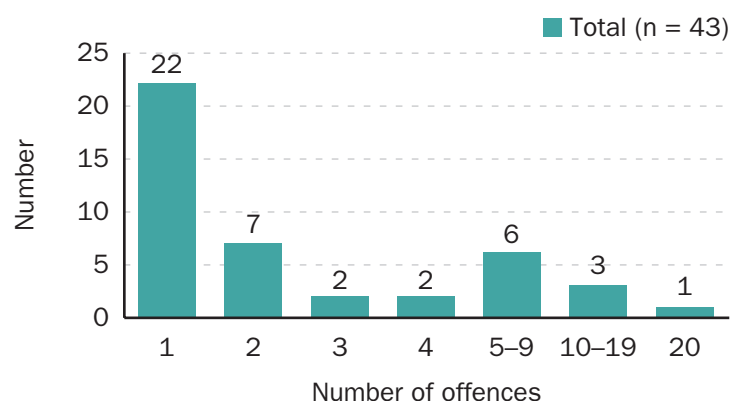


Figure 5: The number of people sentenced for the principal offence of persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 by the number of sentenced offences per person, 2009–10 to 2013–14



While Figure 5 presents the number of sentenced offences for people sentenced for persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16, Table 2 shows what the accompanying offences were. It shows the number and percentage of people sentenced for the 10 most common offences. The last column sets out the average number of offences sentenced per person. For example, 4 of the total 43 people (9.3%) also received sentences for making child pornography. On average, they were sentenced for 1 count of making child pornography.

Table 2: The number and percentage of people sentenced for the principal offence of persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 by the most common offences sentenced and the average number of those offences sentenced, 2009–10 to 2013–14

Offence	No. of cases	% of cases	Average no. of proven offences per case
1. Persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16	43	100.0	1.12
2. Indecent act with or in the presence of a child under 16	9	20.9	4.33
3. Sexual penetration with a child aged 10/12 to 16	4	9.3	4.50
4. Make or produce child pornography	4	9.3	1.00
5. Incest – with own child or child of spouse	3	7.0	4.00
6. Indecent assault	3	7.0	1.67
7. Knowingly possess child pornography	3	7.0	1.00
8. Sexual penetration with a child aged 10/12 to 16 under care/supervision/authority	2	4.7	1.50
9. Use a carriage service for child pornography material	1	2.3	2.00
10. Receive payment for sex services provided by a child	1	2.3	1.00
People sentenced	43	100.0	3.33

Total effective sentence of imprisonment

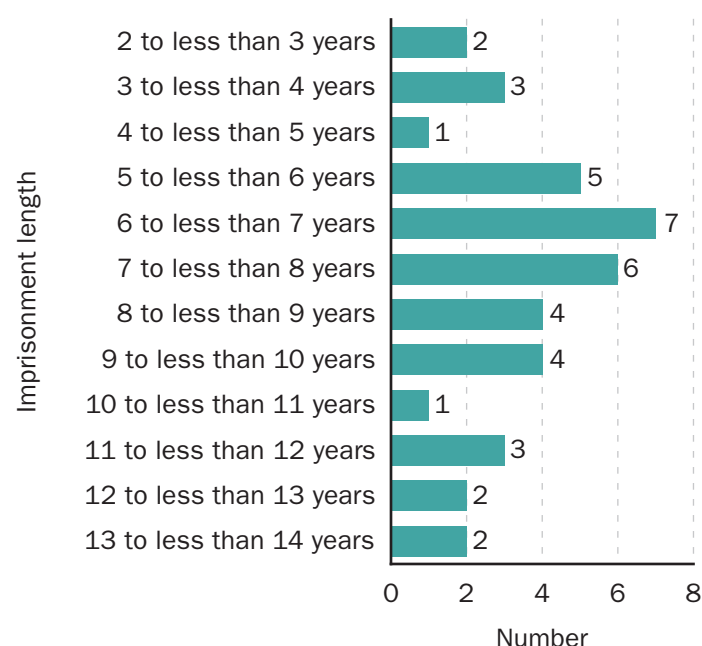
There were 40 people given a total effective sentence of imprisonment. Figure 6 shows the number of people sentenced to imprisonment for persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 between 2009–10 and 2013–14 by length of total effective sentence. The length of total effective sentences ranged from 2 years and 6 months to 13 years and 6 months, while the median total effective length of imprisonment was 7 years (meaning that half of the total effective sentence lengths were below 7 years and half were above).

The most common range of total effective imprisonment length was 6 to less than 7 years (7 people).

Non-parole period

When a person is sentenced to a term of immediate imprisonment of one year or more, the court has the discretion to fix a non-parole period. Where a non-parole period is fixed, the person must serve that period before becoming eligible for parole. Where no non-parole period is set by the court, the person must serve the entirety of the imprisonment term.

Figure 6: The number of people sentenced to imprisonment for persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 by length of total effective imprisonment term, 2009–10 to 2013–14



Under section 11(4) of the *Sentencing Act 1991* (Vic), if a court sentences an offender to imprisonment in respect of more than one offence, the non-parole period set by the court must be in respect of the total effective sentence of imprisonment that the offender is liable to serve under all the sentences imposed. In many cases, the non-parole period will be longer than the individual principal sentence for persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16. Sentences and non-parole periods must be considered in this broader context.

All of the 40 people who were sentenced to imprisonment for persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 were eligible for and given a non-parole period. Figure 7 shows the number of people sentenced to imprisonment for persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 between 2009–10 and 2013–14 by length of non-parole period. Non-parole periods ranged from 10 months to 11 years and 6 months, while the median length of the non-parole period was 4 years and 9 months (meaning that half of the non-parole periods were below 4 years and 9 months and half were above).

The most common range of non-parole period imposed was 3 to less than 4 years (8 people).

Total effective sentences of imprisonment and non-parole periods

Figure 8 presents the average length of total effective sentences of imprisonment compared with the average length of non-parole periods from 2009–10 to 2013–14.

From 2009–10 to 2013–14, the average length of total effective sentences for all people ranged from 6 years in 2013–14 to 9 years and 11 months in 2010–11. Over the same period, the average length of non-parole periods ranged from 3 years and 11 months in 2013–14 to 7 years and 11 months in 2010–11.

Total effective sentence of imprisonment by non-parole period

Data on the total effective sentence of imprisonment by non-parole period for persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 are available on [SACStat – Higher Courts](#).

Non-imprisonment sentences

Data on the length of non-imprisonment sentence types, such as community correction orders, suspended sentences, and fines, for persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 are available on [SACStat – Higher Courts](#).

Figure 7: The number of people sentenced to imprisonment for persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 by length of non-parole period, 2009–10 to 2013–14

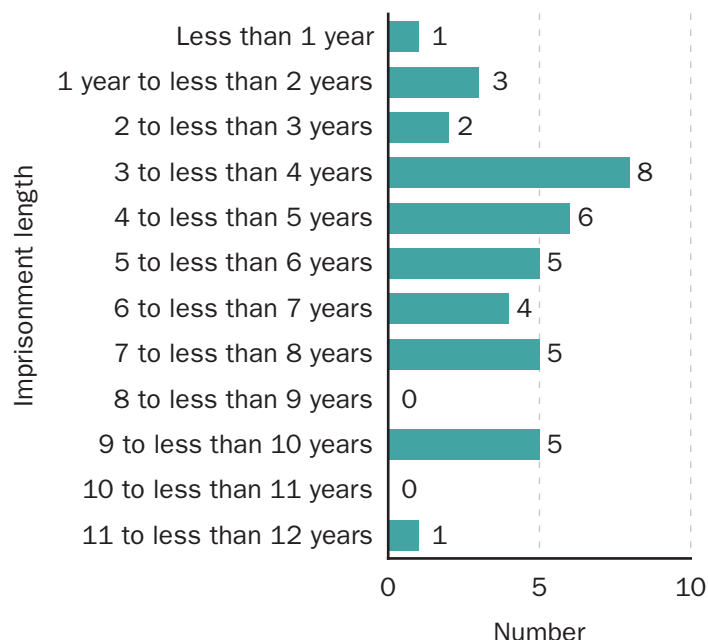
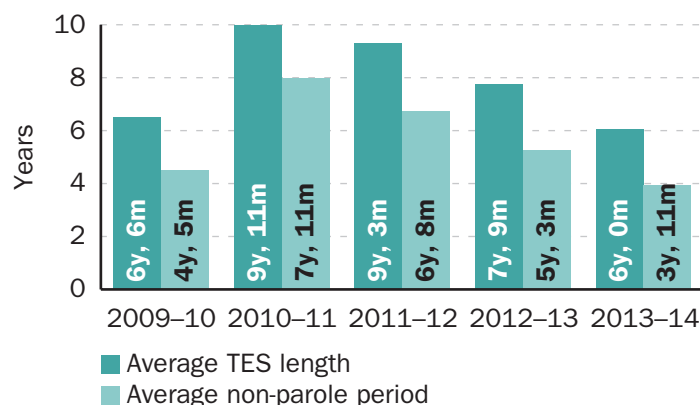


Figure 8: The average total effective sentence and the average non-parole period imposed on people sentenced to imprisonment for persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16, 2009–10 to 2013–14



Summary

Between 2009–10 and 2013–14, 43 people were sentenced for persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 in the higher courts. Of these people, 40 (93%) were given a principal sentence of imprisonment.

The number and range of offences for which people with a principal offence of persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 were sentenced help explain why imprisonment sentence lengths were longer for the total effective sentence than for the principal sentence. The median total effective imprisonment length was 7 years while the median principal imprisonment length was 6 years.

Total effective imprisonment lengths ranged from 2 years and 6 months to 13 years and 6 months, and non-parole periods (where imposed) ranged from 10 months to 11 years and 6 months.

Endnotes

1. This series of reports includes custodial and non-custodial supervision orders imposed under Part 5 of the *Crimes (Mental Impairment and Unfitness to be Tried) Act 1997* (Vic) as sentencing orders and in the count of people sentenced. These orders are not sentencing orders, as they are imposed in cases where the defendant is found to be unfit to stand trial or not guilty because of mental impairment. However, they are included in this report as they are an important form of disposition of criminal charges.

This Sentencing Snapshot is an update of Sentencing Snapshot no. 148, which describes sentencing trends for persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16 between 2007–08 and 2011–12.
2. Data on first instance sentence outcomes presented in this Snapshot were obtained from the Strategic Analysis and Review Team at Court Services Victoria. The Sentencing Advisory Council collected data on appeal outcomes from the [Australasian Legal Information Institute](#). The Sentencing Advisory Council regularly undertakes extensive quality control measures for current and historical data. While every effort is made to ensure that the data analysed in this report are accurate, the data are subject to revision.
3. *Crimes Act 1958* (Vic) s 47A.
4. The value of a penalty unit changes each year and can be found in the Victorian Government Gazette and on the [Victorian Legislation and Parliamentary Documents website](#).
5. If a person is sentenced for a case with a single charge, the offence for that charge is the principal offence. If a person is sentenced for more than one charge in a single case, the principal offence is the offence for the charge that attracted the most serious sentence according to the sentencing hierarchy.
6. Immediate custodial sentences included imprisonment.
7. Refer to endnote 5.

SACStat – Higher Courts Persistent sexual abuse of a child under 16

http://www.sentencingcouncil.vic.gov.au/sacstat/higher_courts/HC_6231_47A_1.html

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