Safeguarding children in closed communities

Evidence brief

Acknowledgements

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Summary of key Insights

- This evidence brief presents findings from a review of online international literature on child protection responses in closed communities that exhibit coercive and controlling ways of managing their members.[1] This brief follows an earlier internal evidence scan from 2020 – Building safety in a closed community.

- The evidence brief is intended to support Oranga Tamariki kaimahi to help develop a holistic approach to care and protection needs, and oranga of the children in closed communities. The insights presented in the brief are based primarily on online articles on child protection responses in closed communities overseas and cover the following broad areas:

    - the impact of coercive control on children in closed community settings
    - knowledge and skills that child protection workers need for their work with coercively controlled closed communities
    - intervention strategies that other jurisdictions have successfully implemented for safeguarding children in such communities
    - institutional responses expected of the group on reporting of abuse and exploitation.

    We didn't find studies that examined intervention strategies to handle child labour concerns in closed communities.

- Children raised in communities where religious norms are interpreted coercively can have profound and long-lasting psychological, physical, and emotional impacts. The way in which religious authority overlays parental authority can serve to compound the coercive effects.

- Members of closed communities face extraordinary barriers to understanding and reporting abuse and exploitation due to hierarchical structure and dynamics in the community. Furthermore, a lack of trust and fear of people external to the group is engrained in children raised in the coercive cult environment. This makes it harder for child protection workers to intervene and safeguard children.

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[1] The term 'closed community' is used in this report to refer to a community with people/members living together as a group in a location separated from the mainstream community in the area. A closed community may include a religious group, intentional group or cult.

- Child protection workers should have the knowledge of specific norms and practices in closed communities and an understanding of their faith, culture, and environment specific to the community. They need specialised skills of developing trust and effectively engaging the family within their cultural norms and the knowledge of formal child interviewing techniques. An understanding that the dangers of power differentials and social workers' own religious biases could hamper child protection investigations is essential. Furthermore, social workers may need to screen cases differently and require careful supervision to ensure that investigations and interviews conducted are neutral, objective, and nonsuggestive. Social workers need to look at religious influences as objectively as possible so that abuse and coercion is not accepted.

- Successful interventions to safeguard children require time and strategies to develop working alliances and trusting relationships with victims, their parents and the community. It may require identification and use of agents – internal or external to the closed community – to adopt a nonconfrontational stance, and rapport building by offering general services, such as parenting or child development education, in a way acceptable to the group. An early community planning and partnership development with local social service agencies that are most likely needed to provide support services is important.

- Interventions to support potential victims of coercive control should encourage them to seek specialist advice and members to move from being silent witnesses to active allies for victims. Any intervention should be provided with victims' consent and at their pace, not putting them at further risk. Empowering victims that disclose abuse is key to their recovery. For leaders, they need support to have a clear directive from them that victims and their dependents are supported.

- Closed communities should be provided with regular and systematic child protection training which should be implemented comprehensively and consistently. The training should include:

  - content that assists individuals to identify the signs of abuse and control and to know how to react in a timely and effective manner, with an emphasis on reporting to statutory authorities promptly for harm
  - different levels of training targeting members at all levels including those who hold key responsibilities within the group.

- Parents have a buffering role to protect their child against leaders' or the group's abusive behaviours. In a closed community context, finding ways to work with parents directly and empowering them as being responsible for the safety and development of their children may work. Such intervention

strategies will likely undermine the usual controlled channels of communication by which leaders gain greater control over followers.

- Child protection work in a closed community must utilise and integrate a variety of experts working in the children's sector. This is important because reported abuse claims may not be identified and investigated through normal avenues and social contacts. When there is a large number of families involved, daily and regular communication and planning among the specialised and integrated service team is crucial.

- Victims and advocates of coercive control ask for stronger institutional responses and accountability mechanisms, including mandatory reporting in a faith or religious community context. Inadequate institutional response by leaders and those in leadership roles provide more opportunities for abuse to happen.

- Legal tools for child protection should be accompanied by implementation strategies for raising public awareness about their rights and coercive control, changing attitudes, and providing education and support for parents.

Background

- This evidence brief presents findings from a review of online literature on child protection responses in closed communities overseas, such as a cult type isolated religious group. In 2020, the Evidence Centre prepared a summary of evidence around child sexual abuse in closed communities and how to build safety in such communities ([Building safety in a closed community - Evidence Scan.pdf_2020) as an internal document for Oranga Tamariki staff](). Following from that, we carried out this second literature scan that focuses mainly on child maltreatment responses in the closed communities that exhibit coercive and controlling ways of managing its members.

- The evidence brief is intended to support Oranga Tamariki kaimahi to help develop a holistic approach to care and protection needs and the oranga of tamariki residing in closed communities.

Key points

Coercive control can harm children and young people with long lasting effects

- The literature documents that children and young people can be direct victims or survivors of coercive control and they can experience it in ways similar to adults, such as, feeling confused and afraid, living constrained lives, and being entrapped and harmed by the perpetrator. Parental coercive control can harm children and young people emotionally, psychologically, physically, socially, and educationally. [2] The way in which religious authority overlays parental authority can serve to compound the coercive effects. Some examples of coercive control by religious leaders in a faith-oriented community context include: drawing on the authority of office, on networks, on charisma and community leadership roles to coerce, and to conceal that coercion; supporting coercive behaviours; silencing and minimising victims of coercive control; punishing those who seek to support victims; non-intervention on reported abuse or exploitation; and endangerment through

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[2] Katz, et. al. 2020. [When Coercive Control Continues to Harm Children: Post-Separation Fathering, Stalking and Domestic Violence (researchgate.net)]()

unsafe intervention.[3] When children are raised in an environment where faith is interpreted coercively, the impact can be profound and long-lasting. For example, children raised in a coercive faith context may experience long term mental health issues.[4] Similarly, International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) reports that the expression of emotions is coercively denied within the cult environment, which supresses the child's creativity, in addition to cognitive and emotional suppression.[5]

Closed communities are distinct populations with unusual barriers to child protection; statutory workers need specialised skills to effectively engage children and families in those communities

- **The structure and the dynamics of closed communities present extraordinary challenges for victims**. Characteristics of closed communities – such as physical isolation, dependency on the group, hierarchy and the standing of the institution over individuals, coercive control by leaders, denial of the possibility of wrong-doing by members, obedience to and trust in the hierarchy or leadership, the leaders' positions as God's representatives whose purity allows them to do anything, forgiveness and loyalty considerations – pose greater risks for child maltreatment.[6] [7] For example, the concept of forgiveness can be misused, both to put pressure on victims not to report their

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[3] Mulvihill, N., Aghtaie, N., Matolcsi, A. and Hester, M., 2022. Faith and Coercive Control: A briefing for faith communities and for practitioners working with victim-survivors of coercive control. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol.
Mulvihill_et_al_2022_Faith_and_Coercive_Control_Practitioner_Briefing.pdf (bris.ac.uk)

[4] Mulvihill, N., Aghtaie, N., Matolcsi, A. and Hester, M., 2022. Faith and Coercive Control: A briefing for faith communities and for practitioners working with victim-survivors of coercive control. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol.
Mulvihill_et_al_2022_Faith_and_Coercive_Control_Practitioner_Briefing.pdf (bris.ac.uk)

5 International Cultic Studies Association (Undated). What Do We Need to Know About Being Born or Raised in a Cultic Environment. Cult Info Since 1979 - What Do We Need to Know About Being Born or Raised in a Cultic Environment? (icsahome.com)

[6] Evidence Centre (2020). Building safety in closed communities – Evidence Scan. Unpublished. Building safety in a closed community - Evidence Scan 2020

[7] Bardin, L. (2005). "Child Protection in an Authoritarian Community; Culture Clash and Systematic Weakness." Cultic Studies Review 4(3). ICSA Articles 1 - Child Protection in an Authoritarian Community (icsahome.com)

abuse and to justify failures by religious leaders to take appropriate action where allegations have been made.[8]

- Child protection workers must balance their dual function as a supportive figure for parents and as the representative of an authority figure. In the context of closed communities, Casoni, et al. (2015) document the tough role of child protection workers in the Baptist Church of Windsor in Canada, which saw a successful state intervention against the group.[9] Social workers assisted parents in the group to help juxtapose the child protection services' arguments against corporal punishment with the leader's justifications for it. The social workers provided information about the normal development of children and presented the parents with other ways to discipline them. They also assisted parents in developing better parenting skills, teaching them how to encourage and support the development of their children in general. As supportive figures, the social workers helped those parents who did not have a voice earlier or were in disagreement with their leaders' views or had doubts. Mulvihill (2022) from their research study on coercive control in faith communities recommend having a dedicated resource or supporter for the victims from within the group for non-judgmental support and a listening ear.[10]

- A lack of trust and fear of outsiders that is deeply rooted in members within a closed community group, is often a barrier to report and validate abuse. Children that are born and raised in a closed community develop their personality within the cult environment, unlike adults who may have joined cults and bring with them a pre-cult personality and identity that they can then reconnect to when they leave the cult. Furthermore, children are taught that the world inside the cult is good, while the world outside is evil. It's possible that the children's behaviour are scripted and dishonest when they come into

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[8] Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse, 2021. Child protection in religious organisations and settings: Investigation report. publishing.service.gov.uk
[9] Casoni et. al. (2015) carried out a case study on the BCW evolution toward an authoritarian and cult-type functioning wherein, isolated from their social environment, members resorted to severe child physical abuse. The authors analysed the group's struggles with the law and with child protection agencies, and their choice of intervention. (Casoni et. al. (2015). State intervention against the Baptist Church of Windsor: From law-abiding citizens to perpetrators of severe child physical abuse. In *International Journal of Cultic Studies*. Vol 6. CASONI1.pdf (infosecte.org)
[10] Mulvihill, N., Aghtaie, N., Matolcsi, A. and Hester, M., 2022. Faith and Coercive Control: A briefing for faith communities and for practitioners working with victim-survivors of coercive control. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol.
Mulvihill_et_al_2022_Faith_and_Coercive_Control_Practitioner_Briefing.pdf (bris.ac.uk)

contact with outsiders.[11] In Bardin's study (2009)[12] of two groups of closed communities in the United States, which the author referred to as Isolated Authoritarian Groups, at least half the participants from those groups who said they were maltreated in their childhood did not tell anyone. Children in both groups mistrusted child protection workers due to the group indoctrination to fear outsiders. Children were also unsure if they would be kept safe or be punished for talking about the abuse. Mistrust of external agencies as a barrier to reporting of abuse in religious communities is also identified in an investigation report by the UK Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse (2021) investigation report.[13]

- Child protective services should provide experienced workers with specialised training for these particularly challenging cases. Religious dimensions add elements of complexity to child harm cases, particularly child sexual-abuse cases in closed communities, further to all of the disturbing aspects that exist in cases where religion is not a factor.[14] The findings from Bardin (2009) make it clear that not only victims, but also the child protection workers engaging with them 'face more barriers and deserve more help'.[15]

- Skills required of child protection workers include the ability to develop trust and engage the family within their cultural norms[16], and the knowledge of formal child interviewing techniques[17]. Training staff about the dangers of power differentials in sects is also recommended.[18] Bardin (2005), from their research in the isolated, authoritarian culture in polygamous Mormon

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[11] International Cultic Studies Association (Undated). What Do We Need to Know About Being Born or Raised in a Cultic Environment. Cult Info Since 1979 - What Do We Need to Know About Being Born or Raised in a Cultic Environment? (icsahome.com)

[12] Bardin, L. (2009). Recognizing the working with an underserved culture: Child protection and cults. Journal of Public Child Welfare. Vol 3.

[13] Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse, 2021. Child protection in religious organisations and settings: Investigation report. publishing.service.gov.uk

[14] Willey, A. & Kent, S.A. (2017). Prosecuting Child Sexual Abuse in Alternative Religions. In *International Journal of Cultic Studies*. Vol 8. Prosecuting-Child-Sexual-Abuse-ICSA.pdf (ualberta.ca)

[15] Bardin, L. (2009). Recognizing the working with an underserved culture: Child protection and cults. Journal of Public Child Welfare. Vol 3.

[16] Bardin, L. (2009). Recognizing the working with an underserved culture: Child protection and cults. Journal of Public Child Welfare. Vol 3.

[17] Willey, A. & Kent, S.A. (2017). Prosecuting Child Sexual Abuse in Alternative Religions. In *International Journal of Cultic Studies*. Vol 8. Prosecuting-Child-Sexual-Abuse-ICSA.pdf (ualberta.ca)

[18] Kendall (Spiritual Abuse Resources - Physical Child Abuse in Sects)

communities (PMCs) notes concerns about accusations of religious bias and fear of a PMC's political power which had the potential to hamper child protection and criminal investigations.[19]

Providing effective services requires understanding of the client's culture, faith and environment

- **Social workers need as much information as possible about specific group norms and practices**. A family's excessive dependence on an authority figure, likely protestation of interference with their beliefs and unusual degree of isolation means that workers may need to screen cases differently. Child protection workers' lack of cultural knowledge means that assessments can be inaccurate.[20] A lesson learnt from the work of a child protection agency with the Lev Tahor community in Ontario Canada showed the importance of the cultural knowledge of social workers.[21] The intervention and assessment was done in such a way that the agency honoured community mores of education, child rearing, and rights to individual and religious freedoms while balancing of the rights of children to their religious and cultural beliefs and the "need for protection" within the closed community relative to child development, socialisation, and educational needs.

- The literature also stresses the ability of social workers to recognise their own culture, values and beliefs as being important, as such factors can obscure the workers' interpretations and conclusions, and influence services that should be provided. [22]

[19] Bardin, L. (2005). "Child Protection in an Authoritarian Community; Culture Clash and Systematic Weakness." Cultic Studies Review 4(3). ICSA Articles 1 - Child Protection in an Authoritarian Community (icsahome.com)

[20] Bardin, L. (2005). "Child Protection in an Authoritarian Community; Culture Clash and Systematic Weakness." Cultic Studies Review 4(3). ICSA Articles 1 - Child Protection in an Authoritarian Community (icsahome.com)

[21] Doig. S. (2018). Lev Tahor: Child Maltreatment in an Insular Community *In* Child Maltreatment in Insular & Isolated Communities. Prepared by the Child Welfare League of America and The Field Center ChildMaltreatmentEssays_final.pdf (cwla.org)

[22] Bardin, L. (2009). Recognizing the working with an underserved culture: Child protection and cults. Journal of Public Child Welfare. Vol 3.

- **Cultural knowledge and understanding of the groups' beliefs is essential also to establish a trusting relationship** with members of the group. [23] [24] Bardin (2009) notes that workers need not endorse or accept group beliefs, but should avoid criticism or judgment, refrain from promoting their own beliefs, and absorb carefully as much detail as they can.

- **Careful supervision is** essential to ensure that investigations and interviews conducted are neutral, objective, and nonsuggestive. [25] Adults' influence of children's accounts is one of many factors that may impact the reliability of children's reports of abuse and most cases unfold as the cases progress. Moreover, it is crucial that these cases are handled as quickly as possible because early conversations help with child's account of the abuse incident.[26]

Social workers need to look at religious influences as objectively as possible so that abuse is not accepted

- **Child protection workers may assess cases either too leniently or too harshly.** Social workers tend to be strengths-based in their approach, focusing on the helpfulness rather than the harmfulness of client's spiritual or religious beliefs, practices, or support systems. This means that discussions with parents may focus only on the good parts of religion and ways that their religious beliefs made them better parents.[27] On the other hand, it is possible that social workers judge and make assessments of abuse too harshly or too lightly, mainly due to a lack of knowledge on how to engage with a closed community. From the work with the Amish community in Ontario, Harder (2018) notes that misrepresentation of the group by media and not knowing how to engage with this unique group meant that child welfare and other professional systems toggle between judging cases too harshly or too

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[23] Doig. S. (2018). Lev Tahor: Child Maltreatment in an Insular Community *In* Child Maltreatment in Insular & Isolated Communities. Prepared by the Child Welfare League of America and The Field Center ChildMaltreatmentEssays_final.pdf (cwla.org)

[24] Bardin, L. (2009). Recognizing the working with an underserved culture: Child protection and cults. Journal of Public Child Welfare. Vol 3.

[25] Willey, A. & Kent, S.A. (2017). Prosecuting Child Sexual Abuse in Alternative Religions. In *International Journal of Cultic Studies*. Vol 8. Prosecuting-Child-Sexual-Abuse-ICSA.pdf (ualberta.ca)

[26] Willey, A. & Kent, S.A. (2017). Prosecuting Child Sexual Abuse in Alternative Religions. In *International Journal of Cultic Studies*. Vol 8. Prosecuting-Child-Sexual-Abuse-ICSA.pdf (ualberta.ca)

[27] (www.ialworkpodcast.com/breakingtheirwill.mp3

lightly—both of which are a disservice to Amish children, families, and communities.[28]

A successful intervention requires time and strategies to develop working alliances and trusting relationships with victims and parents of the abused children

- The time required to build relationships, and identification and utilisation of agents to adopt a nonconfrontational stance can be substantial. [29] These aspects were key in the success of the state intervention at the Baptist Church of Windsor (BCW) in Canada in which Child Protection Services were portrayed as 'mortal enemies' of the BCW. The author emphasises the clinical ability of the social workers who contacted the individual BCW families: the social workers succeeded in building a sufficiently trusting relationship over the course of a year for families to accept voluntary measures that included a parenting project which was at odds with the one their pastor had established for them.[30]

- Bardin (2009) recommends that child protection agencies could **improve rapport by offering general services**, such as parenting or child development education, in a way acceptable to the group.[31] Child protection workers should also encourage and train members in the group to understand potential types of abuse within such settings. Individuals delivering the training should understand the dynamics of coercive control in those communities and be faith-literate.[32] The literature highlights a number of features of child

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[28] Harder, J. (2018). Keeping Amish children safe *In* Child Maltreatment in Insular & Isolated Communities. Prepared by the Child Welfare League of America and The Field Center ChildMaltreatmentEssays_final.pdf (cwla.org)

[29] Evidence Centre (2020). Building safety in closed communities – Evidence Scan. Unpublished. Building safety in a closed community - Evidence Scan.pdf_2020

[30] Casoni et. al. (2015). State intervention against the Baptist Church of Windsor: From law-abiding citizens to perpetrators of severe child physical abuse. In *International Journal of Cultic Studies*. Vol 6. CASONI1.pdf (infosecte.org)

[31] Bardin, L. (2009). Recognizing the working with an underserved culture: Child protection and cults. Journal of Public Child Welfare. Vol 3.

[32] Mulvihill, N., Aghtaie, N., Matolcsi, A. and Hester, M., 2022. Faith and Coercive Control: A briefing for faith communities and for practitioners working with victim-survivors of coercive control. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol. Mulvihill_et_al_2022_Faith_and_Coercive_Control_Practitioner_Briefing.pdf (bris.ac.uk)

protection training for group members, that should be implemented comprehensively and consistently, including:

- content that assists individuals to identify the signs of abuse and to know how to react in a timely and effective manner, with an emphasis on reporting to statutory authorities promptly
- different levels of training targeting members at all levels, including those who hold key responsibilities within the group
- regular and systematic training as opposed to one off events
- training materials to the specific religious context.[33]

- In the case of Lev Tahor group in Canada, due to the large number of children involved, an **immediate community planning and collateral partnership meeting** was convened to update those social service agencies most likely to be contacted by, or needed to provide support services to Lev Tahor members, as reported by Doig (2018).[34] A dedicated media person was allocated, which allowed the child protection agency to fully and openly respond to reports, inaccuracies, and general inquiries from all media sources.

- Interventions to support potential victims of coercive control should not put individuals at further risk and should encourage them to seek specialist advice. Any intervention to support victims of coercive control should be provided with their consent and at their pace and be carefully planned to ensure that victims are well supported.[35]

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[33] Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse, 2021. Child protection in religious organisations and settings: Investigation report. publishing.service.gov.uk

[34] Doig, S. 2018. Lev Tahor: Child maltreatment in an insular community. In *Child maltreatment in insular and isolated communities*. Prepared by Child Welfare League and The Field Centre. ChildMaltreatmentEssays_final.pdf (cwla.org)

[35] Mulvihill, N., Aghtaie, N., Matolcsi, A. and Hester, M., 2022. Faith and Coercive Control: A briefing for faith communities and for practitioners working with victim-survivors of coercive control. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol. Mulvihill_et_al_2022_Faith_and_Coercive_Control_Practitioner_Briefing.pdf (bris.ac.uk)

- Mulvihill et all (2022)[36] recommends that interventions should encourage members in the group to move from being silent witnesses to active allies for victims of coercive control and for leaders to have a clear directive from them that victim-survivors and their dependents are supported. However, those intervening must exercise sensitivity in supporting victim-survivors to ensure they are not put at further risk, and that the intervention moves at their pace, where possible. There should be greater awareness, understanding, and discussions within the communities about the nature and dynamics of coercive control and abuse. Mandatory, meaningful, and regularly updated training should be provided to leaders and other influencing roles, and the knowledge disseminated through the group or community so that members are able to unequivocally condemn abuse and perpetrators of abuse.

Working directly with parents and appealing to them as their responsibility for the safety and development of their children have shown positive outcomes

- **Parents have a buffering role in protecting their child against leaders or the group's abusive behaviours.** The literature highlights the views of some second-generation former members of religious groups that parents served as protective factors and were a buffer against cult leaders.[37] However, parents generally become "middle managers", and their dependency on the leader(s) and willingness to act for the betterment of the group rather than for the best interest of their child, means that the leaders' beliefs and ideas about childrearing influence how parents raise their children.[38] Child protection workers' role includes encouraging parents to understand their children very well for their normative social development, as recommended by Janet Heimlich who is the author of the book *Breaking Their Will: Shedding Light on Religious Child Maltreatment* (2011).[39]

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[36] Mulvihill, N., Aghtaie, N., Matolcsi, A. and Hester, M., 2022. Faith and Coercive Control: A briefing for faith communities and for practitioners working with victim-survivors of coercive control. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol. Mulvihill_et_al_2022_Faith_and_Coercive_Control_Practitioner_Briefing.pdf (bris.ac.uk)

[37] Kendall, L. 2011. Physical child abuse in sects. *ICSA Today*. Vol 2. No 2. Spiritual Abuse Resources - Physical Child Abuse in Sects

[38] Kendall, L. 2011. Physical child abuse in sects. *ICSA Today*. Vol 2. No 2. Spiritual Abuse Resources - Physical Child Abuse in Sects

[39] The Social Work Podcast: Religious Child Maltreatment: Interview with Janet Heimlich

- The case study on BCW presented by Cassoni, et al (2015) similarly highlights the strategy taken by the child protection officials to appeal directly to the parents as capable individuals responsible for the safety and development of their children rather than address them as mere followers who had no say in the development of their children. The Child Protection Services worked directly with the parents of each family unit (**rather than deferred to the leader**) with a view toward building durable working alliances between parents and social workers, without contact with the leader. This intervention strategy **also undermined the usual channels of communication** within the group and between the group and the outside world by which leaders gained greater control over followers, which helped end the physical abuse and the social isolation of the BCW children. The intervention overall contributed to the peaceful breaking-away process most members of the BCW experienced. [40]

- In the context of coercive control by leaders and parents' willingness to obey to authority, it may be useful for child protection agencies to negotiate with group leaders. Bardin (2009) recommends that negotiation by a skilled person who is acceptable to both sides, should acknowledge the leaders' power and present government as co-equal, rather than a threat to the leader's primacy. [41]

Working with a closed community must utilise and integrate a variety of experts working in children's sector

- The assumptions on which child abuse reporting regimes are based may not apply in closed communities. The claims may not be identified and investigated through normal avenues and social contacts, such as via teachers, neighbours, or friends of the family. The accused, group or its

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[40] From Casoni et. al. (2015), the fact that the efforts the pastor habitually exerted to maintain and reinforce group cohesion and loyalty toward himself and the church were temporarily suspended by the active investigations also seems to have helped the authority fulfil its mission of assuring the protection of the BCW's children. The usual group dynamics were disrupted by the investigation, which contributed to the social workers establishing a new context wherein group members were individually solicited to take responsibility for their own actions.
(Casoni et. al. (2015). State intervention against the Baptist Church of Windsor: From law-abiding citizens to perpetrators of severe child physical abuse. In *International Journal of Cultic Studies*. Vol 6. CASONI1.pdf (nfosecte.org)

[41] Bardin, L. (2009). Recognizing the working with an underserved culture: Child protection and cults. Journal of Public Child Welfare. Vol 3.

leadership may not cooperate in taking action in relation to the claims. Similarly, authorities in some jurisdictions, such as in the United States, may encounter statute-of-limitation restrictions. [42] In other cases, groups themselves may have investigated allegations before calling authorities, thereby inadvertently allowing perpetrators to hide or destroy evidence. Any intervention requires a multi-agency effort to be successful.[43] [44] In the state intervention at the Baptist Church of Windsor (BCW) in Canada in the late 1980s, the combined and complementary interventions by the police, child-protection services, attorneys, and child day-care authorities were successful in assuring the safety of the BCW's children. Their combined actions played a determining role in the peaceful implosion of the BCW and in the successful criminal prosecution of its leader.[45]

- The importance of daily, regular communication among the specialised and integrated service team, particularly when there is a large number of families involved cannot be undermined, as emphasised by Doig (2018) in their work with the Lev Tahor group in Canada.[46]

Survivors of coercive control and advocates ask for stronger institutional responses and accountability mechanisms on abuse and exploitation

- Victims and survivors of coercive control in faith communities recommend having stronger accountability structures to reported abuse, so that victims'

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[42] Susan Landa (an Attorney practicing in Palm Springs, California) in Cult Info Since 1979 - Children and Cults: A Practical Guide (icsahome.com)Cult Info Since 1979 - Children and Cults: A Practical Guide (icsahome.com)

[43] Casoni et. al. (2015). State intervention against the Baptist Church of Windsor: From law-abiding citizens to perpetrators of severe child physical abuse. In *International Journal of Cultic Studies*. Vol 6. CASONI1.pdf (infosecte.org)

[44] Cording, J., Collinson, Z., & Carter, M. 2023. Child exploitation literature scan. Prepared by Allen & Clarke. Published By Oranga Tamariki. Child exploitation literature scan (ot.govt.nz)

[45] Casoni et. al. (2015). State intervention against the Baptist Church of Windsor: From law-abiding citizens to perpetrators of severe child physical abuse. In *International Journal of Cultic Studies*. Vol 6. CASONI1.pdf (nfosecte.org)

[46] Lev Tahor: Child Maltreatment in an Insular Community. ChildMaltreatmentEssays_final.pdf (cwla.org)

build confidence that reports will be dealt with fairly, without fear or favour. [47] This would require mechanisms which provide scrutiny that is impartial and respected by the members. Having a safeguarding officer in the community, - possibly supported by a deputy within the group, - who is well-resourced, trained, and authorised to make independent judgments was also recommended. The findings also suggested having a regular, robust, and transparent publication of case and outcome data to enable public monitoring.[48]

- Inadequate institutional response by leaders and those in leadership roles in religious institutions provides more opportunities for abuse to happen. The 2017 Australian review into religious groups carried out by Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse found that the status, power, and authority exercised by people gave them opportunities for abuse, as children and adults within the group frequently saw the people as figures who could not be challenged and as individuals in whom they could place their trust. [49]

- **Advocates call for mandatory reporting of abuse to be applied for religious leaders.** While there is a unified voice from church leaders rejecting child harm and labour, emphasising the need for greater care and attention for children, forbidding all forms of violence against children, and supporting families in protecting their children from all kinds of exploitation[50], research findings and media frequently portray child maltreatment and exploitation of rights in closed communities. A mandatory reporting regime applied to closed communities may provide an avenue for safeguarding children and their

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[47] Mulvihill, N., Aghtaie, N., Matolcsi, A. and Hester, M., 2022. Faith and Coercive Control: A briefing for faith communities and for practitioners working with victim-survivors of coercive control. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol.
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[48] Mulvihill, N., Aghtaie, N., Matolcsi, A. and Hester, M., 2022. Faith and Coercive Control: A briefing for faith communities and for practitioners working with victim-survivors of coercive control. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol.
Mulvihill_et_al_2022_Faith_and_Coercive_Control_Practitioner_Briefing.pdf (bris.ac.uk)

[49] Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017. Fianl Report-Religious institutions. Volume 16, Book 1. Religious institutions | Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au)

[50] UNICEF, 2016. The Christian perspective on protecting children from violence and harmful practices - A guide for priests and servants serving families and children. The Christian Perspective on Protecting Children from Violence and Harmful Practices

rights. Janet Heimlich, who authored *Breaking Their Will: Shedding Light on Religious Child Maltreatment,* for example, advocates for mandatory reporting of child abuse by clergy and leadership in all religious communities; failure to report means more opportunities for the abuse to continue. [51] The author also calls for better law enforcements and for social workers to take such cases seriously, regardless of any religious justification and faith involved.

- Willey and Kent (2017) from their analysis of child sexual abuse allegations on alternative religions[52] conclude that such cases should go to court if professionals assess that it won't further traumatising abuse survivors. Court trials provide opportunities to clearly document what roles, if any, in such groups are involved in the abuses. Such clarity will likely make remaining members in the group aware about their legal and moral responsibilities. Willey and Kent (2017) further stress that groups holding responsibility for abuse should experience pressure from authorities to compensate survivors without costly trials, since such trials may deplete resources away from survivors' assistance.[53]

Empowering and supporting victims that disclose abuse is key to their recovery

- A significant part of rehabilitation for abuse victims lies in helping them regain their own sense of self-agency. Victims of sexual abuse are conditioned to accept the power of others and may agree to a course of action that they do

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[51] The Social Work Podcast: Religious Child Maltreatment: Interview with Janet Heimlich

[52] From the Willey and Kent (2017) report, the term alternative religions is used refer to groups that are outside of the main religious traditions of a particular society. They may represent the faiths of minority populations, sectarian schisms within existing groups, or new religious appearances with little if any precedents in a culture. If they arise within the milieu of social upheaval, they may hold varying degrees of hostility to mainstream society and its religious traditions. They also may embody the idiosyncratic, and sometimes harmful, beliefs of their founders. Cults simply are groups whose beliefs or practices or both are at significant variance from those of the mainstream culture. These terms overlap, and controversies exist about the high demands that many of these groups place upon members' time, resources, and social affiliations. Prosecuting-Child-Sexual-Abuse-ICSA.pdf (ualberta.ca)

[53] Willey, A. & Kent, S.A. (2017). Prosecuting Child Sexual Abuse in Alternative Religions. In *International Journal of Cultic Studies*. Vol 8. Prosecuting-Child-Sexual-Abuse-ICSA.pdf (ualberta.ca)

not want to pursue. Smith et al. (2022) [54] in their study reported that victims' guilt feelings, their sense of responsibility for how disclosure affected loved ones and family members, and the disempowerment associated with having family members and clinicians act on their disclosure in ways the survivors did not want, were common themes.

- Frontline professionals working with survivors should resist any action that undermines victims empowerment, even if the action is on the survivors' behalf. Rehabilitation efforts should focus on the relational nature of support/therapy provided to victims and give due respect to their autonomy, among others.[55] Abuse disclosure is a process unique to each victim and their needs may vary according to a number of factors, including sex and sexual orientation, ethnicity, and age as well as by abuse specific factors.[56,57] Support provided to the victims should be accessible and tailored to their particular needs. Caregivers' and professionals' response can affect disclosure and can be responsible for victims' recantation. Maternal responses that convey protection and support have been found to be associated with victims' improved mental health and social functioning. [58]

- A consideration on how victims and perpetrators, alleged or proven, can be handled within the same setting is important.[59] Similarly, gender and leadership power imbalance can present barriers for some victim-survivors in

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[54] Smith, et.al., 2022. Alone and Not Alone: Implications for Clinicians Working with Male Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse. In International Journal of Coercion, Abuse and Manipulation. Vol 3. International Journal of Coercion, Abuse and Manipulation - Alone and Not Alone

[55] Smith, et.al., 2022. Alone and Not Alone: Implications for Clinicians Working with Male Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse. In International Journal of Coercion, Abuse and Manipulation. Vol 3. International Journal of Coercion, Abuse and Manipulation - Alone and Not Alone

[56] Indenepdent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse, 2022. The report of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse. report-independent-inquiry-into-child-sexual-abuse-october-2022_0.pdf

[57] Lovett, B. 2004. Child sexual abuse disclosure: Maternal response and other variables impacting the Victim. In *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*. Vol 22. Child Sexual Abuse Disclosure: Maternal Response and Other Variables Impacting the Victim | SpringerLink

[58] Lovett, B. 2004. Child sexual abuse disclosure: Maternal response and other variables impacting the Victim. In *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*. Vol 22. Child Sexual Abuse Disclosure: Maternal Response and Other Variables Impacting the Victim | SpringerLink

[59] Evidence Centre (2020). Building safety in closed communities – Evidence Scan. Unpublished. . Building safety in a closed community - Evidence Scan.pdf_2020

approaching leaders to report abuse, or to seek support for recovery following abuse consideration. [60]

- Lovett (2004) [61] also reports that non-abusive caregivers were found to often be marginalised by the child welfare system in its attempt to secure physical safety for the child.

Legal tools and reforms applicable to closed communities should be accompanied by implementation strategies for raising public awareness about their rights, changing attitudes, and providing education and support for parents

- The legal arena provides opportunities for officials to better inform the public about child-abuse issues in closed communities; however, enforcement becomes challenging if the government authority loses credibility and children's well-being is subsumed to the rights of the religious group. [62] Brannum and Drumhiller (2022), in their study of Quiverfull and Twelve Tribes religious groups, argue that state officials are more limited and inconsistent in their actions in providing child protection when accusations of child abuse within religious practices are involved. This is even so when courts of law become battlegrounds where religious groups are spread transnationally – further isolating and endangering the children – as they try to establish favourable legal outcomes.[63] Legal tools should therefore have well thought out implementation strategies that can be applied in the context of closed communities.

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[60] Mulvihill, N., Aghtaie, N., Matolcsi, A. and Hester, M., 2022. Faith and Coercive Control: A briefing for faith communities and for practitioners working with victim-survivors of coercive control. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol. Mulvihill_et_al_2022_Faith_and_Coercive_Control_Practitioner_Briefing.pdf (bris.ac.uk)

[61] Lovett, B. 2004. Child sexual abuse disclosure: Maternal response and other variables impacting the Victim. In *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*. Vol 22. Child Sexual Abuse Disclosure: Maternal Response and Other Variables Impacting the Victim | SpringerLink

[62] Brannum, K. & Drumhiller, N. 2022. Religion and state authority: Control of the child. In *International Journal of Coercion, Control and Manipulation*. Vol 3. IJCAM - Religion and State Authority: Control of the Child

[63] Brannum, K. & Drumhiller, N. 2022. Religion and state authority: Control of the child. In *International Journal of Coercion, Control and Manipulation*. Vol 3. IJCAM - Religion and State Authority: Control of the Child

- **Implementation strategies should take into consideration the rights of children and parents in closed communities**. Rights are interconnected and interdependent; for example children's education rights depend on the fulfillment of health rights. Similarly, fulfilment of children's rights depends in part on securing the rights of parents and other family members who support them. When parents' rights are secured, such as labour rights or non-discrimination rights, the parents are better positioned to advocate and provide rights for their children and prevent harm. Conversely, when children's rights are protected, their well-being reinforces the strength and potential of their parents and families.[64]

There is a lack of research on child labour exploitation in closed communities

- There are only limited studies on labour exploitation of children and young people, focusing mostly on developing countries or in the context of sexual labour exploitation.[65] We couldn't source resources online that provided insights on tackling child labour in closed communities.

- The literature on child labour in general suggest that interventions involve awareness raising at individual, community and policy levels other than comprehensive assessments at an individual level for removing immediate threats to safety and wellbeing and developing appropriate response strategies.[66]

Conclusion

This evidence brief presents findings from a rapid online review of evidence on child protection responses in closed communities that exhibit coercive and controlling ways of managing their members. A hierarchical structure with power and control dynamics that is deeply entrenched in closed communities is widely discussed in the literature as a characteristic of a closed community. However,

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[64] Aggoune et. al., 2020. Faith and children's rights – A multi-religious study on the Convention on the Rights of the Child. UNICEF. Faith and children's rights - A multi-religious study on the Convention on the Rights of the Child.pdf

[65] Cording, J., Collinson, Z., & Carter, M. 2023. *Child exploitation literature scan*. Prepared by Allen & Clarke. Published By Oranga Tamariki. Child exploitation literature scan (ot.govt.nz)

[66] Cording, J., Collinson, Z., & Carter, M. 2023. *Child exploitation literature scan*. Prepared by Allen & Clarke. Published By Oranga Tamariki. Child exploitation literature scan (ot.govt.nz)

documentation on effective intervention strategies to safeguard children in such communities is limited.

The brief discusses the negative impact of coercive control on children raised in such communities. It emphasises the importance of social workers' knowledge of cultural and religious norms and power dynamics shaping the communities' way of life; awareness of their own religious bias impacting investigations; the importance of trust-building with victims and their parents and empowering them. Strategies that child protection agencies in overseas jurisdictions implemented to safeguard children is also presented. The evidence, which is in no way extensive, is intended to help inform kaimahi in developing an approach to care and protection needs, and oranga of the children residing in closed communities.