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'Kids with bad hearing at risk of abuse'

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'It's a smoking gun that people aren't aware of and that hasn't been investigated'

ABORIGINAL children with hearing problems are vulnerable to being targeted by sexual predators, a Territory researcher says.

Darwin psychologist Damien Howard has been examining the social effects of childhood ear disease in remote communities, in collaboration with Aboriginal health workers.

He said in some communities, up to 90 per cent of children suffer hearing problems.

"The vulnerability and social exclusion of children with hearing loss mean they are often more vulnerable to the attention of predators," he said.

"Also, because their social skills may be affected, they may not be as able to report it or protect themselves.

"It's a smoking gun that people aren't aware of and that hasn't been investigated."

Research in non-indigenous communities in the US shows deaf boys are five times more likely to be sexually assaulted than those with normal hearing.

Mr Howard said the findings have a much stronger application in indigenous populations because of the higher rates of both hearing difficulties and sexual abuse.

"What is worse is that this isn't hearing loss alone -- this is hearing loss interacting with a load of other factors ... While most of those other factors are known, this is still an invisible issue."

Mr Howard said middle-ear disease, the cause of most hearing problems in Aboriginal communities, has been an issue for some time.

"More research could help policy makers and practitioners understand the nature of the problems which can help us develop ... interventions," he said.

Many of those problems continue through to adulthood. Mr Howard suggested many of the adult offenders could also be affected by hearing problems.

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