

Nature and Scope



What We Can Learn From the John Jay Studies—Part Two

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For the past six years, the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, with principal researcher Dr. Karen Terry, has been studying sexual abuse by Roman Catholic Clergy. This research was commissioned in 2002 by the National Review Board and the Office of Child and Youth Protection in fulfillment of Article 9 of the Bishop's *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*. Article 9 reads as follows:

To understand the problem more fully and to enhance the effectiveness of our future response, the National Review Board will also commission a descriptive study, with the full cooperation of our dioceses/eparchies, of the nature and scope of the problem within the Catholic Church in the United States, including such data as statistics on perpetrators and victims.

The research by John Jay consists of two studies, the first is descriptive, "The Nature and Scope of Clergy Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church from 1950 to 2002." The description of abuse contains numbers of victims, perpetrators, incidents as well as when the abuse occurred, where, and when the abuse was reported to the Church. The Nature and Scope study was completed in 2004 and is now published on the [USCCB website](#). The second study, an in-depth look at the causes and contexts of the sexual abuse crisis in the Church, will be completed in 2010 and is anticipated to be published in January of 2011.

Answers to questions

In 2002, when many policy and governance decisions were made, neither leaders nor ordinary people knew with certainty how large or widespread the problem of sexual abuse by clergy was. But with virtually all dioceses and most of the religious communities participating in the study, we now have answers we did not have before. We review a few of those questions below.

How many priests sexually abused minors from 1950 to 2002?

In the 52 year period 4,392 priests abused minors. That is about 4 percent of all clergy who served in those years. Approximately 96 percent of clergy who served from 1950 to 2002 did not have an allegation of abuse against them. Of those priests who were accused or found to have abused, 56 percent were accused only once.

Was most abuse concentrated in one area?

No, the Nature and Scope study found that with the exception of a few dioceses that had no allegations from those years, the rates of abuse were stable throughout the country. Percentages ranged from 3 percent in some regions to 6 percent in others. It is safe to say this was a widespread problem and not a problem of a particular geographic region.

When did the abuse occur?

The highest rates of abusive events occurred during the 1970's and starting declining after 1980. The number of abusive events decreased even more sharply after 1985, which is also when an increasing



number of reports began to be made.

When did Church officials begin receiving reports of sexual abuse?

There are many reasons why a delay in reporting sexual abuse may occur. Victim age, fear, misunderstanding, feelings of shame, and lack of opportunity are only a few of the reasons sexual abuse may go unreported for long periods of time. This was shown to be true in many of the Catholic Clergy abuse cases. As of 1959, Church officials knew of 53 cases nation-wide (.5 percent of cases known today); in 1969, they knew of 190 cases nation-wide (1.8 percent); in 1979, 266 cases (2.6 percent). By 1985, when abuse events were decreasing dramatically, 810 cases had been reported throughout the country. Because they were relatively evenly distributed, each diocese or religious community may have been aware of one to four abuse allegations in the thirty-five years from 1950 to 1985.

When were most reports of abuse made?

In total, the John Jay College found that 10,667 individuals reported having been abused from 1950 to 2002. Before 1990, 17 percent of cases known today had been reported to dioceses and religious communities. From 1990 to 2000, an additional 4,022 cases were reported. From 2000 to 2002, 4,533 additional reports came forward, which is about 45 percent of the cases that we know today.

Is there anything different about those who may have abused once or for a short period of time?

The number of priests who abused or were accused of abusing for less than one year was fairly stable throughout the fifty-year period that was studied. On the other hand, those who abused for more than one year fit the overall pattern of peaking in the 1970's and declining after 1985. The implication of this finding is that the factors that may have been associated with the peak of sexual offenses in the 1970's may not affect the clerics who abused for only one year in the same way. Understanding more about this question should be part of the causes and contexts study that is still to come.

Is the rate of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church different from other organizations?

Since the John Jay Study of Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church is a unique research endeavor other organizations have not attempted, it's tough to know the answer to this question. The closest comparison we might consider is the work of Charol Shakeshaft, an expert from Hofstra University who has studied sexual abuse in public schools. She estimates that from 1991 to 2000 approximately 290,000 students experienced some sort of physical-contact sexual abuse by a school employee. Public schools serve very large numbers of students each year with many thousands of employees, so the utility of the comparison is limited. It does, however, provide some perspective to the work that is being done to more fully understand the problem of sexual abuse that is perpetrated by adults in positions of trust with children. The more we know and fully engage in understanding the complexity of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, the better prepared we are to make solid policy decisions for ourselves and recommendations to other organizations that serve children and youth.

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