

Epidemiology of Clergy Sexual Abuse in the U.S. Catholic Church

Angelo P. Giardino, MD, PhD, MPH, Meghan Sacks, PhD, and Karen J. Terry, PhD

Introduction

Dr. Jack Coyne offered background information on sexual abuse by the clergy, reasons why priests sexually abuse children, and a summary and thoughtful critique of the professional response to sexual abuse in the Catholic Church (Coyne, 2011). We would like to add to Dr. Coyne's discussion by reviewing the results of a large-scale study undertaken by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice addressing the quantitative aspects of the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church, which was released in 2004 (John Jay College, 2004). In a subsequent article, we plan to review the results of their second large-scale study, which addresses the contextual aspects of the crisis.

Over the past 10 years, the clergy sexual abuse "crisis" was heralded by a series of articles that appeared in the *Boston Globe* beginning in January 2002, led by emotionally-charged headlines about "scandal and cover-up" and "predator priests" (NPR, 2002; 2007). These investigative reports focused attention not only on the actual cases of sexual abuse but also on how the Archdiocese of Boston handled several instances of sexually abusive contacts between its priests and minors ("Spotlight investigation," 2006). Most concerning was the growing perception that the perpetrators were transferred between parishes and dioceses after the suspicions of potential abuse had surfaced, and that these reassignments were done without basic safeguards in place to protect the new, unsuspecting communities of children and families that would receive and welcome the abusive priests (Newberger, 2003).

The extensive press coverage that ensued led to additional investigations, some of which are detailed on the *Boston Globe's* Web site in "Spotlight Investigation: Abuse in the Catholic Church." This special section chronicles over 10 years of news stories about clergy sexual abuse. Additionally, other major newspapers, including the *New York Times* (Goodstein, Zirilli, & NYT Staff, 2003), the *Los Angeles Times* (Wattanabe, 2002), and *USA Today* ("The accusers and the accused," 2002), carried stories about the sexual abuse crisis on an almost daily basis.

Background of Sexual Abuse in the Church

Philip Jenkins, Professor of History and Religious Studies at Pennsylvania State University, provided a well-researched time line and analysis of the "scandal" that had occurred to date,

notably a full 6 years prior to the "crisis" that would unfold in 2002 (Jenkins, 1996).

He chronicled the media coverage of the notorious cases that had occurred in the mid-1980s and early 1990s. According to Dr. Jenkins, a 1985 report, initially shared confidentially among Church leaders, entitled "The Problem of Sexual Molestation by Roman Catholic Clergy: Meeting the Problem in a Comprehensive and Responsible Manner," addressed the (1) need for Church leaders to avoid the appearance of secrecy and cover-ups by taking urgent action and making swift responses when allegations arose, and (2) possibility of criminal charges if leaders failed to report allegations to civil authorities. Additionally, the report discussed the potential for large settlements in civil proceedings brought by victims against the Church (Jenkins, 1996).

It has been difficult to fully analyze sexual abuse in the Church for many reasons, including the underreporting and hidden nature of sexual abuse and the lack of formal responses by the Catholic Church (Flynn, 2000). The studies conducted in the 1990s prior to the 2002 crisis are not generalizable because they included small samples of clergy members from single parishes or treatment programs. To provide a scholarly foundation for the evolving picture that is emerging from our systematic inquiry into the clergy abuse problem, Table 1 illustrates some of the early studies conducted in the field, including the samples and methodologies employed.

In response to a number of factors, including widespread media attention, the outrage of many Church members (both clerics and lay members) and many local district attorney and state-level attorney general investigations, the U.S. Catholic bishops wrote and ratified a 17-article *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* at their June 2002 meeting in Dallas, Texas. Often referred to as the *Dallas Charter*, this document contained the bishops' collective apology for the leadership failures that were broadly recognized and their commitment to deal with the problem and to prevent further sexual abuse from occurring in the Church. The Charter calls for the dioceses to provide aid to victims and their families, to report allegations of abuse to authorities, to discharge clergymen guilty of sexual abuse, and to provide better background checks on priests and deacons, among other

Table 1. Published Studies in the Church in the 1990s

Author(s), year	Sample	Method
Andrews, 1999	Four congregations of clergy and parishioners	Self-reports
Flynn, 1999	25 sexually abused women	Self-reports
McDevitt, 1999	Three groups of Roman Catholic priests to determine the extent of their own personal abuse	Self-reports
Mendola, 1998	277 Catholic priests and religious brothers referred for psychiatric evaluation	Retroactive study examining archival data
Pritt, 1998	115 Mormon women who reported sexual abuse	Questionnaire examining spirituality, concept of God, and optimism and pessimism.
Rosetti, 1997	1, 810 Catholics to determine the effect of abuse accusations on their faith in Church and God	Questionnaire
Rosetti, 1995	1,810 Catholics to determine the significance in victim trauma based upon age and gender	Questionnaire
McLaughlin, 1994	Pilot study with adults and children to find out the difference in effects of abuse on their spirituality	Spirituality scale and self-reports
Irons and Laaser, 1994	25 sexually abusive priests who are in treatment	Assessment scales to determine sexual and other addictions
Geotz, 1992	374 ordained pastors to find out how many had affairs	Self-report surveys

Source: Terry (2006), p. 232.

important steps to address sexual abuse in the Church (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 2002).

The Dallas Charter contained an agreement on the part of the bishops to establish a lay committee called the National Review Board (NRB) (2004) to assist the bishops in maintaining their commitments to the Catholic faithful that were made in the Charter. The lay members of the NRB were charged with conducting several studies directed at enhancing understanding surrounding the problem of sexual abuse by clergy. In addition to academic studies, the NRB was also asked to receive and approve reports from a newly established diocesan auditing process in which each diocese was visited and data were collected related to the diocese's compliance with the activities called for in the Charter.

The first scholarly study to be commissioned by the NRB, the Nature and Scope study, provided a statistical overview of the epidemiology of the sexual abuse crisis in a report issued in February 2004 (John Jay College, 2004). Also released in February 2004 was the NRB's *Report on the Crisis in the Catholic Church in the United States*, a compilation and analysis of over 85 interviews conducted by NRB members of Church leaders as

well as others who had insights to offer on the clergy sexual abuse crisis (NRB, 2004). These interviews provided a framework from which to view the sexual abuse crisis, and the NRB's report contained a nonscientific analysis of the information gleaned from the interviews. Among other things, the report called for enhanced screening and oversight of priests and deacons, increased effectiveness in responding to abuse allegations, greater accountability of bishops and Church leaders, and improved interaction with civil authorities. A later study, the Causes and Context study, was released in 2011 (John Jay College Research Team, 2011).

The Nature and Scope Study

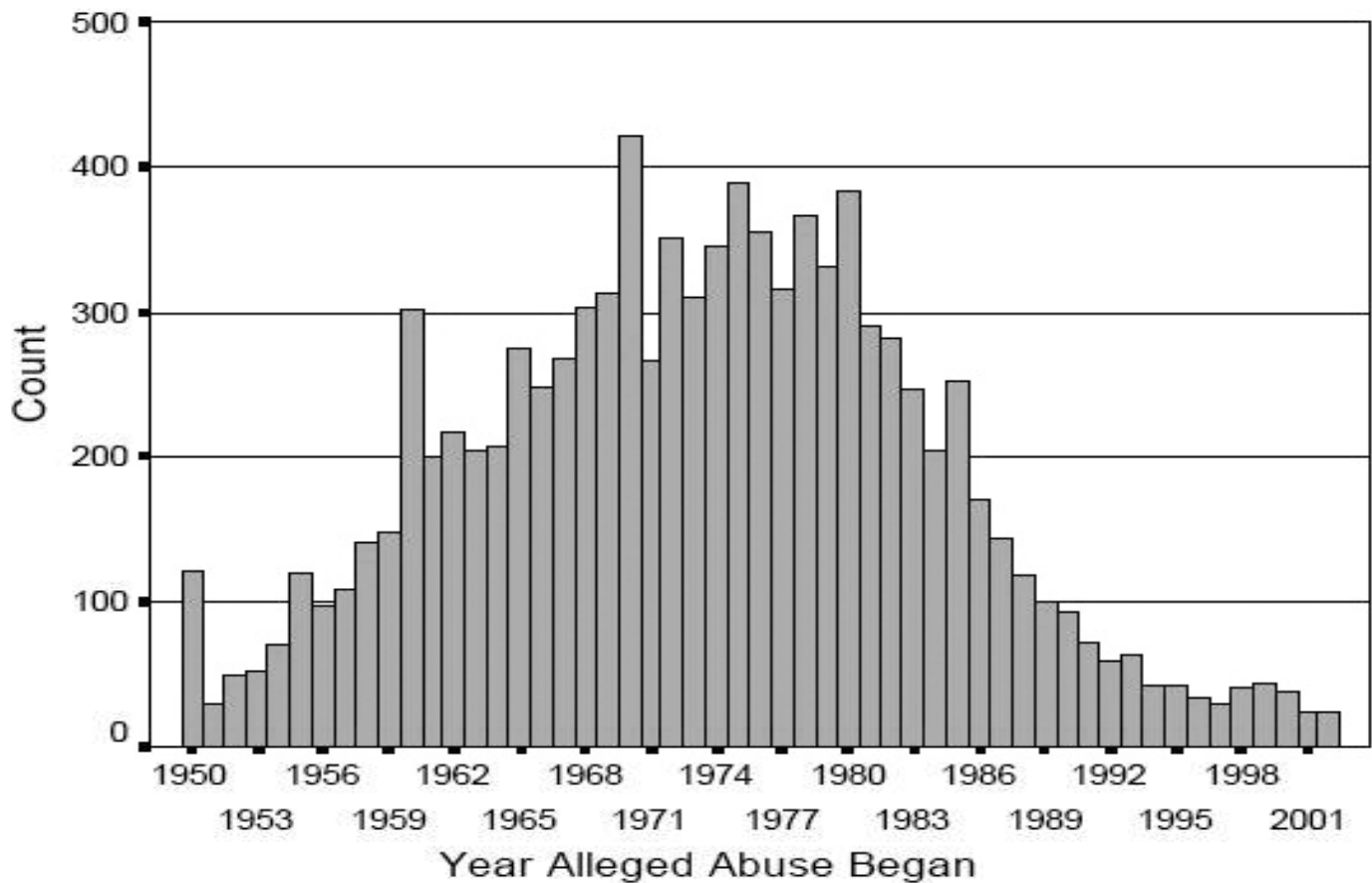
The researchers at John Jay College of Criminal Justice were commissioned to conduct a quantitative study on the nature and scope of child sexual abuse (CSA) in the Catholic Church. The researchers gathered information about every allegation of sexual abuse of a minor by priests and deacons in the United States from 1950–2002 by gathering information from existing files at all Catholic dioceses, eparchies, and religious communities. Individuals at each diocese, eparchy, and community completed

surveys with questions regarding the diocese, the priest with an allegation, and the victim who made the allegation. Identities of all priests and victims were confidential, and the researchers employed a double-blind procedure to ensure the anonymity of the subjects. Overall, 97% of all dioceses and eparchies and 63% of all religious communities (representing 84% of religious priests) responded (John Jay College, 2004).

In the 18 months that followed this report, the Church granted John Jay access to the database to conduct further analyses to address certain issues in more detail, including the following: the estimation of the overall problem of abuse in the Church, patterns of abuse, duration of abusive behavior, priests with one allegation and priests with multiple allegations, subgroups of priests with allegations of abuse, and the institutional response to the abuse problem (Terry & Smith, 2006).

The core findings help illustrate the true scope of sexual abuse among the Catholic clergy. In the period between 1950 and 2002 in the United States, we know that clergy members abused 10,667 children. The majority of these victims (81%) were male and between the ages of 11 and 14. Turning to the clergymen, 4,392 priests or deacons had credible allegations of clergy sexual abuse made against them, which represents 4% of the clergy who were active in the U.S. ministry during that period. Of this number, 149 priests had 10 or more allegations made against them. The results revealed a significant delay in reporting, with 44% of sexual abuse reports made between 2000 and 2002. Additionally, a surge of clergy sexual abuse appears to have begun in the latter years of the 1960s, reaching a peak during the 1970s and then declining steadily during the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Clergy Abuse Cases From 1950, by Year Abuse Began



Source: John Jay College (2004), p. 29.

In the 1970s, child sexual abuse in general was also coming to the forefront of our professional attention, owing to the groundbreaking work of feminists such as Susan Brownmiller and Florence Rush and academic investigators such as Diana Russell, Suzanne Sgroi, and Ann Burgess (Brownmiller, 1975; Burgess & Holmstrom, 1974; Rush, 1980; Russell, 1984; Sgroi, 1981). In addition, with his 1978 address and subsequent publication “Sexual abuse, another hidden pediatric problem,” the world-renowned pediatrician C. Henry Kempe (1978) helped to raise the pediatric profession’s awareness. Additionally, as professional knowledge about sexual abuse grew in the early 1980s, law enforcement and prosecutors began to consistently pursue allegations of child sexual abuse. A significant reporting lag masked the true extent of CSA in the Church at this time. Only 17% of abuse cases were known prior to the 1990s, and only 810 cases of abuse were known to the Church before 1985—the time of the notorious Gaulte case in Louisiana. These 810 cases represent less than 10% of what is now known to have occurred using the post-2002 data (John Jay College, 2004). There are many reasons why victims of sexual abuse do not report the abuse immediately, and this information about clergy sexual abuse is consistent with what is known about sexual abuse in the general population. Victims often do not report or delay reporting, for example, due to feelings of guilt, shame, and embarrassment; when realizing that the abuse is scandalous; and for fear that they may not be believed because the perpetrator is often viewed as a powerful and trusted person in the community (Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones, & Gordon, 2003.) Figure 2 compares all cases known in 2002 with 1993 estimates.

The age and gender distributions of the 10,667 child victims of clergy sexual abuse are displayed in Figure 3. One can see that the majority of the child victims are males who are 12 years old or older. The first observation would be that the clergy sexual abuse problem is less a problem of the sexual abuse of prepubertal children than that of peri- and postpubertal children. This has important clinical implications since the abuse of prepubertal children is often referred to as pedophilia and has specific treatment and rehabilitation issues associated with this problem. The abuse of preteens and teens is viewed clinically as a different type of disorder called ephebophilia.

The preponderance of the abused children being male is a pattern that stands in stark contrast to the overall national child sexual abuse data, which consistently identify girls as being sexually abused at a rate 3 or 4 times that of boys and which also shows the highest risk group for both girls and boys as the 7–13 years of age grouping (John Jay College, 2004). Possible explanations for the dominance of male children being abused in the Church relate to access by clergy to such male children or a primary attraction to male children and adolescents by clergy, or both. Throughout the time period of this study, priests had much more

frequent contact with boys than girls and assumed positions of trust in boys’ lives (Isley & Isley, 1990). It is thus possible that priests abused boys at a much higher frequency because of this unique situational access that gave them the opportunity to use the beliefs of the boys to both manipulate and silence them (Farrell & Taylor, 2000).

Table 2 contains the distribution of male victims’ ages listed for both the single-victim group and for the group in which 2–20 incidents of clergy sexual abuse were known to have occurred. These numbers again show a predominance of abuse victims being pubertal, a dimension that must be considered. Some theoretical constructs have raised concerns that clergy sexual abuse perpetrators may in fact be emotionally and sexually immature males who are involved in inappropriate sexual exploration with victims whom they inappropriately see as similar in development. This in no way is meant to excuse the abuse, but it is a dimension that needs serious attention because the pattern of abuse characteristics is so different from the expected data within the society at large.

Most Recent Number of New Reports and New Cases

One of the major commitments of the Dallas Charter was that the Office of Child and Youth Protection would produce an annual report detailing the progress the Church was making in implementing the Charter. Under the oversight of the NRB, approximately annual audits are conducted to measure compliance. In addition, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) conducts surveys to track new reports of sexual abuse of minors, the number considered to be credible cases, and information on the amount of money dioceses expended related to the allegations as well as the amount the dioceses have paid for safe environment efforts.

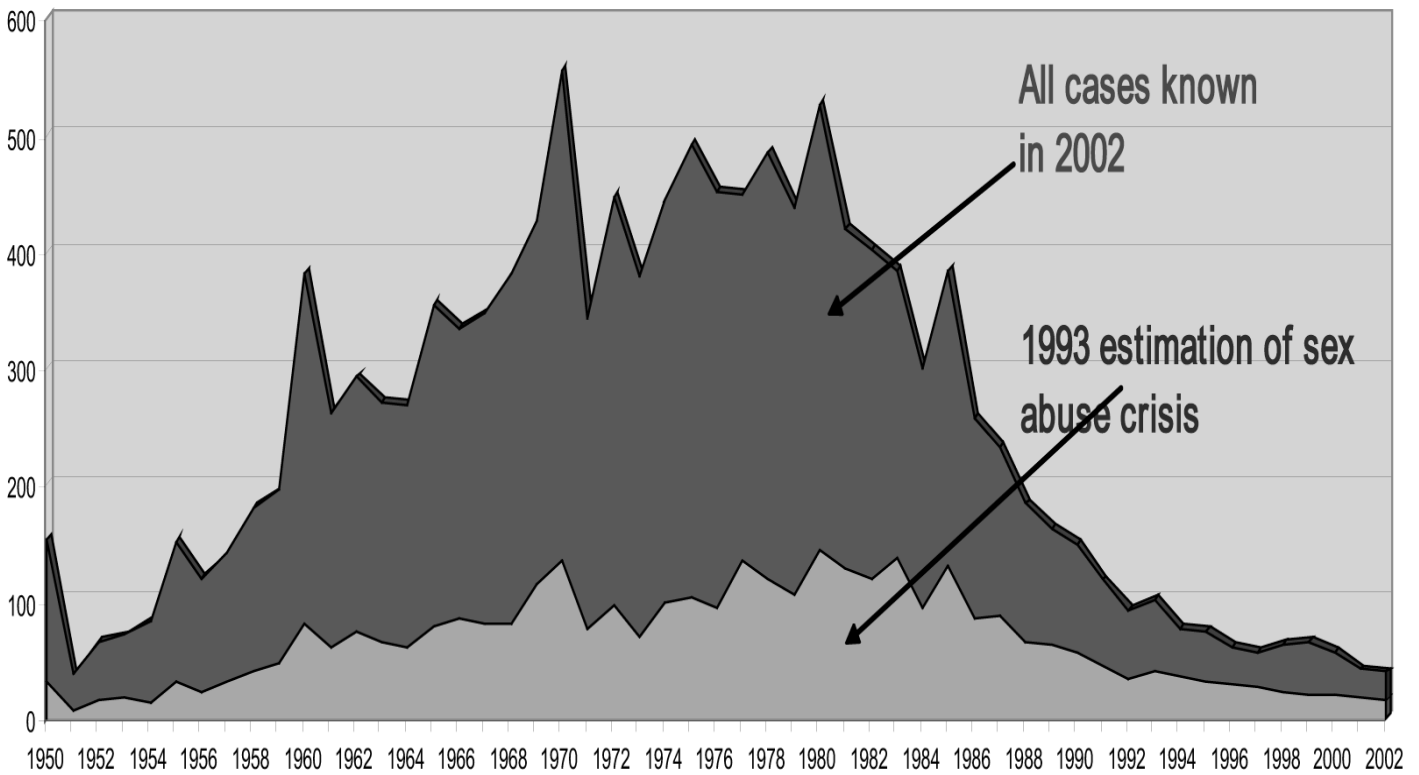
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Table 2. Distribution of Male Victims by Age

Male Victim Age (yrs)	Single Victim Group		2–20 Victim Group	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
1–7	33	2.8	203	3.3
8–10	131	11.1	992	16.6
11–14	482	40.9	2930	48.1
15–17	532	45.2	1964	32.3
Totals	1178	100	6089	100

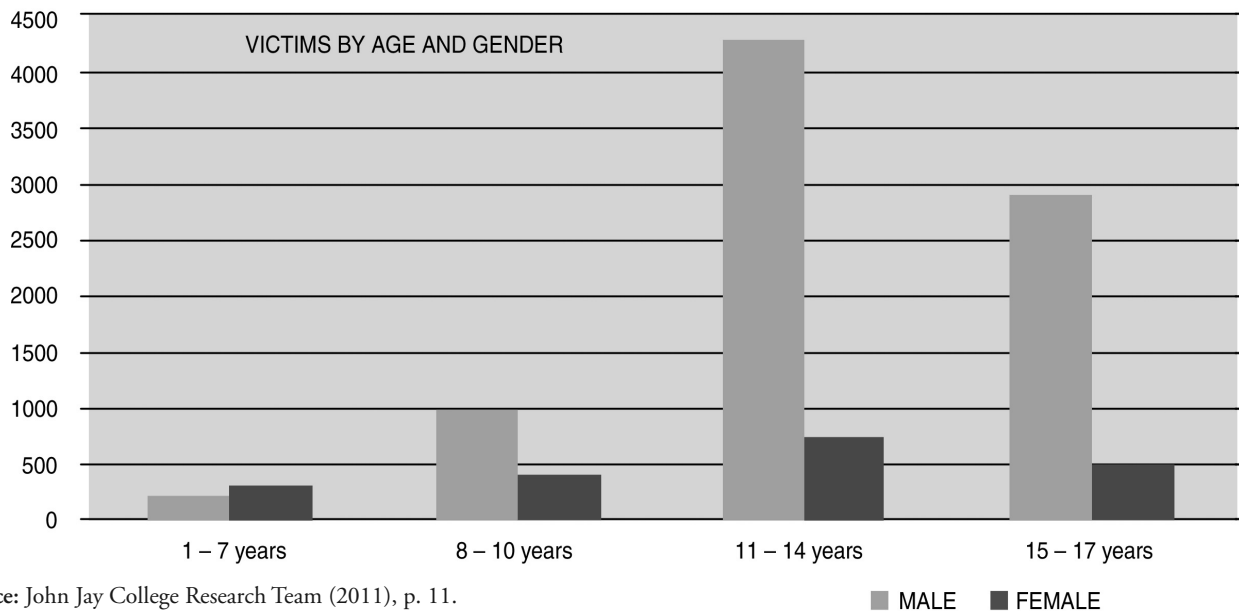
Source: John Jay College (2006), p. 27.

Figure 2. Estimation Based on 1993 Reporting Pattern, Compared to All Known Cases (2002)



Source: John Jay College (2011), p. 11.

Figure 3: Age and Gender Distribution for the Known Cases of Clergy Sexual Abuse in 2002



Source: John Jay College Research Team (2011), p. 11.

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In the most recent annual report issued in April 2012, which covers the 2011 calendar year, of the 195 dioceses, 187 participated in the audit process and 191 took part of the CARA survey (USCCB, 2012). During 2011, 21 allegations of abuse by a cleric were made by current minors and 683 adults came forward to report abuse for the first time. Of the 21 cases involving minors, 7 were considered credible by law enforcement, 3 were considered false, and the others were in various stages of investigation and response at the time the audit was released.

In all, the minors and adults made new allegations that involved 551 priests and 7 deacons. Of the accused clerics, 253 were deceased, 58 had been permanently removed from the priesthood (i.e., laicized), 184 had been removed from ministry, and 281 had been named in previous audits. Safe environment training was completed by 99% of clerics and by 96% of employees and volunteers. Over 4.8 million children had received safe environment training as well. Finally, background evaluations had been conducted on over 99% of clerics, 99% of educators, 96% of employees, and 96% of volunteers. From the CARA surveys, we know that the reporting dioceses and eparchies had total costs related to the current and previous allegations in 2011 of \$108,679,706, which was approximately \$15 million less than in 2010. The total costs from 2004 through 2011 were over \$2.2 billion.

Conclusions From the Studies

The data may be viewed as supporting the idea that clergy sexual abuse is a unique subset of the more general societal problem of CSA, accounting in 2002 for 10,667 cases known to have occurred in the 52-year period of time between 1950 and 2002. Unfortunately, sexual abuse by clergy remains a problem since even one case is one too many and we know from the 2011 audit report that at least 7 minors made a new credible report of being abused. From a public health perspective, clergy sexual abuse is a subset of the much larger problem of CSA, which itself is part of an even larger public health issue of child maltreatment and interpersonal violence.

The institutional response of the U.S. Catholic Church leaders was on public display in 2002 and appropriately remains intense today. In addition to public apologies and commitments to take action to halt the occurrence of clergy sexual abuse, the Church's leaders adopted an approach oriented toward study and disclosure as evidenced by the Nature and Scope study. This public transparency was uncharacteristic and welcome because secrecy and poor communication surrounding the problem of clergy abuse were heretofore hallmarks of how the problem was handled (Benyei, 1998; Fegert, 2004; Plante, 1999).

From the data gathered thus far within the Catholic Church, it is possible to determine a number of unique aspects of clergy sexual abuse that will allow professionals and Church leaders to further understand how this form of sexual abuse is similar to and different from other subsets of the downward trend in cases of CSA that Finkelhor, Jones, and Shattuck (2010) described during the 1990s and 2000s. In fact, the downward trend appears to have begun earlier for clergy sexual abuse when compared with the trends in general CSA because cases began their steady decline in the 1980s. The predominance of male victims and the relatively higher proportion of adolescents are clear differences from the age and gender pattern seen in the general CSA problem.

The U.S. Catholic Church's response to the clergy abuse crisis with a population-based study is welcome but surprising and somewhat unique among child-serving and faith-based organizations. In a comprehensive literature review, Terry and Tallon (2004) looked at a number of other organizations that serve young children and that have come under scrutiny related to the potential of CSA occurring within their organizations. Looking at material related to Boy Scouts of America, the Big Brother Organization, and the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), each has had periods of significant media attention around the risk of CSA, and each has developed proactive training programs for staff and volunteers. However, none has participated in a comprehensive, publicly disclosed epidemiologic study that would provide comparable incidence and prevalence data (Clayton, 2002; Mattingly, 2002; Schaeffer, 1999; Shakeshaft, 2004; Wattanabe, 2002). Other churches may be in the process of planning studies on the topic of sexual misconduct, and some comprehensive data on the topic are anticipated within the next 5 years.

While the Roman Catholic Church can be praised for its unprecedented agreement to set up the NRB and for commissioning the study, there are less positive features of this history—the variable implementation of the Charter across dioceses, the continuing problems with management of problem clergy in some places such as Philadelphia, the slowness to act on recommendations at the level of the Vatican, the fact that few responsible Church officials faced internal discipline for their role, and the challenge the Church has faced in regaining the confidence of survivors and many segments of the Church laity.

In a 2003 commentary, David Finkelhor discussed the “legacy” of the clergy sexual abuse crisis, and he identified a series of positives (described as helpful aspects) and negatives (described as problems) for the public and professionals interested in child maltreatment to consider (Finkelhor, 2003). One of the helpful aspects that emerged from the discovery and response to the clergy sexual abuse crisis was that the crisis had alerted parents to talk about

risk of sexual abuse with their children. Additionally, the attention the crisis received from the media, law enforcement, and the public had highlighted the need for organizations and their administrators to deal proactively with the risk of sexual abuse.

Unfortunately, we cannot ignore the negative effects that have emerged as well. For example, this crisis has reinforced stereotypes about sexual abusers as being pedophiles attracted to prepubertal children, each having multiple victims and compulsion to perpetrate further abuse. In reality, most priests were not pedophiles and did not have multiple victims. The crisis also served to reinforce the idea that homosexuals were to blame for the problem of sexual abuse, thus creating an easy scapegoat that could interfere with substantive reform. Further research will be necessary to clarify the role, if any, that homosexuality plays in this problem. Additionally, the crisis and its coverage in the media served to reinforce the belief that sexual offenders are incorrigible and unable to be treated. Very few of the priest offenders continued to perpetrate sexual abuse after they were discovered and received treatment, which was almost never discussed in the media's reporting (Finkelhor, 2003).

Next Steps

Clergy sexual abuse, like child sexual abuse in general, involves powerful adults taking advantage of a child's trust in a sexualized way. Because the powerful adult in clergy abuse is a religious leader, spiritual well-being may also be harmed in addition to emotional and physical well-being. The additional potential for

spiritual injury makes clergy sexual abuse unique among CSA cases, as do the age and gender distribution differences.

The downward trend in the rate and number of recent clergy sexual abuse cases, which is consistent with the downward trend of CSA cases in general, is welcome, but a small number of cases continue to occur. More prevention work will be necessary to drive this number of new cases to as near zero per year as possible. At an organizational level, the crisis that ensued around clergy abuse points to the need for constant training of workers and officials in large organizations such as the Catholic Church and the need for transparency in how cases are handled to inspire confidence in the way administrators receive and process reports. This need for transparency would appear to be particularly important for stigmatized problems such as clergy sexual abuse. For example, the delay in reporting may in part be due to the belief that arises in secretive and shrouded processes that apparently confirm in the minds of the victims that nothing will be done even if they come forward.

The increasingly accurate epidemiologic statistics that are being collected, analyzed, and publically shared serve a number of purposes beyond simply being an academic exercise. By looking at accurate numbers that have a solid research foundation, victims, the public, and all concerned professionals and organizations can begin to see the magnitude of the problem requiring attention. This is important with regard to developing interventions, treatment services, and prevention and informs training efforts as well. In addition, having accurate measures of the problem allows for a metric to measure the issue's worsening or improvement with some degree of confidence.

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About the Authors

Angelo P. Giardino, MD, PhD, MPH, is Clinical Professor of Pediatrics at Baylor College of Medicine (BCM) and currently serves as Chief Medical Officer for Texas Children's Health Plan and Chief Quality Officer for Medicine at Texas Children's Hospital. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Pediatrics (FAAP) and sub-Board certified in Child Abuse Pediatrics by the American Board of Pediatrics. He currently serves on the National Review Board and previously served as its Research Committee chair. Contact: apgiardi@texaschildren.org

Meghan Sacks, PhD, is Program Director and Professor of Criminology in the Becton College of Arts and Sciences of Fairleigh Dickinson University. Her research interests include sentencing legislation, policy and reform, plea bargaining and bail reform, criminal case processing, and community corrections. Contact: megsacks@yahoo.com

Karen Terry, PhD, is Professor in the Department of Criminal Justice at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY. She holds a doctorate in criminology from Cambridge University and her research focuses on sexual offending and victimization. Most recently, she was the principal investigator for two national studies on sexual abuse of minors by Catholic priests. Contact: kterry@jjoy.cuny.edu