

RICHARD COHEN SMEARS PRIESTS

On March 8, syndicated *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen ran a piece objecting to the congressional hearings by Rep. Peter King on terrorism, arguing that if it is okay to probe Muslims for terrorism, it should be okay to probe priests for sexual abuse: “The organization BishopAccountability.org reports that ‘perhaps more than 100,000 children’ have been sexually abused since 1950 by Catholic clergymen of one sort or another.” The figure is wildly in error. Moreover, even his source mentions these are *accusations*.

The “organization” he cited specializes in publishing accusations against priests—no matter how flimsy—not findings of guilt. The figure of 100,000 they cite is taken from an article written by Andrew Greeley in 1993 that was based purely on conjecture.

Greeley said the data on the general population “suggests that during a ‘career’ of abuse *some* victimizers *may have* as many as 200 or even 300 victims.” [Our italic.] He then picked a “conservative number of 50 victims” to work with, but this was pure posturing: there is nothing “conservative” about a number based on a guesstimate of the highest number of victims committed by a small minority of the offenders.

Greeley then guesstimated that between 2,000 and 4,000 priests might be guilty of the sexual abuse of minors, settling on a figure of 2,500. Finally, he multiplied 2,500 by 50 to arrive at the celebrated figure of “well in excess of 100,000.”

Over a decade later, the real figures were made available by social scientists from the John Jay College of Criminal Justice: an estimated 4 percent of priests have had accusations made against them since 1950, and the majority, 56 percent, were alleged to have abused one victim. Doing a little math (see the “Executive Summary” of the 2004 report)

we find that the total number of alleged victims at the hands of 4,392 priests is roughly between 10,000 and 12,000. That's a very long way from 100,000. Cohen should offer a retraction.