

# Sexual Abuse in Social Context: Clergy and Other Professionals

Special Report by Special Report by Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights

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## **PREFACE**

*The purpose of this special report is to put the recent scandal in the Catholic Church in perspective. It does not seek to exculpate anyone who had anything to do with priestly sexual misconduct, but it does seek to challenge those who continue to treat this issue in isolation. Indeed, to discuss the incidence of sexual abuse committed by Roman Catholic priests without reference to the level of offense found among the clergy of other religions, or to that of other professionals, is grossly unfair.*

*Specifically, this report was prepared to guide the discussion that will inevitably follow two major studies that will be issued on February 27. One of them, a national study on the extent of sexual abuse of minors by priests since 1950, will be released by John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City. The other is a study of the causes and consequences of the abuse crisis; it will be released by the National Review Board that was established by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Both studies were done at the request of the U.S. bishops.*

*It is the belief of the Catholic League that no meaningful conversation can take place on this issue without having some baseline data regarding the incidence of abuse that occurs outside the Catholic Church. That was the sole intent of this*

*special report, and if it contributes to that end, then it will have been a success.*

William A. Donohue, Ph.D.  
President

## **OVERALL DATA**

The National Child Abuse and Neglect Data Systems was developed by the Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Human Services in partnership with the States to collect annual statistics on child maltreatment from State child protective services agencies. For the year 2001, it was found that approximately 903,000 children were victims of child maltreatment, 10 percent of whom (or 90,000) were sexually abused. It also found that 59 percent of the perpetrators of child abuse or neglect were women and 41 percent were men.[i]

In 2001, clinical child psychologist Wade F. Horn reported on the work of researchers at Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health. The researchers found that nearly 20 percent of low-income women, recruited through family planning, obstetrical or gynecological clinics, had experienced child sexual abuse.

Horn summarized the researchers' findings on poor women as follows: "Family friends and acquaintances compose the largest group of perpetrators (28 percent), followed by such relatives as uncles and cousins (18 percent), stepfathers (12 percent), male siblings (10 percent), biological fathers (10 percent), boyfriends of the child's mother (9 percent), grandfathers and stepgrandfathers (7 percent), and strangers (4 percent)." Horn was struck by the fact that 10 percent were biological fathers and only 4 percent were strangers. "Which means," he said, "86 percent of the perpetrators were known to the family, but were someone other than the child's father." [ii]

According to Dr. Garth A. Rattray, about the same incidence of abuse occurs among all the socio-economic classes. For

example, he reports that “about 85 percent of the offenders [of child sexual abuse] are family members, babysitters, neighbors, family friends or relatives. About one in six child molesters are other children.” Unlike the first study cited, Rattray reports that most of the offenders are male.[iii]

It is obvious that children are much more likely to be sexually abused by family members and friends than by anyone else. This suggests that if preventative measures are to work, they must begin in the home, and not someplace else.

## **PRIESTS**

According to a survey by the *Washington Post*, over the last four decades, less than 1.5 percent of the estimated 60,000 or more men who have served in the Catholic clergy have been accused of child sexual abuse.[iv] According to a survey by the *New York Times*, 1.8 percent of all priests ordained from 1950 to 2001 have been accused of child sexual abuse.[v] Thomas Kane, author of *Priests are People Too*, estimates that between 1 and 1.5 percent of priests have had charges made against them.[vi] Of contemporary priests, the Associated Press found that approximately two-thirds of 1 percent of priests have charges pending against them.[vii]

Almost all the priests who abuse children are homosexuals. Dr. Thomas Plante, a psychologist at Santa Clara University, found that “80 to 90% of all priests who in fact abuse minors have sexually engaged with adolescent boys, not prepubescent children. Thus, the teenager is more at risk than the young altar boy or girls of any age.”[viii]

The situation in Boston, the epicenter of the scandal, is even worse. According to the *Boston Globe*, “Of the clergy sex abuse cases referred to prosecutors in Eastern Massachusetts, more than 90 percent involve male victims. And the most prominent Boston lawyers for alleged victims of clergy sexual abuse have said that about 95 percent of their clients are male.”[ix]

In a database analysis of reports on more than 1,200 alleged victims of priests identified by *USA Today*, 85 percent were males.[x] In another study by *USA Today*, it was determined that of the 234 priests who have been accused of sexual abuse of a minor while serving in the nation's 10 largest dioceses and archdioceses, 91 percent of their victims were males.[xi]

Much has been made of a survey done by the *Dallas Morning News* which claims that two-thirds of the nation's bishops have allowed priests accused of sexual abuse to continue working. But the problem with the survey is its definition of abuse—it includes everything from “ignoring warnings about suspicious behavior” to “criminal convictions.”[xii] Thus, the survey is of limited utility.

## **MINISTERS**

The data on the Protestant clergy tend to focus on sexual abuse in general, not on sexual abuse of children. Thus, strict comparisons cannot always be made. But there are some comparative data available on the subject of child sexual molestation, and what has been reported is quite revealing.

In a 1984 survey, 38.6 percent of ministers reported sexual contact with a church member, and 76 percent knew of another minister who had had sexual intercourse with a parishioner.[xiii] In the same year, a Fuller Seminary survey of 1,200 ministers found that 20 percent of theologically “conservative” pastors admitted to some sexual contact outside of marriage with a church member. The figure jumped to over 40 percent for “moderates”; 50 percent of “liberal” pastors confessed to similar behavior.[xiv]

In 1990, in a study by the Park Ridge Center for the Study of Health, Faith and Ethics in Chicago, it was learned that 10 percent of ministers said they had had an affair with a parishioner and about 25 percent admitted some sexual contact with a parishioner.[xv] Two years later, a survey

by *Leadership* magazine found that 37 percent of ministers confessed to having been involved in “inappropriate sexual behavior” with a parishioner.[xvi]

In a 1993 survey by the *Journal of Pastoral Care*, 14 percent of Southern Baptist ministers said they had engaged in “inappropriate sexual behavior,” and 70 percent said they knew a minister who had had such contact with a parishioner.[xvii] Joe E. Trull is co-author of the 1993 book, *Ministerial Ethics*, and he found that “from 30 to 35 percent of ministers of all denominations admit to having sexual relationships—from inappropriate touching to sexual intercourse—outside of marriage.”[xviii]

According to a 2000 report to the Baptist General Convention in Texas, “The incidence of sexual abuse by clergy has reached ‘horrific proportions.’” It noted that in studies done in the 1980s, 12 percent of ministers had “engaged in sexual intercourse with members” and nearly 40 percent had “acknowledged sexually inappropriate behavior.” The report concluded that “The disturbing aspect of all research is that the rate of incidence for clergy exceeds the client-professional rate for physicians and psychologists.”[xix] Regarding pornography and sexual addiction, a national survey disclosed that about 20 percent of all ministers are involved in the behavior.[xx]

In the spring of 2002, when the sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church was receiving unprecedented attention, the *Christian Science Monitor* reported on the results of national surveys by Christian Ministry Resources. The conclusion: “Despite headlines focusing on the priest pedophile problem in the Roman Catholic Church, most American churches being hit with child sexual-abuse allegations are Protestant, and most of the alleged abusers are not clergy or staff, but church volunteers.”[xxi]

Finally, in the authoritative work by Penn State professor

Philip Jenkins, *Pedophiles and Priests*, it was determined that between .2 and 1.7 percent of priests are pedophiles. The figure among the Protestant clergy ranges between 2 and 3 percent.[xxii]

### **OTHER CLERGY AND PROFESSIONALS**

Rabbi Arthur Gross Schaefer is a professor of law and ethics at Loyola Marymount University. It is his belief that sexual abuse among rabbis approximates that found among the Protestant clergy. According to one study, 73 percent of women rabbis report instances of sexual harassment. "Sadly," Rabbi Schaefer concludes, "our community's reactions up to this point have been often based on keeping things quiet in an attempt to do 'damage control.' Fear of lawsuits and bad publicity have dictated an atmosphere of hushed voices and outrage against those who dare to break ranks by speaking out." [xxiii]

Rabbi Joel Meyers, executive vice president of the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly, reports that 30 percent of rabbis who changed positions in 2000 did so involuntarily, and that sexual abuse was a factor in many instances.[xxiv] The Awareness Center devotes an entire website to "Clergy Abuse: Rabbis, Cantors & Other Trusted Officials." It is a detailed and frank look at the problem of sexual abuse by rabbis.[xxv]

The problem of sexual abuse in the Jehovah's Witnesses is evident among church elders but most of the abuse comes from congregation members. "The victims who have stepped forward are mostly girls and young women," writes Laurie Goodstein in the *New York Times*, "and many accusations involve incest." There is a victims support group available, "silentlambs," that has collected more than 5,000 Witnesses contending that the church mishandled child sexual abuse.[xxvi]

According to one study, .2 percent of athletic coaches nationwide have a criminal record of some sort of sexual

offense. This translates to about 6,000 coaches in the U.S. who have been tried and found guilty of sexual offense against children.[xxvii] It is not known how many more offenders have escaped the reach of law enforcement.

Between 3 and 12 percent of psychologists have had sexual contact with their clients. While today virtually every state considers sexual contact with a client as worthy of revoking a psychologist's license, as recently as 1987 only 31 percent of state licensing boards considered sexual relations between a psychologist and his or her patient grounds for license revocation.[xxviii] What makes this statistic so interesting is that many bishops in the 1980s took the advice of psychologists in handling molesting priests.

## **TEACHERS**

The American Medical Association found in 1986 that one in four girls, and one in eight boys, are sexually abused in or out of school before the age of 18. Two years later, a study included in *The Handbook on Sexual Abuse of Children*, reported that one in four girls, and one in six boys, is sexually abused by age 18.[xxix] It was reported in 1991 that 17.7 percent of males who graduated from high school, and 82.2 percent of females, reported sexual harassment by faculty or staff during their years in school. Fully 13.5 percent said they had sexual intercourse with their teacher.[xxx]

In New York City alone, at least one child is sexually abused by a school employee every day. One study concluded that more than 60 percent of employees accused of sexual abuse in the New York City schools were transferred to desk jobs at district offices located inside the schools. Most of these teachers are tenured and 40 percent of those transferred are repeat offenders. They call it "passing the garbage" in the schools. One reason why this exists is due to efforts by the United Federation of Teachers to protect teachers at the expense of children.[xxxi] Another is the fact that teachers

accused of sexual misconduct cannot be fired under New York State law.[xxxii]

One of the nation's foremost authorities on the subject of the sexual abuse of minors in public schools is Hofstra University professor Charol Shakeshaft. In 1994, Shakeshaft and Audrey Cohan did a study of 225 cases of educator sexual abuse in New York City. Their findings are astounding.

All of the accused admitted sexual abuse of a student, but none of the abusers was reported to the authorities, and only 1 percent lost their license to teach. Only 35 percent suffered negative consequences of any kind, and 39 percent chose to leave their school district, most with positive recommendations. Some were even given an early retirement package.[xxxiii]

Moving molesting teachers from school district to school district is a common phenomenon. And in only 1 percent of the cases do superintendents notify the new school district.[xxxiv] According to Diana Jean Schemo, the term "passing the trash" is the preferred jargon among educators.[xxxv]

Shakeshaft has also determined that 15 percent of all students have experienced some kind of sexual misconduct by a teacher between kindergarten and 12<sup>th</sup> grade; the behaviors range from touching to forced penetration.[xxxvi] She and Cohan also found that up to 5 percent of teachers sexually abuse children.[xxxvii] Shakeshaft will soon be ready to release the findings of a vast study undertaken for the Planning and Evaluation Service Office of the Undersecretary, U.S. Department of Education, titled, "Educator Sexual Misconduct with Students: A Synthesis of Existing Literature on Prevalence in Connection with the Design of a National Analysis." [xxxviii]



## **CONCLUSION**

The issue of child sexual molestation is deserving of serious scholarship. Too often, assumptions have been made that this problem is worse in the Catholic clergy than in other sectors of society. This report does not support this conclusion. Indeed, it shows that family members are the most likely to sexually molest a child. It also shows that the incidence of the sexual abuse of a minor is slightly higher among the Protestant clergy than among the Catholic clergy, and that it is significantly higher among public school teachers than among ministers and priests.

In a survey for the *Wall Street Journal-NBC News*, it was found that 64 percent of the public thought that Catholic priests frequently abused children.[xxxix] This is outrageously unfair, but it is not surprising given the media fixation on this issue. While it would be unfair to blame the media for the scandal in the Catholic Church, the constant drumbeat of negative reporting surely accounts for these remarkably skewed results.[xl]

Without comparative data, little can be learned. Numbers are not without meaning, but they don't count for much unless a baseline has been established. Moreover, sexual misconduct is difficult to measure given its mostly private nature. While crime statistics are helpful, we know from social science research that most crimes go unreported. This is especially true of sexual abuse crimes. At the end of the day, estimates culled from survey research are the best we can do.

By putting the sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church in perspective, it is hoped that this report will make for a more fair and educated public response.

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[iv] Alan Cooperman, "Hundreds of Priests Removed Since '60s; Survey Shows Scope Wider Than Disclosed," *Washington Post*, June 9, 2002, p. A1.

[v] Laurie Goodstein, "Decades of Damage; Trail of Pain in Church Crisis Leads to Nearly Every Diocese," *New York Times*, January 12, 2003, Section 1, p. 1.

[vi] Interviewed by Bill O'Reilly, Transcript of "The O'Reilly Factor," May 3, 2002.

[vii] Bob von Sternberg, "Insurance Falls Short in Church Abuse Cases; Catholic Dioceses are Forced to Find other Sources to Pay Settlements," *Star Tribune*, July 27, 2002, p. 1A.

[viii] Thomas Plante, "A Perspective on Clergy Sexual Abuse," [www.psywww.com/psyrelig/plante.html](http://www.psywww.com/psyrelig/plante.html).

[ix] Thomas Farragher and Matt Carroll, "Church Board Dismissed Accusations by Females," *Boston.com*, February 2, 2003.

[x] Janet Kornblum, "85% of Church Abuse Victims are Male, Research Finds," *USA Today*, July 24, 2002, pp. 6-7D.

[xi] "The Accusers and the Accused," *USA Today*, November 11, 2002, p. 7D.

[xii] Brooks Egerton and Reese Dunklin, "Two-thirds of Bishops Let Accused Priests Work," *Dallas Morning News*, June 12, 2002,

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[xiv] Cal Thomas, "Their Sins only Start with Abuse," *Baltimore Sun*, June 19, 2002, p. 9A.

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[xvi] "Pastors Are People, Too!," *Focus on the Family*, May 1996, p. 7.

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[xviii] Cal Thomas, "Their Sins only Start with Abuse," *Baltimore Sun*, June 19, 2002, p. 9A.

[xix] Terry Mattingly, "Baptists' Traditions Make it Hard to Oust Sex-Abusing Clergy," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, June 22, 2002, p. C2.

[xx] "Assemblies of God Tackles Problem of Porn Addiction Among Ministers," *Charisma*, January 2001, p. 24.

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[xxiii] Rabbi Arthur Gross Schaefer, "Rabbi Sexual Misconduct: Crying Out for a Communal Response," [www.rrc.edu/journal](http://www.rrc.edu/journal), November 24, 2003.

[xxiv] Roger Lovette, "Religious Leaders Must Learn to Handle Conflict Constructively," *Birmingham News*, April 28, 2002.

[xxv] See [www.theawarenesscenter.org/clergyabuse](http://www.theawarenesscenter.org/clergyabuse).

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[xxvii] Michael Dobie, "Violation of Trust; When Young Athletes Are Sex-Abuse Victims, Their Coaches Are Often the Culprits," *Newsday*, June 9, 2002, p. C25.

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[xxxiii] Charol Shakeshaft and Audrey Cohan, *In loco parentis: Sexual abuse of students in schools, (What administrators should know)*. Report to the U.S. Department of Education, Field Initiated Grants

[xxxiv] Ibid.

[xxxv] Diana Jean Schemo, "Silently Shifting Teachers in Sex Abuse Cases," *New York Times*, June 18, 2002, p. A19.

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[xxxvii] Berta Delgado and Sarah Talalay, "Sex Cases Increase in Schools; Many Acts of Teacher Misconduct Not Being Reported," *Sun-Sentinel*, June 4, 1995, p. 1A.

[xxxviii] The study is in draft form and is not yet available for quotation.

[xxxix] The dates of the study were April 5-7, 2002. It was reported in Roper Center at University of Connecticut *Public Opinion Online*, Accession Number 0402247. Hart and Teeter Research Companies did the survey.

[xl] The Catholic League took pains to credit the media with fair coverage of the scandal. See the "Executive Summary" of the Catholic League's *2002 Report on Anti-Catholicism*. It is available online at [www.catholicleague.org](http://www.catholicleague.org).