

1.2 METHODOLOGY - HOW THE STUDY WAS CARRIED OUT

The specific research questions posed by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) (see Appendix A1.1.1) required a careful and thorough accounting at the national level of the number of priests against whom allegations of child sexual abuse had been made as well as the number of overall allegations that had come to the attention of the Church over the last 50 years. The study team had a unique opportunity to solicit this information from all 202 dioceses and eparchies (including missions) and 221 religious institutes, together comprising the population of Catholic priests in the United States. The study had the full backing of the USCCB to ensure, to the greatest extent possible, full cooperation from all levels of church hierarchy throughout the country.

STUDY APPROACH

It was clear from the outset that the study team would not itself have access to the confidential Church files, nor did we have sufficient time to conduct a study that would reach all 50 states including every diocese and religious community within the United States, and cover a 52-year timeframe. Given this framework, the research team decided to collect the data necessary by constructing survey instruments and mailing them to each diocese, eparchy and religious institute in the country. Such a population-based survey approach provided the optimum strategy for fulfilling the mandate of the study to produce as complete a census as possible of the scope of the problem of sexual abuse of minors within the Catholic Church. Additionally, such an approach could make a significant contribution to the literature on child sexual abuse since no previous population-based research had been conducted. While research on child sexual abuse in the general population by professionals and academic researchers is substantial, there has been, to date, no population-based research on the characteristics or patterns of behavior of sexual abuse in any single population. The information that was previously available on child sexual in the Catholic Church had been obtained from small samples, largely clinical samples, focused on a specific sub-population (e.g., one parish or diocese) or taken from public records. Therefore, it was our hope that by taking this approach, we would both fulfill the mandate of the Charter and make a significant contribution to this important literature.

STUDY DESIGN

As with any study, the questions to be answered drove the construction of the survey instruments. The study mandate suggested that we needed to address three specific targets: the dioceses/eparchies/religious communities, the priests against whom allegations had been made, and the incidents described in those allegations. Thus, each diocese, eparchy or religious community would complete one survey focused on their institution as a whole, one survey for each priest against whom allegation(s) of abuse had been made, and one survey for each alleged incident(s) of abuse connected with each priest. As a result we were able to construct three separate surveys, which taken together, provided a more comprehensive assessment of the scope of the problem.

The Diocesan Profile. The first survey was the "Diocesan/Order Profile" (Appendices A1.1.2 and A1.1.3). The aim of this survey was to establish aggregate numbers for the particular diocese/eparchy or religious community – the number of priests against whom allegations

had been made and the total number of individuals making allegations. We were able to obtain a census of active and retired priests in the diocese/eparchy/religious community during the study period, 1950 – 2002. The survey consisted of ten questions, half of which provided us with demographic information about the units, and the other half, a profile of the scope of the problem within that unit. Dioceses and eparchies were asked to indicate the church region, the Catholic population, and the number of parishes within their boundaries. Religious communities were asked for the total number of members in the community. Because survey responses contained no identifying information (see our discussion of confidentiality issues later in this section), the broad demographic characteristics, presented in deciles, assisted us in evaluating the survey response rate. The survey then asked for a global number, based on the review of the church records, of the number of priests against whom allegations of abuse had been made and, of those, how many had been completely exonerated. It also requested the total number of individuals who made the allegations and asked specifically for the number of those allegations that had been shown to be false or that had been withdrawn. These false or withdrawn allegations were not included in any further reporting.

The Cleric Survey. The second survey sent to study respondents was the “Cleric Survey” (Appendix A1.1.4). It included 17 questions, with 18 follow-up questions, and focused on individual priests. It was to be completed from existing files and records for each and every priest who had been named in a complaint or allegation of sexual abuse of a minor that was known to a diocese, eparchy or religious community. We were seeking answers to several types of questions in this survey. First, we wanted information related to the history of the individual priest who was accused of abuse, including specifications of the seminary he attended and the history of where he ministered in the Catholic Church (e.g., whether the priest had been transferred within or between dioceses). The relevant history also included information from the file concerning whether he himself had been abused and whether he had a known substance abuse problem or other medical/psychological conditions. The next set of questions related to the individuals who had made allegations against this particular priest, including their number, their age(s) and gender(s). The final section of the “Cleric Survey” focused on the actions taken by the Church in response to the allegations of abuse against this particular priest. These questions focused on the action taken by the church in response to the allegation (e.g., whether the priest was reprimanded, referred for treatment, or removed from duty). They also asked more specifically whether the priest participated in and/or completed any type of treatment, and the years in which those interventions would have occurred. The responses to the three sets of questions in this survey thus provided information on the scope and nature of the problem, information about those against whom allegations were made, and information about the church’s response to the alleged offenses.

The Victim Survey. The third survey, titled the “Victim Survey,” focused on incidents of alleged abuse. The aim of this survey was to capture information about each allegation that was made against a particular priest (Appendix A1.1.5). In other words, for every priest against whom allegations were made, a separate and unique third survey was completed for each one of the alleged incidents. So, for example, if the “Cleric Survey” indicated that this particular priest had five allegations made against him, then five incident surveys would have been completed and submitted as part of the package of material on that particular priest. Surveys were neither requested nor submitted for those allegations which had been shown to be false, which were withdrawn, or for which the priest had been exonerated. This

survey included 36 questions, with 18 follow-up questions. Like the "Cleric Survey," it was to be completed based on the information about the victim in the alleged abuser's file.

This incident survey was divided into two sections. The first section of the survey sought basic information on the person who brought an allegation against this particular priest¹ and about the incident or incidents themselves. This included information on the individual's gender; age at both the time of offense and time the offense was reported; method by which the allegation and follow-ups to the allegation were made; timeframe and type of alleged incident(s); threats, gifts, or enticements used to coax or coerce the individual into participating in sexual conduct and action(s) taken by the Catholic institution and/or civil authorities as a result of the incident(s). The second part of the survey sought information on the financial impact of the incident or incidents of alleged abuse reported in the preceding section. These questions asked about monies paid for treatment of both the victim and the priest, legal fees associated with the incident(s), and overall compensation to the accuser.

Pilot Testing of Surveys. During the development of the survey instruments, in February and March 2003, the research team consulted with many individuals associated with the Church, including members of the National Review Board, the Office of Child and Youth Protection, as well as numerous diocesan and religious priests who agreed to provide feedback to us on the content and wording of the survey instruments. Numerous meetings were held in which terminology and categories of responses were refined, e.g., types of responses a diocese might have taken and manners in which allegations might have come to the Church's attention.

A formal pre-test was also conducted in one diocese. For this pre-test, a high-ranking official within the diocese, at the direction of the presiding bishop, completed the draft survey instruments using actual data from diocesan files, and provided detailed comments to the principal investigator about their content, readability and accessibility. These comments and suggestions were used to refine the study instruments.

STUDY PROCEDURE

In April 2003, a package containing one copy of each of the three separate survey instruments was sent to all 202 dioceses and eparchies in the United States. Prior to that mailing, a letter was sent to all dioceses and eparchies from Bishop Wilton D. Gregory, President of the USCCB, alerting bishops to the study, reminding them of the mandate to comply with the study as stated in the Charter, and requesting full compliance with it.

Unlike the dioceses and eparchies, whose participation was mandated by the Charter, the religious communities of men were invited to participate in the study. When their agreement was given in June 2003, the survey materials were sent to the 140 religious institutes of men in the United States. These religious communities then distributed the surveys to their provinces and autonomous monasteries or abbeys. The organization of religious communities is such that the files with the information being sought for the study were held in the provinces and autonomous communities of many religious communities, rather than at their central offices, so this second level of distribution by the religious institute was required.

Reliability of Data. With so many separate entities within the Catholic Church in the United States preparing to complete the surveys, a number of affirmative steps were taken to maximize the reliability and consistency of the data. First, the surveys were mailed to each

diocese, eparchy and religious community with a packet of information that included two forms of instruction - written instructions (Appendix A1.1.6) and, a videotape with detailed instructions about how to fill out the surveys, how to handle the process of mailing the surveys once they were completed, and how to obtain additional guidance and information if needed during survey completion. Second, the research team provided anonymous telephone and email support five days a week from 10 am to 6 pm, adding an 800 number during the summer months. A number of research assistants were specially trained to answer the telephone and to keep a log of all calls, each of which was reviewed by a member of the study team. Notes were kept on the caller's questions, and written responses were regularly updated. Third, as the volume of calls grew during the summer and a pattern of questions was discerned, a highly secure website with answers to frequently asked questions² was made available in July 2003. The telephone, email and web site support was continued throughout the study period until February 2004. Fourth, members of the John Jay College research team attended the biannual meeting of the USCCB in St. Louis to meet with the bishops and answer any questions they had about the study. And, finally, the structure of the survey instruments themselves assisted in ensuring reliability. The three surveys employed multiple measures of the same information, thus providing additional internal reliability checks for the results.³

Survey Responses. The data collection process lasted approximately eleven months. At first, many bishops and religious superiors had reservations about the study, and some explicitly opposed it. Through discussion, consultation, and the exchange of questions and responses, the research team was able to resolve the concerns of most of the bishops and major superiors, especially their worries about revealing the identities of accused priests. Because all states present unique legal issues, the research team also worked with diocesan attorneys around the country to reduce their concerns and to ensure that the data collection process would not affect pending or potential law suits involving the Catholic Church.⁴ Ultimately, 97% of the dioceses and eparchies returned the surveys, an extraordinarily high response rate for any type of survey research, though perhaps not surprising given the mandate from the Charter and the significant efforts made by all parties to guarantee confidentiality and alleviate concerns. In general, the surveys were complete and showed careful attention to detail, as indicated by the many specific comments provided in the surveys. There was not, however, uniformity in terms of the amount of support, staff and resources that were available around the country, and so the responses did vary in terms of completeness and level of detail provided.

Data Entry. All aspects of data coding, entry, and analysis were overseen by a full-time data analyst, working directly with the study's principal investigator. Actual coding and data entry were done by 16 research assistants. All research assistants were thoroughly trained by both the principal investigator and data analyst, not only in the specific procedures for dealing with the survey data, but, most importantly, to equip them to understand the importance of the study's complex confidentiality provisions. A log was maintained of all study materials received by John Jay College during the entire study period. Information from the surveys was recorded in files using both statistical and database software.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Ensuring the confidentiality of individuals mentioned in the Church's files was an important element that influenced the design of the study and, ultimately, allowed dioceses and

religious communities to participate fully in the study. The research team was concerned about the confidentiality of and risks to those individuals who reported sexual abuse; their friends and family members; priests and deacons against whom allegations had been made; Church employees and the dioceses and religious institutes themselves.

A number of steps were taken to ensure confidentiality. The first decision was that no one on the John Jay College team would have direct contact with the files or records that were the property of the Church. The only persons who had any direct contact with the Catholic Church files used to complete the survey instruments were those persons designated by their bishop or major superior.

Secondly, the study team put into place complex procedures to ensure that no identifying information about any individual who made an allegation of abuse, any priest against whom an allegation had been made, nor any individual diocese, eparchy or religious community would be included on any study materials that came to John Jay College.

Our files contain no personal identifying information beyond age at the time of the alleged incident and gender for those persons who made allegations of abuse against priests. The information for the surveys was taken from existing files, so no new contact was initiated with any person who reported abuse by a priest or any member of his or her family.

With respect to the priests against whom allegations had been made, a challenge arose because one interest of the USCCB was to determine whether individual priests had allegations of child sexual abuse in more than one diocese, eparchy or religious community. In order to answer this question, the researchers needed to be able to give a unique identifying number to each priest, which would then permit us to track information about him from more than one diocese. To do this accurately the researchers needed to collect, at a minimum, the initials and date of birth of each priest who had been the subject of an allegation.

Given this necessity, the following steps were taken to protect the confidentiality of each priest and his community:

1. No survey, nor any study communication of any kind bearing a postmark, was sent directly to John Jay College from any Catholic Church group. An independent auditor, a certified public accountant at a nationally known accounting firm, was designated to receive all communications from Catholic Church representatives.
2. Clear instructions were provided to respondents that all completed survey instruments were to be placed in blank envelopes that were then sealed. Those sealed, blank envelopes were then placed in another envelope or box with a piece of diocesan or religious community stationery and sent to the auditor. When these packages were received by the auditor, the outer envelope and the letterhead were used to make a record of the sender, for purposes of response rate calculation only. A random code number was then assigned to each respondent unit of the Catholic Church. The codes were recorded on the blank envelopes, and the materials boxed and sent to John Jay College. From the time of receipt by John Jay College, the materials were only known by their code numbers. Only the completed surveys that had been placed in sealed envelopes and mailed were seen by the John Jay College research team.

3. All external envelopes, packaging and records that linked the sender to the survey data were destroyed by the auditor.

4. The study's principal investigator opened each one of the envelopes. She recorded the identifying information for each priest—initials and birthdate—and then removed that page from the survey. The identifying data was immediately encrypted and the surveys numbered with a unique numerical code for each priest. The pages with initials and dates of birth were segregated in a secure location, separate from the study office, until data collection was complete. These paper records, and the digital record, have been destroyed.

5. The principal investigator carefully inspected all surveys for accidental disclosure of sensitive or identifying data. If there was any identifying information written on the survey itself, this information was immediately redacted before the surveys were given to the research assistants for coding.

6. Although the formal procedures made it very unlikely that any accidental disclosure of sensitive data would occur, it is always possible that there would be a lapse and sensitive data about victims or abusers be transmitted. Accordingly, the study design included several levels of training in confidentiality protections for research assistants in order to reduce the possibility of accidental exposure.

The John Jay College research team sought and was granted approval to conduct the study by the College's Institutional Review Board which oversees protection of human subjects in research. Additionally, the team applied for a Certificate of Confidentiality, which can be granted by the United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to protect against "compelled disclosure of identifying information about subjects of biomedical, behavioral, clinical, and other research." The certificate protects the researchers against involuntary disclosure about the identities of research participants and is understood to bar any legal demand for testimony in court. Such a certificate does not prevent any individual priest, victim, diocese or religious community from voluntarily releasing data. After a number of meetings and discussions, HHS in November 2003 declined to grant a Certificate of Confidentiality for the study. A major reason for denying the certificate was the determination that the John Jay College researchers had taken adequate measures to ensure that all identifying information would be removed and the surveys would be confidential, thereby precluding the need for a certificate. Additionally, since the primary purpose of the certificate is to protect human subjects who have given their consent to participate in research related to confidential matters that may adversely affect them, this framework did not apply to the John Jay study since the priests were not voluntary research participants, and their consent had not been sought nor granted. Therefore, they were uncertain as to whether it was legally possible to issue a certificate, which is primarily used as a vehicle to encourage human subjects to participate in a research project. In their letter explaining the rejection of a certificate, it was stated that the confidentiality plan for the study "includes multiple and wide-ranging protections for subject identifiers" and as such, "a certificate is not necessary to achieve your research goals." (See Appendix A1.1.7 for a copy of the letter.)

¹ The survey did not request any personal information about those making the allegations, other than age and gender.

² The study website employed multiple levels of security to ensure that the public could not access the questions and answers. The identification name and password were sent to each bishop or major superior so that he or his staff could access the website.

³ Although we worded carefully the definitions to ensure that those filling out the questionnaires would do so in a uniform manner, in a study of this type, it is impossible to create an infallible operational definition with criteria so specific that everyone supplying the information would do so in exactly the same way. Therefore, some degree of variance in the counting of “credible allegations” is inevitable.

⁴ For instance, California law prohibits the disclosure of any identifying information related to sexual behavior. As a result, we worked out complicated procedures whereby identifying information (which was used only to allow us to track priests who had been moved from one Diocese to another) was encrypted prior to arriving at the study headquarters so that California respondents were not providing any identifying information.