

# ***THE PREVALENCE OF SEXUAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN BY PRIESTS***

## 2.1 ESTIMATES OF THE PREVALENCE OF SEXUAL ABUSE OF YOUTHS UNDER 18 IN THE UNITED STATES

The estimation of any form of deviance in the general population is a very difficult task. It is impossible to assess the extent of sexual offending, either in general or with children as targets. Most estimates of the distribution of sexual offenders in the general population are derived from forensic sources, that is, samples of those who are arrested or convicted for sex offenses. All researchers acknowledge that those who are arrested represent only a fraction of all sexual offenders. Sexual crimes have the lowest rates of reporting for all crimes. Not all potential participants in such studies can be known or contacted, not all would use the same language to describe their experiences, and not all are willing to share information. The sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests and deacons is part of the larger problem of sexual abuse of children in the United States. This chapter is a summary of the estimates of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church.

### RESEARCH ESTIMATES

The prevalence of some event or behavior in a specific population represents the proportion of a population who have experienced that event or behavior. Since it is not known how many people in the United States experience a form of sexual abuse as children, some researchers select groups, or samples, of individuals to study and direct questions to them. If the selection of the group to be surveyed is not biased, the results of this study provide estimates of the prevalence of sexual abuse in the population from which the group is selected. In order to avoid bias in a sample, every person in the part of the population to be used as a framework for selecting the sample must have an equal chance of being asked to participate. Researchers use the data gathered from those who participate to estimate the proportion of the United States population who are sexually abused during childhood.

Studies of the incidence, as opposed to the prevalence, of sexual abuse of children concentrate on estimating the number of new cases occurring over a particular period of time and on whether the number of events or incidents is increasing or decreasing. Scholarly studies of both the incidence and the prevalence of sexual abuse of children in the United States began emerging in the 1960s and gained greater urgency after the cluster of day care center child abuse cases in the 1980s made the issue one of acute public interest. A look at victimization studies that focus on the sexual abuse of minor children suggests that the scope of this problem is extensive.

Although we do not have data reflecting the prevalence of abusers, there are data from several studies reporting the prevalence of victimization. The prevalence rates reported in these studies vary somewhat, as noted below.

- 27% of the females and 16% of the males disclosed a history of childhood sexual abuse; 42% of the males were likely to never have disclosed the experience to anyone whereas 33% of the females never disclosed.<sup>1</sup>
- 12.8% of the females and 4.3% of the males reported a history of sexual abuse during childhood.<sup>2</sup>
- 15.3% of the females and 5.9% of the males experienced some form of sexual assault.<sup>3</sup>
- Only 5.7% of the incidents were reported to the police; 26% of the incidents were not disclosed to anyone prior to the study.<sup>4</sup>
- In summary, when compared with their male counterparts, females were more likely to have been sexually abused during childhood. Furthermore, females were more likely than the males to disclose such information; however, disclosure rates are quite low regardless of the victim's gender.

Finkelhor and Jones (2004) have used data from NCANDS to make a national estimate of the number of sexual abuse cases substantiated by child protective services (CPS) for the period from 1992 to 2000. Using data from more than forty states they report that the number of substantiated sexual abuse cases peaked at approximately 149,800 in 1992, followed by annual declines of 2 to 11 percent per year through 2000-when the number of cases reached a low of approximately 89,355.

Professional opinion is divided about why this drop occurred and how much of the drop is real as opposed to factors such as changes in definitions, reporting and investigation by the states (Jones and Finkelhor, 2001; Jones, Finkelhor, and Kopiec, 2001). Finkelhor and Jones (2004) examined other indicia of sex abuse rates and conclude that, taken together they suggest that at least part of the drop in cases has resulted from a decline in sexual abuse of children. The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)--which asks about rape and sexual assault for victims ages 12 and older (including acts counted within the broader definition of child sexual abuse) shows that sex offenses against children ages 12-17 declined 56 percent between 1993 and 2000. Virtually all the decline occurred in offenses committed by known perpetrators (family and acquaintances) which declined 72 percent. Finkelhor and Jones observe that cases involving known perpetrators are the ones most likely to be categorized as sexual abuse.

Another source of self-report data on sexual abuse is the Minnesota Student Survey which has been administered to 6th, 9th, and 12th grade students in Minnesota in 1989, 1992, 1995, 1998, and 2001. Between 90 and 99 percent of Minnesota's school districts and more than 100,000 students have participated in the survey each year. The survey includes two questions about sexual abuse. Results indicate that sexual abuse by family and nonfamily perpetrators showed a slight rise between 1989 and 1992 followed by a 22-percent drop from 1992 to 2001.

At the same time reports of sexual abuse have declined, there has been a significant drop in crime rates and measures of family problems such as violence among adult intimates, and a drop in of out-of-wedlock teenage pregnancies and live births to teenage mothers (some of which are attributable to child sexual abuse) -- all of these suggest a general improvement in the well-being of children.

Additionally, Finkelhor and Jones suggest that rates of sexual abuse have perhaps been reduced as a result of increased incarceration for sexual abuse offenders. They report that surveys of state correctional facilities indicate that between 1991 and 1997, the number of individuals incarcerated in state correctional facilities for sex crimes against children rose 39 percent, from 43,500 to 60,700 (Finkelhor and Ormrod, 2001), having already more than doubled from 19,900 in 1986. They further note that these totals do not include large numbers of sexual abusers who receive sanctions which do not involve incarceration for a year or more.

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<sup>1</sup> David Finkelhor et al., "Sexual Abuse in a National Survey of Adult Men and Women: Prevalence, Characteristics, and Risk Factors." *Child Abuse & Neglect* 14 (1990): 20-21.

<sup>2</sup> H. MacMillan et al., "Prevalence of Child Physical and Sexual Abuse in the Community." *JAMA* (1997): 131-135.

<sup>3</sup> K. Moore, K. Nord, & J. Peterson, "Nonvoluntary Sexual Activity Among Adolescents." *Family Planning Perspectives* 21 (1989): 110-114.

<sup>4</sup> Sue Boney-McCoy & David Finkelhor, "Psychosocial Sequelae of Violent Victimization in a National Youth Sample." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 63 (1995): 726-736.