

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE:
A Review of the Literature

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PART I – LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review provides the reader with an overview of major academic works concerning child sexual abuse in the general population. This is a comprehensive review of the available literature, though it is not a meta-analysis (a synthesis of research results using various statistical methods to retrieve, select, and combine results from previous studies). During the course of the past thirty years, the field of sex offender research has expanded and become increasingly inter-disciplinary. It would be nearly impossible to review every piece of information relating to the topic of child sexual abuse. Instead, this is a compilation of information pertaining to theories, typologies and treatments that have attained general acceptance within the scientific community.

In reviewing the literature concerning sexual abuse within the Catholic Church, the amount of empirical research was limited, and many of the studies suffered from methodological flaws. Additionally, much of the literature consisted of either anecdotal information or impassioned arguments employed by various researchers when characterizing the responses of the church to this incendiary issue. In providing the reader with a comprehensive review, it was necessary to summarize every point of view no matter how controversial. Any of the ideas expressed in this review should not be considered indicative of the point of view of either the researchers at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, or the Catholic Church.

One aim of this literature review is to put into perspective the problem of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church as compared to its occurrence in other institutions and organizations. However, there is little or no empirical data pertaining to the true prevalence of sexual abuse within most other organizations. For this reason, the sexual abuse of children in the Catholic Church is difficult to contextualize because there is no basis for comparison in any group, including the general population. Some journalists have conducted research on sexual abuse in particular organizations, such as the Boy Scouts. Though this work is an important step in studying the problem, it is not comprehensive in nature and more empirical work should be conducted on institutions that cater to children. Though not empirical in nature, this literature review does contain an overview of published newspaper articles on child sexual abuse in specific organizations.