News



Archbishop Mark Coleridge of Brisbane, president of the Australian bishops' conference, and Josephite Sister Monica Cavanagh, president of Catholic Religious Australia, are seen in Sydney, Australia, Aug. 31, 2018. The Australian Catholic Church released its National Catholic Safeguarding Standards governing how the church protects children and vulnerable adults from sexual abuse. (CNS/David Gray, Reuters)

Marilyn Rodrigues

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Around 87,000 Australians have been sexually abused in faith-based organizations during their childhood, with nearly three-quarters of those taking place in Catholic settings, according to new research.

Yet the new study from the Australian Catholic University's Institute of Child Protection Studies showed a significant decline in the prevalence of abuse in the last five decades, falling from 2.2% of men aged 65 and older, down to 0.2% of men now aged 16-24.

One in every 250 Australians, or 0.4% of the population, reported being abused by a pastor, a member of the clergy or other adult in a religious organization.

As boys, men now aged 65 years or older were more likely than girls to be abused in this way, and the most common perpetrator was also male.

The analysis, led by PhD candidate Gabrielle Hunt, confirmed that the Catholic Church carries a proportionally higher burden of institutional child sexual abuse in Australia, but also leads efforts to prevent and address such crimes.

The findings, published in "Child Abuse & Neglect," were drawn from a major child maltreatment study of 8,503 people age 16 and above by Australian Catholic University in 2023, which found that 28.5% of people had experienced sexual abuse as a child.

The report attributed the decline to lower levels of religious observance and engagement, rising secularization, dilution of deference to organizational and religious authorities, robust preventative and response policies, and work by organizations to prevent the admission of high-risk individuals to leadership positions.

Hunt said efforts to adopt background checks for those working with children, mandatory reporting policies, and screening and training programs had contributed

to the reduction in prevalence but that "more needs to be done."

"I think we need to get to a point where we don’t accept the abuse of any child, and so I think we need to maintain our efforts to protect children and young people, including in religious organizations," she said.
She said the greater prevalence of boys among victims of abuse in religious settings aligned with findings of Australia's Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, established in 2013 and which issued its final report in 2017, and is not unique to religious organizations.

"Girls are at a substantially higher risk overall, and boys are at a greater risk across institutional settings, regardless of if they are affiliated with a religious group or not," she said.

The study included forms of child sexual abuse that included physical contact and noncontact (such as acts of abusive self-exposure or voyeurism — the practice of gaining sexual pleasure from watching others when they are naked or engaged in sexual activity).

Most people who experienced child sexual abuse by leaders or other adults said it occurred in Catholic organizations (71.9%), followed by other Christian denominations including Anglicans, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Orthodox (21.8%) and non-Christian religious organizations (5.1%).

Boys experienced more sexual abuse (0.8%) than girls (0.1%) by religious perpetrators, and the average age at which child sexual abuse was first experienced was 9.8 years.

Despite the Royal Commission and other inquiries highlighting the problem of child sexual abuse in religious organizations, the study yields the first-ever national estimates of the prevalence of sexual abuse by a leader or adult in a religious organization.

Authors said the numbers reported are "conservative" as they do not include acts perpetrated by adolescents or in other settings with religious affiliations such as schools and out-of-home care facilities.

"Accordingly, they underrepresent the true overall prevalence of child sexual abuse in religious organizations," the report read.

ACU professor Darryl Higgins, director of the university’s Institute of Child Protection Studies and the report’s co-author, said while all forms of child maltreatment are unacceptable, child sexual abuse in religious organizations is "particularly egregious" as it represented a stark betrayal of trust and a form of spiritual abuse.

But the decline in the prevalence of this abuse over time was a "very positive and promising shift."

"It’s down to about one-tenth of what it was about five decades ago, which is testament to not only the broader societal changes we've had and the Royal Commission throwing attention on these issues,” said Higgins, “but the engagement of all organizations that engage with and serve children and young people including places of worship, health, welfare and education services."

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Ursula Stephens, CEO of Australian Catholic Safeguarding Ltd., said the data was an "important reminder of the importance of constant vigilance to ensure the level of child mistreatment and abuse in Australia is addressed."

"The good news is that the research demonstrates the significant reduction in abuse of younger people by leaders in religious organizations since 2000," she said.

"At ACSL we unequivocally acknowledge the lifelong trauma of abuse victims and survivors and their families.

"While the harm to victims and survivors can never be undone, the Catholic Church in Australia has learnt, and continues to learn from the grievous failures in its past and today is resolutely committed to providing safe environments for children, adults at risk and all people as its utmost priority," she said.

Australia has become a respected participant in international safeguarding efforts, with organizers of the International Safeguarding Conference held in Rome in June praising a presentation from representatives of the ACU, ACSL and the Archdiocese of Sydney’s Ephpheta Center for the deaf and hard of hearing.

Safeguarding and disability was the 2024 theme for the annual event, held at the Pontifical Gregorian University.

The Australian group of 20 professionals met four times to discuss safeguarding and disability in the national context before presenting the input at the Vatican conference.

"We were really impressed by the thoroughness of your work," organizers told them.

In April, the Australian bishops conference also released a new national code of conduct for people ministering in Catholic dioceses around Australia, replacing a number of earlier codes as requested by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sex Abuse.