

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

May 19, 2011 at 9:14am

Causes and context report released on clergy sexual abuse of minors

by David Gibson by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON -- Because potential sexual abusers of minors cannot be pinpointed through "identifiable psychological characteristics," it is "very important" to prevent abuse by limiting the "situational factors" associated with it, according to a long-awaited report on the causes and context of sexual abuse by priests in the United States.

The report, released in Washington May 18, said there is "no single identifiable 'cause' of sexually abusive behavior toward minors." It encouraged steps to deny abusers "the opportunity to abuse."

Titled "The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950-2010," it reports the findings of a study mandated in 2002 under the U.S. Catholic bishops' "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People."

The charter, adopted by the bishops during a historic meeting in Dallas, created a National Review Board and directed the lay consultative body to commission studies of the abuse problem's "nature and scope" and its "causes and context." The John Jay College of Criminal Justice of the City University of New York conducted both studies.

The nature and scope study appeared in February 2004. The causes and context study commenced in 2006.

The new report addressed several misperceptions about the sexual abuse of minors by priests. It said:

- Priestly celibacy does not explain this problem. "Constant in the Catholic Church since the 11th century," celibacy cannot "account for the rise and subsequent decline in abuse cases from the

1960s through the 1980s."

- Despite "widespread speculation," priests with a homosexual identity "were not significantly more likely to abuse minors" than heterosexual priests. Sexual "identity" should be differentiated from "behavior." A possible reason so many male minors were abused is that priests had greater access to them.
- Less than 5 percent of priests with abuse allegations exhibited behavior consistent with pedophilia. Few victims were prepubescent children.

Seventy percent of priests referred for abusing a minor "had also had sexual behavior with adults," the study found. The majority of priest-abusers did not "specialize" in abusing "particular types of victims."

The new study's goal was to understand what factors "led to a sexual abuse 'crisis' in the Catholic Church" and "make recommendations to Catholic leadership" for reducing abuse, the John Jay College researchers explained.

They said their report also "provides a framework" for understanding "sexual victimization of children in any institution" and how organizations respond.

No other institution has undertaken a public study of sexual abuse like this one, they said.

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Priests who abused minors were not carbon copies of one another. The report said they constituted a "heterogeneous population." The majority "appear to have had certain vulnerabilities," such as "emotional congruence to adolescents" or difficulty interrelating with adults.

Some priest-abusers were abused as youths. "Having been sexually abused by an adult while a minor increased the risk that priests would later abuse a child," the report said.

The stress priests may experience at transitional moments -- moving from seminary to parish life; transferring to new parishes; becoming pastors -- was cited as a factor that can increase "vulnerability to abuse."

The report indicated that "situational stressors" do not cause abuse, but may serve "as triggers." High alcohol consumption during stressful times can lower inhibitions, it noted.

"The peak of the crisis has passed," the report observed. It said the church "responded," and abuse cases decreased substantially.

A "system of change" has begun in the church, according to the report. However, it said, "organizational changes take years, and often decades, to fully implement."

The report called sexual abuse of minors "a long-term societal problem," one "likely to persist, particularly in organizations that nurture and mentor adolescents." It said diocesan leaders "must continue to deal with abuse allegations appropriately."

Priest-abusers represented only a small percentage of all priests. The researchers judged it "neither possible nor desirable to implement extensive restrictions on the mentoring and nurturing relationships between minors and priests, given that most priests have not sexually abused minors and are not likely to do so."

Because so many abuse cases first were reported to authorities in the early 2000s, some people suspect the abuse remains "at peak levels," the report said. The reality is otherwise.

Sexual abuse of minors by priests "increased steadily from the mid-1960s through the late 1970s, then declined in the 1980s and continues to remain low," the report showed. "Most abuse incidents occurred decades ago."

And "the majority of abusers (70 percent) were ordained prior to the 1970s," the study noted; 44 percent of those accused entered the priesthood before 1960.

Social factors influenced the increase of abuse incidents during the 1960s and 1970s, the report said. It found this increase consistent with "the rise of other types of 'deviant' behavior, such as drug use and crime," and changes in social behavior such as the "increase in premarital sexual behavior and divorce."

Those generations of priest-abusers also lacked "careful preparation for a celibate life," the report noted. Moreover, they failed to recognize the harm done to victims.

Awareness of the harm of sexual abuse to minors grew in society and the church during the 20th century's last decades. An increasing reluctance over time to reinstate priests in parishes after a first accusation may reflect the growth of this awareness, the report suggested.

In the 1990s, it said, "the failure of some diocesan leaders to take responsibility for the harms of the abuse by priests was egregious in some cases."

The report accented the critical role of what today is called "human formation" in seminaries. It said a gradually intensifying focus on human-formation concerns coincided with a decline of abuse cases.

Human formation addresses matters such as the future priest's relationships and friendships, his self-knowledge, integrity and celibate chastity. The report recommended that human formation continue after ordination.

Can seminaries screen-out priesthood candidates who will abuse minors? While encouraging further research, the report said "personality tests did not show statistically significant differences on major clinical scales" between priest-abusers and others without abuse allegations.

Nonetheless, it said screening tools remain "critically important" for identifying "other psychological problems not necessarily related" to abuse of minors.

Removing opportunities to abuse minors, making abuse more difficult and increasing its risks are among prevention steps the report recommended. Excuses priest-abusers make need to be recognized for what they are, it advised.

The report affirmed the safe environment programs implemented throughout the church in the U.S. These programs educate potential victims, abusers, parents and others, increasing the likelihood that abusers "will be identified" and "have more to lose."

Priests need "outlets to form social friendships and suitable bonds with age-appropriate persons," the report said. It encouraged attention to priests' health and well-being, including factors such as stress.

It recommended that dioceses periodically evaluate priests' performance. Evaluation is "an established element of most complex organizations," it noted.

The church has taken many steps "to reduce opportunities for abuse," the report said. It recommended that these efforts "be maintained and continually evaluated for efficacy."

[Gibson was the founding editor of Origins, Catholic News Service's documentary service. He retired in 2007 after holding that post for 36 years.]

Editor's Note: The full text of the John Jay report is now available as a pdf file: **Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950-2010**

For more coverage of the John Jay report, see:

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