

The John Jay Study: What it is and what it isn't

Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea | Jul. 21, 2011 Examining the Crisis

ANALYSIS

The publication of the most recent John Jay study of sexual abuse in the church has been met by predictably impassioned binary responses. Church leaders seem to idealize the results, feeling vindicated in at least some of their responses to sexual abuse. Victims and advocates, on the other hand, lambaste the research as a dismissive invalidation of their pain. It is always difficult to speak dispassionately about sexual abuse; the crimes at issue involve passion, denial by perpetrators is standard fare, and brittle experiences of new betrayal are at the ready for victims expecting their suffering to be minimized. It is worth trying, however, to put passion aside temporarily to make room for reason. I hope to do a little of that here.

Before unpacking specific aspects of the John Jay study, it is important to put the entire project into a research and scholarly context.

It is what it is and it is not what it is not. The John Jay study is not the piece of research on the sexual abuse crisis; it is one contribution to the literature. Any topic as broad, long-lasting, and multilayered as the sexual abuse of children by priests over the course of 60 years -- the scope of the study -- and the failure of adequate responses to those crimes by others cannot be fully covered by one research project. Rather, it will take years of empirical research studies, clinical narratives, memoirs, theoretical books and papers that eventually may generate a coalescence of findings about exactly what happened and why.

It is a study conducted by criminologists. Criminology is one field. Like any science, it involves a set of principles, biases and methodologies, and a body of literature to draw from that is peculiar to that science. Criminologists view the world through a limited number of lenses. Psychologists, theologians, historians, sociologists and cultural anthropologists look at the world through their own sets of perspectives. No one field and no one study in any of these fields can be expected to tell a complete story. We need them all to do their work, as they surely will over the next years and decades.

Principal investigator Karen Terry and her team have generated some meaningful results, conclusions and recommendations that indeed shed light into a corner of the church that has long been shrouded in shadows.

To continue reading Mary Gail Frawley O'Dea's analysis of the John Jay report, see: [The John Jay Study: What it is and what it isn't](#)^[1]

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