



## Research article

# Child sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church in Germany: Comparison of victim-impact data collected through church-sponsored and government-sponsored programs



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## ABSTRACT

At around the same time in 2010, the German government and the Roman Catholic Church in Germany each set up a critical incident reporting system (CIRS) to gather information on child sexual abuse that had taken place within the Church. The objective in both cases was to solicit stories from victims and former victims and allow them to have input into a review process. The existence of these two similar systems, one initiated by the institution involved in the abuse and the other by an independent entity, provided an opportunity to compare the background and motivation of victims who chose to communicate through one channel or the other. Data were obtained on a total of 927 individuals, 571 through the church CIRS and 356 through the government CIRS, who had reported that they had experienced childhood sexual abuse within the Roman Catholic Church. Some differences were found between the two groups in terms of gender, the reported frequency of abuse, and the desire for compensation. These differences highlight the need for an effective complaint management system to offer not just one but complementary channels of communication. In addition, the findings confirm the feasibility and value of a CIRS approach and the use of so-called 'citizen science' in politically driven review processes.

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## Background

The disclosure in early 2010 of severe and extensive sexual abuse of children that had taken place in institutions in Germany, including boarding schools run by the Roman Catholic Church, triggered intense media coverage and led to broad public debate about the issue. Similar revelations were taking place at around the same time in other countries, including Ireland ([Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, 2003](#)), Belgium ([Adriaenssens, 2010](#)), the Netherlands ([Deetman et al., 2011](#)), and the United States ([Boston Report, 2003](#); [John Jay College Study, 2004](#)). In Germany, these disclosures resulted in actions taken by both the church and the state.

The decision to focus on sexual rather than physical abuse was a political one. Historically, corporal punishment in schools was viewed as socially acceptable; a cultural shift toward the rejection of this form of violence against children and adolescents is relatively recent, occurring over the last few decades, and the practice was outlawed in Germany only in 2000. In contrast, sexual abuse has always been viewed as forbidden and immoral. Accordingly, two separate review programs

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were set up, one for the investigation of sexual abuse and a separate one that investigated physical violence inflicted on former residents of children's homes. Only the first program is described in this article.

In the case of the church, which was under considerable pressure to act, authorities reacted very quickly, convening a plenary meeting of the German Conference of Catholic Bishops in February 2010. Several important actions resulted from this meeting. First, forensic psychiatric evaluations were ordered for 78 priests who were alleged offenders (Leygraf, König, Kröber, & Pfäfflin, 2012). It is planned that the findings of these evaluations will be reviewed by an external research group; however, that has not yet been done. Second, new guidelines on procedures to address the sexual abuse of minors were issued in August 2010 to update the previous guidelines from 2002. Third, a new framework of action for the prevention of the sexual abuse of minors within church institutions was issued in September 2010. An evaluation conducted by the German government in 2012–2013 of the implementation of such frameworks found this one to be among the strongest (Unabhängiger Beauftragter zur Aufarbeitung des sexuellen Kindesmissbrauchs, 2013). Fourth, a bishop was appointed as commissioner to oversee subsequent remedial actions. Finally, a hotline for victims, the first such in the Catholic world, was established. In addition to enabling victims to tell their stories, the hotline program offered the possibility of having disciplinary procedures initiated against abusers, even in cases where the statute of limitations had passed.

The German government also took action, partly because public and religious institutions were implicated in the scandal and because Article 6 of the German constitution states that public authorities are responsible for guarding children's best interests. Pressure on the government to do something was increasing, despite the action that was already being taken by the church because it was deemed necessary to involve a body that was independent of the implicated institution and that would also investigate cases not connected with the church (i.e., intra-familial sexual abuse). Accordingly, two entities were established to enable a politically driven review process: a Round Table, titled "Child Sexual Abuse in Relationships of Dependence, and Imbalance of Power in Private and Public Institutions and in Families", whose task was to develop recommendations for prevention and intervention, and a position titled "Independent Commissioner for the Review of Child Sexual Abuse", whose task was to review cases of sexual abuse in both institutions and families.

The first Independent Commissioner appointed by the government based her work on the principle of reaching out directly to victims of sexual abuse and learning from their experiences. To achieve this, she established contact points (telephone, mail, and e-mail) through which victims could voluntarily and freely describe what had happened to them and express their opinions or suggestions, thereby contributing to the political review process and the subsequent actions that were implemented. Detailed descriptions of the work of the Commissioner, the Round Table, and the research process that supported the political process are available in Unabhängige Beauftragte zur Aufarbeitung des sexuellen Kindesmissbrauchs (2011), Runder Tisch sexueller Kindesmissbrauch (2011), and Rassenhofer, Spröber, Schneider, and Fegert (2013), respectively.

In sum, two parallel, independent, and complementary programs for the collection of information on child sexual abuse were put in place in Germany at around the same time, one by the government and the other by an institution within which the abuse had taken place. Although the programs were separate, there was some collaboration between them: each included a member from the other program on its advisory board, and the organizers and research groups on each side exchanged information. The focuses were different, but both programs solicited direct input from victims, both reached many people, both were supported by advisory boards and research teams, and both provided feedback to victims by publishing interim results online or through the media. This approach of complaint management is termed a critical incident reporting system (CIRS) and is described elsewhere in more detail (Fegert, Ziegenhain, & Fangerau, 2010; Rassenhofer et al., 2013). The complete data sets of the information derived from the Catholic victim hotline (Zimmer, 2011; Zimmer, Lappehse-Lengler, Weber, & Götzinger, 2014) and of that derived from the contact points set up by the Independent Commissioner (Fegert, Rassenhofer, Schneider, Seitz, & Spröber, 2013; Rassenhofer et al., 2013) are available.

The existence of these two separate data sets provided an opportunity to compare information solicited by different sources from individuals who had been victimized by the same entity. It is important to differentiate uses of a CIRS based on who has sponsored it because respondents' characteristics or expectations might vary. This article describes similarities and differences that were found in this comparison and discusses the feasibility and value of using a CIRS sponsored by the institution responsible versus one sponsored by an independent governmental body.

## Method

The Ethics Committee of the University of Ulm approved the research process for the collection and analysis of the government-sponsored data.

Victims could provide any information they wished via letters, e-mails, or calls to a telephone hotline. The church program included an online psychological counseling service; in the government program, no counseling services were provided, but hotline staff would refer callers to a local counseling center if necessary. The campaigns employed to raise public awareness of the programs made it clear that the information gathered would be used for research purposes only and that anonymity and data security were guaranteed. Callers to the hotlines were asked if they would give permission for their information to be documented anonymously (the conversation could still take place if permission was denied), whereas for those who chose to communicate through letters or e-mail, it was explained beforehand that doing so implied giving consent to permit the contents to be anonymously documented. The online psychological counseling service offered within the Church program provided an option for respondents to delete the entire record at any time if they wished. For details about the number of contacts (including calls, letters, and e-mails), contacts that were excluded from analysis (test calls, prank calls, and repeat

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