



Research article

Childhood sexual abuse by representatives of the Roman Catholic Church: A prevalence estimate among the Dutch population[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Estimates of the extent of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) within in the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) in the general population are difficult to find. The independent Commission of Inquiry into sexual abuse of minors in the RCC in the Netherlands collected population-based data to estimate its prevalence. A large random online population sample was surveyed using a two-phase stratified sampling procedure. In Phase 1, 34,267 subjects aged 40 years and older were screened for childhood exposure to sexual abuse by non-family members, a history of institutionalization and a Roman Catholic upbringing. In Phase 2, a stratified subset of 2,462 subjects was assessed to obtain more detailed target information about sexual abuse reports within the RCC. We employed multiple imputation for the estimation of RCC CSA in the original Phase 1 sample. The prevalence of non-familial CSA in general (14.0%) was higher among women (17.2%) than among men (10.6%). The prevalence of CSA within the Dutch RCC (1.7%) was higher among men (2.7%) than among women (0.7%). As expected, older subjects reported more often CSA in the RCC than their younger counterparts. Respondents who stayed for some time in RCC run institutions for education or child protection had a higher risk to report sexual abuse. Although sexual abuse of minors by representatives of the RCC was a structural problem during a period that the Church was highly influential in the Netherlands, the estimated prevalence of the phenomenon is only a fraction of the prevalence rate of non-familial CSA.

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Introduction

Sexual abuse in childhood constitutes a major social problem and a health risk throughout the world (WHO, 2002). Concern over (non-)familial sexual abuse of children became a leading issue in the media between 1978 and 1984, shifting to 'clergy sexual abuse' during 1985 in the United States after testimonials of abuse of hundreds of minors by clergy became known to the public (Jenkins, 2001). The volume of reported cases of sexual misconduct by clergy and the public attention that these have attracted increased extensively, raising questions about the possibility of its occurrence elsewhere (Rossetti,

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1996). From the mid-1980s onward, high profile cases of child sexual abuse (CSA) involving religious personnel became publicized in the United States, Canada, Ireland and the United Kingdom (Jenkins, 2001; Kenny, 2009). The issue of clergy sexual abuse soon became linked to the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), due to a growing emphasis on the Catholic aspects of CSA (“pedophile priests”) in the news reports in the United States (Jenkins, 2001).

The first official inquiry into CSA by Roman Catholic clergy was initiated in Canada (Winter-report, 1990). In this report CSA concerned “...involvement of male children in any form of sexual activity with members of the Roman Catholic clergy.” (Chap. 1, p. 4). However, it was not until 2002, that extensive inquiries, including male and female victims were initiated in the United States (John Jay College, 2004) and in Ireland (Goode, McGee, & O’Boyle, 2003; McGee, Garavan, De Barra, Byrne, & Conroy, 2002). In that year, an international institutional crisis unfolded. The media coverage of CSA in the United States and Ireland focused primarily on (the cover-up of) sexual abuse of minors by priests in the RCC (Cheit, Shavit, & Reiss-Davis, 2010; Conway, 2014; Kenny, 2009). When CSA cases involving Roman Catholic priests in the United States were prominently covered in the media in 2002, the Philippines media began reporting on abuses by local priests and the Australian and New Zealand media on church apologies to dozens of victims (BBC World, 2002). In 2008, when Pope Benedict XVI made his visit to Australia, protests by victims of CSA in the RCC and/or their families was given prominent coverage in the international media (The Guardian, 2008).

Between 2002 and 2009, media attention around the subject was minimal in other nations, in particular in Europe. In May 2009, the finding of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse at Institutions in Ireland (Ryan-report) that sexual abuse was endemic in boys’ institutions, caught public attention. Gradually, reports in other European countries (e.g., Belgium, Germany) were issued (e.g., Belgian Chamber of Representatives, 2011; Zinsmeister, Ladenburger, & Mitlacher, 2011) (see also Böhm, Zollner, Fegert, & Liebhardt, 2014).

In February 2010, the issue of sexual abuse of minors by representatives of the RCC started receiving attention in the media in the Netherlands. Many cases came to light during the first half of 2010. According to the general portrayal of the problem in the Dutch media the vast majority of cases of sexual abuse of minors occurred in educational institutions run by the RCC (i.e., boarding schools, private schools, seminaries, reform schools), the victims were mainly males, and all forms of abuse were considered equally serious. Moreover, in the view that commonly prevailed, sexual abuse was a large scale phenomenon, inherent to the closed and hierarchical culture of the educational institutions and other institutions of the RCC.

In fact, little is known internationally about the prevalence of CSA perpetrated by persons with religious authority such as priests and religious employed by the RCC or lay persons and volunteers such as choirmasters or youth leaders working for the Church (Keenan, 2012). Much of the research carried out on CSA in the RCC concerns clinical or court report based samples that are not representative for the general population. Prevalence estimates of CSA in the RCC stem primarily from different sources of registered cases. Based on reports of actual and alleged religion-related abuse of a child encountered during the 1980s, Bottoms, Shaver, Goodman, and Qin (1995) estimated the prevalence of sexual abuse by a Catholic (including Roman Catholic and Greek or Russian Orthodox) authority to be 4.1% in the general population. The cases in this study were reported by a large sample ($N = 19,272$) of mental health professionals in the United States. Loftus and Camargo (1993) reported that 8.3% of the Roman Catholic priests alleged to have sexually abused a minor. Their estimate was based on records of 1,322 clergy treated for psychological problems in a Canadian treatment center during a 25-year period. Finally, researchers of the John Jay College estimated that 4% of the priests had sexually abused a minor (Terry, 2008). They used records of accused priests recorded by 97% of the dioceses and 64% of the religious communities of the RCC in the United States during a 50-year period (1950–2002) (John Jay College, 2004, 2006, 2011).

While these three official reports are valuable, their methods may underestimate the true extent of sexual abuse of minors in the RCC because of missed or incomplete records and the assumed high ‘dark number’ (i.e., the proportion of undisclosed cases) (e.g., Priebe & Svedin, 2008). For example, since the John Jay study on the nature and the scope of the problem of CSA by Roman Catholic clergy in the United States (US) has been completed, many more Catholic priests in the US have been named in relation to CSA allegations for the relevant study period (Keenan, 2012). However, it is imperative to note that accusations do not equate to convictions and may or may not be an accurate reflection of actual number of abuse cases (Piquero, Leeper Piquero, Terry, Youstin, & Nobles, 2008; Terry, 2008).

Research among random samples of religious or lay persons employed by or working as volunteers in the RCC in the United States has estimated that between 3.3% of these men and 1.6–1.7% of these women have been sexually abused by a representative of the RCC (Chibnall, Wolf, & Duckro, 1998; Rossetti, 1995). The question is, though, whether one can generalize from these specific groups of Roman Catholic individuals.

Research among community samples reported lower rates: Langeland (2011) estimated that 0.2% of women aged 20–40 years report CSA including ‘hands-on’ experiences by representatives of the RCC using the data from a representative Dutch population survey (Draijer, 1988) of 1,054 women in this age group covering a period of 20 years (1960s and 1970s). Goode and colleagues (2003) found that 1% of the 3,120 respondents in a survey (McGee et al., 2002) in Ireland reported CSA including non-contact experiences in the RCC during a 40-year period (1940–1980). What these estimates from population surveys suggest is, that while the experiences may have been very disturbing for the victims, CSA within the RCC is rather uncommon, concerning a small proportion of all reports of CSA by non-family members in the general public.

With this in mind, the Commission of Inquiry into sexual abuse of minors in the RCC in the Netherlands conducted a population-based survey using a two-phase study design (Deetman et al., 2011). This method is often applied to medical studies where the object is rare, as a cost-efficient way to obtain population characteristics on the target phenomenon (Hand,

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