

OVERVIEW

of research by

**John Jay College of Criminal Justice
City University of New York**

into

**Sexual Abuse of Minors
by Catholic Clergy in the USA**

and relevant Victorian data

***Prepared by Shane Mackinlay
on behalf of the Catholic Church in Victoria
for submission to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry
into the Handling of Child Abuse by
Religious and other Non-Government Organisations***

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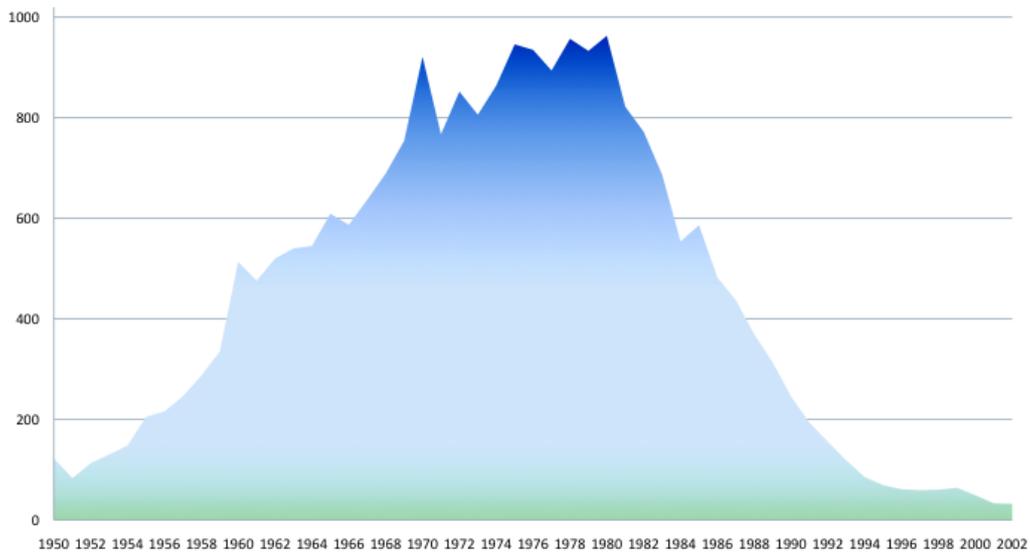
The most comprehensive international research into child sexual abuse by Catholic clergy was carried out in the U.S.A. by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. This research was commissioned by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and resulted in two reports:

2004: *The Nature and Scope of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons, 1950-2002*

2011: *The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950-2010*

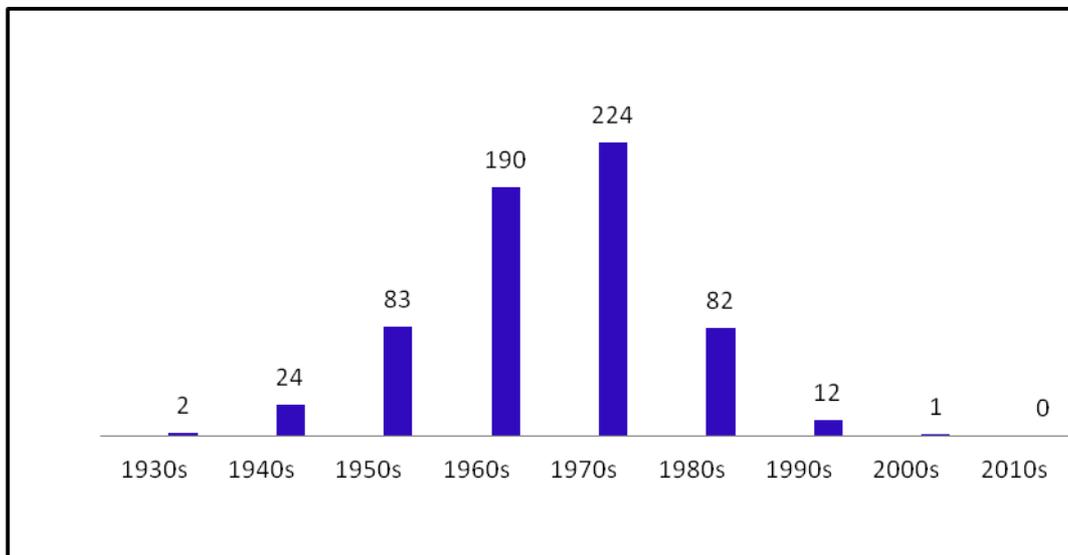
The main findings correlate with statistics available for Victoria, which are included at appropriate points below.

John Jay found there was a 25-year blight of child abuse from around 1960 to the mid-1980s, with a dramatic decline after that time. More abuse occurred in the 1970s than in any other decade.



*John Jay College, Causes and Context, Figure 1.1
Incidents of sexual abuse by U.S. Catholic priests, by year of occurrence, 1950–2002¹*

Although there is commonly a delay in reporting child sexual abuse, cases reported in the last ten years fit this same distribution. They continue to be clustered around the 1970s peak, as is the case in Victoria. The researchers concluded that the decline in reported cases after 1990 therefore reflects an actual decline rather than just a delay in reporting.



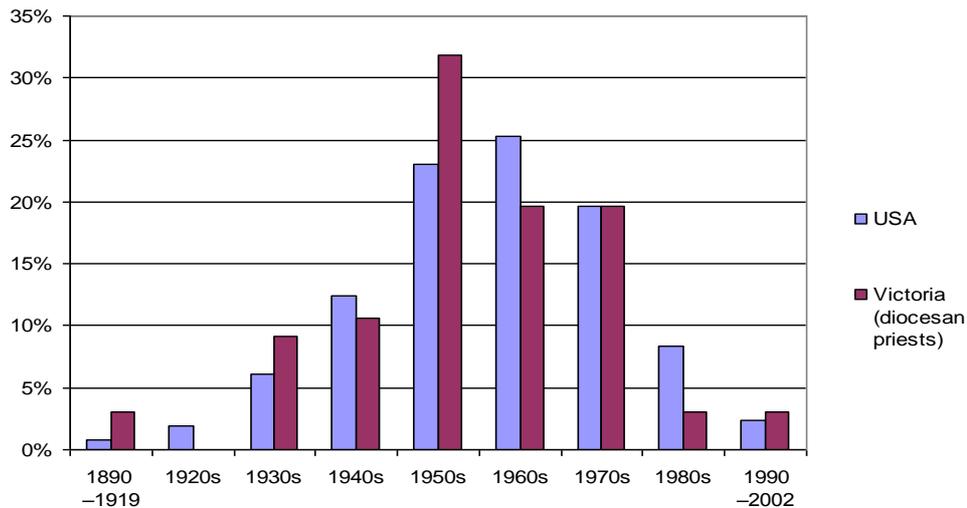
Number of victims of criminal abuse against children in Victoria, upheld by the Melbourne Response or Towards Healing, by decade of incidence²

¹ *Causes and Context*, 8.

² Data from *Facing the Truth*, appendix 3.

The research also found that four percent of all priests active in the United States between 1950 and 2002 had allegations of abuse made against them.

However, this figure is much lower for priests ordained in the last thirty years, who account for only 10.7% of all abuse allegations in the study. Just under half of the abuse allegations relate to priests ordained in the twenty years between 1950 and 1970. This is consistent with Victoria, where just over half of the diocesan priests who committed abuse were ordained in this same period.



Percentage of offenders ordained in each decade³

Similar to the United States, almost all the reported abuse in Australia occurred before 1990, though the bulk of the reports were made after that time.

The researchers point out that because no organisation has undertaken a similar study, "it is impossible to accurately compare the rate of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church to rates of abuse in other organisations."⁴

This data raises two critical questions:

1. What caused the sudden rise in child abuse by Catholic clergy in the 1960s, and its equally sudden decline in the late 1980s?
2. Why is the rate of offending particularly high amongst priests ordained between 1950 and 1970?

³ U.S. data is from *Nature and Scope*, Table 3.3.2, page 41.

⁴ *Causes and Context*, 17.

Causes

The research identifies “no single ‘cause’”⁵ of the sexual abuse, but rather proposes a number of contributing factors.

Importantly, treatment data shows that priests who identified as homosexual were not significantly more likely to sexually abuse minors than priests who identified as heterosexual.

Also, the researchers concluded that because “an exclusively male priesthood and the commitment to celibate chastity, were invariant during the increase, peak, and decrease in abuse incidents ... [they] are not causes” of the blight.⁶

They found that priests who abused children had “vulnerabilities, intimacy deficits, and an absence of close personal relationships before and during seminary.”⁷ Up to 1970, priests generally had few support structures such as spiritual direction, and psychological and professional counselling. By contrast, since the 1970s, there has been increasingly rigorous psychological testing, assessment and discernment of candidates for the priesthood, both in the U.S. and in Victoria.

The research found that the organisational, psychological, and situational factors affecting priests ordained prior to 1970 are a major influence on their high rate of offending. They were poorly trained in the human maturity, self-understanding, and relationship skills that they needed when they encountered the “social and cultural changes in the 1960s and 1970s” that included an increase in permissive behaviour, both “in the general society and also among priests of the Catholic Church in the United States.”⁸

The researchers also found that “men who were sexually abused themselves when they were minors were significantly more likely to commit acts of abuse than those who were not abused.”⁹

In summary, priests ordained prior to the 1970s were more likely to suffer from personal vulnerabilities, emotional deficits and social isolation, which were exacerbated by the cultural changes beginning in the late-1950s, such as reduced social restrictions on individual behaviour, sexual liberation, and greater tolerance for permissive behaviour. This was especially true for those who had themselves been abused as children.

⁵ *Causes and Context*, 2.

⁶ *Causes and Context*, 3.

⁷ *Causes and Context*, 5.

⁸ *Causes and Context*, 2.

⁹ *Causes and Context*, 4.

Church contribution to decline in abuse

Reasons for the decline in abuse seem clearer, with John Jay finding that “factors specific to the Catholic Church contributed to the decline in the mid-1980s.”¹⁰

In both Australia and the U.S., bishops and religious orders started to take action in the 1980s, as victims began coming forward and awareness grew of child sexual abuse by priests, religious and lay people.

By the 1990s, Australian church leaders had introduced changes to seminary formation of priests, better screening of candidates, codes of conduct, and programs to raise awareness of the issue, as well as systematic processes with independent investigation of complaints: the *Melbourne Response* (1996) and *Towards Healing* (1997).

Three Recommendations for Prevention Policies

The Causes and Context report concludes with three recommendations for prevention policies:

1. Education

Noting the “critical” importance of a human formation program in seminary education, the report recommends that there be a mandatory curriculum for seminary faculty, and that there be increased funding and commitment for structured ongoing formation after ordination: “A clear delineation of behavioral expectations appropriate to a life of celibacy must be part of formation goals during seminary education and also throughout priests’ time in ministry.”¹¹

2. Situational Prevention Models

Because tools such as codes of conduct have the effect of educating potential victims, potential abusers and the general community about abuse, the report recommends these codes as making it more difficult for opportunities for abuse to arise and more likely that offenders will be detected.

3. Oversight and Accountability

The researchers recognise the organisational changes the Catholic Church has made in the last two decades, but points out the challenges of embedding these changes in a culture. The report therefore recommends “continued transparency and

¹⁰ *Causes and Context*, 2.

¹¹ *Causes and Context*, 120.

accountability mechanisms ... [so that] changes can become institutionalized.”¹² In this respect, the report notes the importance of “Pope Benedict XVI’s recent and highly publicized support for accountability and transparency regarding abuse victims and hierarchical neglect.”¹³ It indicates the progress that has been made in this respect by the 2002 Dallas Charter, which has many parallels with the statement of principles in *Towards Healing*, and urges dioceses to commit themselves to “a more continuous redefining/restructuring of response mechanisms.”¹⁴

Finally, the report recommends that the Church undertake “continued education of the community about these issues and about the church’s commitment to respond to such reports [of abuse].”

The report insists that it is only through an ongoing commitment by Church leaders to such measures that the Church’s response to sexual abuse “will have become institutionalized as part of ... ordinary practice and culture.”¹⁵

Conclusion

While the report’s conclusion mentions particular events in the U.S., these are paralleled by developments that have occurred in the Catholic Church in Australia, such as the commitments made in the adoption of *Towards Healing* in 1996:

*The Catholic Church has taken serious steps toward understanding and reducing the problem of sexual abuse of minors by priests. Diocesan leaders began these discussions as a body in the mid-1980s when the problem of sexual abuse was becoming known, but actions to address the behavior at that time were inconsistent. In 2002, at the height of discourse relative to the crisis, the bishops signed a charter committing to study the problem, address it, and implement policies to prevent it from occurring in the future. They are continuing through the model of organizational change and are on their way to implementing what are considered to be best practices in terms of education about abuse for potential victims, potential abusers, and potential guardians. The church has responded to the crisis, and as a result, a substantial decrease in the number of sexual abuse cases has come about at present.*¹⁶

¹² *Causes and Context*, 121.

¹³ *Causes and Context*, 121.

¹⁴ *Causes and Context*, 122.

¹⁵ *Causes and Context*, 122.

¹⁶ *Causes and Context*, 122.