

Guest commentary: Report on U.S. Catholic priests' sex abuse, and what the critics got wrong

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The following is printed with the permission of Karen Terry, Professor and Associate Provost of the John Jay College of Criminal Justice and principal investigator and co-author of the Causes and Context report on clergy sexual abuse, at the request of Archbishop O'Brien, whose column will appear occasionally during the summer months.

Sound bites should not be confused with facts.

By the time we officially released our report on “The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950-2010” May 18, the media had already seized on incomplete leaks of the report to give it a spin that had only a tangential relationship to what we wrote.

It's time to put the record straight – and to chart a way forward so that the pattern of abuses we studied is never repeated.

To do that, it's important to understand the background of the report and what it was intended to accomplish. Our mandate was to understand what led to the problem of child sexual abuse by Catholic priests from 1950 to the present day.

We studied individual priests who abused, the church leaders who were responsible for overseeing them, and the broader social context in which the abuse took place.

A study of this complexity does not easily lend itself to an accurate sound bite.

Nevertheless, one early media report in a national paper attributed the explanation of social factors as a “Blame Woodstock” excuse, a phrase that went viral and was

cited more than 14,000 times within the next two days.

The truth is, at no point in the report did we “blame” Woodstock or simplify the explanation of the abuse crisis to the “swinging ’60s,” as some papers reported.

Another fallacy contained in the early media reports included the “fact” that we did not address the problematic actions of the bishops. Critics suggested that since we relied only on data from the dioceses, the bishops influenced the study findings.

Actually, the data for the Causes and Context study came from seven unique sources – a fact overlooked in most media reports. The data were derived from bishops and priests, victim assistance coordinators, victim advocates, survivors, clinicians, seminaries, historical and court documents.

Many media outlets also accused us of being “puppets of the church.” Although nearly half of the funding for the study was provided by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the National Review Board – a group of lay Catholics created in the 2002 Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People – was tasked with overseeing the progress of the report.

The bishops did not influence our findings in any way.

It is also worth pointing out that I am not Catholic, and I have not historically, nor do I currently have, any personal ties to the Catholic Church.

The controversy over the report is understandable. The sexual abuse of children is an emotional, disturbing and heart-wrenching issue. It is even more so when the abusers were in a place of trust and spiritual leadership over the children they abused.

What the study really found

To understand why Catholic priests sexually abused minors, we conducted extensive data collection over a period of four years.

We studied the problem from socio-cultural, psychological, situational and organizational perspectives, and we consulted with psychologists, sociologists of

religion, statisticians, and theologians.

Though we recognize that sexual abuse has always occurred in the Catholic Church, as well as in other organizations and society generally, we were mandated to study the problem from 1950 onward. It would have been prohibitive to study abuse prior to this time for practical and methodological reasons.

The data collected for this study indicated that the factors associated with the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church were complex.

This is not surprising. There is no single “cause” of child sexual abuse in society, and we did not hypothesize that there would be one in the church.

Rather, the findings indicate that abusive behavior could best be explained through an interaction of micro- and macro-level factors. While the patterns of abuse in the Catholic Church are consistent with (though not caused by) patterns of other types of social behavior from the 1960s through the 1980s (when abuse cases peaked), data showed that most of the priest-abusers had problems such as intimacy deficits, an emotional and psycho-sexual maturity level similar to adolescents, and life stressors, as well as inadequate seminary education on how to live a life of chaste celibacy.

The abuse was particularly pronounced for men who were ordained in the 1940s and 1950s, a time when there was a substantial increase in Catholic seminarians and inadequate education for them.

These men were placed in positions where they were mentoring and nurturing adolescents and, like many non-clergy sex offenders, they regressed to abusive behavior.

Few abusers were primarily sexually attracted to children; a very small percentage of priests were clinically diagnosed with pedophilia (by clinicians, using standard guidelines of the “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders”). Many had other problems, such as alcoholism, stress or financial improprieties.

And many priests who abused children also had sexual relationships with adults.

Taken together, this means that there is no risk assessment instrument that could have weeded out the abusers before ordination. This was a human problem; some adults are susceptible to abuse children in the church and in any organization where adults spend time with children.

But the abusers themselves are only one part of the story. The Causes and Context report also chronicled in detail the church's response to abuse. The report states that the church has taken significant steps in creating safe environments since signing the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People in 2002.

The report also notes, however, that the implementation of child protection policies in the 1980s and 1990s was focused on priests instead of victims, was not consistent across dioceses in the United States and lacked transparency.

What's next?

Since the publication of the report, we have been subjected to substantial criticism from those who are not happy about the "findings" - or at least the findings reported in those first media articles.

We have received malicious and even threatening calls and letters, and we have been mocked through satirical cartoons, on syndicated television programs and in op-eds. Those who have responded in such a way have asked two questions: how could we have so irresponsibly blamed Woodstock, and how could we let the bishops off the hook?

The critics with the loudest voices, who were making statements before and on the day the report was released, had not even read it.

Perhaps the most disturbing thing about the controversy surrounding the report is that the one-dimensional headlines have obscured some of the healthy responses to its findings. These should not be overlooked.

Academics have begun engaging in serious discussions about the findings, their importance, and their application to the field of child sexual abuse generally.

And while no single measure can root out all individual child sexual abusers in the

church, we have already detected a strong and broadly based commitment to address the gaps in current policies of prevention and oversight that allowed these unhealthy patterns of abuse to continue for so long in the U.S. and elsewhere.

We are confident that our study has laid the groundwork for such strategies of response by church leaders and the laity.

This may be small comfort to the many victims who continue to cope with the traumatic consequences of their experiences. But it offers some measure of confidence that this sordid chapter of church history can be brought to a close.

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