

Child Sexual Abuse by Catholic Priests, Deacons, and Male Members of Religious Orders in the Authority of the German Bishops' Conference 1946–2014

Sexual Abuse

2021, Vol. 33(3) 274–294

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DOI: 10.1177/1079063219893371

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Abstract

This study explores the extent of sexual abuse of minors by members of the Catholic Church in Germany. It is the first comprehensive study to examine this extent in a European country. The goals of this study are as follows: (a) to analyze whether the extent and characteristics of sexual abuse in a European country are comparable to those in the United States and Australia and (b) how discrepancies can be explained. The personnel files of 38,156 Catholic Priests, deacons, and male members of religious orders in the authority of the German Bishops' Conference were analyzed. The study period lasted from 1946 to 2014. All 27 German dioceses took part in this study. A total of 4.4% of all clerics ($N = 1,670$) from 1946 to 2014 were alleged to have committed sexual abuse, and 3,677 children or adolescents were identified as victims. These results are similar to those from comparable studies in the United States. Sexual abuse of minors within the authority of the Catholic Church seems to be a worldwide phenomenon.

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Keywords

sexual abuse of minors, Catholic Priests, clericalism

Introduction

Clergy sexual abuse within the Catholic Church has attracted increasing attention since the 1990s. Over the past two decades, the issue has produced a growing body of research focused on the nature, extent, and institutional correlates of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church. Initiated in the United States, scientific inquiry has expanded worldwide. However, comprehensive studies have so far only been conducted in the United States and Australia.

Although certain aspects of clergy perpetrated sexual abuse within European countries have been explored within the research literature, this study represents the first comprehensive study on sexual abuse of minors by Catholic priests in Germany. The goals of this study were to examine (a) the scope of child sexual abuse within Germany's 27 dioceses, (b) the characteristics of perpetrators and victims, (c) incident characteristics, and (d) institutional dynamics and responses. Another aim was to put these results within a comparative framework of similar studies to analyze whether extent and shape of sexual abuse within the authority of the Catholic Church in a European country are comparable to those in the United States and Australia, and how discrepancies can be explained.

The acronym of the study (MHG study) refers to the participating study centers in Mannheim, Heidelberg, and Giessen (MHG-Forschungsprojekt, 2018). The MHG Research Team gathered information on allegations of sexual abuse of a minor by priests, deacons, and male members of religious orders in the authority of the German Bishops' Conference from existing personnel files. All 27 dioceses in Germany pledged to take part in this study and to provide the necessary information on the entire population of their clergy. Therefore, we were able to analyze a rich data set consisting of 38,156 personnel files, spanning a period of 68 years, from 1946 to 2014.

Before presenting the study, we begin with a literature review examining key constructs of interests of our study: prevalence data, characteristics of persons who perpetrated and victims, incident characteristics, health problems of persons affected as a consequence of the offense, and institutional responses (e.g., transfer of accused priests to another parish or diocese).

Literature Review

There are so far few comprehensive scientific studies on sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. As recently as 2002, there had been only a few studies with small sample sizes that examined the extent of sexual abuse by Catholic clerics (Firestone et al., 2009). The John Jay report was the first major official inquiry (John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004) dealing with this subject. In the following period, some peer-reviewed studies have been published which involve reanalysis of the John Jay data. Only

recently, the report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017) and the Pennsylvania report ("40th Statewide Investigating Grand Jury Interim Redacted Report," 2018) published further comprehensive research.

Research focused on clergy sexual abuse may be viewed according to the following dimensions: nature and extent of victimization and alleged perpetration; victim and perpetrator characteristics; reported incident characteristics; health problems of persons affected as a consequence of the offense; and institutional responses to alleged abuse. Here, we address each of these areas in turn.

Nature and Extent of Victimization and Alleged Perpetration

The John Jay report (John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004) and reports from Pennsylvania ("40th Statewide Investigating Grand Jury Interim Redacted Report," 2018) have provided the deepest insights into this topic so far, showing that 4% of Catholic Priests had been accused of sexual abuse. A study from Australia reported an even higher prevalence of accused Catholic Priests at 7.0% (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017). So far, European studies have only reported absolute numbers of accused clerics (Dressing, Dölling, Hermann, Horten, Kruse, et al., 2017). A Dutch study (Deetman et al., 2011) reported 800 accused clerics and ecclesiastical staff and 774 victims. A publication from Ireland reported 434 accused clerics and 381 victims and emphasized that it was impossible to determine the full extent of sexual abuse committed in boys schools because perpetrators were able to operate undetected for long periods at the core of these institutions (Ryan, 2009). In a random online population sample, the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse within the Dutch Roman Catholic Church was 2.7% among men and 0.7% among women (Langeland et al., 2015). Data from the United States showed that the incidence of abuse events was steadily increasing from 1950 to 1980 and since then is steadily declining. Sexual abuse of minors was, therefore, also interpreted by some authors as a temporal phenomenon influenced by cultural and social changes occurring between 1960 and 1990 (Smith et al., 2008).

Characteristics of Persons Who Perpetrated

Concerning characteristics of persons who perpetrated, the data of the John Jay study were analyzed further with regard to the specific dynamics of sexually abusive behavior conducted by Catholic Priests. This analysis highlighted that 55.7% of accused priests had a single allegation of abuse and most of them were not driven by pedophilia. The authors identified the situational element of abuse as one of the most significant, reporting that 41% of the abusive acts took place in a parish residence or the private home of the cleric (Terry & Ackerman, 2008). The majority of abuse cases by the accused clergy appear to be enabled by opportunity (Holt & Massey, 2013). Another analysis of the John Jay data leads to a categorization of offenders. A small group was characterized as persistent offenders with 10 or more allegations. These high-rate offenders had an earlier onset of abuse in their careers and were more likely

to target boys than other offenders with fewer allegations. The authors of this study proposed a continuum of behavior, reaching from regressed offenders to more fixated offenders (Mercado et al., 2008). A closer analysis of victim characteristics indicated that most of the offenders seem arbitrary in their choice of victims. Only 2.2% of offenders matched criteria for the pedophilic-interest group, defined as priests who had more than one victim 10 years of age and younger and no victims older than 10 at the time the abuse began.

Findings suggest that clergy offenders are in many areas similar to others who have sexually offended and the Static-99 is an effective predictor of recidivism among Catholic clergy who have had sexual contact with minors (Montana et al., 2012). However, besides general similarities, several unique circumstances have been mentioned (Anderson, 2015). For example, clergy abusers are older and a personal history of sexual abuse seems to be a strong predictive factor for recidivism, unlike the general sexual recidivism literature (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005; Piquero et al., 2008). Being a victim of sexual abuse as a child might, therefore, contribute to the relationship with children and also to the decision to become a priest (Perillo et al., 2008). This hypothesis is supported by a case-control study that compared offending clergy to nonoffending clergy. Offenders reported a history of personal sexual abuse more frequently and had fewer female dating and sexual experiences prior to seminary (Calkins et al., 2015). Homosexuality, however, has not been regarded as contributing significantly in the choice of a male victim (Holt & Massey, 2013; Parkinson et al., 2012). Research on personality characteristics of clergy who perpetrated abuse revealed that clerics who sexually abused children differed from other clergy members only on the Aggressive/Sadistic scale of the Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory-III (Amrom et al., 2017). Content analysis of personnel files of accused priests indicated that many priests denied responsibility and justified their sexually abusive behaviors (Spraitz & Bowen, 2016). Clerical training, specific to the Catholic Church, may lead to an ideology which prevents remediation and compounds earlier psychosocial and psychosexual difficulties. This has been described as a typical developmental experience of clerical sex offenders (D'Alton et al., 2013).

Characteristics of Victims

In most instances, victims were male and between 11 and 14 years of age (Terry, 2008a, 2008b). With regard to the characteristics of victims, the large discrepancy between male and female abuse victims found in the Roman Catholic Church in the United States, as well as in the Anglican Church of Australia, has been explained by the easier access of priests to male youth. Findings that the percentage of female victims increased in the 1990s, when access to female youth also increased, support the role of opportunity (Terry & Freilich, 2012). Since sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests also entails a violation of a sanctified trust, the implications of this violation have to be considered in the therapy of victims of clergy abuse (Guido, 2008; Pargament et al., 2008). However, studies on the psychosocial consequences of sexual abuse for the victims are scarce.

Incident Characteristics

Concerning the incident characteristics, the John Jay study showed that priests were accused of committing several types of sexually abusive acts. The most common were touching under the victim's clothes, touching over the victim's clothes, disrobing of the victim, cleric performing oral sex, and penile penetration or attempted penile penetration (Terry, 2008a).

Institutional Responses

Anderson (2016) argues that the institutionalized attempt to preserve a patriarchal system by the Catholic Church facilitates violence against children. Doyle (2017) emphasized that the Australian Royal Commission received more reports of sexual abuse of minors from victims of Catholic Church personnel than from any other source. Doyle suggests that this finding can be explained in great part by the Church's justification for its own structure and the role of its clerics. Transfer of accused priests to another parish or another diocese has been described as another inadequate institutional response. However, a systematic analysis of transfer policies of accused and non-accused priests has not been carried out so far.

Studies on Child Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church of Germany

Comprehensive studies on sexual abuse of minors in the German Catholic Church have not yet been carried out. Our study, therefore, aims to both shed light on this issue within Germany and to contribute to the broader international literature surrounding child sexual abuse within the Catholic Church. The study examines the extent of victimization, the characteristics of the accused clerics and their victims, and the incident characteristics as well as the way the institution has dealt with the problem so far.

Method

In 2014, the German Bishops' Conference commissioned an interdisciplinary research project on the prevalence and causes of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic priests, deacons, and male members of religious orders in Germany (Dressing et al., 2015). The ethics committee of the University of Heidelberg approved the study design.

Data Collection

The data for this study originate from the following sources: (a) general clergy personnel records, screened by diocesan staff; (b) questionnaires focused on perpetrator and victim characteristics and incident characteristics; (c) questionnaire on the number of relocations of accused and non-accused clerics; and (d) questionnaire on organizational and structural details of dioceses and contents of priest training and prevention programs.

General Clergy Personnel Records

Data on the frequency of sexual abuse of minors are the results of a comprehensive analysis of the personnel records of Catholic priests, deacons, and male members of religious orders from all 27 dioceses in Germany. The screening comprised all available records from 1946 to 2014. In total, 38,156 records were screened for evidence of accusations of sexual abuse of minors. For confidentiality reasons and data protection, as well as due to the vast amount of records, the church stipulated that the study team would receive no direct access to the records. The screening was done by specifically trained staff of the dioceses, who worked on the basis of standardized and detailed guidelines designed and produced by the study team.

Questionnaires Focused on Perpetrator and Victim Characteristics and Incident Characteristics

In case of a positive screening, two comprehensive questionnaires had to be filled out by the screening teams of the dioceses. There was one questionnaire for the accused cleric and separate questionnaires for each of the persons affected by sexual abuse. Detailed information was collected on the accused cleric, such as sociodemographic data, time of the abuse, age of the person affected by sexual abuse and the cleric, their role in the church, history of substance abuse, and other problems, as well as actions taken against them by the dioceses.

Information on the persons affected by sexual abuse comprised, for example, sociodemographic data, the type of offenses against them, and circumstances and consequences of the abuse.

Questionnaire on the Number of Relocations of Accused and Non-Accused Clerics

To study the actions taken by the institution in response to accusations of clergy, the number of relocations within their home dioceses and from one diocese to another were collected for the accused cleric, as well as for clerics without allegations of abuse.

Questionnaire on Organizational and Structural Details of Dioceses and Contents of Priest Training and Prevention Programs

Furthermore, the survey gathered additional information on relevant organizational and structural details of the dioceses, such as the recruitment of priesthood candidates and the availability and amount of sexual education or prevention programs in the priesthood training. A standardized questionnaire on these issues was filled out by vicar-generals and prevention officers for each diocese.

All information on identified cases of sexual abuse was added in an anonymized way to the questionnaires and sent to the study team for analysis. To ensure standardization of the screening and the survey, a pilot test with typical cases was conducted.

Furthermore, all dioceses were provided with detailed written instructions on how to complete the survey. A telephone hotline of the study team was available for the screening times during the entire study period for discussing any methodological problems.

The research project did not pursue a legal or criminological approach, but rather aimed to work in a retrospective-descriptive and epidemiological way. It was not intended to assess the plausibility of individual cases. For the study team, all persons involved remained anonymous during the whole research project.

In a descriptive analysis, we report continuous variables as mean values with a standard deviation (*SD*) and 95% confidence interval (*CI*), as well as dichotomous and categorical variables as number (*n*) and percentage (%). The statistical analysis of group differences was performed either by χ^2 test or bilateral bootstrapped *t*-test ($n = 1,000$). The data analysis was performed with SPSS version 24 for Windows (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL).

Results

Number and Characteristics of Accused Priests

Allegations of sexual abuse of minors were found for 1,670 clerics (Table 1). This corresponds to 4.4% of all clerics from 1946 to 2014 whose personnel records and other documents were screened and reviewed in the dioceses. Allegations were found for 5.1% (1,429 accused persons) of diocesan priests; 2.1% (159 accused persons) of monks from religious orders, delegated to act as parish priests by the German Bishops' conference; and 1% (24 accused persons) of full-time deacons. Clerical status was unknown for 58 accused persons. Full-time deacons were significantly less frequently accused than diocesan priests, $\chi^2(1) = 78.6607, p < .0001$.

The age of onset of abusive behavior varied substantially, ranging from below 20 years to above 70 years. Accused clerics had a mean age of 42.6 years at the time of the first offense. On average, the beginning of alleged abusive behavior was after 14.3 years in ministry. Of accused clerics, 54.0% were accused of abusing a single child or adolescent, whereas 42.3% were accused of abusing two or more. In 3.7% of cases, the number of abused minors was unknown. The average number of abused minors was 2.5 per accused cleric; in the subgroup of accused multiple abusers, the average number of abused minors was 4.7. The highest documented number of abused minors for a single cleric was 44.

Abuse of at least two minors of 13 years or younger lasting 6 months or longer was found in 28.2% of accused clerics. Clerics of this group had not been accused of abusing children older than 13 years at the time the abuse began. This pattern seems to be at least suggestive of pedophilia, although a clinical diagnosis is not possible without expert evaluation. Clerics fulfilling the above-mentioned criteria were significantly younger at the time of the first accusation than accused clerics who did not fulfill these criteria ($\chi^2 = 14.284, p < .001$).

The personnel records of accused clerics rarely contained information whether they themselves had suffered sexual abuse during childhood or adolescence. Indications for

Table 1. Number of Accused Priests.

Clerical status	N (screened personnel records)	N (accused persons)	%
Total	38,156	1,670	4.4
Diocesan priests	28,202	1,429	5.1
Deacons	2,356	24	1.0
Priests within religious orders	7,534	159	2.1
Clerical status unknown	64	58	0.2

Note. % = Percentage of accused persons in relation to total number of personnel records.

this could only be found in 1.8%. However, the personnel records of accused clerics contained numerous indications of problematic behavior or personal problems not directly related to sexual abuse, which might be interpreted as potential risk factors. Personal problems or behavior patterns included constant overload with job duties (56.4%), feelings of isolation (13.7%), substance abuse (24.5%), inadequate behavior in social relationship, and signs of development delays or psychological problems (49.7%).

Number and Characteristics of Victims

A total number of 3,677 children or adolescents (62.8% male, 34.9% female, 2.3% missing gender information) were identified as victims of sexual abuse committed by 1,670 accused clerics. Half (51.6%) of minors were below the age of 14 during the first abuse, whereas 25.8% were 14 years or older. Age was unknown in 22.6% of minors. The mean age of victims was 12.0 years (12.5 vs. 11.8 years of age for boys and girls, respectively). In those cases, in which it was possible to determine or estimate duration of abuse, the average duration was 15.8 months.

Considering that priests formerly had a higher proximity to boys as altar servers, and that the distribution of gender in abuse cases is possibly a consequence of opportunity, we compared the data to the distribution of gender after 1992, when girls were also allowed to be altar servers. In Germany, now, more than half of altar servers are girls. However, the share of girls affected by sexual abuse has decreased since 1992, from 40% before 1992 to 21% since 1992.

Distribution of Accusation Over Time

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the first known abuse by accused clerics in 5 years intervals until 2014. There was a peak between the 1960s and 1980s. The decrease in accusations during the following decades has to be interpreted considering the simultaneously declining number of clerics. It was not possible to determine the number of accused priests in a particular year, and therefore no year-to-year trends could be estimated.

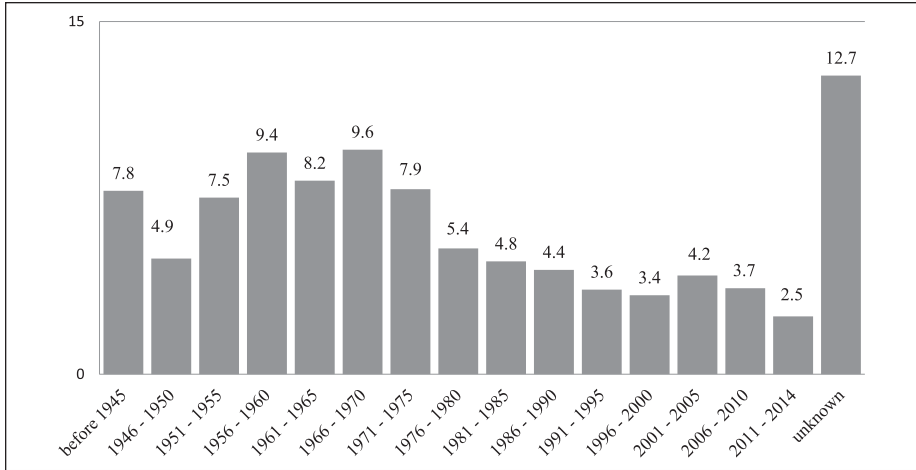


Figure 1. Percentage of first accusations in relation to accused priests ($N = 1,670$).

Type and Severity of Abuse

There was a wide variety of types of offenses (see Table 2). More than 80% of persons affected by sexual abuse suffered contact offenses. Anal, vaginal, or oral penetration was reported in 15.8% of the persons affected. Approximately 24% of abusive acts took place in a parish residence and 48% in the cleric's home.

Health Problems of Victims as a Consequence of the Offense

A wide range of health problems was detected among victims of sexual abuse. For 1,028 out of the 3,677 victims, information on health problems was available. Again, the absence of information on health problems of victims, due to the high variability and lack of standards in the documentation of personnel files, does not mean there were no problems, only that no problems were recorded in the files.

There was a vast variety of physical and psychological symptoms such as depression, anxiety, sleep or eating disorders, posttraumatic symptoms (flashbacks, nightmares, avoidance behavior), suicidal thoughts and tendencies, self-harming, or alcohol and drug abuse (see Table 3). However, these symptoms were mostly self-attributed without diagnostic assessments. Nonetheless, individual symptom patterns suggest that at least 244 affected persons suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder. This represents 6.6% of all 3,677 victims, and 23.7% of 1,028 victims with available health problem information.

Institutional Responses

Accused diocesan priests were transferred within their home diocese from one parish to another on average 4.4 times ($SD = 2.9$) during their lifetime, prior to or after

Table 2. Most Common Types of Abusive Acts (Not Mutually Exclusive).

Acts of abuse	No. of affected persons	Percentage of cases with information on acts of abuse (N = 3,388)
Touching over victim's clothes	1,084	32.0
Touching under victim's clothes	701	20.7
Kissing	421	12.4
Verbal abuse	420	12.4
Penile penetration	412	12.2
Masturbation (offender)	408	12.0
Victim disrobed	407	12.0
Oral sex (victim)	211	6.2
Mutual masturbation	181	5.3
Oral sex (offender)	156	4.6
Finger penetration	125	3.7
Make nude photos	114	3.4
Masturbation (victim)	107	3.2
Unspecified sexual abuse	289	7.9

Table 3. Health Problems of Victims (Not Mutually Exclusive).

Health problems	No. of affected persons	Percentage of cases with information on health problems (n = 1,028)
Fears	436	42.4
Depression	435	42.3
Distrust	295	28.7
Sexual problems	294	28.6
Nightmares	247	24.0
Sleep disorders	203	19.7
Physical complaints	191	18.6
Flashbacks	175	17.0
Suicidal ideations	157	15.3
Panic attacks	133	12.9
Concentration disorder	109	10.6
Suicide attempt	96	9.3
Alcohol abuse	91	8.9
Irritability	65	6.3
Self-harm	50	4.9
Drug abuse	42	4.1

the accusation, while non-accused diocesan priests were transferred on average 3.6 times ($SD = 2.6$, $t = -2.20$, $p < .0001$). The same pattern was found in the case of transfers of diocesan priests from one diocese to another. Accused diocesan priests

were more frequently transferred to other dioceses ($n = 467$, 33.2%) than diocesan priests who had never been accused ($n = 7,775$, 29.0%) ($\chi^2 = 11.04$, $p = .0009$). In many of the transfers of accused priests, the receiving parishes or dioceses were not informed of the allegations or the potential risk of future offenses by the transferred priest.

Alleged abuse proceedings according to the canon law of the Catholic Church were initiated in 33.9% of cases and were not initiated in 53.0%. Information was missing in 13.1% of cases. A similar pattern was observed with criminal charges; 37.7% of accused clerics had criminal charges compared with 60.8% without criminal charges, with missing information in 1.5% of cases. Criminal charges were mainly filed by the victim or their families (27.5%) or by representatives of the Catholic Church (19.4%). Only 14.0% of accused persons were reported to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome.¹ The duration between accusations and the initiation of these proceedings averaged more than 13 years for criminal charges, 22 years for proceedings under canon law, and 23 years for notification to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. About one-quarter of all proceedings under canon law ended without any sanctions being imposed. There were only a very small number of dismissals from the priesthood (2.6%) or excommunication (5.3%), the strongest sanctions possible according to Catholic canon law. The majority of sanctions that were imposed appear to be minor (e.g., admonition or relocation).

Data from a questionnaire on organizational and structural details of dioceses and contents of priest training and prevention programs revealed that in response to earlier allegations of sexual abuse by priests, the majority of dioceses in Germany have included sexual education training modules and teaching units dealing with sexual abuse in their theological schools and priesthood trainings. The implementation of these modules peaked between 2001 and 2003. The seminars that were held on the subject of sexual abuse varied in terms of the amount of time that these modules took up within the curriculum. In four dioceses, the duration was 1 day or even shorter, whereas it was between 1 and 2 days in nine dioceses. Six dioceses indicated a module size of more than 2 days. Four dioceses did not specify the duration. This seems to be rather short in view of the problems and challenges that celibacy poses to Catholic priests throughout their lifetime.

The Catholic Church in Germany has adopted an overall framework for the prevention of sexual abuse of minors, and this framework applies to all 27 dioceses. All dioceses reported some progress in implementing the framework, although dioceses varied in the level of reported speed and intensity. For example, the number of positions or working hours reserved for prevention commissioners or experts varied greatly at the time of assessment. To date, some dioceses still do not have confirmed how many professionals they plan to install for this task. The average prevention commitment across dioceses was the equivalent of 70% of a full-time position (26.4 hr). The prevention commissioners listed "clerical power structures," as well as a noticeable resistance among clerics to deal with the problem of abuse as reasons impeding their work, making the implementation of effective protection concepts in the parishes difficult.

Discussion

The present study examined the extent of sexual abuse of children by Catholic clergy in Germany between 1946 and 2014. In addition to determining the frequency of accused persons and victims, key constructs of interests were the characteristics of persons who perpetrated and the characteristics of their victims, the incident characteristics, and the institutional dynamics and responses. The data stem from the review of 38,156 clergy personnel files.

Nature and Extent of Victimization and Alleged Perpetration

One of the main findings of our study is the 4.4% share of accused clerics in a sample of 38,156 personnel records. A total number of 3,677 children or adolescents were identified as persons affected by sexual abuse committed by 1,670 accused clerics. Frequencies are to be considered as rather low estimates of the actual sexual abuse committed by clerics under the responsibility of the German Bishops' Conference. This is especially relevant seeing that some research teams reported from dioceses that at the beginning of the study, several records were missing or had been visibly altered, because pages had been ripped out.

Epidemiological studies employ different samples, different case definitions, and a variety of inclusion and exclusion criteria. It is, therefore, impossible to compare data on frequency from different studies without taking these methodological differences into account (Bolen & Scannapieco, 1999; Jud et al., 2016; Moody et al., 2018). Despite these methodological variations, the rate of accused clerics that was found in this study was very similar to the prevalence found in the U.S. dioceses. By applying a comparable method, the John Jay study reported 4.0% of clerics as being accused of sexual abuse of minors across all dioceses in the United States (John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004). A study conducted in Australia found that 7% of clerics were accused (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017).

Characteristics of Persons Who Perpetrated

We found many similarities in the characteristics of persons who perpetrated with the John Jay study. In our study, accused clerics had a mean age of 42.6 years at the time of the first offense, whereas the age of onset of abusive behavior was 39 years in the U.S. data (Piquero et al., 2008; Terry & Ackerman, 2008). Clerics with allegations began their abusive behavior on average after 14.3 years in ministry in the German sample versus 11 years in the United States (Terry, 2008a). Of accused clerics, 54.0% were accused of having abused a single child or adolescent, whereas 42.3% were accused of abusing two or more. The share of clerics accused of having abused a single child was 55.7% in the United States (Terry, 2008a).

The personnel records of accused clerics rarely contained information whether they themselves had suffered sexual abuse during childhood or adolescence. Indications for this could only be found in 1.8%. The share in the United States was not significantly

different at 4% (Terry, 2008a). However, the personnel records of accused clerics contained numerous indications of problematic behavior or personal problems not directly related to sexual abuse. Abuse of at least two minors of 13 years or younger lasting 6 months or longer was found in 28.2% of accused clerics. Clerics of this group had not been accused of abusing children older than 13 at the time the abuse began.

This pattern seems to be at least suggestive of pedophilia, although a clinical diagnosis is not possible without expert evaluation. Clerics fulfilling the above-mentioned criteria were significantly younger at the time of the first accusation than accused clerics who did not fulfill these criteria. An analysis from the John Jay study defined the pedophilic-interest group as priests who had more than one victim aged 10 years or younger and no victims older than 10 at the time at which the abuse began. When applying this definition, 2.2% (Tallon & Terry, 2008) and 3.8% (Terry et al., 2011) of priests were assigned to the pedophilic-interest group. Using the same definition, but applying the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; *DSM-5*; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) age criterion (13 years and younger), the share of priests belonging to a pedophilic-interest group in our study was 28.2%. The observed difference is, therefore, probably due to the application of the *DSM-5* age criterion in our study. We emphasize that the use of this age criterion was not motivated by an attempt to diagnose pedophilia, which is not possible on the basis of the data, but rather to align the criteria with an accepted international standard.

Characteristics of Victims

Our study also shows comparable results concerning the characteristics of the victims. While females were more frequently victimized in other circumstances (Bolen & Scannapieco, 1999), all studies point toward a higher share of male victims in the context of sexual abuse of minors in the Catholic Church (Dressing, Dölling, Hermann, Horten, Kruse, et al., 2017). In the German sample, 62% of persons affected by sexual abuse were male. An analysis from the United States reported a share of 81.3% male victims (Holt & Massey, 2013) and in Australia 78% of victims were male (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017). The mean age of persons affected by sexual abuse in our study was 12 years; males were on average 12.5 years and females 11.8 years of age. Similar results were found in Australia (mean age of persons affected by sexual abuse: 11.4 years; boys 11.6 years and girls 10.5 years of age; Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017) and in the United States (most persons affected by sexual abuse were between the age of 11 and 14 years and the mean age of males was older than that of females; John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004).

Reports on health problems of persons who have become victims of sexual abuse by clergy are so far scarce in the scientific literature. Therefore, we tried to gather information on this topic. Although symptoms were mostly self-attributed, symptom patterns suggest that at least 244 affected persons suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder, representing 6.6% of all affected persons ($n = 3,677$) and 23.7% of affected persons with available health problem information ($n = 1,028$). We found a vast

variety of other physical and psychological symptoms such as depression, anxiety, sleep or eating disorders, suicidal thoughts and tendencies, self-harming, and alcohol or drug abuse.

Incident Characteristics

More than 80% of victims of sexual abuse in the German sample suffered contact offenses. Anal, vaginal, or oral penetration was reported in 15.8% of the persons affected. The seriousness of the offenses from the U.S. study appears even more severe with 25.7% penile penetration or attempt (Terry, 2008a). Findings indicating a situational element to the sexual abuse of minors are strikingly similar to the findings of the John Jay study. In the United States, approximately 41% of abusive acts took place in a parish residence or cleric's home (Terry & Ackerman, 2008). The current study found similar results: 24% of abusive acts took place in a parish residence and 48% in a cleric's home.

Institutional Responses

To investigate the institutional handling of allegations of abuse, we have analyzed the frequency of transfers of accused and non-accused clerics. To our knowledge, such an investigation has not yet been carried out. The analysis of transfers of all 38,156 clerics showed that clerics who were accused of sexual abuse were relocated significantly more often within their diocese, as well as out of their diocese. In many cases, the new diocese was not informed of sexual abuse allegations. These relocation efforts effectively lead to the covering-up of abuse cases and hindered the disclosure of these offenses, their sanctioning, and the prevention of future offenses. These results emphasize the necessity to scrutinize structural circumstances within the Catholic Church that enable abusive behavior (White & Terry, 2008). Group loyalties could provide a psychological motivation to mistrust child abuse allegations, thus limiting the ability of bishops and other responsible Church figures to conduct investigations into allegations of child abuse within the institution (Minto et al., 2016). However, this phenomenon is not limited to the Catholic Church, but it is evident across institutions. Members of institutions may tend to place the interest of the institution above the protection of children (Hamilton, 2017). Therefore, structural explanations for clergy abuse have to be considered, namely, the unique authority of priests, the high level of isolation, a lack of supervision, and a subculture that is defined by solidarity and informal rules that value secrecy and maintain the status quo (Rashid & Barron, 2018a, 2018b; White & Terry, 2008).

Limitations

Some careful considerations must be made when interpreting the results of this research. Due to the nature of the original data source—personnel files created for administrative purposes instead of scientific purposes—all data regarding the cases, as

well as the affected and accused persons, were not original statements by the persons involved nor was the information documented in a standardized way; instead, files were dependent on the person responsible for the files. Due to this, many details on cases or persons were incomplete or missing. This was especially true concerning individuals who were affected by sexual abuse, as this was frequently inadequately documented in the personnel records.

The quality of record-keeping was extremely heterogeneous across the dioceses and the time covered. No uniform standards were applied in general and particularly with regard to allegations of sexual abuse. Therefore, it is important to state that the data missing on persons and specific details are not evidence that these characteristics were absent or actions did not take place in these specific cases. In addition, during the study period, which covered more than six decades, an unknown quantity of files or information were destroyed before the study started.

The findings from personnel records were comprised exclusively of those cases that were reported by the staff of the dioceses. Unreported cases could not be uncovered. In some dioceses, there were indications that personnel records had been manipulated regarding accusations of sexual abuse or had been completely destroyed. The exact number of such manipulations could not be determined. Therefore, it is likely that all data presented in this article underestimate the true frequencies. Since the data were examined and collected by diocesan staff, it has to be considered that the staff might have been biased and we do not have data concerning interrater reliability.

Despite these limitations, a large informative and detailed data set was compiled and the similarities between central findings in studies from the United States, Australia, and Germany concerning sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clerics are remarkable.

Implications for Practice and Policy Reform

At least in highly developed countries, sexual abuse of minors seems to be an institutional problem of the Catholic Church (Böhm et al., 2014). However, studies from Central and South America, Africa, and Asia are completely lacking so far. Sexual abuse of minors is an abuse of power. Thus, the misuse of clerical power by high officials of the Catholic Church, as well as by ordained priests, might be considered both as contributor to sexual abuse and an explanation for the inadequate manner in which the Catholic Church was dealing with the problem and its tendency to cover up these offenses. Thus, the concept of clericalism may be discussed as a specific structural feature of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church (Doyle, 2003, 2017).

Interestingly, our study showed that deacons were significantly less often accused of sexual abuse than priests. Deacons are not obliged to be celibate and have less clerical power than diocesan priests. The obligation to celibacy cannot explain the sexual abuse of minors on its own, but this finding raises the question to which extent celibacy in co-occurrence with additional risk factors may contribute to sexual abuse of minors. This is currently subject to a heated debate in the literature. Some experts recommend the abolition of mandatory celibacy since it is seen as a risk factor for

sexual abuse (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017), whereas others claim that the link of sexual abuse by clerics and celibacy lacks evidence (Leygraf et al., 2012). In light of recent findings and above-mentioned evidence, a substantiated discussion of this topic is of high importance (Keenan, 2012; Scott-Samuel, 2009).

Furthermore, our results pose the question, why persons affected by sexual abuse in the context of the Catholic Church are more frequently boys than girls. The preponderance of male children and adolescents among the persons affected by sexual abuse is in contrast to the majority of studies on sexual abuse—mostly conducted in non-Catholic settings—where females are more frequently victimized (Moody et al., 2018; Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). With the exception of a few authors (Fitzgibbons & O’Leary, 2011), this finding is explained mostly by the more prevalent opportunities for Catholic clerics to make contact with male children or juveniles, for example, as altar servers or in all-male Catholic boarding schools (Fernau & Hellmann, 2014; Holt & Massey, 2013). However, this factor does not seem to be sufficient on its own to explain the predominance of boy victims, because we found the share of boy victims increased rather than decreased in 1992, when girls were allowed to be altar servers in Germany and now constitute more than half of altar servers. There is evidence in the literature that the prerequisites for the emotionally and sexually mature personality development of priesthood candidates in the seminaries are inadequate (Keenan, 2012). In particular, the appropriate guidance of candidates with regard to the challenges posed by a life of celibacy is considered insufficient. Official attitudes and statements made by the Catholic Church, such as that celibacy is a “gift” to priests, fall short and do not take into account sufficiently the biological and psychosocial needs for this commitment. While it is possible to have a mature and voluntarily chosen celibate form of life, not all candidates for the priesthood are prepared. The findings of our study suggest that very little time and attention are devoted in the seminaries to address the topics of sexuality and sexual identity formation in an intensive, professional, and personalized way. This may increase the risk for sexual abuse by vulnerable priesthood candidates and priests.

Through the “Boston Globe Spotlight Investigation” (2004), the topic of sexual abuse by Catholic clerics received attention much earlier in the United States than in Germany. During the development of prevention measures in the United States, the German Bishops’ Conference did not deem it necessary to implement similar steps, famously stating that the German church does not have to put themselves in the shoes of the Americans (<https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-22955262.html>, last accessed on August 8, 2019). This delay may have attributed to the differences in the development of first-time accusations between the two countries. Similar to the trend in the United States, the most first-time accusations were brought forward in the 1960s to 1980s in Germany and have since been declining. However, during 2000 to 2014, clerics have been accused for the first time in 10.4% of the German sample group, which is considerably higher than in the United States during the same time-frame. It remains to be seen if there will be a similar decrease in frequency in Germany in the following years as public attention has also risen sharply.

The Catholic Church in Germany started to take steps toward prevention of sexual abuse not before 2010. However, the initiatives for the comprehensive implementation

of prevention programs were quite heterogeneous across the 27 dioceses in Germany. In an anonymized survey as a part of this study, the prevention commissioners of the dioceses themselves pointed out that in contrast to other professional groups in the Catholic Church, some clerics are highly reluctant to cooperate as soon as issues of prevention of sexual abuse are addressed. Despite the implementation of prevention programs from 2010 onwards, not all clerics in the dioceses had yet received appropriate training by 2016 (Dressing, Dölling, Hermann, Horten, Collong, et al., 2017).

The sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clerics must not only be perceived as an individual problem that is related to isolated perpetrators who must be identified early and removed from risk constellations, but it must also be understood as a specific institutional problem concerning the basic structure of Catholic Church. Adequate selection mechanisms and training programs, as well as the implementation of widespread and lifelong psychological counseling for clerics is of utmost importance (Terry, 2008b). Much higher priority should be allotted to these aspects than was previously the case, not only in the selection of candidates but also during the basic and further training of priests. An exclusively pastoral-spiritual approach is not sufficient, but must be complemented by findings of modern psychology and sexology (Keenan, 2012).

Conclusion

Our data strongly support that at least in former decades, the handling of this issue by the Roman Catholic Church was inadequate and weakened by a culture of secrecy and clandestine organizational management models (Rashid & Barron, 2018a, 2018b). This lack of institutional transparency is part of the problem. Like the researchers of the John Jay study, we were not allowed direct access to the data. These limitations of research have also to be considered in the discussion of tendencies of the Catholic Church to cover-up the issue of sexual abuse of minors by clergy.

Future research should have direct access to the personnel files to identify the perpetrators and those responsible for covering-up the crimes. Specific risk factors could be identified that may promote sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergymen.

Acknowledgments

The authors take responsibility for the integrity of the data, the accuracy of the data analyses, and have made every effort to avoid inflating statistically significant results.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This study was supported by the German Bishops' Conference, June 25, 2014.

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Note

1. The Congregation deals with crimes against faith, more serious crimes against morals, and those committed during the celebration of the sacraments.

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