

## **Safeguarding barriers continue in religious settings – new research**

Australian religious leaders have highlighted “significant barriers” to child safeguarding practices in their organisations, new Australian Catholic University (ACU) research shows.

Study participants cited cultural resistance to safeguarding driven by theological or doctrinal beliefs, hierarchical leadership structures, a perception of safeguarding as unnecessary external regulation, gendered power dynamics, compliance-focused approaches, and limited funds and resources as factors impeding change.

The study involved interviews with 20 religious leaders – mainly priests, ministers, or pastors – from Catholic, Anglican, Uniting Church, Baptist, Churches of Christ, Lutheran, Salvation Army and other non-denominational Christian ministries.

Lead author Gabrielle Hunt, of ACU’s Institute of Child Protection Studies (ICPS), said the study, published in [\*Child Abuse & Neglect\*](#) and co-authored with ICPS director Professor Daryl Higgins and Associate Professor Megan Willis, of ACU’s Faculty of Health Sciences, aimed to identify strengths, weaknesses and barriers to safeguarding practices in religious settings to improve the protection of children and young people.

“Participants highlighted that leadership commitment, improved governance and awareness, and policy implementation represent improvements in practice since the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse,” Ms Hunt said.

“However, significant barriers for effective safeguarding practice remain. Cultural resistance to safeguarding initiatives at the local level, driven by deeply held theological or doctrinal beliefs, hierarchical leadership structures, and a perception of safeguarding as unnecessary external regulation, continues to impede change.

“Gendered power dynamics, a reliance on compliance-focused approaches, and limited resources and finances were also identified as factors which hinder meaningful progress for religious organisations.”

Women were overrepresented in the study, which involved 11 women and nine men, particularly in safeguarding roles, despite them accounting for about 22 per cent of senior leadership roles in Australian churches.

The women in the study discussed how they were the predominant drivers of safeguarding initiatives and described their role as “salespeople” who had to focus on safeguarding as a way to protect the institution and its leaders, rather than the intrinsic value of protecting children.

Women also described leaders and volunteers as “aggressive” and “resistant” to safeguarding initiatives or training and said they required constant reminders to engage in child protection activities.

Another barrier identified was the assumption of innocence afforded to religious leaders, even if convicted, which could lead to disbelieving victims, reduced reporting, and dismissing the need for safeguarding.

Other feedback from the participants about safeguarding included differing interpretations of responsibilities and acceptable practices in multicultural contexts, resistance to new approaches to child protection among older members, and concerns about a disproportionate amount of attention placed on religious settings when there was also abuse between young people and, more commonly, in the home.

Ms Hunt said while the sample was small, the study provided crucial insights for religious organisations, legislators, policymakers, and researchers. She said the responses also identified ways forward.

“These findings highlight opportunities for improving safeguarding efforts through stronger theological foundations for safeguarding principles, more rigorous and consistent training, and enhanced collaboration across jurisdictions and denominations,” she said.

“By framing safeguarding as central to their mission and role, religious organisations can cultivate a culture that prioritises safety and the needs of children, families, and victim-survivors.”

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