

Study reveals prevalence of child sexual abuse in religious settings

One in 250 Australians were sexually abused by a leader or other adult in a religious organisation during childhood, new research led by Australian Catholic University shows.

The first nationally representative figures on the prevalence of child sexual abuse by leaders or other adults in religious settings shows nearly three-quarters of the reported cases occurred in Catholic-run organisations.

The research, led by ACU's Institute of Child Protection Studies (ICPS), reveals about 0.4 per cent of the population, or an estimated 87,000 Australians, experienced sexual abuse by leaders and other adults including male and female clergy, priests, and pastors, in religious organisations during childhood.

The analysis, published in *Child Abuse and Neglect*, was based on the data from the landmark Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS), which surveyed 8503 Australians aged 16 and above about their childhood experiences of maltreatment. The new analysis found:

- Most people who experienced child sexual abuse by leaders or other adults said it occurred in Catholic organisations (71.9 per cent), followed by other Christian denominations including Anglican, Jehovah's Witness, and Orthodox (21.8 per cent) and non-Christian organisations (5.1 per cent).
- Boys were more likely to have experienced this kind of abuse (0.8 per cent) than girls (0.1 per cent).
- For almost all who experienced this form of child sexual abuse, it was perpetrated by men.
- Children were typically aged 7-11 when first sexually abused by religious leaders or other adults.
- The prevalence of child sexual abuse at the hands of leaders or other adults in religious organisations has declined over time, from 2.2 per cent of men aged 65 and older, down to 0.2 per cent of men aged 16-24.

The new study was led by ICPS PhD candidate Gabrielle Hunt and co-authored by researchers including ICPS Director Professor Daryl Higgins, QUT School of Law Professor Ben Mathews, and ACU Faculty of Health Sciences Associate Professor Megan Willis.

Ms Hunt said the data revealed boys were disproportionately impacted by child sexual abuse from leaders or other adults in religious organisations, which was overwhelmingly perpetrated by men in positions of power.

"We can learn from this data by understanding the heightened risk to boys in religious settings, addressing the role men are playing in harming children, and examining the ways in which toxic ideas about power, sex, and masculinity create harm for children," she said.

Professor Higgins said while all child maltreatment was unacceptable, child sexual abuse in religious organisations represented a stark betrayal of the faith families put in such institutions.

"Child sexual abuse by religious perpetrators is a particularly heinous issue as it involves abusing positions of power, betraying children's trust, and exploiting a tripartite power relationship driven by sexual, organisational, and religious power," he said.

The ACMS key findings, released last year, revealed 62.2 per cent of Australians aged 16 and above had experienced child maltreatment including physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, and exposure to domestic violence. They were also more likely to experience multiple types of maltreatment.

Professor Mathews said ongoing analysis of the landmark research, including the new findings led by Ms Hunt, had revealed the prevalence of all forms of child maltreatment in Australia as well as a benchmark for change.

"It is heartening to see in this latest research into child sexual abuse in religious organisations that the prevalence has declined over time. We know child-safe regulations and the spotlight on this criminal behaviour is having a positive impact," he said. "But the work is far from over; one case of maltreatment of any type, in any setting, by any perpetrator, is one case too many."

Click [here](#) for a link to the study.

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