

# Revealing Statistics

## Sexual Abuse of Children Runs Spectrum of Society

by Steve Weatherbe

PORTLAND, Ore. — No more tellingly could the prevalence of sexual abuse in America have been demonstrated than it was in a Portland, Ore., courtroom in March. There, in a civil suit against the Boy Scouts of America, the lawyer for an alleged victim of sexual molestation by a repeat-offender troop leader recited the Boy Scout oath and promised to be “trustworthy.” Then the attorney vowed to prove “how the Boy Scouts of America broke that oath.” He presented six boxes of the so-called secret “perversion files” that the Scouts used to keep tabs on leaders suspected of sexual misconduct, arguing their confidentiality prevented their effectiveness in preventing misconduct. The jury delivered a \$1.4 million verdict April 13. The Scouts plan to appeal, arguing the “perversion files” are outdated and do not reflect current prevention efforts or even past policy, AP reported.

A 2002 study of professional sexual misconduct by German psychiatrist Werner Tschan found that at the height of the problem in the 1960s and 1970s, 15% of psychotherapy patients reported sexual relations with their therapists, while it occurred with 7.5% of physiotherapy patients, and with 4% of medical patients and their doctors. Though Canada, with the United States, is a leader in cracking down on professional sexual misconduct, a 1999 Ontario study found that 1% of the population there reported “inappropriate professional behavior in the previous five years.” Those who study sexual misconduct, like psychologist Thomas Plante of Santa Clara University, say there is no evidence that sexual predators gravitate to jobs like doctors or priests or volunteer posts like scout leaders or sports coaches, the better to find and groom victims. “There’s no data to support that theory,” said Plante, who has edited several academic examinations of priestly abuse.

### Priests at Half the Rate

Plante said that about 4% of Catholic clergy were sexual abusers in the 1950s through 1980s and that “this is about the same as it was among other clergy ... and less than it was in the general population of males,” which was about 8%. Statistics are hard to come by, he admits. In fact, the John Jay study on priestly abuse commissioned by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops is the hardest data available. “The good news is that it is coming down,” he noted, for males generally, and across the range of trust professions and positions. Everyone interviewed for this article agrees. According to Finkelhor, it’s partly due to the publicity around these cases making it clear that it’s wrong to do it and wrong to cover it up; but that it’s also de-stigmatized as far as victims’ talking about it and getting counseling for it. Victims are therefore less likely to become victimizers.

The John Jay study also supports the Tschan study: Priestly abuse was mainly a phenomenon of the '50s, '60s and '70s, a function, Plante believes, partly of the repressive sexual culture in which candidates for the priesthood were raised and their immaturity when they entered seminary. The average age of current postulants, he notes approvingly, is 53. In those days, says Plante, psychotherapists had more confidence in their curative powers. But their judgment was probably marred by another factor, says Plante: “It has been estimated that 40 years ago about 23% of male psychotherapists have been sexually involved with their clients.”

A 2002 study across the spectrum of Christian churches by Christian Ministry Resources, a publisher of church administration literature, indicated at least 3,500 reported cases of child sexual abuse in Protestant churches yearly, with volunteers rather than staff being the typical suspects. Complaints peaked in 1994 and have declined since, perhaps, according to The Christian Science Monitor, because of preventive measures instituted in the meantime. Three years earlier, the Presbyterian Church reported that “between 10% and 25% of [its] clergy nationwide have engaged in sexualized behavior or sexual contact with parishioners, clients, employees, etc.” The fact that other denominations have the same problems as the Catholic Church is reflected in malpractice insurance premiums, reported Newsweek this month in an online feature titled “Mean Men.” One insurer specializing in church clients, the GuideOne Center for Risk Management, reported no difference in the incidence of sexual-misconduct claims across denominations.

Charol Shakeshaft is the leading researcher into sexual abuse in the public schools and author of a much-repeated, and much-misunderstood, statement that “the physical sexual abuse of students in [public] schools is likely more than 100 times the abuse by priests.” Chairwoman of the department of education leadership at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Shakeshaft told the Register that the comment is based on the certainty

that, "since there are many more students in public schools than children in Catholic churches or schools, there will be more victims."

### **7% in Public Schools**

Shakeshaft's mammoth research project for the federal government indicates 7% of public-school students will be sexually molested by staff or teachers, or about 4.2 million victims, while the abuse of various sorts by fellow students will be greater. Shakeshaft, too, said the problem is getting better — but not much. "If the problem were being taken seriously," she said, school systems and education faculties across the U.S. would be training teachers about "educator sexual misconduct," liability insurance rates would be tied to anti-abuse training in schools, there would be regular federal studies on sexual misconduct (instead of just the one she did), and adults who sexually abuse children "would be reported to the police and charged ... and automatically lose their teaching licenses."

Shakeshaft did her federal study when there was a Republican majority in Congress to order the federal Department of Education to commission it. The bureaucracy in the federal Department of Education has never shown any willingness to pursue the issue on its own, she said, and added that the current Congress appears not to be interested either. Shakeshaft did a second study of 125 cases of public-school teachers whose school districts were convinced by the evidence they were abusers. In only one case, she said, did an administrator not only fire the teacher but made sure he got no further work in schools. "In most of the cases, nothing was done. Maybe they would say, 'Don't do that again.' Sometimes they did move them along to different schools." David Finkelhor, executive director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire, said that the scandal of priestly sexual abuse has had a positive effect on the public schools by raising awareness both with the public and with administrators.

### **'Passing the Trash'**

"Before that, it was a case of 'passing the trash,'" he told the Register. If the teacher would agree to resign without a fuss, he said, the administration wouldn't blackball him with other school districts. In a famous Canadian case of "passing the trash," British Columbia public-school teacher Robert Noyes is believed to have molested hundreds of male and female primary-school students in a succession of schools and districts during the 1970s and 1980s. He pleaded guilty to 19 assaults in 1985. The case resulted in a Royal Commission and the creation of the College of Teachers to discipline the profession, separate from the provincial teachers' union.

Having adequate disciplinary bodies has been crucial to cracking down on sexual misconduct in the health professions and the clergy of many denominations, said John Gonsiorek, a professor of clinical psychology at Minnesota's Argosy University Twin Cities. His own profession of psychotherapy was typical of the health field in the 1970s, Gonsiorek said. "The licensing boards for psychologists and doctors were insensitive to the issue of sexual misconduct. Some boards did not even respond to complaints at all." Lawsuits changed that. "I would argue that without the pressure from the legal community the health professions wouldn't be where they are today," he said. But victims' suits and pressure from legislators made licensing boards realize that their state-appointed job was actually "to protect the public from the profession. The boards had the power to discipline, and now they began to use it." The professions responded in the 1980s and 1990s with serious ethical guidelines regarding sexual misconduct with patients, which then were reflected in university curriculums.

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