

A year after the grand jury report, a critical look at its findings

As the first anniversary nears of a grand jury report that paints a lurid picture of sex abuse by Catholic priests in Pennsylvania over the last seven decades, other studies dispute the grand jury's charge that bishops did nothing about the problem. The picture that emerges instead is one of people struggling to cope with a crisis whose causes and solutions were little understood at the time.

The author of one such study, John Nelson, a Harvard-trained psychiatrist, cautions against a rush to judge "those who tried to deal with the painfully difficult issues of sexual abuse at a time when those issues were not well understood, greatly feared and widely avoided throughout society."

Meanwhile, attorneys general in 20 other states are said to be conducting or considering probes like that in Pennsylvania.

In some places, matters have taken a bizarre turn. In California, efforts are underway to enact a law requiring priests to report information about abuse they obtain in confession. In Dallas, 40 lawmen, some wearing ski masks and carrying SWAT gear, raided diocesan offices and a warehouse in May demanding documents on sex abuse. Bishop Edward J. Burns said the diocese already had handed over all it had, and the diocese simply didn't have the documents police were looking for.

Appearing in mid-August last year hard on the heels of disclosures of sexual misconduct by former cardinal Theodore McCarrick, the Pennsylvania report together with coverage by media fed the impression that sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests was widespread and continuing.

Significant differences

The report, spearheaded by Pennsylvania Attorney General Joshua Shapiro, said that in the last 70 years more than 300 priests had abused more than 1,000 minors in the dioceses of Allentown, Erie, Greensburg, Harrisburg, Pittsburgh and Scranton. The Philadelphia archdiocese and the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown were covered in earlier grand jury reports.

The New York Times set the tone in its first story on the report, highlighting a version of what happened that was lifted from the text: “Priests were raping little boys and girls, and the men of God who were responsible for them did nothing; they hid it all. For decades.”

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That account went largely unchallenged until last January, when the Catholic magazine *Commonweal* published a 12,500-word critique by Peter Steinfels, a veteran journalist who was senior religion report for *The New York Times*. He concluded that the Pennsylvania report was “inaccurate, unfair, and fundamentally misleading” in failing to take into account “significant differences” in how different dioceses and their bishops responded to abuse allegations.

Of the frequently quoted claim that Church authorities did nothing about abuse except conceal it, Steinfels wrote: “This ugly, indiscriminate and inflammatory charge, unsubstantiated by the report’s own evidence, to say nothing of the evidence the report ignores, is truly unworthy of a judicial body responsible for impartial justice.”

Ignorance of the problem

Nelson takes a different tack in his study. Nelson trained in psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School, graduating in 1967. He worked and taught residents there for seven more years, then worked and taught at the University of Pittsburgh for 12 years before entering private practice. In 1992, he was asked to serve on a committee established by the Pittsburgh diocese to help formulate policies and procedures for dealing with sex abuse.

He attributes much of the inadequacy of early efforts to grapple with the problem to the influence of Sigmund Freud, who regarded children's claims of having been abused as "fantasies" arising from "strong emotional conflicts." Freud's view was adopted and taught by most psychoanalysts who dominated the field into the 1970s, he says.

Drawing on data in the grand jury report, Nelson's analysis of the trajectory of abuse in the six dioceses shows that starting in the 1940s and gradually rising, incidents increased from a few per year to about 15 annually in the 1960s and close to 30 annually in the 1970s. After peaking at 58 in 1980, the annual total declined, falling to fewer than five per year since 2000. The victims, he writes, were "mostly boys" between the ages of 10 and 15, while most of the priests who abused were born before 1950.

A maximum of 1.1% of all priests in the six dioceses abused in any given year, and in most years the rate was half that. "Put positively," Nelson says, "99% of priests did not abuse in any given year, and 94% had never done so." Among the abusers, about one-third were implicated in a single incident.

Nelson suggests that the rise of abuse by priests before 1980 is explained largely by the impact of "lifestyle" changes in secular culture along with "doctrinal and moral confusion" in the Church.

Starting in the 1960s, he writes, “All legal restraint of sexually explicit material was forgone, even when it depicted ‘man-boy love’ and other forms of child abuse. ... The general culture was saturated with sexual images and ideas, usually depicted as being sophisticated and liberated or liberating.”

In an op-ed article in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Nelson said initial failures by Church authorities and others to deal effectively with abuse should be evaluated in the context of widespread ignorance about the problem.

“When the abuse cases of the early 1980s became public,” he wrote, “some bishops and other clergy tried desperately to do the right thing, as they did in Pittsburgh, but they also were conditioned by the ignorance that prevailed among medical professionals and the confused relationship between church and civil authorities. So it was not surprising that the first attempts to address the situation were neither coherent nor consistent.”

Nelson attributes the steep decline in abuse occurring in the last two decades to educational efforts by the Church directed to clergy and laity, legal changes and clarifications, fear of prosecution, and “pressure from the bishop and other officials to leave the ministry.”

To learn more, John Nelson’s study on the “PA Grand Jury Report on Clergy Sexual Abuse” is available at https://drjohnpnelson.com/studies_grand_jury_report/

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Additional conclusions of the grand jury report

- Abusers were age 30-60 when they first abused, their ages quite evenly distributed.
- Few men (11 total in the 6 dioceses, and zero of 112 in Pittsburgh) who were eventually abusers were ordained since 1990.
- Many eventual abusers started doing so in the first years after ordination. The report has no information about their behavior before seminary, since they were not under Church supervision.
- The rapid decline in new abuse incidents after 1990 has persisted through 2018. Few recent incidents have been alleged since then, though many new allegations about the peak period continue to be made. Allegations of abuse for more recent events have been made more promptly, so unreported recent abuses seem unlikely.
- The historical causes of the rapid increase, and then the rapid decline, in clergy sexual abuse of minors, are probably many. I propose that those who were close to those events should write their memoirs for future historians to ponder. My observations and hypotheses are drawn out at the end of this article.

– From the Dr. John Nelson report at

https://drjohnpnelson.com/studies_grand_jury_report/