

CLERGY SEXUAL MISCONDUCT

awareness and prevention

Executive Summary

The Prevalence of Clergy Sexual Misconduct with Adults: A Research Study Executive Summary

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This research study involved two companion projects: (1) a national random survey to determine the prevalence of clergy sexual misconduct (CSM) with adults; and (2) a qualitative study of three groups of women and men: (a) those who self-identified as survivors who had been the objects of CSM, (b) family or friends of survivors, and (c) offenders who had themselves committed CSM. The goal of both projects was to define the scope and nature of CSM, so that effective prevention strategies can be proposed for the protection of religious leaders and congregants.

General Statistics of the Research:

- national, random survey conducted in 2008 with 3,559 respondents
- phone interviews with 46 persons who had experienced clergy sexual misconduct as adults, representing 17 different Christian and Jewish religious affiliations
- phone interviews with 15 persons who were second-hand victims of CSM (husbands, friends and other church staff members); and with 21 experts (non-offending religious leaders, researchers, and professionals who provide care for survivors and offenders)
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The Prevalence of CSM

We used the 2008 General Social Survey (GSS) to estimate the prevalence of clergy sexual misconduct. This is an in-person survey of a nationally representative sample of noninstitutionalized English- or Spanish-speaking adults, conducted by National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. The 2008 survey included 3559 respondents. Although the GSS is an in-person interview, the questions we developed specifically for this project were self-administered, making it easier for respondents to report potentially painful or embarrassing experiences.

Clergy sexual misconduct was defined in this study as:

Minister, priests, rabbis, or other clergypersons or religious leaders who make sexual advances or propositions to persons in the congregations they serve who are not their spouses or significant others.

Of those surveyed:

- More than 3% of women who had attended a congregation in the past month reported that they had been the object of CSM at some time in their adult lives;
- 92% of these sexual advances had been made in secret, not in open dating relationships; and
- 67% of the offenders were married to someone else at the time of the advance.
- In the average American congregation of 400 persons, with women representing, on average, 60% of the congregation, there are, on average of 7 women who have experienced clergy sexual misconduct.
- Of the entire sample, 8% report having known about CSM occurring in a congregation they have attended. Therefore, in the average American congregation of 400 congregants, there are, on average, 32 persons who have experienced CSM in their community of faith.

Of course, CSM does not occur evenly across congregations, but these statistics demonstrate the widespread nature of CSM and refutes the commonly held belief that it is a case of a few charismatic and powerful leaders preying on vulnerable followers. In the nonrandom qualitative study that occurred concurrently with the survey, survivors hailed from 17 different Christian and Jewish affiliations: Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Seventh Day Adventist, Disciples of Christ, Latter Day Saints, Apostolic, Calvary Chapel, Christian Science, Church of Christ, Episcopal, Friends (Quaker), Mennonite, Evangelical, Nondenominational (Christian), and Reform Judaism.

How CSM Happens

In the second phase of the project, we analyzed phone interviews with 46 persons who as adults had experienced a sexual encounter or relationship with a religious leader. We also interviewed 15 others who had experienced the effects of those sexual encounters (husbands, friends and other staff members in the congregation), as well as two offending leaders. We identified subjects for this study using networks of professionals, web sites, and media stories about the project. Most of the offenders of the interview subjects were male, but two were female. Considering that most religious leaders are male, it is significant that we found both male and female offenders, and offenders who committed heterosexual, gay and lesbian sexual misbehavior.

We used the software package Atlas-Ti to code the interview transcripts and then to identify six common themes that describe the social characteristics of the congregations in which clergy sexual misconduct (CSM) occurs. Those themes include:

1. *Family members, friends, and victims ignored warning signs.* Religious leaders acted inappropriately in public as well as private settings, but in a culture that has no cognitive categories for understanding or explaining clergy misconduct as anything other than an affair, observers mistrusted their own judgment, perhaps considering themselves hypersensitive, particularly since the behavior was committed by a trusted leader. First indicators of CSM were thus ignored.
2. *Niceness culture:* American culture expects persons to be nice to one another, particularly those we know and respect, and particularly in a congregation. Nice means not being confrontational, giving the other the benefit of the doubt, and overlooking social

indiscretions in order to avoid embarrassment. Even when family members, friends, and victims knew about or suspected CSM or behavior leading to CSM, they did not speak about their observations.

3. *Ease of private communication:* E-mail and cell phones have replaced mailed letters and phone calls to the family household. An intimate relationship between leader and congregant can develop via e-mail and cell phones with complete invisibility to family and community.
4. *No oversight:* Religious leaders often answer to no one about their daily activities and are free to move about the community and to maintain an office that is isolated from observation.
5. *Multiple roles:* Religious leaders engage in multiple roles with congregants in addition to their role as leader, including counselor and personal friend. They obtain knowledge about congregants personal lives and struggles that can make the congregant vulnerable and dependent.
6. *Trust in the sanctuary:* Congregations are considered sanctuaries safe places where normal attentiveness to self-protection is not considered necessary. Because of this perceived sanctuary, congregants share life experiences and private information with religious leaders that they would not share with others.

Prevention Strategies

The project proposes four strategies for lowering the incidence of CSM:

1. Educate the public about CSM as misconduct and abuse of power, not a consensual affair between persons of equal power. Give the public language and permission to identify what they experience as inappropriate conduct and important early warnings that can enable prevention or early intervention.
2. Provide religious education based on the scriptures about the role of power, and its use and abuse, in the workplace, the community of faith, and the family. Power and its use and abuse are not unique to religious congregations. Supervisors, teachers, community leaders, and parents need to understand and handle power appropriately, according to their religious faith. (*Study series from Baylor School of Social Work on Christianity and the Abuse of Power is forthcoming.*)
3. Provide a code of ethics and clear role expectations for leaders that protect them from multiple and conflicting roles and provide them with appropriate oversight and support.
4. Provide model legal legislation that defines sexual contact with congregants as illegal, not just immoral. See Helge and Toben, *Sexual Misconduct of Clergypersons with Congregants or Parishioners Civil and Criminal Liabilities and Responsibilities*.

Visit the study web site at <https://www.baylor.edu/clergysexualmisconduct/> to obtain that document.

* *The co-investigators of this study are Diana R. Garland, LCSW, Ph.D., Dean and Professor of Social Work, Baylor University; and Mark Chaves, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology, Religion, and Divinity, Duke University. The study is reported in two forthcoming articles. Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion will publish Chaves and Garland, The Prevalence of Clergy Sexual Advances towards Adults in their Congregations; and the journal Social Work and Christianity will publish Garland and Argueta, How Clergy Sexual Misconduct Happens: A Qualitative Study of First-Hand Accounts.*