

Truth Project Thematic Report

Child sexual abuse in the context of religious institutions

Executive summary

Rachel Hurcombe
Dr Andrea Darling
Beth Mooney
Grace Ablett
Claire Soares
Dr Sophia King
Dr Verena Brähler

IICSA Research Team
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 INDEPENDENT INQUIRY
CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

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Executive summary

Introduction

This is the first publication in a series of thematic reports examining what victims and survivors have shared with the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse ('the Inquiry') as part of the Truth Project about their experiences of child sexual abuse and the institutional context in which it occurred. It details the research findings in relation to experiences of sexual abuse that occurred in 'religious contexts', based on the location or perpetrator of the abuse. This includes both sexual abuse that has taken place in a religious institution and sexual abuse that has taken place in a different setting but where the perpetrator was a member of the clergy or other staff affiliated with a religious institution (see section 1.2 of the full report for a more detailed discussion of our inclusion and exclusion criteria).

The accounts in this report are from victims and survivors who came to the Truth Project between June 2016 and November 2018. The majority of participants reported sexual abuse by individuals from Anglican and Catholic Churches in England and Wales. However, such abuse within other Christian denominations and other religions – including the Jehovah's Witnesses, Islam and Judaism – was also reported and is included in the analysis. The analysis was undertaken by members of the Inquiry's Research Team between November 2018 and May 2019.

In particular, the analysis aimed to address the following topics:

- The nature of child sexual abuse experienced by participants in religious contexts.
- What victims and survivors said about whether anything could have been done to prevent the abuse at the time and how much institutions knew about the abuse at the time.
- Victims and survivors' experiences of disclosing the abuse and the responses, including barriers and facilitators for disclosure.
- The impacts of child sexual abuse in religious contexts and victims and survivors' suggestions for improving the protection of children in religious institutions in future.

A full list of the specific research questions for this report can be found in Chapter 1.

This thematic report complements *Child sexual abuse within the Catholic and Anglican Churches: A rapid evidence assessment* (IICSA Research Team, 2017), and the Inquiry's investigations into the institutional response to allegations of child sexual abuse in the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches in England and Wales.

This report describes the experiences of participants who told us they were sexually abused in religious contexts between the 1940s and 2010s. Given that the most recent case of abuse included in this analysis occurred almost a decade ago and most of the experiences shared relate to experiences occurring in the 1970s and earlier, it is not possible to make any comparisons with current-day experiences in religious contexts on the basis of Truth Project data.

Sample and methods

The statistical information in this report is based on a sample of 1,697 participants who took part in the Truth Project during June 2016 to November 2018. Of these, 183 individuals told us they had been sexually abused as children in religious institutions, or by clergy or church-related staff elsewhere. To draw out themes and commonalities, quantitative data from these participants are shown alongside quantitative data from the 1,514 participants whose descriptions of abuse did not involve religious contexts.

As the participants in this report are individuals who have chosen to take part in the Truth Project, the statistics produced are not necessarily reflective of the general population. Differences between those sexually abused in religious and non-religious contexts should therefore not be interpreted as reflecting differences within the general population of victims and survivors. The differences should also not be interpreted as being statistically significant, as tests of significance¹ have not been carried out. Tables containing all the figures for the statistical data are available in Appendix A, with the salient points drawn out within the body of the report.

We also qualitatively analysed the experiences that 12 of these victims and survivors shared with the Truth Project. A total of 12 were selected to enable analysis of a range of experiences and circumstances of sexual abuse in religious contexts. This sample will also form part of a total of around 70 participant accounts that will be qualitatively analysed as part of the full Truth Project analysis. The sample for the qualitative analysis described in this report was randomly selected within a sampling framework designed to ensure we included a range of characteristics and circumstances, such as religious institution type, time period in which the abuse occurred, victim age and victim sex. This framework and further information about the sample can be found in Chapter 2.

The majority of cases analysed in this report relate to the Anglican or Catholic Church, with a minority relating to other Christian denominations or other religions². In order to prevent the possible identification of participants in our qualitative sample and because the number of cases in each group was too small for meaningful quantitative analysis, we did not break down our research findings by specific religion or type of religious institution in this report. Consequently, we only draw out commonalities and differences between those abused in religious contexts and those abused in non-religious contexts.

An overview of the process used for carrying out analysis of Truth Project information can be found in the separate report, *Truth Project Research: Methods* (King and Brähler, 2019).

Ethics

All social research conducted or commissioned by the Inquiry is subject to approval from the Inquiry's Research Ethics Committee. The Truth Project research is subject to rigorous ethical scrutiny as the data collected are highly personal and sensitive. In order to safeguard these data, each component of the research process was reviewed in line with strict ethical standards by the Inquiry's Research Ethics Committee. For example, the wording of the 'consent for research' statement that Truth Project

¹ Tests of significance are typically used to assess whether a result is likely to have occurred by chance.

For example, a statistically significant result would suggest that a result is unlikely to be explained by chance.

² These include: Judaism, Baptist, Methodist, Mormon, Salvation Army, United Reform Church.

participants are presented with was discussed and agreed with the Research Ethics Committee. Ethical approval was obtained prior to the collection and analysis of the data.

Information is only included where Truth Project participants have agreed to their accounts being used for research purposes. All information analysed for this report was anonymised prior to analysis and all identifying information has been removed.

Key findings from the research

The research findings from this study indicate particular features and characteristics of sexual abuse in religious contexts in the past. Although this is the first of our published thematic reports, ongoing analysis and review of wider Truth Project sessions data suggests that abuse in religious contexts features some particularly notable characteristics:³

- Those sexually abused in a religious context often did not report the abuse whilst it was ongoing due to feelings of shame or embarrassment.
- The types of sexual abuse reported by participants in religious contexts typically involved fondling or other forms of sexual abuse involving non-penetrative contact, rather than penetrative abuse.
- Victims and survivors of child sexual abuse in a religious context often shared that they knew of others being abused in the same institution or by the same perpetrator.
- Participants considered that the power, authority and reverence bestowed upon religious institutions and the individuals working within them meant that the conduct of perpetrators was not questioned. This made it relatively easy for them to find opportunities to abuse and they were able to act with relative impunity.
- The reported extent of influence and involvement the religious institutions had over their communities and the daily lives, culture and background of victims and survivors and their families was more pronounced than typically seen in other institutions. This provided more opportunities for the abuse and made it particularly difficult for victims and survivors to be able to tell anyone about what was happening. Connected with this was the way in which perpetrators were able to use the child's spirituality and religion to manipulate them.
- When disclosing sexual abuse as a child or as an adult, participants abused in a religious context often shared that they reported their experiences of abuse to someone in authority inside the institution. This indicates the level of influence religious institutions often have.
- The protection of the reputation of the religious institution and individual perpetrators at all costs meant victims and survivors said they were often disbelieved, discredited and not supported after disclosing their experiences of sexual abuse both as children and as adults. Participants perceived that these protections were offered by religious leaders as well as community members and were viewed by participants to be more extensive than seen in other types of institution.
- There was an apparent contradiction in some cases between victims and survivors being told their disclosures were not believed or being actively discredited and the perpetrators being moved elsewhere within the religious institution, including overseas. Participants knew at the time or found out later that those in the new location were not advised of the known concerns about the perpetrator, creating further risk of abuse.

³ Please note that these research findings are not necessarily representative of the wider population and that differences found between abuse in religious and non-religious contexts have not been tested for statistical significance.

- The spiritual impact of the abuse upon victims and survivors is evident in these accounts of sexual abuse that occurred within religious contexts. This can have a particularly damaging impact on victims and survivors, particularly where their religion provided the foundation to their morality, beliefs, social relationships and the way they lived their daily lives.

Background of children abused in religious contexts

Participation in the Truth Project sessions to date demonstrates a higher proportion of males among participants sexually abused in a religious context compared with those abused in a non-religious context (61 per cent and 34 per cent respectively).

Overall, the most common individual decade for such abuse to commence was the 1970s, with one in three participants reporting the abuse started in this time period. However, 42 per cent of participants sexually abused in religious contexts reported abuse that commenced prior to the 1970s, compared to 30 per cent of participants who were abused in other contexts. This suggests that among participants who took part in the Truth Project, experiences of child sexual abuse in religious contexts tended to commence in a slightly earlier time period than for those abused in other contexts.

The most common age range for participants to first experience abuse in a religious context was 8–11 years old (41 per cent). The age of participants when they first experienced child sexual abuse in a religious context was slightly older on average than for those abused in non-religious contexts. Of the participants sexually abused in a religious context, 73 per cent of participants shared that they were eight or older when the abuse started in comparison to 56 per cent of participants abused in other contexts.

Participants highlighted that religion was central to their childhoods and family life. Many spoke of emotional distance and dysfunction within their families. Others, many of whom were isolated, geographically or socially, described solitary childhoods.

Context and nature of the sexual abuse

The majority of participants reported that they were sexually abused by individuals from the Anglican and Catholic Churches in England and Wales. However, individuals from other Christian denominations and other religions – including the Jehovah's Witnesses, Islam and Judaism – came to the Truth Project and were also included in the analysis. Perpetrators were often highly regarded and held particular positions of power in their communities.

Participants abused in religious contexts spoke most often about fondling (62 per cent), followed by other forms of sexual abuse involving non-penetrative contact (34 per cent). This contrasts slightly with abuse that occurred in other contexts, where participants most often talked about fondling (54 per cent) and penetrative abuse (50 per cent). Participants described the abuse as progressively escalating and many were abused over an extended period of time.

Institutional context and knowledge of the abuse

Participants described male-dominated, closed and insular religious institutions with considerable influence on the community and the lives of their congregants. They described self-governing institutions with little or no external contact or supervision. Many participants knew of someone else being sexually abused in the same institution. Some participants either knew or strongly believed that those within the institution knew about the abuse at the time and that other adults (including parents and other professionals) did not act as a result of the power and control of the religious institution and religious leaders. This power, by virtue of a perceived higher authority, and the lack of safeguarding awareness or practices, created conditions where perpetrators were easily able to abuse and where a range of strategies were used by religious leaders and others in the community to protect the institution. In this context participants reported how the reputation of the institution was seen as paramount and the needs of child victims were diminished or ignored.

Experiences of disclosure and responses by institutions

Only around a third of victims and survivors in this sample had disclosed or reported any of the abuse at the time. Participants who did not disclose the abuse at the time spoke of the fact there was no one for them to tell and there was no encouragement to open up and disclose in any indirect ways either. Barriers to disclosing at the time of the sexual abuse were reported to be: lacking a relationship with a trusted adult; feelings of shame and embarrassment; lack of education around sex and abuse; and fear of the power and influence of the religious community.

Where participants had disclosed at the time of the abuse, this had typically been to a person in authority inside the institution. When disclosing, many participants shared that they were disbelieved, had their experiences of abuse minimised and little or no action was taken.

Participants who disclosed as adults typically reported their experiences of such abuse to the police or a person in authority inside the institution. Generally participants shared that they were disappointed with the response of the authorities they reported to. They described responses from authorities as muted and noted a lack of communication between the authority and the individual.

Barriers to disclosing as adults mentioned by participants were: not wanting their families to find out; fearing hostility from the religious community; and their past experiences of unsuccessfully challenging religious institutions.

Overall, a greater proportion of participants sexually abused in a religious context reported their experiences of abuse to someone in authority inside the institution than participants who were abused in other contexts, both as a child and as an adult. This difference indicated the relative influence religious institutions had in comparison to other institutions.

Experiences of the criminal justice system

A small number of participants abused in a religious context reported the abuse to the police at the time it was happening, with a greater proportion choosing to disclose to a person in authority inside the institution. However, when reporting the abuse after it ended, participants most commonly reported it to the police. Participants described mixed experiences when dealing with the police and criminal justice agencies as adults. Some individual officers were supportive and helpful, others lacked compassion and minimised the sexual abuse as it related to non-recent events.

Impacts of abuse

Participants spoke extensively about the life-long impact of their experiences of sexual abuse in religious contexts. Many participants described the detrimental impact the abuse had on their mental health. Notable amongst those who had experienced abuse in a religious context were feelings of guilt and loss of religious faith. A high percentage of participants sexually abused in religious contexts also reported an impact on their sexual behaviour.

Coping and recovery

Participants described a wide variety of coping mechanisms they had employed, including suppressing memories or forcing themselves to carry on with their lives regardless. Others talked about actively speaking out about their experiences of abuse, giving something back to their community, choosing to believe in a greater good or seeking validation and justice. For many, recovery was complicated because they had been abused by religious individuals and, subsequently, their belief systems had been challenged.

Experiences of support

A minority of victims and survivors spoke about accessing any kind of support services as children. As adults, most participants reported receiving both informal and formal support, with the support of family members and counsellors often mentioned. Experiences of formal support were very mixed. Overall, victims and survivors alluded to the idea that they had to overcome systemic issues within support services – such as long waiting lists and the limited availability of some services – and constantly fight to receive the support they required.

Victims and survivors' suggestions for change

Participants made a number of suggestions to improve child protection and assist victims and survivors of child sexual abuse in future.

Structurally, it was suggested that there needed to be better counselling and support provision and that child protection education and support in religious institutions should be delivered by external agencies who are specially approved. Financially, participants thought there should be an end to deadlines impacting on the ability of victims and survivors to receive compensation. Culturally, participants stated that the secrecy that comes from the sanctity of religious institutions and the assumption of the automatic morality of those involved in them had to be addressed. Politically and professionally, it was suggested that victims and survivors needed to be at the centre of all concerns, actions and support relating to sexual abuse. Religious institutions and their leaders needed to take responsibility for abuse that has happened, come together to effect required change and ensure child protection policies and procedures were fully implemented in the best interests of the child.

Overall, the research findings detailed in this report share many similarities with previous research into sexual abuse in the Anglican and Catholic Churches (see Dreßing et al., 2018), including the Research Team's *Child sexual abuse within the Catholic and Anglican Churches: A rapid evidence assessment* (IICSA Research Team, 2017) and the Australian Royal Commission's findings relating to experiences of abuse in religious institutions (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c).

Consistent with our research findings here, these reports found that a central factor in the child sexual abuse in religious contexts was the particularly high regard and trust placed in religious institutions and those associated with them (often referred to as ‘clericalism’ in the Catholic Church) (IICSA Research Team, 2017; Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c). This status has both enabled abuse in religious contexts and hindered appropriate responses to it.

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Note on language

Please see Appendix B for a glossary which contains definitions of various terms used throughout this report.

Where the term ‘abuse’ is used throughout the report we are generally referring to sexual abuse, unless otherwise stated.