

Child sexual abuse and the church: How widespread is the problem?

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This article is part of a series on child sexual abuse and the church:

- [How widespread is the problem?](#)
- [Impact on children and youth](#)
- [Impact on adults](#)
- [The church's responsibility to protect children](#)
- [Reporting and care after abuse occurs](#)
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In recent years, reports of child sexual abuse scandals in the Catholic Church grabbed headlines for months. Not long after the initial reports of abuse among Catholic priests and cover-up by church officials, a prominent football coach at Penn State University, Jerry Sandusky, was arrested and convicted of molesting many children. His boss, famous head coach [Joe Paterno](#), was fired for failing to report the abuse to police.

In more recent days, horrifying accounts emerged of widespread abuse of young U.S. gymnasts by their team physician, [Dr. Larry Nassar](#). More than 150 women testified against him in the trial that resulted in his conviction.

In Southern Baptist circles, questions about physical and sexual abuse preceded and drew widespread attention at the 2018 Southern Baptist Convention. Immediately following the convention, the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* reported a [former IMB missionary](#) and leader in the South

Carolina Baptist Convention was charged with sexual assault of a child under 17. His alleged abuse of a teenage girl occurred as he served in youth ministry in a church in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Similar accounts of other [former Texas youth ministers](#) also made headlines in the last year.

These stories highlight the incredible importance for churches, ministry personnel, and for all who attend Baptist churches to be aware of the issue of child sexual abuse, to be knowledgeable about the matter, to be able to act to protect children from abuse, and to help produce healing for children and families when abuse occurs.

To that end, this is the first article of a four-part series on child sexual abuse in the church, which covers the following:

- *What is the rate of abuse; how widespread is the problem?*
- *What are the ramifications of abuse; how does it impact those who are abused?*
- *What is the responsibility of the church and church leadership to protect children and how can churches do this most effectively?*
- *What resources are available to churches and families?*

How is sexual abuse defined?

A key problem in determining the rate of abuse is how a researcher defines abuse. Abuse may be defined from legal perspectives, from social perspectives, or from the perspective of those attempting to provide protection to children. Varying definitions of abuse tend to lead to a wide range of outcomes in reporting rates of sexual abuse.

An example of [one researcher's definition](#) of sexual abuse can be seen in the work of Delphine Collin-Vézina and her colleagues, who define child sexual abuse as, “any activity of a sexual nature between a child and an adult or another child who by age or development is in a relationship of

responsibility, trust or power, the activity being intended to gratify or satisfy the needs of the other person.”

Two common subcategories in defining child sexual abuse are contact abuse and non-contact abuse. Contact sexual abuse tends to include penetration, fondling, kissing or touching of an adult or older child directed toward a younger child. Non-contact sexual abuse can include adult exhibitionism or voyeurism toward a child, exposing a child to pornography or sexualized material, or interacting sexually with a child through electronic means, such as by phone or on-line.

What is the rate of child sexual abuse?

Despite the challenges in defining abuse, one thing upon which all experts agree—the rate of abuse is higher than what is reported.

Some children do not tell any adult what happened to them. Others are coaxed, tricked, coerced or threatened into silence by the abuser. Some victims are too young to comprehend what has taken place to them and do not have the emotional capacity or communication skills to alert adults.

The outcome is that the extent of abuse is higher—likely much higher—than what is reported. The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that [only 30 percent](#) of sexual assault cases are reported to authorities.

Even though rates of abuse are underreported, the numbers are still staggering.

In the United States, 10 percent of all children experience some form of child sexual abuse before age 18. According to an article appearing in the April 2014 issue of *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics*, of those abused, 75 percent are females and 25 percent are males.

In a 2013 JAMA article, David Finkelhor, a leading researcher on violence

toward children, found that just under 6 percent of all children in the U.S., ages 1 month through 17 years experienced contact sexual assault the previous year. Of this group, 14-17-year-old females were particularly vulnerable, with 22.8 percent reporting being sexually victimized in the previous year. Nearly 13 percent of females 14-17 years of age experienced some kind of unwanted sexual solicitation on the internet within the previous year.

Most children who are molested know their victimizer. Only 10 percent of children are abused by a stranger; [90 percent know](#) their abuser. The younger the child victim is, the more likely the perpetrator is [an older child or teenager](#).

The need for awareness

The biggest and most costly mistake church leadership can make related to child sexual abuse is assuming “it can’t happen here.”

If the statistics are anywhere near accurate (and there is reason to believe the data grossly underrepresents the scope of the problem), at any church activity, children are present who have been victims of child sexual abuse. In medium and larger size churches, dozens of victims are in attendance each time the church gathers. Most unfortunately, for some children, the abuse may have happened in a church or in a church-related setting or at the hands of ministry personnel who are wolves in sheep’s clothing.

Upcoming articles

- What is the [effect on children and youth](#) who have been victimized?
- What is the [impact of sexual abuse on adults](#), and is there hope?
- What is the [responsibility of the church](#) and church leadership to

protect children from abuse, and how can churches do this most effectively?

- Who must [report abuse, and](#) how can churches help abuse victims and their families?
- What [resources are available](#) to churches and families to help prevent abuse and to help the family where abuse has already occurred?

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