

# Some abusive predators hide in plain sight in trusted institutions

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—The abuse allegations at Penn State seem unthinkable—revered assistant coach and prominent community activist Jerry Sandusky preying on eight children. But such abuses of trust play out across the country over and over again.

Experts say respected people who set up charitable or social groups for children, only to be implicated in some form of child sexual abuse, are a frightening reality.

Legendary Penn State football coach Joe Paterno was fired for not reporting to police an assistant coach who allegedly was caught molesting a young boy.(RNS PHOTO/ Joe Hermitt/The Patriot-News.)

"I call them 'institutions of trust,'" said Portland, Ore., attorney Kelly Clark, who has represented more than 300 sex abuse victims.

Some predators are so tacitly trusted "that when something like this happens, the instinctive reaction is: 'That can't happen here. We can't allow the mission to be compromised,'" he said.

Abuse experts say the common denominators in many such crimes are parents willing to allow noted people to have unrestricted access to their kids. Among recent cases:

- *A Utah judge recently sentenced a 70-year-old orphanage co-founder to three consecutive terms of five years to life in prison after he pleaded guilty to three counts of abuse. Lon Kennard originally faced 43 counts dating to 1995, but most charges were dropped as part of a plea deal. Kennard's victims were among six children adopted from Ethiopia, where he and his wife helped establish an orphanage.*
- *A Miami jury returned a \$100 million verdict against a retired Roman Catholic priest accused of sexually abusing dozens of boys since the 1980s in the city's Little Haiti neighborhood. More than 20 people say Neil Doherty, 68, trolled for victims wearing his priest's collar.*
- *In Portland, Ore., last year, a jury awarded a 38-year-old former Boy Scout \$1.4 million, finding the national Boy Scouts of America and a local council negligent in a sex abuse case involving an assistant scoutmaster and convicted pedophile.*

"A pedophile is going to go where they have access to children," said Richard Serbin, an Altoona, Pa., attorney who has represented 150 clergy sex abuse victims statewide since 1987. He said the Penn State allegations parallel the Catholic Church scandals—a trusted institution playing host to a pedophile. In each case, he said, the institution unwittingly lent predators access and respectability.

Washington, D.C., journalist Patrick Boyle, author of the 1994 book [\*Scout's Honor: Sexual Abuse in America's Most Trusted Institution\*](#), said reaction to the Catholic Church's sex abuse complaints and those against the Boy Scouts of America were similar.

"In both cases, there was a lot of willful ignorance among the higher-ups," he said. "They almost tried not to know things."

Penn State head football Coach Joe Paterno's response to sex abuse

suspicious was "disappointing," Serbin said. Paterno allegedly reported the incident to a supervisor without summoning the police or pursuing the matter further.

"It appears to me that no one wanted to ask the pertinent questions," Serbin said.

Clark also sees similarities to the sex abuse complaints against the Boy Scouts—he estimates that about 50 to 60 involving Scouts are pending in courts nationwide.

"I call it 'borrowed credibility,'" Clark said. "If it was Smilin' Joe's Day Care Center, I might not leave my kid there. But it's the Boy Scouts, so I'm going to let my kid go with this troop and three or four or five adult men, some of whom I don't know. I might not trust them, but I trust the Boy Scouts."

Boy Scouts of America spokesman Deron Smith said that in 101 years, 150 million young men have been Scouts.

Smith said the organization takes abuse seriously. Since 1990, he said, the Boy Scouts have included a pamphlet titled "How to Protect Your Children" in every handbook, and adult leaders regularly are required to take youth protection training.

"Before they ever get into the program and certainly after they're in the program, we want this to be a point of discussion," Smith said.

Since 2003, the Boy Scouts of America has required criminal background checks of all new volunteers; it also requires at least two adults to supervise all activities.

It also requires mandatory reporting—to the police and local Scouting council—of "any reasonable suspicion of inappropriate conduct with youth."

In the Penn State case, Boyle said, "everybody seems to have done the

minimum, instead of doing the maximum or more, which is what we'd expect of these institutions."

"If you can give 110 percent on the field, why can't you give 110 percent for the victims?"