

What We Can Learn from the John Jay Studies—Part Three

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A distinct advantage to the United States Catholic Church's enlisting of criminal justice experts to study the problem of sexual abuse by clergy is that these experts bring with them a valuable broadening of the issue. Criminal justice views clergy who have sexually abused as sexual offenders, allowing those who study the problem and develop solutions to tap into a wealth of newly discovered information about the nature, etiology, and dynamics of sexual offending as a whole. Among the promising new perspectives on general crime prevention is a framework called *Situational Crime Prevention*.

Basics of the Framework. Situational Crime Prevention focuses on how to modify the environment so that crimes are less likely to occur. An example of situational crime prevention would be to reduce car theft by teaching citizens not to leave their keys in the ignition. In the case of sexual offending, situational crime prevention uses the *elements of the environment* to decrease the likelihood that sexual abuse will occur. This is in contrast to a psychological framework that would focus on changing an individual's desire to sexually offend or relying on an individual's increased impulse control to prevent abuse from occurring. Elements of the environment that may prevent the specific crime of sexual abuse include modifying aspects of physical environments, potential victims, availability of opportunities, or the consequences of being caught.

Application to the Catholic Church. In a study of Australian sexual offenders, researchers found that situational factors did play an important role in the perpetration of sexual abuse in society as a whole. In 2009, John Jay researchers Terry and Ackerman examined the situational factors found to influence sexual abuse and applied them to the question of whether situational factors may have had a role in the abuse perpetrated in the Catholic Church. They concluded that, yes, situational factors likely did play role. This conclusion was based on a number compelling findings of the John Jay Study. Several of these are listed below:

- Very few chronic offenders, only 3.5 percent were considered "persistent offenders."
- Very low instances of "stranger abuse."
- Most of the children and youth were highly accessible, including 17 percent of victims who also had a sibling who was abused.
- The location of the abuse was most likely to be the cleric's home, the home of the victim, or on an overnight trip.

Taken together, this information means that we are dealing with a majority of situations in which an individual sexually abused a familiar child or youth who was accessible in his own or the child's home. Prevention of this type of crime requires a very different set of precautions than preventing a persistent sexual offender from actively pursuing sexual contact with children in a variety of settings such as parks, schools, recreational centers, or churches.

Prevention Using Situational Strategies. Terry and Ackerman (2009) recommended four techniques for situational crime prevention, some of which have already become part of the culture of the Catholic Church within the United States. These techniques may certainly be

used to prevent clergy sexual abuse, but are also indicated for the prevention of sexual abuse by other adults in relationships with children in any setting.

1. **Increase effort**—Increasing effort means increasing the amount of effort it takes on the part of a potential abuser. In other words, “don’t make it easy.” Strategies to *increase effort* include education and skills-building for minors, preventing the use of facilitators such as alcohol or drugs with children, controlling access to minors by restricting overnight visits, prohibiting time alone in homes, and supervising overnight and off-campus time with children and youth.
2. **Increase risk**—Increasing risk means increasing the likelihood that abuse or attempts to abuse will be detected. Strategies to *increase risk* include formal and informal supervision of programs and personnel, providing information to parishioners and volunteers about what to watch for in others, and directing specific educational efforts to parents and guardians about specific dangers, why they are important, and what to do if warning signs are observed.
3. **Control prompts**—Controlling prompts means addressing the behaviors and circumstances that may “trigger” the selection of a particular child or youth. A child seeking intimacy, closeness, and physical affection may not be seeking sexual contact, but can behave in a manner that is misconstrued by an adult who is already struggling with profound loneliness or attraction to minors. Within the context of a deeply intimate relationship with a child or young person, adults who have not otherwise abused, have crossed the line into sexual relationships. You can best *control prompts* in organizations through awareness of the need for boundaries between adults and children and adherence to specific expectations regarding relationships between adults and children or youth. Codes of conduct, awareness education, and ongoing professional development should address the content of conversations, limits of physical contact, as well as where and how time is spent in the development of private relationships.
4. **Reduce permissibility**—Reducing permissibility means being clear that sexual behavior of any kind, with minors of any age is wrong, is a crime, is harmful, and will be punished to the full extent of the law. One of the most common behaviors of adults who sexually abuse minors is to minimize what they did, why they did it, and what effect it may have had on the victim or victims. The history of the Catholic Church shows that there have been members of the clergy who sexually offended and were not held accountable for their actions, were permitted to apologize and move on, or were able to explain away the situation as a misunderstanding. Unfortunately, this pattern of minimalization has been extremely common for men and women in many different positions of trust and authority. *Reducing permissibility* can be accomplished by teaching adults and young people how abuse affects a child, clearly defining acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, and clearly articulating all consequences for policy violations and sexual abuse. While clear consequences may not be enough to prevent a persistent offender from sexually abusing, a clear understanding and expectation of punishment may give the “situational” offender just enough pause to reconsider a very damaging mistake.

Conclusions. When examining sexual abuse within the Catholic Church, much attention has been given to the factors that are unique to the Catholic environment. It is possible, however, that we have something to learn from a more general framework of crime prevention. Situational Crime Prevention provides a framework for much of the work that

has begun, and suggests strategies that may supplement the current efforts to create safe environments.

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