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Sexual Abuse of Minors in the German Catholic Church

Abstract The study presents the results of an investigation of the sexual abuse of minors in the German Catholic Church. The analysis covered the period from 1946 to 2014. It found that many priests had been accused of sexual abuse. In many cases, priests were charged with multiple offenses. The minors affected were predominantly male. The health and social consequences for the victims were partly severe. Priests were only punished in relatively few cases. In many cases, there was no serious response to the crimes by the church, which can be seen as an example of the “silence of organizations”.

Keywords sexual crimes against minors, Catholic Church, delinquency in institutions

Introduction

In recent years, sexual crimes against minors in the Catholic Church have become a matter of great public interest. The following report presents the results of a research project which was aimed at determining the frequency and the forms of sexual abuse of minors in the German Catholic Church and to identify church structures and dynamics that may have fostered the abuse and its veiling. The project was conducted on behalf of the German Bishops' Conference. In 2014, after a call for bids, the study was awarded to a research consortium made up of researchers from Mannheim, Heidelberg and Giessen. The study is referred to as "MHG Study", indicating the cities where the researchers are active. Under the parameters of the project, the study covers the priests and deacons in the German dioceses and male members of religious orders who have been or are still active in the authority of a diocese.

Methodology

Because access to the object of the research is difficult, multiple methods were used to obtain reliable results. The project as a whole is made up of seven sub-projects (closer to the conception of the research project Dreßing et al. 2015). Sub-project 1 consists of a qualitative and quantitative exploration of the data and the data management practices related to the personnel records at the 27 dioceses. For this purpose, all of the dioceses were surveyed in a written questionnaire. Qualitative interviews were also conducted in addition (see for sub-project 1 Dreßing et al. 2018a). Sub-project 2 includes qualitative interviews with 214 victims, 50 accused and 100 non-accused clerics (for sub-project 2, see Kruse et al. 2018). Sub-project 3 evaluates records of state criminal proceedings for sexual abuse of minors against catholic clergymen and for comparison with employees of other institutions, e.g. schools. The analysis covered 243 criminal files on employees of the Catholic Church. These criminal files referred to 209 accused clerics and 645 victims. In addition, 77 criminal files for employees of other institutions were examined. These criminal files dealt with 78 accused employees and 403 victims (for sub-project 3, see Dölling et al. 2018). Sub-project 4 consists of an analysis of the prevention efforts of the Catholic Church. Written surveys were conducted of the vicars' general and prevention officials at the 27 dioceses (for sub-project 4, see Dreßing et al. 2018b). In sub-project 5, a secondary analysis was conducted of national and international studies of sexual abuse in institutions and a meta-analysis of prevention projects in institutions. 53 primary studies of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church and 25 primary studies of sexual abuse in other institutions were analyzed. The meta-analysis of evaluation studies of prevention projects in institutions included 25 evaluation studies (for sub-project 5, see Dölling/Hermann/Horten 2018). The subject of sub-

project 6 was the quantitative analysis of personnel, reference and case files from the 27 dioceses. Files were evaluated for 38,156 clergymen. In 10 dioceses, files were analyzed for all clerics who were living, active or retired during the period from 1946 to 2014. For the remaining 17 dioceses, the reference and case files for the period 1946 to 2014 and the personnel records for the period 2000 to 2014 were analyzed (for sub-project 6, see Dreßing et al. 2018c). In sub-project 7, an anonymous online survey was performed for victims. 69 victims took part in this survey (for sub-project 7, see Dreßing et al. 2018d).

Results—Offenders, Offenses and Victims

The analysis yielded the following findings: The analysis of personnel records found that complaints of sexual abuse of minors were made against 1,670 clergymen. This represents 4.4% of clerics whose personnel records were reviewed. Among diocesan priests, the share of the accused is 5.1%, among deacons 1.0% and among religious order priests in the authority of a diocese 2.1% (see Table 1). It has to be taken into consideration that there was some evidence of the destruction of records and that not all of the offenses were documented in the records. The rate obtained is therefore only the tip of the iceberg, the true extent of which is unknown. This is the case even if we allow for the fact that the documented cases in the personnel records may include some false accusations.

	Total	Diocesan priests	Deacons	Religious order priests
Records viewed	38,156	28,208	2,356	7,534
Accused clerics	1,670	1,429	24	159
Rate	4.4%	5.1%	1.0%	2.1%

Table 1 Number of Accused Clerics according to Personnel Records

The distribution of accusations over time in the personnel records shows a concentration in the 50s, 60s and 70s of the previous century (see Table 2). We cannot conclude on this basis, however, that the sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clerics is a problem that lies exclusively in the past. It should be noted that the number of priests has fallen significantly in recent years and there is often a long period of time between the act and the reporting of the act, meaning that we can assume a significant number of unreported incidents especially in recent years. It is therefore clear that we are dealing with a persistent problem that still requires clearing up, accounting for the past and prevention.

Period	Percent	Period	Percent
Before 1945	7.8	1981–1985	4.8
1946–1950	4.9	1986–1990	4.4
1951–1955	7.5	1991–1995	3.6
1956–1960	9.4	1996–2000	3.4
1961–1965	8.2	2002–2005	4.2
1966–1970	9.6	2006–2010	3.7
1971–1975	7.9	2011–2014	2.5
1976–1980	5.4	Unknown	12.7

Table 2 Distribution of Accusations Over Time according to Personnel Records (in %, n = 1,670)

The evaluation of the personnel records yielded a number of 3,677 persons victimized by sexual abuse crimes against minors. This is not the same as the total number of all victims during the period of study, as we also have to allow for a significant number of unreported cases. The analysis of personnel records found that 62.8% of the victims were male, while based on the analysis of criminal records, 80.2% of victims were male and according to the qualitative interviews, the percentage of male victims was 76.6%. The percentage of male victims is thus significantly higher than with the sexual abuse of minors within the family and circle of friends. A possible explanation is the opportunity for easier access to male victims or a homosexual disposition on the part of perpetrators. A complex interplay of sexual immaturity and repressed homosexual inclinations in an ambivalent and in part homophobic environment may potentially be an explanation for the preponderance of male victims in the sexual abuse by Catholic clerics. Based on the analysis of personnel records, the age of victims at the first incident of abuse averages 12 years. The same average was obtained from the analysis of criminal records. The average age of victims at the time of the first abuse according to the interviews was 10.6 years.

Frequently, victims were abused multiple times. Only a minority of the victims suffered a single incident of abuse. More than 10% of the victims were victimized over 10 times (see Table 3). Accordingly, individual cases of abuse often extended over a long period of time. The abuse lasted 15.8 months on average according to the analysis of personnel records, 15.3 months according to the criminal record analysis and 20.3 months according to the interviews. In many cases, the sexual abuse had severe health and social consequences for the victims (see Tables 4 and 5).

The average age of the accused at the time of the first offense was 42.6 years according to the analysis of personnel records, 40.5 according to the analysis of criminal records and 30.2 according to the interviews. The average time between consecration and the first incident of abuse was 14.3 years according to the personnel records analysis. It appears, therefore, that a number of priests were able to act in

	Personnel records n = 3,677	Criminal files of Catholic Church n = 645	Criminal files comparison group n = 403
1	27.8%	30.7%	27.8%
2–10	21.3%	32.5%	38.4%
11–30	5.4%	9.0%	5.5%
31–50	1.5%	1.7%	2.0%
51–100	1.1%	1.2%	0.7%
More than 100	2.6%	0.6%	0.5%
Unknown	40.3%	24.2%	25.1%

Table 3 Number of Acts of Abuse per Victim

Health consequences	Percent	Health consequences	Percent
Fears	11.9	Suicide attempts	2.6
Depression	11.8	Pain	2.5
Distrust	8.0	Alcohol abuse	2.5
Sexual problems	8.0	Restlessness	2.2
Contact difficulties	7.9	Irritability	1.8
Nightmares	6.7	Self-harm	1.4
Sleep disorders	5.5	Memory disorders	1.1
Physical complaints	5.2	Drug use	1.1
Flashbacks	4.8	Nervousness	1.1
Suicidal ideations	4.3	Bulimia	0.8
Panic attacks	3.6	Anorexia	0.6
Mood swings	3.5	Medication abuse	0.5
Concentration disorder	3.0	Severy obesity	0.4

Multiple answers, victims with health consequences named in the personal records of the accused n = 1,028; 28.0%

Table 4 Health Consequences among Victims

Social consequences	Percent
In a relation or partnership	12.9
In sexual life	10.4
In work life	8.3
Participating in society	7.9
In school or education	4.8
Unability to forget	4.6
In religious life and faith	4.4

Multiple answers, victims with social consequences named in the personal records of the accused n = 890; 24.3%

Table 5 Social Consequences among Victims

conformity for a period of time before their crime. It should be noted, however, that for a significant number of the accused, the first offense was significantly before or after the average. There were indications of a homosexual orientation with 14.0% of the accused according to the analysis of personnel records, 19.1% of the accused according to the analysis of criminal records and 72.0% according to the interviews. There were hints of paedophilia for 28.3% of the accused according to the analysis of personnel records, 28.2% of the accused according to the analysis of criminal records and 28.0% according to the interviews. For a significant number of the accused, indications of overload, e.g. problems fulfilling the responsibilities of the position, were documented in the personnel records (see Table 6). In many cases, the

Indications of overload	Percent
Difficulties carrying out official duties, problems meeting the responsibilities in the office	26.6
Social or maturity deficits, psychological abnormalities	23.4
Specific hardships (finances, death of relatives, etc.)	23.4
Substance abuse	11.6
Feeling of isolation	6.5

Table 6 Indications of Overload Documented in Personnel Records (as % of all accused)

accused were charged with sexually abusing multiple victims. This was the case for 42.3% of the accused according to the evaluation of personnel records and 51.2% of the accused according to the analysis of criminal records. Most of the accused were charged with multiple offenses. In many cases, these offenses numbered more than ten (see Table 7).

	Criminal files of Catholic Church n = 209	Criminal files comparison group n = 78
1	19.1%	15.4%
2–10	19.1%	35.9%
11–30	11.0%	6.4%
31–50	5.3%	7.7%
51–100	4.8%	9.0%
> 100	2.4%	2.6%
Several offences	24.4%	12.8%
Many offences	11.0%	7.7%
Unknown	2.9%	2.6%

Table 7 Number of Offences per Accused

In the overwhelming majority of cases, the abuse was planned and not spontaneous (see Table 8). Most offenses were part of a longer-term systematic pattern of abuse (see Table 9).

	Criminal files of Catholic Church n = 645	Criminal files comparison group n = 403
Spontaneous	5.4%	5.0%
Planned	83.1%	83.6%
Both (when committing several offences)	5.3%	5.2%
Unknown	6.2%	6.2%

Table 8 Spontaneous and Planned Acts of Abuse

	Criminal files of Catholic Church n = 645	Criminal files comparison group n = 403
Yes	64.8%	75.7%
No	17.1%	11.9%
Unknown	18.1%	12.4%

Table 9 Acts of Abuse as Part of a Longer Term Systematic Line of Action

The offenses took place in a range of different contexts. Frequently, the abuse occurred in the context of private meetings, instruction, camps or vacation trips and sacral activities (see Table 10). The offenses were predominantly hands-on activities, i.e. activities where there was physical contact between the participants. According to the analysis of personnel records, for 81.2% of the victims the abuse was a case of hands-on activities. For 9.6% of victims, the abuse involved exclusively hands-off activities. For the remainder of victims, no precise determination could be made as to the abuse that occurred. For 15.8% of victims, the abuse involved penetration. The evaluation of the state criminal proceedings showed that 91.8% of proceedings involved at least one case of hands-on activity. 8.2% of the proceedings involved cases of exclusively hands-off activities. According to the analysis of criminal records, bodily penetration occurred for 16.3% of victims. Acts of violence were not very frequent. In 10.7% of the official criminal proceedings analyzed, the use of force was investigated.

	Share of all victims n = 3,677
Private meeting	41.4%
Teaching	14.8%
Camp/vacation	10.9%
Sacral activity other than confession	10.0%
Boarding school/institutional care	7.8%
Confession	5.9%
Church excursion	5.0%
Assistance activities by the victim in the community	3.0%
Special occasion (e.g. communion celebration)	2.4%
Communication via internet/other new media	1.4%
Assistance by victim in household of accused	1.3%
Contact of accused with family of the victim	0.1%
Unknown	14.3%

Table 10 Table 10: Context of Acts of Abuse according to Personnel Records Analysis (multiple answers possible)

Reactions

With respect to the response of the Catholic Church to the charges of abuse, the analysis of personnel records found that in many cases the church responded by transferring priests. Both transfers within the diocese and between dioceses were significantly more frequent than for non-accused priests (see Table 11). The analysis of personnel records further revealed that a canonical process was initiated against 33.9% of the accused (see Table 12). A report to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome was observed for 13.9% of the accused (see Table 13).

In many cases, there was a long period of time separating the initial offense and the initiation of a canonical process or a criminal complaint. According to the analysis of the personal files, the time interval between the first offense and the beginning of the proceedings was on average 22.0 years (standard deviation 16.1 years) for proceedings under canonical law, 23.5 years (standard deviation 16.2 years) for reports to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and 13.7 years (standard deviation 15.3 years) for criminal complaints. With regard to the results of the canonical processes, the analysis of personnel records indicated that in many cases, lighter sanctions, such as a change in area of activity, were issued. Serious sanctions, e.g. excommunication or discharge from the clergy, did occur, but they were not very frequent (see Table 14).

The data shows that in many cases there was no serious response by the church to reported sexual abuse crimes. The sexual abuse by priests was viewed by church

		Average number of transfers Within diocese (Std Dev)	p-value (two-sided)
Transfers within diocese	Diocese priests without accusation	3.6 (2.6)	< .001
	Diocese priests with accusation	4.4 (2.9)	
		Transfer to other diocese	p-value (two-sided)
Inter-diocese transfers	Diocese priests without accusation	29.0%	< .001
	Diocese priests with accusation	33.2%	

Table 11 Transfer of Diocese Priests

	Number of accused	Share of all accused (n = 1,670)
Canonical process initiated	566	33.9%
No canonical process initiated	885	53.0%
Unknown	219	13.1%
Total	1,670	100%

Table 12 Canonical Processes for the Sexual Abuse of Minors

	Number of accused	Share of all accused (n = 1,670)
Report	233	13.9%
No report	1,165	69.8%
Unknown	272	16.3%
Total	1,670	100%

Table 13 Report to Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

Process results	Number of accused	Share of all accused (n = 1,670)	Share of accused with processes (n = 566)
Process not concluded at time of study	34	2.0%	6.0%
No punishment or sanction	154	9.2%	27.2%
Change of area of activity	278	16.6%	49.1%
Celebration ban	203	12.2%	35.9%
Early retirement	164	9.8%	29.0%
Therapy out-patient	148	8.9%	26.1%
Therapy in-patient	127	7.6%	22.4%
Suspension from office	119	7.1%	21.0%
Intradiocese transfer	116	6.9%	20.5%
Admonishment	103	6.2%	18.2%
Monetary penalty	102	6.1%	18.0%
Spiritual exercises	95	5.7%	16.8%
Other sanctions	92	5.5%	16.3%
Excommunication	88	5.3%	15.5%
Release from clergy	41	2.5%	7.2%
Interdiocese transfer	39	2.3%	6.9%
Reduction of salary	35	2.1%	6.2%

Table 14 Result of Canonical Process (multiple entries, n = 566)

authorities primarily as a threat to the institution and the clerical system. Sanctioning offenses and protecting the victims were deemed less important than protecting the system of the church. There was an informal strategy to veil the sexual abuse crimes.

With respect to the state criminal proceedings against clerics for sexual abuse of minors, the analysis of records showed that 67.1% of criminal proceedings were dropped by the public prosecutor's office. Only in 32.9% of cases did the prosecutor bring charges or apply for an order of summary punishment (see Table 15). The high rate of cases where charges were dropped was due overwhelmingly to the expiration of the statute of limitations for the offenses in question.

Of the clergy members against whom criminal main proceedings were brought, 96.3% were convicted (see Table 16). 18.2% of these received fines, 26.0% of them a suspended prison sentence and 51.9% were sentenced to prison without probation (see Table 17).

The surveys on prevention work in the Catholic Church revealed that prevention was practiced in the dioceses with varying degrees of intensity. This becomes clear

	Catholic Church n = 249	Comparison group n = 78
Charge/apply for a penal order	32.9%	79.5%
Termination of proceedings	67.1%	20.5%

Table 15 Decision of Public Prosecutor after Conclusion of Investigations

	Catholic Church n = 80	Comparison group n = 60
Conviction	96.3%	88.3%
Termination of proceedings	2.5%	1.7%
Acquittal	1.3%	10.0%

Table 16 Legally Binding Decision of the Court in Main Proceedings

	Catholic Church n = 77	Comparison group n = 53
Warning with sentence reserved	0	1.9%
Fine	18.2%	7.5%
Suspended prison sentence	26.0%	43.4%
Imprisonment without probation	51.9%	45.3%
Corrective and prevention measure	2.6%	1.9%
Unknown	1.3%	0

Table 17 Criminal Sanctions

e.g. in the varying position quotas for the prevention officers in the dioceses (see Table 18). The prevention officers noted “clerical power structures” as well as reactance among some clerics regarding the problem of sexual abuse, which hampered the implementation of effective protective concepts in the pastoral units.

Position quotas of prevention officers	Number of dioceses
No hourly allotment or none defined	6 (22%)
Up to 20 hours per week (max. 0.5 position)	10 (37%)
21 to 30 hours per week (max. 0.75 position)	1 (4%)
31 to 40 hours per week (max. 1.0 position)	8 (30%)
More than 40 week hours	2 (7%)
<i>Position allocation over all dioceses</i>	<i>26.4 h (average week hours)</i>

Table 18 Position Quotas of Prevention Officers (Current as of 2014)

Conclusion—Sexual Abuse in the German Catholic Church— A Case of Organizational Silence?

Overall, the findings of the investigation show that the sexual abuse of minors by clerics is not only a matter of misconduct on the part of individuals but suggest that we have to look at specific structural characteristics of the Catholic Church that foster the sexual abuse of minors and hamper its prevention. For example, sexual abuse delinquency is associated with problems with the selection and training of priests, as well as their guidance after they are in their position.

For a long time, the Catholic Church viewed the problem of the sexual abuse of minors as an attack on the institution of the Catholic Church and attempted to solve the problem through silence. This was also an attempt to protect the accused priests and a general strategy on the part of the church. The result of this strategy of silence was not only that the problem was not solved, but it was in fact strengthened. It also resulted in a significant loss in the credibility of the Catholic Church.

In recent years, efforts by the church to solve the problem have been noticeable. In 2010 and 2013, for example, the church issued general directives on the prevention of sexual abuse of minors and guidelines for handling the sexual abuse of minors. 2019 saw the beginning of the “synodal path”, in which the German Bishops’ Conference and the Central Committee of German Catholics seek to address fundamental problems in the Catholic Church, which also relate to the problem of sexual abuse: the church’s relationship to power, the sexual morality of the church, the way of life of priests and the role of the woman in the church. The question of whether these efforts will be successful remains to be seen.

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