

Posted 5/23/11

## THE CHURCH, ABSOLVED

*Victims of sexual abuse by Catholic clergy scream “whitewash” over John Jay’s report*



[Click here to link to video](#)

Predictably and conveniently, the bishops have funded a report that tells them precisely what they want to hear: it was all unforeseeable, long ago, wasn't that bad and wasn't their fault.

*By Julius (Jay) Wachtel.* Sexual abuse victims [have voiced dismay](#) at a suggestion by researchers at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice that the scandal in the Catholic church wasn't so much its fault as a product of [the social upheaval of the 1960s](#). Reactions in the media have ranged from disbelief to mockery. Here's what two major newspapers had to say about the so-called “Woodstock defense”:

- *New York Times*: “...a new study of the abuse problem...cites the sexual and social turmoil of the 1960s as a possible factor in priests' crimes. This is a rather bizarre stab at sociological rationalization and, in any case, beside the point that church officials went into denial and protected abusers.”
- *Los Angeles Times*: “A study commissioned by Roman Catholic bishops ties abuse by Roman Catholic priests in the U.S. to the sexual revolution, not celibacy or homosexuality, and says it's been largely resolved.”

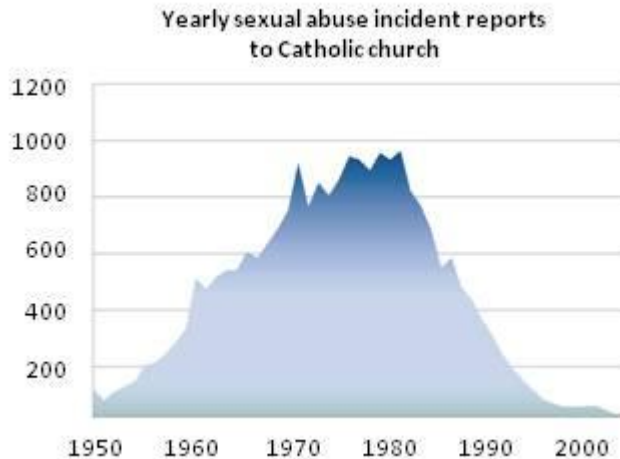
To be fair, John Jay's scholars don't articulate their conclusions quite so neatly. Yet from the very start [the report](#) conveys the unmistakable impression that the Church was also a victim, caught up in forces beyond its control:

- “Social movements, such as the sexual revolution and development of understanding about sexual victimization and harm, necessarily had an influence on those within organizations just as they did on those in the general society” (p. 7)
- “The representation of sexuality was contested in print, film, and photographic media, and increased openness about the depiction of sexuality emerged as sexual acts became more loosely associated with reproduction. These changes were termed ‘sexual liberation,’ and sexual behavior

among young people became more open and diverse” (p. 36)

- “The documented rise in cases of abuse in the 1960s and 1970s is similar to the rise in other types of “deviant” behavior in society, and coincides with social change during this time period” (p. 46)

To illustrate the connection John Jay’s authors graphed sexual misconduct complaints received by the Church between 1950-2002. Their data

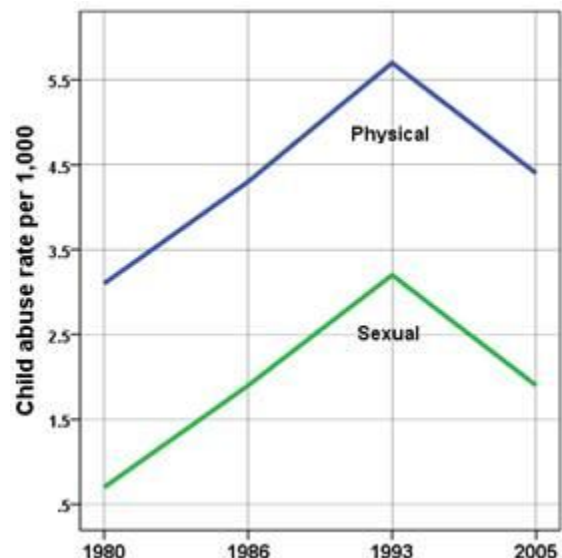


reveals a steady increase during the 1950’s and 60’s, peaking at between 800 and 1,000 per year between 1978 and 1981. The trend then reversed; by the mid-eighties complaints plunged fifty percent. By the mid-nineties less than one-hundred were being filed each year.

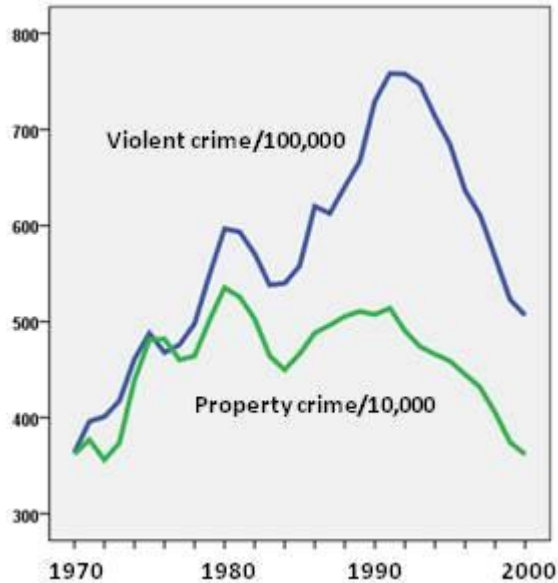
To demonstrate that the decline was part of a larger trend the authors cite data from the [National Incidence of Child Abuse and Neglect](#). This survey measured child abuse in the U.S. in

four waves: NIS-1 (1979-80), NIS-2 (1986), NIS-3 (1993) and NIS-4 (2005-06). Applying the rigorous “Harm” standard, which requires “that an act or omission result in demonstrable harm,” the physical abuse of children decreased 15 percent from NIS-3 to NIS-4, while sexual abuse fell 38 percent. (No significant change was evident under the looser “Endangerment” standard.)

However, once we move away from the extreme right tail of the distribution of complaints to the Church, the concordance with national child abuse statistics evaporates. Between 1980 (NIS-1) and 1993 (NIS-3), a period when complaints of abusive priests were already plunging, [the national rate of physical abuse of children doubled](#). Sexual abuse jumped four-fold. (See chart on the right. Rates for NIS-1, 2 and 3 are from the [NSPCC](#); rates for NIS-4 were calculated by the author. All are based on the “Harm” standard.)



Child abuse is a secretive crime. Reporting depends on intervention by teachers, caseworkers and police. One explanation for its sharp rise in past years is that society may have started taking better notice of the problem. NIS-3 surmises that **better recognition did lead to more reporting**. But it was thought unlikely that child abuse rates would have climbed as steeply unless the actual incidence of abuse had also



increased. As a contributing factor NIS-3's authors suggest the catastrophic effect of the drug epidemic of the 1980's, particularly as drug abuse was frequently cited in the study's data collection forms.

While the NIS report didn't mention crime rates, they are assumedly linked with problems of social disorganization. Clearly, the trends are similar. Crime increased in tandem with child abuse. And when the well-known "great crime drop" of the 90s got underway, child abuse in the U.S. also plunged.

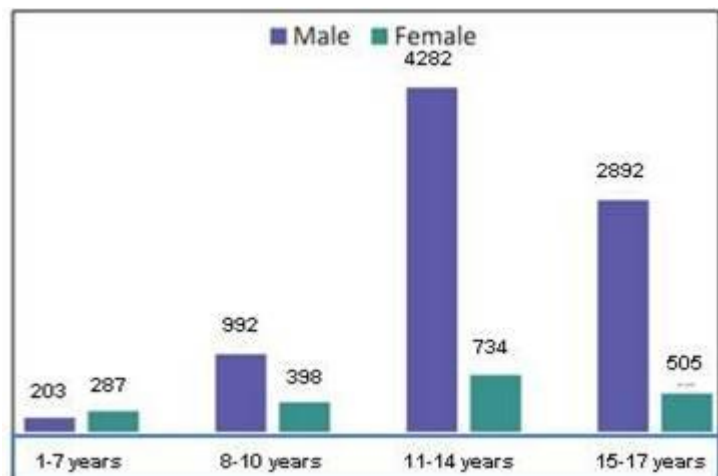
Could crime and drug use help explain why priests sexually abuse children? First, there is no known theoretical connection. Why would they be more likely to abuse children when crime is on the increase, or less likely when it's falling? What's more, the downturn in complaints against priests preceded the

great crime drop, like it preceded the drop in the national incidence of child abuse, by a full decade.

If it's not drugs and crime what about the Woodstock defense? Alas, that seems equally far-fetched. Your blogger, who was a teen in the sixties, doesn't remember that it was ever OK to sexually experiment on children. Why would priests think otherwise? If there is data to support that odd notion we'd sure like to see it.

On the other hand, pedophiles don't need to be told that abusing children is OK. Was the Catholic Church admitting large numbers of sexual predators into its ranks? Was it ignoring signs of abuse? If so, the problem wouldn't lie with society but with the selection, training and supervision of priests. John Jay's authors, though, take pains to demonstrate that clergy are no more likely to be afflicted with pedophilia than the general population: "Less than 5 percent of the priests with allegations of abuse exhibited behavior consistent with a diagnosis of pedophilia (a psychiatric disorder that is characterized by recurrent fantasies, urges, and behaviors about prepubescent children)" (p. 3).

John Jay's report includes a table that depicts the distribution of child victims of priest sexual abuse by age and gender. "Prepubescent," defined by the authors as age 10 and under, constitutes 18 percent (1,880) of the 10,293 victims in the sample. (The authors also cite a 22 percent figure, but we'll stick with the



numbers in the chart.) Either way, if only about one in five victims are prepubescent, the notion that abusive priests are predominantly pedophiles seems misplaced.

And here's where we come to a real head-scratcher. What John Jay's authors don't reveal is that the [controlling description of pedophilia](#), as set out in the APA's DSM-IV, a source they repeatedly cite, defines prepubescence differently:

The paraphilic focus of Pedophilia involves sexual activity with a prepubescent child (generally age 13 years or younger). The individual with Pedophilia must be age 16 years or older and at least 5 years older than the child...Those attracted to females usually prefer 8- to 10-year-olds, whereas those attracted to males usually prefer slightly older children.

DSM's definition of prepubescent as 13-and under would land a majority (probably, most) of John Jay's abusive priests in the pedophile camp. Naturally, that seriously undermines the Church's position that it wasn't aware that pedophilia was a problem. With so many afflicted priests, how could it *not* know?

The startling age-range discrepancy, which has been noted by the *New York Times* and other sources, brings the scholarship of John Jay's report into question. When an academic study is financed nearly exclusively by those with a stake in its outcome (indeed, the Catholic conference holds the report's copyright), any hints of bias can easily destroy its credibility.

What steps should John Jay's authors take? First, they must reexamine their assertion that changing social mores were somehow responsible. It seems far more likely that sexual abuse by Catholic clergy has always been a serious issue, and that reporting went up because of heightened awareness, brought on in part by episodes such as [Boston](#). Really, if the authors are sincerely convinced that pedophilia among priests is rare they ought to prove it fair and square. Instead of massaging (some might say, twisting) data beyond recognition, they might interview former priests. [Here's what one had to say](#):

Pedophilia is a major problem that is sweeping the church. They've been trying to muzzle any information about its happening but it's causing the priesthood to be destroyed.

If they're feeling a bit adventurous they might also review [examples of abuse by Catholic clergy in Europe, Asia and elsewhere](#). These are an excellent basis for comparison as they were unlikely to have been influenced by Woodstock. As for the rest of us, a good starting point is the Oscar-nominated documentary "[Deliver Us From Evil](#)." Thanks to its producers' generosity, all that's required is to click on the image at the top of this post. But be sure to do it on an empty stomach.