



Assessing reporting patterns of child sexual abuse within the Catholic Church using discontinuities in model parameter timeseries [☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 June 2011

Revised 12 August 2011

Accepted 3 November 2011

Available online 12 November 2011

Keywords:

Catholic Church

Sexual abuse

Clergy

Abuse disclosure

Model parameter timeseries

ABSTRACT

Prior to 2002, little was known about sexual abuse within the Catholic Church. After the Boston Globe broke the story about John Geoghan – a priest in the Boston Archdiocese who was accused of abusing numerous children, convicted of one count of indecent assault, and eventually murdered in prison – the Church had many questions to answer. To this end, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) commissioned John Jay College of Criminal Justice to research the nature and scope, as well as the causes and context of child sexual abuse within the Catholic Church.

This research analyzes the data from the John Jay studies using a new quantitative technique, capable of adjusting for distortions introduced by delays in abuse reporting. By isolating discontinuities in model parameter timeseries, we determine changes in reporting patterns occurred during the period 1982–1988. A posteriori to the analysis, we provide some possible explanations for the changes in abuse reporting associated with the change-point. While the scope of this paper is limited to presenting a new methodological approach within the frame of a particular case study, the techniques are more broadly applicable in settings where reporting lag is manifested.

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1. Introduction

The 1980s brought much attention to the issue of child sexual abuse, in part because of an increase in the number of cases being identified or reported to authorities (SPS Name, SPS Year). According to Jones and Finkelhor (2001), data from child protective services (CPS) indicate that in the 1990s there was a substantial decline in child sexual abuse. In addition, the authors highlight multiple reasons as to how the data indicate such a decline. For instance, they state that the number of substantiated cases has decreased nationally in a gradual fashion and that reports of abuse declined 26% from 1991 to 1998. There are many sources of data that suggest this downward trend in sexual victimization is legitimate: the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), the Minnesota Student Survey, and data from CPS agencies around the nation. Recent data from NCANDS shows that the national estimate has leveled-off (Child Maltreatment, 2004) and results from the Minnesota Student Survey indicate that sexual abuse rose slightly between 1989 and 1992 followed by a 22% drop through 2001. Finkelhor and Jones (2004) suggest that at least part of the drop in cases of sexual abuse is real and not a reflection of reporting patterns or changes in the definition of sexual abuse. However, changes in reporting patterns and delays present a real obstacle when attempting to estimate the

[☆] Data in this paper is derived from the Nature and Scope study. The study, conducted by a research team at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, was funded by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

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