

Thousands of nuns sexually victimized, survey shows.

Source:  Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service

Publication Date: 04-JAN-03

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ST. LOUIS _ Already shaken by a yearlong sex abuse scandal involving priests and minors, the Roman Catholic Church has yet to face another critical challenge _ how to help thousands of nuns who say they have been sexually victimized.

A national survey, completed in 1996 but intentionally never publicized, estimates that a "minimum" of 34,000 Catholic nuns, or about 40 percent of all nuns in the United States, have suffered some form of sexual trauma.

Some of that sexual abuse, exploitation or harassment has come at the hands of priests and other nuns in the church, the report said.

The survey was conducted by researchers at St. Louis University and was paid for, in part, by several orders of Catholic nuns.

The study, recently obtained by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, indicates that the victimization often has had devastating psychological effects on the women. Many of the nuns said they were left with feelings of anger, shame, anxiety and depression. Some said it made them consider leaving religious life, and a few said they had attempted suicide.

"These women have been the stalwarts of the church for centuries, and a significant percentage of them have been victimized as a result of the structure of the very institution to which they have dedicated their lives," said study co-author John T. Chibnall, a research psychologist and associate professor at St. Louis University.

Another of the researchers, Ann Wolf, said she believes it is vital that the Catholic church recognize the problem.

"The bishops appear to be only looking at the issue of child sexual abuse, but the problem is bigger than that" Wolf said. "Catholic sisters are being violated, in their ministries, at work, in pastoral counseling."

A spokeswoman for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops said the group was unaware of the St. Louis University study on nuns and its members have not addressed the issue. Officials with local orders of nuns who participated in the study say they remain concerned, but have made no changes as a result of the report.

The survey is the only national scientific study dealing with the sexual victimization of nuns in the Catholic church, according to its researchers. Despite the scope of its findings several years ago, no further studies have been done, they say.

The survey also solicited comments _ many of them poignant _ from the nuns who were questioned.

Of the more than 1,100 surveys returned to the university, several included brief, personal stories from women who said they had been targeted. One woman wrote that after a priest fondled one of her breasts during confession, she remained so upset that she did not return to confession for the next 18 years.

Another wrote that as a young girl, her uncle, who also was a priest, insisted on touching holy oil to her genital area "to keep me safe while dating." Later, her superiors forced her to attend religious retreats with the same uncle, she said.

Still another wrote that a priest-therapist treating her for severe depression encouraged her to become involved in "sexual experimentation." The woman said she later began a relationship with another nun.

Several of the women said such research was long overdue. "Thanks for taking the time to admit there is a problem in this area," wrote one. "Best wishes. God bless."

Findings of the study were published in two religious research journals in the spring and winter of 1998 but have never been reported by the mainstream press.

"Review for Religious," published at St. Louis University, printed a summary of the survey results in its May-June 1998 issue. "Review of Religious Research," an academic journal published by the Religious Research Association, printed the full results in December of that year.

Both are respected journals with limited circulations.

Chibnall said researchers agreed not to prepare a press release about the findings because a national women's Catholic group, Leadership Conference of Women Religious, believed the information would be sensationalized.

"It was like this: `we don't wash our dirty laundry in public; we'll take care of it,'" Chibnall said.

Paul N. Duckro, the St. Louis University professor who headed the survey team, said researchers "guaranteed" religious communities "that we would not handle this in any way that sought publicity."

The two publications chosen to report the results, Duckro said, were chosen carefully to get information to the people who needed it, but "not out in front of everybody's eyes."

But a former Catholic priest who has said he was sexually abused as a boy by three different priests said last week he believes it is crucial to get the results of the St. Louis University survey to the public.

Christopher Dixon, who left the priesthood in 1996 and now lives in St. Louis, said he hopes that the publicity over the survey will generate the same "groundswell" of action that resulted from recent reports of priests' sexual abuse of minors. Bishop Anthony J. O'Connell of Palm Beach, Fla., resigned in March after admitting he sexually abused Dixon more than 25 years earlier.

Women church leaders can be "as much a part of this toxic environment" of cover-up and denial as male church leaders, Dixon said.

The SLU study is the result of a 15-page survey returned by 1,164 nuns representing 123 religious orders throughout the United States. The large majority of nuns surveyed were highly educated; more than 9 of 10 who returned questionnaires had at least a college education.

The survey dealt with three main types of victimization.

The first, child sexual abuse, was defined as any sexually-oriented contact with a person of the same or opposite sex where the target is younger than age 18.

The second, sexual exploitation, was defined as any sexual advance, request for sexual favors, or other verbal or nonverbal sexual conduct that occurs when a woman entrusts her property, body, mind or spirit to another person acting in a professional role.

The third, sexual harassment, was defined as any unwelcome sexual advance that affects employment decisions, interferes with work, or creates a hostile or intimidating work environment.

Among the key findings:

_Nearly one of five nuns said she had been sexually abused as a child. While most of the abuse came at the hands of a male family member, some 9 percent of those abuse cases were at the hands of a priest, nun or other religious person.

_One in eight nuns said she had been sexually exploited. Of those, nearly three of every four maintained she was victimized by a priest, nun or other religious person. The exploitation included everything from pressure for "dates" to requests for sexual favors to sexual intercourse. Two of every five nuns who said they had been sexually exploited said the exploitation involved some form of genital contact.

_Slightly less than one in 10 nuns said she was the focus of sexual harassment at least once during her religious life. Almost half of those were at the hands of priests, nuns or other religious persons. More than half of the total harassment cases involved some type of physical contact.

In their report the researchers noted that they believe the figures are more likely to underestimate

rather than overestimate the true prevalence of sexual victimization among sisters. "The fear and pain of disclosure would be sufficient enough to discourage responding in some sisters," the report said.

It's not exactly clear how the sexual victimization of nuns compares to the general population, but the abuse results of the nun survey seem in line with many other surveys of women. National surveys indicate that somewhere between 20 percent and 27 percent of all women have been sexually abused as children.

The harassment figure would appear lower. In a 1994 Louis Harris and Associates national survey, 31 percent of women claimed to have been harassed at work.

While the St. Louis University study of U.S. nuns has received little attention within the Catholic Church, the church has addressed the issue of abused nuns internationally.

In March 2001, in fact, two major Catholic groups pushed for action by the Vatican following news accounts of abused nuns. Those stories primarily concerned sexual abuse of nuns by priests in Africa.

In a joint statement, the Conference of Major Superiors of Men and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious said they were "deeply disturbed" by reports first published in the National Catholic Reporter, an independent weekly based in Kansas City.

The idea to interview Catholic nuns about sexual victimization came from Wolf, then a graduate student at St. Louis University.

In the early 1990s, Wolf was researching previously published work on sexual victimization and the clergy when she came across two different studies on sexual harassment. One had surveyed female Jewish rabbis; the other surveyed women in the United Methodist Church.

Of the women rabbis, 73 percent said they had been a victim of sexual harassment. Of United Methodist Church women surveyed, 77 percent said they had been sexually harassed.

A lifelong Catholic, Wolf could find no similar surveys of Catholic nuns and suggested the project.

The first step was a pilot study not intended for publication. The pilot survey was done through the Program for Psychology and Religion with the St. Louis University Health Sciences Center. Duckro, director of the psychology and religion program, led the survey effort. Chibnall was responsible for the conceptual, methodological and statistical portions of the project.

The research team first contacted provincial leadership of three orders of Catholic nuns in the St. Louis area asked to survey their members for the pilot study.

In late January 1995, surveys were mailed to 855 sisters in 37 states and four foreign countries. More than half of the surveys were mailed to nuns living in Missouri. Ultimately, 578 nuns returned a completed survey.

The researchers said they would not release the names of the three orders surveyed for the pilot study.

The pilot study _ which showed incidences of sexual exploitation and sexual harassment similar to the later national survey _ concluded that the data "suggest that sexual history and sexuality are critical areas to bring to the fore in the formation and ongoing formation of women religious.

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"Many women have had experiences of sexual victimization and many have not found the courage to discuss it. Religious communities can become more inviting with regard to discussions of sexuality, but it will require education and structure. Women need to know that they are not alone in their experiences."

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The pilot survey also indicated something else. The study found that nearly half of all nuns had been involved in some sort of consensual sex during their religious lives, often with other nuns or priests.

Many of those relationships lasted several months or years and were described by several of the women as "loving, respectful and caring." Others described the relationships as "inappropriate, humiliating or harmful."

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The pilot survey warned of strong "emotional inhibitions" against coming forward to report sexual victimization. "There is fear of unleashing powerful forces which will lead to more trouble than benefit." The report of the pilot survey also said it was hoped the survey information could be more widely disseminated "without attracting undue interest from the public news media."

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The SLU researchers began work on the national survey in June 1995. In that survey, researchers debated whether to include questions regarding consensual sex and, in the end, decided against it.

Duckro said he believed that the section dealing with consensual sex was a "distracting" part of the study.

"I didn't think it was a big issue," Duckro said. "What we really wanted to know about was abuse, exploitation and harassment."

For the national survey, the researchers went to the Maryland-based Leadership Conference of Women Religious and asked for contact information for the 538 orders in the leadership group.

Of those orders, 123 agreed to take part in the survey and supplied researchers with the names and addresses of their members.

From the 29,000 names provided, researchers used random sampling to pare the list to 2,500 nuns who were sent questionnaires. Of those women, 1,164 returned completed surveys.

The average age of the nuns surveyed was 62; the average time in religious life was 42 years.

Researchers said few of the survey results were surprising, but they admit that the information was disturbing.

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"Women suffer, all women," said Duckro.

"Under the surface, people are people. The stories of all people can be so sad."

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Chibnall called the nuns "strong, bright, highly educated women" who were "willing to admit there was abuse going on and they wanted to make it better."

Wolf said her work on the survey was so painful that she changed plans to make it the focus of her doctoral thesis: "I didn't want to devote my life to something that could have been very depressing."

The national study was paid for, in part, by several orders of Catholic nuns. Among them was St. Louis-based Franciscan Sisters of Mary, with 165 current members, most in Missouri.

Sister Sherri Coleman, who serves on the order's leadership team, said her order felt the work was important.

"We have always been supportive of one another," she said, adding that the survey results may have created an "increased awareness" of the victimization of women in the church. "Hopefully, it has made us more sensitive to one another," she said.

She said she is aware of no new programs that the Sisters of Mary implemented as a direct result of the survey.

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Another backer of the national survey was the St. Louis-based Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet

with 518 sisters in the St. Louis area.

Sister Mary K. Liston, one of three members of the order's leadership group, said she was not involved in the decision to help finance the national survey.

But, she said her order felt the survey was a way to "educate and work toward the compassionate healing of our women if they had experienced abuse." She said the results showed "we were not any different from the rest of the population."

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The Leadership Conference of Women Religious, which provided researchers with addresses to contact member orders, took no action following the study.

The current executive director says she does not believe the conference distributed the survey results or sought any policy changes.

The director, Carole Shinnick, said "it is not within LCWR's mission to directly respond to the needs of women who were victimized. It is the responsibility of their own congregations."

Shinnick, a therapist who worked almost exclusively with Catholic nuns for 12 years, said she knows first-hand the care given to abused nuns.

"My experience of LCWR congregations in responding to their members is that they are pastoral, generous and patient with the recovering person."

Sister Mary Ann Walsh, a spokeswoman for the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said the group was not aware of the nun survey and had not addressed the issue. That group, headed by Bishop Wilton Gregory of Belleville, has taken a leading role in the debate over new policies in the wake of the priest sex-abuse scandal.

Researcher Wolf, who now works in Catholic education, said few nuns have come forth publicly to talk about their experiences. She said that is no surprise.

Many may feel shame or guilt and recognize they could have a lot to lose if they come forward.

"These women have to ask themselves what are the benefits and what are the costs," she said. "The church is the only corporation in town."

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