

# Church sexual abuse just as likely for girls

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Young girls are just as likely as young boys to be sexually abused by a member of the clergy, a new QUT study has shown.

The report, *'They Did Not Believe Me': Adult Survivors' Perspectives of Child Sexual Abuse by Personnel in Christian Institutions*, is the first of its kind in Australia relying on [personal experiences](#) rather than church data.

Dr Jodi Death from QUT's Crime and Justice Research Centre said the results, published yesterday, contradicted previous studies showing young boys were more likely to be sexually assaulted in the church.

"Past studies, which have relied on the church's data, have shown that boys are represented in about 80 per cent of sexual abuse cases, but we saw an almost even split (49 percent male and 51 per cent female)," Dr Death said.

"It may be because traditionally women and girls had a lesser position and voice in the church so the abuse against girls is less likely to be recorded.

"Theologically, the responsibility for the abuse falls in a different area. With the boys there is the construction of the issue as [homosexuality](#), which is then dealt with as a sin."

The report also shows that the majority of sexual abuse against [females](#) (54 per cent) occurred between the ages of 6 and 10, while abuse against

males most commonly (48 per cent) took place when they were aged between 11 and 13.

"It also concerned me how deep the impact has been," she said.

"The comments from the participants show the depth of not just the abuse, but also the 're-abuse'- the way it was dealt with by authorities and the church."

Dr Death said her survey was also the first to look at 'non-denominational' abuse within Christian institutions, although 80 per cent of the 81 participants said their abuse was at the hands of clergy within the [Catholic Church](#).

"In 60 per cent of the cases it was also found that the clergy were deliberately targeting vulnerable families where [domestic violence](#) or [alcohol abuse](#) were taking place. It appears there was a very deliberate guise of offering help and support to vulnerable mothers in order to get access to young children," she said.

"This number is alarming, but we know that sexual abuse in the wider society is also more likely to take place when there are issues within the family unit.

"It appears that in 40 per cent of these cases the vulnerability was, in fact, just being engaged with the church."

## **At a glance**

- The onset of abuse occurred at an earlier age for female participants than male participants
- Participants most commonly (41 per cent) waited 20+ years before disclosing their abuse.

- 54 per cent of people who officially reported the abuse did so with police. 53 per cent of these cases resulted in official investigations
- 71 per cent of single perpetrator abuse occurred between 1961 and 1985
- 37 percent of participants experienced occasional (16 per cent) or frequent (21 per cent) incidents of abuse over a long period of time. Only 17 per cent of participants recorded a single incident.
- The perpetrator of abuse was most commonly (40 per cent) identified as a priest
- 25 per cent of incidents of [sexual abuse](#) took place primarily at school, 19 per cent at the perpetrator's house and 14 per cent at the home of the survivor.

Provided by Queensland University of Technology

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