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There is Hope: Child Sexual Abuse Cases Are Decreasing

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Sometimes when we are confronted with an issue that seems obviously wrong or one that provokes clear public outrage, we wonder why it is not resolved already. That is the case for most of us when dealing with the sexual abuse of children and cases we learn about within the Catholic Church. We can't imagine how this has not been stopped completely—it is so obviously wrong. We continue to see news stories about cases in the Catholic Church, or the local schools, or foster care, and we are surprised and angry there is still a risk to our children. By now, we surely should have found a way to ferret out all those in our church and our community who molest children. After all, this is not a new problem. How does it keep coming up? Why isn't this fixed already? Are



all these stories in the media new incidents of abuse? With all this media attention, it seems like this problem is getting bigger—not smaller. This is the public perception, but what are the facts?

One element of this issue that is difficult to understand is that for society, child sexual abuse is a relatively new problem. While we can't imagine that anyone could ever have thought that sexual acts between adults and children was acceptable—or that society could ever have turned a blind eye to the sexual abuse of children, that is exactly what history tells us is true.

Perhaps we can better understand how we got to this place and the importance of the work being done in the last 25-30 years by professionals and by the Church by putting it in context. Let us consider the facts of how history tells us society treated children, and how the priority we place on the welfare of children now was not honored historically.

Raising public interest:

Before 1962, how children were treated was considered a "family matter." No one intervened. No one addressed the behavior as wrong. No one labeled any physical traumas suffered by children in the home as "abuse." There was nowhere for children to go and no one for them to tell. There was no one to rescue them from the horror they suffered at the hands of people who professed to love and care for them. If children ran away, they were picked up by police officers and returned to their parents. The children (not the parents) were punished by the system and labeled "out of control." Parents and other caregivers had complete control and children really had no rights.

Child abuse was not a "public problem." Broken bones were explained away as "accidents" and unwanted pregnancies by young teenage girls were blamed on the girls. No one even asked about it. Nice people did not talk about such things in public—they just pitied the parents who had to deal with it.

In 1962, things began to change. Dr. C. Henry Kempe and his colleagues published a paper in the *Journal of American Medicine* entitled "*The Battered Child Syndrome*"ⁱ and challenged doctors to look at certain injuries with a new eye and report them to law enforcement as abuse. The article triggered two important developments in efforts to protect children. First, by 1966, every state in the U.S. had enacted a reporting law mandating certain individuals to report suspected abuse. Second, Congress took up the issue in hearings, resulting in the creation of the National Center for Child Abuse and Neglect in a bill passed into law in 1973. This law established the child protection system in this country and gave states the right to intervene in families and remove children in severe cases to protect them from physical harm.ⁱⁱ We take child protection services for granted now as if they have always been there. However, no such thing existed until after 1974.ⁱⁱⁱ

Prevention efforts were first introduced in schools in 1981 when a few new programs began to teach children to "Say "NO!", Run away and tell somebody." This was the first real effort to prevent child sexual abuse. Since then, most programs have focused on educating children as the way to prevention and it started to make a difference.

The impact on society:

In our society, between 1992 and 2014, child sexual abuse declined 64% and physical abuse reports were down 55%.^{iv} Since 2002, when the crisis in the Church became front page news and the Bishops of the U.S. added adult prevention education and training to the efforts to train children (via the [Charter](#) for the Protection of Children and Young People), incidents and reports of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church have also declined every year—even in years when child neglect and physical abuse incidents rose or went unchanged in our society.^v

There is no consensus among child maltreatment professionals that any one thing has resulted in the decline of abuse in our society.^{vi} However, the important factor to realize is that every action, every effort, every prevention program and every presentation to adults and children about reporting is one more positive step toward prevention and proper response, and we are truly moving in the right direction.

What about the Catholic Church?

It is absolutely essential that we recognize the way the Church works to prevent abuse today is radically different than the past—even if we still feel the effects of past behavior.

There is a distinction between prevention and response efforts, such as what we learn within the VIRTUS training, versus what happens within a diocese (or any organization) after abuse concerns are reported. We cannot hide from the way that cases have been addressed by the Church. And we must be clear that the Church and her administrative hierarchy have not always done the right thing, and that their behavior and the way that victims have been affected is reprehensible. This article is not about what happens within the hierarchy of a diocese after allegations come forward, which is a separate matter that deserves more attention.

However, this article is concerned with how prevention efforts have made significant traction, despite what media informs.

Much of the media attention on the Church that we continue to hear about today is focused on incidents that happened 40, 50 and 60 years ago. Those cases were reported, compiled and analyzed in the first John Jay College of Criminal Justice [Report](#) on the history of child sexual

abuse specifically by clergy in the Church. In this vein, while media often relays the diocese's response to allegations, it rarely reports the full picture, one that should include the substantial prevention efforts and the great strides that have been made for children within our society and particularly within the church—the main themes of this article.

The problem of child sexual abuse is not gone. Regardless of when and how it happened, one event of child sexual abuse is one too many. Efforts since the 1980s within our society in general to raise awareness and prevent abuse are working. Within the Church, cases are diminishing, and much of that is because of all of the people who participate in prevention and response training on ways to address abuse, and who learn how to act upon concerns. Something is being done. Children are better protected. Knowing this can spur us on to greater efforts and broader impact on the health and well-being of all God's children.

Please continue to participate in Church ministry and affiliated child protection programs within your organization, including screening measures such as background checks, paperwork, interviews, etc. Read that policy and code of conduct so you know the best practices and behavior that you should avoid. Please be willing to reflect on the warning signs that highlight risky behavior on behalf of others, and have the courage to communicate concerns about anyone to the right person in your church or school's organization. Elevate the concern to someone higher up if you don't feel proper resolution has occurred! If ever your concern is elevated to a suspicion of abuse, you must communicate this information to civil authorities first, and then also to the diocese, so that the person can be removed from ministry while the investigation is being conducted to ensure the utmost safety of children in the Church's care.

Your presence and willingness to be a caring adult may ultimately save a child's life.

References:

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- vi. Ibid.