# *THE PREVALENCE OF SEXUAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN BY PRIESTS*

## 2.1 ESTIMATES OF THE PREVALENCE OF SEXUAL ABUSE OF YOUTHS UNDER 18 IN THE UNITED STATES

The estimation of any form of deviance in the general population is a very difficult task. It is impossible to assess the extent of sexual offending, either in general or with children as targets. Most estimates of the distribution of sexual offenders in the general population are derived from forensic sources, that is, samples of those who are arrested or convicted for sex offenses. All researchers acknowledge that those who are arrested represent only a fraction of all sexual offenders. Sexual crimes have the lowest rates of reporting for all crimes. Not all potential participants in such studies can be known or contacted, not all would use the same language to describe their experiences, and not all are willing to share information. The sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests and deacons is part of the larger problem of sexual abuse of children in the United States. This chapter is a summary of the estimates of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church.

RESEARCH ESTIMATES

The prevalence of some event or behavior in a specific population represents the proportion of a population who have experienced that event or behavior. Since it is not known how many people in the United States experience a form of sexual abuse as children, some researchers select groups, or samples, of individuals to study and direct questions to them. If the selection of the group to be surveyed is not biased, the results of this study provide estimates of the prevalence of sexual abuse in the population from which the group is selected. In order to avoid bias in a sample, every person in the part of the population to be used as a framework for selecting the sample must have an equal chance of being asked to participate. Researchers use the data gathered from those who participate to estimate the proportion of the United States population who are sexually abused during childhood.

Studies of the incidence, as opposed to the prevalence, of sexual abuse of children concentrate on estimating the number of new cases occurring over a particular period of time and on whether the number of events or incidents is increasing or decreasing. Scholarly studies of both the incidence and the prevalence of sexual abuse of children in the United States began emerging in the 1960s and gained greater urgency after the cluster of day care center child abuse cases in the 1980s made the issue one of acute public interest. A look at victimization studies that focus on the sexual abuse of minor children suggests that the scope of this problem is extensive.

Although we do not have data reflecting the prevalence of abusers, there are data from several studies reporting the prevalence of victimization. The prevalence rates reported in these studies vary somewhat, as noted below.

- 27% of the females and 16% of the males disclosed a history of childhood sexual abuse; 42% of the males were likely to never have disclosed the experience to anyone whereas 33% of the females never disclosed.[1]
- 12.8% of the females and 4.3% of the males reported a history of sexual abuse during childhood.[2]
- 15.3% of the females and 5.9% of the males experienced some form of sexual assault.[3]
- Only 5.7% of the incidents were reported to the police; 26% of the incidents were not disclosed to anyone prior to the study.[4]
- In summary, when compared with their male counterparts, females were more likely to have been sexually abused during childhood. Furthermore, females were more likely than the males to disclose such information; however, disclosure rates are quite low regardless of the victim's gender.

Finkelhor and Jones (2004) have used data from NCANDS to make a national estimate of the number of sexual abuse cases substantiated by child protective services (CPS) for the period from 1992 to 2000. Using data from more than forty states they report that the number of substantiated sexual abuse cases peaked at approximately 149,800 in 1992, followed by annual declines of 2 to 11 percent per year through 2000-when the number of cases reached a low of approximately 89,355.

Professional opinion is divided about why this drop occurred and how much of the drop is real as opposed to factors such as changes in definitions, reporting and investigation by the states (Jones and Finkelhor, 2001; Jones, Finkelhor, and Kopiec, 2001). Finkelhor and Jones (2004) examined other indicia of sex abuse rates and conclude that, taken together they suggest that at least part of the drop in cases has resulted from a decline in sexual abuse of children. The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)--which asks about rape and sexual assault for victims ages 12 and older (including acts counted within the broader definition of child sexual abuse) shows that sex offenses against children ages 12-17 declined 56 percent between 1993 and 2000. Virtually all the decline occurred in offenses committed by known perpetrators (family and acquaintances) which declined 72 percent. Finkelhor and Jones observe that cases involving known perpetrators are the ones most likely to be categorized as sexual abuse.

Another source of self-report data on sexual abuse is the Minnesota Student Survey which has been administered to 6th, 9th, and 12th grade students in Minnesota in 1989, 1992, 1995, 1998, and 2001. Between 90 and 99 percent of Minnesota's school districts and more than 100,000 students have participated in the survey each year. The survey includes two questions about sexual abuse. Results indicate that sexual abuse by family and nonfamily perpetrators showed a slight rise between 1989 and 1992 followed by a 22-percent drop from 1992 to 2001.

At the same time reports of sexual abuse have declined, there has been a significant drop in crime rates and measures of family problems such as violence among adult intimates, and a drop in of out-of-wedlock teenage pregnancies and live births to teenage mothers (some of which are attributable to child sexual abuse) -- all of these suggest a general improvement in the well-being of children.

Additionally, Finkelhor and Jones suggest that rates of sexual abuse have perhaps been reduced as a result of increased incarceration for sexual abuse offenders. They report that surveys of state correctional facilities indicate that between 1991 and1997, the number of individuals incarcerated in state correctional facilities for sex crimes against children rose 39 percent, from 43,500 to 60,700 (Finkelhor and Ormrod, 2001), having already more than doubled from 19,900 in 1986. They further note that these totals do not include large numbers of sexual abusers who receive sanctions which do not involve incarceration for a year or more.

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[1] David Finkelhor et al., "Sexual Abuse in a National Survey of Adult Men and Women: Prevalence, Characteristics, and Risk Factors." *Child Abuse & Neglect* 14 (1990): 20-21.
[2] H. MacMillan et al., "Prevalence of Child Physical and Sexual Abuse in the Community." JAMA (1997): 131-135.
[3] K. Moore, K. Nord, & J. Peterson, "Nonvoluntary Sexual Activity Among Adolescents." *Family Planning Perspectives* 21 (1989): 110-114.
[4] Sue Boney-McCoy & David Finkelhor, "Psychosocial Sequelae of Violent Victimization in a National Youth Sample." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 63 (1995): 726-736.

## 2.2 SUMMARY RESULTS: PREVALENCE OF SEXUAL ABUSE OF YOUTHS UNDER 18 BY CATHOLIC PRIESTS AND DEACONS

A paramount concern for all involved with the study has been the determination of the prevalence of the problem in the Catholic Church in the United States. The survey responses make it clear that the problem was indeed widespread and affected more than 95% of dioceses and approximately 60% of religious communities. Of the 195 dioceses and eparchies that participated in the study, all but seven have reported that allegations of sexual abuse of youths under the age of 18 have been made against al least one priest serving in ecclesiastical ministry in that diocese or eparchy. Of the 140 religious communities that submitted surveys, all but 30 reported at least one allegation against a religious priest who was a member of that community.

Researchers asked each diocese, eparchy and religious community to provide the total number of priests who were active, or serving in ministry, between 1950 and 2002 so that the number of the accused could be presented as a part of an overall total. In our effort to understand the scope and distribution of the problem for the dioceses and eparchies, researchers collected information on the region, a geographical division of the Catholic Church, the number of Catholics per diocese and the number of parishes per diocese. Dioceses and eparchies were asked to indicate these numbers by choosing one of ten equal ranges for the number of Catholic communicants and the number of parishes. The range, i.e., 88,000 – 120,000 or 121,000 – 170,000, etc. in Catholic population, were used to ensure confidentiality of each study participant. Religious communities were grouped into ten equal groups by their total membership and clerical membership, as reported in the Official Catholic Directory 2002. These different ways of looking at the scope of the problem were used to examine the extent of sexual abuse of youths under 18 by Catholic priests and deacons.

- Dioceses and eparchies reported that allegations of child sexual abuse had been made against 4,692 priests and deacons for incidents that took place while these men were serving in ecclesiastical. Individual survey forms were submitted for 4,557 of these priests.

- Religious communities reported that allegations of sexual abuse had been made against 647 clerics who were members of their communities. Dioceses reported additional religious priests, for a study total of 929 religious priests.

- When the 143 priests who were the subject of allegations in more than one diocese or religious community are counted as a single individual, the total number of Catholic priests and deacons in the United States who have been accused of sexual abuse of children is 4,392.

- When dioceses are grouped by the fourteen geographical regions of the Church, the average percent of all incardinated priests in that region's dioceses to have been accused of sexual abuse is consistent: all regions averaged between 3% and 6% of priests accused.

- If the number of priests in a religious community who have had allegations made against them is presented as a percentage of all priest members of that community between 1950 and 2002, the percentage accused of child sexual abuse is 2.7%.

Even before the calculation of an estimated percentage of all priests and deacons is attempted, the consistency of the findings in dioceses across the United States is remarkable: whether region, number of Catholic communicants or number of parishes is used to array the dioceses, the results show the allegations of sexual abuse have been made against 2.5% to 7% of diocesan priests. Similarly, whether religious priests are ranked by overall membership or clerical membership, the percent of priests in the community who have been accused ranges from 1% to 3%, or approximately half of that of the diocesan priests.

To estimate the percentage of all priests in ecclesiastical ministry between 1950 and 2002 who have been the subject of allegations requires a reliable overall total of priests in ministry during that time period. This calculation was done two different ways – first by using the data collected through the Diocesan and Religious Order Profiles, and then by using the estimates produced by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate[1]. These different methods both yielded the same statistic: approximately 4% of Catholic priests and deacons in active ministry between 1950 and 2002 have been accused of the sexual abuse of a child under the age of 18.

Surveys for 90% of the priests and deacons reported to have had allegations of child sexual abuse included the year of ordination. If the yearly ordination totals for diocesan priests accused are compared to an overall number of diocesan priests ordained in that year, the percentages range from a maximum of almost 10% in 1970, decreasing to 8% in 1980 and to fewer than 4% in 1990.

These prevalence estimates alone do not describe the extent of the problem of sexual abuse. Another way to understand the extent of the problem is to ask how many incidents of sexual abuse were alleged to occur each year of the study period or, alternatively, to ask how many priests were accused in each year. This distribution of alleged abuse events over time shows the pattern of the reported sexual abuse. When the incidents recorded in the surveys are tallied for each year of occurrence (of each incident),the resulting figure shows that 75% of the events were alleged to occur between 1960 and 1984. When this result is considered together with the declining percentage of priests ordained in each year who have been accused of sexual abuse, it presents a more positive picture.

The prevalence statistics do not fully capture the decline in the number of new allegations being made against priests and deacons. Before any allegation of sexual abuse can be made, the person making the allegation must first understand the behavior experienced to be inappropriate and then sense that it is abusive. The social sensibility about what acts are inappropriate sexual behavior and how these acts are abusive has changed markedly between 1950 and 2002.

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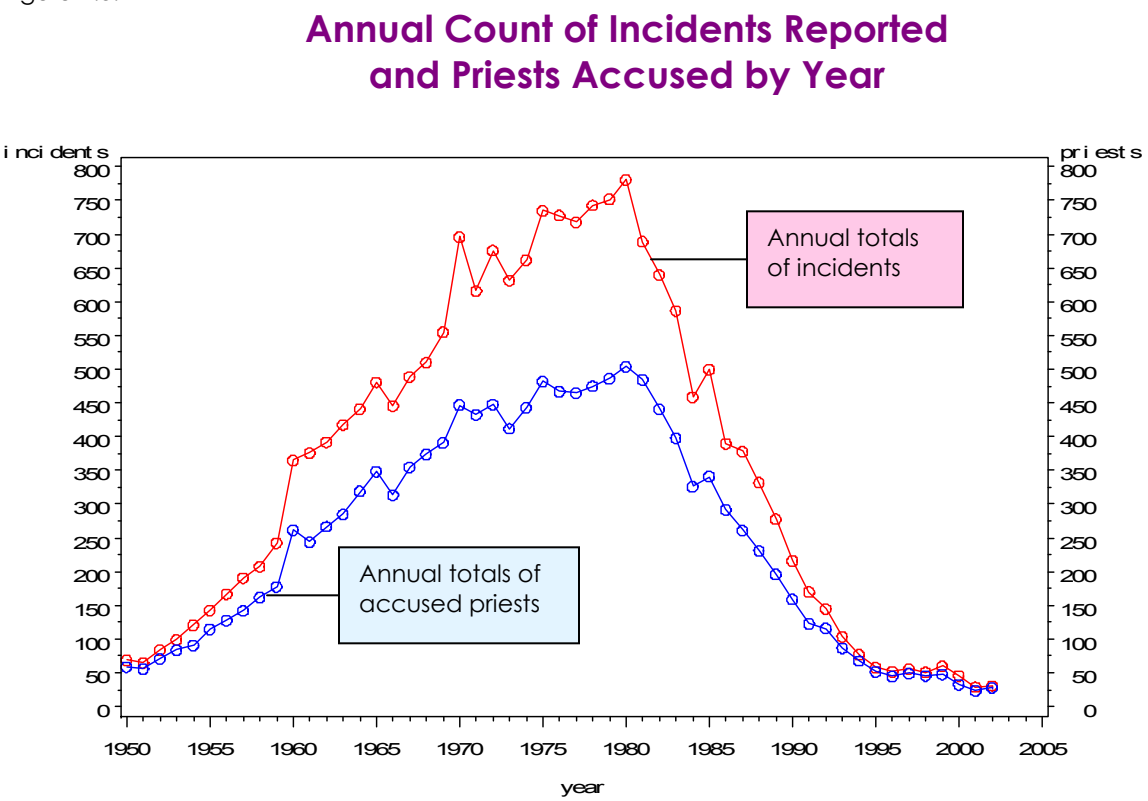
[1] Bryan T. Froehle, "Numbers of Priests in the United States 1960 – 1996" (Working Paper, Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Georgetown University, Washington DC, 1997).

## 2.3 DETAILED DATA ON PREVALENCE OF SEXUAL ABUSE OF YOUTHS UNDER 18 BY CATHOLIC PRIESTS

If all incidents of alleged abuse are recorded for all years of the incident, and the results are added to produce a total number of alleged incidents occurring in each year of the study period, the results are displayed by the red line in Figure 2.3.1. If all priests and deacons accused of an incident of child sexual abuse in a single yearare totaled for each year of the study period, the outcome is shown by the blue line in the figure below.

Figure 2.3.1

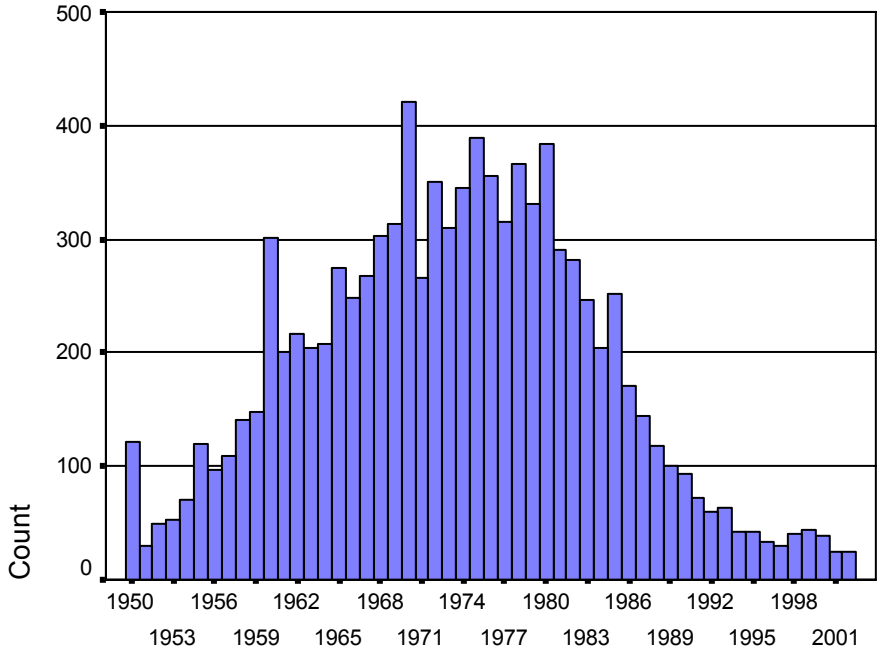



The calculation of an overall percentage of priests in ministry was initially derived using information from the Diocesan Profiles for total numbers of priests and deacons subject to allegations compared to the total of those in ministry between 1950 and 2002. The surveys reported 75,694 diocesan priests and 34,000 religious priests in ministry. If these two overall totals are simply added, the result is 109,694 priests in ministry between 1950 and 2002. If the total of the accused priests is divided by the overall total, the result is 4.0%.

Alternatively, the total of priests in ministry estimated by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate is 94,607 between 1960 and 2002. If the priests who had no allegations after 1959 are removed (265), the total of surveys for priests and deacons with allegations of child sexual abuse is 4127, and the resulting percentage is slightly more than 4%.

If the numbers from the Profiles are used for incardinated priests (3,265/75,694), the percentage is again 4.25%, while the same calculation for religious priests (929/34,000) is 2.7%

*Figure 2.3.2* DISTRIBUTION OF ALLEGED INCIDENTS OF ABUSE BY DATE OF FIRST INSTANCE




The tables that follow show in detail the distribution of the allegations of child sexual abuse for each diocese or religious community, arrayed by a series of demographic variables. The results are fairly uniform across each of the three diocesan tables: the percentage of incardinated priests and deacons accused of child sexual abuse is consistently between 3% and 6% and the overall average is 5%. For the religious communities, a similar uniformity is evident, although at approximately half of the diocesan totals. The tables that follow do not include priests who have been exonerated, or those who were determined to be ineligible for the study.

Table 2.3.1 shows the average number of incardinated clerics who have been accused of sexual abuse, and the accused clerics as a percent of the total number of incardinated clerics in an individual diocese, grouped by Catholic Regions. These tables also show the range, the diocese with the lowest number (and percentage) of accused priests in a Region and the diocese with the highest number. Table 2.3.2 shows the United States dioceses grouped by the size of the Catholic population and Table 2.3.3 repeats this display with the number of parishes. Tables 2.3.4 and 2.3.5 show the average number of religious community members who have been accused of sexual abuse, grouped by overall membership of the community and then by clerical membership. Figure 2.3.3 shows priests accused as a percent of all those ordained in a year.

The average number of incardinated clerics in an individual diocese or eparchy who have been the subject of an allegation of sexual abuse is 19. Another way of expressing this statistic is that the average diocese or eparchy had records or knowledge of allegations against 19 clerics. The total number of accused clerics incardinated to an individual diocese or eparchy, between 1950 and 2002, ranges from a minimum of 0 to a maximum of 165.

*Table 2.3.1.* NUMBER AND % OF INCARDINATED PRIESTS/DEACONS PER DIOCESE OR EPARCHY ACCUSED OF SEXUAL ABUSE, GROUPED BY REGION

| United States Dioceses Grouped by Catholic Region | Accused Priests/Deacons as % of All Accused of Abuse | | | Number of Incardinated Priests/ Deacons Accused of Abuse | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Average Per Diocese | Minimum | Maximum | Average per Diocese | Minimum | Maximum |
| 1 | 5% | 0% | 10% | 40.42 | 0 | 165 |
| 2 | 4% | 1% | 9% | 38.22 | 4 | 73 |
| 3 | 5% | 0% | 24% | 26.13 | 0 | 69 |
| 4 | 5% | 0% | 10% | 17.00 | 0 | 46 |
| 5 | 5% | 0% | 11% | 8.24 | 0 | 30 |
| 6 | 3% | 0% | 8% | 17.71 | 0 | 93 |
| 7 | 4% | 1% | 7% | 24.47 | 5 | 116 |
| 8 | 5% | 2% | 16% | 13.45 | 3 | 26 |
| 9 | 3% | 1% | 5% | 16.50 | 2 | 64 |
| 10 | 5% | 0% | 19% | 7.44 | 0 | 31 |
| 11 | 4% | 1% | 9% | 15.07 | 1 | 71 |
| 12 | 4% | 2% | 9% | 6.80 | 2 | 21 |
| 13 | 6% | 0% | 11% | 9.89 | 0 | 24 |
| 14 | 5% | 1% | 10% | 8.38 | 2 | 12 |

*Table 2.3.2.* NUMBER AND % OF INCARDINATED PRIESTS/DEACONS PER DIOCESE OR EPARCHY ACCUSED OF SEXUAL ABUSE, GROUPED BY CATHOLIC POPULATION.

| United States Dioceses Grouped by Catholic Population | Accused Priests/Deacons as % of All Incardinated Priests, 1950 - 2002 | | | Number of Incardinated Priests/ Deacons Accused of Sexual Abuse | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Average In Diocese | Minimum | Maximum | Average In Diocese | Minimum | Maximum |
| Group 1 (5,000 - 45,000) | 4% | 0% | 9% | 3.00 | 0 | 10 |
| Group 2 (45,001 - 66,000) | 4% | 0% | 11% | 5.00 | 0 | 12 |
| Group 3 (66,001 - 88,500) | 6% | 0% | 19% | 9.35 | 0 | 41 |
| Group 4 (88,5001 – 122,000) | 3% | 0% | 6% | 7.63 | 0 | 23 |
| Group 5 122,001 – 170,000) | 5% | 0% | 10% | 12.53 | 0 | 35 |
| Group 6 (170,001 – 239,000) | 4% | 0% | 10% | 15.55 | 0 | 34 |
| Group 7 (239,001 – 350,700) | 4% | 1% | 9% | 21.17 | 3 | 52 |
| Group 8 (350,701 – 475,000) | 4% | 2% | 7% | 18.31 | 1 | 39 |
| Group 9 (475,001 – 778, 700) | 5% | 0% | 24% | 23.85 | 0 | 64 |
| Group 10 (788,701 – 4,500,000) | 4% | 0% | 10% | 45.47 | 0 | 165 |

*Table 2.3.3.* NUMBER AND % OF INCARDINATED PRIESTS/DEACONS PER DIOCESE WHO HAVE BEEN ACCUSED OF SEXUAL ABUSE, GROUPED BY NUMBER OF PARISHES.

| United States Dioceses Grouped by Number of Parishes | Accused Priests/Deacons as % of All Incardinated Priests, 1950 - 2002 | | | Number of Incardinated Priests/ Deacons Accused of Sexual Abuse | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Average in Diocese | Minimum | Maximum | Average In Diocese | Minimum | Maximum |
| 1 (1 - 35) | 3% | 0% | 9% | 1.10 | 0 | 3 |
| 2 (36 - 46) | 5% | 0% | 11% | 4.36 | 0 | 12 |
| 3 (47 – 56) | 4% | 0% | 19% | 5.73 | 0 | 23 |
| 4 (57 – 71) | 5% | 0% | 12% | 8.41 | 0 | 31 |
| 5 (72 – 84) | 3% | 0% | 7% | 7.42 | 0 | 17 |
| 6 (85 – 97) | 5% | 1% | 9% | 15.37 | 3 | 41 |
| 7 (98 – 119) | 6% | 2% | 24% | 16.80 | 5 | 35 |
| 8 (120 – 138) | 5% | 1% | 10% | 23.67 | 6 | 52 |
| 9 (139 – 185) | 4% | 1% | 8% | 27.04 | 9 | 93 |
| 10 (186 + ) | 4% | 2% | 8% | 55.67 | 11 | 165 |

## *Table 2.3.4* NUMBER AND % OF ALL PRIESTS/DEACONS IN RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES ACCUSED OF SEXUAL ABUSE, GROUPED BY THE OVERALL MEMBERSHIP

| U.S. Catholic Religious Communities Grouped by Overall Membership | Accused Priests/Deacons as % of All Priests in a Religious Community, 1950 - 2002 | | | Number of Religious Priests/Deacons Accused of Abuse | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Average Per Community | Minimum | Maximum | Average Per Community | Minimum | Maximum |
| 1 (1 – 10) | -0- | -0- | -0- | -0- | -0- | -0- |
| 2 (11 – 20) | 2% | 0% | 9% | .67 | 0 | 3 |
| 3 (21 – 30) | 2% | 0% | 5% | 1.55 | 0 | 4 |
| 4 (31 – 40) | 3% | 0% | 13% | 2.10 | 0 | 7 |
| 5 (41 – 75) | 3% | 0% | 8% | 2.71 | 0 | 9 |
| 6 (76 – 110) | 3% | 0% | 7% | 6.62 | 0 | 17 |
| 7 (111 – 150) | 1% | 0% | 2% | 4.38 | 1 | 8 |
| 8 (151 – 305) | 2% | 0% | 5% | 10.19 | 1 | 21 |
| 9 (306 – 540) | 1% | 0% | 4% | 16.00 | 4 | 55 |
| 10 541 + | | | | 10.50 | 6 | 15 |

- The average number of clerics who are members of an individual religious community and who have been accused of sexual abuse is 5.7, and ranges from 0 to 55.

*Table 2.3.5* NUMBER AND % OF ALL PRIESTS/DEACONS IN RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES ACCUSED OF SEXUAL ABUSE, GROUPED BY THE CURRENT CLERICAL MEMBERSHIP

| U.S. Catholic Religious Communities Grouped by Clerical Membership | Accused Priests/Deacons as % of All Clerics in a Religious Community, 1950 - 2002 | | | Number of Religious Priests/Deacons Accused of Abuse | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Average Per Community | Minimum | Maximum | Average Per Community | Minimum | Maximum |
| 1 (1 – 6) | 2% | 0% | 9% | .17 | 0 | 1 |
| 2 (7 – 14) | 2% | 0% | 7% | 1.57 | 0 | 4 |
| 3 (15 – 21) | 2% | 0% | 5% | 1.00 | 0 | 2 |
| 4 (22 - 35) | 3% | 0% | 13% | 2.45 | 0 | 9 |
| 5 (36 – 57) | 2% | 0% | 5% | 2.71 | 0 | 6 |
| 6 (58 – 80) | 3% | 0% | 7% | 5.58 | 1 | 17 |
| 7 (81 – 110) | 2% | 0% | 5% | 6.30 | 0 | 17 |
| 8 (111 – 176) | 2% | 0% | 5% | 9.41 | 1 | 21 |
| 9 (177 – 399) | 2% | 0% | 4% | 13.93 | 1 | 55 |
| 10 (400 +) | 1% | 0% | 1% | 8.67 | 4 | 15 |

# *FIGURE 2.3.3* PRIESTS/DEACONS ACCUSED AS % OF ALL ORDINATION, BY YEAR

