

The Scope of Religious Related Child Sexual Abuse in Spain: A Prevalence Study

Noemí Pereda

University of Barcelona

Josep M. Tamarit

Open University of Catalonia

Elizabeth Suárez-Soto

University of Barcelona

Author Note

Noemí Pereda, Research Group on Child and Adolescent Victimization (GReVIA), Institute of Neurosciences (UBNeuro), University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain; Josep M. Tamarit, Research group on Empirical and Applied Victimology (VICRIM), Studies of Law and Political Science, Open University of Catalonia, Barcelona, Spain; Elizabeth Suárez-Soto, Research Group on Child and Adolescent Victimization (GReVIA), University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Noemí Pereda, Faculty of Psychology, University of Barcelona, Passeig Vall d'Hebron, 171, 08035 Barcelona, Spain. Email: npereda@ub.edu

Noemí Pereda, Ph.D., is a Full Professor of Victimology at the University of Barcelona and director of the Research Group on Child and Adolescent Victimization (GReVIA).

Josep M. Tamarit, Ph.D., is a Full Professor of Criminal Law at the Open University of Catalonia and the University of Lleida.

Elizabeth Suárez-Soto, Ph.D., is a Lecturer at the Universidad Internacional de Valencia and a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Complutense University of Madrid and the University of

Barcelona. **Abstract**

Background and Objectives: Research on the prevalence of child sexual abuse within the Catholic Church has been limited in Europe. The aim of this study was to estimate the prevalence and characteristics of religious-related sexual abuse in a broad sample of the Spanish population, placing it within the broader context of sexual violence against children and adolescents. Participants and Setting: Among the survey respondents, 52.3% were women ($n = 4,188$) and 47.7% were men ($n = 3,825$). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 100 years ($M = 51.5$, $SD = 17.6$), with the majority ($n = 7,154$; 89.5%) born in Spain. Results: The results indicated that 11.7% of respondents were victims of child sexual abuse, with a higher prevalence among women (8.6%) compared to men (3.1%). A total of 1.1% of respondents reported having experienced religious-related sexual abuse, primarily in religious educational institutions or churches, with 0.6% identifying a Catholic clergyman as the perpetrator. The majority of ecclesiastical abuse involved physical contact, and in many cases, the abuse was recurrent. Victims of religious-related abuse reported more significant spiritual consequences compared to those abused in other contexts. Conclusion: The findings highlight patterns of sexual abuse similar to those observed in other countries, with a notable prevalence of abuse in male Catholic schools during the Franco dictatorship era.

Keywords: sexual abuse, Catholic church, prevalence, epidemiology, Spain.

The Scope of Religious Related Child Sexual Abuse in Spain: A Prevalence Study

After the first scandals related to sexual abuses perpetrated by members of the clergy in the United States in the late 20th century, the problem of child sexual abuse (CSA) within the Catholic Church has garnered heightened attention in different countries. In response to the profound social impact of these events, various initiatives have been launched in many countries by public institutions or by the Catholic Church itself. Among the public initiatives, the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse in Ireland (2009), the Adrianssens Commission in Belgium (2010), the Australia's Royal Commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse (2017) or the Independent inquiry of child sexual abuse in the United Kingdom (2020) have issued reports dealing with different dimensions of the problem. In addition, valuable contributions have been the reports commissioned by national conferences of Catholic bishops, such as those in the United States (John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004), Germany (MGH-Report, 2018), France (Commission indépendante sur les abus sexuels dans l'Église, CIASE, 2021), and Portugal (Comissão Independente para o Estudo dos Abusos Sexuais de Crianças na Igreja Católica Portuguesa, 2023).

As a result of the Commissions mentioned and of several academic studies (Terry, 2015) a substantial body of research has allowed us to gain understanding on the problem of CSA perpetrated within the Catholic Church at an international level. The characteristics of the abuses do not differ substantially from sexual abuses committed in other environments, with a predominance of acts involving bodily contact, including touching and masturbation on the body of the victim or the perpetrator, as well as penetration in a number of cases (Dressing et al., 2017). The studies reveal significant differences in the average age of onset of abuse between victims of abuse within the Catholic Church and victims of abuse perpetrated in other environments, with the victims of the clergy being older and more likely to be post pubertal at abuse onset (Cimbolich & Cartor, 2006). Regarding the gender of

victims, there is a higher prevalence of boys among the victims of the clergy (McPhillips et al., 2022). With regard to the specific consequences of sexual abuse perpetrated by the clergy, existing evidence reveals that the severity of the effects is as great as the severity of the effects associated with intrafamilial abuse (McGraw et al., 2019). The review by Pinto-Cortez, Suárez-Soto et al. (2022) highlights that victims of abuse within the Church often report spiritual impacts, affecting trust in the Catholic Church and faith in God.

In Spain, a country where the Catholic Church has a significant social presence, CSA within this institution has historically been invisible, perceived as a taboo or at least as a matter of little importance for research (Rashid & Barron, 2022). Nonetheless, the phenomenon has featured increasingly on the public agenda (Sáez Martínez, 2015), largely as a result of some victims fighting to uncover their cases and claiming for justice (Varona & Martínez, 2015) and of the stubborn activity of some media. The problem has emerged as a matter of public concern, coinciding with a rapid process of secularization in society (Rosa-González & Cabrera, 2023). In October 2023 the Ombudsman presented the report elaborated by the Commission on the sexual abuses committed within the Catholic Church and the role of the public institutions to the Congress of Deputies (Pereda et al., 2024).

Some recent academic studies have also investigated CSA within the Catholic Church in Spain. These studies have, either focused on illustrating the characteristics and severity of its consequences (Pereda & Segura, 2021), including judicial sentences related to abuses perpetrated by religious leaders (Tamarit et al., 2023) or utilized in-depth interviews with members of the clergy to assess their perceptions of the problem and explore aspects of the Church's cultural and institutional structure that may contribute to CSA (Tamarit & Balcells, 2022). Other studies also reveal significant symptoms of spiritual crisis in victims, since the abuse of spiritual power is a key characteristic of this type of abuse (Pereda et al., 2022). Likewise, research on victims of CSA by the Catholic Church in Spain suggest that the use of

religious symbols, objects, and images within the context of abuse stands as a specific feature of this form of sexual victimization (Pereda & Tamarit, 2023).

Despite growing awareness of sexual abuse by members of the Catholic Church and its impact on a significant portion of the population, no official study has been conducted to assess the prevalence and characteristics of CSA in religious settings, particularly within the Catholic clergy. Additionally, previous Spanish studies on the subject, due to factors such as non-random sampling, do not allow for the generalization of results to all victims of clergy-perpetrated CSA in the country. This gap in research underscores the need for a comprehensive and representative study to better understand the scope and nature of this issue and its broader implications.

The Prevalence of Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church

The research on the prevalence of CSA within the Catholic Church has been scarce. Only a few countries in Europe, including the Netherlands, Germany, and France, have conducted population-based surveys to estimate the prevalence of the phenomenon.

In the Netherlands, Langeland et al. (2015) surveyed 34,267 Dutch adults over 40, revealing that 14% had experienced sexual abuse outside the family before age 18, with 1.7% reporting abuse within a Catholic Church institution. This figure is notable given that only 35% had received a Catholic education and 6.1% had lived in a Catholic institution, both of which were identified as risk factors for abuse. The study also found a higher prevalence among men (2.7%) than women (0.7%). Additionally, findings align with broader trends of declining abuse over time, as prevalence increased with age, from 0.6% among those aged 40–49 to 2.5% in individuals over 70.

In Germany, using a similar methodology to the previous study, Witt et al. (2019) found that 3.1% of a sample of 2,437 people over the age of 14 had experienced some form of sexual abuse in an institution. The authors stated that the sample is representative, although

they noted that there was a low representation of higher-risk populations. Most of the reported abuses had been perpetrated in schools, child welfare centers, and sports centers. Another study by the same team (Witt et al., 2022) with a representative sample of 2,156 surveyed individuals, found that 0.3% had been victims of some form of sexual abuse by a cleric or pastor (Catholic or Protestant), with half (0.15%) occurring in a Catholic institution and the other half (0.15%) in a Protestant institution.

In France, a survey conducted as part of the CIASE's work with 29,026 participants found that 14.6% of women and 6.4% of men experienced childhood sexual abuse (Bajos et al., 2023). Extrapolated to the national population, about 330,000 people were abused by someone linked to the Catholic Church, with 216,000 victims abused by clergy. The Church was the second highest-risk environment after the family, with 0.8% of women and 1.3% of men reporting abuse. Abuse within the Church showed a downward trend over time: 0.9% (1940-1969), 0.3% (1970-1989), and 0.5% since 1990 (0.8% for men and 0.3% for women), in contrast to rising family abuse rates.

In Spain, a groundbreaking study by López et al. (1995), pointed out that 1% of the population had been affected by the problem of CSA within the Catholic Church. According to this study, among the 20% of people who reported having experienced abuse, 4.2% responded that it had been perpetrated by a priest or religious figure (9% among men who answered affirmatively, and 1% among women).

The Present Study

The present study was conducted as a part of the work carried out by the Advisory Commission on sexual abuse in the context of the Catholic Church, appointed by the Spanish Ombudsman (Defensor del Pueblo, 2023), who deemed it necessary to conduct a survey on a broad sample of the population in order to determine the prevalence of the phenomenon and place it in the context of the general issue of sexual violence against children and adolescents.

The aim of the study has been to estimate the prevalence and characteristics of religious related sexual abuse experienced by the adult population residing in Spain, before the age of 18. By means of this work a retrospective study has been developed in order to compare the data obtained with data related to CSA in other contexts and with previous information on the phenomenon in other countries.

Methodology

Sample

The target population consisted of adults residing in Spain. A quota sampling method was used based on sex and age groups (18-29, 30-44, 45-64, 65 and older). The margin of error was $\pm 1.1\%$ with a 95.5% confidence level under the most conservative assumption of $P=Q=0.5$ in a simple random sampling scenario. The sample size, considering the number of surveys that were valid, was 8,013.

Among the survey respondents, 52.3% were women ($n = 4,188$) and 47.7% were men ($n = 3,825$). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 100 years ($M = 51.5$, $SD = 17.6$). The vast majority ($n = 7154$; 89.5%) were born in Spain. Most respondents ($n = 4,118$; 51.4%) declared they were married, 21.5% ($n = 1,722$) were single, and the rest ($n = 2,173$) were in other situations. The majority were employed ($n = 3,583$; 44.7%), and 27.1% ($n = 2,168$) were retired or in a similar situation such as being pensioners. Regarding their level of education, 13.8% ($n = 1,104$) reported having primary education or lower, 36.1% ($n = 2,889$) upper secondary, 11.5% ($n = 924$) had secondary education, and 37.9% ($n = 3,034$) had higher studies (university degree or equivalent). Most of them identified as Catholic (92.8%) and 39.8% ($n = 31,88$) described themselves as non-practicing believers (See Supplementary Material).

Participant Selection

The study followed a cross-sectional self-report design in which a broad sample of adults living in Spain were asked about their experiences of sexual abuse in their childhood. The study included a quota distribution by sex, age, and territory. Regarding age, the sample was determined considering the following groups: 18-29, 30-44, 45-64, 65 years old and above. Concerning territory, quotas of distribution by autonomous communities were used, distinguishing between cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants and urban areas with less than 50,000 inhabitants.

Procedure

Data collection took place between April and June 2023 through telephone interviews (CATI) and online surveys (CAWI). Out of the total participants, 4,802 were surveyed by phone and 3,211 online. Regarding the telephone interviews, a total of 113,126 calls were made, successfully reaching 23,991 individuals. Among these, some declined to participate, while others were unsuccessful or invalid, mostly due to call disconnections or failure to meet representativity quotas. The final sample of 4,802 interviews represents 20% of all successful contacts. The sampling was conducted by a social research consulting company (GAD3, Madrid, Spain). Individuals aged 18 years and older having sufficient Spanish language skills were eligible to participate in the study. Information was assessed via a structured interview. Participants were contacted by research assistants and informed consent was obtained. Research staff conducted the interviews.

The study adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration on research involving human subjects (World Medical Association, 2013). Ethical approval was obtained from the review board of the Spanish Ombudsman following a thorough evaluation of the study protocol to ensure compliance with ethical standards and protection of the rights and well-being of participants. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. No financial assistance or compensation was provided to participants.

Measures

Sociodemographic Information

Participants were asked 8 questions regarding sociodemographic variables, such as age, sex, country of origin, marital status, educational level, employment status, and religion among others.

Child Sexual Abuse

Experiences of sexual abuse in childhood were assessed with 25 closed-ended questions created ad hoc for the objective of this study. The questions were developed based on previous research conducted in Spain (López et al., 1995) and the conceptual definition by Mathews & Collin-Vézina (2019), which defines the victim as a minor under 18 years old. The acts in which they are involved are of a sexual nature, whether they involve physical contact or not, and are therefore considered a criminal offense. Before answering these questions, participants were provided with the following explanation to ensure a clear understanding of the experiences being referenced:

We define sexual violence or abuse as any sexually motivated behavior committed by another person, either with (e.g., fondling, touching, masturbation) or without physical contact (e.g., propositions, exhibitionism, exposure to pornography, engaging in sexual acts in your presence), that may be considered abuse or sexual assault and occurred before the age of 18.

The questions included topics such as the context in which the abuse occurred (e.g., family, school, sports, religious) the age of onset, the location where the abuse occurred (e.g., victim's home, perpetrator's home, school, Church, online), the characteristics of the perpetrator (i.e., sex, age, relationship with the victim), the nature of the abuse (i.e., without contact, with contact, penetration), the frequency (i.e., one time, several times, continuously), its consequences on the victim (i.e., psychological, social, educational/professional, spiritual),

and whether the abuse was disclosed to an adult at the time or reported to the authorities. A question regarding whether the participant had direct knowledge, not information obtained through the media or similar sources, and knew other people who had been abused by the same person was also included.

Data Analysis

The results of participants who reported experiencing CSA have been analyzed using IBM-SPSS 27. Variables related to having experienced childhood sexual abuse, having experienced it in a religious context, and by a priest or religious figure of the Catholic Church were crossed with independent variables related to gender, age, sociodemographic characteristics, and religious beliefs. Additionally, tests of statistical significance (Cramer's V, Mann-Whitney U test, Shapiro-Wilk test, mean difference T-test, Levene's test) were conducted concerning the characteristics and consequences of the abuses. The results of participants who reported experiencing CSA have been analyzed. The total number of abused individuals was considered, including both those who suffered abuse in Spain and those victimized abroad. This criterion aimed to ensure that cases occurring in other countries but potentially linked to religious institutions based in Spain were not excluded. Furthermore, to facilitate analysis, a variable categorized as "religious related sexual abuse" was created. This variable includes all cases where individuals responded affirmatively to any of the five questions related specifically to abuse experienced in this context: religious setting, religious educational setting, perpetrator being a Catholic clergyman (priest or a religious figure), religious school establishment, or religious institution.

Results

Prevalence of CSA

A total of 11.7% ($n = 936$) respondents stated that they had been victims of some form of sexual abuse before the age of 18, 246 (3.1%) men and 690 (8.6%) women, with

percentages calculated based on the total sample. The difference between genders was statistically significant ($\chi^2 (1) = 195.3; p < 0.001$; Cramér's $V = 0.16$), indicating a weak to moderate strength of association.

The mean age of victims was 48.6 ($SD = 17.3$) years at the time of the survey. Of the total survey respondents, 9.7% reported having been abused only in Spain, 1.7% in another country, and 0.2% both in Spain and abroad. Therefore, the percentage of people who were victimized in Spain was 9.9%. Most of them were married (7.1%; $n = 568$), had university studies (4.5%; $n = 365$) and were employed (4.9%; $n = 389$).

Prevalence of Religious-Related CSA

The total number of cases reporting religious related sexual abuse was 91, indicating a prevalence of 1.1% where 42 (46.2%) victims were women and 49 (53.8%) were men ($\chi^2 (1) = 0.54; p = 0.463$), with an average age of 56.5 years ($SD = 18.4$) at the time of the survey. The majority were born in Spain ($n = 84; 92.3\%$), were married ($n = 52; 57.1\%$), and had higher studies ($n = 46; 50.5\%$). Most were either retired or in a similar occupational situation ($n = 39; 42.9\%$). Of the participants, 37.4% ($n = 34$) identified as Catholic and 26.4% ($n = 24$) as non-practicing believers. Specifically, 48 respondents (0.6%) reported being sexually victimized by a Catholic clergyman, with an average age of 65.1 years ($SD = 20.5$) at the time of the survey. Among them, 35.4% ($n = 17$) were women, while 64.6% ($n = 31$) were men. The difference between genders was statistically significant ($\chi^2 (1) = 5.49, p = 0.02$; Cramér's $V = 0.26$), indicating a weak to moderate association (see Table 1).

Table 1.

Differences between Men and Women Victims of CSA in Different Settings

Variable	% of the total sample ($N = 8013$)			% of those who have suffered CSA ($n = 936$)		Statistics
	Total	Men	Women	Men	Women	

	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	%	%	
CSA (Total)	936 (11.7)	246 (3.1)	690 (8.6)	26.3	73.7	$\chi^2(1) = 195.3; p < 0.001$ Cramér's V = 0.16
Religious-related sexual abuse	91 (1.1)	49 (0.61)	42 (0.52)	53.8	6.2	$\chi^2(1) = 0.54; p = 0.463$
Sexual abuse by a Catholic clergyman	48 (0.6)	31 (0.39)	17 (0.21)	64.6	35.4	$\chi^2(1) = 5.49, p = 0.02$ Cramér's V = 0.26

Comparison between Victims of CSA in Religious and Non-Religious Contexts

Significant differences were found in sex and age between those victims of religious related sexual abuse and those victims of other sexual abuse experiences. Men represent 53.8% ($n = 49$) of those victims of religious related sexual abuse, while 23.3% ($n = 197$) of those who reported other sexually abuse experiences ($\chi^2(1) = 39.5; p = 0.00$; Cramér's V = 0.21). Regarding the age of the surveyed individuals, the Mann-Whitney U test shows significant differences ($U = 27339.00; p = 0.001$) between the mean age of those victims of religious related sexual abuse. $M = 56.6$ ($SD = 18.5$), and the rest of victims, $M = 47.7$ ($SD = 17.0$). By age group, 7.1% ($n = 12$) of those aged 18–29 reported abuse within religious settings, followed by 5.5% ($n = 13$) of those aged 30–44, 8.4% ($n = 27$) of those aged 45–65, and 18.7% ($n = 39$) among participants aged 65 or older. The highest proportion was observed in the oldest group, with a statistically significant difference across age groups ($p < 0.001$).

Nature and Extent of the Abuse

The victims of religious-related sexual abuse had a mean age of 11.1 years ($SD = 2.83$) when the abuse began and 12.6 years ($SD = 2.74$) when it ended. Similarly, victims of non-religious CSA had a mean age of 11.3 years ($SD = 3.78$) at the onset of abuse and 12.6

years ($SD = 3.65$) when it ended. No significant differences were found between the two groups.

The majority of victims of religious-related sexual abuse experienced abuse involving physical contact ($n = 59$; 92.2%). Additionally, 58.3% of these victims reported the insertion of objects or parts of the abuser's body into their own body, either vaginally, anally, or orally. In comparison, victims of sexual abuse in non-religious contexts reported physical contact in 96.1% of cases ($n = 497$), with 71.7% reporting the insertion of objects or body parts by the abuser. No significant differences were found between the two groups.

Regarding the frequency of abuse, the majority of victims of religious-related sexual abuse reported that the abuse occurred more than once: 57.8% ($n = 52$) experienced multiple instances, and 10.0% ($n = 9$) reported continuous abuse. In contrast, only 27.8% ($n = 25$) of these victims indicated that the abuse occurred only once. On the other hand, among victims of non-religious CSA, 45.5% ($n = 317$) reported that the abuse occurred only once, 43.8% ($n = 305$) experienced multiple instances, and 8.9% ($n = 62$) reported continuous abuse. Significant differences were found between the two groups ($\chi^2(1) = 11.76$; $p = 0.008$).

Location of the Abuse

Participants were asked to report up to three locations where the abuse took place. In cases of religious-related CSA, the majority of incidents occurred in religious educational institutions (38.5%) and churches or religious institutions (19.8%). In contrast, in cases of non-religious CSA, abuse most commonly occurred in private residences (41.8%, combining the victim's and perpetrator's homes), on the street or other public spaces (27.8%), and in educational institutions (5.1%). Table 2 summarizes the primary categories of abuse location, grouped into broader domains to enhance readability.

Table 2.

Main Reported Locations of Abuse by Context

Location category	Non-religious CSA (<i>n</i> = 845)	Religious-related CSA (<i>n</i> = 91)
Private residences (victim's or abuser's home)	353 (41.8%)	10 (11.0%)
Religious settings (churches or religious schools)	0 (0.0%)	53 (58.3%)
Non religious educational institutions	43 (5.1%)	14 (15.4%)
Public spaces (street, camps, sports facilities)	264 (31.3%)	12 (13.2%)
Other or unspecified	182 (21.6%)	9 (9.9%)

Note: The percentages in the table do not sum to 100%, as participants were allowed to select or report up to three different locations, reflecting a multi-response format.

Sexual Abuse Perpetrator

Regarding the perpetrator, most religious-related sexually abused participants responded that it was an acquaintance (*n* = 73; 80.2%), adult (*n* = 79; 86.8%), and male (*n* = 83; 91.2%). Similar results were obtained for the rest of victims where the perpetrator was also an acquaintance (*n* = 472; 67.1%), adult (*n* = 557; 79.2%), and male (*n* = 671; 95.4%). Additionally, 45.5% of religious-related sexual abuse victims indicated that they knew other people who had been abused by the same person, but only 27.0% of the other CSA victims had this information.

Consequences Associated to the Sexual Abuse

Regarding the consequences of sexual abuse, victims' responses were assessed using a five-point Likert scale, which classified the level of impact as: "High", "Moderate", "Low", "None", and "Don't know/No answer." In the spiritual domain, 34.1% of victims of religious-related abuse reported a high level of impact (22.7% high, *n* = 20; 11.4% moderate, *n* = 10), while 25% of victims in other contexts reported being affected in this area (13.4% moderate, *n* = 92; 11.6% high, *n* = 80). The differences between the two groups in this domain were statistically significant ($\chi^2(3) = 8.93$; $p = 0.01$), although Cramér's *V* (0.11) indicates a small effect size. In the relational domain, 29.5% of victims of religious-related abuse reported

consequences (19.3% moderate, $n = 17$; 10.2% high, $n = 9$), compared to 47.5% of victims from other contexts (24.4% moderate, $n = 168$; 23.1% high, $n = 159$). The differences between the groups were also statistically significant ($\chi^2 (3) = 10.6$; $p = 0.001$), but with a Cramér's V of 0.12, indicating a small effect size. In the psychological domain, 26.1% of victims of religious-related abuse reported being affected (17% moderate, $n = 15$; 9.1% high, $n = 8$), while in the other group, 50.9% reported psychological consequences (25.9% moderate, $n = 178$; 25% high, $n = 172$). The differences were more pronounced ($\chi^2 (3) = 20.9$; $p = 0.00$), with a Cramér's V of 0.17, suggesting a small to moderate effect size, indicating a somewhat greater difference between the groups in this domain. Finally, in the professional or educational domain, 15.9% of victims of religious-related abuse reported consequences (10.2% moderate, $n = 9$; 5.7% high, $n = 5$), while 22.3% of victims from other contexts were affected in this domain (11.3% moderate, $n = 78$; 11% high, $n = 76$). No significant differences were found between the two groups in this domain ($p = 0.17$).

Religious Beliefs in Sexual Abuse Victims

The relationship between experiences of CSA and religious beliefs was also analyzed. Results show that having suffered religious-related sexual abuse is significantly associated with being non-religious ($\chi^2 (1) = 7.1$; $p = 0.07$). Non-believers make up 44.6% ($n = 377$) of all individuals who experienced sexual abuse in non-religious contexts, whereas this rate increases to 59.3% ($n = 54$) among those victims of religious-related sexual abuse. Moreover, individuals abused in a religious context are 1.81 times more likely to declare themselves non-believers compared to those who suffered sexual abuse outside this context ($OR = 1.8$, 95% CI [1.17-2.8], $p = 0.007$).

Disclosure of The Sexual Abuse

Individuals abused in a religious context were less likely to disclose the abuse at the time it occurred ($n = 25$; 27.3%). In this group, the majority of victims disclosed the abuse to

their parents (60%; $n = 15$), followed by friends (40%; $n = 10$). In the group of victims of sexual abuse in other contexts, the rate of disclosure was considerably higher ($n = 295$; 42.9%), with 75.1% ($n = 223$) primarily disclosing the abuse to their parents, followed by friends (24.6%; $n = 73$). This reflects a common trend of disclosing abuse to parental figures in both groups, although victims of religious-related abuse were slightly more likely to disclose the abuse to friends compared to those abused in other contexts. Significant differences were found between the two groups, with disclosure rates being higher in non-religious contexts than in religious-related abuse cases ($\chi^2(1) = 6.24$; $p = 0.01$; Cramér's $V = 0.091$). Although the difference is statistically significant, the weak strength of the association suggests that other factors may also influence the likelihood of disclosing abuse.

Notification of the Sexual Abuse

Regarding the reporting of abuses to the justice system (police, public prosecutor, or courts), 76% ($n = 19$) of the religious-related sexual abuse victims indicated that no official report had been made, while 24% ($n = 6$) acknowledged that they had filed a report. Within the group of victims of sexual abuse in other contexts, a similar pattern was observed, with 78.4% ($n = 232$) stating that they had not reported the abuse, and 21.6% ($n = 61$) confirming that they had. No significant association was found between the context of the abuse and the likelihood of reporting it to the justice system ($\chi^2(1) = 0.14$; $p = 0.798$).

As for whether the abuses had surpassed the statute of limitations by the time of reporting, the two groups showed differing responses. In the religious-related sexual abuse group, 66.7% ($n = 2$) of the cases were reported as having expired, leaving only 33.3% ($n = 1$) still within the legal timeframe. Among the victims of sexual abuse in other contexts, the majority, 85.7% ($n = 30$), indicated that their cases had not expired, with only 8.6% ($n = 3$) reporting expired cases. An additional 5.7% ($n = 2$) in this group were unsure about the legal status regarding the statute of limitations. A significant association was found between the

type of abuse and the expiration of the statute of limitations ($\chi^2 (1) = 7.6$; $p = 0.04$; Cramér's $V = 0.46$), indicating a moderate effect size.

Regarding the outcomes of legal proceedings, among religious-related CSA victims, 33.3% ($n = 2$) indicated that the cases were trialed but without a conviction, 16.7% ($n = 1$) stated that the abuses were not prosecuted, and another 16.7% ($n = 1$) reported that the cases resulted in a conviction. In the group of victims of CSA in other contexts, 24.2% ($n = 15$) reported that the cases were trialed but without conviction, 33.9% ($n = 21$) indicated that the abuses were not prosecuted, and 33.9% ($n = 21$) reported that the cases resulted in a conviction. A small proportion of participants in both groups (5.9%, $n = 4$) were unsure about the legal outcome. Given the small sample size in the religious-related group, no statistical comparisons were performed for this variable.

Table 3 provides a summary of the key sociodemographic, abuse-related, and impact-related characteristics among victims of CSA, comparing religious and non-religious contexts.

Table 3

Comparison between Religious and Non-Religious CSA Victims

Variable	Religious	Non-religious
Mean age at the time of the survey	56.5	47.7
Male (%)	53.8	23.3
Female (%)	46.2	76.7
Mean age at onset of abuse	11.1	11.3
Mean age at end of abuse	12.6	12.6
Abuse involving physical contact (%)	92.2	96.1
Insertion of objects or body parts (%)	58.3	71.7
Abuse occurred more than once (%)	57.8	43.8
Ongoing abuse (%)	10.0	8.9
Higher education (%)	50.5	37.8

High or moderate psychological impact (%)	26.1	50.9
High or moderate spiritual impact (%)	34.1	25.0
High or moderate relational impact (%)	29.5	47.5
High or moderate work/educational impact (%)	15.9	22.3
Disclosure at the time of abuse (%)	27.3	42.9
Reported to the justice system (%)	24.0	21.6
Legal conviction (%)	16.7	33.9

Note. Percentages or means are shown depending on the nature of the variable.

Discussion

The issue of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church in Spain has only recently been a matter of interest, both socially and in the academic context. The aim of this study has been to provide an estimate of the prevalence of the problem in the Spanish population, highlighting its similarities and differences with sexual abuse committed in other contexts.

The results of the present study are consistent with those of the previous work by López et al. (1995) with a representative sample of adults, according to which 1% of the population in Spain reported childhood sexual abuse by someone related to the Catholic Church. In our study, those victimized by a Catholic clergyman were 6% among the victims of CSA and 0.6% when considering the entire sample. The decline can be attributed to the time elapsed between the two studies, since the number of sexual abuse cases in this context has shown a decrease in recent decades, similarly to what has happened in other countries (Donnelly & Inglis, 2010).

The findings are comparable to those found in other countries, although comparisons must be made cautiously, considering variations of the samples and questions surveyed. In addition, cultural variables may have worked as a determining facilitating factor for both the abuses and the cover-up mechanisms (Marotta, 2021). The survey with the greatest affinity is the CIASE study in France (2021), which indicated that 6.1% of individuals who suffered

CSA had been victimized within the Catholic Church context, with the percentage being lower (3.9%) when considering only cases where the abuse was committed by a clergyman, this representing a 0.7% of men and 0.2% of women (Bajos et al., 2023). The reasons why the study in the Netherlands has yielded higher figures (1.7% of victims abused in a Catholic Church institution, according to Langeland, 2015) and the study in Germany lower ones (0.3%, according to Witt et al., 2019), must be attributed, to a large extent, to dissimilarities related to the sample and the questionnaire, beyond obvious differences concerning the social relevance of the Catholic Church in every country. Spain appears thus not to be a unique case regarding the prevalence of the problem of CSA within this religious institution.

The comparison of responses by sex and age reveals that the phenomenon of CSA within the Catholic Church in Spain exhibits similar characteristics to those in other countries, not only regarding its prevalence. The presence of a greater number of male victims in religiously related sexual abuse cases, compared to CSA in other contexts, is a consistent finding across all countries where this issue has been studied (Perillo et al., 2008). This gender difference is especially significant in cases of sexual abuse by Catholic clergymen, as found in other studies (Bajos et al., 2023).

The age characteristics clearly point to a phenomenon also observed in other countries. The results indicate that younger age groups report lower percentages of sexual abuse in religious contexts compared to older groups. This trend aligns with previous studies suggesting that abuse reports may be influenced by generational factors and the evolution of social norms (Bajos et al., 2023). Sexual abuse within the Catholic Church was a problem that affected many children in the 1950s and 1960s, and subsequently, while it has not disappeared entirely, it has decreased as the number of clergy and the number of children in religious schools, seminaries, and boarding schools has declined. All of this occurs within the context of secularization, the reduced social influence of the Church, and increased societal

awareness regarding the issue of sexual abuse (Rosa-González & Cabrera, 2023). The limited number of young victims found is associated with the diminishing social influence of the Catholic Church and the decreasing number of believers (Pinto-Cortez, Garrido-Cabezas et al., 2022).

The greatest particularity in Spain is the concentration of abusive experiences in the religious educational sphere, mainly schools for boys, with 15.2% men and 3.2% women victims in this context. This is aligned with previous studies indicating that the presence of children in contact with potential abusers in all-male educational settings were, for a time, a significant risk factor for sexual victimization (Terry & Freilich, 2012). It also can be linked to the frequent attendance of boys at boarding schools in Spain, particularly during the Franco dictatorship era (López et al., 1995).

Results revealing a high figure of sexual abuse involving physical contact, with a notable occurrence of penetration, are consistent with observations from prior studies on sexual abuse by the clergy, both at the national level (Pereda & Segura, 2021) and internationally (Dressing et al., 2021). In addition, CSA in a religious environment has shown in our study a more pronounced pattern of victims enduring abuses committed continuously than in other types of abuse. This may be related to another characteristic, which is the victims' awareness of other individuals abused by the same perpetrator, indicating that in certain environments and due to the actions of certain abusers, the abuse could have a systematic nature (Mercado et al., 2008).

Spiritual harm, declared as significant by a notable portion of respondents in the present study, is another characteristic of religious related sexual abuse, already known through previous studies, that has been corroborated. Farrell & Taylor (2000) explain that sexual abuse by the clergy involves unique theological, existential, and spiritual trauma, highlighting the need for a deeper understanding of this type of abuse. This is consistent with

previous studies in Spain which found that, beyond its parallels with the consequences of other forms of CSA, victimization by a religious leader has been associated with notable symptoms of spiritual and belief-related crises (Pereda et al., 2022). Notably, feelings of anger directed toward God have emerged as a powerful and consistent predictor of compromised mental well-being among victims of sexual abuse involving Church representatives (Pargament et al., 1998). These findings must be examined alongside another key result in our study: the higher number of individuals declaring themselves non-believers among those who have experienced sexual abuse in the religious sphere. It can be concluded that experience of sexual abuse affects an individual's faith and relationship with God in any country (Rudolfsson & Tidefors, 2014).

Practice Implications

The findings of this study highlight the necessity for targeted interventions addressing the unique characteristics of CSA within the Catholic Church in Spain. Given the historical and cultural context in which these abuses occurred, specialized therapeutic approaches should be developed to address not only the psychological impact but also the spiritual harm experienced by victims (Pereda et al., 2022). Mental health professionals, clergy, and support organizations should receive training on the theological and existential trauma associated with religiously related sexual abuse to better assist survivors. In addition, prevention efforts should focus on strengthening child protection policies within religious institutions (Kaufman et al., 2019). Transparency and accountability mechanisms, including independent reporting structures and survivor-led advisory boards, should be established to ensure that abuse allegations are addressed promptly and justly.

Future Research

This study highlights the need for further research in several key areas. Future studies should examine the long-term psychological, social, and spiritual consequences of clergy-

related sexual abuse to enhance support strategies for survivors. Investigating the role of religious beliefs in resilience or trauma could inform tailored therapeutic interventions (Pereda & Segura, 2021). Comparative research across religious and secular institutions may reveal broader abuse patterns and contribute to improved child protection policies.

Additionally, further inquiry is needed into institutional mechanisms that facilitated abuse cover-ups and their evolution in response to legal and societal changes. Assessing the impact of preventive measures, such as mandatory reporting and safeguarding training, would provide insights into their effectiveness. Lastly, qualitative research on survivor narratives could deepen understanding of disclosure barriers, coping mechanisms, and recovery processes, guiding survivor-centered policies and services.

Limitations

The findings of this study have to be seen in light of some limitations. Although the sample of over 8,000 participants is substantial, disclosing clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse remains challenging, particularly in a historically Catholic country where the Church and political power have been closely linked (Díaz-Salazar Martín, 1990). Consequently, the number of reported cases is small, limiting generalizability. While significant differences emerged between victims abused in religious and other contexts, effect sizes were generally small to moderate, necessitating cautious interpretation. The disparity in group sizes—fewer victims from religious settings—may have influenced effect magnitudes. On the other hand, the definition of sexual abuse, which includes both contact and non-contact behaviors, may be considered broader compared to more restrictive definitions in other studies, though it follows the approach of previous research conducted in Spain (López et al., 1995).

Additionally, the retrospective nature of CSA assessment introduces potential memory errors and biases (Lyon, 2007). Although reported distress symptoms align with previous research (Pinto-Cortez, Suárez-Soto, et al., 2022), causal links between abuse and its consequences

cannot be established. Lastly, the sampling method systematically excludes high-risk populations, such as individuals without permanent residence and those in institutional care.

Conclusion

The investigation into sexual abuse within the Catholic Church in Spain sheds light on a historically taboo subject. The results of the survey have offered valuable insight into the extent and characteristics of the problem. While prior awareness existed, the present study sets out the country's first official report on this controversial topic. The findings reveal patterns of sexual abuse similar to those found in other countries, with the particularity of a high prevalence of CSA in male Catholic schools during the period of the Franco dictatorship. These findings underscore the need for specialized attention to address the unique aspects of clergy-related sexual abuse and address efficient mechanisms to support victims and repair harm.

Data Availability Statement The data that support the findings of this study are available from Ombudsman of Spain but restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license for the current study, and so are not publicly available. Data are however available from the authors upon reasonable request and with permission of Ombudsman of Spain.

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