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John Jay investigator criticizes reporting

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NEW YORK -- Many news stories about the recently released report on "The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950-2010" tried -- and failed -- to capture its complex findings in a sound bite, according to the principal investigator for the study.

Karen Terry of the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York said researchers who prepared the report have received "malicious and even threatening calls and letters" from some people who criticized the findings based on overly simplistic and sometimes factually inaccurate news reports.

Writing June 23 in The Crime Report, an online publication of the Center on Media, Crime and Justice at John Jay and the Criminal Justice Journalists organization, Terry said some media wrongly said the report attributed the clergy sex abuse crisis to social attitudes attributed to Woodstock or the "swinging '60s."

Instead the report concluded that "the factors associated with the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church were complex," she said.

"Another fallacy contained in the early media reports included the 'fact' that we did not address the problematic actions of the bishops," Terry wrote. "Critics suggested that since we relied only on data from the dioceses, the bishops influenced the study findings."

But she said the data in the report came from "seven unique sources -- a fact overlooked in most media reports. The data were derived from bishops and priests, victim assistance coordinators, victim advocates, survivors, clinicians, seminaries, historical and court documents."

Noting that the study was commissioned by the lay-led National Review Board and not by the bishops, Terry said "the bishops did not influence our findings in any way." She added that she is not Catholic and has never had any personal ties to the Catholic Church.

The John Jay investigator expressed concern that "the one-dimensional headlines have obscured some of the healthy responses" to the report's findings.

Among these Terry cited serious discussions among academics about the response to sex abuse, actions by the Vatican and the National Review Board to improve current policies to prevent child sex abuse and a "strong and broadly based commitment to address the gaps in current policies of prevention and oversight that allowed these unhealthy patterns of abuse to continue for so long in the U.S. and elsewhere."

"These should not be overlooked," she said.

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