

Article

# Child Sexual Abuse in Protestant Christian Congregations: A Descriptive Analysis of Offense and Offender Characteristics

Andrew S. Denney <sup>1,\*</sup> , Kent R. Kerley <sup>2</sup> and Nickolas G. Gross <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of West Florida, Pensacola, FL 32514, USA

<sup>2</sup> Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Texas at Arlington, Arlington, TX 76019, USA; kent.kerley@uta.edu (K.R.K.); nickolas.gross@mavs.uta.edu (N.G.G.)

\* Correspondence: adenney@uwf.edu; Tel.: +1-850-474-2784

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**Abstract:** Utilizing data from 326 cases of alleged child sexual abuse that occurred at or through activities provided by Protestant Christian congregations, this study examines demographic and contextual characteristics of alleged child sexual abuse that took place within the most prevalent religious environment in the United States. Research questions are addressed in this study. First, what type of child sexual abuse most commonly occurs at or through activities provided by Protestant Christian congregations? Second, where do such offenses physically take place? Third, who are the offenders and what role(s) do they assume in the congregations? We find that the overwhelming majority of offenses were contact offenses that occurred on church premises or at the offender's home, and that most offenders were white male pastors or youth ministers who were approximately 40 years in age. We conclude with policy implications and recommendations for future research.

**Keywords:** child sexual abuse; clergy; evangelical; religion; protestant; sexual abuse

## 1. Introduction

Child sexual abuse that occurs within religious settings has been the subject of widespread media attention for approximately the past fifteen years (Bailey 2013; Bohm et al. 2014; Clayton 2002; Boston Globe 2004; Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project 2010; New York Times 2015). This increasing media and political attention has largely been the result of highly publicized instances of alleged sexual abuse within the Roman Catholic Church, which has involved an estimated 16,000 victims and 3700 Roman Catholic clergy (Bishop Accountability 2011; Bohm et al. 2014). Consequently, members of various religious faiths, the media, and politicians have begun to question the frequency of child sexual abuse that occurs within other faith traditions in the United States (US), such as in Protestant Christian congregations (Bailey 2013). With an estimated 314,000 Protestant Christian congregations and a membership base of about 60 million, an exploration of alleged child sexual abuse is needed (Grammich et al. 2012; Pew Research Center 2007; Johnson et al. 2016).

Although Protestant Christian congregations are both the most prevalent and frequently attended of all religious institutions within the US (Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life 2015), research on instances of child sexual abuse within these settings has been sparse. Some of the only estimates that exist are from faith-based insurance companies that have released data on claims paid for religious institutions. Specifically, three faith-based insurance companies that provide coverage for 165,500 churches—mostly Protestant Christian churches and 5500 other religious-oriented organizations—reported 7095 claims of alleged sexual abuse by clergy, church staff, congregation members, or volunteers between 1987 and 2007 (Seattle Post-Intelligencer 2007). This is an average of 260 claims of alleged sexual abuse per year, which resulted in \$87.8 million in total claims being

paid (Seattle Post-Intelligencer 2007). Although information on the extent and context of abuse is preliminary and limited, these previous statistics suggest to us the need for systematic research on child sexual abuse within US Protestant congregations. This study will provide a more comprehensive understanding of alleged child sexual abuse that occurs with Protestant Christian congregations, while also serving as a strong foundation for future research on this understudied topic.

### 1.1. Background on Sexual Abuse by Clergy

With the exception of a few loosely related studies that have examined issues surrounding clergy sexual misconduct and abuse (see, for example, Chaves and Garland 2009; Garland and Argueta 2010; John Jay College 2004), examination of alleged child sexual abuse in Protestant Christian congregations has been limited. To provide some context, however, it is helpful to review studies of general instances of sexual victimization within faith congregations. Since the Boston Globe's (2004) report on the molestation of 130 boys by Boston Reverend John Geoghan of the Catholic Church from 1962 until 1993, academic studies attempting to uncover instances of sexual abuse within religious, primarily Catholic, environments have increased. John Jay College (2004), for example, was granted unprecedented access to official Catholic Church records, finding that 4% of all priests within the US from 1950 to 2002 had some sexual abuse allegation(s) made against them. Moreover, this study revealed that the alleged instances of sexual abuse involved nearly 11,000 children with a mere 3% referred to law enforcement authorities (Terry and Tallon 2004). The revelation made by the John Jay College (2004) report led many from Protestant Christian organizations to question the extent of abuse in their congregations, as well as their protocols for preventing and controlling such abuse in their congregations (Bailey 2013).

The overwhelming majority of studies that have been published on this topic have focused on either individual cases of abuse, how to stop abuse from occurring, how to recover from such instances of sexual abuse, or some combination of those (see Capps 1993; Flynn 2003; Horst 2000; Muse 1992; Poling 1999). Even though the above issues are crucial for study, there is even less information about what offenses occur at a national level, where they physically take place, and who offends. This information is especially crucial when considering Capps' (1993) three key reasons why religious leaders have the strong potential to engage in sexual abuse. These reasons are the (1) power of access throughout the church and victim accessibility; (2) power from not being under the surveillance of others; and (3) power over congregants by being privy to personal knowledge (e.g., marital issues and addictions).

Garland and Argueta (2010) later identified factors that may be related to sexual abuse committed by religious leaders. These factors are (1) *family members, friends, and victims ignored warning signs*; (2) *the niceness culture* (i.e., discounting sexual flirting for being friendly); (3) *ease of private communication*; (4) *no oversight*; (5) *multiple roles* (e.g., pastor, marital counselor, etc.); and (6) *inherent trust in the sanctuary*. With the lack of specific research on sexual abuse within these environments, it is pertinent to briefly examine the sexual misconduct literature within these environments for contextual purposes.

#### 1.1.1. Clergy Offender Characteristics

One universal trait that has been found in prior studies pertaining to both sexual misconduct and abuse is that the overwhelming majority of known offenders are male (Francis and Baldo 1998; Friberg and Laaser 1998; Garland and Argueta 2010; Thoburn and Whitman 2004). This characteristic should not come as a surprise since most Christian denominations (88%) only allow males to assume leadership positions within the church (Cooperative Congregations Studies Partnership 2010).

A second key characteristic found regarding clergy that do engage in sexual abuse is that only a small percentage are believed to have some form of paraphilia, which is an extreme fixation on a certain individual, object, or situation that results in intense sexual arousal (American Psychiatric Association 2013). Specifically, 2% are believed to be potentially diagnosable as a *pedophile* (i.e., sexual focus on prepubescent children), while 4% could be diagnosable as an *ephebophile* (i.e., sexual fixation on those between the ages of 15 and 19 years of age) (Sipe 1990, 1995). Other psychological issues

that have been attributed to priests that have been known to engage in child sexual abuse include addiction, depression, and even cognitive dysfunction (Blanchard 1991; Plante and Aldridge 2005).

A third key characteristic found regarding clergy who have reported to have engaged in sexual misconduct have had higher-than-normal levels of narcissism when using Raskin and Hall's (1979) Narcissistic Personality Inventory (see Brock and Lukens 1989; Francis and Baldo 1998; Hands 1992; Muse 1992; Muse and Chase 1993; Seat et al. 1993). Narcissism is seen as a key trait that can amplify instances of sexual abuse for individuals in positions of power.

#### 1.1.2. Victim Characteristics

The John Jay College (2004) report is one of the few studies to have examined sexual abuse victim characteristics within religious environments. In their study, they found that 81% of victims were male, and the majority (51%) were between the ages of 11 and 14. Other studies that have examined victim characteristics within religious environments have solely examined adult victim characteristics of both sexual misconduct and sexual abuse (see Chaves and Garland 2009).

#### 1.1.3. Offense Locations

Where offenses physically take place is also crucial to understand, as it can have differential impacts on victimization experiences, particularly for children (Culbertson et al. 2014). The two most common factors identified that are related to the location of child sexual abuse are that (1) the abuse occurs in a private setting and (2) the private setting chosen is typically the offender's home (Wortley and Smallbone 2006). Only a few studies that have examined either clergy sexual abuse or misconduct have reported where the alleged sexual misconduct physically took place, with John Jay College (2004) finding that 41% of all alleged sexual abuse occurred within the priest's home. Moreover, Calkins-Mercado, Tallon, and Terry (Calkins-Mercado et al. 2008) found that priests that had more than one victim were more likely than those who had just one victim to sexually abuse within the offender's home.

For instances of sexual misconduct and abuse that occurred within Protestant Christian churches, Chaves and Garland (2009) found that most (92%) sexual misconduct occurred in a private setting. Garland and Argueta (2010) found that most sexual misconduct/abuse occurred inside the offender's church office while conducting a counselling session. Since Protestant Christian clergy generally live off the church campus, this may restrict their attempts to commit sexual abuse due to less absolute privacy (Bohm et al. 2014; Fegert et al. 2011).

Despite research that has examined sexual misconduct and abuse within religious settings, there still exists a need for research pertaining to offenses that occur at or through activities provided by Protestant Christian churches. Such information is crucial with an estimated 314,000 churches in the US, with a substantial portion of that population being occupied by the ages with the highest known sexual victimization rates (Grammich et al. 2012; Pew Research Center 2007). Any environment that may be conducive for instances of sexual abuse is essential to study because of long-lasting side effects, such as depression, increased substance abuse, and suicidal thoughts/attempts/completions (see Beitchman et al. 1992; Dube et al. 2005; Najdowski and Ullman 2009; Rossow and Lauritzen 2001; Simpson and Miller 2002). As such, the expansion of research into specific and contextual information regarding child sexual abuse that occur at or through activities provided by Protestant Christian churches is imperative.

### 1.2. Clergy Sexual Misconduct

Sexual misconduct refers to clergy that have engaged in legal, sexual relations, adultery, or some other related sexual action with a congregant that is deemed unethical or improper within these environments. Several studies have attempted to understand the prevalence of clergy sexual misconduct among Protestant Christian clergy (see Cooper 2002; Francis and Stacks 2003; Meek et al. 2004; Seat et al. 1993; Thoburn and Whitman 2004). Studies have revealed that as few as

1% to as many as 38.5% of all clergy, across a wide range of Christian denominations, have engaged in sexual misconduct of some form (Francis and Stacks 2003; Meek et al. 2004; Seat et al. 1993; Thoburn and Whitman 2004).

## 2. The Present Study

There are three foci for the present study. First, we examine the types of child sexual abuse alleged to occur within Protestant Christian congregations. Second, we provide information on where these offenses are alleged to occur. Third, we examine who commits alleged offenses within these environments and which role(s) they assume within their congregations. It is important to understand these core contextual characteristics, to provide a framework for additional research on this topic, and to provide law enforcement officers and faith leaders with information that could be useful in preventing and controlling child sexual abuse in faith environments.

## 3. Research Methodology

### 3.1. Data

The sample for the present study consists of a collection of digital news articles from local news outlets who reported on issues of child sexual abuse alleged to have occurred at or through activities involving Protestant Christian churches. News articles were retrieved from three separate websites, with each acting as a depository for news articles reporting on church sexual abuses. These three individual websites were (1) [www.reformation.com](http://www.reformation.com); (2) [www.stopbaptistpredators.org](http://www.stopbaptistpredators.org); (3) [www.mojoey.blogspot.com/p/the-morally-corrupt.html](http://www.mojoey.blogspot.com/p/the-morally-corrupt.html). Collectively, 2240 cases appeared across all three websites for the period of 1982 to 2014. However, duplications, alleged offenses at non-Protestant Christian churches, civil lawsuits, cases outside of the US, and a combination of each appeared across all three websites. As such, the present study focused on individuals who were *arrested* for child sexual abuse that occurred at or through activities provided by Protestant Christian churches from 1999 to 2014, as follow-up information per case prior to 1999 was rarely available. The final sample size was 326 individual cases.

### 3.2. Data Analysis Strategies

Occasionally, the archived news articles did not contain all desired information (e.g., victim's sex, offense location, etc.) for the research questions. As such, search terms that included the purported offender's name, church name, and/or a combination of each were used in Google™ and/or Google News™ to identify other related news articles. Similar methods have been implemented in other qualitative studies that utilized a content analysis of news articles (see Denton 2010; Stinson et al. 2013). On average, each case yielded approximately three news articles from a local news agency or newspaper typically near where the alleged offense(s) occurred, resulting in a total of 969 news articles viewed.

Once each news article was identified, all articles were read multiple times to pull data necessary to meet the four research goals of the present study. Cases involving incest were not included as they do not directly pertain to the dynamics of the church. Themes among data pulled from articles were formed using principles of analytic induction via a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Offense Type

Across all 326 cases that resulted in an arrest, a total of 454 individual offenses were alleged to have occurred. Since the 326 cases occurred in 41 total states, numerous local and state jurisdictions were crossed. As such, the name for a particular offense in one jurisdiction may be entirely different in the legal definition, severity, and overall scope than an offense with the same/similar name in another jurisdiction. As such, sexual offenses were organized into the two categories of (1) *contact offenses* and

(2) *non-contact offenses*. A similar categorization strategy has been employed in prior studies examining sexual offenses (see Babchishin et al. 2015; MacPherson 2010). *Contact offenses* are criminal actions that involved the offender making some form of direct physical contact with the victim's body, whereas *non-contact offenses* are still sexual in nature, yet do not involve the offender making direct physical contact with the victim. A third category of *property offenses* was also developed to include the property offenses (e.g., possession of criminal tools, and burglary) that were alleged to have occurred during the commission of the alleged sexual abuse.

#### 4.1.1. Contact Offenses

Contact offenses refer to alleged offenses that involved some direct physical sexual contact between the offender and the victim(s) (Mair and Stevens 1994). Notable examples of contact offenses include, but are not limited to, sexual assault, rape, and groping. In total, contact offenses represented fully 80% ( $n = 363$ ) of the 454 total offenses. Therefore, the overwhelming majority of all offenses included direct physical sexual contact between the offender and the victim(s). The total number of victims per case ranged from one to as many as 20 individuals. However, the vast majority of cases involved only one known victim at 61.7%. We must note here that cases involving child pornography were not included in this part of the analysis. Therefore, the number of cases is 321.

#### 4.1.2. Non-Contact Offenses

Non-contact sex offenses refer to those where the offender did not have physical sexual contact with any victim(s) (Mair and Stevens 1994). Some examples of non-contact sex offenses include stalking, sexual harassment, and possession of child pornography. Across all 326 cases, non-contact offenses represented 18.9% ( $n = 89$ ) of the 454 separate offenses. Although this is a sizeable minority, it is important to consider that 79.1% ( $n = 258$ ) of cases involved the offender being charged with both contact and non-contact sex offenses when arrested, and only 7.4% ( $n = 24$ ) were charged with solely a non-contact sexual offense.

#### 4.1.3. Property Offenses

Some individuals within the present study were also charged with a property offense at the point of arrest in conjunction with a sex offense (i.e., contact and/or non-contact). In total, a mere 1.1% ( $n = 5$ ) of all offenses at the point of arrest were for a property crime (e.g., burglary and theft of a victim's clothing).

### 4.2. Offense Locations

A total of 41 states were represented in the present study. The top five states that had the most reported instances of alleged sexual abuse were as follows: Florida (9.6%;  $n = 32$ ), Texas (8.4%;  $n = 28$ ), California (7.5%;  $n = 25$ ), Illinois (5.1%;  $n = 17$ ), and Tennessee and Alabama, respectively, at 4.2% ( $n = 14$ ). Across the 326 cases, the specific offense location was available in 70.9% ( $n = 231$ ) of the cases. Fully 29.1% ( $n = 95$ ) cases did not have a specific location reported. Findings were divided into two primary subsections, being (1) *general offense locations* and (2) *specific offense locations*.

#### 4.2.1. General Offense Locations

General offense location was divided into three distinct categories. These three categories were if the offense(s) occurred either exclusively (1) *on church grounds*; (2) *off church grounds*; or (3) *both on and off church grounds*. Among cases with a reported location ( $n = 231$ ), 45.5% ( $n = 105$ ) occurred exclusively off-site. Specifically, most cases with a reported offense location occurred within the offender's home, victim's home, or some other off-site location (e.g., hotel/motel room). In contrast, fully 35.5% ( $n = 82$ ) of cases with a known location occurred exclusively *on church grounds*. Examples of such locations on church grounds included church offices, the parking lot, and the sanctuary. A sizeable minority of all offenses with a reported offense location took place *both on and off the church grounds* at 19.0% ( $n = 44$ ).

#### 4.2.2. Specific Offense Locations

Across all 326 cases, there were a total of 311 reported offense locations. Five unique offense locations were reported across the 311 offense locations. Table 1 presents the findings for the specific offense locations, percentages, and the total numbers.

**Table 1.** Offense locations.

Location	Percentage
at the church	38.9% ( $n = 121$ )
offender's home	31.2% ( $n = 97$ )
off-site	12.9% ( $n = 40$ )
off-site church-sponsored activity	10.6% ( $n = 33$ )
victim's home	6.4% ( $n = 20$ )

$n = 311$ .

The most frequent specific offense location reported was that it occurred someplace *at the church* (e.g., office, basement, bathroom, etc.). Altogether, 38.9% ( $n = 121$ ) of all offenses allegedly took place on the church premises, with 15.4% ( $n = 48$ ) occurring within the personal office of the alleged offender. The second most frequent specific offense location was at the *offender's home* (31.2%;  $n = 97$ ), thus suggesting some degree of planning and/or grooming by the offender to isolate the victim inside a relatively controlled environment. The third most frequent offense location was at a sponsored *off-site church-sponsored activity* (e.g., mission trips, camping trips, etc.), accounting for 10.6% ( $n = 33$ ) of all cases with a known location. The fourth most frequent offense location was at an *off-site* (e.g., offender's car) location at 12.9% ( $n = 40$ ). The fifth and final specific offense location was alleged to have occurred within the *victim's home* at 6.4% ( $n = 20$ ).

#### 4.3. Offender Characteristics

To meet the third goal of this study, the offender characteristics are presented. Altogether, 332 offenders across the 326 identified cases were identified. The remainder of this section is divided into the four subsections of (1) *offender sex*; (2) *offender race/ethnicity*; (3) *offender age*; and (4) *offender role*.

##### 4.3.1. Offender Gender

The overwhelming majority of identified offenders were male. Specifically, male offenders were represented by 98.8% ( $n = 328$ ) with female offenders at only 1.2% ( $n = 4$ ) of the offender sample.

##### 4.3.2. Offender Race/Ethnicity

There were five total races/ethnicities represented among the offender sample being *White*, *Black*, *Hispanic*, *Asian*, and *Native American*. A total of 18.3% ( $n = 61$ ) of the race/ethnicity of the offender was missing. The overwhelming majority of offenders were identified as *White* (73.1%;  $n = 198$ ) with *Black* representing 18.8% ( $n = 51$ ) of all offenders. The remaining three races/ethnicities of *Hispanic*, *Asian*, and *Native American* accounted for less-than 10% of all offenders.

##### 4.3.3. Offender Age

In total, 56 distinct offender ages were represented in the sample. Specifically, offender ages at the time of the alleged sexual abuse ranged from 18 to 88 years of age. Altogether, only 2.7% ( $n = 7$ ) of all offender ages were missing, yielding 325 total cases. The mean age was 40.4 years of age with a standard deviation of 13.7 years.

For male offenders ( $n = 315$ ; 7 missing), the mean age was 40.5 with a standard deviation of 13.7 years. For female offenders ( $n = 4$ ), the mean age was considerably younger at 23.5 with a standard deviation of 12.8 years. One's age is oftentimes associated with one's role within a church, with many

positions relying upon a seniority system. Thus, the offender's role held within the church is an important characteristic for understanding who occupies the role and how such a role can potentially influence one's opportunities for victim access.

#### 4.3.4. Offender Role

The specific role that the offender held within the church was available in 92.2% ( $n = 306$ ) of the cases with 7.8% ( $n = 26$ ) having no reported role. Across all cases, 12 distinct offender roles were represented within the sample. The overwhelming majority (80.1%) of offenders were employed in an official capacity within their respective churches with a substantial minority (19.9%) being volunteers. Table 2 presents the findings for both male and female offender roles.

**Table 2.** Offender Role within the Church.

Offender Role	Percentage
<i>Male Offender Roles</i>	
Pastor	34.9% ( $n = 110$ )
Youth Minister	31.4% ( $n = 99$ )
Youth Volunteer	8.3% ( $n = 26$ )
Associate Pastor	5.4% ( $n = 17$ )
Music Minister	4.8% ( $n = 15$ )
Volunteer	3.2% ( $n = 10$ )
Sunday School Teacher	2.9% ( $n = 9$ )
Deacon	2.2% ( $n = 7$ )
Church Member	2.2% ( $n = 7$ )
Church Camp Worker	0.6% ( $n = 2$ )
$n = 315$	
<i>Female Offender Roles</i>	
Youth Volunteer	50% ( $n = 2$ )
Youth Minister	25% ( $n = 1$ )
Pastor's Wife	25% ( $n = 1$ )
$n = 4$	

#### Male Offender Roles

Of the 328 male offenders in the present sample, 94.7% ( $n = 305$ ) of their roles were known with 4.0% ( $n = 13$ ) missing. The most frequent male offender role was a *Pastor* at 34.9% ( $n = 110$ ) of the sample, followed by *Youth Ministers* at 31.4% ( $n = 99$ ). The third most frequent offender role of *Youth Volunteers* was a sharp contrast in frequency compared to the first two roles consisting of 8.3% ( $n = 26$ ) of the sample. *Youth Volunteers* can range from someone that is an unpaid church member to a young adult who assists with the youth ministry. Combined, those who occupy roles that require the direct supervision and/or interaction with youth (generally under 18 years of age), comprised 38.8% of the total offender sample.

The fourth most frequent offender role was that of *Associate Pastor*, followed by *Music Ministers*. Specifically, *Associate Pastors* represented 5.4% ( $n = 17$ ) of the sample, whereas *Music Ministers* held 4.8% ( $n = 15$ ) of the total sample. Even though all but one of the male offender roles at this point have been employees of the church, the remainder of offenders held some volunteer role.

*Volunteers*, the sixth most represented male offender role, made up 3.2% ( $n = 10$ ) of the total sample. *Volunteers* is a general category that includes a wide-range of individuals serving in various capacities, such as a sports coach or bus driver. Yet another form of volunteer that was also represented were *Sunday School Teachers* at 2.9% ( $n = 9$ ). Typically, *Sunday School Teachers* are tasked with preparing and instructing individuals with religious materials on a weekly or more basis. The eighth most represented offender role, *Deacons* (2.2%), are also individuals that provide a wide-range of services

to the church, such as collecting tithes and visiting church members in the hospital. The ninth most represented male offender role was a general *Church Member* at 2.2% ( $n = 7$ ) of the offenders. Somewhat unique when compared to the other offender roles present, *Church Members* do not occupy a specific role within the church, nor do they hold an official title.

The final two male offender roles were *Church Camp Workers* (0.6%;  $n = 2$ ) and *Choir Volunteers* (0.6%;  $n = 2$ ). *Church Camp Workers* are individuals that worked for a short-term summer camp or other camp operated by the respective church. *Choir Volunteers* are those that sing within the respective church's choir. Although male offenders held 10 distinct roles, the female offenders occupied only three individual roles.

#### Female Offender Roles

Even though there were only four female offenders represented, these offenders also warrant discussion. The three female offender roles were a *Youth Volunteer*, *Youth Minister*, and the *Pastor's Wife*. *Youth Volunteers* represented 50% ( $n = 2$ ) of the female offender sample while *Youth Minister* and the *Pastor's Wife* had one case (i.e., 25%), respectively.

### 5. Conclusions and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to uncover common offense, offender, and victim characteristics of child sexual abuse that occurs at or through activities provided by Protestant Christian churches. Through examination of news articles that covered arrests pertaining to this issue, this study found that there are common offense, offender, and victim characteristics of child sexual abuse that occurs within these settings. The results of this study shed light on an important topic, while simultaneously laying the foundation for future examination into this vital issue.

We found that the overwhelming majority (80%) of offenses included *contact offenses*. This means that most offenses involved direct and physical contact between the offender and their victim(s) (e.g., sexual assault, groping, or a degree of rape) in comparison to non-contact offenses (e.g., child pornography on a church computer) at 7.4%. Therefore, the overwhelming majority of sexual abuse within this environment appears to be what is generally considered as the more severe types of sexual offenses. As with 41 states included in the study, individual differences between specific offense-types at the state-level were not examined. Future research should explore individual crimes using cases at the state-level to assess the specific types of crime present, not solely general categories of contact or non-contact sexual offenses.

Five specific location-types of *at the church*, *the offender's home*, *off-site*, *off-site church-sponsored activity*, and the *victim's home* emerged. This finding of sexual abuse likely occurring at the *offender's home* was echoed by Calkins-Mercado et al. (2008) where they found that 41% of all instances of Catholic sexual abuse perpetrated by priests occurred inside the offender's home. Whereas many Catholic Priests live in a Rectory directly located on church grounds, Protestant clergy do not. As such, the present study's findings of offenses occurring at the *offender's home* suggests substantial contextual differences that surround how and in what manner the offender was able to isolate the victim to their residence.

Findings in the present study support the notion of the church office as a location for sexual abuse, as other studies have suggested as high as 92% of all instances of sexual misconduct occurred primarily in a church office (Chaves and Garland 2009; Garland and Argueta 2010). Thus, when considering only the offense location(s), findings generally support Fegert et al.'s (2011) notion that sexual abuse that occurs at the church seems opportunistic in nature (e.g., during a counseling session). Future research needs to examine the specific context in which sexual abuse arises, how the individual location for instances of sexual abuse is selected by the offender, and what role opportunity may or may not play.

Findings revealed a number of key characteristics pertaining to offender characteristics being mostly white males. Offenders being male should not be a surprise since the majority of known adult sex offenders are male (Rennison 2001; Rennison and Rand 2003) and occupy 88% of all head pastor

positions in US Protestant Christian churches (Cooperative Congregations Studies Partnership 2010). This is a notion also supported in literature examining clergy offenders for sexual misconduct and abuse (Francis and Baldo 1998; Friberg and Laaser 1998; Garland and Argueta 2010; Thoburn and Whitman 2004). Thus, women in most congregations may not be in positions of power that can influence the propensity to engage in sexual abuse. That offenders are mostly white also mirrors what is known about most sex offenders (Ackerman et al. 2011) and those who identify as Protestant Christians (Pew Research Center 2007).

With the average offender age at 40.4 years, these findings are considerably younger in comparison to a prior study on clergy sexual misconduct by Francis and Baldo (1998), where they found the age range of clergy who have engaged in sexual misconduct to be between 51 and 60 years of age. However, when examining the average age of registered sex offenders found by Ackerman et al. (2011), the findings in the present study are close to the wider population of registered sex offenders. Simply put, this could mean that younger offenders are more likely to be reported to law enforcement. It is important to note that Francis and Baldo (1998) defined *sexual misconduct* as, “any activity in which a clergyperson, single or married, engaged in sexual behavior (sexual intercourse, kissing, touching or hugging with sexual intent, or use of sexually explicit language) with a parishioner, client, or employee of the church” (p. 82).

It is also important to note that the aforementioned study did not include respondents disclosing their commission of child sexual abuse, but only instances of sexual misconduct with adult parishioners in Lutheran churches. As such, this may result in a comparison of a wholly different offender. There are two possible reasons for this. First, it is possible that there is an inherent difference between men who engage in any sexual misconduct compared to those that engage in sexual abuse within these faith settings. Regarding sexual misconduct, the setting in which sexual misconduct occurs is crucial as it changes the power dynamics of relationships that exist, such as educational environments (Knoll 2010), counseling settings (Simon 1995), and faith congregations (Francis and Baldo 1998; Horst 2000). In the context of congregations, clergy who commit sexual misconduct have been found to suffer from high levels of narcissism, need for affirmation of their sexual identity, and sexual compulsion (Friberg and Laaser 1998). However, men who commit child sexual abuse are likely to suffer a range of issues from being less likely to pursue romantic relationships with individuals their own age to suffering from severe mental disorders and related issues (Miller 2013). Second, *Youth Ministers* were the second most commonly represented offender role (31.4%) in the present study. Generally, individuals who occupy the role of youth minister are younger because of their perceived ability to reach child and adolescent church members, recently graduated seminary school, or a combination of these and related factors.

For the final offender characteristic measured in the present study of offender-role, there were 10 individual roles represented. However, nearly two-thirds of all offenders held the roles of *Pastor* or *Youth Minister*. This finding is echoed in the John Jay College (2004) report, where 25% of offenders held the position of Head Priest, the equivalent of Pastor in most Protestant Christian churches. However, this finding is in contrast to a sexual misconduct finding by Thoburn and Whitman (2004) that individuals most likely to engage in sexual misconduct were *Associate Pastors*.

It may be that those in the primary position of power and control in the church are those that are the most likely to offend in this environment. It is also possible that those in the primary position of power within their church view sexual offending as a mere extension of their power and control over their environment and their congregants. This is especially probable since power and control have been identified as key traits for male rapists with female victims (Brownmiller 1975; Stermac and Segal 1989). Future research needs to explore the specific mechanisms of how power and control inherent in one’s role within the church are utilized, if at all, by the offenders in order to sexually abuse child congregants.

The third most frequent offender role was that of *Youth Volunteer* at 8.3% ( $n = 26$ ) of offenders. Similar to *Youth Ministers*, *Youth Volunteers* may also have considerable power and control over youth group activities and members. However, the volunteer nature of the role may severely restrict the

amount of total control one could exert. One important consideration in regards to *Youth Volunteers* is that these individuals may be more likely to have originally sought such a position in order to sexually offend, as unguarded access to a child has been identified as a key characteristic in child sexual abuse (see [Colton et al. 2010](#); [Sullivan and Beech 2004](#); [Wortley and Smallbone 2006](#)). The role of unguarded access to children may also prove useful for explaining four of the remaining seven offender roles (25.7%) that consisted of a volunteer position within the church, similar to offenders known to target other youth-centric organizations (e.g., daycares and youth athletic organizations) (see [Brackenridge 1997](#); [Bringer et al. 2001](#); [Finkelhor and Williams 1988](#); [Stirling and Kerr 2009](#)). Future research needs to explore the motivations for individuals to take on these volunteer roles. The original purpose for seeking-out such a role could be non-sexual in nature, yet the sexual offending develops over time. It may also be that individuals who are actively seeking volunteer roles within these organizations are for the sole purpose of sexually offending and seeking specific victim characteristics.

Although the present study has contributed to the lack of research pertaining to child sexual abuse in Protestant Christian settings, this was not achieved without limitations. The first limitation is in regards to the websites where the news articles were located. The possibility exists that each entity and/or individual that owned/operated each website that contained the news articles worked under their own bias or agenda. As such, an individual website administrator's agenda could potentially have influenced the nature and overall type of offenses that were included. The second limitation is that news articles only reported on those who had been arrested for the alleged offense(s). Consequently, not all individuals included as offenders in the present study have been or were convicted of their offense(s). The third limitation is that, due to the use of news articles as the primary source of information regarding each case, some useful contextual information may not have been present. Thus, the lack of some contextual information, such as the use of partners (e.g., administrative assistance or other staff members) to assist in the sexual abuse of children as was found to have happened among Catholic clergy offenders, was not present in examined news articles ([Boston Globe 2004](#); [Calkins-Mercado et al. 2008](#)).

There is one primary policy implication of the present study. Findings provide information on major Protestant Christian organizations (i.e., Southern Baptist Convention, United Methodist Church, etc.), in the US and abroad, pertaining to the types of child sexual abuses that occur in Protestant Christian settings and offense characteristics. Therefore, major Protestant Christian organizations can potentially use this information to craft actual and model policies to be adopted by member churches to assist in prevention, intervention, and response efforts. For example, policies prohibiting adults being alone with minor congregants on-site or off-site could potentially curtail a significant number of offenses that become known to law enforcement as has been suggested previously ([U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2007](#)).

Continued examination of sex offenses that occur at or through activities provided by Protestant Christian churches is crucial, with millions of youth estimated to participate in church-sponsored activities on a weekly or more basis in the US, with thousands of males in key power positions. Thus, the potential for continued sexual victimization remains high. Unless future research continues to examine this important topic, effective prevention, investigation, and intervention methods cannot be fully developed to counter such issues of sexual victimization within the estimated 314,000 Protestant Christian churches currently in the United States.

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