Abstract

RISK ASSESSMENT OF SEXUALLY ABUSIVE CLERGY: UTILITY OF SEX OFFENDER RISK INSTRUMENTS WITH A UNIQUE OFFENDER SUBGROUP

by

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Sex offender risk instruments provide empirically based outlooks on recidivism risk and often serve as a critical part of sex offender management. If applied to unrepresented offender groups, these instruments may offer inaccurate pictures of risk and hinder efforts to reduce sexual violence. With little research available on sexually abusive clergy prior to the abuse scandal of the early 2000s, sexually abusive clergy are one group not represented in the research used to develop risk measures. An understanding of the validity of current risk assessment practices with sexually abusive clergy is critical and timely, as changes to the handling of abuse by the Church will lead to increased need for risk assessment in the community.

Based on archival file data of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church and data from a state-wide investigation of sex offenders ($N = 6,934$), the current series of studies were designed to incrementally identify differences between sexually abusive clergy and general sex offenders, evaluate the validity of current risk instruments with clergy, and explore alternatives to improve risk assessment with clergy. Study 1, which compared clergy and general offenders over the course of their offending history, found that clergy exhibited different patterns from general sex offenders on most variables included in risk measures. Study 2 ($N = 2,852$) examined recidivism in relation to scores on established risk measures. Recidivism rates for clergy (14%) were similar to rates from the body of sex offender research. Of the four instruments examined (Static-99,
Static-99R, RRASOR, and MnSOST-R), only the Static-99R predicted recidivism for clergy (and did so poorly). Study 3 (N = 616) identified additional predictors of clergy recidivism and possible modifications to current items. This revised approach resulted in stronger predictions of clergy recidivism, on par with the best predictors of recidivism for general sex offenders. Overall, results suggest sexually abusive clergy to be a unique subgroup of offenders not properly accounted for in current risk measures. Use of the Static-99, RRASOR, and MnSOST-R with clergy is not recommended. Future research is needed to develop proper and valid risk assessment approaches with sexually abusive clergy.