

EDUCATION, BUSINESS, & LAW

Across U.S. Catholic archdioceses, child protection policies vary widely

A report from CHILD USA, led by Professor of Practice Marci Hamilton, found that such policies lack uniformity, aren't comprehensive, and often don't take a victim-centered approach.



Marci Hamilton, the Robert A. Fox Leadership Program professor of practice, speaking on behalf of the Child Victims Act. (Photo: Courtesy of Marci Hamilton)

Although the 32 Catholic archdioceses in the United States have some sort of policy to protect children from clergy sex abuse, the content and quality of these policies varies, with little to no standardization across the board, according to a new report (https://childusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Archdiocesan_Policies_WhitePaper_10-1-20s.pdf) from the nonprofit think tank CHILD USA (<http://www.childusa.org/>), founded and led by Penn (<https://www.upenn.edu/>)'s Marci Hamilton (<https://foxleadership.upenn.edu/directors-and-affiliates/marci-hamilton>).

“We live in a time where everyone is asking, How do we prevent child sex abuse in every institution, whether that’s the Boy Scouts or the Catholic Church or at boarding schools,” says Hamilton, a national expert on child sex abuse and the Fels Institute of Government (<https://www.fels.upenn.edu/>) Professor of Practice. “In the past decade, some of the bishops have claimed to have the ‘gold standard’ for child protection and thus should no longer be subject to scrutiny or criticism for their past problems with child sexual abuse. We decided to examine the evidence.”

The project began when a district attorney’s office in Minnesota asked CHILD USA to assess the policies of the archdiocese of St. Paul & Minneapolis. The research team soon realized there weren’t good criteria against which to measure the institution, nor was there a great tool to use to do it. So, CHILD USA’s visiting scholar Stephanie Dallam created one.

Dallam began by analyzing the child protection and safe environment policies of every archdiocese in the country. Fourteen different policy types—from background screening and abuse reporting to victim assistance and evidence handling—emerged, fitting into four broad categories of prevention, detection, care for victims, and investigation and response.



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From there, the team broke down each policy into distinct components related to child protection, which formed the basis of the policy analysis tool that Dallam built. “She came up with a brilliant way of trying to assess what the Catholic Church has done within its own universe,” says Hamilton. The goal was to determine the presence or absence of each component within individual archdiocese’s policies.

“We came to the conclusion that, one, there is no uniformity, two, none of them has all factors that you would want to see in these policies, and, three, if this organization that has been so pressured to make changes has only made it this far, we need other institutions to create and establish this gold standard,” Hamilton says.

Some archdioceses fared better than others in the process. Washington, D.C., Cincinnati, St. Paul & Minneapolis, Boston, and Philadelphia ranked in the top five, reflecting more comprehensive policies in each of the four domains. Yet even those scoring the highest had significant room to improve, particularly in areas like victim response, investigational process, and response to abuse allegations, according to Hamilton.

“Many of the archdioceses have some prevention policies in place, and those include reporting to the authorities, having a victims-assistance program, and covering therapy,” she says. “What they don’t have are

rules about whether the perpetrator can go to church with the general population. There are very few rules regarding the rights of the victim in the process, but a lot of attention to the rights of the abuser.”

A shift to a child- and victim-centered approach needs to happen, she says, and should include ways to reduce retraumatization. For example, consider the needs of a child in the midst of abuse or an adult stepping forward as a former victim. Ensure that abuse reports get taken seriously and that the perpetrator doesn't remain in the vicinity of the child. “If you're a victim and you're sitting in the pews and you look to your left and there is your perpetrator,” Hamilton says, “that institution is saying to you that they're just not that worried about you.”

Though this report focused solely on archdioceses in the U.S., the researchers say it has implications for those in other countries. CHILD USA is also using the analysis tool to assess policies and practices of other types of organizations; a report on the Boy Scouts, for instance, is forthcoming, Hamilton says.

Beyond that, CHILD USA is itself working to help establish best practices for policies around clergy sex abuse. “We are convening experts to discuss putting together what will be, in our view, the gold standard for the protection of children,” Hamilton says. “This is an example of what makes us different from other child protection organizations: We put the best social science together with the best legal analysis to come up with better policies.”

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