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UNH Professor Cautions About Legacy of Clergy Abuse Scandal

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DURHAM, N.H.-- A University of New Hampshire sociologist warned this week about possible negative fallout for future child protection efforts as a result of the clergy abuse scandal that has dominated the child welfare news over the last two years.

David Finkelhor, director of UNH's Crimes against Children Research Center, who also was appointed to a special advisory commission by Cardinal Bernard Law, expresses these concerns in a commentary published in *Child Abuse and Neglect*, the leading scientific journal of that field.

Among the concerns he cites are that other more common forms of child maltreatment may go unrecognized, that treatment programs for child molesters may be discredited, and that some victims may be re-traumatized in a rush for more civil litigation.

Finkelhor also points out some of the beneficial effects the scandal has had. He writes that it has put many organizations besides churches on notice that they cannot just quietly dismiss employees about whom credible abuse complaints are made without reporting, investigation and follow-up.

He also draws attention to the many men, including working-class men, who came forward during the scandal to talk publicly about their victimization, making it easier in the future for boys and men to disclose.

But he urges colleagues in the child protection field to be critical about the extensive publicity the scandal has generated. Sexual abuse, he points out, makes up less than 10 percent of all child maltreatment coming to official attention. He believes seriously harmful physical abuse and emotional abuse have also been prevalent in religious and other youth serving organizations, but it is getting increasingly hard to draw people's attention to these other forms of child maltreatment.

He also argues that the scandal reinforced many of the most insidious and extreme stereotypes about child molesters: that they are uniformly compulsive, impervious to treatment, and destined to re-offend. He argues the spectrum of offenders, clergy offenders included, is very broad, and contains many who can benefit from treatment and, with proper management, be rehabilitated.

Finkelhor also is concerned that the successful Catholic Church litigation may result in a tidal

wave of new civil lawsuits. Unlike child abuse treatment and investigation work, the handling of civil litigation has not been similarly scrutinized with an eye to establishing best practices that are minimally traumatizing to this vulnerable victim group. In a new rush to sue, he says, victims may not truly come out the winners.

“Public controversies are not sporting events,” Finkelhor writes. “Responsible advocates cannot simply root for their team and go home happy when they win. The excesses and misconceptions of any ... public exorcism may come back to haunt the field later on.”