

MEDIA RELEASE

29 April 2024



Journey to safeguard children ongoing in Catholic Church – study

Lay members of the Catholic Church have scored lowest on a range of child safeguarding measures compared with those holding other roles, new ACU-led global research shows.

Clergy recorded the strongest results when it came to their positive attitudes and taking personal responsibility for safeguarding children, as well as their awareness of policies, procedures, and cultures that support safety.

The research, led by ACU's Institute of Child Protection Studies (ICPS), involved 184 participants from ministries in Australia, the United Kingdom, the Philippines, Ghana, India, Poland, and a tertiary institution in Italy, who were grouped into roles – clergy, postgraduate students, lay people, and school staff and safeguarding officers.

People in each group rated their beliefs about their organisational culture of safeguarding and **awareness** of policies and procedures, their **confidence** to act, their **attitude** to prevention and the agency of children/ young people, and their situational prevention **knowledge** and education out of a maximum score of five.

Lead author and ICPS Senior Research Officer Douglas Russell said the research, using ICPS's Safeguarding Capabilities Survey, showed people working in different roles within churches and church-affiliated institutions including schools and hospitals were at different stages of their safeguarding journey.

“This research shows us that safeguarding initiatives globally must focus on lay people in churches as well as clergy and designated safeguarding leaders to ensure widespread culture change and a safe environment for children and young people,” Mr Russell said.

The survey results, published in the journal *Child Abuse & Neglect*, and co-authored by ICPS Director Professor Daryl Higgins and members of the Global Safeguarding Alliance, found:

- Overall, participants scored highest in the knowledge domain (4.30), followed by attitude (4.07), confidence (3.95), and awareness (3.84).
- Clergy scored higher for knowledge (4.33), attitudes (4.21), awareness (3.99), and confidence (3.95) compared with lay people (4.18, 3.67, 3.53 and 3.68 respectively).
- Of the countries represented, the highest scores in the attitude and awareness domains were from the Australian respondents.
- In terms of their self-perceived prevention knowledge, respondents from the UK were the highest, with participants from Ghana recording the highest response in the confidence domain.

Professor Higgins said the research found varying levels of awareness, confidence, attitude, and knowledge, showing more needed to be done to keep children safe.

“When we compared these results to other Australian data we have already collected, the participants in this study scored higher in their knowledge and confidence, but lower in their attitudes and awareness,” he said. “But we know having positive attitudes is at the heart of effective safeguarding.”

Mr Russell said the results also showed participants from countries in which there have been inquiries into institutional sexual abuse, including in Australia and the UK, had more positive attitudes towards the importance of safeguarding compared with countries that had not.

“Conversely, participants in countries such as Ghana and India scored higher in their confidence to prevent and respond to child sexual abuse, however such perceived confidence must be aligned to knowledge and skill,” he said. “Knowledge and awareness in countries where there have not been national inquiries needs to be improved to achieve culture change across Catholic entities globally.”

Click [here](#) for a link to the study.