

OPINION
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Some accusations may be false, but most are all too real, says David Clohessy.

If ever anyone doubted that our justice system makes mistakes, surely those doubts have largely been erased in recent years. Innocent people do go to jail sometimes (though far more guilty people do indeed go free). With luck, new evidence comes to light and sets them free. And yet, they can't get those years back, nor easily repair their broken relationships, careers and lives.

Tragic? Absolutely. Yet proportionality must be considered.

For each relatively rare case of an innocent man being deemed guilty, we should remind ourselves that far more heinous criminals are never charged, never found guilty and never locked up. As a result, more vulnerable adults and innocent children are taken advantage of, exploited and raped.

Let me get more specific regarding what I know best: child sexual abuse by clergy.

For decades, Catholic bishops and their PR staffs worked hard to minimize the now widely documented crisis caused by thousands of twisted priests and hundreds of complicit bishops. They repeatedly claim (citing fundamentally partial and misleading figures) that most of the crimes took place long ago.

But they rarely cite one telling number provided by their own most knowledgeable source, Patrick Schiltz, who for over 20 years as a defense lawyer has helped more than 500 Catholic priests accused of molesting children.

In an Aug. 31, 2002, story in The New York Times, Mr. Schiltz admitted that "fewer than 10" of these 500 cases involved false allegations. Fewer than 10. That is a sobering figure, coming from a credible but unlikely source.

Reading Laura Beil's account of her cousin's plight, one cannot help but feel terribly sad for him and his family. Still, we must avoid the temptation to overgeneralize and overreact and assume that there must be thousands more such cases out there.

There are some, of course. We have no idea how many. On the other hand, however, we can be certain that thousands more kids are being horribly abused right now, most too confused, scared and threatened to report the crimes. And thousands more adults who were sexually assaulted as children silently suffer in shame and self-blame, too overwhelmed or frightened or hopeless to file police reports against their perpetrators.

They often lead lives of quiet desperation: unemployed, unemployable, too crippled with severe depression or mental illness or thoughts of suicide to be productive workers, stable partners or competent and loving parents. Finally, thousands of adults who suspect or witness these crimes are too reluctant to act on those reports.

Our natural and even admirable concern for Greg Speers must not be allowed to trump our equally natural and admirable concern for the most vulnerable among us, those who cannot defend themselves – the children. It is hard for an innocent adult to repair his reputation. It is much harder, though, for dozens of innocent children to repair their shattered emotional, physical and sometimes spiritual lives.

David Clohessy is national director of Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests (www.snapnetwork.org).