

Experts: Sexual predators hidden in plain sight

by [Greg Toppo](#) in the [December 13, 2011](#) issue

The abuse allegations at Penn State seem unthinkable: revered assistant coach and prominent community activist Jerry Sandusky preying on eight children. But such abuses of trust occur repeatedly across the country.

Experts say respected people who set up charitable or social groups for children, only to be implicated in some form of child sexual abuse, are a frightening reality.

"I call them 'institutions of trust,'" said Portland, Oregon, attorney Kelly Clark, who has represented more than 300 sexual abuse victims. Some predators are so tacitly trusted "that when something like this happens, the instinctive reaction is, 'That can't happen here. We can't allow the mission to be compromised,'" he said.

Abuse experts say the common denominator in many such crimes is the willingness of parents to allow noted people to have unrestricted access to their kids.

Among recent cases:

- A Utah judge sentenced a 70-year-old orphanage cofounder to three consecutive terms of five years to life in prison after he pleaded guilty to three counts of abuse. Lon Kennard originally faced 43 counts dating to 1995, but most charges were dropped as part of a plea deal. Kennard's victims included six children adopted from Ethiopia, where he and his wife helped establish an orphanage.
- A Miami jury on November 10 returned a \$100 million verdict against a retired Roman Catholic priest accused of sexually abusing dozens of boys since the 1980s in the city's Little Haiti neighborhood. More than 20 people say Neil Doherty, 68, trolled for victims wearing his priest's collar.
- In Portland, Oregon, a jury last year awarded a 38-year-old former Boy Scout \$1.4 million, finding the national Boy Scouts of America and a local council negligent in a sexual abuse case involving an assistant scoutmaster and

convicted pedophile.

"A pedophile is going to go where they have access to children," said Richard Serbin, an Altoona, Pennsylvania, attorney who has represented 150 clergy sexual abuse victims statewide since 1987. He said the Penn State allegations parallel the Catholic Church scandals. In each case, he said, the institution unwittingly lent predators access and respectability.

Washington, D.C., journalist Patrick Boyle, author of the 1994 book *Scout's Honor: Sexual Abuse in America's Most Trusted Institution*, said reaction to the Catholic Church's sexual abuse complaints and those against the Boy Scouts of America was similar. "In both cases, there was a lot of willful ignorance among the higher-ups," he said. "They almost tried not to know things."

Serbin said Penn State head football coach Joe Paterno's response to sexual abuse suspicions was "disappointing." Paterno allegedly reported the incident to a supervisor without summoning the police or pursuing the matter further.

"It appears to me that no one wanted to ask the pertinent questions," Serbin said.

Clark also sees similarities to the sexual abuse complaints against the Boy Scouts; he estimates that about 50 to 60 cases involving Scouts are pending in courts nationwide. "I call it 'borrowed credibility,'" Clark said.

Boy Scouts of America spokesman Deron Smith said that over 101 years, 150 million young men have been Scouts. He said the organization takes abuse seriously. Since 1990, he said, the Boy Scouts have included a pamphlet titled "How to Protect Your Children from Child Abuse: A Parent's Guide" with every handbook.

Since 2003, the Boy Scouts of America has required criminal background checks of all new volunteers, and it stipulates that at least two adults must supervise all activities. It also requires mandatory reporting—to the police and the local Scouting council—of "any reasonable suspicion of inappropriate conduct with youth."

In the Penn State case, "everybody seems to have done the minimum, instead of doing the maximum or more, which is what we'd expect of these institutions," Boyle said. "If you can give 110 percent on the field, why can't you give 110 percent for the victims?" —*USA Today*