News



Illinois Attorney General Kwame Raoul speaks on the findings of his office's investigation into Catholic Clergy Child Sex Abuse in Chicago, on Tuesday, May 23, 2023. Raoul released the results of a sweeping investigation into allegations of sexual abuse by Catholic clergy in the state on Tuesday. (Eileen T. Meslar/Chicago Tribune via AP)

Kathleen Foody

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Michael Tarm

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An Illinois attorney general's office investigation released May 23 found that 451 Catholic clergy sexually abused nearly 2,000 children in the state over a nearly 70-year period, which was more than four times the 103 individuals the church named when the state began its review in 2018.

Attorney General Kwame Raoul said at a news conference that investigators found that Catholic clergy abused 1,997 children in Illinois between 1950 and 2019, though he acknowledged that the statute of limitations has expired in many cases and that those abusers "will never see justice in a legal sense."

"It is my hope that this report will shine light both on those who violated their positions of power and trust to abuse innocent children, and on the men in church leadership who covered up that abuse," Raoul said, crediting the accusers for making the review possible. "These perpetrators may never be held accountable in a court of law, but by naming them here, the intention is to provide a public accountability and a measure of healing to survivors who have long suffered in silence."

The lengthy report describes Illinois church leaders as woefully slow to acknowledge the extent of the abuse. It also accuses them of frequently dragging their feet to confront accused clergy and of failing to warn parishioners about possible abusers in their midst, sometimes even decades after allegations emerged about a clergy member.

The review began in 2018 under Raoul's predecessor, Lisa Madigan, who released a blistering report as she prepared to leave office. Raoul committed to continuing the investigation and reported May 23 that 25 staff members reviewed more than 100,000 pages of diocesan documents and engaged in more than 600 confidential interactions with contacts.

Among those cited in the report are accusers who contemplated suicide after being abused, and who turned to drugs or alcohol in a bid to cope with "anxiety and feelings of unworthiness." One survivor, referred to only as "David" in the report, said a priest's sexual abuse of him as a child directly affected his career, financial wellbeing and ability to hold jobs. He told investigators he has "left, quit, or was fired from every job he's ever had."

"Survivors spoke of years, and often decades, struggling with challenges including insomnia, anxiety, trust issues, nightmares, suicidal ideation, guilt, addiction, alcoholism, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, issues creating and maintaining relationships, and sexual side effects," according to the report.

In a statement released May 23, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests called the report "stunning" but emphasized that the numbers of victims and abusers cited by state investigators are likely undercounted.

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"There is no questioning the facts of the report — until 2018 when the investigation began, hierarchs in every Illinois diocese kept known abusers under wraps, declined to include them on their accused lists, and refused to acknowledge the truth that survivors of abuse who came forward to make a report shared with them," the group said. "It is to us, in a word, disgusting that these supposed shepherds would lie so blatantly."

Similar government-led investigations detailing reports of clergy sexual abuse and church leaders' failure to hold perpetrators accountable have rocked archdioceses in other states, including Pennsylvania and Maryland.

In a joint statement issued May 19 ahead of Raoul's announcement, the state's Catholic dioceses released summaries of their current process following an accusation of abuse and said the attorney general's review prompted a review of their policies and unspecified changes. Cardinal Blase Cupich, archbishop of Chicago, on May 22 called abuse "repugnant" but said the church in 1992 began overhauling its policies and programs and cooperated fully with the state's review.

"My hope is that the release of this report will be an occasion for the attorney general to issue a rallying cry to all adults to join in the work of safeguarding

children, lest this moment be a lost opportunity," Cupich said. "I stand ready to continue to do my part."

The preliminary report conducted under Madigan found that the dioceses had done a woefully inadequate job of investigating allegations. Raoul, too, accused Catholic leaders of making decisions and policies that "allowed known child sex abusers to hide, often in plain sight."

In its statement May 23, SNAP also called on other attorneys general and prosecutors to initiate similar investigations of Catholic dioceses under their authority.

"For many survivors, secular investigations like this will open an area for new conversations, healing among fellow victims, and assisting communities to comprehend the horrors of their past and the risk of their present," the group said. "When the legal system fails to provide victims with justice, statewide investigations can assist citizens and survivors in communicating essential facts about the global scourge of child sexual abuse."

The Catholic Conference of Illinois says 3.5 million Catholics make up approximately 27% of Illinois' total population, and that the Church maintains 949 parishes and has 2,215 priests, 1,372 deacons, and 260 religious brothers.

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