News



Ombudsman Angel Gabilondo, right, delivers a report on the country's first independent probe into the abuse of minors within the Catholic Church to President of the Congress Francina Armengol, left, at the Spanish parliament in Madrid, Spain, Friday, Oct. 27, 2023. A survey released Oct. 27 indicates some 440,000 people may have been victims of sexual abuse by Catholic church clergy or lay people connected to the church in recent decades in Spain. The survey was part of a damning report by the Ombudsman's office following an 18-month independent investigation of 487 cases. The report was handed to Parliament. (Jesus Hellin/Europa Press via AP)

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Spain's first official probe of sex abuse by clergy members or other people connected to the Catholic Church in the country included a survey that indicated that the number of victims could run into hundreds of thousands.

The survey was part of a damning report by the office of Spain's ombudsman, or "defensor del pueblo," following an 18-month independent investigation of 487 cases involving alleged victims who spoke with the ombudsman’s team.

Ombudsman Ángel Gabilondo criticized the church's response to sex abuse scandals, saying it had often been to minimize if not deny the problem. He presented the nearly 800-page report to the speaker of the Spanish parliament’s lower house Oct. 27 and then to reporters.

"This is a necessary report to respond to a situation of suffering and loneliness that for years has remained, in one way or another, covered by an unfair silence," Gabilondo said in a statement.

He acknowledged that the church had taken steps to address both abuse by priests and efforts to cover up the scandal, but said they were not enough.

Included in the report were findings from a survey based on 8,000 valid phone and online responses. The poll said 1.13% of the Spanish adults questioned said they were abused as children by either priests or lay members of the church, including teachers at religious schools. Of those, 0.6% identified their abusers as clergy members.

Given that Spain's adult population stands close to 39 million, that would mean some 440,000 minors could have been sexually abused by Roman Catholic priests, members of a religious order and lay members of the church in recent decades.

The survey conducted by GAD3, a well-known opinion pollster in Spain, had a margin of sampling error for all respondents of plus or minus 1.1 percentage points.

The ombudsman's investigation represents Spain's first official probe of the child sex abuse problem that has undermined the Catholic Church around the world, and the estimate from the survey is the first time such a high number of possible victims was identified in the country.

Gabilondo did not extrapolate the survey findings into a count of possible victims but said the percentages were in line with similar reports in other European countries.

An investigative commission in France, which has a population of nearly 68 million compared to Spain's 47.6 million, estimated based on surveys two years ago that some 330,000 minors had been abused by church personnel over 70 years.

The report calls for a public event to recognize victims, the creation of a state fund to pay compensation and for the Catholic Church to provide a way to help victims in the recovery process and introduce reforms to prevent abuse and compensate victims.

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Spain's parliament voted in March 2022 to open the country's first official investigation by the ombudsman into the extent of sexual abuse committed by priests and church authorities.

The government was forced to act after Spanish newspaper El Pais published abuse allegations involving more than 1,200 victims, provoking public outrage.

Acting Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez described the report as a "milestone" for Spain's democracy.

"Today we are a little better as a country," Sánchez said Oct. 27 from Brussels. "Because a reality has been made known that everyone has known for many years, but which no one spoke of."

He said the report and its recommendations would be studied and acted upon.

Spain's Stolen Childhood abuse survivors' group collaborated with the ombudsman's office on the report. Juan Cuatrecasas, a co-founder of the group, said the final document was "positive" but it remained to be seen how lawmakers respond to the recommendations.

He said the report covered a time period from the 1960s up until recent years.

Miguel Hurtado, who was representing an international group called Ending Clergy Abuse, called the report "disappointing" and inferior in its scope and conclusions to ones produced in Australia or Ireland.

Hurtado said the only effective model would be a truth commission with coercive investigative powers.

The Spanish Bishops' Conference is scheduled to meet Oct. 30 to consider the ombudsman's report.

A Madrid-based law firm is conducting a parallel inquiry ordered by the bishops' conference. Its findings are expected to be released later this year.

Only a handful of countries have had government-initiated or parliamentary inquiries into clergy sex abuse.