

Report: 330,000 French children were victims of church sexual abuse

by [Sylvie Corbet](#) in the [November 3, 2021](#) issue



Commission president Jean-Marc Sauvé (left) hands copies of the report to Éric de Moulins-Beaufort, president of the Bishops' Conference of France. (Thomas Goex, Pool via AP)

Victims of abuse within France's Catholic Church welcomed a historic turning point on October 5 after a new report estimated that 330,000 children in France were sexually abused over the past 70 years, providing the country's first accounting of the worldwide phenomenon.

The figure includes abuses committed by some 3,000 priests and an unknown number of other people involved in the church—wrongdoing that Catholic authorities covered up over decades in a “systemic manner,” according to the president of the commission that issued the report, Jean-Marc Sauvé.

The 2,500-page report said the tally of 330,000 victims includes an estimated 216,000 people abused by priests and other clerics and the rest by church figures such as scout leaders or camp counselors. The estimates are based on broader research by France's National Institute of Health and Medical Research into sexual abuse of children in the country.

The study's authors estimate 80 percent of the church's victims were boys, while the broader study of sexual abuse found that 75 percent of the victims overall were girls.

François Devaux, head of the victims' group La Parole Libérée (the Liberated Word), said it was "a turning point in our history." He denounced the cover-ups that permitted "mass crimes for decades."

"But even worse, there was a betrayal: betrayal of trust, betrayal of morality, betrayal of children, betrayal of innocence," he added.

Olivier Savignac, the head of victims association Parler et Revivre (Speak Out and Live Again), contributed to the investigation. In an interview, he said that the high ratio of victims per abuser was particularly "terrifying for French society, for the Catholic Church."

The commission worked for two and a half years, listening to victims and witnesses and studying church, court, police, and news archives starting from the 1950s. Sauvé characterized the church's attitude until the beginning of the 2000s as "a deep, cruel indifference toward victims."

"Sometimes church officials did not denounce [the sexual abuses] and even exposed children to risks by putting them in contact with predators," he stressed.

The president of the Bishops' Conference of France, Éric de Moulins-Beaufort, said French bishops "are appalled" at the conclusions of the report.

"No one expected such a high number [of victims] to come out of the survey, and that is properly frightening and out of proportion with the perception that we've had on the ground," he said in an interview.

Luc Crepy, the bishop of Versailles who heads an office fighting pedophilia, said, "This is more than a shock. It is a deep feeling of shame."

Crepy said a process was underway to put together funds and create an independent commission to handle church compensation for the victims.

Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni said Pope Francis learned about the report's findings "with sorrow."

"His thoughts go in first place to the victims, with a profound sadness for their wounds and gratitude for their courage to speak out," he said.

Francis issued in May 2019 a groundbreaking new church law requiring all Catholic priests and nuns to report clergy sexual abuse and cover-ups by their superiors to church authorities. In June, Francis said a process of reform was necessary and every bishop must take responsibility for the "catastrophe" of the sexual abuse crisis.

The shocking estimate of more than a quarter million potential victims dwarfs numbers released by other countries that have also faced national reckoning with church sexual abuse. But each country has investigated the problem in different ways.

Instead of limiting itself to specific cases, France's report made an estimate of the overall scale of the problem, extrapolating the number of victims based on studying specific incidents and nationwide surveys. —Associated Press. Masha Macpherson contributed from Paris and Nicolas Vaux-Montagny contributed from Lyon, France.