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Illinois' attorney general has ended a five-year investigation into sexual abuse of children by Catholic clergy in the state, releasing a nearly 700-page report that revealed the problem was far worse than the church acknowledged in 2018 at the start of the state's review.

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Illinois' attorney general has ended a five-year investigation into sexual abuse of children by Catholic clergy in the state, releasing a nearly 700-page report that revealed the problem was far worse than the church acknowledged in 2018 at the start of the state's review.

Attorney General Kwame Raoul said May 23 that state investigators found that more than 450 Catholic clergy in Illinois had sexually abused nearly 2,000 children since 1950. But Raoul and other experts say the finding is unlikely to lead to criminal charges.

That follows a familiar pattern — no rush of criminal charges followed the 2018 release of a bombshell grand jury report on clergy abuse in Pennsylvania or last month's report on abuse in the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

Advocates say they believe the report will help more people feel safe to discuss what happened to them with family, friends, support groups and law enforcement. They also say it could prompt people to file civil lawsuits, even for abuse long ago. They hope legislatures take further steps enabling prosecutors to charge older sex abuse cases and toughen standards for mandatory reporting.

"I'm proud of the attorney general and what he's done, but there's more we can all do together," said Larry Antonsen, a leader of the Chicago chapter of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests.

Raoul said that his office referred cases with potential for criminal charges to local prosecutors but he did not know of any charges being filed.

The attorney general's report acknowledges that Illinois limitation statutes are, despite legal changes, insurmountable hurdles to prosecuting nearly all clergy who abused children decades ago. Such statutes limiting how long after a crime a suspect can be charged are meant to ensure fairness and avoid issues such as witnesses forgetting over time and evidence going missing.

"Because the statute of limitations has frequently expired, many survivors of child sex abuse at the hands of Catholic clerics will never see justice in a legal sense," the report says.

Into the 2000s, the Illinois limitation statute on child sex abuse was 20 years. State lawmakers passed a series of laws eliminating all statutory limits on child sex abuse, effective Jan. 1 2020, though it is not retroactive for older acts of abuse, with a few rare exceptions. Similar changes were made to filing civil claims.

The push to scratch the limitation statutes on child sexual abuse was driven partially by the 2015 case of U.S. House Speaker Dennis Hastert. Prosecutors said time had run out to charge him with abusing boys while he was a wrestling coach decades ago, but they did pursue a case against him on banking violations tied to the abuse.

There are also practical obstacles, even when older cases might be prosecutable. Many of the priests accused of abuse in the '70s, '80s and '90s are dead. So, too, are many potential corroborating witnesses.

The report also says diocese evidence files — which would form the core of any criminal case — are often woefully incomplete, disorganized and sometimes include illegible handwriting. The report says churches typically don't investigate with criminal prosecutions in mind.

"Child sex abuse investigation files from all six dioceses sometimes reveal a bias in favor of protecting the institution over searching for truth," according to the report.

There's also little possibility of criminal charges against church officials who helped conceal abuse, said David Clohessy, former abuse survivors network national director. Without enforcing reforms to how churches handle these cases, "external forces have been and remain the only effective way to bring even a modicum of change we've seen," he said.

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In a Pennsylvania case against church officials' handling of abuse complaints, a 20-year effort to convict Msgr. William Lynn of felony child endangerment ended in December with a misdemeanor no contest plea.

Lynn was the first U.S. church official to face criminal charges but his 2012 conviction was overturned twice in the next 10 years.

Civil claims, however, can move forward in Illinois if a child was sexually abused in 2014 or later. But earlier abuse falls under the law at the time.

Attorneys who have handled civil lawsuits on child sex abuse said it can be worthwhile for survivors to sue, even for older abuse not covered by state law.

Marc Pearlman, a Chicago attorney who frequently handles such cases, said attorneys can often negotiate for therapy or counseling at the church's expense. Filing suit at least gives clients an opportunity to discuss what happened to them for the first time and be believed, he said.

Michael Mertz, another attorney who concentrates on child sex abuse cases, also encouraged people who experienced abuse to get legal help and evaluate whether exceptions to the statute of limitations may apply to their case.

"Illinois law currently allows victims of childhood sexual abuse to come forward where the church fraudulently concealed involvement in the abuse," Mertz said. "As this report shows, the church has been concealing the identities of hundreds of abusers."

In statements released May 23, diocesan leaders apologized to victims and said they have made substantial changes, ensuring allegations are taken seriously and thoroughly investigated.

The archdiocese of Chicago said in its statement that it offers "care, compassion ... and even compensation to all who come forward, regardless of the statute of limitations."

Some states have created "lookback windows" allowing people to sue no matter how long ago they say they were abused.

But in Illinois, it would take a constitutional amendment, according to a 2009 state Supreme Court decision in a lawsuit against three Catholic dioceses. The lawsuit said a priest acting as a school's guest speaker sexually abused a 14-year-old boy decades earlier.

Pearlman, though, said the Illinois investigation's release could create the chance to push a constitutional change through the Legislature and then win voters' support.

"The way to make progress is to continue to make small and medium and big changes when we have the opportunity," he said. "Something like the reports in Pennsylvania, in Maryland, here in Illinois, it creates an opportunity."