

Rhode Island Priests Abused Hundreds of Children Over Decades, Report Finds

The report from the state's attorney general, covering 75 years, faulted the Diocese of Providence for not removing accused priests and not contacting the police enough.

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By Jenna Russell

March 4, 2026 Updated 3:57 p.m. ET

A blistering report issued Wednesday describes decades of child sexual abuse in Rhode Island's Catholic churches, documenting accusations against dozens of priests involving hundreds of victims.

The report from Peter F. Neronha, the state's attorney general, also lays out repeated failures by the Diocese of Providence to remove priests or bring in law enforcement in response to accusations. Instead, investigators working for Mr. Neronha found, the diocese chose to handle reports of abuse internally, primarily by moving offending priests to new parishes.

The diocese transferred at least 30 accused priests to new jobs at least five times each, Mr. Neronha said in a news conference on Wednesday.

“So much hurt and harm could have been avoided” had the diocese removed the priests from their duties, he said. “Nothing explains it, nothing justifies it.”

Many of the abuses in the church have been previously reported, but the new report represents the most thorough accounting to date of both the crimes and their cover-up by church leaders.

The product of a review that began in 2019, aimed at giving abuse survivors a more complete picture of the scope of crimes committed in the state, the 300-page report covers 75 years, dating back to 1950. Its findings, involving 75 accused priests and 300 child victims, were based on the review of 250,000 pages of records provided by the diocese and 150 interviews.

The roster of abusive priests in the report includes 20 names that the diocese had not previously included on its own list of credibly accused priests, the attorney general said. Even before the report came out, the state investigation resulted in four prosecutions of current or former priests, three of whom were awaiting trial, he added.

In a statement responding to the report, the Diocese of Providence acknowledged “serious missteps” in its handling earlier cases of abuse, but it said that longstanding protections instituted since then have proven “overwhelmingly effective.”

“The report presents this 75-year history in ways that might lead the reader to conclude these issues are an ongoing diocesan problem or that these are new revelations,” the statement said. “They are not.”

The diocese also credited its own “unprecedented and voluntary agreement to extraordinary transparency” for making the state’s work possible. It stressed that it had no obligation to cooperate with the recent inquiry, but did so anyway.

“Despite how the attorney general now frames this as an ‘investigation,’ the report did not result from legal compulsion, criminal or civil administrative proceedings, or coercion by governmental power,” the diocese’s statement said. “This voluntary records review was made possible only because the diocese freely granted access

to the attorney general through a 2019 memorandum of understanding, set aside its valid legal objections and willingly endured six and a half years of persistent requests for over seventy-five years of material.”

The diocese further asserted that it was primarily its own reporting, and not Mr. Neronha’s efforts, that resulted in the prosecutions of James Silva, Kevin Fisette and John Petrocelli, current or former priests whose recent prosecutions were noted in the report. A fourth priest, Edward Kelley, was indicted in 2021 but was found incompetent to stand trial because he had dementia. He died shortly after the finding.

The report found that most victims were boys between the ages of 11 and 14, many of whom served as altar boys and in other church roles. The largest share of victims were abused in the 1970s. On average, it took 26 years for victims to report the abuse.

Mr. Neronha, a Democrat who took office in 2019, said the findings will be painful for many in Rhode Island, where as many as 40 percent of residents identify as Catholic. Some of his own friends “aren’t crazy about the fact that we’re issuing this report,” he said.

His parents, now in their 90s, “revered some of the people in this report,” said Mr. Neronha, who was raised as a Catholic.

The report includes a separate appendix with details of what the attorney general’s office said were each accused priest’s offenses. It also recommends reforms to prevent abuse and address past harms, including that the diocese create a financial compensation program for victims. The report also endorses updating state law to extend the statute of limitations for second degree sexual assault, and to explicitly include clergy in the existing statute outlining mandatory abuse reporting.

The state review found progress had been made in the diocese’s willingness to involve law enforcement. Between 1990 and 1999, it found, the diocese received 65 complaints about priest abuse, and referred only five to law enforcement. By

contrast, 55 such reports were received from 2010 to 2019, and most — 47 — were referred to the police.

But Mr. Neronha said his office's efforts were hampered by the refusal of the diocese to make its personnel available for interviews. "This report is limited by what they gave us," he said, "and I have no way of knowing if they produced everything we asked for."

Ann Hagan Webb, a survivor of childhood abuse by a priest at her home parish in Rhode Island, said at the news conference that the report had profoundly affected her by finally declaring her allegations "credible."

"You have no idea how important this is to me," she said. "To be called 'noncredible' by the diocese has haunted me."

She credited the state for showing how church leaders "enabled pedophiles while silencing their victims."

"This report should make Rhode Island Catholics gasp in horror," she said. "Read it. Please read it. By reading it, you honor the children who were hurt."

A correction was made on March 4, 2026: An earlier version of this article misspelled the surname of a former priest who was recently prosecuted. It is Fisette, not Fissette.

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