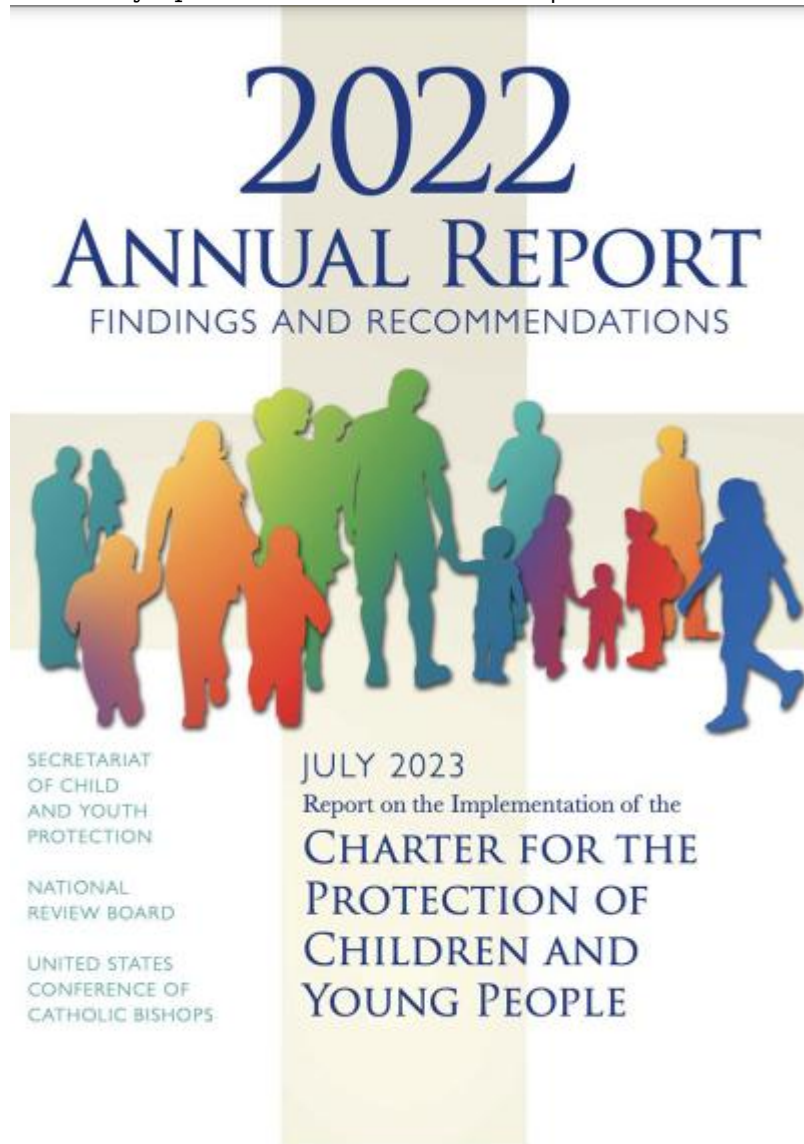


Fewer abuse charges in U.S. last year, more work needed

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |



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Abuse allegations against Catholic clergy and religious in the U.S. declined last year, but challenges remain regarding protecting vulnerable adults and ensuring online safety, according to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

On July 14, the USCCB's Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection released the "2022 Annual Report- Findings and Recommendations on the Implementation of the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People."

USCCB President Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio of Military Services said in his preface the report was "a milestone accounting of the continued efforts in the ministry of protection, healing, and accompaniment."

The document — covering the period July 1, 2021, to June 30, 2022 — consists of a progress report from the secretariat; an audit report conducted by the Rochester, New York-based consultants StoneBridge Business Partners; and a survey of abuse allegations and costs by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University.

Now in its 12th year of performing the audit, StoneBridge visited 62 dioceses and eparchies, 48 in person and 14 virtually.

The report itself is the 20th of its kind since 2002, when the U.S. bishops established the "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People" as a number of clerical abuse scandals emerged.

Commonly called the "Dallas Charter" for the city in which the bishops met at the time of its ratification, the document lays out a comprehensive set of procedures for addressing allegations of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy. The charter also includes guidelines for reconciliation, healing, accountability and prevention of abuse.

During the 2022 report period, 1,998 individuals came forward with 2,704 allegations of abuse, with claims down 399 from 2021 and 1,548 from 2020. The decrease was largely due to resolutions of allegations received through lawsuits, compensation programs and bankruptcies. Most allegations (83%) were initially brought to diocesan officials by an attorney.

Sixteen reports during the period involved current minors, with all other allegations made by adults citing abuse as minors.

The CARA portion of the report said that 194 responding dioceses and eparchies had judged 245 allegations of sexual abuse of a minor by a priest or deacon to be credible. Of those, 20 allegations involved children who were under the age of 18.

CARA also calculated that total costs incurred by dioceses and eparchies due to allegations were down 19% from the previous year, totaling over \$157 million. (Costs for men's religious communities, by contrast, rose 53 percent, approaching \$45 million.)

The secretariat said in its assessment "the year-over-year trends are encouraging as the number of current minor allegations in the U.S. remains low."

Many dioceses and eparchies "have taken certain measures that go beyond the specific requirements of the charter," StoneBridge noted in its report.

Among the measures cited were recurring adult training, parish audits and background check renewals (which are not currently required by the charter).

However, StoneBridge found that more than 30 percent of dioceses and eparchies it had visited during the report period struggled with "some dysfunction" in their review boards, including "lack of meetings, inadequate composition or membership, not following the by-laws of the board, members not confident in their duties (and) lack of rotation of members."

Auditors pointed out an unevenness in the charter's overall application, with "196 different implementations" of the document resulting from the various policies of dioceses and eparchies.

Another concern centers on the protection of "vulnerable adults," a definition for which is not contained in the charter, said auditors.

A year after the charter's most recent revision in 2018, Pope Francis issued the *motu proprio* "Vox Estis Lux Mundi" ("You are the light of the world"), outlining global legal procedures for how the church should deal with clergy sexual abuse, including procedures for investigating bishops.

The document, implemented for a three-year experimental period beginning June 1, 2019, included the term "vulnerable person," defined as "any person in a state of infirmity, physical or mental deficiency, or deprivation of personal liberty which, in fact, even occasionally, limits their ability to understand or to want or otherwise resist the offense."

On March 25, Pope Francis published an updated version with the specific term "vulnerable adults," without altering the previous definition. The revised text also was broadened to include investigations of leaders of Vatican-recognized international Catholic lay associations and movements.

Yet Suzanne Healy, chairwoman of the lay-led USCCB National Review Board, highlighted findings by StoneBridge in her remarks in this report, saying that while the charter addresses clerical abuse of children, "there is confusion in reporting matters pertaining to "Vos Estis Lux Mundi" and canon law regarding penal sanctions.

The board "recommends the pursuit of a separate auditable resource with specific guidelines for these adult and lay matters of abuse," she wrote.

The audit results represent 194 of the 196 dioceses and eparchies in the U.S., with the report listing the Chaldean Eparchy of St. Peter the Apostle and St. Nicholas Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy as not participating.

Father Richard Janowicz, vicar general and safe environment coordinator for the Chicago-based St. Nicholas Eparchy, said in an email to OSV News he was "quite surprised" to learn the eparchy had been listed as such, since it had been audited by StoneBridge on April 17 of this

year, and confirmed in a June 21 letter that the eparchy had remediated its initial lack of a children's safe environment training program. It remains unclear as to why the eparchy was listed in the report as "not participating," and OSV News has reached out to the USCCB for clarification.

Father Simon Eshaki, secretary to Bishop Emanuel Shaleta of the St. Peter Eparchy in El Cajon, California, said in an email to OSV News that the eparchy "did in fact have a full 'Protecting God's Children' program for 2022," but "unfortunately for some reason the statistics were not shared with the USCCB."

The dioceses of Birmingham, Ala., Lubbock, Texas, and St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands were each found noncompliant regarding Article 2 of the Dallas Charter, which in part specifies a required review board, comprised of mostly laypeople not employed by the diocese, that meets regularly and serves as a consultative body to the bishop. Each diocese subsequently corrected the deficiency.

For the Birmingham Diocese, the problem was one of timing, Donald Carson, director of communications and public relations, told OSV News.

Two resignations due to health concerns and the transfer of a religious sister left three vacancies on that review board during the audit period. The seats "have since all been filled, bringing the number of representatives not employed by the diocese back in compliance with the requirements of the charter," he said in an email to OSV News.

In the Lubbock Diocese, COVID was at its height during the reporting period and had "stopped many areas of our work," Lucas Flores, communications director, told OSV News in an email, adding that the diocese had resumed review board meetings.

OSV News was awaiting a response from the Diocese of St. Thomas.

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Bishop announces completion of independent review

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This is a follow-up to the diocese's internal review that was announced Sept. 10.

On Sept. 10 of last year I wrote you about the steps we are taking to address the clergy sexual abuse crisis in Arkansas. I disclosed the names of 12 priests and former priests against whom credible allegations had been received in the last 70 years. I also announced that an independent review of our clergy files would be undertaken by Kinsale Management Consulting. On Oct. 23 I provided an update, stating that since Sept. 10 the diocese had received reports of additional allegations of clergy sexual abuse from the public — most of which were against priests already listed; none of which were against priests who are currently in active ministry in Arkansas; and all of which were regarding events that would have occurred prior to 2002.

Although it is difficult or impossible to investigate, such allegations after a priest has already died, the diocese investigated all the new allegations to the extent possible or referred them

over to the appropriate civil authorities or religious orders. And all new allegations were also reviewed by Kinsale, who had access to all files contained in the diocesan archives, all confidential files, and all active working files.

We have also contacted several religious orders whose clergy may have served in our diocese at some point in the past and obtained additional information from some of them. Several orders are currently in the process of conducting their own external review (including Subiaco Abbey), with the goal of publishing their own lists sometime in the future. When they or other dioceses publish or update their own lists, we will update ours as well.

Kinsale's exhaustive review of over 1,350 files on clergy and religious who have served here has now been completed. They made no dramatic discoveries, but their efforts confirmed that we have a clear understanding of the scope of incidents of clergy sexual abuse committed in the past. The results of Kinsale's review as well as the diocese's ongoing file review and investigations were all brought before the Diocesan Review Board — a group of majority lay people who are not employed by the diocese and who meet regularly to advise me on various matters, including the credibility or lack thereof of such allegations against clergy.

Sadly, as a result of this entire process, we must add the name of one additional priest and one religious brother against whom allegations of abusing minors in Arkansas can be considered credible at this time.

There is also a report on how previous bishops handled allegations where is available here and on our diocesan website.

The following names, updated information on those priests previously disclosed, and an exit letter from Kinsale can also be found on our website.

Additional Diocese of Little Rock priests against whom credible allegations have been substantiated: None

Additional Diocese of Little Rock priests against whom unsubstantiated though credible allegations of abuse of a minor have been received:

- Walter Rajmund: Died 1990. Served in Arkansas 1956-1990. Two known victims.

Additional priests of other dioceses or members of religious orders, against whom credible allegations were made within Arkansas as confirmed by other dioceses or religious orders:

- Bill Wright, GHM: Died 2011. Served at Holy Cross Church in Crossett, Arkansas, 1982-1986.

Additional priests of other dioceses or religious orders who have served in Arkansas, against whom credible allegations outside of Arkansas have been confirmed by other dioceses or religious orders: Information regarding these priests can be found on the Diocese of Little Rock website.

Thomas Benkhe, OCD

Gabriel Hentrich, OCD

Albert Holmes, GHM

Kevin McCarthy

Bede Mitchell, OSB

Patrick J. L. Nicholson

Vance Thorne, SVD

In addition to the above names, I must address the public allegations involving Ralph Esposito, a diocesan priest in Pittsburgh 1967-1978 and in Arkansas 1978-2002. He appears on a list of 17 priests named in a 2007 group settlement of a lawsuit between 32 people and the Diocese of Pittsburgh, a settlement in which he was not consulted or involved. His case is listed as involving a "John Doe" accuser and based on his time in Pittsburgh, about which we have no further information. Significantly, Fr. Esposito does not appear in the list of 300+ priests named in last year's Pennsylvania grand jury report, nor does he appear on the Diocese of Pittsburgh's public list of those credibly accused of child sexual abuse. Although there have been concerns expressed about boundary violations with minors during his time here in Arkansas, at this time none of these seem to rise to the level of child sexual abuse. He retired in 2002, returned to Pennsylvania in 2005 and has not engaged in any priestly ministry since then.

Although to date the diocese has not paid any money to settle legal claims related to the priests included in our Clergy Disclosure List, since 2002 the diocese has spent approximately \$205,000 out of the diocesan insurance fund providing counseling and other assistance to persons alleging child sexual abuse by a priest, even including some cases in which the allegations were unverifiable but where the person was nevertheless in obvious need of help. We have tried to be as generous as possible in providing this help, always giving the person the benefit of the doubt.

As I said at the end of my previous letters, I once again ask for your prayers for all the victims of sexual abuse from whatever source, but in particular those who have been abused by a priest, deacon or other representative of the Church. I would like to renew my call for any others who have been abused or know someone who has been abused to come forward by first contacting the Arkansas Child Abuse Hotline (800-482-5964). And then please call our diocesan contacts: Deacon Matthew Glover, chancellor for canonical affairs (501-664-0340, ext. 361) or our victims assistance coordinator (501-664-0340, ext. 425). I am deeply concerned to see to it that we offer whatever assistance we can provide.

Let us continue to pray for one another during these most trying times in our Church. But let us pray most especially for the victims and their families — they are the ones who are hurting the most.

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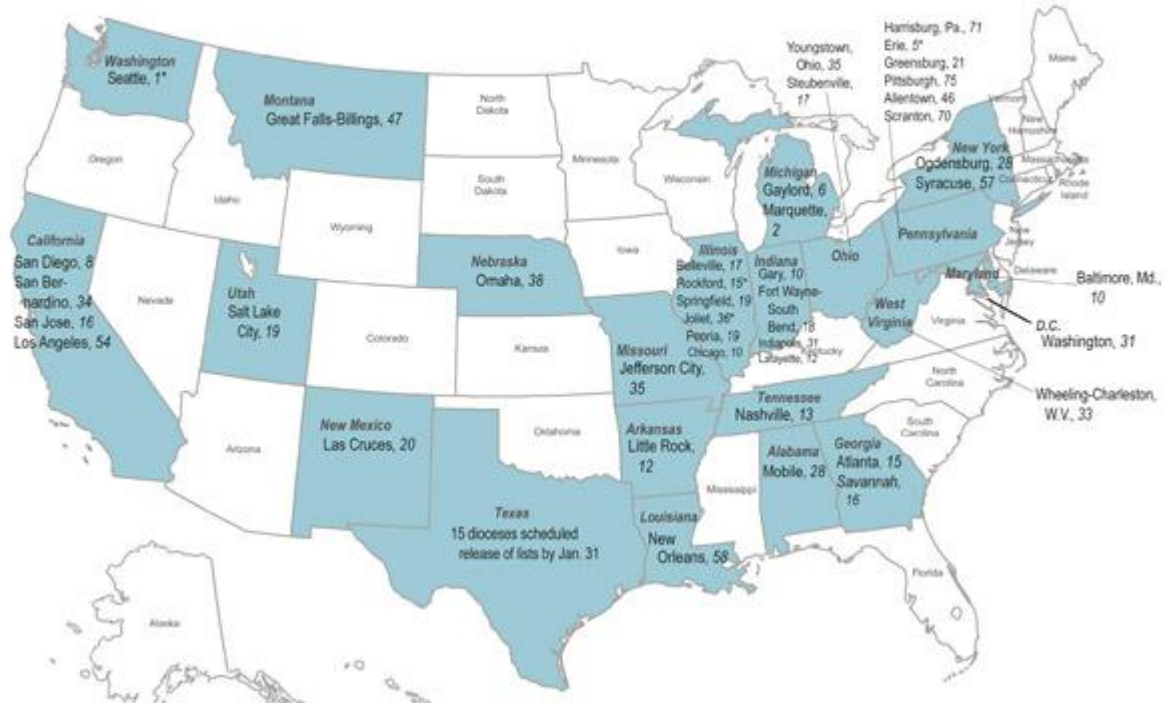
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written by Aprille Hanson Spivey |

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