

Results from the  
**Survivors Insight Survey:**  
Gender, Stereotypes,  
and Reporting

# Results from the Survivors Insight Survey: *Gender, Stereotypes and Reporting*

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 51% of Catholic Church survivor respondents were female.
- 81% of respondents were abused by priests, brothers or deacons. Eleven percent were abused by nuns. Teachers, volunteers, etc., comprised less than eight percent of alleged predators.
- 40% said that their perpetrator is not on any list of accused clerics published by a diocese or religious order.
- Survivors of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church prefer the term “survivor” to the term “victim.”
- Vast majority of survivors did not first disclose to a church official.
- 78% of respondents believe that civil litigation is healing for survivors, while only 53% consider church-run independent compensation programs to be healing.





## INTRODUCTION

### Who are the men and women who survived sexual abuse in the Catholic Church?

For almost 20 years, conventional wisdom has stated that most survivors are middle-aged men abused in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

But what if that assumption is wrong? What if most of the conventional assumptions are inaccurate?

This survey was created in an attempt to begin the process of testing conventional assumptions and creating a more accurate picture of the population of survivors of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church.





## BACKGROUND

Since 2002, when news about the Catholic Church sex abuse scandal in the United States first dominated headlines, the composition of the survivor population has been generalized based on a series of assumptions—as well as potentially biased, self-reported statistics from the Catholic Church.

“*...the composition of the survivor population has been generalized based on a series of assumptions*”

These assumptions, often perpetuated by the stakeholders themselves (media, survivors’ movement, and advocates), paint what can, at times, be an inaccurate picture of the survivor population.

## WHAT ARE SOME OF THE ASSUMPTIONS?

- 1 It is in the interest of the Catholic Church to accurately depict the demographics of the survivor population.
- 2 Males in childhood comprise the majority of victims because it is believed that priests generally have more access to boys.
- 3 Males in childhood comprise the majority of victims due to what certain spheres of the church call a “problem with homosexual clergy” (scapegoating of the LGBTQ community).
- 4 Survivors do not find church “compensation programs” healing or beneficial.



## ASSUMPTIONS FIT CATHOLIC CHURCH NARRATIVE, MARGINALIZE POPULATIONS

Unfortunately, the stereotype of the “sexually abused altar boy” fits a preferred narrative of the Catholic Church.

By citing a majority of pubescent and pre-pubescent male victims, some church leaders can (erroneously) claim that the sexual abuse crisis was a problem of homosexual priests. (<https://www.npr.org/2018/09/19/647919741/sex-abuse-scandal-deepens-divide-over-gay-priests>)

Supporting this “theory” is the 2004 John Jay Report on abuse, which cited a 4:1 ratio of male victims to female. These numbers, self-reported by individual dioceses, are almost the exact opposite of the gender imbalance of sexual abuse survivors in the general population. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6026962/>

Church officials and advocates cited reasons including increased access to male children by priests, the preponderance of male altar servers, sexual dysfunction caused by early seminary training, and the teachings and canons of the church (many of which equated the crime of child molestation to the actions of masturbation or the ordination of women).

However, it is also possible that the Catholic Church’s teachings and attitudes about women—their role in the church and the demonization of their sexuality—has led many female survivors to believe the false notions that the abuse was their fault, or **simply not abuse at all.**

As a result, the Survivors Insight Survey was born.



## CONFLICTING TRENDS IN CIVIL LITIGATION

According to attorneys who represent survivors of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, the 4:1 ratio of male to female victims is also reflected in civil litigants.

Why does this conflict with the data from the survey?

The answers show how female survivors are discouraged from seeking redress.

Women are often disenfranchised in the civil justice system. According to the American Bar Association, approximately 95% of personal injury cases (including child sexual abuse) are settled behind closed doors. In addition, settlement amounts for male victims of injury and abuse are higher across the board.

Women are also under-represented in the legal field that helps survivors. The same 2013 ABA study found that 79% of personal injury cases that go to trial are headed by male lawyers. Without a female voice, many women survivors believe that they will remain a “secondary” priority. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-04/cross-to-bear-catholic-church-domestic-abuse/8680158?nw=0>

A 2002 study used the “Attitudes Toward Rape Victims” scale to assess how members of the clergy addressed and responded to women who were sexually abused as children.



The study found that on a whole, clergy (especially those in conservative or male-centric organizations) tend to blame female victims, adhere to rape myths, and misunderstand the practices and results of predatory grooming.

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249675420\\_Clergy's\\_Attributes\\_and\\_Attributions\\_of\\_Blame\\_Toward\\_Female\\_Rape\\_Victims](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249675420_Clergy's_Attributes_and_Attributions_of_Blame_Toward_Female_Rape_Victims)

Finally, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation analyzed data from the Royal Commission on the Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. They cited that women were less likely to report or seek legal help due to prevailing anti-women sentiments in the church, including: 1) clergy calling child sexual abuse and domestic violence women's "crosses to bear", 2) fear of not being believed or supported due to the lack of women in the all-male hierarchy, and 3) church teachings on forgiveness, which included a "forgiveness at all costs" attitude concerning women and violence.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-04/cross-to-bear-catholic-church-domestic-abuse/8680158?nw=0>

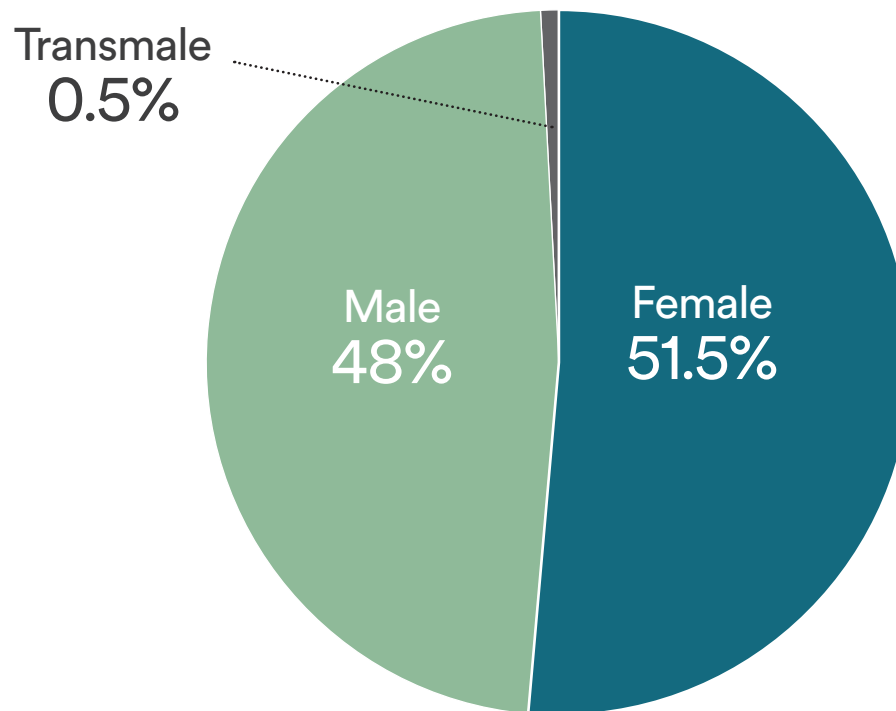


*“...they cited that women are less likely to report or seek legal help due to prevailing anti-women sentiments in the church...”*



## SURVIVORS INSIGHT REPORT: KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 1 According to the survey, 51% of Catholic Church survivors respondents were female.



## WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

This result directly contrasts the church's own self-reported numbers, which claim male victims outnumber females 4:1, and is statistically significant at the 0.01% level.

With  $n=171$ , one would expect to see a sample proportion ( $p$ ) as extreme as  $0.52 < 0.001\%$  of the time under the null hypothesis. Even at a significance level of 0.01%, there is sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis ( $P_0 = 0.20$ ).





- 2** Of those surveyed, 40% of respondents said that their perpetrator was not on a list published by a diocese or religious order.

**SURVIVORS WERE SEXUALLY ASSAULTED BY PEOPLE IN THE FOLLOWING ROLES.**

	Priest, Monk, Deacon or Religious Brother	148
	Nun	18
	School or Church Employee	15
	Teacher	15
	Volunteer	9
	Responses Other	8

**Note:** Many respondents were abused by more than one person.



**40%**  
**of predators'**  
names are undisclosed  
by the dioceses

### WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT

We don't have a volunteer child sexual abuse crisis. We have a clergy sexual abuse crisis.

Widespread fingerprinting and training programs (such as VIRTUS) for employees and volunteers should have a greater focus on identifying and reporting suspected child sexual abuse directly to law enforcement (as opposed to reporting to church officials, who are quite possibly the perpetrators as well). Since clergy comprise the majority of offenders, they should be a focus of greater scrutiny including fingerprinting, reporting, training, and monitoring.

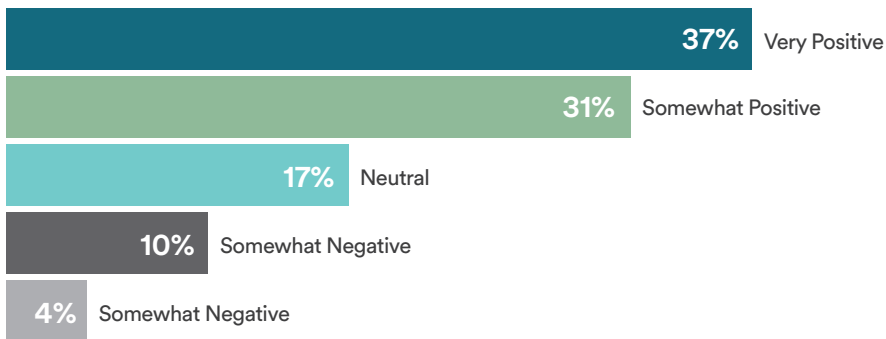
Finally, with 40% of predators' names undisclosed by dioceses and religious orders, we can conclude that there is a large number of predators still unknown or protected, facilitated, and covered up by the church.

*“Since clergy comprise the majority of offenders, they should be a focus of greater scrutiny including fingerprinting, reporting, training and monitoring.”*

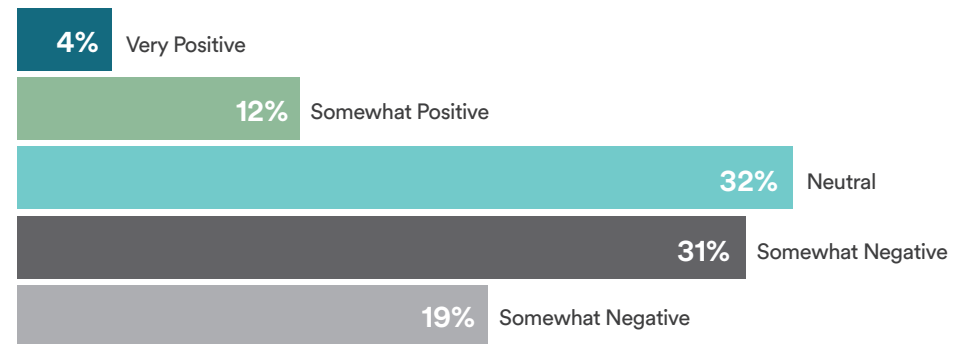


### 3 Survivors of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church respond more favorably to the term “survivor” than the term “victim.”

#### Response to the use of the term “survivor”



#### Response to the use of the term “victim”



### WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

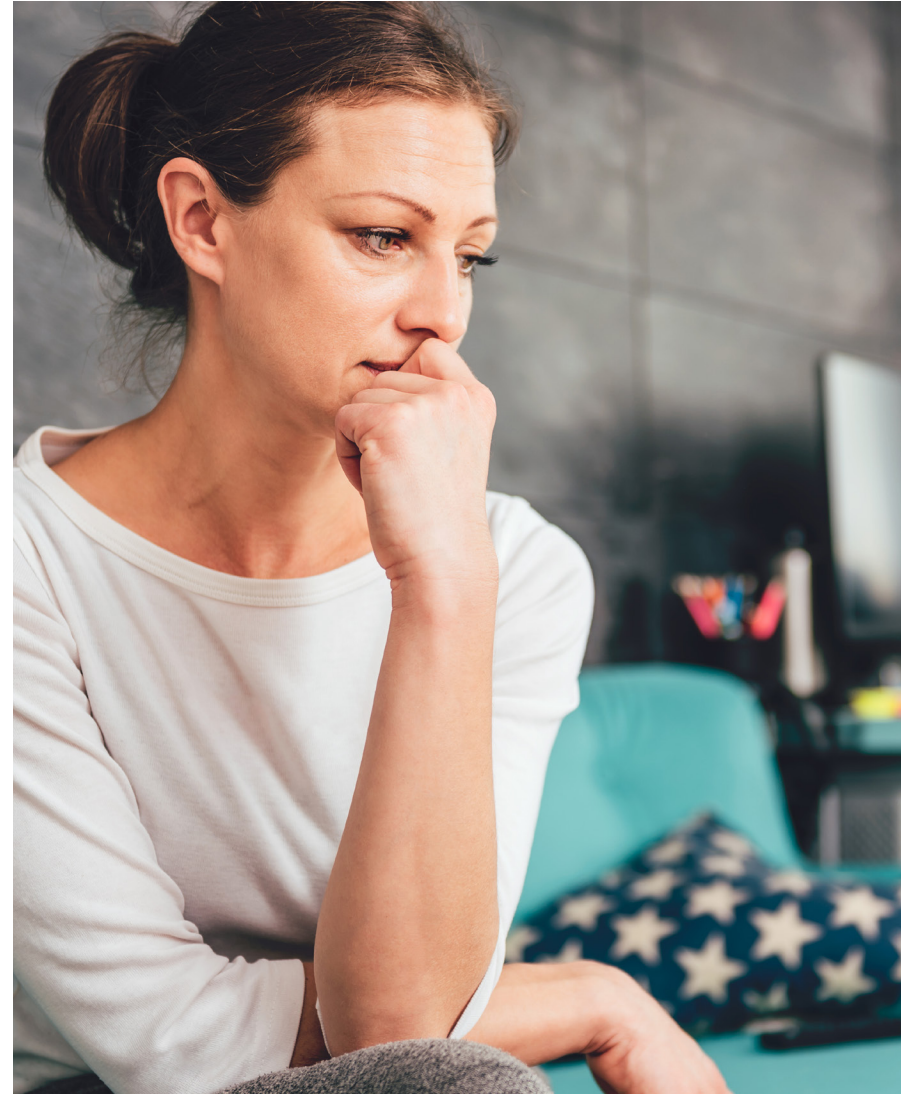
The terms “victim” and “survivor” have been used synonymously in literature about the sex abuse crisis in the Catholic Church.

Some dioceses have even combined the terms into “victim-survivor.” According to the survey results, however, most survivors do not consider these terms synonymous and do not respond favorably to the term “victim.”

According to respondents, the term “victim” implies negativity, weakness and/or the direct, short-term result of a crime. To the majority of respondents, it is not a term of ownership. Instead, a “victim” describes an event that happened.

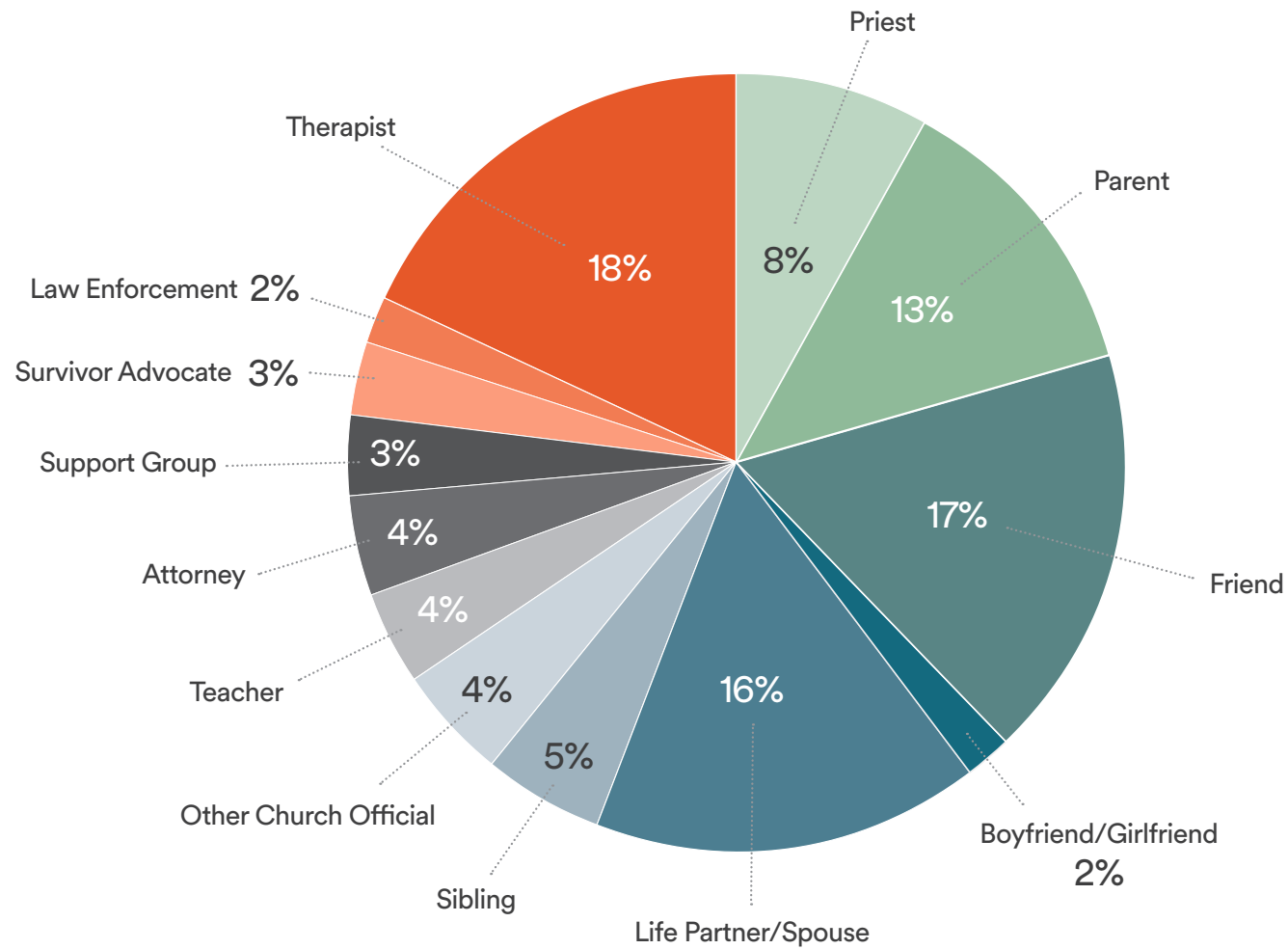
According to respondents, the term “survivor” is one that describes the journey of healing that happens post-abuse, including the person’s relationship to the crime and its effects, as well as the process of recovery.

Lawyers, advocates, media and other stakeholders can be more supportive through a simple change in terminology.





## To whom did you first report your abuse?



#### WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

The majority of survivors first disclosed their abuse to one of three groups: therapist, friend, or life partner/spouse. Only 13% reported to a priest or other church official.

While the survey does not ask if the abuse was eventually reported to the church, it does show that we, as a society, need to prepare and equip ourselves to listen to disclosures of abuse and act in a compassionate and safe manner. It also shows, as does the question about perpetrators, that widespread community education on the proper reporting of child sexual abuse to law enforcement is necessary.

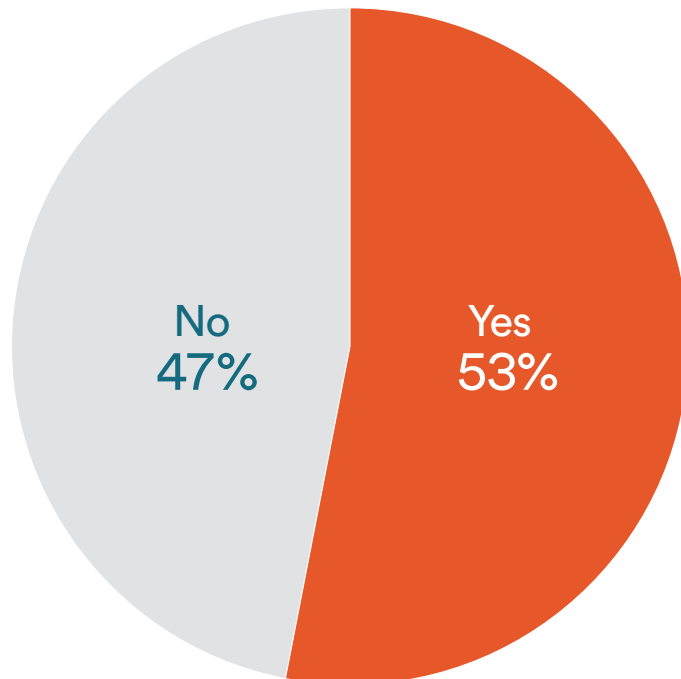




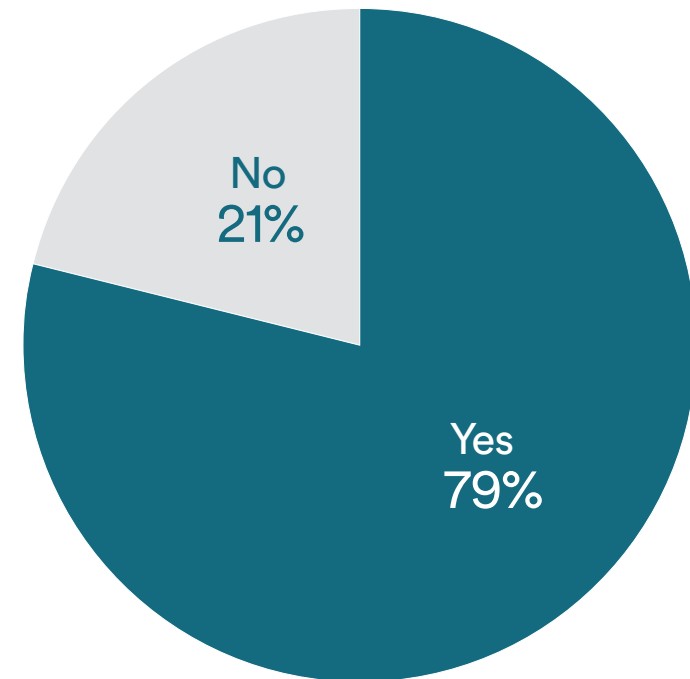


- ④ Independent Compensation Programs are viewed less favorably than the opportunity of civil litigation for survivors. However, more than 50% view these church programs as “healing” for survivors. An overwhelming majority—79%—consider civil litigation to be beneficial for survivors.

Generally speaking, do you think that the Independent Compensation Programs are beneficial to survivors?



Generally speaking, do you think that the CIVIL LITIGATION process is beneficial to survivors?






### ADVOCACY GROUP RECOGNITION AND OTHER FINDINGS


SNAP, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, is viewed well, with 73% rating the group's work "positive" or "very positive." Ending Clergy Abuse, or ECA, the group started by Barbara Blaine to focus on international clergy sexual abuse, is relatively unknown, with 49% of respondents saying they are not familiar with the group, or familiar enough to have an opinion.

While survivors of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church espouse the full spectrum of political viewpoints, the majority—58%—identify as "progressive." However, only forty-two percent say that issues surrounding child safety and sexual abuse influence their voting habits.

Eighty-five percent of respondents actively research the names of the person who abused them to determine the person's current job status and whereabouts.



**53%**  
of respondents  
said church-run programs  
can be healing for survivors



**42%**  
say that issues surrounding  
child safety and sexual  
abuse influences their  
voting habits



## CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

Additional surveys can and must explore the unique experiences survivors of color, survivors with immigration insecurity or refugee status, survivors from non-English-speaking communities, and female vs. male survivors. Other issues that must be addressed are the long-term outcomes of Independent Compensation Plans and civil litigation; the process of reporting to church officials; and language that properly relates to the survivor experience.

Additional questions should include the year of the abuse, age of the survivor at the time of the abuse, the survivor's current age, whether the crimes continued into adulthood, and the age of the alleged abuser at the time of the crime.

To aid in reporting, further surveys can ask whether or not survivors ever disclosed to a church official or law enforcement.

But what we do know is this: it's time to ask more questions and listen more fully.

## Survey Parameters

The survey asked 171 U.S. residents who were sexually abused in the Catholic Church a series of questions regarding statistical and subjective issues.

Survey participants were solicited through direct email, social media, and press coverage of the survey.

“*...what we do know is this: it's time to ask more questions and listen more fully.*”

The survey—delivered via Survey Monkey—was open between February 27, 2020 and March 19, 2020.

Results were interpreted with the assistance of an independent statistician.