



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Research and Information Service Briefing Paper

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Dr Lesley-Ann Black

Child protection and crimes against children

1 Introduction

This paper is an addendum to NIAR 156-11 (Child protection and referral statistics). It provides Members with further information in regard to child protection, in particular:

- Pregnant teenage mothers (in this case, those under 18 years of age) and the Child Protection Register in Northern Ireland;
- Details of child protection statistics in the Republic of Ireland;
- Child level data on child protection registration in Northern Ireland;
- Information relating to crime data and violence against children in the UK.

2. The Child Protection Register and pregnant teenage mothers

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) have advised that there is **not an automatic registration of either a teenage mother or her unborn child onto the Child Protection Register.**¹ If a risk or need is identified (for example, the teenage mother is living with or in contact with a person who is known to have abused or neglected children, or there are concerns regarding parenting capacity)

¹ Personal correspondence with DHSSPS to the author. Response dated 15.5.12.

then the mother and unborn child will be assessed.² However, each assessment is based on the circumstances of the individual case. The DHSSPS states that:

All assessments of the specific needs of the baby and teenage mother and any risks will be undertaken on a multi-disciplinary and inter-agency basis. Child protection registration is the product of a comprehensive assessment undertaken on a multi-disciplinary and inter-agency basis and, in relation to a teenage mother and her baby, will be specific to the needs of both.

The DHSSPS has also commented about the assessment process:

Pre-birth risk assessment

If a 'pre-birth' risk assessment and Case Conference has taken place (prior to the baby's birth and after 24 weeks gestation) and the Case Conference has determined that risks from which the baby will need protection will exist upon birth, the baby's name can be added to the Register when born – this is usually as an immediate protective measure. This should be followed by a Review Child Protection Case Conference as soon as possible after child's birth.

Registration of the young mother and her child

- *If on the basis of assessment of risk and need of the mother and child, it is concluded that there is a risk to the infant baby, the baby's name may be added to the Register under the category of registration appropriate to the assessed risk.*
- *The needs of the young mother should also be assessed, including her need for support and/or safeguarding and protection. Again, if risks are identified, then her name may be included on the Register under the category of registration appropriate to the assessed risk.*

*If a risk assessment concludes that registration of the young mother and child are required, **both** can be placed on the Register and appropriate services provided. However, this does not mean that mother and baby would not remain together when subject to child protection plans e.g. both could reside in a residential assessment unit or a 'mother-and-baby placement' (fostering) with the intention of assessing parenting skills and capacities to enable relocation in the community with required levels of support.*

3. Child protection data in the Republic of Ireland

The Committee also sought information in relation to Child Protection data concerning the Republic of Ireland. The Child Protection Notification System (CPNS) is a record of every child where the Health Service Executive is satisfied that unresolved child protection issues exist.³ When a child is placed on the CPNS, the child becomes the

² Personal correspondence with DHSSPS to the author. Response dated 15.5.12.

³ Personal correspondence with Aidan Waterstone, Office of the National Director of Children and Family Services. Response dated 30.4.12

subject of a Child Protection Plan.⁴ The decision to place a child on the CPNS is made at a Child Protection Conference.

Data shows that between 2007 and 2009, the number of children on the CPNS decreased. In 2010, the number of children on the CPNS has increased slightly, as shown in Table 1.

Numbers notified to Child Protection Notification System	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Total	2,719	2,430	1,822	2,176	Not yet available

Table 1. Data returns: Notifications to the Child Protection Notification System.⁵

The Office for the Children and Family Services in the Republic of Ireland states that this data should be treated with caution as it *“is not fully reliable as there are legacy issues in regard to variation from area to area in the interpretation of categories, definition of thresholds and criteria of prioritization”*.⁶ They have also advised that these issues have now been resolved through the introduction of standardised business processes in all social work departments and a review of ‘Children First’ National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2011).⁷ Due to these legacy issues, it is not possible to compare these figures on child protection registrations with those of the rest of the UK.

Table 2 overleaf - from the previous Child Protection research paper (NIAR 156-11), reminds us of how many children were listed on the Child Protection Register or subject to a child protection plan across the UK.⁸ In 2011, **50,552** children in the UK were listed on the Child Protection Register or subject to a Child Protection Plan.

⁴ A child protection plan is an interagency plan formulated at a child protection conference where the Conference confirms that the child is at on-going risk of significant harm. It outlines the actions that professionals and agencies directly involved with the family need to take in order to ensure the child’s continued protection and well-being.

⁵ Health Service Executive. Data available at <http://www.hse.ie/eng/services/Publications/> Website accessed 11.5.12

⁶ Personal correspondence with Aidan Waterstone, Office of the National Director of children and Family Services. Response dated 30.4.12

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ In England, a Child Protection Register is no longer held; instead, information is collected on children who are the subject of a child protection plan.

Nation	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
England	27,900	29,200	34,100	39,100	42,700
Scotland	2,593	2,433	2,682	2,518	2,571
Wales	2,325	2,320	2,510	2,730	2,880
Northern Ireland	1,805	2,071	2,488	2,361	2,401
UK	34,623	36,024	41,780	46,709	50,552

Table 2: Number of children on Child Protection Registers or subject to a Child Protection Plan at 31 March 2011 (or 31 July in Scotland)^{9,10}

In relation to this data, the NSPCC also states:

“It should be emphasised that the primary purpose of holding information about children who have been made subject to a child protection plan is to assist in the protection of children. The value of this data for statistical purposes is, therefore, a secondary benefit. Data is only held on children who have been identified by the authorities as being in need of a child protection plan. Many children who have experienced or are likely to experience significant harm may not be identified. These figures should therefore not be interpreted as a record of all child abuse.”

4. Child level data in Northern Ireland

As part of this research request, the researcher also sought more detail on the number of children who are new to the Child Protection Register, in addition to those being added (registration) and taken off (deregistration) the Register.

Between 2006 and 2011, the number of children on the Register increased by 46%, from 1,639 to 2,401 respectively.¹¹ On 31 March 2011, **2,401** children were listed on the Register (this figure is a snapshot and each child is only counted once). Of the 2,401 children:

- Only **386 (16%)** were new to the Register and had never been on it before;
- The remaining **2,015 (84%)** had been on the Register more than once before, indicating that a proportion of families have issues that are not always resolved, or that new risks are identified when a child comes off the Register.

Between 2005/06 and 2010/11 Child Protection Registrations **rose** by 82% from 1,166 to 2,123 respectively.¹² The DHSSPS has also provided figures for the number of children coming on and off the Register during the period 1 January 2011 to 31 December 2011:

⁹ NSPCC Inform: Child protection and referral statistics UK. Data available online at:

http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/statistics/unitedkingdom_wdf81294.pdf Website accessed 8.5.12

¹⁰ England figures also include unborn children; Wales data has been rounded to the nearest 5 for disclosure reasons

¹¹ DHSSPS Children Order Statistical Trends for Northern Ireland 2005/06 to 2010/11 p15.

¹² DHSSPS Children Order Statistical Trends for Northern Ireland 2005/06 to 2010/11 p1.

- There were **1,972** registrations (children added to the Register). This includes children who may have been registered then deregistered, and re-registered at a later date during the twelve month timeframe.
- There were more de-registrations (**2,164**), that is, children coming off the Register, during 2011.

4. Crime data (UK)

Many studies have been conducted to ascertain the prevalence of child abuse.¹³ However, abuse and maltreatment are often hidden and never disclosed, hence gaining an accurate picture is difficult.

Crime data is perhaps the one of the best indicators of child abuse. In Northern Ireland, **11,927** violent crimes against children were recorded by the PSNI between 2008 and 2010.¹⁴ Of these, 82% were physically violent offences¹⁵ and 18% were sexual offences.¹⁶

In trying to compare this data with the rest of the UK, unfortunately significant gaps in crime data exist. For example, the British Crime Survey excludes children under 16 who are subject to a crime from its data collection.¹⁷ The *National Statistician's Review of Crime Statistics: England and Wales* states that:

*"Data availability on crimes against children is important for understanding child abuse, neglect and domestic violence, and assisting in the development of programmes to tackle these problems. The Home Office has for some time been actively considering how best to fill this gap in the coverage of the British Crime Survey, and has recently consulted on experimental statistics on crimes against 10-15 year olds developed through extending the coverage of the BCS."*¹⁸

The Office of National Statistics has also confirmed that it does not hold data relating to crimes against those under 16 in the four jurisdictions across the UK, therefore a comparison between the number of children experiencing violent crime in Northern Ireland with the rest of the UK has not been possible.¹⁹

¹³ See for example, Radford et al (2011) Child abuse and neglect in the UK today. NSPCC

¹⁴ Bunting, L. (2011) Sexual and physical violence against children in Northern Ireland. A statistical overview of recorded crime. NSPCC, p5.

¹⁵ Violent offences include for example murder, attempted murder, manslaughter, threat or conspiracy to commit murder, GBH, wounding with intent, neglect, and cruelty.

¹⁶ Sexual offences include for example rape, attempted rape, sexual activity with a child, indecent exposure.

¹⁷ Government National Statistics (2011) National Statistician's Review of Crime Statistics: England and Wales

¹⁸ Government National Statistics (2011) National Statistician's Review of Crime Statistics: England and Wales p9.

¹⁹ Personal correspondence with author to Office of National Statistics on 23.5.12.