

Missing Separated Children in Ireland

February 2011

Introduction

Between 2000 and 2010, **513** separated children went missing from State care and **440** of them are still unaccounted for (Irish Times, 10th January 2011). Previously, hostels for separated children did not have round the clock trained childcare workers on site and were instead run by managers and security personnel.

The HSE social work team provided social work services to separated children in these hostels on a Monday to Friday office hour basis, meaning that during the evenings and weekends, the young people had no access to care supports.

The lack of adequate round the clock care staff in the hostels and the absence of a proper inspection regime meant that, amongst other shortcomings, significant numbers of separated children went missing from care over the last few years and some still remain unaccounted for.

Background

Historically, there has been a lack of child centred approach in dealing with separated children, with too much emphasis placed on the immigration status of the child rather than the interests of the child. This impacted negatively on the quality of care given to separated children in the State.

Certainly, the inadequate staffing of hostel accommodation by trained childcare professionals was seen as a contributory factor to the numbers of separated children going missing while in State care. It was also duly noted in various reports that human traffickers were most likely aware of the locations of the separated children hostels and whether they were staffed appropriately by qualified childcare workers.

Another significant inconsistency is that only a fraction of separated children who go missing are listed on An Garda Síochána's missing persons website <http://ie.missingkids.com> therefore outside of practitioners working in this area, there is not much publicity about these missing children except for the occasional media article.

Generally the main criticism has been the lack of the immediate and automatic placing of missing separated children on the website.

Joint Protocol between An Garda Síochána and the HSE

Children Missing from Care; A Joint Protocol between An Garda Síochána and the Health Service Executive, was set up to ensure a consistent and coherent response for every missing child, and to maximise inter-agency co-operation and promote the safety and welfare of children.

The Protocol, though certainly a step in the right direction, does not adequately address the specific issues of a separated child who goes missing. As the statistics indicate, a separated child who goes missing from care is unlikely to be found.

At a national level, both the HSE and An Garda Síochána have agreed to review the protocol after six months of operation and at appropriate intervals thereafter. The first review was due in October 2009, however it is not clear if this review was carried out and if a report is available.

Current practice in cases whereby a separated child goes missing from State care involves immediate notification of the GNIB and police station local to where the child was residing. A missing persons report and a photograph of the child (if one exists) is distributed to the local Child Care Manager who in turn will distribute these to all other Child Care Managers on a national separated children ale.

The separated children's social work team may also submit a completed Garda form, for the missing child to be placed on an Irish and international online missing persons website, provided that it is deemed to be in the minor's best interests. Social workers have stated that once referred as a missing case, the predominant responsibility lies with the GNIB and/or Gardaí.

HSE Equity of Care Policy

In late 2009, the HSE started implementing its Equity of Care Policy which would ensure that separated children receive the same level of care as Irish children in care.

After the closure of the privately run hostels, the four remaining residential units (two for boys, one for girls and a mother and baby centre) became operational in early February 2010. All were registered with the Social Services Inspectorate and subject to inspection.

The HSE also appointed Crosscare, the social care agency of the Catholic archdiocese of Dublin, to run the units and provide a 24 hour care service. These four units are now registered with Health Information Quality Authority (HIQA) and will be subject to inspection following the enactment of the relevant sections of the Health Act 2007.

The HSE met its target to close all hostels by December 2010 and started fully implementing its equity of treatment and care for all separated children in the State, and ensure they had equal access to quality care placements and education services as outlined in the Ryan Implementation Plan.

Conclusion

On a positive note, the early figures for 2011 show that no separated children have gone missing from care so far, something which should mainly attributed to the closure of the hostels. However, there are still concerns about those separated children who went missing from care and are still not accounted for.