
Members survey on children without parental care – Summary of analysis of 1st edition

Between March-June 2009 Eurochild carried out a survey of the situation of children without parental care in the EU-27 through its member organisations. The survey requested information on: the numbers of children in alternative care including residential, community and family-based care; the profiles of children in care; the outcomes for children in care; the institutional framework and availability of data; and the existence of standards and support for children's participation.

By June 2009 surveys from 19 countries have been collected and published in a first edition. A second edition will be published in October 2009, where data will be verified and missing countries included.

A few general conclusions and recommendations can be drawn from the surveys.

There is a lack of consistent, comparable data

It is clear from the surveys that data is not collected in a consistent way across member states. There are different definitions of type of care. Residential settings may for example include boarding schools, 'special schools', infant homes, homes for mentally or physically disabled, homes for children with behavioral problems, institutions for young offenders, after-care homes. There is no common understanding of what constitutes family- or community-based care. The system of data collection varies by country. For example, the Netherlands does not have data available on the number of children in alternative care, but rather has data on the number of beds available in institutions in four different sectors of residential youth care. There are differences in understanding of foster care, guardianship, kinship care and data collection methods.

- ⇒ *Definitions of UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children should be adopted across all countries. The EU must request a minimum set of data from all member states collected in a consistent way (e.g. those proposed by the Better Care Network)*

An estimated 1% of children are taken into public care

Despite the lack of data, it can be roughly estimated that around 1% of children are taken into public care. This of course varies between countries. In Latvia around 2.2% of children live in out-of-home care. In Sweden approximately 0.66% of the child population is affected. In Romania, approximately 1.6% of the child population is under special protection – more or less unchanged since 1997 (1.66% of children).

Across the 19 EU member states surveyed, approximately 110,000 children are in residential-care settings

This figure must of course be treated with caution given the above statement on lack of comparable data. The figure for the EU must be much higher given that 8 EU countries are missing from the survey including France, Germany and Poland.

Proportion of children going into residential care settings is declining in *most* countries

In most countries of the EU the proportion of children in public care who are placed in residential care settings has been steadily declining in favour of family-based care. For example in Ireland 85.6% of children are in foster care.

There are nonetheless a few exceptions. In the Czech Republic for example only around 25% of children are in foster-care settings and the number of children in institutions has increased since 2000 (Unicef Transmonee). Latvia and Lithuania have also seen an increase in the number of children in institutions.

Since new legislation was introduced in Romania, the number of foster care placements has increased by 35% compared to January 2005. Nonetheless an estimated 24,126 children are still in residential type services (2008).

In Bulgaria, whilst there were 7,276 children in residential homes in 2008, there were only 72 children placed in foster care (less than 0.01%).

Baby homes for children under 3 still exist in several member states

It is widely recognized that infants in institutional care for several months suffer irreversible damage to their brain development. But the practice of placing under 3s in institutions still exists.

Data from the Czech Republic (Institute of Health Information and Statistics – UZIS) of 2007 indicate 1,407 under 3s are in institutions. In Romania, although new child protection laws in Romania forbid the placement of children under 3 in institutions, maternities and paediatric hospitals act effectively as institutions in cases of child abandonment (4,000 new borns were abandoned in 150 medical units in 2004 – Unicef & the Ministry of Health). As a result of a procedural void, 31.8% of children left in hospitals/paediatric hospitals do not have identification papers – leaving them particularly vulnerable to exploitation including trafficking.

There is a lack of data on the situation of under 3s in our survey from other member states, but a 2005 study of the World Health Organisation estimated 21,955 under 3s were in institutional care in 2003.

Over-representation of particular groups as a result of discrimination

Discrimination is clearly a factor in placement of children in care.

In Bulgaria, Roma children account for approximately 45% of children in care. In the Czech Republic in 2007 24% of children in baby homes were Roma. In Hungary, children of Roma origin are over represented in institutions, sometimes by a factor of 11, compared to their representation in the population as a whole (officially it is not allowed to collect data based on ethnic origin on the basis of right to privacy).

Institutionalisation of children with disabilities is a major concern in many countries of the EU. In Latvia the survey reports that municipalities do not have the resources to give additional support to children with minor physical or behavioural disorders. Placing children in institutions avoids this cost – they are not under municipality authority.

Poverty is still a clear factor in placement of children in care

Despite the fact that most Member States exclude poverty and material deprivation as a reason for placement of a child, it clearly an underlying cause in many countries. Indeed the

lack of data around the links between poverty, social exclusion and placement of children obscures how poverty features in the decisions that result in placement, and how the most appropriate prevention approaches can be developed.

Eurochild, 17 July 2009