

**“there’s groups of men... they’re clearly targeting children in care. And I think it’s only the tip of the iceberg what I’m seeing with my own eyes.”**

# **PROTECTING AGAINST PREDATORS**

A Scoping Study on the Sexual Exploitation  
of Children and Young People in Ireland

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**“It [the sexual exploitation of children] was far more prevalent when we started the conversation amongst ourselves yesterday. We said, ‘Oh, my God—’ Like, we thought we might know one or two, but there’s twelve there now that I have listed and that’s just from brief conversations with my six colleagues, like... all of my colleagues were saying the same thing. This is certainly something that needs to be looked at deeper... we’re only touching the surface here.” (I/V12)<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Canning, M., Keenan, M. and Breslin, R. (2023) *Protecting Against Predators: A Scoping Study on the Sexual Exploitation of Children and Young People in Ireland*, p.40. Dublin: SERP.

## Background context

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The sexual exploitation of children<sup>2</sup> is a profoundly damaging human rights violation that has serious, immediate and long-term physical, mental, emotional and social health consequences for the victims.<sup>3</sup> In its fight against the sexual exploitation of children, Ireland, like many other countries, has recognised the child's right to protection from sexual exploitation by ratifying a number of legal instruments including the Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>4</sup> and the Council of Europe's Lanzarote Convention<sup>5</sup>. However, to meet the highest standards in the protection of children, Ireland must also ratify the Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography<sup>6</sup> which it signed in 2000.

The sexual exploitation of children can manifest itself in a variety of forms and appears to be associated with children whose life experiences make them more vulnerable. It is a complex issue that has proven difficult to define but some factors that are common to many of the definitions show that it is a form of sexual abuse of a person under 18, where the young person is manipulated, coerced or deceived into sexual activity in return for something they want or need and to the advantage of the perpetrator. There is an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the young person and it is important to stress that the sexual exploitation of children can happen even if the sexual activity appears consensual as many young people may not consider themselves victims, believing instead that they are in a 'boyfriend/girlfriend' relationship or are getting something tangible in return for performing the sexual activity. As a result, it is important to collect reliable and comprehensive data on the nature and scale of the sexual exploitation of children in Ireland, which while challenging, can ensure professionals respond in an appropriate manner when dealing with victims of sexual exploitation. Therefore, this scoping study is a first step to inform this process by seeking to establish what is known about the sexual exploitation of children and young people in Ireland.

## The study

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The aim of this study is to explore the sexual exploitation of children and young people in Ireland. The research was funded by the Community Foundation Ireland and involved an in-depth review of previous literature as well as conducting qualitative semi-structured interviews with 21 stakeholders from 14 agencies with diverse experience of working with, and representing children across a variety of sectors including residential care, homelessness, education, social care, advocacy services and policing. In addition to the interviews, separate consultations were held with two senior members of the Garda National Protective Services Bureau (GNPSB)<sup>7</sup> and ten staff members holding various senior positions in Tusla – the Child and Family Agency. The findings emerging from the research interviews

- 2 In this report, the term 'children' is used in its broadest sense as many young people do not identify themselves as children but instead as young adults. A child is defined as any person under the age of 18 in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (See UNCRC (1989) *UN General Assembly on the Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC). Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx> (accessed 12 January 2022).
- 3 Mitchell et al. (2017) 'Rethinking research on sexual exploitation of boys: Methodological challenges and recommendations to optimize future knowledge generation', *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 66, pp. 142-151.
- 4 UNCRC (1989) op cit.
- 5 Council of Europe (2007) *Convention on the protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (the Lanzarote Convention)*, (CETS No.201) adopted in Lanzarote, 25 October 2007. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/1680084822> (accessed 12 January 2022).
- 6 UN General Assembly (2000) *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography*. A/RES/54/263, 25 May 2000, entered into force on 18 January 2002.
- 7 The GNPSB provides advice, guidance and assistance to Gardai investigating sexual offences, online child exploitation, child protection, domestic violence, human trafficking and organised prostitution.

were presented to them so that their responses to the issues could also be captured. The study received approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee at University College Dublin.

## Key findings

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- The findings highlight a grave concern about the safety of children and young people being cared for by the State. Children and young people, and in particular girls, in residential care or who go missing while in State care, are being targeted for sexual exploitation in an organised manner by coordinated networks, or gangs, of predatory men.
- Participants reported that hotels across Ireland are being used as locations for the sexual exploitation of children and young people with hoteliers described as feeling ill-equipped to deal with and report what they are encountering.
- There is a worry that the sexual exploitation of children and young people is hidden as people in authority are not recognising or understanding the risks and signs of sexual exploitation. Difficulty or discomfort in speaking about it means that professionals caring for children and young people may fail to record and respond to reports of sexual exploitation. That said, efforts have been made by Tusla and An Garda Síochána in recent times to address these challenges by educating and training more of their staff about the indicators of, and vulnerabilities of children to, sexual exploitation and trafficking as well as providing them with clear reporting pathways. Specialised expert units that deal with all forms of sexual crimes against adults and children have also been set up in each Garda division in Ireland and it is hoped these efforts will lead to a more consistent and informed Garda response to the sexual exploitation of children.
- A further concern highlighted in the study is the length of time that it takes for children and young people in State care to disclose their experiences of sexual exploitation to professional care providers. Disclosure of such experiences requires the child to have a strong relationship of trust with the care provider which is difficult to develop in an environment where securing and maintaining the continuity of social workers and social care staff is challenging.
- Another issue that dominated the findings is the sexual exploitation of children and young people through prostitution. While not always named as such, reports of young girls in State care being coerced or enticed to provide sex acts to multiple men in exchange for a variety of goods prevailed. Poverty and addiction intersected sexual exploitation through prostitution, further emphasising the importance of the State recognising the need to address this intersection. Tusla has begun to address this in its plans to adopt a multi-agency, cross-community response to deal with the complexity of the risks of sexual exploitation that exist for children in its care. It is also critical that professionals have the necessary language to speak about this form of sexual exploitation and understand its complexity in order that they can take the appropriate measures to protect children and young people they care for from exploitation of this kind.
- Ambiguity, or a lack of understanding in relation to what constitutes sexual exploitation and trafficking, was also highlighted in the study. It is hoped that the planned additional training and education on the sexual exploitation and trafficking of children for staff in Tusla, residential care centres and An Garda Síochána will help improve their understanding of the complexities underpinning these issues.
- The study also illustrates the explosion of online sexual exploitation of children and young people in recent years. This form of sexual exploitation is believed to be associated with the increased use of smart phones and social media platforms by children and young people and the

length of time they spend in a vastly changing online world that many parents and caregivers are unable to understand and monitor, but which predators of sexual exploitation are using to their advantage. While many of the incidents of online sexual exploitation reported started as sharing self-generated sexual abuse imagery for a small ‘reward’, in nearly all of the cases reported, the exploitation escalated to extortion, intimidation or more widespread sharing of images across several platforms without the child or young person’s knowledge.

## Recommendations

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Based on this study’s findings the following recommendations are made to help safeguard and protect children and young people in Ireland from sexual exploitation.

### National policy on the protection of children from sexual exploitation

- The findings reported in this study suggest the need for a national policy on the protection of children from sexual exploitation. Responsibility for this policy should rest with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and be informed by relevant research that highlights children’s vulnerability to, and risk of, sexual exploitation as well as the experiences of State and non-governmental organisations working to protect children from sexual exploitation. Including sexual exploitation in the Children’s First Guidelines, as recommended by IHREC in 2022, would not only help prioritise this issue but would also trigger further improvements in the training of individuals responsible for the care and protection of children and young people from sexual exploitation.<sup>8</sup>

### Audit of residential care centres by the Health Information Quality Authority (HIQA)

- Revelations in this study that children and young people in State care in Ireland are being targeted in an organised manner for sexual exploitation and are taxied to hotels around the country are very worrying and require immediate investigation and follow-up action by HIQA.<sup>9</sup> While such findings are not unexpected given that previous studies have shown that children in residential care have a number of vulnerabilities that increase their risk of sexual exploitation, it is recommended that HIQA undertake an immediate audit of the residential care centres and assess the risk of sexual exploitation therein. It is also recommended that they consider drawing on the specialist knowledge that exists in the UK following the inquiries into the sexual exploitation of children in Rochdale and Rotherham to help inform the development of procedures and safeguards in residential care units here in Ireland that can better protect children and young people in their care from sexual exploitation.

### Support and training of professional care staff in residential care centres

- Significant discomfort was reported around speaking about sexual exploitation by professionals caring for children and young people. Not being able ‘to use the correct language risks minimising or even erasing the experience of the child’.<sup>10</sup> This risk is accentuated in the area of

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8 Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) (2022b) *Trafficking in Human Beings in Ireland: Evaluation of the Implementation of the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive*. June. Dublin: Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission. p. 25. Available at: <https://www.ihrec.ie/documents/trafficking-in-human-beings-in-Ireland/> (accessed 10 January 2023).

9 At present HIQA is responsible for the inspection of Tusla residential centres only. The Registration and Inspection Unit in Tusla is responsible for the inspection of all other residential centres – private and community run residential centres.

10 Rape Crisis Network of Ireland (RCNI) (2022) *Breaking the Silence: Terminology Guidelines for Data Collection on Sexual Violence Against Children*, January. Dublin: Rape Crisis Network of Ireland. p.7. Available at: <https://www.rcni.ie/wp-content/uploads/RCNI-Breaking-the-Silence-1.pdf> (accessed 27 October 2022).

sexual exploitation given the difficulty that children and young people have around disclosing their experiences of sexual exploitation in the first instance to professionals. Furthermore, if professionals do not have the necessary language and understanding of the complexity underpinning this phenomenon, they may inadvertently blame the young victims for their own experiences of sexual exploitation. Therefore, it is recommended that all professional care staff are provided with training and support to speak and listen to children and young people who disclose experiences of sexual exploitation to them. It is also recommended that Tusla extend their training on sexual exploitation and trafficking to care staff in all residential care centres so that they are trained in recognising the signs and risks of sexual exploitation and trafficking and that all residential care units have clear policies and procedures for staff to follow in order to safeguard and protect the children and young people in their care.

### Training and resources for An Garda Síochána

- The study reported a perceived lack of understanding by some members of An Garda Síochána of the risks and vulnerabilities of children and young people in State care to sexual exploitation. Instead, there were reports of children and young people being seen by some Gardaí as ‘problematic’, or even at times being blamed for their own exploitation while predatory men continued in an organised manner to target them for sexual exploitation. While a joint working protocol between Tusla and An Garda Síochána was developed in 2017 and a Child Sexual Exploitation procedure in 2021 to deal with organised sexual exploitation, they do not appear to be bedded down sufficiently, particularly given the evidence reported here of how some Gardaí are responding to reports of its occurrence. It is therefore recommended that in order to disrupt the sexual exploitation of children and young people in residential care centres the specialised Garda units must be adequately resourced, and their members, as well as all frontline Gardaí, trained to understand the complexity and risks of sexual exploitation, including that children may be slow to report or ever even disclose it. In addition, training of all frontline Gardaí to probe further into what happens when children go missing from care is required. The provision of these resources and training will enable An Garda Síochána to be better placed to deal with reports of sexual exploitation of children and young people in State care and prosecute those responsible for perpetrating it.

### Education and responsibility for digital safety

- Given the increase in online sexual exploitation, the need for education in digital safety for both children and their care givers as a way of protecting children from this form of sexual exploitation has been clearly identified in this study. As children’s access to internet-enabled mobile devices is a relatively new phenomenon, it is possible that parents are not fully aware of the dangers inherent in unsupervised use.<sup>11</sup> Hence they may need to be educated and prompted to put safeguarding practices in place to protect their children from risky online activity, as leaving children unsupervised in this context escalates their vulnerability to online sexual exploitation. It is also recommended that greater responsibility is placed on social media companies to make their sites and platforms safer and more secure for children and young people to use.

### Future research

- In order to help inform and improve the procedures and safeguards in Ireland to better protect children and young people from sexual exploitation, we need to first extend this scoping study

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11 Rudolph, J.I., Walsh, K., Shanley, D.C. and Zimmer-Gembeck, M.J. (2022) ‘Child sexual abuse prevention: parental discussion, protective practices and attitudes’, *Journal of interpersonal violence*, vol.37, 23/24, pp. 22375-22400.

and investigate the prevalence of the sexual exploitation of children and young people here. This would involve the collection of prevalence data using a combination of a survey of young people in Ireland that asks them a series of questions relating to sexual exploitation<sup>12</sup> and the completion of sexual exploitation risk assessments by social workers in Ireland based on their existing caseloads of children and young people in their care.<sup>13</sup>

- A larger research study is also required to explore in more depth what interventions could have been undertaken to help prevent, or respond more effectively to, the sexual exploitation of children. This would entail a retrospective case analysis research approach, using a template for case analysis, as well as in-depth interviews with professionals working with children and young people in social care, health, policing, education and youth work practitioners. It would ask them to reflect on and unpack the learnings from different cases they have encountered of sexual exploitation. In addition, the research would also involve speaking with women who are survivors of prostitution, and who may have been sexually exploited as children, to determine whether there were any interventions that may have helped prevent their sexual exploitation. All of this research would then feed into the development of guidelines and procedures to help practitioners be alert to, detect/ identify and then respond appropriately to disclosures of sexual exploitation of children and young people, and lead in turn to the development of better safety practices for children in future.
- Certain forms of sexual exploitation, that of child or forced marriage and in travel and tourism, were not reported to any great extent by participants in this study. However, the absence or limited evidence of these forms of sexual exploitation may be explained in part by the fact that representatives from organisations working with migrant children are unfortunately missing from this exploratory study. Therefore, more research by way of in-depth interviews with migrant organisations is required so that their voices and experiences are included and allow us to better understand the extent to which different vulnerabilities and marginalisation may increase migrant children's and young people's risk to different forms of sexual exploitation in Ireland. In addition, extending the research to include representatives from hotels and the tourism industry is also warranted given the reports that children were being collected at, or taken to hotels, for the purpose of sexual exploitation.<sup>14</sup>
- Given the increase in reports of online sexual exploitation of children and young people in this exploratory study, further research is warranted that involves more in-depth discussions with digital safety experts in policing, technology and education.

It is hoped that the above efforts will significantly strengthen the evidence base on the sexual exploitation of children and young people in Ireland with a view to enhancing policy and practice measures to protect those at risk and prevent future generations from experiencing the terrible harms of sexual exploitation.

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12 The proposed survey would draw on questions on sexual exploitation used to poll young people over 14 years in Northern Ireland and the UK (see Young Life and Times Survey: Sexual risks and exploitation (ark.ac.uk) (accessed 15 November 2022).

13 The proposed risk assessment tool would be adapted from an existing sexual exploitation risk assessment framework, developed by Barnardo's and modified by Beckett (2011) in her Northern Ireland study (see Beckett, H. (2011) *Not a world away: The sexual exploitation of children and young people in Northern Ireland*. p.16. Belfast: Barnardo's Northern Ireland).

14 Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) (2022a) Contribution to the 4th Progress Report on the Fight against Trafficking in Human Beings in the European Union. February. Dublin: Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission. p.23. Available at: <https://www.ihrec.ie/app/uploads/2022/03/Contribution-to-the-4th-Progress-Report-on-the-Fight-against-Trafficking-in-Human-Beings-in-the-EU.pdf> (accessed 20 June 2022).

## About the research

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Full reference: Canning, M., Keenan, M. and Breslin, R. (2023) Protecting Against Predators: A Scoping Study on the Sexual Exploitation of Children and Young People in Ireland. Dublin: SERP.

SERP in the Geary Institute for Public Policy, UCD, is the leading research programme in Ireland dedicated to building the research base on commercial sexual exploitation and investigating the impact of the sex trade on those exploited within it and on society at large. Our starting point is a feminist analysis of commercial sexual exploitation as a form of gender-based violence and harm. Our research in this field is designed to influence academic discourse and create useful knowledge for law and policy makers, practitioners, survivors, supporters and activists.

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**Community  
Foundation  
Ireland**

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**“I even think there’s still a bit of a whisper among professionals. I’m not sure that the full conversation’s been really fully had out there. And it’s almost like... it’s [sexual exploitation] named but it’s not named... by not actually fully discussing it, it’s kind of like ‘this is what we think is happening but we’re not really sure’... and we need to kind of say, ‘well, actually we know this has happened for this child’. ” (I/V10)<sup>15</sup>**

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15 Canning, M., Keenan, M. and Breslin, R. (2023) *Protecting Against Predators: A Scoping Study on the Sexual Exploitation of Children and Young People in Ireland*, p.41. Dublin: SERP.