

CAAB Research Briefing Note: No. 7

Audit of Child Protection Research Literature in Ireland 1990-2009

1. What is this study's purpose?

In 2009 the CAAB commissioned the Children's Research Centre and the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College, Dublin to conduct an audit of Irish child protection literature. The study has two key outputs, a database containing the information from the research included in the audit and a report summarising the key points from the analysis of the identified research, information on funding sources and appropriate conclusions. The report was independently peer reviewed.

This briefing note summarises the method of research, key findings and identified gaps in the research, conclusions and benefits of the study. The full report can be downloaded from the CAAB website at www.caab.ie.

2. How was the study undertaken?

The methods used to identify relevant research were database and internet searches and stakeholder consultation. The method used to identify funding allocated to child protection research in the Republic of Ireland in specified years was direct contact with research funders. The audit focused on research from 1990 to 2009 and key definitions are provided below.

Definition of Children: Children are defined as people from 0 to 17 years of age inclusive

Definition of Research: Research is defined as the process of answering questions and/or exploring phenomena using scientific methods; these methods may draw on the whole spectrum of systematic and critical enquiry.



Child Protection Literature: Responding to alleged or actual physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect of children but excluding research on general disadvantage and youth justice matters unless they are directly linked to any of the types of child abuse.

Relevant Literature: Articles in academic journals (peer reviewed and non-peer reviewed); conference papers; commissioned research undertaken by consultants and researchers; systematic research undertaken by government departments, agencies or independent public bodies; PhD studies of a significant nature.

3. What are the key findings?

A total of 190 research documents are included in the audit. The key findings from the analysis of the audit are discussed here.

Type of Abuse: Research in the area of child protection has tended to focus on child protection and the child protection system generally and sexual abuse. The types of abuse focused on in the identified research documents include cross subject, which is relevant to more than one type of abuse (111 or 58%), sexual abuse (57 or 30%), exposure to domestic violence (10 or 5.3%), physical abuse (7 or 3.7%) and neglect (5 or 2.6%)

Sector: The identified research was located in seven sector categories. Over half (54% or 103) of the research documents identified fell into the cross sectoral category, indicating that they were not specific to only one sector. The majority of primary subject areas (types of abuse) within each sector were also cross subject (70%). This cross subject research is focused on broad child protection issues or on the child protection system as opposed to focusing on combinations of specific areas of child abuse. This combination of cross subject and cross sectoral studies is potentially due to the multifaceted nature of child abuse and the number of professionals from different disciplines, agencies and services engaged in child protection work.

Type of Study: Over half, (110 or 58%) of the research falls under the heading of policy/practice review/analysis. This is further reflected in the fact that the research most commonly focused on operating procedures, followed by practice issues and policy framework, both in studies with a single focus and those with multiple foci. The lack of service or intervention evaluations is notable with only 12 (6%) identified.





Focus of Research: The most common focus of the research with a single focus was operating procedures (44 or 39%), followed by practice issues (26 or 23%) and policy frameworks (18 or 16%). In addition, in research with more than one focus, combinations of two or all three of these foci were also very common. This reflects the overlap between policy that sets many of the parameters of child protection work, operating procedures that influence the implementation of policy and work on the ground, and practice issues that deal with how child protection work is managed and organised. Overall, this data reflects a concern with the child protection system generally as opposed to specific forms of child abuse.

Type of Publication and Sector of Commissioner: The most common type of publication was the peer reviewed article (74 or 39%), with commissioned research accounting for just 7% (13). This is in line with the findings that 68% (128) of commissioning/publishing bodies and 74% (139) of research bodies were in the academic sector. It is noteworthy that little of the research identified was externally commissioned, with only 7% of the documents identified falling into this category.

Peer reviewed articles often drew on data from PhD theses as well as organisational/clinical studies and a small number of commissioned studies and it is notable that in a number of cases, there were several articles based on data from a single study.

Information Sources and Topics Covered: Direct research methods such as interviews and focus groups with professionals, practitioners, social workers, front-line staff and managers of services, service users and parents and family members were used in 55 (30%) of the publications identified. Direct contact with children and young people as a source of information was cited in 14 (8%) of the documents, with information on children being more commonly gathered from case files, professionals and family members.

A wide variety of topics are covered in the research included in the audit. Where research is located within a single primary subject area (type of abuse) and the sector can be identified, the topics covered appear to be closely related to areas relevant to that sector. Where the research is identified as cross subject and cross sector in nature, the topics tend to be more wide-ranging and include policy, legislation, victim/abuser profiles and the perspectives of a wider range of stakeholders such as parents, children, social workers, managers etc.

4. What are the gaps?

The Extent to Which Research is Available on the Different Areas of Child Abuse

The audit shows that the main focus of research appears to be on cross subject research followed by child sexual abuse. It should be noted here that the vast majority of cross subject research does not refer to the study of the combination of specific forms of abuse (such as physical and sexual abuse) but rather it refers to research that is located in the broad area of child abuse and child protection and does not address specific forms of abuse but instead these studies critically examine or review the child protection system. While neglect is the most commonly reported form of child abuse, the proportion of research on the topic is quite low when compared with the proportion of research on child sexual abuse. Physical and emotional abuse are each reported marginally less often than child sexual abuse but appear to be under-researched as specific topics.

The Extent to which Research Provides Cross Sectoral Coverage of Child Abuse Issues

There is a clear emphasis in child protection policy on inter-agency and inter-disciplinary working, as evidenced in policy and strategy documents. It would therefore appear appropriate that a cross sectoral approach is taken in relation to child protection as this can contribute to and draw on inter-agency and inter-disciplinary working, as well as providing more comprehensive and holistic analysis of issues and potential solutions. However, the audit shows that inter-agency and inter-disciplinary research on child abuse is relatively limited.

The Extent to Which Research Answers Key Questions for Policy and Practice

Examining the factors most commonly associated with child abuse reports and placement of children in out of home care shows that the most frequently reported type of concern is child neglect but the audit shows that only 3% (5) of the research materials focused on this. Child sexual abuse is the second most frequently reported type of abuse and is the topic which features most frequently in the identified research material. However, it is not possible to judge whether the materials are adequate or sufficient without a comprehensive assessment of the needs of policy

makers and practitioners. Nevertheless, it could be reasonably inferred that the comparatively low number (7) and percentage of material on physical abuse (4%) and the lack of material on emotional abuse are inadequate to answer key questions for policy and practice.

Furthermore, only 6% (12) of the materials identified offer profiles of victims of child abuse, only 5% (9) of the materials identified focus on the experiences of children and families who are users of the child protection services and only 6% (12) of the materials identified in the audit covered programme and service evaluations. There is a shortage of research on 'what works' and sources of information on the most useful interventions and programmes with which to address the identified problems in the Irish context.

The Degree of Research Quality and the Extent of Confidence in Research

The quality of the research in the audit appears to be somewhat uneven. While it was not always clear that a piece of material, apart from journal articles, had been peer reviewed, it could be estimated that up to 50% of the content had not been subject to external quality assurance. Empirical evidence has an important role to play in facilitating quality research and promoting confidence in that research but current Irish data has several shortcomings as follows:

- There is no single source, publication or website that gives comprehensive information about the incidence and prevalence of child abuse, including the gender and ages of the children, the causal or associated factors and the numbers of children that died from child abuse.
- Data recorded on child abuse reports are not recorded consistently. Published service level indicators give very limited scope for analysis, e.g. the broad sources of reports of abuse and service outcomes for children in terms of immediate results and medium term impacts.
- National statistics reveal no epidemiological trends, merely the number of new reports year on year and they give no sense of the prevalence, or recurrence, of different types of child abuse, the length of interventions or the resource implications of service provision in different types of cases. They do not make any linkages between social factors affecting families and the incidence of child abuse and thereby do not identify vulnerability factors.

- Restricting the collection of data about child protection to reports made to the statutory child protection system is limiting and consequently the comprehensiveness of these data is questionable.

The Extent to Which Research is Accessible

While a number of research databases already exist in Ireland and elsewhere, the entire content is not always available for viewing or downloading. Of the materials in the current audit, approximately 75% (142) are not available without purchase at individual or institutional level.

5. What are the conclusions?

Based on the available material, the following conclusions were reached

1. While the audit has identified an amount of material on child protection from a number of disciplines, the **volume and coverage** of Irish research does not appear to be commensurate with the current national concern about this problem and the challenges being faced by policy makers and service providers in the following respects.
 - There is a shortage of good quality, robust research on child protection practice in the statutory sector, particularly in respect of social work, which is acknowledged to be central to child protection.
 - There is a shortage of child protection-focused research on the factors that cause and perpetuate child abuse, such as homelessness, addiction, parental mental illness and domestic violence. The need for material on these areas is demonstrated by the nature and scale of reports to the child protection system and the removal of some children from their families into out of home care as a result of the above mentioned adversities.
 - There is a shortage of research on the profile and characteristics of child victims or studies that involve children as active participants in, as opposed to objects of, research.
 - The audit illustrates a shortage of evaluative studies that demonstrate the impact of interventions and 'what works' in child protection.
2. There have been some very useful developments in research dissemination and supporting access to research, particularly by the OMCYA and the HRB, but

this audit shows that the **majority of the Irish research material is not publicly accessible beyond abstract formats, a factor that limits its usefulness.**

The lack of professional peer reviewed journals and outlets for publication in Ireland, particularly for social work research, also limits dissemination. The production and public availability of systematic reviews of existing research, by topic, would facilitate greater take-up and utilisation.

3. While a number of relevant and important topics have been the subject of commissioned research, there is currently **no integrated research agenda on child protection** although the OMCYA is currently developing a children's research agenda. This reflects the ad hoc funding arrangements that have existed to date. National statistics on the nature of child abuse reports indicate that neglect and associated problems should take priority in this agenda. The implementation of *The Agenda for Children's Services* and the creation of the HSE as one body under which health and welfare services operate provide more opportunities for co-ordinated research commissioning and dissemination.
4. Available statistical data on child protection, which are vital for planning services and allocating resources, **require further development and analysis to improve accuracy and to provide a more comprehensive picture of child protection issues and activities.** For instance, the source of referrals, the type of adversities being experienced by families, the interventions being made and their impact on children.

The above conclusions are based on the objectives underpinning this project, which were to identify and develop a database of Irish child protection literature, identify the main sources of funding and identify gaps in research as demonstrated by the audit of literature available. The database that has been developed will require updating to reflect new additions and hopefully will provide a useful resource to policy makers and

service providers. While this audit revealed a number of shortcomings in the availability and accessibility of Irish research, the project represents an important step in bringing together existing material and should provide a starting block for the development of a national agenda for research on child protection. Such a task will require a wider scoping exercise that encompasses the views of all stakeholders in the sector, reflects international developments on the topic, and considers child protection as one dimension of the wider context and continuum of child welfare, from prevention to out of home care.

6. What are the benefits from this study?

The benefits from this study arise from its dual purpose:

- The provision of an accessible online database of relevant child protection research completed in Ireland.
- The identification of key gaps in our knowledge of Irish child protection issues that could be filled by future research.

The database will hopefully provide a useful resource to policy makers and service providers. While this audit revealed a number of shortcomings in the availability and accessibility of Irish research, the project represents an important step in bringing together existing material and should provide a starting block for the development of a national agenda for research on child protection. Such a task will require a wider scoping exercise that encompasses the views of all stakeholders in the sector, reflects international developments on the topic, and considers child protection as one dimension of the wider context and continuum of child welfare, from prevention to out of home care.

For more information:

- ✓ Phone 01-6724100 to speak to Robert Murphy or Jim McGuirk
- ✓ Check out www.caab.ie to see this study's full report or to access its online database