

COVID-19: Survey of residential services in Ireland during the restrictions

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Abstract

Resulting from the outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown, EPIC (Empowering People in Care) decided to contact all young people's residential centres in Ireland. Often the young people that live in residential homes are the forgotten children in care, so it was important to reach out to ensure that their issues were being heard. The survey concentrated on the needs of the young people, issues affecting staff, how work practices had changed and what extra supports were needed. The responses were positive on many levels and certainly the voices of the young people and the staff were heard.

Keywords

COVID-19, residential care, Ireland, EPIC, voice of the child, staff supports

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Introduction

At the start of April 2020, during the lockdown due to COVID-19, EPIC decided that we would endeavour to contact all residential centres in Ireland. The ideas behind this were varied but essentially we were seeking to hear from managers about the current situation for their staff and young people living in their care. The survey was carried out through initial phone calls with the managers of the homes and then e-mailing them the questionnaire to complete in their own time.

Our aims for the survey were to:

1. Reach out to as many staff and young people as possible to let them know that they were in our thoughts and to offer any immediate support that they made need.
2. Hear what difficulties the young people may be experiencing under new conditions.
3. Determine what issues were presenting for staff and management.
4. Ascertain if work practices had changed within the home and what if any new initiatives were brought forward.
5. Establish if extra supports were required for the unit.
6. Capture a moment in time of when everyone was trying to cope with a pandemic.

In Ireland, residential care is organised into three different governed categories. Firstly, there are the statutory run centres, governed by Tusla (The Child and Family Agency). Secondly, and with the most numbers, are the privately run homes. Finally, making up the smallest cohort, are the voluntary run centres.

Our survey was sent to 38 statutorily run homes, 107 private residential centres and 29 voluntary run homes, totalling 174 residential centres.

Limitations of the survey

Due to this being just a snapshot in time, it is important that the survey was conducted and the information collated quickly. This is necessary so as not to miss the

information that is very current and hopefully for a short period of time. At the time of writing the report we had received 28% of the 174 centres that were contacted.

A major limitation is that due to ethical and legal constraints it was not possible to talk directly with the children and young people in the homes. This would have been the ideal scenario. According to Tusla figures, at the end of 2019 there were 409 children¹ in residential care in the State.

In keeping with the idea of the survey being a glimpse of residential care during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the questions were kept short and focussed. The five main questions were focussed on the young people and staff in the homes. The question relating to the young people was broken into six sub-questions but remained focused on their experiences and how they were coping with lock-down and new restrictive guidelines.

The next question was staff related and asked about the difficulties that they may be experiencing. The focus on this question was to help raise the possible issue of staffing and of the change in shift patterns.

The survey then focussed on how work practices had to change and what new initiatives had been introduced. This question was intended to elicit the positives and inventiveness that we had heard anecdotally and to have them recorded. Also, when we heard of good practices we hoped to share these with other homes.

The penultimate question was to ask if extra supports were needed. The reasoning behind this was two-fold. Firstly, if it were a local issue and EPIC could in some way help or to attempt to obtain more resources, we would. Secondly, if issues were presenting themselves across a range of homes and counties we could advocate on a national basis for a resolution.

The last question was left open, inviting any other comments or suggestions.

¹
https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Q4_2019_Service_Performance_and_Activity_Report_V2.pdf

p.35 [Last accessed: 22 April 2020].

Findings

Two main issues stood out when asking about the difficulties were experiencing under the lock-down of COVID-19.

Family access

First, and very understandably, was the lack of access and contact with families. Although centres were doing their best to ensure that young people were able to use social media apps and other forms of technology, it was noted that the parents of the young people may not have access to this form of technology. This issue of digital poverty led to feelings of loss for the young people involved.

Education

The second major issue was around education and schooling. This took many forms. Both young people and staff missed the structures and routine of the school day. This was especially pronounced in the first few weeks. Associated with this, some young people did not want to engage in their schoolwork when they were not in the physical environs of their school. There were difficulties then for staff to motivate the young people to participate in their schoolwork during the day. Staff also said that they felt very pressured in this regard and with the curriculum. Staff mentioned that they were care staff and not qualified to teach the young people in their homes.

One example given, which was concerning, was a young person whose placement in school had been deferred until September meaning that they were receiving no schooling or tuition at all. But on a more positive note, one home stated that their young people were far more relaxed about their schoolwork and were getting more work done. The young people were out of the stressful school environment and thriving.

The survey attempted to get a sense of the day-to-day lives of the young people. The responses in some areas were minimal, showing that they were not major issues at the time. However, due to the uniqueness of this period in time, it is important to have them recorded.

Daily Life

Social distancing

Most of the residential centres did not have major comments about the rules of social distancing, and when speaking with the managers briefly when introducing the survey, they said that it was strange for everyone at first, but most had adapted well quickly.

However, for the small number of homes that have very young children, i.e. under the age of 12, this was very difficult as children and staff missed the physical contact and hugs.

When I asked this question, I was thinking of within the house and how that was impacting on the young people and the relationship with the staff. However, one answer dealt with issues outside of the home. When the young people and staff members had been out for a walk, and social distancing, they were shouted at and verbally abused by some members of the public. Naturally, this left the young people scared and feeling like outsiders within their own community. Often the issue of young people feeling stigmatised by being in care is raised by them, and incidents like that only exacerbate them.

In another example, one home worryingly said that their young people were completely ignoring the rules of social distancing and meeting with their friends and getting on with their own social lives as if nothing had changed. The staff felt very disrespected because of this behaviour and this led to more tension within the house.

Strained relationships with other residents (cabin fever)

Generally, the comments around this issue were positive. In fact, it was stated on many of the questionnaires that relationships between the young people living together had improved. The belief was that the young people realised that they were all in this together and were relying on each other for support. A minority of homes, in single figures, stated that relationships had become fractious, but that everyone was working hard to improve the situation.

Strained relationships with staff

Once again, the results were very positive with little if any negativity. Generally, managers spoke of a stronger bond developing between young people and their staff. This was explained as the young people understood the difficulties that the staff were encountering with schedules and travel restrictions.

Other

The last section relating to the young people was left open to broaden the scope and to elicit any information that may not have been garnered in the previous questions.

The issue that arose most often was understandably the concern the young people had of their families contracting COVID-19. This led to increased anxiety among the young people and was further heightened by their inability to meet with them and converse normally.

One of the other major concerns noted was the loss of services, especially mental health facilities which were operated on a limited basis without physical meetings.

Staff issues

The next question that was posed was in relation to the difficulties that staff were encountering.

The most common response was the fear that staff had of bringing COVID-19 into the residential centre. The implications for the home and all living and working there was of great stress to all staff. Thankfully, as this article was being written at the end of June 2020, no issues of COVID-19 in young people's residential centres in Ireland had been reported.

The other main issue regarding staff was the fear of burnout. Shifts had been increased to lessen the footfall in the homes and when staff were finished their work, they had no outlets for tiredness and stress, other than to return home. The constant work-home-work scenario was of concern to both staff and management.

Changed in work practices

The reasoning behind this question was to stimulate discussion and consideration of creative practices that were introduced to help the young people and staff during lockdown.

Two types of answers were reported. Firstly, all units spoke about their new hygiene regimes and guidelines for work. The second type referred to the new equipment and supplies that had been bought for the houses. Gym equipment was very popular, as was the purchase of Netflix and Disney channels. Some homes were very creative and introduced their own sports event, talent contests and bingo nights. The increase in baking and cooking was very much part of making the day more enjoyable for all in the house.

Extra supports

The main issue that was reported was the difficulty in obtaining PPE, and the quality of this. At the start of the lockdown this was the predominant concern for all homes. Another issue raised was about extra supports regarding the mental health of the young people and the staff.

Other comments/suggestions

The significant issue of digital poverty and how this has impacted on young people having contact with their parents was raised here. Children in care may not have access to their smart phone or tables and in many cases their parents certainly did not. This left families unable to see each other for long periods of time which intensified the feelings of loss and increased stress levels. On a lighter note, there were calls for a nationwide event for all young people and staff to come together

Conclusion

The purpose of this survey was to check-in with all children's residential centres in Ireland to see if EPIC could offer any support. The response was very positive and even if homes did not return completed surveys they were happy to have been thought of and to have been offered assistance. Generally, all residential centres responding to

the survey were coping well despite the uniqueness of the situation. The continuation of supports and information to the centres must be maintained to ensure that as life changes and progresses the young people can fully reach their potential.

The young people, staff and management need to be commended for their great efforts during this time.

*The full report, Empowering People in Care: The Impact of Covid-19 on Children's Residential Care, can be accessed at: <https://www.epiconline.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/EPIC-Empowering-People-In-Care-The-Impact-of-Covid-19-on-Childrens-Residential-Care.pdf>

About the author

John Murphy left University College Cork in 1999 with a social science degree to pursue work in a residential home for teenagers in Cork for three years. He then worked with Barnardos as an information counsellor for the Origins services for nine years. This provided a trace and reunion service for those who had been in the Industrial and Reformatory School system in Ireland.

John has worked with EPIC since September 2012 as an advocacy officer and over the last two years combined this work with research. During this time John completed a law degree in UCC and followed this up with an LLM (Child and Family Law) where he did his dissertation on young people in special care.