

A secure online database on gender-based violence

Ireland 2003 – ongoing

In brief

There is a growing recognition of the need to have timely, accurate and comprehensive data on which to develop policy and to commission services relating to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. The Rape Crisis Network Ireland (RCNI) database is a secure online database which allows authorised non-statutory sexual violence services in Ireland to record anonymised information on the specific needs and use of services by individual service users. The data allows the individual services and RCNI to generate a wide range of reports about the use of services at a local and national level, and the characteristics and situation of service users in relation to sexual violence. The system offers a unique data source as almost two thirds of this data relates to non-reported cases of sexual violence. While the services deal with those aged 14 years and above, the sexual violence may have occurred at any age. However, recent changes in the funding of sexual violence services in Ireland may have implications for the future of the database.

Irish strategy on gender-based violence

Over the last two decades Ireland has made a concerted commitment to, and progress in, addressing violence against women through legislation, policy and service development. The first *National strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence* was approved by the Irish Government on 9 February 2010, and the second strategy and associated action plan were published on 20 January 2016. The strategy sets out the strategic vision, objectives and actions of the Irish Government in tackling a range of crimes related to sexual, domestic and gender-based violence. The overall aim of this work is to reduce the prevalence of these issues and to ensure that the system of prevention, support of victims and response to perpetrators is effectively coordinated in a manner which increases the effectiveness of the response and engenders public confidence. The strategy was developed by the National Office for the Prevention of Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence (Cosc) (which is located within the Department of Justice and Equality) in consultation with a broad range of stakeholders.

The Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland (SAVI) Report produced by McGee et al. (2002) provided information on the prevalence of sexual violence for women and men in Ireland. It specifically highlighted that 42 per cent of women and 28 per cent of men disclosed to the researchers some form of sexual abuse or assault in their lifetime, with nearly 30 per cent of women and 25 per cent of men disclosing varying levels of sexual abuse in childhood. Furthermore, 24 per cent of women disclosed sexual abuse by their partner or ex-partner, and the comparable finding for men was just over 1 per cent. The SAVI report highlighted that many victims of sexual violence do not report their victimisation to the police, but that most do want access to support services.

The need for a unique data source

To date statistics relating to sexual violence in Ireland are collected by a number of statutory and non-statutory agencies, although there is no central collation or analysis of these. In 2003, Rape Crisis Network

Ireland (RCNI) developed a regional database in partnership with rape crisis centres across Ireland and a local IT company who developed the database in a public-private partnership at nil cost to RCNI. The database is a secure online system which allows authorised non-statutory sexual violence services in Ireland to record anonymised information on the specific needs and use of services by individual service users. The data facilitates the individual services and RCNI to generate a wide range of reports about the experiences of survivors, the use of services at a local and national level, and the characteristics and situation of service users in relation to sexual violence. The system offers a unique data source as almost two thirds of this data relates to cases of sexual violence that have not been reported to the police. While the services deal with those aged 14 years and above, the sexual violence may have occurred at any age. In 2005 a senior and well-respected academic partner became involved to offer statistical advice and to enhance the quality assurance of the data and analysis, which is of prime importance to RCNI. In 2010 and 2012 the project expanded to incorporate additional service providers. The RCNI have incorporated further learning into the development of the database through engaging with a range of other stakeholders including:

- An Garda Síochána (police) Research Unit
- the Government's Central Statistics Office
- the Commission to Support Victims of Crime
- the National Disability Authority
- the Health Service Executive.

As a result of working with partners in the statutory and non-statutory sector the data categories have been refined in order to better represent the collective experience and pathways of service users and sexual violence services in order to answer important questions necessary to provide better services, inform national service planning and inform national discussions, debates and policy formulation, and most importantly, to give a voice to survivors who are otherwise silent in shaping understanding, policy and responses to sexual violence.

Data collection structure and main information

The data collection is incorporated into the standard operating procedures of service providing organisations, thereby ensuring that the data is routinely inputted. The database covers the full range of services provided including information from helpline and counselling services. In order to ensure consistency in the way that data is collated and inputted the RCNI coordinates and delivers annual training and capacity building to each local service provider on aspects including:

- using the RCNI database
- data entry
- extracting data
- reliable and accurate presentation of local data.

An extensive data cleaning process is carried out nationally before any data is analysed. This involves checking all of the data entered for mistakes and omissions, and rectifying these. The RCNI contracts external statistical analysis expertise for the project to ensure national data presentation is accurate. The

RCNI infrastructure around the data system also supports best practice in upholding survivor rights to data protection and privacy, particularly given the majority of data relates to instances of have not been reported to the police, and supports services in meeting their legal obligations as data controllers.

The database collects information on over 70 separate items and has a number of fields for data including:

- *Demographic information on the service user:* including gender, approximate age, nationality, legal status, housing type, education, who knows the service user is attending the service, when they started/finished counselling/support and why
- *Crime/sexual violence information:* including age of service user when abuse occurred, type of abuse, information about the abuser, was the abuse reported to any authority
- *Appointment/service uptake information:* records data on every time the service user attends the service, including date, time, location and type of appointment, counsellor, was the appointment attended or not, was an interpreter needed
- *Helpline information:* including date, time, why contacting service, gender, type of abuse if any, country of origin, approximate age
- *Accompaniment information:* including date, time and type of accompaniment (sexual assault treatment unit, police, etc.), gender, approximate age, type of violence.

Increasing understanding of gender-based violence and more focused interventions

The database has assisted RCNI and service providers in calling for legislative and policy change and in increasing understanding of sexual violence through analysis of survivors' experience which may otherwise be invisible to the authorities. It also allows evidence-based advocacy on behalf of victims, public awareness-raising through campaigns and media work, and in the development of educational programmes to better inform the public and professionals. In addition, the data has been used by a range of statutory and non-governmental agencies to inform their own work in meeting the needs of victims in the criminal justice, health and social care fields.

In January 2014 the Irish Government established the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) as an independent State agency responsible for improving the wellbeing and outcomes for children through early intervention, family support and child protection services. With some 4,000 staff and an operational budget of approximately €600m, Tusla is a major and highly regarded development in responding to the needs of children and families in Ireland. Tusla has also been delegated with responsibility for commissioning a range of services in relation to responding to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. Tusla has developed a national office to take forward its remit with regard to victims of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, with a dedicated national team recently established. The need for timely, accurate and comprehensive data on which to develop policy and to commission services relating to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence has been central to Tusla's planning around data. Tusla is particularly mindful of the longer term requirements under the Istanbul Convention and Victims' Directive to be able to demonstrate the level of access to services for victims/survivors and the outcomes achieved. In 2014 Tusla undertook a comprehensive review of the sexual and domestic

violence sector. This review provided a national picture of service provision for the first time. Following the review Tusla has developed a strategy with the intention of providing the domestic and sexual violence sector with a more sustainable basis for operating. This strategy has prioritised funding of direct services to victims. At present Tusla do not intend to continue the funding for the RCNI database.

In July 2015 the Minister for Justice published draft legislation, the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Bill 2015, to give effect to Directive 2012/29/EU of the European Parliament and Council on *Establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime*. The legislation seeks to improve the immediate protection for victims, improve the safeguards for victims in court and to strengthen the arrangements for assessing and responding to the needs of victims for support. The intent of the Directive is reflected explicitly in Ireland in the second *National strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence*.

The RCNI experience as a tool for future strategies and interventions

There is a growing recognition of the need to have timely, accurate and comprehensive data on which to develop policy and to commission services relating to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence in Ireland. At present data on sexual violence is collected by a number of agencies, but this information is neither collated nor analysed centrally to provide an up-to-date comprehensive picture on the nature of sexual victimisation in Ireland, or service usage. The RCNI database has been one highly significant initiative to contribute to this required wider understanding. The development of the database from 2003 has resulted in significant learning in relation to:

- the type of information that is most useful
- the importance of having robust data handling and quality assurance processes
- the involvement of a range of stakeholders, including potential users of the data generated
- the uses to which such data can be put.

Through collecting and using this data there is clear evidence that the needs of victims and the nature of sexual violence have gained wider recognition among the public, policy makers and politicians. In addition, the data generated has informed the delivery of direct services to victims of sexual violence in those services directly involved with the database, as well as highlighting the unmet need of victims.

However, such databases are not without their challenges. The need to address issues of data ownership, data security and the future proofing of information developments across data related to sexual violence (and other sensitive) services require detailed consideration, and there are different views about how best these safeguards can be achieved. The experience of the staff and services involved with the RCNI database should be useful in this regard.

Within the action plan published in January 2016 taking forward the *Second national strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence*, the Government in Ireland has committed to

establish a bottom line 'gold standard' of data collection and analysis by all agencies working in the area(s) of domestic and sexual violence whereby all datasets are disaggregated by: age of victim and perpetrator; sex of victim and perpetrator; relationship between victim and perpetrator; ethnicity of victim and perpetrator; any disabilities of victim and perpetrator.

This work will be led by Cosc, and will involve input from a range of statutory organisations. This is a very welcome and important development, although it remains to be seen how non-statutory organisations, which provide the majority of direct contact with victims and perpetrators in Ireland, are involved in this process.

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Links to audio-visual materials and websites with additional information/context (if available)

RCNI website: <http://www.rcni.ie/publications/research-and-reports/>

Second National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence 2016 – 2021

<http://www.cosc.ie/en/COSC/Pages/WP08000096>.

References

McGee, H.R., Garavan, R., de Barra, G.M., Byrne, J. and Conroy, R., 'The sexual abuse and violence in Ireland (SAVI) report: a national study of Irish experiences', *Beliefs and Attitudes Concerning Sexual Violence*, Liffey Press, Dublin, 2002.