

RCNI NATIONAL STATISTICS DATA PROJECT

The RCNI National Statistics project is a vital tool in working to end sexual violence in Ireland. In order to provide the best responses to victims and hold perpetrators to account, it is imperative that we all have evidence-based research to monitor, improve and build on existing service provision. Accurate information contributes to a society where survivors are believed and supported, where disclosure becomes easier, and where isolation is broken down. On the other hand, the major consequence of poor data collection is persistent violence, increased harm to victims and potentially death (Wong et al, 2007). Lack of data leads to ill-informed public policy and public expenditure and hampers legal reforms (Kilpatrick, 2004) while poor data give an unclear picture of the incidence and nature of sexual violence. When basic data are lacking it is not possible to carry out 'realistic stocktaking' of how effective and successful publicly funded bodies are in carrying out their duties in relation to the protection of survivors and the prosecution of perpetrators of violence (CAHRV, 2008:31). This in turn seriously limits the basic statistics available for European-level research and means that neither state-specific nor international checking mechanisms can be applied. In so much as information can be used to develop evidence-based services and supports to address the consequences of sexual violence, it also serves as a useful tool to aid law enforcement and in prevention work to address the extent of the problem.

Given RCCs critical position in Ireland as one of the main providers of counselling, support and other key services to survivors of sexual abuse and their supporters, it is vital that the administrative data produced in the course of the daily work of these organisations is utilised to construct a true and accurate profile of these service users as well as a complete and nuanced understanding of the nature of the sexual violence they have been subjected to.

The truth about the sexual violence perpetrated on survivors and their supporters is revealed in RCNI national statistics as a direct result of the outstanding detail, accuracy and quality of the data collected by the RCNI's web-based data recording system. What determines the usefulness of the RCNI data is one, its' comprehensiveness, and two, its' quality, i.e., its reliability and validity. What has been learned from working with Rape Crisis Centres over the course of the data project is that the story of sexual violence is not one-dimensional (one incident, one perpetrator) but rather is layered and multidimensional, often involving more than one perpetrator on a recurring, sometimes continuous, sometimes intermittent, basis. This is difficult to capture in statistical terms, in a way that reflects the complexity and nuanced nature of this type of violence. The only correct way to do this is to break down the narrative into 'person' and 'incident-based' data, where all aspects of the story are systematically and meticulously recorded according to pre-agreed and pre-defined quantitative data items. As well as recording detailed profile information on the survivor, the relationship between the survivor and perpetrator, the RCNI system also records data on the nature of the abuse, when the abuse first occurred, the duration of abuse, location of abuse, reporting of sexual violence, the pattern of disclosure of abuse, amongst many other items. In addition to the information captured in these statistics, the direct services that RCCs provide also include accompaniment to Sexual Assault Treatment Units, other forensic appointments, medical appointments, the Gardaí and court. Case-specific information, including detailed appointments data and exit data is also captured, thereby producing a complete service usage picture for each survivor;

this is critical in service planning and in understanding multiple entrances to and exits from services. These recorded 'raw data' are exported from the database and are then analysed and re-fashioned in tabular form, where it is possible to generalise data for 'all' or 'some RCC's' or according to some other criteria such as 'childhood sexual abuse', 'male only survivors', 'non-Irish survivors', etc.

Highest Possible Data Quality

Each of the data items have been rigorously constructed using unambiguous definitions. The RCNI uses well-defined procedures in relation to data collection and has an active programme of quality assurance which incorporates systematic support, training, and feedback to those responsible for collecting and recording these data. In addition, the RNCI data recording system has been developed and refined to record information that covers the relevant and appropriate concepts, terminology, and definitions of sexual violence as defined by European and international best practice. The data items produced support user-defined measures of sexual violence, thereby providing an accurate and appropriate tool for the capture of data required for the development of policy at all levels of government, research and evaluation, and planning of services and service delivery. Of course, the analysis of the data produced by the RNCI web-based system is equally rigorous in providing an accurate and comprehensive picture of both the characteristics of RCC users and the nature of the sexual violence they have experienced. Expertise on the analysis of quantitative data was originally sought from statistical experts in UCD and the ESRI who analysed the data using an appropriate statistical software package for data of this type (SPSS). Mentoring and training by these experts has facilitated in-house RCNI personnel to now conduct the data cleaning and analysis function themselves, with the ongoing support and supervision of the original data experts. Working with key RCNI and RCC personnel over the past six years, these same experts have advised on the honing and development of the measurement items in the data recording system to the point where the system which exists operates equally successfully as a research and case-management system. In this context, the RCNI has been fortunate in working with women in member RCCs who fully recognise and appreciate the critical importance of accurate and complete information in service provision and planning. The importance of such a co-operative approach cannot be emphasised enough; success of a statistical data project such as this is wholly dependent on the existence of trust and the sharing of long-term objectives, as well as the continuity of resources by funders.

Negative consequences of the substitution of the HSE template

The substitution of the RCNI database with the proposed HSE template (namely 'Reporting Template for Service Level or Grant Aid Agreement') would essentially replace a well-designed and well-functioning system that delivers systematic, accurate and useful information with a summary list of performance indicators reported on a monthly basis. The summary sheet pays no attention to the methodology behind the collection, recording and analysis of these data, with the obvious risk of 'poor data in, poor data out'. In other words, the lack of attention to the system behind the data can only result in unreliable, inaccurate, incomplete, and therefore, misleading information on the characteristics of RCC service users and no information on the nature, or context, of the abuse they have endured.

More specifically, difficulties with the 'Reporting Template' include the following:

- There are no definitions, not to mind clear and unambiguous ones, for what is essentially a set of performance indicators.

- Data are not requested in their most disaggregated form (i.e. at the greatest level of detail) for each individual. Taken together, these first two problems imply that the data generated cannot possibly be accurate. This reflects the lack of reference to, and concern with, the system of collecting, recording and analysing the service usage data as explained above.
- Utilising the template will not allow anyone to know whether one individual has been referred to four different services or four different individuals have been referred to four different services.
- There is no provision for the recording of the 'context of patterns of service usage'. Many clients enter and exit a particular service perhaps many times, sometimes continuously, sometimes intermittently and sometimes erratically. This pattern of usage can occur over a short or a long period of time. Such usage is acceptable to RCCs on the basis that this is the type of support these survivors or their supporters require at this particular point in time. It is important to link individual client data to, for example, the nature of the violence experienced. Without this context it is not possible to understand service usage patterns and therefore impossible to accurately examine current service delivery or plan for such services in the future.
- The ethnic identifiers chosen are problematic. The categories utilised are not mutually exclusive and combine colour with region/continent and in some instances nationality. Data is again not being collected in its most discrete and disaggregated form. This would lead to confusion on the part of anyone entering the data and result in a high probability of incorrect data being recorded. From a service provision point of view, the country of origin and whether someone requires an interpreter are more important as both provide information about the cultural and political situation someone is coming from and what she or he needs to be able to access services. The only possible relevance to the identifiers chosen is a comparison to census figures.
- Some of the information requested on the template is not accurate when collected monthly. One example is the average length of stay per woman in a refuge which can only be calculated when the entry and exit date are known. This is only useful when collected over a longer period of time which will take account of entry and exit and makes no sense to report on a monthly basis.

National Strategy

Concern with research and data of domestic violence and sexual violence are critical to the success of the Cosc National Strategy, most particularly in terms of High Level Goal Three - ensuring greater effectiveness of policy and service planning. In this context the first and most fundamental action is the development of a systematic approach to data capture and collection. The substitution of the 'Report Template' would be a retrograde step as it does not involve a systematic approach and will lead to inaccurate data.

International Best Practice

There are several relevant Council of Europe campaigns, recommendations and conventions which support the systemic collection of accurate and reliable data. These include:

- The Blueprint of the Council of Europe Campaign to Combat Violence against Women, including Domestic Violence prepared by the Task Force to Combat Violence against Women and adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 21 June 2006 urges member states to contribute to the campaign in a number of areas, including data collection. In this regard

states are asked to ensure the systematic collection of statistical data disaggregated by sex and by type of violence as well as by the relationship of the perpetrator to the victim in all fields.

- Following on from the Blueprint, the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence was drafted. Cosc contributed to the drafting. The Convention itself will be open for signatures on May 11, 2011. Article 11 states "For the purpose of the implementation of this Convention, Parties shall undertake to: (a) collect disaggregated relevant statistical data at regular intervals on cases of all forms of violence covered by the scope of this Convention; (b) support research in the field of all forms of violence covered by the scope of this Convention in order to study its root causes and effects, incidences and conviction rates, as well as the efficacy of measures taken to implement this Convention.

Again, using the 'Report Template' would not fulfil the recommendations and requirements of the Council of Europe campaign, recommendations and convention.

REFERENCES

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The Rape Crisis Network Ireland (RCNI) National Rape Crisis Statistics and Annual Report (2009) is a vital resource to researchers, practitioners, and policy makers in our collective efforts to end sexual violence against women, men, and children. One of the most difficult challenges for rape crisis centers is knowing whether the hard work of staff and volunteers is making a difference. The national data organized by RCNI is critical because it provides the kind of information necessary for long-term planning and evaluation. We need know the who's, the how's, the when's, and the what's in order to develop effective services for survivors and to move forward with prevention initiatives. The RCNI data answer these questions and can be used to guide planning efforts in order to make the most of limited resources. Frankly, I wish similar data were available in the United States as it would be an invaluable resource to my work as a sexual assault researcher and consultant to policy makers.

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