

**Jana Hainsworth**  
Secretary General  
Eurochild  
Brussels, Belgium  
[jana.hainsworth@eurochild.org](mailto:jana.hainsworth@eurochild.org)

**Dr. Mária Herczog**  
Member of the Eurochild Management Board  
Member of the UNCRC Committee  
Chair of Family, Child & Youth Association,  
Budapest, Hungary  
[herczog@mail.datanet.hu](mailto:herczog@mail.datanet.hu)

**Dr. Agata V. D'Addato**  
Policy Officer  
Eurochild  
Brussels, Belgium  
[agata.daddato@eurochild.org](mailto:agata.daddato@eurochild.org)

# Europe's children in care: What role for the European Union?

In 2009 Eurochild – the network which brings together over 80 children's organisations from 32 European countries – carried out a survey of the situation of children in alternative care in Europe through its member organisations and originating from the work of the thematic working group on 'Children in Alternative Care'<sup>1</sup>. The results of the survey, first published in June 2009 and now updated to cover all European Union (EU) Member States (plus Moldova), provide a unique resource for practitioners, campaigners and policy makers as regards the situation of children who are among the most vulnerable section of society in Europe today.

The survey requested information on the numbers of children in alternative care including residential, community and family-based care; the profiles of children in care; the outcomes for children in care; the institutional framework for child protection in each country and availability of data; and the existence of standards and support for children's participation. 30 European countries participated, including the 4 nations of the United Kingdom (UK) and Moldova. The survey was not intended as a scientifically rigorous research exercise; the aim was rather to identify what information is readily available, note some common trends across Europe, identify visible gaps in the existing information, common definitions and professional language, and enhance the understanding of methodology for data gathering at national level.

## **Main findings from Eurochild's survey on children in alternative care**

A few general observations can be drawn from the survey.

A first consideration is that some countries clearly offer very comprehensive data. However, it is by no means universal across the EU; some of our members found it very difficult to access information, and whether there is information it is by no means consistent or coherent across EU Member States making it very difficult for any kind of benchmarking and comparisons. For example, the Netherlands does not have data available on the number of children in alternative care, but instead has data on the number of beds available in institutions in four different sectors of residential youth care. There are differences in understandings of different forms and content of care, guardianship and data collection methods. There are different definitions of types of alternative care. Residential settings may, for example, include boarding schools, 'special schools', infant homes, homes for mentally or physically disabled children, homes for children with behavioural problems, institutions for young offenders, after-care homes. Furthermore, there is no common understanding of what constitutes family or community-based care. In this survey we have not had the opportunity to look at the reasons, ways and procedures of coming into care and leaving care. Nevertheless one can estimate the same type of difficulties exploring those closely related areas.

Despite the lack of data, it can be roughly estimated that approximately 1 per cent of children in the EU are living in alternative care – including residential, community and family-based care – that is about 1 million children. This proportion of course varies between countries. In Latvia around 2.2 per cent of children are taken into public care. In Sweden approximately 0.66 per cent of the child population is affected. In Romania, approximately 1.6 per cent of the child

population is under special protection – more or less unchanged since 1997 (1.66 per cent of children).

Whilst placement in an institution is widely recognised as the solution of last resort after family support services and family-based care, the number of children in institutions is stable or even rising in several EU countries. In the Czech Republic, for example, only around 25 per cent of children are in foster-care settings and the number of children in institutions has increased since 2000. Latvia and Lithuania have also seen an increase in the number of children in institutions. Since new legislation was introduced in Romania, the number of foster care placements has increased by 35 per cent, compared to January 2005. Nonetheless an estimated 25,386 children are still in residential type services (mid-2009). In Bulgaria, whilst there were 7,276 children in residential homes in 2008<sup>2</sup> according to the official information provided by the State Agency for Child Protection, there were only 72 children placed in foster care (less than 0.01 per cent).

Furthermore the practice of placing children under the 3s in institutions still exists in several Member States, despite a consensus that placing infants in institutional care for several months causes irreversible damage to brain development. Data from the Czech Republic of 2007 indicate that 1,407 under the age of 3 are in institutions. In Romania, although new child protection laws forbid the placement of children under 3s in institutions, maternities and paediatric hospitals effectively act as institutions in cases of child abandonment (4,000 newborns were abandoned in 150 medical units in 2004). As a result of a procedural void, 31.8 per cent of children left in hospitals/paediatric hospitals do not have identification papers – leaving them particularly vulnerable to exploitation including trafficking. There is a lack of data on the situation of under 3s in our survey from other Member States, but a 2005 study carried out by a consortium of 8 countries led by Birmingham University<sup>3</sup> estimated 21,955 under 3s were in institutional care in 2003 across Europe. Eurochild feels that

there could be very strong leadership from the EU to make a ban on the placement of children under the age of 3 in institutions.

It is clear that certain vulnerable groups are heavily over-represented in care system. In Bulgaria, Roma children account for approximately 45 per cent of children in care. In the Czech Republic in 2007 24 per cent of children in baby homes were Roma. In Hungary, children of Roma origin are over – represented in institutions, sometimes by a factor of 11, compared to their representation in the population as a whole (officially it is not allowed to collect data based on ethnic origin on the basis of right to privacy) often as a form of punishing parents. The institutionalization of children with disabilities is a major concern in many countries of the EU. In Latvia the survey reports that municipalities do not have the resources to give additional support to children with minor physical or behavioural disorders. Placing children in institutions avoids this cost – they are not under municipality authority.

Although poverty and material deprivation cannot be a reason for placement of a child according to the legislation, it is clearly a root cause for many children entering the care system in many countries. Indeed, the lack of data surrounding the links between poverty, social exclusion and placement of children obscures how poverty features in the decisions that result in placement, and how the most appropriate prevention approaches can be developed. High level political commitment to end child poverty must mobilise more resources for early intervention and prevention, strengthening families and access to quality services.

Although most European countries have standards to protect the rights of children in alternative care, in many cases their implementation is very weak. There are still several countries (e.g. Greece, Latvia and the Czech Republic), where standards are not yet implemented. Concerning monitoring of the standards, in many countries we find that there is a lack of data, while in some others,

like Estonia, Finland, Sweden, regular reports are published. In other countries such as the UK, the time and cost involved in regulation, monitoring and inspection are seen as being disproportionate to the actual benefits in terms of improved services.

Involvement of children and parents in the decision-making process still remains very weak in many of the European countries. In the case of Ireland we see that while regulations, standards and legislation are significant in comparison to other countries, the reality of proper consultation with children and their families is a separate issue. The Irish Social Services Inspectorate found that *“care planning was still more often determined by crisis management rather than long term planning”* where the voice and opinion of the child and family may not be considered. In the UK, although progress has been made with regard to involving children in alternative care in planning their own care, there is still much scope for improvement.

In most of the countries analyzed there are no formal structures through which the voices of children with experience of care are able to be systematically heard. Where structures exist, they are usually set up and supported by NGOs, as is the case in Austria, Denmark, Finland, Slovakia and Sweden. In The Netherlands we learnt of the National Client Forum Youth Care, which is an organisation that represents the interests of the clients at provincial and at national level. The goal of the forum is to improve the quality of youth care. In the UK there are several organisations which are supported by the government. These include ‘A National Voice’, ‘The Debate Project’, and ‘Voices from Care Wales’. These work to empower young people who are currently leaving care or have already left by giving them the opportunity to share their experiences and to improve the care system for other young people in the future.

Very few country reports note the existence of peer-led group of parents whose children are taken into care. In several countries there are extensive and sophisticated support

arrangements for foster carers but little or nothing for the children’s own families. Denmark and Sweden are exceptions, as they have national peer-led groups of parents with children in care. In principle social services should provide programmes and support to families but often, due to the lack of resources and willingness, there is not much happening and, despite the compulsory review procedure, few evaluations of outcomes and measurements of success and failure are documented both concerning the reunion of families and the achievements of children living and leaving the care system. The support and empowerment of parents whose children are in care is a crucial component of service provision for children in alternative care. Too often the child is removed and little is done to help the parents improve their parenting skills in order for the child to be able to return home. Peer support networks can play a valuable role in this.

## Key messages

Building on the analysis of the surveys on the situation of children in alternative care in Europe and armed with this statistical resource, Eurochild proposes specific recommendations to the EU Member States and the European Commission<sup>4</sup>.

### Recommendations to Member States

It is the responsibility of the state and appropriate level of regional, local, government to ensure the development and implementation of coordinated policies regarding the care of children deprived, or at risk of being deprived, of parental care. To fulfil this responsibility, EU Member States should be encouraged to align their national care legislation to the Guidelines for the alternative care of children, a United Nations framework<sup>5</sup>.

In that framework, Eurochild recommends the following to the EU Member States:

1. Ensure that no child is taken into care due to poverty, disability or ethnic origin.

2. Ensure the development of family – and community-based alternatives to institutional care that can offer individualised support to each child, as well as quality standards whose implementation is regularly monitored and evaluated. In particular, family support and family-based care must be prioritized to ensure no child under 3 years is placed in an institution. Such a ban could be monitored at EU level.
3. Ensure that the different forms of conflicts of interest – i.e., institutional and financial – are made visible and resolved as much as possible.
4. Ensure high quality, on-going training and supervision of carers.
5. Ensure effective transition from institutional to family-based care. De-institutionalisation without comprehensive assessments on the suitability of family-based carers, prior to the move, will place the child at risk of entering a placement that cannot meet their needs. Any form of alternative, family-based care must provide high-quality care that enhances the development and protection of the child.
6. Monitor the review procedure and the re-integrated children also by providing after-care.
7. Ensure direct involvement of children and young people with care experience, and their families, both in decision-making processes that affect them directly and in the development of alternative care policies and services.
8. Ensure sufficient and appropriate allocation of resources.

### **Recommendations to European Commission**

Eurochild supports the ad-hoc expert group's recommendation that the European Commission adopt a Communication, setting out a broad road-map for EU action aimed at developing necessary family – and community-based care.

Complementary to the recommendations of the ad-hoc expert group, Eurochild emphasises:

### ● **The need to make full use of the Social Open Method of Coordination**

Thanks partly to the Open Method of Coordination on social inclusion and social protection, the fight against child poverty and the promotion of child well-being has become a clear political priority of the European Union. Considerable knowledge base has been gathered on the best policy approaches. However, the links to child protection and the situation of the most vulnerable children are still weak. Whilst 14 Member States document efforts targeted at children in alternative care or at risk in their national action plans on social inclusion and social protection, to date there has been no systematic effort to gather evidence of the situation in Member States or to facilitate exchange and mutual learning through peer reviews or transnational projects. The forthcoming call for social experimentation projects may start this process. However, Eurochild calls on the European Commission and Social Protection Committee to adopt common definitions and improve the collection of comparable data on children in alternative care, and facilitate benchmarking and peer learning across Member States in this field.

To further boost the work of Member States in the field of child well-being, Eurochild is supporting an European Commission Recommendation on child poverty and well-being. A key element of the Recommendation will be a commitment to quality of alternative care for children without, or at risk of losing, parental care.

### ● **The need to link to the future EU Strategy on the rights of the child**

The Stockholm Programme<sup>6</sup> adopted by the European Council in December 2009 commits the European Commission to developing 'an ambitious EU strategy on the rights of the child'. Such a strategy commits the EU to taking children's rights into account 'systematically and strategically' across all EU policies. A clear example of how children's rights can be

mainstreamed into EU policies and programmes is in the area of de-institutionalisation. Such a mainstreaming programme would involve systematic training of staff, scrutiny of all relevant policies and programmes from a child-rights perspective, regular monitoring and evaluation of the impact of policies on children's rights and effective coordination between policy areas.

Eurochild calls on the European Commission to ensure that a road-map of action on de-institutionalisation is carried out clearly within a broader framework of mainstreaming children's rights across EU policy and action.

## Notes

- 1 Eurochild is a network of organisations and individuals working in and across Europe to improve the quality of life of children and young people. Our work is underpinned by the principles enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Eurochild is funded by the European Commission within the PROGRESS Programme. The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of the European Commission.
- 2 Eurochild (2009), Children in alternative care – National surveys – 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.
- 3 Within the above number there are 1,039 children with disabilities placed in residential care.
- 4 Browne, K.D., Hamilton-Giacritsis, C.E., Johnson, R., Chou, S., Ostergren, Leth, I., Agathonos, H., Anaut, M., Herczog, M., Keller-Hamela, M., Klimackova, A., Stan, V., & Zeytinoglu, S. (2005), 'A European survey of the number and characteristics of children less than three in residential care at risk of harm', *Adoption and Fostering*, 29(4), 1-12.
- 5 Eurochild's thematic working group on children in alternative care has adopted a policy position Call for action on quality of alternative care for children deprived of parental care (March 2010). This paper endorses the recommendations of the Report of the Ad Hoc Expert Group on the Transition from Institutional to Community-based Care (European Commission, 2009) and adds specific recommendations towards EU Member States on quality of care and to the European Commission.
- 6 UNGA resolution, November 2009, Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children.6 Council of the European Union: The Stockholm Programme – An open and secure Europe serving and protecting the citizens, 9 December 2009.

## Les enfants en institution en Europe : quel rôle pour l'Union européenne ?

Jana Hainsworth  
Secrétaire Générale  
Eurochild  
Bruxelles, Belgique  
jana.hainsworth@eurochild.org

Dr. Mária Herczog  
Membre du Comité directeur du Eurochild  
Membre du Comité UNCRC (Convention relative aux droits de l'enfant)  
Présidente, Association « famille, enfance et jeunesse »  
Budapest, Hongrie  
herczog@mail.datanet.hu

Dr. Agata V. D'Addato  
Responsable des politiques  
Eurochild  
Bruxelles, Belgique  
agata.daddato@eurochild.org

En 2009, Eurochild – le réseau qui réunit plus de 80 organisations pour les enfants dans 32 pays européens – a conduit une enquête sur la situation des enfants en institution en Europe par le biais de ses organisations membres, à la lumière des travaux du groupe de travail thématique sur « les enfants placés hors du foyer parental ». Les résultats de cette enquête, dans un premier temps publiés en juin 2009 et aujourd'hui mis à jour pour couvrir l'ensemble des Etats membres de l'Union européenne (plus la Moldova), constituent une ressource unique pour les praticiens, les

organiseurs de campagne et ceux qui élaborent les politiques concernant la situation des enfants – qui, aujourd'hui, constituent le groupe le plus vulnérable de la société en Europe.

En s'appuyant sur l'analyse d'enquêtes relatives à la situation des enfants placés hors du foyer parental en Europe, et sur des ressources statistiques, Eurochild propose des recommandations spécifiques aux Etats membres de l'UE et à la Commission européenne.

## **Pflegekinder in Europa: Welche Rolle soll die Europäische Union spielen?**

Jana Hainsworth  
Generalsekretärin  
Eurochild  
Brüssel, Belgien  
jana.hainsworth@eurochild.org

Mária Herczog  
Mitglied des Leitungsausschusses von Eurochild  
Mitglied des UN-Fachausschusses für Kinderrechte  
Gesellschaft für Familie, Kinder und Jugend  
Budapest, Ungarn  
herczog@mail.datanet.hu

Agata V. D'Addato  
Verantwortliche für Politik  
Eurochild  
Brüssel, Belgien  
agata.daddato@eurochild.org

2009 hat Eurochild – das Netzwerk von mehr als 80 Kinderorganisationen in 32 Ländern Europas – über ihre Mitgliedsorganisationen und als Folgemaßnahme zur Arbeit der thematischen Arbeitsgruppe über ‚Kinder in alternativer Pflege‘ eine Umfrage zur Lage von Kindern in alternativer Pflege in Europa durchgeführt. Die Ergebnisse der Umfrage, die zuerst im Juni 2009 veröffentlicht wurden und jetzt aktualisiert werden, um alle Mitgliedstaaten der Europäischen Union (EU) (plus Moldawien) einzubeziehen, liefern eine einzigartige

Ressource für Praktiker, Organisatoren von Kampagnen und Politiker über die Lage von Kindern, die zu den am stärksten gefährdeten Mitgliedern der Gesellschaften im heutigen Europa zählen.

Aufbauend auf der Analyse der Umfragen zur Lage von Kindern in alternativer Pflege in Europa und ausgestattet mit dieser statistischen Ressource schlägt Eurochild konkrete Empfehlungen an die EU-Mitgliedstaaten und die Europäische Kommission vor.