

Child abandonment and its prevention

Article 7 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) clearly states that every child has “the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents”. When a child is abandoned, this right is violated. Infants and young children are those most at risk of being abandoned. This is concerning, as a child deprived of a stable upbringing in his or her early years of life may experience difficulties in terms of emotional and behavioural development. Despite the importance of understanding the extent, causes and consequences of child abandonment, there is a distinct lack of research in this area. Such studies are essential in order to develop effective prevention programmes and strategies aimed at protecting those most vulnerable in our European society.

Defining child abandonment

In a sample of 10 EU countries (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and the UK), there is no clear legal definition of child abandonment. The lack of a clear definition, and the ambiguity regarding what constitutes child abandonment, raises challenges for research and practice concerning this phenomenon. For the purposes of the current EU Daphne-funded project, two definitions of child abandonment were employed, namely open abandonment and secret abandonment.

Open abandonment is defined as a child being knowingly left behind by his or her parent, who can be identified, and whose intention is not to return but to willingly relinquish parental responsibility. Further, no other family members are able or willing to take on the responsibility to parent and care for the child. Secret abandonment is defined as a child being secretly left behind by his or her parent, who cannot be identified, and whose intention is not to return but to willingly relinquish parental responsibility anonymously.

The extent of child abandonment in Europe

Research has found that child abandonment is one of the key reasons why children under the age of three are placed in institutional care. A comparison of children in institutions revealed that in Western Europe only 4% were abandoned, as opposed to 32% of children in institutions in Central and Eastern Europe. Romania, Hungary and Latvia had the majority of children in institutional care who were abandoned, while Denmark, Norway and the UK reported child abandonment as being a rare event.

It is difficult to establish the true extent of open and secret child abandonment across Europe, as only some countries maintain national statistics regarding these phenomena and, where this information is maintained, data differs depending on the child's age group and the definition of child abandonment used.

As part of the current EU Daphne-funded project on child abandonment and its prevention, government departments from all 27 EU member countries were written to, requesting information in relation to open and secret abandonment. Of the 22 countries who responded, Slovakia had the highest number of children (aged 0-3) who were openly abandoned (4.9 per 1,000 live births), followed by the Czech Republic (4.1 per 1,000 live births), Latvia (3.9 per 1,000 live births) and Poland (3.7 per 1,000 live births).

Across all 22 countries surveyed, there was very little information (if any) regarding the number of children abandoned outdoors or in public places. Additionally, the majority of countries do not keep national records of the number of children (aged 0-3) abandoned at maternity units. Where countries do keep records, Romania had the



highest number of children abandoned per year at maternity units (3.6 per 1,000 live births), followed by Slovakia (3.3 per 1,000 live births), Poland and Lithuania (1.7 per 1,000 live births), and France (1 per 1,000 live births).

Addressing secret child abandonment

The approaches to addressing secret child abandonment across the EU vary. In some countries it is no longer illegal to abandon a child, on condition that the child is left somewhere safe. Special baby hatches are available in some European countries where mothers can leave their babies anonymously and safely.

Of the 27 EU member countries, 11 have baby hatches in operation. Baby hatches can be found in Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, and Slovakia. In France, women have the right to remain anonymous to their babies after giving birth in a hospital. This is referred to as *accouchement sous X*, which removes the legal ties between the mother and the baby.

In terms of the UNCRC, there is much debate surrounding these approaches to child abandonment, and there is a significant lack of research regarding whether they actually save lives or encourage parents to abandon their children. Additionally, although the assumption is often made that it is the mother who leaves her infant at a baby hatch, there is increasing evidence that this is not necessarily true. It is frequently men or relatives who leave infants at baby hatches, which begs the question of what has happened to the mothers and have they consented to abandoning their children. Due to the anonymous nature of baby hatches, they carry with them several further implications. First, children left behind in this way have no way of determining their family medical history. Second, the father's paternal rights are denied. Third, the opportunity to place the baby in other relatives' care is completely removed, as

there is no way of tracing the child's family. Nevertheless, the Czech Republic and Lithuania both have an average of 7 infants left behind in baby hatches per year. Poland has an average of 6, while Hungary and Slovakia both have an average of 4 infants left behind in baby hatches per year.

Causes of child abandonment

Primary causes of child abandonment have been found to be poverty or financial hardship, being a single parent, post-natal depression, mental illness, a lack of sexual health education, poor knowledge regarding family planning, restrictions regarding access to abortion, the child having some form of disability, the child being HIV positive, pregnancy as a result of rape, abuse or force by partner, and a lack of services and resources to support parents who have children with disabilities.

In Bulgaria, research found that the majority of parents do not want to abandon their children. However, when confronted with poverty, illness or social exclusion, they often make this decision, thinking that they are acting in the best interests of the child. In a study that interviewed 75 parents who had recently openly abandoned their children (aged 0-3) at a local institution, the reasons for abandoning the children included homelessness, lack of food, no heating during winter, and not enough resources (eg nappies).

Additionally, 41% of the participants already had four or more children in their family and felt that they could not afford any more. The study also found that 72% of the participants were mothers from the Roma community, who reported being asked by staff at the maternity unit if they wished to keep their child, and stated that a member of staff completed adoption forms for them as a matter of routine. Research in Romania also found that parents may 'relinquish' their children due to pressure from staff at the hospital. This often occurs if the mother lacks identity papers, which can prevent the official registration of the child's birth. In other countries, mothers may be encouraged by medical staff to relinquish their child if they are HIV positive, abuse drugs, are not married, or are very young. These findings suggest that children are often abandoned not because their parents do not want them, but rather because of the lack of support available to parents, or the cultural stigma associated with children born to single mothers.

Preventing child abandonment

There are a number of actions being taken by countries in the EU to help prevent child abandonment. These include:

- Social assistance
- Day-care facilities
- Mother-baby units
- Family planning services
- Counselling services for the mother and/or the whole family
- Financial support
- Programmes that focus on high risk families and child identity
- Parent 'training centres'
- Helplines to support mothers in need
- Guidance on preventing child abandonment at maternity units
- Social workers in maternity units
- Training of hospital staff to be able to recognise and manage high-risk situations and provide positive counselling

Child abandonment in the UK

In the UK, it is a crime to secretly abandon a child, and baby hatches or anonymous birthing laws do not exist. However, there is no legislation that specifically outlines what constitutes child abandonment (abandonment often falls under the general category of neglect), and there are currently no central databases that record cases of child abandonment in general.

In 2009, Sherr, Mueller and Fox attempted to determine the extent of child abandonment across the UK. When accessing the Home Office recorded crime statistics, they found that the statistics did not make a distinction between abandonment of a child under the age of two, concealment of birth, and infanticide. Additionally, they found that the Abandoned Baby Register only includes newborns whose parents are never found.

Overall, Sherr and her colleagues identified 124 cases of infant abandonment across the UK between 1998 and 2005. However, because of the ambiguous statistics available, this figure can only be viewed as an estimate. On the back of this research, Mueller and Sherr (2009) highlight the need for a centralised national database to record cases of child abandonment across the UK. Additionally, their findings expose a lack of guidelines available in UK hospitals that explain how to deal with cases of child abandonment. For this reason, the development of national guidance on child abandonment is essential.

As there are so few cases of secret child abandonment, it is difficult to conduct any research to establish its causes. Additionally, the nature of the act makes it almost impossible to explore the characteristics of the mothers who do it. A small number of studies have been carried out that look at the reasons for open abandonment (or adoption), and there are suggestions that ethnicity and honour may play an important role. Much more research is needed in this area to improve our understanding.

Given that the rate of child abandonment in the UK is so low in comparison to other EU countries, it is important to understand the social context and influential factors acting on this. Access to family planning advice is free in the UK, and there are specific sexual health centres and clinics for young people under the age of 25. Additionally, contraception is free to all female citizens, and there are many schemes that provide free condoms to young people. Abortion is also legal up until 24 weeks of pregnancy, and any young person can have an abortion without their parents knowing, provided that they have a good enough understanding of their decision. In terms of the hospitals in the UK, not all of them are 'baby friendly' according to the UNICEF guidelines, but many of them follow a number of practices set out in the initiative (eg, 'rooming in'). Finally, the UK benefit system is one of the most comprehensive in the world, and offers an array of financial support for all families with children, plus additional support for those with low or no income.

In terms of preventing child abandonment, there are no services in the UK that have been specifically set up to prevent child abandonment. However, there are numerous general prevention services that work to address a range of risk factors and help families and children in need (eg, mother-baby units in prisons and mental health residential facilities). These services are designed to address child care and protection issues and strive to keep families together. Indeed, the sentiment of many of the professionals taking part in this project was that families have more chance of having their child removed from them for child protection reasons, than they do of willingly abandoning their child. This could be a result of the many services available within the UK that help families cope with their children and overcome their difficulties, therefore reducing the risk of child abandonment.