

Child abandonment in Europe is neglected issue, say researchers

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Researchers have called for a consistent and supportive approach to child abandonment in Europe to protect the welfare of the hundreds of youngsters given up by their parents every year.

Academics from the Centre for Forensic and [Family Psychology](#) at The University of Nottingham conducted a two-year project exploring child abandonment and its prevention across the 27 countries of the [European Union](#).

The study, funded by the [European Commission](#)'s Daphne programme, looked at children who were both openly left for adoption at maternity units and those secretly abandoned, including the use of controversial 'baby hatches' in some European countries to allow mothers to leave their babies anonymously.

Professor Kevin Browne, who led the study, said: "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 and the rates of child abandonment within the EU are concerning, especially in the current economic climate."

"Child abandonment is a neglected issue in [Europe](#). Few countries keep national records regarding the number of children abandoned, abandonment is seldom legally defined in legislation, and very little

research exists regarding the extent, causes and consequences of this phenomenon.”

“What is required is a consistent and supportive approach to children in need across Europe.”

Exploring the extent of abandonment

The researchers interviewed staff from 100 maternity units and 100 prevention programmes across 10 partner countries — Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and the UK — to explore the extent of child abandonment, its causes, its consequences and good practice in terms of prevention.

Government departments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the remainder of the EU were contacted for information relating to child abandonment in their countries.

Of the 22 countries which responded, Slovakia had the highest number of children aged up to three years old who were openly given up for adoption at 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).

The researchers found little information regarding the number of children secretly abandoned outdoors or in public spaces but some countries did keep national records of children abandoned by their mothers in maternity units.

Institutional care

Romania had the highest number of children abandoned per year at

maternity units with 8.6 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](#)). They found that a child being left in a maternity unit is one of the key reasons why children under the age of three are placed into institutional care.

The approaches to addressing secret child abandonment across the EU vary. In some countries it is no longer illegal to abandon a child, provided that the child is left in a safe place.

Of the 27 EU member countries, 11 still have ‘baby hatches’ in operation — Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal and Slovakia — a practice which dates back to medieval times.

The study found that although the assumption is that it is the mother who leaves her infant at a baby hatch, there is growing evidence that it is frequently men or relatives abandoning the child, raising questions about the mother’s whereabouts and whether she has consented to giving up her baby.

Maternal consent questions

The anonymous nature of the hatches also have further implications, among them the lack of information about the child’s family medical history and the lack of opportunity for the baby to remain with its family in the care of other relatives.

The research found that the Czech Republic and Lithuania both have an average of 7 infants left in baby hatches per year, followed by Poland with 6 and Hungary and Slovakia with 4.

In France and Holland, women have the right to remain anonymous to

their babies after giving birth, while in the UK it remains a crime to secretly abandon a child and no such comparable birthing laws exist. Previous UK research has identified 124 cases of secret infant abandonment across the UK between 1998 and 2005.

Further information about the project can be found on the web at [www.nottingham.ac.uk/iwho/rese ... andonment/index.aspx](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/iwho/research/abandonment/index.aspx)

Provided by University of Nottingham

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