

INTRODUCTION

In Ireland, the primary legislation for regulating child care policy is the Child Care Act, 1991 and the Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations 1995. Due to recent reports in Ireland and an increased awareness of the experiences of children in care internationally, much work is underway in Ireland to increase our understanding and improve their lives. The number of children living in care in Ireland is estimated to be over 60,000 and has been increasing each year. The majority of children are in care for five or more years¹.

To date, very little is known about the lives of children living in foster care or children's homes in Ireland. Studies in the UK and the US have illustrated that children in care are particularly vulnerable to negative life experiences. Children who become involved with the child welfare system are described as a population at risk for adverse outcomes in multiple domains². Compared with the majority of children raised at home, those who grow up away from their families suffer multiple disadvantages, and the health outcomes are generally poor³.

OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study is to explore the lives of Irish children living in foster care or children's homes in Ireland. Using a subset of the National Set of Child Well-being Indicators, as published in the biennial State of the Nation's Children Reports (SONC)⁴, the lives of children in care will be explored. Analysis will focus on children's relationships as well as their social, emotional and behavioural outcomes.

METHODS

Data for this paper are based on the 2006 Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) survey, a large WHO collaborative study (www.hbsc.org). A nationally representative sample of children aged 10-17 years was recruited through schools and questionnaires were completed anonymously in class. The school and student response rate was 63% (n=215) and 83% (n=10,335), respectively. Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the National University of Ireland, Galway and consent from schools, parents and children was obtained.

Using the HBSC-based indicators that are presented in the SONC report series, the relationships and social, emotional and behavioural outcomes of children in care will be explored.

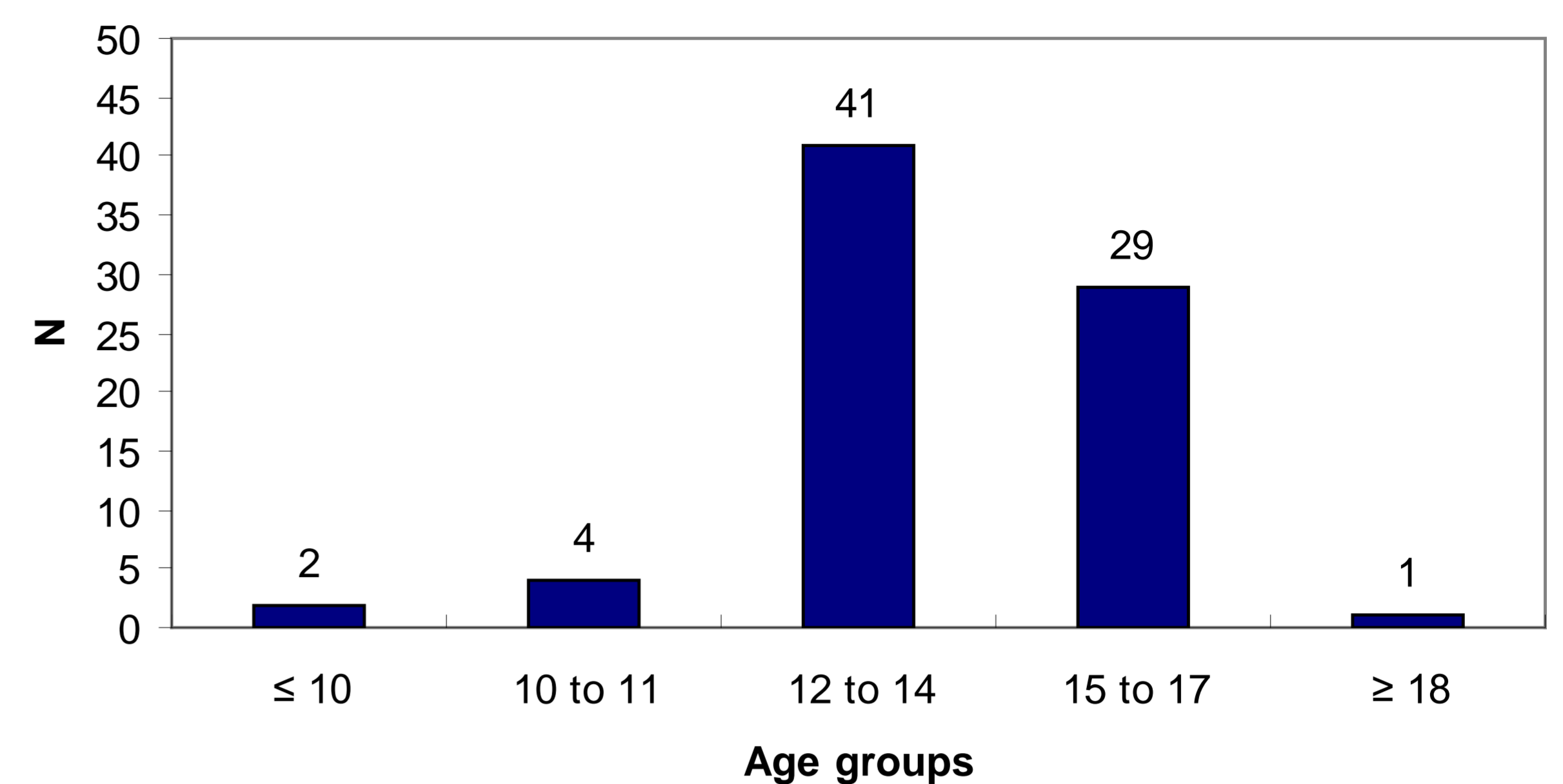
In order to identify those children living in care, children were asked the following question: *Please answer this question for the home where you live all or most of the time and tick the people who live there.* The response options were: mother; father; stepmother; stepfather; grandmother; grandfather; I live in a foster home or children's home; I live somewhere else with someone else.

State of the Nations Children (SONC) indicators included:

- easy to talk to their mother when something is really bothering them;
- easy to talk to their father when something is really bothering them;
- 3 or more friends of the same gender;
- having a pet of their own or in the family;
- been bullied in school (in the past couple of months);
- students in their school participate in making the school rules;
- smoking cigarettes every day;
- been drunk at least once in the last 30 days;
- taken cannabis at least once in their lifetime;
- feeling happy with the way they are;
- being happy with their lives at present;
- physically active for at least 60 minutes per day on more than 4 days per week;
- eat breakfast 5 or more days per week;
- feeling safe in the area where they live;
- there are good places in their area to spend their free time.

RESULTS

Figure 1: Children in care, by gender



There were a total of 129 children identified in the survey as living in foster care or a children's home. The breakdown for the children in care by gender was: 57% boys (N=45); 43% girls (N=34). The following is the breakdown for children in care by HSE Area: 22% HSE West (N=17); 26% South (N=20); 15% Dublin – North East (N=12); 37% Dublin – Mid-Leinster (N=29).

Table 1: Comparison of Indicators from the 2010 State of the Nations Children Report*

Indicator	Children in Care (%)	SONC (%)
Talk to mother	54	78
Talk to father	41	60
Have a pet	69	74
Been bullied	41	25
Participate in making school rules	37	23
Smoking – every day	21	9
Been drunk (last 30 days)	20	20
Cannabis use (lifetime)	30	16
Physically active 5+ days	57	55
Happy with way you are	42	58
Happy with life	72	91
Breakfast 5+ days a week	67	76
Feel safe in local area	70	90
Good place to spend free time	64	42
3 or more friends of same gender	73	90

* n.b.: statistical analysis was not carried out to compare the groups

CONCLUSION

It is apparent from the data that children in care in Ireland report experiencing negative health and well-being outcomes in comparison to children who are not in care. In particular children in care are more likely to participate in risk behaviours (smoking and cannabis use) and have poorer social relationships. Overall, these children represent a vulnerable group who require particular attention in improving their health and well-being.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was funded by the Department of Health and Children, Ireland. We would like to thank school Principals, teachers and students for giving their time to take part in this survey.

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