

Abuse support service inundated with calls from men

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Recent revelations about sexual abuse in private schools is a reminder that this type of abuse is endemic in Irish society, according to the support service One In Four.

The charity said it has been "inundated with calls" from men who had this experience and who are disclosing their abuse, often for the first time.

According to its latest annual report, One In Four supported 673 men and women last year who experienced sexual abuse in childhood and 65 men who had caused sexual harm to children.

In 2021, it delivered 2,398 individual and group psychotherapy sessions to 125 clients and met 56 people for a first assessment meeting.

Around 43% of clients were abused in their own family, while 37% of the clients were men.

Last year, the charity had to close its waiting list for psychotherapy for four months because the waiting period went beyond one year.

Support from Tusla enabled One In Four to create a new position of a waiting list case manager, who provided support and crisis counselling to people on the list.

The organisation's advocacy case managers supported 492 survivors to engage with the criminal and civil justice systems and child protection services and it accompanied 53 clients through criminal trials.

A total of 65 men who had caused sexual harm to children attended its prevention programme, a core project designed to keep children safe.

The report points out that increased access to the web has created a changing landscape, where growing numbers of people are accessing images and videos of child sexual exploitation.

Around 48% of its prevention clients had committed an online offence. There was also an increase in younger offenders, with 7% aged between 18 and 25.

There are many factors that prevent children and adults disclosing experiences of child sexual abuse, according to One in Four's CEO Maeve Lewis.

Maeve Lewis said the child protection system is under-resourced (file image)

"Many believe they are the only person to whom this has ever happened and are paralysed by a sense of personal shame," Ms Lewis said.

"Others fear they will be disbelieved. Many are worried, often with good reason, that they will be ostracised by their families.

"When there is a major scandal and some survivors speak publicly, then others are encouraged to come forward."

According to Ms Lewis, the child protection system is under-resourced and "cannot hope to properly investigate every notification of alleged sexual abuse, particularly when the victim is now an adult and the abuse is historic".

Ms Lewis said the criminal trial continues to be a source of great distress to survivors and despite a more trauma-informed approach in recent years, people still describe the experience as re-traumatising, humiliating and dehumanising.

"In cases of historic sexual abuse where there is no forensic evidence, it is essentially the credibility of the survivors' testimony that is at issue," she said.

"This means the survivor may feel personally assailed as their life choices, often a result of the impact of sexual abuse, are used to undermine their evidence."

Despite progress over the last 20 years, Ireland is still a place where one in four children experience sexual harm, according to Ms Lewis.

"We believe that these latest shocking disclosures must become an opportunity to drive systemic change and to tackle the root causes of why sexual abuse is so pervasive," she said.

"We also hope that this may be a defining moment in creating timely, accessible expert services to heal the pain, suffering and damage that has been caused."

If you have been affected by any of the issues raised in this article, you can contact Dignity4Patients, whose helpline is open Monday to Thursday 10am to 4pm.