

Child deaths while in care or contact with services now at 188:

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AT LEAST 188 young people who were in care or in contact with social services have died over the past decade, according to new figures from the Health Service Executive.

Children's charities last night expressed shock at the scale of the deaths, which they said pointed to major failures by social services in protecting vulnerable young people.

Last week the HSE said 37 young people in care had died, up from 23 a week previously. Yesterday, it revised the figure upwards by 151 deaths.

The new figure, it said, was based on a wider definition of deaths to include children who were known to social services, or young people aged 18-21 who were in aftercare.

The majority of deaths were due to unnatural causes (102). Most of these young people died as a result of suicide (26), drug overdoses (19), unlawful killings (12), road traffic incidents (18) and other accidents (27). A further 86 deaths were linked to natural causes or health conditions.

Details of the deaths are due to be passed onto a review group established by the Government, which will examine the handling of each case by social services.

Bernard Gloster, a senior HSE official involved in the collating the figures, said the number could rise further if social work teams around the country found evidence of further deaths. He also admitted that disputes over the provision of figures had further dented public confidence in social services.

The delays, he said, were due to confusion over the definition of what constituted a child death and acknowledged that the HSE made mistakes in its handling of the issue.

Minister of State for Children Barry Andrews, who sought a definitive number for deaths of children in care three months ago, said there would be "shock at the scale of the numbers".

He said he looked forward to the review group's findings, which will examine the extent to which the children were cared for or failed by the State. Fine Gael spokesman on children Alan Shatter also expressed shock at the numbers and said it was clear many of these deaths were never properly investigated by the HSE or health boards.

"It is not acceptable that 151 children about whom social services had a child protection concern died without any record being properly maintained with regard to their deaths," he said.

Children's charity Barnardos said the scale of the numbers pointed to significant failures on behalf of the system to properly assess the risk to children and take the appropriate action to keep them safe.

Barnardos chief executive Fergus Finlay said: "Everybody knows the system is stretched to breaking point, is drastically under-resourced and suffers from appalling structures and a lack of adequate political priority. If the most senior members of Government fail to address these glaring deficiencies, more and more tragedies will result."

The HSE said that while the care of children was of paramount importance, the number of deaths was comparable with other jurisdictions such as the UK and the US.

It added that the the deaths should be set against a background where there are about 5,500 children in care and up to 200,000 referrals to child protection teams each year.

Mr Gloster said the HSE would do everything possible to share information on child deaths with the

review group, bearing in mind legal obstacles and privacy constraints.

The Government is due to pass emergency legislation in the Dáil shortly, which will remove any uncertainty over legal obstacles.

The delay in providing accurate data and problems in sharing files on child deaths has heightened tension between the Government and HSE.

In addition, Ombudsman Emily O'Reilly has accused the HSE of invoking the in camera rule on some occasions to conceal its failures or mistakes. The HSE has rejected the claim.