DAPNHE III – Sexual Abuse Against Children at Residential Institutions

Greece – Research findings
Increasing rates of reported child abuse (physical, psychological and sexual)
Each year, more than 700 children are reported as victims of abuse
The number of children becoming victims of abuse is far greater than 700, as the majority of cases still goes unreported
National framework supporting children victims of sexual abuse

- Legislation
- National Centre for Social Solidarity
- Childcare Units and Institutes
National framework supporting children victims of sexual abuse

- Childcare Units and Institutes
  - Institute of Child Health
  - Children’s Ombudsman (Independent Authority)
  - MENTORAS Association for Child Protection
Research on sexual abuse against children in Greece

- Ongoing research in 2010
- Target groups
  - Children living in residential institutions
  - Adults who used to live in residential institutions
  - Staff working in residential institutions
  - Professionals with an expertise in how residential institutions operate and the phenomenon of sexual abuse against children
Methods of research on sexual abuse against children in Greece

- Use of questionnaires for children residing in institutions
- Use of questionnaires for staff working in residential institutions
- Conduct of interviews with adults who used to live in residential institutions to adulthood
- Conduct of interviews with professionals
Questionnaires

- Children
  - A total of 35 questionnaires have been filled out
  - Three different residential institutions – Two cities (Thessaloniki and Ioannina)
  - Questionnaires were administered under discrete supervision of the researcher
  - More questionnaires are expected to be administered in the forthcoming weeks
Questionnaires

- **Staff**
  - A total of eight (8) questionnaires have been filled out
  - Two different residential institutions – Two cities (Thessaloniki and Ioannina)
  - More questionnaires are expected to be administered in the forthcoming weeks
A total of eight (8) interviews have been conducted with children who used to reside in institutions

- 7 male / 1 female
- Mean age: 20 years old
- All interviewees had stayed in more than one institution during their childhood
- Many interviewees had come in Greece as immigrants
- Interviews lasted from 45’ to 2 hours
Interviews (2)

- Three professionals have been approached to give their views on sexual abuse against children in residential institutions:
  - Director of services in NCSS
  - Sociologist (NCSS)
  - Psychologist / Director of MENTORAS
- Material also collected from other sources through the internet
Main findings from interviews with former residents of institutions (1)

- Most interviewees had entered institutions at a very early age (5-7)
- Used to be victims of systematic physical abuse from the family
- They keep minimum contact with parents, if any
- Adjustment to residential institutions was difficult, no sense of belongingness
- Privacy has been an issue for interviewees of a particular institution / no place to withdraw if needed
Main findings from interviews with former residents of institutions (2)

- Staff showed lack of initiative, no particular pattern for daily activities
- Insufficient supervision of staff towards children
- For some, bullying was a common practice within the institution
- Also reported that staff used to follow non-pedagogical methods
- Lack of attention, care and understanding from staff, children felt as a burden
Main findings from interviews with former residents of institutions (3)

- Children’s anger and violent outbursts stemmed from the staff’s physical and psychological abuse
- No person from staff was to be trusted from children for sensitive issues
- Felt vulnerable to sexual abuse as there was a condition of fear to report any incident
Main findings from interviews with former residents of institutions (4)

- No attempts were made to educate children on sexual issues
- Reported incidents of sexual abuse from older children to younger ones (with own consent or by force)
- Majority of these incidents went unreported for staff
Main findings from interviews with experts (1)

- “The worst family accounts for the best institution” (Sociologist, NCSS)
- Residential institutions become progressively disdained by the State
- Lack of motivation from staff
- Lack of monitoring and control
- Lack of transparency in how institutions operate
- Most residential institutions for children are understaffed
Main findings from interviews with experts (2)

- Sexual abuse against children in institutions remains an issue not openly discussed.
- Children in residential institutions may be victims of sexual abuse both by children and adults, especially children with a history of abuse in the family.
- Children may feel more hopeless and frightened when in a residential institution due to its character and the way it operates.
There is a number of parameters which decide staff’s reaction toward children reporting sexual abuse:
- Education
- Sensitivity
- Guidelines

There is a lot of skepticism whether any of these parameters are met to a satisfactory level.
Main findings from interviews with experts (4)

- Other parameters which may influence staff’s effectiveness on dealing with such issues:
  - Passivity
  - Feelings of inadequacy
  - Burnout syndrome
  - Other ideological and moral priorities
  - Lack of training
Main findings from interviews with experts (5)

- On the whole, children receive no information on issues around sex or their rights if they are victims of sexual abuse – left alone to discover for themselves.
- Lack of monitoring and control over residential institutions for children also encourages pedophiles to work there, where they can easily “hide” behind their role.
Recommendations concerning the residential institutions

- More psychological support and information with regard to such issues
- Presence of special therapists:
  - can better detect such behaviors and act accordingly
  - can act as a point of reference for children who need to discuss sensitive issues and any concerns
Recommendations concerning Good Practices to be implemented by staff

- Doors should be kept *always* open any time an adult is talking to a child
- When bathing children, staff should *always* use sponges and not have direct contact with hands
- No child should be isolated with someone from staff, presence of at least another professional should be mandatory
Recommendations concerning Good Practices to be implemented by the State

- Establish a national centre for surveillance, which will act as an independent authority
- Special Units to offer counseling and support for children, easily accessible
- Legislative framework and guidelines for staff on how to deal with cases of sexual abuse
- A wider spectrum of research studies on a national level to realize the extent of this phenomenon
Be proactive, not reactive

- Development of specific tools assessing vulnerability of each child to become victim of sexual abuse
- Organized visits to residential institutions by monitoring authorities and external specialists
- Campaigns to raise awareness for both children and the authorities
Thank you!!!